LOOKING TO OR FROM THE MARGINS IN CONTEMPORARY GRAPHIC NOVELS

QUEER THEORY, BIOPOLITICS, AND THE RISK OF REPRESENTATION:
LOOKING TO OR FROM THE MARGINS IN CONTEMPORARY GRAPHIC NOVELS

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY   JULY 2016

(English & Cultural Studies)   HAMILTON, ON

TITLE: Looking to or From the Margins, and the Risk of Representation: Queer Theory,

Biopolitics, and Contemporary Graphic Novels

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SUPERVISOR: Dr. Nadine Attewell

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 196P

Abstract

In my dissertation, I bring together the fields of comics theory, biopolitics, and queer theory in order to read contemporary coming-of-age graphic novels that represent characters (and sometimes lives) at the margins. Coming-of-age graphic novels in this category often depict complex engagements with trauma and history, and couple those depictions with the loss of attachments: the subjects represented in these texts usually do not belong. I make a case for productive spaces inside of the unbelonging represented in my chosen texts. In Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Alison finds multiple nodes of attachment with her deceased father through the process of writing his history. Importantly, none of those attachments require that she forgive him for past violences, or that she overwrite his life in order to shift focus onto the positive. Jillian and Mariko Tamaki's *Skim* features a protagonist, Skim, who is rendered an outcast because of her body, her hobbies, and eventually her process of mourning. Skim carves out a life that is survivable for her, and resists the compulsion to perform happiness while she does it. Charles Burns's *Black Hole* depicts a group of teens who are excommunicated from their suburb after contracting a disfiguring, sexually transmitted disease, and who take to the woods in order to build a miniature, ad-hoc society for themselves. I concentrate on the question of precarity, and notice that safety and stability have a strong correlation with gender and sexuality: women and queers are overrepresented at the margins.

Acknowledgements

This project is the fruit of many years worth of labour- my own, as well as that of my supervisor, committee, and external examiner.

Thank you to Nadine Attewell, for always challenging me to do better, more rigorous work, and for supporting me all of the way through this process. Thank you, especially, for letting me be the first student you've worked with as a supervisor. You thoughtful questioning and detailed, careful feedback have helped immeasurably in the shaping of this document. Thank you to Melinda Gough and Mary O'Connor, whose support as readers has been bolstering and reassuring. Your questions and corrections have strengthened my writing, in this piece and beyond it. Thanks also to my external examiner, Candida Rifkind, whose meticulous review of and commentary on my work has helped to rekindle my excitement for the project.

Thanks to Nadine and Mary, who I've worked with in a teaching capacity: you are both brilliant, elegant teachers, and I am lucky to have you as teaching models. Thank to Chantelle Thauvette, who demonstrated poise and professionalism, even in very early teaching days; I am thrilled to have been one of your first TAs. Melinda and Nadine- the classes that I was able to take with you as a graduate student modded the foundations of my work. Thanks, Melinda, for encouraging me to take risks. I've been privileged to work with many engaged, bright, and hard-working students, whose eagerness in the classroom has been a source of energy. Thanks especially to Abeer Siddiqi, Rita Reid, Aelya Salman, Taylor Flett, and Julia Empey. Special thanks to Amber Cook, whose thoughts on *Skim* helped me determine the final direction for chapter two.

I owe many thanks to those that have helped me to maintain focus, excitement, and sometimes sheer endurance through this process. Lisa Kabesh and Emily West have been lovely colleagues, good friends, and amazing role models. Others that are deserving of thanks for their role in supporting me include Laura Buzzard, Matthew Dorrell, Alissa Bender, Elizabeth-Anne Johnson, Sarah D'Adamo, Zak Edwards, Emily Tyler, Gena Zuroski Jenkins and Derek Jenkins. Special thanks to Ruby Jenkins, who showed me her monster book and changed the trajectory of chapter three. Thanks to Matthew Froese, my spouse, for being willing to make the move to Hamilton that made the entire process possible.

I am grateful to my larger support network as well. Thank you, to English and Cultural Studies department for facilitating the leave that I took in 2012, when my mother passed, so seamlessly, and especially to Mary O'Connor, Nadine Attewell, Lorraine York, Sarah Brophy, and Peter Walmsely for their kindness (and patience) at that time. I would also like to acknowledge the congregation at HMC, who have graciously folded my family into their numbers.

Finally, thank you to Gwen Sakal, for making me promise not to quit.

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Introduction: Readings From the Gutter

In the late 1960s, North America saw a proliferation of underground "comix":[1]

small-run comics that depicted sex, drug use, and violence in an attempt to provide a

counter perspective to the squeaky-clean narratives demanded by the Comics Code.[2]

Though the majority of comix creators were straight white men, gay and lesbian comix

artists rose in number and popularity over the same period. Gay comics found cultural

purchase in the space created by the readership of underground comix and the gay

newspapers, such as *The Advocate*, that began circulating around the same time. Gay

papers, along with their gay comic strips, rode (and contributed to) the same political

groundswell as Stonewall and other queer anti-police riots (Hall np). The 1980s saw

another surge in the production of gay comix (including the magazine *Gay Comix*, which

began circulating in 1980), one that paralleled a further increase in gay newspapers and

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[1] Comix are distinguished from comics mainly in their content and method of circulation. Where comics tended to be family-friendly, and to circulate in newspapers and as mass-produced comic books, comix aimed to represent that which was taboo, and to act as a binary to the Comics Code. Because of their content, larger comics presses and specialty stores were hesitant about carrying them, and so comix circulated in small-run batches out

[2] The Comics Code, put in place by the Comics Code Authority of America, was a censorship policy that allowed the comics industry to avoid government oversight by way of self regulation. Though the Code was specifically applicable to American comics, it impacted Canadians as well. In the 1940s, Canada passed the "Fulton Bill," a piece of legislation that prohibited obscenities along the same lines as the Code, which remains on the books to this day (Greyson 131). The Fulton Bill was predominantly used to censor American comics coming over the border, which had a wide-reaching impact, as the majority of comics widely-available in Canada were American produced. Canada experienced a similar surge in underground and indie comix publications in response to both the Fulton Bill and the Code. Academic scholarship on comics tends to treat the Code in cursory way. For a more detailed examination of the Comics Code Authority of America, see Dr. Amy Kiste Nyberg's "Comics Code History: the Seal of Approval" on the Comics Books League Defense Fund website, and for a detailed account of the impact of the Code in Canada, see the archived page "Comix Rebellion: 1967-1974," on the Library and Archives Canada website.

zines. The second increase in production was followed closely by the onset of the AIDS epidemic, and thus accompanied by a stark change in tone. Gay and lesbian comix (and comics) began to depict material that demonstrated a distinct focus on affect, as in Rupert Kinnard's *Cathartic Comics* (Greyson 131), which provided "an intimate look into people's fear, anger, despair, as well as courage and precarious hope in the face of such a profound challenge" (Hall np). Both comix and comics have been an important piece of queer history in North America, just as GLBTQ* artists and auteurs have made important contributions to those field. Or, as Jerry Mills, notable gay cartoonist and creator of the comic strip "Poppers," suggests, "Comics and gays. They go together well; after all they have one major thing in common: both tend not to get any respect" (qtd in Hall np).

In this project, I read three coming-of-age graphic novels[3] that concern marginalized subjects: Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), Jillian and Mariko Tamaki's *Skim* (2008), and Charles Burns' *Black Hole* (2005). Each of my selected texts perform the coming-of-age story in a manner that departs from Euro-American convention in that

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[3] I use the term "graphic novels" loosely here, and as an imperfect term meant only to gesture to the similar form in which each of my texts currently circulates: as a single, bound text, rather than in installments. None of my texts fits wholly or perfectly into the full set of assumptions that generally accompany the term: *Fun Home* is memoir, rather than fiction; *Skim,* the text that best fits the descriptor, flirts with the diary format in ways that challenge an easy categorization of form; and while this project looks at a collected edition of *Black Hole*, it originally did circulate in installments. It should be noted that the term graphic novel is controversial in the field, and for good reason, not least of which being that the term graphic novel has accumulated a certain amount of cultural capital that has not yet been extended to the term "comics." Dave Scheidt's *Huffington Post Blogs* article, "It's Called a Comic Book, Not a Graphic Novel," critiques the application of "graphic novel" to collected comics series specifically, while Paul Levitz's article, "Will Eisner and the Secret History of the Graphic Novel," parses the overall ambiguity of the term as a signifier. My own use of the term reflects a desire to think about my texts in conversation with one another in particular, and with the comics form in general.

none of these texts tells the coming-of-age of straight, white men, while each of them is interested in the coming-of-age moment as inflected by a particular systemic shift made visible by context and trauma: the move to late capitalism and the logics that attend, and resist it. This text follows two lines of argumentation in support of this examination, which can be summarized as: history, and trauma. Each of my texts finds a link between national events such as internment (*Skim*) and scandal (Watergate and AIDSGATE in *Fun Home*), historical shifts in systems and national economies (the move to a system of circulation, rather than production) as visible in *Black Hole*, and local or personal histories, such as Alison's writing of a history of her father. Those historical nodes, be they macro or micro, are further linked to trauma, including exclusions at the national and local level, but also suicides, sexual assault, and gun violence. Each of my texts thinks through its protagonists' relationships to the particulars of their historical moment; each subject's particular engagement with history reveals a trauma that reads as both private and public, personal and national. For Alison of *Fun Home*, trauma comes in the form of queer history itself; queer history is revealed to be an archive in process, insofar as it is at once found and built, written and rewritten as the needs of queer subjects shift in accordance with changes in national culture and policy. Alison works to find a way to write her father into queer history following his suicide, and to strike a balance between being honest about his faults and acknowledging his contributions to her own development as a queer person and activist. Meanwhile, *Skim*'s Skim must find a way to move through a world in which the historical function of the state, including through the school system, has contributed to a hostile environment for people like her, that is, for

queers, and for Japanese Canadians. Skim finds modes of engagement that are fulfilling to her on the periphery: through the practice of Wicca and goth subculture, but also through a melancholia that at once reflects psychic trauma at the site of racialized subjectivity and amounts to a refusal of what Sara Ahmed calls a "happiness duty" (*Promise of Happiness* 7; 47; 50-53). Finally, *Black Hole*, which is speculative graphic fiction, depicts a group of teens who are made to carry risk on their bodies, which are disfigured after they become infected with a sexually transmitted disease that is making its way through their suburb. The teens' bodies make visible the intersection between history and trauma: set in the late 1960s or early 1970s, the disease functions as a metaphor for the dual increases in risk and risk awareness—the increasing sense that one's life might be shaped by unseen, but powerful forces. Attending to the calculating logics of late capitalism, the subsequent production of waste populations, and the forms of resistance that crop up against them, this project therefore makes significant contributions to the fields of comics studies, queer theory, and biopolitics, which I will elaborate on in the remainder of the introduction.

Minority Comics: Visual and Historical Exclusions

Women and LGBTQ* comics artists, have been part of American comics at the periphery, including in the thriving underground and indie industry, though they remain excluded from the majority of historical and scholarly accounts of comics in North America. Two outlines of comics history, in Stephen Weiner's *Faster than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel* and Shirrel Rhoades's *A Complete History of*

American Comics respectively, make little or no mention of the contributions of minority comics producers, even though both texts cover indie and underground comics at length. Where queerness is acknowledged in these and other accounts, it is so done in a perfunctory way. In *A Complete History of American Comics,* for example, queerness is mentioned only three times: during two brief dismissals of the claim that Batman and Robin might be lovers ("Batman and Robin gay? Luring unsuspecting children to a life of homosexuality? Get real" [65, 59]), and as part of an interview with "filmmaker and comics buff Kevin Smith," who concedes that the mutants of the *X-men* series can be read as an allegory for perceived gay monstrosity and exclusion (66), but says little else about it. All of these citations occur in the same chapter, the title of which is a jokey dismissal of the very idea of queer content in comics: "Gay comics? Not that There's Anything Wrong with that!" (65). Additionally, while Rhoades discusses the work and legacy of Jeanette Kahn, the first female president of DC comics, his text makes no mention of female comics artists save for Marjane Satrapi, creator of *Persepolis,* and, with the exception of the small amount of space devoted to discussing the contributions of Jewish comics artists such as Art Spiegelman (13, 193, 280), mentions of race and ethnicity are even scarcer. At issue here is less the exclusion of women and queers from the discussion (though that remains at issue), and more the claim to completeness that this text puts forward.

Weiner's text is slightly more inclusive, but still lacking. For example, *Faster than a Speeding Bullet* acknowledges Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* as an important American text. However, Weiner's account of Bechdel's contribution as a comics

producer is limited to his description of her text as being "about a young woman trying to resolve her gay father's suicide" (np). Weiner's account, like Rhoades's, shows substantial bias towards the work of straight, white men in the field. In the same paragraph that Bechdel's *Fun Home* is described, Robert Crumb is named the "grandmaster of alternative comics" and his *The Book of Genesis* is described as a "respectful, incisive, humanistic examination of the first book of the bible" (np). Weiner suggests that while "the importance of [Art Spiegleman's] *Maus* cannot be overstated," *Persepolis* is discussed only in relationship to *Maus*, rather than on its own merits: "As *Maus* had done, *Persepolis* cemented the position of the adult autobiographical novel" (np). While Dan Clowes's *Ghost World*, a "tale of teenage angst," is "perfect in tone and presentation," Alison Bechdel wrote about her gay father; where *Maus* and *Watchmen* "can be traced back to comic book roots," Bechdel and Satrapi's roots in traditional, short-form comics, including Bechdel's "Dykes to Watch out For" and the early circulation of "Persepolis" as a weekly comic strip, are apparently not worth mentioning. Rhoades's and Weiner's texts are two of many that tell the history of comics in North America such that it excludes the stories, lives, and even the creative works of women and LGBTQ* subjects.

The contributions of comics producers at the periphery are often acknowledged, in publications that form the centers of fan and niche cultures, but remain outside of the center of comics production: on websites like the Mary Sue, on blogs and other fan spaces, but also increasingly in academic publications, such as Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women*. At issue here is that, in light of the "complete" accounts of history mentioned

before, texts that perform this particular function are marked off as "special interest:" this is comics, that is women's comics. Increasingly, however, that chasm is shrinking, and will continue to do so as women, people of colour, and LGBTQ* comics producers, critics, and scholars continue to insist on representation.[4]

Comics studies remains at the periphery of the humanities: comics scholars can be found embedded in various departments, and there is currently no formal distinction between scholars whose work is predominantly in the area of comics studies and those who do comics studies piecemeal, or as side-projects.[5] Comics studies, defined loosely as an assemblage of publications, conferences, and scholars, retains the same biases described above at all levels. Unsurprisingly, comics texts that are produced by minorities or represent minority positions tend to be studied in sub-fields that have historically been pushed to the periphery as well: in the corners of literature and philosophy departments already concerned with questions of gender, race, and sexuality. The analytical framework for this project reflects a shift away from this academic garrisoning, insofar as I am broadening the approach to comics studies in order to reach and include the histories of comics produced at the margins. I bring the fields of queer theory, life writing, visual studies, and biopolitics into conversation with a more centrist, normative comics theory,

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[4] This overview of the field is cursory, and paints the trajectory of comics study and reception in broad strokes. For example, I don't mention the increasing number of publications on and by women comics, or the now-biannual Queers in Comics conference in any great detail. I don't mean to erase the important work of comics producers at the margins, but rather to point to overarching trends, including those now heading toward the positive.

[5] This is both a strength and a weakness, and is similar to the current state of affairs in the study of popular culture more generally: the area as a whole benefits from new and interdisciplinary perspectives, while individual conferences and publications deal with an onslaught of proposals and papers mounting similar claims.

and especially with the work of Hillary Chute, whose *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* has been formative for my work.

Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester point to the recent growth in comics study in the academic context, which has been accompanied by a parallel growth in academic "infrastructure" supporting the field. In the last twenty years, the field of comics study has witnessed a growth in publications and audiences for talks and texts alike, along with "archives, conferences, journals, [and] listerv groups" (xi). Comics theory as a distinct body of scholarship has moved through several phases. The earliest comics theorist, Will Eisner, produced work that was mainly prescriptive: he suggested that comics are incapable of moving beyond stereotypical representations, arguing that the medium is inherently plot based and so relies entirely on single-panels and first impressions for character development. However, while Eisner's work on character has been largely disregarded, his descriptions of how sequential art works to communicate meaning, and especially his work on line and shape, have been either generally accepted or adapted by scholars after him. After Eisner, there is a split in comics theory: some scholars, like Scott McCloud, continue to develop an understanding of the comics medium by focusing on form, while others, like Hilary Chute, use an understanding of form in order to produce readings that are grounded in social and cultural contexts. Recent criticism of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* describes more fully the nature of the current split in the area of comics studies: Robyn Warhol suggests that in his aim to find universal language to describe the workings of the comics medium, McCloud fails to "attend to the differences that gender and sexuality might make in one's approach to that

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art" (Warhol 6). Comics scholars have recently been bringing together formalist work like McCloud's with analytical tools crafted with questions of gender, embodiment, and structures of power specifically in mind. The result is a set of complex theoretical lenses that enable readings of comics texts that explore how the visual is a site for cultural and historical articulation.

Hillary Chute, for example, suggests that "the non-transparency of drawing—the presence of the body, through the hand, as a mark in the text—lends a subjective register to the narrative surfaces of comics pages that enables comics works to be productively self-aware in how they 'materialize' history" (457). This project finds a seed in Chute's optimism around the abilities of the graphic novel to serve as a critical form for responding to the complex

> demands of [traumatic] histor[ies]. As it relies on space to represent
> time, the medium of comics becomes structurally equipped to challenge
> traditional, oversimplified modes of storytelling and history writing.
> ("Ragtime" 287)

My interest throughout this project is in the intersections between representations of trauma, bodies, nations, and belonging in coming-of-age graphic novels. I begin from Sara Ahmed's suggestion that "bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others" (*Cultural Politics* 1). Specifically, I am interested in the way that this contact is represented in visual narratives, and in teasing out the consequences of that representation. The genre of the graphic novel lends itself to this particular analysis, owing to the way that the graphic novel engages in the representation of time as space

(McCloud, Chute various), which gives it an added capacity for "express[ing] the jagged weave through paradoxical spaces and shifting temporalities that are the lived experience of history" (Chute, "Ragtime" 287). I build on Chute's work by nuancing it: I suggest that the same characteristics that make comics especially useful for reading history extend to reading histories at the margins, as traumas are made visible in their lingering effects, and further nuance my readings by attending to the particularities of how trauma is experienced by racialized subjects.

I also attend to the intertwined nature of visual and historical exclusions. For example, in her work on family photography, Laura Wexler describes the archive of early American family photography as an incomplete one. This particular archive attests to only certain kinds of families, and not others, and so leaves behind an inaccurate record of the American family. If the photograph is a "democratic medium" as it is "commonly alleged" (Wexler 1), it operates much like actual democracy in American (and Canadian) history, in that it bears traces of its own gaps and absences. Wexler notes a dual set of exclusions in photography as it operates as a visual record of American domesticity through time: while black people have been involved in photography from "shortly after the invention of the daguerreotype," most have been "banished from historical record for no other reason that their racial heritage" (Davis, qtd in Wexler 2), and, access to photography as a means of archiving one's family, one's history, or even one's self has been unevenly distributed. In light of this history, claiming a space for representation, then, is a political act in and of itself; *Skim* and *Fun Home* can both be read as making this kind of claim to self-representation that acts as a response to historical exclusion.

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Working with a more contemporary archive, Sonja Vivienne and Jean Burgess note the particular ways that photography has remained family-centric: "both the industry discourses and everyday practices of such forms of personal photography insistently invited us to construct and expect a normative family gaze" (280). For Marianne Hirsch, the family photograph, with its inscribed "family roles and hierarchies" both "reinforce[s] the power of the notion of 'family'," and makes available certain "broad-based identification[s] and affiliation[s]" (47). The structure of the family photograph is so taken-for-granted that it has become inextricably bound up with a particular shape of the family, and with the set of attachments and relationships that accompany the nuclear family as such. Queer exclusion in the photographic archive occurs when the script of the normative, nuclear family is overwritten onto the images of queer subjects. A search for examples of lesbian visual culture in museum collections further reveals heterosexist underpinnings in concepts such as the aesthetic that have led to queer exclusion in that particular vein of representation as well. When Patrick Steorn asked museum curators to identify representations of lesbian visual culture in their collections, he was met with the suggestion that he was seeking "imagery of social or cultural interest—topics unlikely to meet the aesthetic standards of the museum" (356). By representing lesbian desire and sexuality, *Skim* and *Fun Home* make a claim to this register of representation as well.

The photographic archive operates, too, as a tool for writing national histories of which the family photograph is only one part. Anna Pegler-Gordon notes the exclusion of Chinese labourers from photographs documenting the building of the Central Pacific Railway (51): though Chinese labourers made up "as much as 90 percent of the Central

Pacific Railroad workforce," they have been erased from the official photographic archive, along with their substantial contributions to national industry and the economy. Visual record of Japanese internment in the U.S. marks another kind of historical absence, as the U.S government "produced propaganda films depicting the camps as a benevolent exercise in civil obedience" while simultaneously prohibiting cameras in the camps, and so prohibiting "any significant production of counterimages" (Sturken 36). In Canada, Japanese-Canadian family photographs were confiscated as "'evidence' of disloyalty to Canada," and Japanese Canadians were forbidden from possessing cameras, even prior to relocation (Kunimoto 129). As Marita Sturken notes, the photograph as a "tool of memory" enables both "remembering and forgetting" (29): at the basic level of representation, photographs engage in the process of history making, offering up signification in both presences and absences.

While the photograph is clearly a site at which a white-washed version of the nation is produced, Namiko Kunimoto suggests that the "projected battleground" at which the image of Japanese Canadians was shaped at the outset of WWII extended beyond the photograph, and into the realm of visual representation more generally (129). Canada's first superhero, Nelvana of the comic book series "Nelvana of the Northern Lights," was created during the same period that saw the growth in anti-Japanese sentiment and the restriction of self-representation by Japanese Canadians by way of laws around camera possession and the confiscation of family photographs. One of Nelvana's earliest adventures, "Nelvana of the Northern Lights in the Strange Frozen World of Glacia" depicts Nelvana as protecting the Alcan Highway from the Japanese, who intend to

destroy it in order to cut Canada's northernmost indigenous populations off from supplies. In "Glacia," the Japanese are depicted as racist caricatures, with eyes that are slanted closed, and sly grins. Jason Dittmer's reading of the "Captain America" comics from just prior to America's entry into the war finds a similar pattern of anti-Japanese sentiment and orientalist tropes: the comics depict the Japanese as brutish thugs with animal-like characteristics such as defined eyebrow ridges and fangs, or as "huge, muscle-bound men with topknots" (417). In both of these cases, North American comics were influenced by the "geopolitical circumstances of the war in Europe" (420-1), and, in representing the Japanese as an insidious threat (the "Captain America" comics "prefigure a surprise attack on the United States Pacific Fleet" [417]) reflect anti-Japanese sentiment in the same moment that they reinforce it as a national value. Moreover, the Japanese are inscribed as especially sinister or evil in these works predominantly through images: while their storylines depict them as brutal, it is via drawn images that they are made into either laughable, disempowered tropes or powerful, sub-human monsters. Like photography, comics is engaged in the process of recording and producing cultural climate, and has its own histories, which include both violences and socio-political accomplishments where representation is concerned.[6]

Comics engage in history at both the macro (as detailed above) and micro-levels: comics offer up a platform for thinking about the relationship of the present moment and the immediate past because of the unique manner in which time is represented as space. Narrative time in comics moves across the page both in the sense of the ordering of

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[6]For example, Nelvana is an Inuk woman, making "Nelvana of the Northern Lights" ahead of its time in some regards.

events and in the conscious structuring of images and panels: as such, the particular shape

and content of individual images and the relationship between images meet up together in

the moment of reading in and create something that comics theory scholar Scott McCloud

calls pace.[7] Images, photographs and comics alike produce a particular relationship

between reader, the present, and the past. Each image or frame represents, at once, two

stories about time: first, each image depicts a moment created in the past that can be

viewed, and in some sense experienced in the present, repeatedly; second, each image or

frame operates in the present of the narrative at the moment of reading. Scholars,

including Susan Sontag, Gilbert Caluya, and Ann Cvetkovich suggest that to gaze on a

photograph is to acknowledge that the moment captured therein has slipped away, even if

only by a few seconds. Susan Sontag further suggests that this quality serves as a

reminder of death (154), while Elizabeth Freeman points out that physical visual artifacts

become marked like a palimpsest with traces of past viewers: the past represented in the

image, the past of the artifact itself, and the future death of the viewer are all invoked in

the moment of viewing. The image, photographic or drawn, offers up an account,

however troubled, that is intimately linked to the knowledge of events, spaces, bodies,

and subjects, and inextricably bound up with the relationships, communities, and nations

represented therein, which are equally formed by the act(s) of feeling together: images,

then, speak to the binding power of affect. In this dissertation, I embark on a project to

read coming-of-age graphic novels as speaking to the movements of bodies in the world,

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[7] Pace in comics is similar to pace in film, in that it is an operation of time and narrative together.

and to the manner in which graphic novels make histories, spaces, and affects visible in the moments that they shape (and fail to shape) subjects.

In *Archive of Feelings,* Ann Cvetkovich reads Bechdel's *Fun Home* alongside what are perhaps the two most famous graphic novels in existence: Art Speigelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. Cvetkovich aims to signal that *Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *Fun Home* all bear witness to intergenerational traumas: individual traumas that are absorbed into collective experiences and narratives. Ultimately, Cvetkovich suggests that national traumas reverberate through private lives in multiple iterations, and in iterations that at once uphold normative narratives of nation and deconstruct them. This project likewise looks at three graphic novels that depict the movement of national trauma through private life, and through individual lives: Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home,* which thinks through AIDS and suicide as especially queer traumas that are at once national and personal, public and private; Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim*, in which queer desire meets up with official, public silence around suicide as a queer trauma, and which carries traces of melancholy that linger in the wake of racialized state violence; and Charles Burns' *Black Hole,* which features a disfiguring, sexually transmitted disease that symptomizes the multiple traumas inflicted by the ruthlessness of late capitalism. I do this work on marginality and trauma through a lens that is attentive to the visual register, and to the operation of particular elements of the comics form. My project, therefore, attests to the ability of the comics form to act as a vehicle for nuanced depictions of complex material: as I explain in the next section, I make a case for each of my texts as enacting their particular political engagements *through* the comics form.

Reading Images: An Interdisciplinary Approach

Part of the challenge has been to find an appropriate framework through which to read comics. My solution has been to develop an interdisciplinary approach that pulls from comics theory, as well as from scholars working in the fields of cultural studies, visual studies, bipolitics, and queer theory to develop an understanding of images as doing the work of representation on multiple levels: if the photograph promises to represent something like truth, the drawn image, especially in the context of memoir, promises to capture and distill moments at their most poignant. Throughout this project I move between readings that are based in the material reality of drawn images and comics—I focus on colour, shape, motion, framing, time, and on the workings of splash pages in particular—and on readings based in queer theory and visual studies, which extend understandings of image texts to reflect the national and cultural context central to the traumas and histories that I read in each of my texts.

Some of my framework for this project is based on tools for reading photographs. Noting that two of the three graphic novels considered in this project represent photographic images, I borrow from Ann Cvetkovich's approach to reading photographs, which informs her readings of what she calls the "archive of feeling." Of a photograph represented in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* Cvetkovich says,

> Its real significance lies in what it means to Bechdel looking at it from
>
> adulthood. As such, the photograph becomes a key document in what I have
>
> elsewhere called the 'archive of feeling,' serving as a touchstone for both her

father's feelings and her own, as well as the complexities of their relationship. (*Drawing the Archive* 116-7)

One of the main through-lines of this project is that images, photographic and otherwise, belong to, and generate, an "archive of feeling," a way of accounting for, documenting, and engaging with affect as it forms the "foundation for the formation of public culture" (10), and so both represent and shape their contexts.

I also take my cue from Judith Butler's *Frames of War*, which is interested in both the way that photographs are framed and the way that photographs, in turn, frame their subjects, objects, and contexts: in framing people and actions within a space, the photograph, too, frames the nation, or tells a story about which kinds of lives are possible there. For Butler, the promise of realness that the photograph carries implicates the subjects pictured, those behind the camera, and those willing to consume or circulate the image. The nation, then, becomes the backdrop against which certain actions are possible: in the case of the Abu Ghraib photographs, for example, the photographs framed the US a space in which inhumane, politically motivated acts of torture are possible, and even required. Butler's interest in frames is most useful to this project at the place where it extends beyond the photograph, however. For Butler, frames in writing, a category that I extend to include graphic novels, work as in photography, and link to broader norms in determining which lives are grievable. Grievability is, of course, not the only element of life that the norm influences. Norms also determine social organization: which bodies and which subjects are located at the center, and which are not; which bodies are subject to increased surveillance or social policing. There are further consequences to the uneven

distribution of grievability, as to be outside of the category of "grievable" is to be, in some fashion, expendable. The lines of grievability are cast alongside lines of race; Anne Cheng's racial melancholia, the psychic injury that occurs at the site of racialized subject formation because of histories of racialized trauma, can be read as a potential result of violences enacted against people groups considered ungrievable.

I am interested in showing how the nation, as an assemblage of norms and possibilities, is experienced, or made manifest, at the level of affect: in the spaces that demonstrate citizenship and community as lived through feeling. I use the work of scholars like Lily Cho and Gilbert Caluya, whose work on photographs and affect underscores the ability of images to speak to exclusions and bad feelings, but also to the ability of bad feelings to produce community, inside of what Raymond Williams calls the structure of feeling, and thus to create space for attachments that are based the circulation of negative affect, and melancholia specifically for Caluya and Cho. I look to other scholars to flesh out my framework for reading affect. Thus, for example, I use the work of Michael Warner to discuss queer shame in my first chapter, and suggest that the pro/anti shame distinction that Warner lays out is predominantly useful for laying out loose divisions, such as the one between Alison and her father, that is upheld in certain moments and challenged in others. In my second chapter, I read melancholia as binding Skim into a larger history, as well as into particular friendships, and in my final chapter I focus on the humanizing effect of empathy, or of being made to feel with someone. Butler suggests that "it is always possible to say that the affective register where precarity dwells is something like dehumanization" ("Precarity Talk" 173), and in doing so links precarity,

both the fact of it and the feeling of it, to the production of waste populations. My dissertation makes a contribution to the fields of queer theory and biopolitics in its thinking through of the relationship of affect to the creation and management of waste populations. Affect offers up a modality for living that acts as a counter to the development of waste populations in multiple registers: by shifting focus onto feeling rather than efficiencies, but also by allowing those designated as waste to feel together, and to thus create communities inside of the space of marginalization.

Chapter Breakdown:

To "come of age," is, in the popular imaginary, to begin to enter the world as an adult: to shoulder increased responsibility, but also to carry more fully the weight and responsibility of citizenship. The coming-of-age moment is, then, an inherent piece of the project of nation-building: national climate, and even national coherence sometimes shifts along with major changes in demographic. Coming-of-age narratives have long focused on the production of autonomous selves, in accordance with liberal humanist ideologies that "value the autonomous individual" above all else (Rishoi 117). Coming of age texts that focus on marginalized subjects, however, represent values and ideas that are at risk of becoming subsumed under already established discourses, deemed to be radical, or shrugged off as irrelevant. The value of coming of age texts that do this work, then, is in representing that which may be unrepresentable in the public sphere.

Each text considered here explores the workings of personal traumas that are linked up with public ones, and national traumas that bear down on individuals in the

forms of various pressures and exclusions. The bodies at the center of these texts perform

the difficult work of carving their own space where none existed before: Alison from

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is tasked with building an archive around her father's death

and her own incipient queerness; Skim of Tamaki and Tamaki's *Skim* finds a way to

carve out a community and sense of belonging, even after she is made the subject of

extensive social surveillance in response to her particular mode of grieving the loss of a

fellow queer and an unrequited love; and Chris, from Charles Burns's *Black Hole* bears

the dual burden of social expulsion and misogynistic expectations around the availability

of her body for the sexual pleasure of others. Each of these texts, too, thinks about

grievability, and does so by working through (or, in the case of *Black Hole*, up to) a

suicide. Bechdel's text takes up the task of history and memory: she writes her father into

an archive in a move that is motivated by a thoughtful, honest examination of his life and

possible futures—she avoids glorifying, or even forgiving him in death, and in doing so

speaks to the archive as a space in which lives can (and must) be recorded on their own

terms, and with careful attention to their complexities and nuance. *Skim* thinks about

grievability by mounting a critique of therapy culture in light of the mode of grieving that

her school and peers take up in response to the suicide of John Reddear. Rather than

grieving Reddear, the school and its students celebrate his life, and seem only to grieve

his lack of access to resources for coping with depression. Skim refuses the script that the

school expects her to take up, and instead reflects on the lingering effects of social

exclusion in her own life, and insists on remembering John Reddear as chronically queer,

rather than curably depressed. Finally, grievability in Burns' text operates in the spaces

between the social exclusion that Chris endures and the inability of those who claim to care for her to account for or mitigate the damage of their own actions—namely of their entitlement to her body—on her psyche. Chris's suicide at the end of the text feels like a relief that has been too long coming, which reverberates backward through her narrative and underscores her position as a subject driven to self-extermination by the unlivable conditions forced onto her by virtue of consistent and violent objectification.

My opening chapter, "I ached as if he were already gone: Queer History as a Tool for Survival," takes up Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home.* Bechdel's *Fun Home* follows Alison, an avatar for Bechdel herself, as she revisits her family history by way of both documents and memories in order to come to terms with her father's death. While the narrative falls short of finding closure for Alison or her family—by the narrative's end Alison has no concrete proof that her father killed himself, although she maintains a preference for that possibility over others—it instead illuminates and makes available a series of imperfect attachments that provide a kind of retroactive, equally imperfect intimacy between Alison and her father; the looking-backward that Alison does in order to explore this history allows her to figure her own childhood, and her later coming-of-age, in terms of a national context that is volatile in particular ways: Watergate, Stonewall, the AIDS crisis, and the Reagan presidency all appear as actors in the assemblage of her life.

Bechdel's *Fun Home* has received extensive academic attention: Ann Cvektovich, Julie Watson, Hillary Chute, Valerie Rohy, Jennifer Lemberg, and Robyn Warhol have made significant contributions to the study of this text, which have been important to my

work in this chapter. My focus in this chapter is on Bechdel's use of the queer archive. I build on Ann Cvetkovich's work in order to signal that the political and the personal seep into one another: political moments and shifts reverberate in private lives, while private traumas either reflect public ones or become them, even if only in limited ways. I suggest that Bechdel's use of documents through *Fun Home* offers up a queer modality for doing and understanding history that challenges normative chronologies, narratives, and modes of belonging.

The subject of my second chapter, Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim,* follows Kimberly Cameron, a Toronto teenager of mixed Japanese descent also known as Skim, through an especially tumultuous year at her Catholic high school. In *Skim,* ordinary seeming events—Skim and her best friend, Lisa, fight; a romantic relationship comes to an end—brush up against extraordinary ones: Skim and Lisa attend a wiccan coven in the woods; a teen from a sibling school dies by suicide. Concomitant to the unfolding of narrative events, which take shape predominantly around the school's way of dealing with a grieving, and somewhat shocked student population, is Skim's burgeoning queer sexuality, and the loss of her first love: Skim falls in love with her English teacher, Ms. Archer, who is transferred to another school after their relationship grows too intimate. Like *Fun Home*, *Skim* develops a first-person narrative, placing the "I" that represents Skim at the center of a text that explores community and un-belonging. In this chapter, titled "'Julie Peters is telling people that you are showing classic signs of someone who is suicidal:' Social Exclusion and the Management of Grief in Jillian and Mariko Tamaki's *Skim,*" I read *Skim* as a text that uses the story of one teen's private struggles in order to

shed light on the operations of social systems as they reflect Canadian culture, history, and especially Canada's relationship to the value of multiculturalism. Ultimately, I suggest that *Skim* speaks to an especially North American pattern of maintaining sustained interest in one trauma at the cost of all others. The text holds the traumas of queer desire and racialized subjectivity in balance with one another but, as Monica Chiu points out, relegates any exploration of those topics to arguably extra-narrative spaces, and thus subordinates them in relation to those traumas that are less politically marked[8]. For example, the school goes to great lengths to allow students space in which to grieve for the teenaged boy whose death is at the center of the text, while avoiding any interrogation of the rumored role of homophobia in his death. For Chiu, the melancholy that undergirds the text's affective work is directly bound up with Skim's experiences as a teenager *outside* of her particular experiences as a queer, Asian Canadian teen. Building on Chiu's observation, I argue that though the text certainly subordinates the particular traumas of queer desires and racialized subjectivity, it binds the same traumas *indirectly* to the melancholia that permeates the text. In accordance with Ahmed's theories of orientation, the traumas of queer desire and racialized subjectivity exist in the background of Skim's life. For Ahmed, phenomenology can be made queer by "facing the back," or becoming oriented by that which is in the background, rather than allowing it to fade away, or be subsumed by that which is in front (*Queer Phenomenology* 28-29). Seeing *Skim* through a lens of queer phenomenology means reading the traumas of race and

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[8]I don't mean, here, that the traumas that form the center of the plot—John Reddearr's suicide, most notably—are not politically marked: they absolutely are. However, the manner in which they are so marked differs in kind.

queer desire as setting the stage for her encounters and events, rather than sitting at the edge of her existence. Thus, those traumas are foundational to her experiences, rather than peripheral.

Charles Burns's *Black Hole,* the subject of my third and final chapter, follows a group of white American teenagers whose quiet, suburban lives are interrupted when they contract a disfiguring, sexually transmitted disease. Burns speaks to and from the margins in a fairly literal sense: once infected, the teens are banished from their community, and take to the woods in an attempt to find security away from their non-infected community, which responds to them with disgust, and occasionally violence. Even among the infected teens, however, the distribution of risk and burden is unequal: Chris, a conventionally attractive, popular teen, is further marginalized by her position as both a woman and a desired sex object. Her body quickly becomes her biggest enemy: she is made vulnerable both by the visible, growing signs of the disease responsible for her social ostracization, and by her femaleness. She internalizes the inescapability of her social position, and soon comes to think of herself as dirty and undeserving of either care or material resources, taking first to alcohol to numb her feelings of anxiety and depression, and eventually committing suicide.

My chapter on *Black Hole,* titled "'I felt like I was looking into the future … and the future looked really messed up:" White Monsters and the (Re)Distribution of Risk in Charles Burns's *Black Hole,"* approaches *Black Hole* as distinct from *Fun Home* and *Skim* in several important ways. Burns' text is speculative fiction, rather than memoir or pseudo-autobiographical realist fiction. It was written and published serially between

1995 and 2004, and later collected into a graphic novel. *Black Hole* thus exists in closer relation to comics in its formatting and circulation history than any of the other primary texts considered herein. In its circulation and relationship to form, *Black Hole* also straddles the divide between "popular" and "literary" in a way that *Fun Home* and *Skim* do not. Part of the appeal of a text like *Black Hole* in the context of this project is that it provides a lens into the world of comics outside of the literary prestige of the graphic novel, while remaining well inside of the scope of this project based on its content and uses of form. Or, *Black Hole* allows me to stretch my claims beyond those texts that are legitimated inside of the academy, and to suggest that the increased interest in narratives of trauma, nation, sexuality, and the body that I recognize in *Fun Home* and *Skim* extends to contemporary iterations of the coming-of-age story in graphic fiction. Rather than operating in the purview of the contemporary autobiographical and semi-autobiographical text, this particular orientation towards community and belonging hinges on the precarious engagement with the conditions of life that has always been true for certain subjects, and which becomes increasingly part of the norm for citizens and non-citizens alike under late capitalism and in the neoliberal moment. The decision to depict white subjects as burdened by the same exclusions that have long marked the conditions of life for people of colour is effective and problematic at once. To do so is to bring awareness of the violence of late capitalism into the dominant culture by way of writing it onto bodies that are so often made safe from the pressures of the system. However, the same move ignores the subjects who are at the greatest risk of experiencing violence, and at once underscores a cultural bias in which problems emerge as problems only when they

begin to effect the white majority, and are often otherwise ignored. My reading of Burns'

text finds several elements of Burns's narrative productive, while accounting for this

tension.

Throughout this dissertation, I analyze national traumas that intersect with the

lives of individuals, and note that traces of national trauma are present in visual narratives

in the forms of both overt signification and in the structures of feeling through which

citizens must engage with the world. In this way, I bring the lens of affect theory to bear

on the intersection of national traumas and individual lives, and ultimately make a case

for affect as a mechanism through which communities can be forged. Alison's attachment

to her father through an "archive of feeling" (Cvetkovich's term) is only one example of

this: Skim's social exclusion, and her few friendships are forged in part by negative

affects, and the teens in *Black Hole* bond across social divides that would have been

impermeable in their pre-infected lives because of their shared feelings of precarity, and

shared position as objects of disgust. Using the lenses of comics theory, biopolitics, and

queer theory, I demonstrate that my chosen texts find lines (and nodes) of attachment

across perilous and precarious conditions of life.

"I ached as if he were already gone:" Queer Memory as a Tool for Survival in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

"Our interest in everyday life, in how global politics and history manifest themselves at the level of lived affective experience, is bolstered by the role that queer theory has played in calling attention to the integral role of sexuality in lived experience."

-Ann Cvetkovich, 461.
Public Feelings.

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is bookended by a truncated iteration, and subsequent rewriting, of the myth of Icarus. The opening sequence depicts a young Alison and her father engaging in the game of "airplane" (3), which Bechdel's narrator notes is reminiscent of a style of acrobatics referred to as "Icarian Games." In a twist that is characteristic of the text's complex relationship with chronology, narrative, and time, the narrator states: "in our particular reenactment of this mythic relationship, it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky" (4). The closing page of the novel brings the framing of Alison's life story as told through her search for a kind of truth about her father that is available to her only in his death full circle with a depiction of young Alison leaping from a diving board into her father's outstretched arms, which is accompanied by the text: "but in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt" (232).

This moment indicates a frame, both within Bechdel's text and my reading of it that thinks of time as a set of telescoping lenses through which texts may be read and re-read, a characteristic that Hillary Chute reads as particular to the postmodern text. Linda Hutcheon describes the same characteristic when she refers to contemporary fiction's mode of operation via "reevaluation of and dialogue with the past in light of the present"

(19). Hutcheon's definition of the postmodern text links up with what Marianne Hirsch

calls "post memory," which is described by Jennifer Lemberg as a "term for how the

memory of trauma belonging to one generation shapes the memories of the next" (Hirsch

22, Lemberg 130). *Fun Home* takes up both of these approaches in its thinking through of

the workings of history. Specifically, *Fun Home'*s Alison reinterprets both past and

present through allusions to family history in the form of memories, stories, photographs,

national political history including events and policies, and through a rich archive of texts

and mythologies. For Bechdel, history is never static. Rather, history is written and re-

written by context as much as by events, memories, and discoveries. Take, for example,

the bewildered college-aged Alison who lays on her dorm room floor, "stupefied" by a

revelation about "the thing with Roy"—the affair her father had with a family

babysitter—which she frames as amounting to a "wholesale revision of [her] history"

(79). Or, consider how hard the text works to depict Bruce's presence, imperfect as it is,

in Alison's childhood (perhaps as a revision itself) as a measure towards correcting the

manner in which Bruce's "absence resonate[s] retro-actively, echoing back through all the

time I knew him" (23, Lemberg 131). This resonance is one of many that describes a core

piece of *Fun Home's* project: to situate personal traumas in relation to historical ones. In

this examination of Bechdel's text, I take many cues from Ann Cvetkovich's "Drawing

the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home,*" and build on that project by further

nuancing some of Cvetkovich's claims, including by bringing a lens of public sentiment

and suspicions around both Watergate and the AIDS epidemic to bear on my reading.

Writing Lives: Where the Personal Meets the Political

Benedict Anderson gestures to a link between capitalism and the printing press in the fomentation of national communities in his text *Imagined Communities*. A major focus for Anderson is the binding power of the printed word, which he articulates as resulting from a convergence of a particular moment in the history of reading publics with vernacular publishing. An increased demand for readily available texts, combined with advancements in technology that enabled mass printing and circulation, meant that reading material began to be printed in vernaculars—the common and comfortable languages of citizens including the non-elite or middle class. The shift towards texts printed and circulated in vernaculars meant that larger segments of populations began to feel connected through shared reading practices: not only could a large chunk of a population engage in a shared reading practice, but they were further bound by the act of reading the same text in the same language (Anderson 44). Newspapers, which could be printed daily and circulated widely, further cemented reading publics to their larger, and even national communities. Early newspapers devoted space mainly to issues of trade and business, and focused to a lesser degree on "world events," thus signaling a particular relationship of the reader to both the local and the global (62). Citizenship in the imagined community of nation and the sub-communities contained therein in the form of states, provinces, cities, and towns, is then shown to be meted out according to geographic position, an assumed minimum literacy in a vernacular, and the practice of imagining that links citizens together via an idea of a singular, cohesive community, despite the fact that most citizens will never meet.

The first document that Bechdel reproduces is a copy of the local newspaper dated July 3, 1980 (27), which reveals a front page headline that reads "Local Man Dies After Being Hit by Truck." This headline is nestled above (and in bigger font than) an article on the rising heat death toll in the southwest (88), and sits to the left of coverage on the lingering aftermath of Three-Mile Island. Further down the page, in a panel that purports to be depicting the late Bruce Bechdel's copy of Albert Camus's "A Happy Death" as evidence of his suicide, sits another newspaper. It is dated two days earlier, and bears similarly competing headlines: "Reagan has Reservations about Running with Bush" (in the same space as the headline on Bruce's death), "Justices Uphold Hyde Amendment: Curbs on Abortion Stand" (left), and "Heat Persists in Southwest: Wheat in Trouble" (27). In the space of two panels, Bechdel gives readers three types of information: the newspapers signal themselves as time-orientation devices in the narrative, while also giving detailed information about both the community that Bruce has exited and to which Alison has returned in order to mourn him, and the affective, political, and literal climate of America at the time of Bruce's death. I will address the second of these first, as the first and third are most tightly bound up in one another.

Bechdel dedicates a sizeable portion of her narrative to building up a sense of the community in which she was raised. She includes a map intended to highlight the town's small size and the close proximity of family (146), and juxtaposes the town and the funeral home that her family operates, which is affectionately called the "fun home," with the cosmopolitan, global-village life that she and her family might have lived out had they been able to stay in Germany (most notably on pages 32, 71, and 72), where her father

had been posted for military duty. The juxtaposition of this focus and the space dedicated to it with the effectiveness of the newspapers that appear in only two panels speaks to the power of the newspaper to act as a snapshot of community by giving detailed information about community events, citizens, and values at a glance. What the newspapers suggest is this: the death of a single man is as much local news, carries as much affective and political weight as the precarious nature of the local food supply, 188 lives that are physically and affectively separate from the community of the town while remaining part of the larger national community, and even the Republican party in-fighting in light of the upcoming presidential election.

These two panels further establish the backdrop against which the life events uncovered by Alison throughout the text occur, including Bruce's affairs with his high school students. The implications of this are stark: in a community as small and tightly knit as this one, the silences around Bruce's homosexuality—and his suspect relationships with some of the town's youth—that Alison must navigate are tied to the maintenance and preservation of that community. Information, here, is affective: different ways of knowing are bound up in different ways of feeling, a conglomeration then sutured to the mechanics of information circulation in the community. It is important, for example, that Bruce's death is reported in a manner that implies a tragic accident ("local man dies after being hit by truck" [27]), and which invokes a kind of mourning tied to the sudden, too-soon nature of his death, rather than in a manner that leaves open the possibility of death-by-suicide, the mourning of which, as evidenced by the very existence of this text, requires a more complex grappling of such affects as shame. Bruce's death is allowed to circulate as

information, so long as it is packaged to evoke only sadness, while information about Bruce's relationships with under-aged boys is tied to shame, and to community shame, and so does not circulate nearly as easily.

The simplest work that these two panels do, after marking the time and date of Bruce's death, is signal documents as markers of time in the text. Documents that reveal dates not only situate the events of the text in relation to real time (the text is autobiographical), but also in relation to one another (which does not mean that they always signify as the present of the text), serving as a helpful guide in a text that weaves together multiple timelines. Documents that serve this function in Bechdel's text come in multiple iterations: newspapers (27, 155, 173, 195), personal correspondence (28, 48, 49, 58, 62, 63, 65, 145, 211, 212), court summons (184), and police reports (161), to name only a few. While documents of this type do offer information, they also do more. In addition to referencing events that inform the affective and political environment that foregrounds the text while existing outside of the explicit narrative, the signaling of replicated documents as a time-keeping mechanism suggests that the text wishes also to signal a chasm between those replicated documents that do and do not act as temporal cues, which I will return to after a brief discussion of the role of newspapers in framing Bruce Bechdel's death.

The particular shape that the papers take is important here: the report of Bruce Bechdel's death sits alongside reports of national news, signaling the importance of the death to the community. One might even go as far as to claim that the newspaper provokes, and also calls for, a collective affective response: the community is called upon

by the local paper, a vessel that circulates the same news in the same time to a group of people and therefore unifies them, to *mourn* Bruce's death. Elizabeth Freeman remarks on just this phenomenon, though she doesn't make the exact leap to newspapers for which I am advocating: "soliciting the masses to stop and feel together, activities done in tandem with strangers seen and unseen, like singing the national anthem or watching the Olympics, revivify national belonging as a matter of shared emotion, rather than civic action" (6).

I want to suggest that the newspapers that figure in Bechdel's narrative are working at multiple levels: each iteration makes visible some national issue, while each paper remains a small community newspaper, and retains its affective, communal attachment to a specific set of bodies: the town in which the paper is embedded, and the households that make it up. At the edges of the frame are everyday household objects (a mug, salt and pepper shakers, a teaspoon) that locate the newspaper literally and figuratively in the home. The newspaper is, literally, on a wooden table, likely a kitchen table. Figuratively, the newspaper is located in the space of communal consumption and conversation. The news of Bruce's death, like the news of the nuclear accident and the mounting heat wave death toll, will circulate in conversations across the community, and will ripple through social spheres in accordance with the respective positions that each subject occupies: young people will tell each other about it at school, while women in the community will discuss it when they meet at the grocery store. Bruce's death, then, is embedded into the community on at least two registers: officially, by way of the

newspaper, and in a more informal, personal way by virtue of how it will circulate through the town's social network.

The second frame of interest here, located at the opposite corner, depicts a newspaper from three days earlier that reports on Ronald Reagan and George Bush's upcoming run for the oval office, the same heat wave, and a court ruling that maintains a series of "curbs on abortion" (27). This newspaper, too, is located on the kitchen table, signaling that the political maneuvers depicted also circulate in conversations in the community, as the kitchen table signifies an orientation towards a particular intimacy: it is the place around which the family gathers to share food and conversation, and thus the material on the depicted front cover is brought into the family, and the larger community, in this fashion. The work of the frame, according to the accompanying narrative, is to cause the reader to focus on the copy of Albert Camus' *A Happy Death*, which Bruce Bechdel had been "reading and leaving around the house in what might be construed as a deliberate manner" (27). Or: the narrative directs the reader to this frame as containing a possible clue to the mystery of Bruce Bechdel's death.

For both Elizabeth Freeman and Benedict Anderson, the daily nature of newspapers impacts on their ability to bind. For Anderson, the newspaper situates the reader in a geographic locale demarcated by national borders, and ensures that a certain set of topics—the national economy, national security, and localised emergencies, for example—get consistent representation. In turn, those characteristics begin to define the health and well being of the nation. A strong national economy, for example, is framed as good for all citizens, despite the fact that economic stimuli, including Reagonomic style

tax cuts that some believe are necessary for economic growth, might damage certain smaller, localised economies.

Freeman's conception of the binding ability of the newspaper maps onto the act of reading about an event simultaneous to others in one's community: for Freeman, the experience of any event in time with others (she gives the example of singing the national anthem together) signals that bodies belong together, or are "in time" with one another. Freeman suggests that the modes of community that come out of being "in time" with one another can operate inside of normative structures, as reading the newspaper does, or outside of them. Mourning, for example, operates "outside of ordinary time, as recurrent, even sacred" (5), making the period of mourning queer by definition, even as the propensity of doing together as a mechanism for binding subjects together remains. If Bechdel's project can be framed as one that comes out of mourning, or out of a desire to make sense of mourning, then it is also one that operates "outside of ordinary time" (5), and is queer in the same moment that is historical, even to the degree that it makes the historical queer by virtue of thinking historically through a queer lens.

The two newspaper covers that appear in the family home following Alison's return in response to the death of her father (27) lay out the political and affective climate in both the larger community of America and the smaller community of Bruce and Alison's hometown at the time of Bruce's death. The papers clearly indicate that Bruce's death took place in early July 1980, just four months before the presidential election in which Ronald Reagan was elected, and six months before he officially began acting as president. Unlike many other narrative references to the past, which are often shrouded in

language like "maybe" and "I think," the newspapers, like other documents in the text, offer up a kind of certainty that comes along with their referent: presumably, a real newspaper (photograph, court summons) identical to this one exists somewhere.

Alison and Bruce's respective lives, then, are necessarily framed by vastly different political and affective climates; Reagan's presidency is foundational to later American economic policy characterised by cost cutting and disinvestment in the national social security network, subsequent biopolitical regimes and intensifications, and the rise of the "New Right." While Bruce's political leanings and solidarities remain unknown, his life remains marked by pre-Reagan era events and affects: he lived through the Stonewall riots of 1969 and the decade of struggle for acceptance and equality that followed. His gayness, named here as such because he foments his identity prior to the gay community's reclamation of the term "queer," is equally marked by secrecy and small gains in the post-Stonewall era, and the growing specter of the AIDS epidemic that reverberates into his narrative by way of same looking-back that allows Alison to find coincidences, parallels, and other hidden moments in her family's history.

Bruce and Alison's respective relationships to the AIDS epidemic and to a queer archive give clues about the text's complex engagement with history, one which informs (and sometimes complicates) my reading(s). Bruce's narrative is, of course, filtered through a lens of the present. Readers, then, are forced to confront the workings of history in narrativization: the North American AIDS epidemic, simultaneously in the reader's past and Bruce's unrealised future, is, for him, "narrated more than ... lived" (Schudson 58), but nonetheless tied as an historic possibility, a ghostly trace, to his story. Bechdel

makes it plain that she wants readers to grapple with AIDS as a specter, a haunting that is both constrained by historical time and outside of it. If, as I argue later, the "present" from which the text is narrated is haunted by the search for a cure for AIDS concomitant to the worst of the epidemic, so too must the narrative as told from that present be haunted. Because of the text's engagements with history, and with queer conceptions of time, Bruce is equally impacted by AIDS and not: his life and experiences remain outside of the real threat of AIDS, but his narrative becomes a piece in a larger history that includes AIDS, as expressed within a text told from a present that is deeply scarred by the human cost of neoliberal policy in relation to that epidemic.

Bechdel situates her text, and the segments of family life that she orients her reader towards, in the context of two particular American presidencies that are known to have changed the affective engagements of Americans to their government and, for some, to their daily lives. Bruce's death is contextualised as directly pre-President Reagan, while Nixon, along with Watergate, provides the context for her own coming into puberty; "this juxtaposition of the last days of childhood with those of Nixon and the end of that larger, national innocence may seem trite. But it was only one of many heavy-handed plot devices to befall my family" (155). The contextualising loss of "national innocence" is furthered layered in references to the Gay Village in New York City, to especially gay masculine aesthetics, and to the Stonewall riots; the loss of national innocence is one that arrives dually on the tails of Watergate and post-Stonewall bids for gay acceptance. Or, as Julia Watson puts it, amid the "the unmasking of political 'dirty tricks' in the Nixon

administration [which occurs] simultaneously with cultural coming-out in films, novels and popular culture" ("Pleasures" 304).

Bruce's court case, during which charges of "furnishing a malt beverage to a minor" (175) are dismissed on the condition that Bruce attend six months of counseling (180), represents another loss of innocence even as the named charges are substituted for "true offense," which is available only in the "whiff of ... sexual aroma" of the official sentence (180). This loss of innocence is strictly judicial: Bruce's guilt, the "true" root of which is known but masked, is made evident in his punishment, which marks him as having lost the presumed innocence that is hypothetically afforded all American citizens. Each of these moments, the reference to Nixon and Watergate, the onset of puberty and early sexual experimentation for Alison, and Bruce's court case all occur in the same few pages, are all linked as the personal "loss of innocence" that mirrors the larger political one.

Michael Schudson points out that in the days after the Watergate scandal broke, public mistrust was split between the government and the journalists charged with reporting on it. For Schudson, the theatre of the White House press conference following Watergate is indicative of the space between event, recording, and historical memory: he describes prevailing historical memory of Watergate as unspecific, and the event itself as one that is "directly an affair of the state, and only indirectly through the media an affair of society ... [one that is] narrated more than an experience lived" (58). Schudson's lens on Watergate is useful for thinking about Bechdel's historical approach. Bruce's court case might be said to be, like the White House press coverage following the breaking of

that story, theatrical: in both instances there is a public performance of justice—whether in reporting to the public or in local judicial process—that reveals a wrongdoing via the same channels through which the event is processed. In both cases, the so-called theatrics also shape the official record, or the official history of the event.

Bechdel's text, then, bears "witness to intimate life" ("Drawing the Archive" Cvetkovich 112) as a mechanism for linking up meaningful, ordinary lives with their respective, complex contexts in order to rewrite, or at least to re-orient the significances of a series of poignant, formative moments. The historical lens that Bechdel applies is one that resists linear movements through time, and instead makes strides and leaps through flashpoint moments in order to give them life, or to flesh them out more fully. She does this by moving through the past according to a map made partially of memory and partially of documents and archival materials: texts, photographs, newspaper clippings. These artifacts offer "access to history" while simultaneously creating an "archive of feeling," or acting as "memorial talismans that carry the affective weight of the past" ("Drawing the Archive" Cvetkovich 120). Further, as Ann Cvetkovich suggests, Bechdel's text traffics in an economy of affect in which drawing is an act of witnessing. This set of scenes does certainly amount to a kind of witnessing, that of the triple loss of innocence that seem intertwined in some way. And, to witness a loss, or perhaps to describe what one has witnessed as "loss" denotes affect: loss is often a way of feeling, rather than strictly a material reality (although the presence of the Bechdel family funeral home doesn't allow the reader to fully forget the material reality of loss either). Thus

Bechdel takes up an especially queer engagement with history: one that centres around *feeling* history as much as witnessing and recording it (Freeman 93).

Like Watergate, the Reagan presidency offers contextual information that enables a reading that links up the personal, private difficulties of queer life with a larger, national struggle. When Ronald Reagan took the presidency in 1981, the United States of America was entering a slump in its post-Vietnam recovery, and was engaged in a nuclear arms race with the USSR. It was a moment of heightened tensions that would characterize the cold war for much of the 1980s. Reagan inherited an America eager to recover from the oil crises and attending economic recession of the seventies, yet equally hampered by the looming threat of the cold war. While I in no way mean to take up the stance of a Reagan apologist, it cannot be understated that Reagan's presidential changes, especially his changes to economic policy, the structure of the government, and American defense spending, were made possible in part by the state of the nation in 1981 (Rosseau, Niskanen).

Of the changes that Reagan made, I will focus on two:[9] he cut spending to the welfare state in order to increase funding to the military without increasing national debt,

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[9] This chapter does not take up a discussion of Reagan's AIDS policy in detail, owing to my reading of Bechdel's project: Bechdel is much more focused on cultural climate than on specific policy, which is why her readers learn that the fallout from Watergate was a loss of national innocence without learning any specific details about what actually happened at Watergate. What is important about Reagan's AIDS policy here is that for the majority of his presidency there wasn't one: the Whitehouse under Reagan remained silent on AIDS 1985, during which he paid lip service to AIDS research in a single speech. In 1988, a full seven years after the initial outbreak, he increased funding for AIDS research. Bechdel's narrative doesn't make it into 1988, however: instead, the latest years of Alison's life are marked by the cultural shifts that I discuss here, and Reagan's official silence on AIDS.

and he garnered support for doing so by disparaging minority and special interest groups. Reagan begins this work almost immediately, and makes the following statement about special interest groups in his inaugural address:

> We hear much of special interest groups. Well, our concern must be for a special interest group that has been too long neglected. It knows no sectional boundaries or ethnic and racial divisions, and it crosses political party lines. It is made up of men and women who raise our food, patrol our streets, man our mines and factories, teach our children, keep our homes, and heal us when we're sick— professionals, industrialists, shopkeepers, clerks, cabbies, and truckdrivers. They are, in short, "We the people," this breed called Americans. (Inaugural Address 1981)

There is a certain stickiness to the rhetorical tactics here used: clearly Reagan says one thing, and implies another. What is explicit here is that "We the people" have been neglected. "We the people" deserve better, and will benefit from the renewed focus on the everyday American that Reagan promises his economic policy, including tax cuts, decreased government spending, and, eventually, reduced inflation, will produce. What is explicit in the same language is that "we the people" have been neglected for the sake of special interest groups.

Who, exactly, might be part of a special interest group is not at all well-defined by president Reagan, except in one State of the Union Address, during which he refers to special interest groups as those that have the money to put representatives in Washington, and thus to have their concerns heard. Special interest groups are left amorphous: though

some bodies certainly have special interests, any body might be included in the category, and, as implied by the strategic turn of phrase through which the Reagan administration promises not to deny access to the welfare state to anyone with real need, any body might access the resources set aside for special interest groups at the cost of "we the people," whose resources, it is implied, are being drained by anyone and everyone who claims to be "special." Such is the intentionally confused manner in which Reagan frames special interest groups: they are the wealthiest of all Americans, those with enough political and financial savvy to bring their specific needs to Washington; yet they are also taking up too much space, making up too great a percentage of the American public, and thus acting as a burden on the American economy. They access, perhaps illegitimately, the funding reserved for those with "real need," and their specialized concerns—such concerns as access to health care, freedom of religion, and freedom from discrimination, concerns that are not in any way "special" except when denied to certain bodies based on one's sex, gender, race, etc—provide, for Reagan's vision of America, little more than a distraction from the "real" needs of the American people.

The particularities of the Reagan presidency, especially those made evident in the inaugural address and concerning special interest groups resonate with both the histories and hauntings that Bechdel's text lays as a foundation for its narrative. Certainly, this framing of special interest groups as hogging resources, which reads as an especially volatile, violent conception of special interest groups in light of the AIDS epidemic which will break out across American in the years following this address, speaks to Julie Watson's conception of the project at the core of *Fun Home,* which is to situate "sexual

desire as a struggle to assert bodies and pleasures in the face of an American history of pathologizing them" ("Autographic Disclosures" 53).

The Reagan presidency and the weighing of the necessity to assert one's subjectivity even in a context in which one is pathologized for the very thing she aims to assert is further complicated by another line that reverberates through the text: that of nuclear family. Two years into his presidency, Reagan refers to the family as the "basic unit of the society," and states that "the concept of the family ... must withstand the trends of lifestyle and legislation" (Nov 3, 1983). This statement pits "the concept of the family" against gays and lesbians, who are referred to in the thinly veiled "trends of lifestyle." Reagan goes as far as to link special interest groups to the "mortgag[ing of] our future and our children's future for the temporary convenience of the present" (Inaugural Address, 1981), a statement that echoes Lee Edelman's naming of the sinthomosexual, or the figure that engages in non-reproductive sex—including the elderly, but also gay and queer people—and is thus conceived of in the popular imaginary as aligned with the death drive (45, 49, 50). Bruce's death makes a certain kind of sense in relation to the logic of the sinthomosexual, as his gayness marks him as having no future. His relationship to the nuclear family, however, complicates this reading: he performs all of the "proper" duties assigned to him by the forces of patriarchy and chrononormativity (the normalizing effect that time has on the organization of one's life), and does, in fact, produce a biological line for himself.

In the same moment that he publicly denounced the credibility of special interest groups and encouraged general suspicion of citizens accessing the welfare state, president

Reagan discreetly made a call for the end of identity politics. Michael Warner identifies the early eighties as the moment of emergence for the political homosexual—the homosexual for whom internal debates within the queer community center around tensions between acceptance and shame—acceptance, for Warner, was offered to the queer community in exchange for enacting a public persona vacant of any sign of sex or sexuality: between the desire to fit in with straight America and the need for an affirmation of queer sex as part of a healthy, or even, perhaps, unhealthy queer sexuality and citizenship (50). The shift in the eighties that spawned this particular set of tensions was embodied, for Warner, in the tension between the safer sex movement and the projected normal-ness of the increasingly high-profile gay celebrities. It also occurs alongside the reverberations of Reagan's speech, which can be interpreted as suggesting that special interest groups, in desiring to be met and understood as they are, are hogging resources and making life difficult for Americans. Or: gay men and women who insist on access to safe sex resources and safe spaces, persons with disabilities that insist on accessibility measures be put into place to guarantee their continued access to various public spaces leverage their "special" status to access resources at the expense of access to the good life for "we the people." Necessary to granting cultural purchase to the set of claims that enable this particular popular perspective is the turn of phrase through which president Reagan equates special interest groups with both having and hogging. For Reagan, the crux of the queer problem has little to do with access to condoms, information, and the kinds of anti-discrimination legislation that would help keep queers from suffering increased levels of homelessness, and increased exposure to AIDS, and

everything to do with phantom, big-spending representatives in Washington ensuring that the gay agenda supersedes the actual needs of the nation. AIDS, in this formulation, is rendered a special-interest issue, and thus of no concern of the government, despite the huge risk that it is now known to have posed to the general American population.

It is the emergence of the political homosexual in a specifically anti-shame mode that is important for my reading of Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and for the various queernesses available to and enacted by both Alison and her late father. For Warner, to be pro-shame is to be a shameful queer: a queer who adopts as many signifiers of normative culture as possible, and who cultivates a public persona that is as de-sexed as possible in order to avoid disrupting the hegemonic cultural norm. To be anti-shame, by the same token, is to reclaim that which is deemed shameful: to take up the shameful as a legitimate piece of one's identity, regardless of how disrupting that identity may be to the hegemonic norm. He states: "as soon as the movement was organised, embarrassment became a permanent condition of its politics" (49).

Concomitant with a politics of shame, inevitably, is a rise in individuals wishing to distinguish themselves from the shameful core, a group that Warner refers to as the supposed "silent majority of gay people—the rest of us" (52). While the distinction between pro and anti-shame queers is important for my argument, I want to stress that I do not meant to hold only queers accountable for either this limited range of options, or for the ways that each side of the shame-debate shapes possible public encounters. Rather, I want to point out the political chasm that opens between pro and anti-shame queers, and to note that while anti-shame queers often face public backlash, especially,

though not exclusively, from conservative citizens, pro-shame queers incur increasing social and cultural respect. This respect hinges, of course, on the willingness of pro-shame queers to wear a mask of asexuality in their everyday lives or, in the words of Michael Warner, to promote a sexuality without sex. Such a sexuality is desirable to those invested in "we the people" as formulated by Reagan, as it is a sexuality that elides difference, and demands nothing "extra" based on identity. What I mean to hold accountable is the culture and cultural climate that enables a pro-shame stance at all, and that upholds certain queers as preferable over all the rest. This distinction, which is sometimes described as the difference between pre and post Stonewall queers, is crude at best, and remains a tool for beginning to think through Alison's relationship with her father, rather than a perfect description of their differences.

Identification Across the Chasm: Queering History

Instead of finding a way forward from the distinction that Warner lays out, as important as it is, I want to turn back towards the particular lens of history, trauma, and memory that Bechdel applies in her narrative in order to articulate the specific way that she finds reverberations and points of identification across the perceived chasm between pro and anti shame. Bechdel's narrator herself speculates on the degree of likelihood that Bruce, and possibly her mother as well, would have been lost to the AIDS epidemic had he survived past 1980. Moreover, she muses about the possibility that she's linked her father's death to the butting heads of Reagan's anti-identity politics stance and the AIDS epidemic that had such traumatic impacts on the queer community in North America:

"maybe I'm trying to render my senseless personal loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative. A narrative of injustice, sexual shame and fear, of life considered expendable" (196). Evident here is that *Fun Home*'s narrator seeks to perform a looking-back that amounts to a "means of securing a more stable and positive identity in the present" (Love 34), while also questioning both the productivity of such a project, and her desire to do so at all. Her reference to "senseless personal loss" in relationship to a "larger narrative" is exemplary of her skeptical, ironic approach to this particular project of memory: in the same moment that she acknowledges her personal loss as meaningless, she frames the project of one of meaning-making by way of attachments to the same archive that she dually finds and builds.

This move is one that avoids what Heather Love names as a major trapping of queer history: turning "shame into pride after the fact" (32). Alison seeks not to "rescue" Bruce from his own history, but to record it, and in doing so to attend to both his moments of triumph (in his elaborate and detailed decoration of the house, for example), and his failures as facts of that history. Bruce's shame cannot be discredited in favour of focusing *only* or predominantly on his success, however, as his shame is part of the reverberation of trauma that Alison carries throughout the text: though she is unable to express grief (or, her expressions of grief are peculiar, to say the least), she is able to tease her father's gayness, masked as it is, out of memories and stories, and to link it up however tenuously with her own. Julia Watson suggests that "by graphing and authoring the coming-out narrative he could not tell, Bechdel makes her father's story of private shame, 'perversion,' and early violent death into a happier story that enabled her own

embrace of sexuality as their shared 'erotic truth'" ("Autographic Desires" 48). I am cautious about naming Bechdel's re-framing of her father's life as "happy" in any way— Alison is clear about wanting to retain a distant kind of anger with her father, to be able to blame him (196), but I do think that Bechdel re-frames her father's life (and his death) as having a particular kind of purpose for her, and as one that is worth remembering, despite its many flaws.

Bechdel's text, then, aims to bind up the personal and the political into something like a living historical archive: the personal and political together make up that which bleeds between generations, or which becomes post memory. Cvetkovich suggests that Bechdel's text takes up a lens of queer production and interpretation that effectively redefines the relationship between traumas and personal lives in order to "make public space for lives whose very ordinariness makes them historically meaningful" ("Drawing the Archive"111). Bechdel does so through a lens that enacts a looking-backward: she brings the complicated, messy past of her family into the present in order to parse it out in a text that amounts both bearing witness and writing an origin story for her own queer self. Specificity of context becomes important, then: her father's court case *did* happen over the same few weeks that the Watergate scandal broke. Watergate has come to represent a breaking point in the American public's trust in government and journalism alike, and speaks, in the form of the fallout of that event, to the way that historical narratives are constructed and reconstructed in order to maintain, preserve, or create trust in certain sectors. Narratives of personal histories are able to operate in the same way, with potential benefits for those subjects for whom the intricacies of intimacy, lineage,

and attachment may become visible only in hindsight. So much is evident in the structure of Bechdel's text, which takes the reader through chronology in a spiraling, telescoping way: in each chapter, the narrative picks up key moments in Alison's childhood and traces their fallout in detail before arriving at a moment in the narrator's present (or near-present) and beginning all over again in the next chapter. Though Cvetkovich is referencing a different queer text, she might equally be referring to *Fun Home* when she writes: "one of the book's projects, then, is to situate sexual trauma in relation to trauma as a national category as well as to incorporate it into national and transnational histories that address the question of trauma" (*Archive of Feelings* 36). Bechdel's project is broader even than that: *Fun Home* grapples with a past that is both personal and national, and one that straddles pre- and post- Stonewall queerness in order to allow shame and pride to sit side by side even if that relationship in an uneasy one, as in moment when Alison "drop[s] the subject" of the queerness that she and her father ostensibly share "partly because of his derision, but mostly because of the fear in his eyes" (219).

Multiple scholars have written on the archive in *Fun Home* (Cvetkovich, Rohy), and I want to build on that work in order to mobilize a specific set of claims about the histories that Bechdel makes claim to, even as she queers the historical lens through which she finds said connections. The Watergate example detailed above is one such case. Bechdel links up her family trauma and concurrent national trauma while flipping the historical lens so that she can trace out multi-directional lineages of affect and trauma, accounting both for those that are "accidental"- as in the "genetic relation of lesbian daughter to bisexual father" and the accidental alignment of various losses of innocence

in time, and those that move on a more complex, more distinctly queer line: "the strands

of identification and disidentification—gendered, literary, aesthetic, archival—that

engage [Alison and Bruce] in an endless conversation" (Rohy 349). Further evidence of

the wealth and varied nature of lines of connectivity between Alison and her father, but

also between Alison and her present, past, and the future, from which the real and living

Bechdel produces the very text that meditates on history and archive, is visible in the

equally varied vehicles through which Bechdel signals points of identification. In addition

to obvious signifiers of archive—photographs, legal documents, letters, and so on—the

text indicates the "emergence of lines" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 16) of

identification between Alison and her father. For example, Alison and Bruce are both

depicted at the moment they receive news of their respective fathers' deaths (32, 46).

Later, the narrative voice wonders whether Bruce's cold, unemotional exchange with

young Alison over the corpse he is embalming ("hand me those scissors over by the

sink") is one meant to bring Alison into the lineage of the family business—"maybe this

was they same offhand way his own notoriously cold father had shown him **his** first

cadaver"—or if that moment is meant to bring Alison into line with Bruce as an

emotional surrogate: "or maybe he felt that he'd become too inured to death, and was

hoping to elicit from me an expression of the natural horror he was no longer capable of"

(44). Here, the cost and benefit of working with ghosts makes itself plain: no amount of

looking back will reveal Bruce's intention, but it is through looking back that Alison is

able to find a narrative to which she can suture some of her own behaviours and quirks.

Alison admits to using "the former technique ... to access emotion vicariously" after her father's death; she develops a habit of relaying the "facts" of her father's death (she describes it as a suicide, side-stepping that cause or motivation remain officially unresolved) "in a flat, matter-of-fact tone ... Eager to detect in my listener the flinch of grief that eluded me" (45). Important here is that Bechdel doesn't provide answers—it isn't clear whether Alison and Bruce have difficulty expressing emotion for reasons that differ or are similar, or if, perhaps, their shared emotional dissonance is caused by something atmospheric in the funeral home. Instead, Bechdel offers up a node of identification, and one that becomes visible to Alison only through an historical lens and a careful piecing through of the archive of her own memory.

She offers up other moments of identification and disidentification, both between herself and her father, and between herself, her father, and historical/cultural flash points. Of note especially are: the Reagan presidency and the ghostly trace of the Stonewall riots, which both act as political dividers between Alison and Bruce, and the turn towards particular kinds of documents—newspapers—as signaling and fomenting community. Bechdel's choice to represent particular documents as markers of time—especially in the way they gesture to events that remain in living memory—in a text that defies chronology can be read as signaling a relationship that Ann Cvetkovch identifies: the one between information and affect that resonates through the archives.

History in *Fun Home* isn't bound strictly to the factual: mythology and text structure Alison's consciousness, her mechanisms for being in and understanding her relationships with others to such a degree that they become inextricable from the facts of

history. Mythologies, in the various ways that Bechdel references and even makes them, expand meanings in this text, and offer up meaning where there was none before. For example, if Bruce is as much Icarus as Daedalus in the moments that he variously sends Alison soaring and offers her a safety net, so too is Alison both Icarus and Daedalus, both the boy that is subject to his father's creative ambitions and the ambitious father; her text takes flight on the experimental wings of something like biomythography in the same gesture that it risks bringing Bruce and his history too close to the sun. Hutcheon's complication of readings in and through time becomes, when applied to comics, another method by which the medium does the work of "expanding and complicating its own boundaries" (Chute, "Ragtime" 273). This becomes evident in *Fun Home* in the bringing together of representations of various kinds of documents such that their signification is altered or challenged, as with the photographs that Bechdel reproduces, whose authority as "official histories" (Watson 37) is undercut by the very fact of their translation into the comics form. Bechdel also resists the heterotemporal imperative so often demanded by historical account, in which "sexual identity is causally related to chronological explanations" (Traub 29), and which seeks to locate events in time that signify as "endings," and to then look backward for presumed beginnings (Madhavi Menon, qtd in Traub 29).

Bechdel's text manifests these refusals partially in its seeking of "spiritual, not consubstantial ... paternity" (Bechdel 231): while the text does aim to interrogate the "tricky reverse narration that impels" the "entwined stories" of Alison and her father (232), it finds traces of historical and personal traumas rather than significant answers or

a satisfactory chronology, and thus questions what history is, and who it is for. Alison's queerness, too, is made legible inside of a complex relationship to history, communicated in the text largely via her increasing collection of texts that make queer history available to her. Unlike Bruce, Alison's queerness is marked affectively by a confidence in her ability to both know and understand her sexuality and to openly embody it. She writes, when describing the circumstances around a coming-out letter sent to her parents: "My homosexuality remained at that point purely theoretical, an untested hypothesis. But it was a hypothesis so thorough and convincing that I saw no reason not to share it immediately" (58). The ease with which Alison is able to know and express her sexuality, one of the most marked differences between herself and her father, is enabled by both the support that she finds in the gay alliance group at her school, and via the archive of queer texts, many of which she accesses through Bruce, that is built up slowly throughout the narrative. This archive marks a "claim to the fact of history" (Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings* 9) that is equally available to Alison and Bruce—they both have access to books and to libraries—but which has direct and personal consequences for Alison's understanding of her sexuality, and no visible parallel for Bruce, though Bruce does experience a similar coming-into-himself around his early readings of *Gatsby* and Fitzgerald's biography.

The archive also represents a queer relationship to time that parallels that between Bruce and AIDS in the narrative. Though the archive of queer texts to which Alison has access appears go "grow"—she accesses an increasing number of texts throughout her adolescence and early adulthood—the archive is actually fixed in time. Bechdel's text is

engaged in history as a queer modality, "a mode of inhabiting time that is attentive to the recursive eddies and back-to-the future loops that often pass undetected or uncherished beneath the official narrations of the linear sequence that is taken to structure normative life" (Jagose 158). The function of such a feature is to comment on the work of the archive itself: though each of the texts that Bechdel references by name exists in the "past" of both the narrative and the text, they are accessed only through reading, and thus operate in a kind of perpetual present. And, that present is useful beyond only illuminating an oft-overlooked history, as Heather Love shows:

> Contemporary critics tend to frame the past as the unique site of need, as if the practice of history were not motivated by a sense of lack in the present. We might conceive of the work of historical affirmation not, as it is often presented, as a lifeline thrown to those figures drowning in a bad gay past, but rather as a means for securing a more stable and positive identity in the present. (Love 34)

Bechdel's text signals itself as part of that same archive, making *Fun Home* a text that operates in the past (the moments of production and publication), in the present (the moment of reading or re-reading), and that comments on the ability of texts to make visible certain histories and politics in a particular present despite being located in the past. Bechdel's text further interrogates the past, and the ability of narratives of the past to enact a normativizing force on the present, in two ways: first, in having the text close before the timeline reaches the "present" of the moment of writing, and second in embedding an engagement with the political climate and resulting conditions of life for queer subjects in particular moments into the very fabric of the text: the images.

Time Binds: Queer Temporality meets Queer History in Fun Home

Elizabeth Freeman, in her provocative book "Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories," details the manner in which the tool of time structures relationships between state and government bodies and citizens. She lays out the markers of chronobiopolitics, which seeks to link "properly temporalized bodies to movement and change" thusly: "these are the teleological schemes of events or strategies for living, such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals" (4). This precise prescribed cycle of time, also called chrononormativity, is tied to the management of bodies as they move through space, as well as the accumulation and predictability of tax revenue and economic stimulus that comes out of strict regulation and bureaucracy. For example, births, marriages, name and location changes, and deaths are all registered with the state, meaning that each citizen leaves a paper trail that carries with it information on past behaviours and the resulting access they may have been or be denied. Simply put: if the entire nation is perceived to follow a pre-destined path, bodies fall into a sequence of events that, with the currency of repetition and state-enabled, and mandated, normalisations, begins to appear natural.

Returning, for a moment, to the role of documents as time-keeping devices and markers of political climate: Alison's coming-out letter is the prime example of the divide in political contexts for Bruce and Alison. The letter that Alison writes to inform her parents that she is a lesbian, the entire text of which reads "I am a lesbian," is one of few personal letters in the text that is reproduced without a firm date, attesting to the fuzziness

in the temporal divides that I've been describing. Specifically, though the text "I am a lesbian" is itself reproduced, the letter is not: a college-aged Alison sits hunched over a typewriter while an arrow pointing from a text-box to her page indicates only that she has written "I am a lesbian" (58). As if to suggest that the act of coming out is itself located outside of the specificity of time, a parallel, nearly identical scene appears at least once more, much later in the text (210), from a slightly different perspective, and at an unspecified time. Though it is clear that both iterations of letter writing feature a college-aged Alison, it is left ambiguous as to whether they are one and the same moment. Separated by approximately one hundred and fifty two pages and multiple facts, speculations, and narratives, readers are left to guess whether Bechdel means to communicate the same event in two separate, vague instances—to gesture towards coming out as an activity that must be repeated again and again—or whether she means to gesture towards the rupture between remembering and knowing. Regardless of which reading any individual reader clings to, it is clear that those events that remain without a definite time signature take on the characteristics of floating between knowable events, or of being "out of time."

Time, and timeliness, is an important factor in how the newspapers (27), too, do their work. Not only does the narrative follow Alison's mental processing of her relationship with her father, and her father's relationship to the community, which takes her backwards and forwards in time in the form of episodes, but the very page on which these two newspapers appear signals a parallel relationship to time. The page begins with an image of the first newspaper, presumably published the morning after Bruce's death,

and then makes a jump in time via a set of panels that take place at the funeral (possibly a number of days after the death, but at the very least taking place after standard newspaper delivery time). The final two panels showcase two separate strategies through which they execute a move back in time: the printed, verbal narrative of the text asks readers to consider that Bruce Bechdel's death might be related to events that occurred just prior to the instance ("The fact that my mother asked him for a divorce two weeks before" [27], is mentioned above an image of an unknown man offering condolences to Alison), while the final panel brings the image of the newspaper from three days prior to the reporting of Bruce's death into both the present (the reader looks at it, is brought into that moment in a manner something like, but not equal to, a flashback) and the past. At the moment of officially sanctioned communal grieving, the funeral, all of these iterations of time resonate and make meaning for Alison.

Crucially, the future—the future of the present of the scene described above, specifically, but also the future as an idea, as an always-not-yet here—also resonates in this scene. Part of the project of the text is that an Alison located in the future of the depicted events looks back through resonant moments in her life. Each episode is selected for its memorability, and becomes increasingly so, and even cemented in a particular form *as* memory, and for its impact for the narrative project of untangling the condition and cause of her father's death. The fact of looking back, at memories as well as documents, is part of the mechanism by which that which is represented in the text gains status as "memorial talismans that carry the affective weight of the past" (Cvetkovich

120). Readers are asked to consider the past, present, and future of the image(s) in question alongside their own, lived present.

Bechdel further links up past and present in her references to New York City, and to the Stonewall Inn especially. At almost the exact center of her text Alison identifies her first walk past the infamous Stonewall Inn in as "a curious watershed moment between my parents' young adulthood in the city a decade earlier, and my own a decade later" (105). Directly following this identification, she wonders if some kind of recognition was stirred in her child self on passing the site of the famed riots, asking "might not a lingering vibration, a quantum particle of rebellion still have hung in the humectant air?" (104). In the background of this scene, a message is posted to the side of the Stonewall Inn that reads "we homosexuals plead with our people to please help maintain peaceful and quiet conduct on the streets of the village" (104), signed by the Mattachine Society. To place Alison's wonderings about the "quantum particle of rebellion" next to such a sign is to gesture to a tension that mirrors the one threaded throughout the text in the relationship between Alison and her father, and one that is deceptively difficult to tease out. Alison and her father might be divided into pre- and post- Stonewall queers, but that distinction, like the one between pro- and anti- shame, undercuts the nuance that gives meaning to the relationships in historical and familial relationships in *Fun Home* meaning. The Mattachine Society's plea for "peaceful and quiet conduct" perhaps speaks to the aftermath of similar uprisings that took place pre-Stonewall in major cities across the US, but which didn't have the same staying power. Elizabeth Armstrong and Susan Crage suggest that Stonewall happened at a particular convergence of factors that simply

weren't in place for other, similar events: "it was ... the first commemorable event to occur at a time and place where homosexuals had enough capacity to produce a commemorative vehicle- that is, where gay activists had adequate *mnemonic capacity* ... Time and place mattered" (725).

Time and place matter, too, for Alison and her father. Bruce's court case and its suspicious, coded outcome is certainly a product of the context of the crimes deliberated therein. Bechdel's narrator emphasis that the specific context of the family visit to NYC in which Alison perhaps absorbs something of queer liberation and rebellion is important for Bruce as well. She notes that her father's implied cruising in NYC during that trip aligns in context with the opening scenes of *And the Band Played on*, which symbolically represents the birth of the AIDS epidemic as tied to the NYC harbor on the night of the bicentennial celebration. Perhaps most importantly, the text operates as an homage to Bruce as the queer that came before: Alison's queerness, her open expression, even that the Stonewall Inn exists as a symbolic flashpoint for her all depend on others having gone before, and having fared differently. *Fun Home* follows a logic similar to the one encouraged by Martin Duberman, who prefers to think of Stonewall as an effect of a larger gay liberation movement rather than as a point of origin. Duberman cautions against the dismissal of early gay activists, including those involved in the Mattachine society, for being "assimilationists and apologists:" even if they were, their early struggles, along with those of organizers in the black civil rights movement and the feminist movement of the 60s laid an important piece of the foundation that ensured that "conditions had finally become ripe for Stonewall" (22). Bechdel's narrator reflects the

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possibility of a parallel ripening that occurs for Alison partially by way of her father, and especially by way of his library, when she says: "I wondered if you knew what you were doing when you gave me that Colette book" (220). And, like the "assimilationists and apologists" (Duberman 22) that made a way for Stonewall without knowing, and indeed without fully condoning the specifics of the Stonewall moment, Bruce's response reveals that he "didn't really ... It was just a guess" (220). Stonewall, the archive, and Bechdel's own text operate as a counter to the chrononormativity that underpins the sexual arrangement of life; each works to bind people into community, but through loose lines, backward glances, and a palimpsest-like quality that accompanies the carrying of meanings that shift with time and in response to the subjects that actively engage them.

As with Stonewall, the reverberating impact of Colette's autobiography on Alison's life—its memorability, the way it shapes her understanding of herself, but also her father—has to do with it coming into her life at the right time, and in the right place. Documents of all shapes in the text perform a similar myth-making function, in that they record only a limited selection of events and ideas, and therefore mark some as memorable while relegating others to the back room of history, or to be forgotten altogether. If Bruce Bechdel's memorialisation on the cover of the community newspaper marks him a valued citizen and resident of that place, so too does the "gay pride issue" of the *New York Native* (195) mark a particular kind of belonging for Alison. The choice to feature the gay pride issue of an otherwise non issue-specific paper is itself a signal of dual belonging. First, Alison clearly works at the paper, and is therefore an insider in the process of news production and dissemination in the community of New York City.

Second, Alison makes a point of featuring herself working on a 1985 issue of the paper, which includes a front-page headline stating "AIDSGATE continues," and what appears to be a second page story on HPA-23. Each of these signals a possible social-political alignment for Alison: the AIDSGATE comment is a direct reference to President Reagan's official silence on the AIDS crises, while HPA-23 was a drug thought to boost the immune system of AIDS patients, though it was only available in France at the time, and was later proved to be ineffective. To put it frankly: Alison frames herself (quite literally) as an active participant in AIDS activism, and as belonging, in all of the ways signified by the newspaper, to the New York City queer community. The context of the text, the United States during the Reagan presidency, frames the nation, and especially those living with and dying from AIDS, as dependent on volunteer and donation run services amid a world that seeks to shame and marginalise them.

The term AIDSGATE circles back to Watergate, and in doing so prompts the reader to think about national and personal innocence; in this instance, however, the scandal hasn't broken, but continues. It is no accident, either, that it is the newspaper spread dealing with gay pride that also appears strung out in a line, a single panel thus representing multiple days at once: this scene represents the densest compression of time depicted in the entire text. Queer time seldom operates in only one register. Certainly, for individuals living with AIDS, for their networks of support, and for AIDS activists, enduring AIDSGATE means operating under a dual pull of temporality: to endure AIDSGATE is to hurtle towards the annihilation (of life communities, family, friends) wrought by AIDS, and simultaneously to hang suspended in the slow death that an AIDS

diagnosis brings. Time, then, is both squeezed and suspended for queer subjects, who are marked as existing inside of a "temporality of anticipation, poise, readiness" (Freeman 153).

It is over the image of Alison laying out proofs for the gay pride feature of the newspaper that she makes her commentary about displacing her "actual grief with [the] ... imaginary trauma" (195) of her father surviving into the 1980s only to contract AIDS. Notable in this juxtaposition is that the named trauma of AIDS is not imaginary at all, except in the future that Alison imagines for her father, which is doomed to remain unrealized. There is, perhaps, a two-directional suppression of grief happening in this moment, in which the real trauma of AIDS in the queer community of NYC in the 1980s is displaced onto an imaginary, even impossible future for a man that is already dead. The placement of this scene is also important: it's located near, but not quite at the end of the book, and at the furthest end of Alison's development: there is only one further page that depicts Alison at the stage of life represented here, following which the text takes a turn backward, and the narrative moves again into Alison's past. Accompanying Alison in the frame as she hangs newspaper proofs is her boss, who tells her "you can take off. We'll put it to bed tomorrow" (195). The sequence that follows depicts Alison leaving her job, mounting her bicycle, and then sitting at the NYC harbor, smoking and gazing over the water. Those words, "we'll put it to bed tomorrow," are the final dialogue in the chronological narrative, and as no tomorrow is depicted they are left hanging, unfulfilled. As with HPA-23, the promising drug that proved to be ineffective, a narrative line is

opened and never resolved, which speaks to Ann Cvetkovich's claim that *Fun Home* "embraces a queer temporality, one that refuses narratives of progress" (124).

<u>Conclusion in Absentia: The Complicating Factors of Myth and Memoir</u>

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is bookended by a truncated iteration, and subsequent rewriting, of the myth of Icarus. The opening sequence depicts a young Alison and her father engaging in the game of "airplane" (3), which Bechdel's narrator notes is reminiscent of a style of acrobatics referred to as "Icarian Games." In a twist that is characteristic of the text's complex relationship with chronology, narrative, and time, the narrator states that "in our particular reenactment of this mythic relationship, it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky" (4). The closing page of the novel brings the framing of Alison's life story as told through her search for a kind of truth about her father that is available to her only in his death full circle with a depiction of young Alison leaping from a diving board into her father's outstretched arms, which is accompanied by the text: "but in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt" (232).

A later scene between Alison and Bruce as they drive to see a film speaks to the weaving together of history, archive, and myth in service of the queer temporality through which the text operates. After inquiring about Bruce's intention when he gave her Colette's autobiography, and subsequently being made privy to previously private anecdotes from Bruce's sexual history, Alison's response is to feel "distinctly parental listening to his shamefaced recitation" (221). She even compares the conversation to that of "fatherless Stephen and sonless Bloom" (221), questioning which of them plays the

role of the sonless father in this parallel replaying. Questioning of the sort that Alison does here acts as an implicit challenge to chronobiopolitics, suggesting that the father must not always claim either the power or expertise assumed to belong to that position, nor must networks of community and support operate in the top-down manner implied by the status quo practice of what Sara Ahmed calls following the line. Queer communities, Bechdel implies, can be organized in ways other than those dictated by the normative structures that often exercise unquestioned authority in American life, opening up space for alternative arrangements, for "spiritual, not consubstantial ... paternity" (Bechdel 231). Much like Bechdel's rewriting of the myth of Icarus, in which Alison and Bruce are variously both Icarus and his Daedalus, Bechdel offers up a less rigid script for the family, or at least for lineage.

This queer script, the one that makes space for flawed fathers of various types but retains some difficulty with grief, is perhaps most evident in the text's return to the rewritten version of the Icarus myth. In the closing frames, Bechdel frames Bruce's death as his Icarus moment by layering the text "he did hurtle himself into the sea, of course" over a close-up image of the front of a large truck (232), a contrast to the framing provided via the snapshot of "Icarian games" in the opening pages (3), in which Alison is Icarus and Bruce Dedalus. The effect produced here is multifaceted, both specific to Bechdel's reworking of the myth of Icarus and more generally to her interest in histories and communities as represented and reinforced by literature. Bechdel's turn to mythologies is part and parcel of her project of revisiting sites of queer production and interpretation in order to highlight the "historically meaningful" (Cvetkovich, "Drawing

the Archive" 111) nature of lives, including queer ones, and intersects especially with her work of queer historicising. In this case, queer history is recounted, or perhaps made, in images organized in a sequence that loops back in on itself, and which "refuses easy distinctions between heroes and perpetrators" (Cvetkovich 125).

Bechdel brings together myth and memoir in service of a project of history and archive, and in doing so, undercuts the claim of truth promised by both the photograph— she reproduces several—and memoir. Ariela Freedman underscores this particular trouble when describes the project as engaging with "the complex founding of an autobiographical fiction based on inheritance but also on subversion, reframing, rewriting and even betrayal" ("Modernism"132). The result is a text that itself resists easy classification—it's the story of a life, but heavily mythologized: not quite bio-mythography, not quite autofictionalography. In this manner, Bechdel's text demonstrates the equally slippery and productive nature of the queer archive.

<u>"Julie Peters is telling people that you are showing classic signs of someone who is</u>

<u>suicidal:" Social Exclusion and the Management of Grief in Jillian and Mariko Tamaki's</u>

<u>*Skim*</u>

[The] cultures document[ed here] *do* take as a starting point 'the nation as a site of struggle,' seeking to illuminate the forms of violence that are forgotten or covered over by the amnesiac powers of national culture, which is adept at using one trauma story to suppress another

—Ann Cvetkovich, 16
An Archive of Feeling

Jillian and Mariko Tamaki's *Skim* is a coming-of-age graphic novel that follows Toronto teen Kim Cameron, nicknamed Skim, as she comes to terms simultaneously with the suicide of a likely-gay teen and her own lesbian desire. Over the course of the narrative, Skim falls in love with her English teacher who subsequently leaves the school, develops a complicated posthumous relationship with the memory of John Reddear, the teenager whose death is at the center of the text, loses her best friend and fellow outcast— Lisa—to normative grieving rituals as proffered by both the school system and a group called the "Girls Celebrate Life" club (or the GCL), and eventually befriends Katie, who is John Reddear's ex-girlfriend. This chapter will take up the question of belonging when community is shaped predominantly by proximity to, and expression of, ugly or bad feelings. Central to this discussion will be the role of disciplinary institutions such as schools, which perform the work of facilitating and maintaining belonging and community in Tamaki and Tamaki's *Skim*. While my first chapter attempts to account for

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the impact of witnessing in instances of private traumas that are bound up with American national narratives in its reading of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, this chapter, in its reading of Tamaki and Tamaki's *Skim*, attempts to account for the particularities of Canadian history that have shaped the question of access and belonging for Asian Canadians, and specifically for Japanese Canadians. While my work on *Fun Home* traces a line from personal trauma and history to public and even national traumas and histories, this chapter moves in the opposite direction: for Skim, it is public, national trauma that trickles into the everyday lived experience of the individual.

In her chapter "A Moment Outside of Time," from *Drawing New Color Lines: Transnational Asian American Graphic Narratives*," Monica Chiu suggests that the question of affect and belonging is taken up in *Skim's* extra-narrative components, and most often on splash pages that are "without any connective narrative antecedent nor subsequent logical explanation ... imagistically present, but absent in prose" (27, 29). Building on Chiu's argument, this chapter will consider both that which is included in the prose and timeline of the narrative, and that which is represented "imagistically" and outside of time, or outside of the text's timeline, in order to suggest that *Skim,* like *Fun Home,* makes a case for queer belonging and queer futurity *through,* rather than in spite of, negative affects and loss. The case for queer futurity via what Sianne Ngai calls "ugly feelings" in *Skim is* inextricably linked to discourses and lived realities of race and racialized bodies, which appear most obviously in *Skim* in the extra-narrative sections that Chiu remarks on. Drawing on Himani Bannerji's arguments in *"The Dark Side of the Nation,"* I will consider how the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism underpins a

structure of power that places whiteness at the center, while representing a liberal politics

that appears to make each subject equal under the law and in access to social provisions.

The first half of this chapter will perform the work of theoretical grounding: I will

develop a framework for thinking through affect and its bearing on community and

belonging, alongside of which I will enact an approach to *Skim* that is predominantly

focused on the textual component of *Skim*. My framework in the second half builds on the

textual analysis established in the first section, but is additionally informed by work on

affect and the visual. The second half is further divided into two sections: the first of

these is predominantly focused on reading the visual, by way of comics theory and

theories of the image more broadly, in *Skim*, while the final section thinks through racial

injury and its lingering effects in Canadian history and in *Skim* in particular.

Part One: Affect, Belonging, and Therapy Culture in *Skim*

Running centrally through *Skim* is the theme of the norm. For the central

character, Skim, and her best friend Lisa, being outside of the norm is framed as a marker

of agency: both teens choose active involvement in non-normative spaces; they both

practice Wicca, for example. A key piece of Skim's narrative is that her position outside

of the normative social structure of her various communities gives her perspective on

those communities that is lacking among those who have fully "bought in," or who have

been offered full belonging, in those spaces. Skim's relationship with her closest friend

suffers as they each undergo changes in their subjectivities and world views: as the text

progresses, Skim's sexuality—she slowly comes to terms with being a lesbian—becomes

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increasingly central to her worldview, and prompts her to think in increasingly critical ways about social structures and belonging. Lisa, on the other hand, begins to identify more and more with the normative expressions of grief and mourning encouraged by various groups inside of their school, which ultimately allows her a fairly seamless point of access to the community of girls that make up the "Girls Celebrate Life" club, while simultaneously causing her to view Skim's worldview as hostile.

Schools—that is, both the system and the individual institutions that make the underlying purpose and politics of that system manifest—are highly political in nature, and germinal to the making of subjectivities in accordance with a wide variety of social norms. That is, the school is the site at which the norm is produced. *Skim* is set inside of a school that bears a set of markers that gesture to particular investments: it is an all-girls school, and the students are required to wear uniforms (page 11 provides the clearest, least interrupted image of the uniforms), which suggests that the school is part of the Ontario Catholic school system. The Catholic school system that operates in parts of Canada runs parallel, in many ways, to the public school system. For example, its operating budget comes out of government funds, meaning that it remains bound by provincially mandated curricula, but retains the right to operate under a faith-based mandate. Schools inside of the Catholic school system sometimes operate at a cost to users, and may have entrance requirements, but are not classified as fully "private" schools; instead, they exist in a kind of third space within the Canadian public school system. Additionally, the Canadian Catholic School system has a direct link to Canadian confederation: though the Catholic community made up a minority of the Canadian

population at the moment of Confederation, it retained enough political clout that the

confederation agreement was made partially contingent on the retention of the right of

Catholics to access education grounded in their religious beliefs for their children.[10] The

link between confederation and the Catholic school system is described by Sir Charles

Tupper as being so strong that "without this guarantee of the rights of minorities

embodied in that constitution, we should have been unable to obtain any Confederation

whatever" (Tupper qtd in Dixon 3). The quiet centrality of the Catholic school system in

Skim thus gestures to the text's engagements with the history of the Canadian nation, at

the root of which is an exchange that grants particular privileges a group that is

technically a certain kind of minority and weighs that same privilege, and the act of

granting access to it, against hegemonic national coherence in favour of the dominant

group in the same moment.

It is in the context of an all-girls Catholic school that the plot of *Skim* unfolds, and

it in this particular context that Tamaki and Tamaki aim to challenge norms based on their

reverberating impacts. Skim's self-introduction is a kind of barometer of her personality

and perspective that sits in what the reader is meant to understand as the inside cover of a

diary (7). In addition to listing Skim's full name, best friend, and the name of her cat, the

introduction reads: "Interests: Wicca, tarot cards, astrology (me=Aquarius=very

unpredictable), philosophy." Given the year provided below this brief introduction, 1993,

this set of interests is actually relatively predictable; these interests were common

amongst girls in that era wishing, as Skim and her best friend Lisa do, to remain external

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[10] It is worth mentioning that the public school system in Canada at that time would have
been Protestant, rather than non-religious.

to and critical of the norm. The 1990s saw rapid growth in the number of practitioners of Wicca, especially among young women, which was reflected in the popularity of films like *The Craft*. This positioning illustrates the particular stakes for Skim and for Lisa, both of whom want to occupy a non-normative position in relation to their peers: they exhibit a desire and willingness to appear as others, but as others who are not too different, or who are within the acceptable range of difference made accessible in accordance with popular culture. In the opening pages of the text, the girls attach themselves to identities that mark them as other, though their respective relationship to otherness is unequal. The particular set of identifications to which they cling is relatively safe, and entirely reversible. Skim, on the other hand, is one of only two Asian Canadian characters in the text, and the only person of color to appear with any frequency through the novel: she is marked by a layer of difference that she cannot alter or remove.

The school system, in its enforcement of various kinds of norms, outlines demarcations for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, which is integral to the workings of this type of disciplinary institution. After John Reddear's suicide, however, the school begins to take an added interest in behaviors normally outside of its purview, especially those related to bodily and affective management and autonomy. In a series of events that follow logically from a cataclysmic event such as a suicide, the school's guidance counselor and teaching team begin to focus on providing grief support. As the text progresses, and especially following what is likely an attempted suicide on the part of John Reddear's surviving girlfriend, Katie Matthews ("On Monday, Mrs. Hornet announced in prayers that Katie Matthews 'accidentally' fell off of her roof and broke

both her arms" [45]), the school doubles down in its monitoring of affect, and consequently in its policing of the performance of grief. They bring in grief counselors, put the students through more than one mandatory session on coping with loss, arrange private meetings between students and school guidance counselors, and alter sections of the standard curriculum so that affect management is at the fore: "Today in gym we did anti-stress breathing relaxation exercises and I fell asleep on my mat" (74). The pattern that reverberates through the text around this particular kind of management of selves is that students either take up the proffered relationship to mourning and compulsory happiness, or find themselves alienated by it. In his book *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age*, Frank Furedi uses the title phrase "therapy culture" to refer to the manner in which emotions have been ushered into the public sphere in North America. Extending Lauren Berlant's concept of the intimate public sphere and the attendant transference of measures of citizenship from civic acts to personal and individual actions, Furedi reads therapy culture as originating in increased social attention to emotion and affect as both a barometer for the health and wellness of a citizen group and a site at which the maintenance of that citizen group can occur. For Furedi, the shift that brings affect into the public sphere is accompanied by an increasing belief that individuals are incapable of managing the emotions that arise through the regular function of their personal relationships, which Furedi understands as contributing to an overall diminishing of emotional depth and competency. Public displays of emotion, and public platforms for working through emotion, including those like the machinery of care that is put into motion at Skim's school in response to the suicide are, for Furedi, coupled with a

"call to restrain the way we feel about our intimates" (83). When considered through this lens, an increasingly complex structure of feeling becomes visible in *Skim*: the therapy culture that permeates the school seeks to manage the way that students feel by offering a platform for expressing negative feelings that is ultimately aimed at dampening individual displays of emotion. The trouble with Skim, then, is that she fails to display the proper public grief while continuing to feel too much in her private life. Perhaps this is why the school, and the Girls Celebrate Life club, find it necessary to double down in their efforts to police Skim's expression of feeling.

Michel Foucault writes about the role of institutions in bodily and social management in *The History of Sexuality,* stating that:

> a power that is to take charge of life needs continuous regulatory and corrective
>
> mechanisms ... I do not mean to say that the law fades into the background, or that
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> the institutions of justice tend to disappear, but rather that the law operates more
>
> and more as a norm, and that the judicial institution is increasingly incorporated
>
> into a continuum of apparatuses ... whose functions are for the most part
>
> regulatory. (144)

Important to the following discussion is an understanding of how I use the term "law," which is in accordance with my reading of Foucault. I use the term "law" to refer to the complex relationship between actual laws as appearing in the criminal code of Canada, rules and regulations that may act with an authority akin to that of the criminal code inside of particular institutions, and ideas about the legality or permissibility of particular actions or substances that circulate as if they *were* law. This relationship is complex and

difficult to describe in concrete terms, but can be glimpsed in the spaces between the

removal of prohibitions against attempted suicide from the criminal code of Canada in

1972, contemporary debates around the legality of doctor assisted suicide for terminally

ill Canadians, and prevailing attitudes, some based on religious and otherwise moral

beliefs, that suicide is always tragic at worst and wrong at best. I understand the norm, on

the other hand, as being made manifest in the regulatory effect of the law. If prevailing

attitudes on suicide, which dictate that suicide is always morally wrong, are considered

"law," the norm is manifest in the types of actions, conversations, and coping

mechanisms that are permissible around the topic. In the case of *Skim,* the law operates

vaguely and beneath the surface: a great deal of action in this text comes out of

circulating ideas about the moral failing manifest in suicide, and the perceived

connectivity between persons thought to be failing morally and their propensity toward

suicide.

I am interested, here, in the rule of the norm as manifest via the education system

in Tamaki and Tamaki's *Skim,* and want to suggest that the norm, in this instance,

operates in and through two forms: the official arms of the education system, as enforced

by policies, rules teachers, guidance counselors; and the interactions between students, in

their internalization of the scope and function of the norms. My contention is that certain

kinds of social policing, especially those that mark out certain subjects by class,

adherence (or not) to the norms of sex and gender, and race, begin in the school system,

and continue to reverberate from there. These norms reflect what Raymond Williams

refers to as a "structure of feeling," or a kind of inherited sense of that which is expected

of one which is always specific to time and place, and which may be loosely recognized while remaining just outside of articulation.[11]

Williams points to art and literature as speaking especially well to structures of feeling, as in art and literature "true social content is in a significant number of cases of this present and affective kind" (133), where affect can neither be reduced to, nor separated from, the larger set of systems that form the social and cultural moment that art or literature may be said to represent. Lily Cho extends Williams' framing of art and literature as especially rich sites in the analysis of structures of feeling to include images. She reads Chinese head tax photographs, which were part of official documentation tracking the movement of Chinese immigrants issued in Canada prior to 1923, as speaking to a structure of feeling, particularly insofar as they gesture to the neutrality of expression that citizenship demands, even without an official request in place that they do so (19). For Cho, the head tax photographs remain as an archive of images that sit at the edge of articulation of a structure of feeling, and in doing so communicate that the structure of feeling demands both a particular way of feeling and a consistency of feeling among subjects that are linked by time, place, and embodiment. Skim, then, can be understood to be operating outside of the community of feeling that her context demands: the problem with Skim, which cannot be fully articulated, even by the systems that attempt to manage Skim's feelings and even to "correct" them, is that her feelings are out

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[11] "Meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt ... Interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences ... characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships. ... We are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still *in process*" (Williams 132).

of sync with a group that identifies itself as aligned with the norm. Skim's friendship with

Katie Matthews blossoms partially out of their kindred embodiment of emotion that is

outside of the norm.

The best evidence of out-of-sync-ness acting as a bonding agent between the teens

occurs in the moment that Julie Peters, known popular girl and president of the GCL,

attempts to physically prevent Skim and Katie from leaving a fundraising dance

organized by the GCL, the proceeds of which will go to a suicide support telephone line.

Peters' response to Katie's desire to leave the event demonstrates that Peters perceives

Katie as enacting an improper performance of feeling: "Okay, Katie, but I have to say that

I'm totally disgusted that you don't seem to care at ALL that all of this was done for YOU

and you're just stepping all over all your friends' efforts" (131). Katie and Skim's

friendship grows out of moments like these, in which their respective rejection of the

demands of their cultural moment—that they be thankful or grateful, or that they express

sadness in a particular way—is met with anger and further ostracization.

Skim and Lisa both choose to participate in Wicca as a subculture, and both

identify as goth; it is their identification with these categories that cause their guidance

counselors, and even their peers, to take special interest in them, and to read them as

especially predisposed to suicidal thoughts. Evident on the surface of that association is

the manner in which the norm is understood by the dominant group, or as part of the

structure of feeling that underpins the school community. That is, the normative

expression of emotion or affect is, in that community, linked directly to presentation or

performance, meaning that the thick eyeliner and black clothing that Lisa and Skim select

are bound up in the popular imaginary with a public expression of depression or angst, while the ponytails and light makeup that the popular girls don are made to signify a neutral expression, one that is read as an appropriate performance of emotion. The text doesn't sidestep the possibility that involvement with these particular subcultures may lead the girls to weird places, or that the potential for weirdness (including low levels of danger) isn't part of the appeal. Skim's and Lisa accompany Lisa's older sister to a coven, to which Skim responds: "It's funny because I was nervous before. I thought, like, wow, Witches in the park. Isn't that something people warn you about?" (18). Skim updates her assessment of the situation after the coven leader tells her that he sees "the spirit" in her, and touches her chest just above her heart: "Just then I had all these thoughts like, 'THIS is something else people warn you about,' and 'He wants a handjob ... or he wants me to kiss him'" (19). Each of the "things that people warn you about" have different impacts on Skim's experience: the first signals a kind of glee at participating in a taboo practice, and in effectively being the witch in the woods that people might whisper warnings about, while the second signals a real threat of sexual violence or coercion that is not limited to this particular moment, or to this particular activity. Key to this scene is that danger is sutured not to the activities that the girls choose, taboo as they may be, but to the experience of being young and female in public spaces, and, in the form of the intimate touch that comes without consent or even warning, to Skim's body.

The image depicting the second iteration of "things people warn you about" underscores the emotional cost of bearing an unwanted touch or gaze. The text in question is laid over an image that is sandwiched between two panels depicting Skim's

response to the coven experience (neutral, perhaps slightly excited), the image depicting the chest-touching, and a three panel montage of the man walking away. Skim's face bears an expression that is similar to her common neutral expression, except that her eyes appear to be looking beyond the edge of the frame, giving the impression that she's become emotionally distant, or has drawn into herself. The threat of the touch is one of boundary crossing, beginning with the socially-imposed boundary around touching another person (outside of formal greetings such as handshakes and nods) without explicit consent. In more ways than one, Skim has nowhere else to go. Colour, too, impacts on the panel: the generous palette of grays used in inking this text are here evacuated, leaving only sparse black lines and an entirely white background. Skim appears blanched, which aids in making her appear slightly panicked. Overall, the effect is something like a photo negative: a remainder, or binary to an image that might be developed into a better representation, and an iteration of a moment that hones in on that which is regulated to the background. While the teachers and peers around Skim are actively engaged in policing her response to a crisis situation, unwanted sexual touching directed at Skim blends into the scope of the norm, which is to say that the vulnerability of women's bodies, and especially of young women's bodies, is unremarkable precisely because it is expected.

Though Skim and Lisa's participation in their various subcultures is framed as, on the whole, non-harmful, potentially positive, and complex, the school's population—both faculty and students—are unable to read beyond the cultural baggage that has become tied to that specific iteration of community. Skim and Lisa are both targeted for extra

surveillance based on the associated pairing of goth culture and Wicca with depression, and potentially with self harm and suicide. It is through this additional policing that the norm operates as law in the text: Skim and Lisa are effectively put through a series of hurdles intended to encourage them to self-police, and to alter certain aspects of their behavior and appearance: an intensification of the mechanisms of surveillance already in play in the school system that fails to account for the actual lived experiences of those under its power. The well-intentioned act of singling out Lisa and Skim based on dress and social association is at once a discriminatory act and one that fails to take note of the girls' actual reactions to the event in any meaningful way. The declaration of John Reddear's suicide occurs shortly after the coven incident, and is wrapped in language and signifiers that indicate shock: "Dear Diary, JOHN REDDEAR (Katie Matthews' ex-boyfriend) is DEAD!! He KILLED HIMSELF!!" (21). This reaction is not dissimilar from the various responses that come from the remainder of their school. Additionally, while the school, and the handful of girls that voice support for the school's mechanism for dealing with trauma, seem obsessive in their treatment of the event and its monitoring of grief, Skim, and to a lesser degree Lisa, maintain what might objectively be called a healthy distance from the event. Skim, especially, is thoughtful about the impact of specific mandated grieving exercises on Katie Matthews: "Like Katie cares if we make her a card like 'Hi, you don't know me, but I'm sorry your ex-boyfriend is dead'" (23); "She said the GCL call her, like fifty times a day and are constantly stalking her. She said all they want to talk about is John" (135). She even draws complex connections between the frustrated grief expressed by her peers, the trauma of suicide itself, and her high

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school reading assignments. Skim is driven "crazy" by Lisa's suggestion that "Katie Matthews and John Reddear are like Romeo and Juliet ... on delay," remarking in her diary that "if Juliet could have just suffered in silence and got married and pretended everything was okay and not said anything, maybe things would have turned out better" (71). Important to note is that while it may appear that Skim is missing the point, she is actually honing in on a seemingly minor, but highly important element of social life for young people and especially teenagers. While the text is eerily quiet about the speculation that John Reddear's suicide may have been in some way linked to his queerness, it also implies that silence is itself the root of the problem: implied is that had John Reddear been able to access a platform from which to announce his identity, he might have survived high school. Skim's commentary, then, seems out of line with message of the text. However, the meat of Skim's commentary is in its nuance: her point is that the pressure to speak, and to thus claim one's sexual identity in a public and therefore political way, can also have a negative impact on subjects.

Despite Skim's thoughtfulness, she remains a target for the operations of the norm-as-law because of her appearance. She recounts her experience of the initial meeting for which she is called in: "Mrs. Hornet said she's particularly concerned about people like me, because people like me are prone to depression and depressing stimuli. Mrs. Hornet says students who are members of the 'gothic' subculture (i.e. ME) are very fragile" (22). This kind of policing, of surveillance and control that operates, perhaps unknowingly, under the guise of caring, is not limited to teachers and guidance counselors; when the school further supports a group of young women in the creation of

the GCL, the same women take on the task of acting in the name of the norm-as-law on themselves, and of policing others, especially Skim. This social policing is made manifest in both public and private actions: a member of the GCL hugs Skim, and says she is worried about her; Julie Peters, head of the GCL, circulates her own fear that Skim shows "classic signs of someone who is suicidal" (62) to other members of the GCL. Three traumas in the text are effectively papered over by the workings of the GCL: that the GCL club continually reminds Katie Matthews of her ex-boyfriend's death; that the same club insists on following Katie Matthews around and policing her emotions; and that Skim's alignments with the particular subcultures she chooses come, in part, out of actively exclusionary behavior on the part of the same people that are now part of the GCL.

Almost feverish in their efforts and sense of self-righteousness, the GCL embodies the same pressures designed to coerce subjects into self-maintenance in accordance with social norms. The slippage from norm to law is further evident in the actions of the GCL club, especially in the response to minor vandalism of a bulletin board used to advertise the group and its events. Julie Peters, head of the GCL club, confuses the work of the club as a social organization, the purview of the school as an institution, the limits of the legal system, and laws around property ownership and vandalism in order to read the situation as not only unlawful, but as a potentially punishable offence: the GCL hang signs declaring the bulletin board to be school property, and Peters herself states that "in some schools they send you to jail for this sort of thing" (77). For Peters, the right to the bulletin board and its message is a near-sacred thing to which she displays an uncritical sense of entitlement. That the message itself might be exclusionary and even harmful

seems not to occur to her; nor does she seem conscious that the content of the message performs an ironic undercutting of her project.

John Reddear is described by Skim as a "star volleyball player," "happy, outgoing, and athletic," suicidal, and likely gay (94). Skim takes issue, explicitly, with being singled out as high-risk on account of her alignment with particular subcultures in the specific context of John's death, puzzling over why "all the girls on the soccer team aren't in counseling" (22). It seems, much to Skim's frustration, that under the governance of the norm-made-law inside of the school system, only certain subjects are singled out for what Foucault calls "confession" (59-60). That is, certain bodies are perceived as being more susceptible to the sin of suicide, and those bodies are interpellated to confess. Other bodies, those without the markers that signal Skim and Lisa as different, in this instance, are presumed safe. Safe bodies are not called upon to confess: they are not made to attest to their normalcy, or made to speak to their own safety. Rather, safe bodies fade into the background, and blend in with each other. Like the vulnerability that women's bodies are expected to carry, safe bodies are normalised to the degree that they appear neutral, and as such make up the background to bodies that are noticeable, and events that can be said to have happened. Lisa, for example, begins to fade into the background of the text as a normative body. She is easily able to slide into the periphery of the GCL by hanging out with non-central member Anna Canard, and her body—she is skinny and blonde—blends in with the remainder of the school's population. Lisa's body starts out bearing certain markers of transgression, coded by the GLC as markers of risk, but is able to easily transition such that she occupies the space of safety, a process that is aided by

her normative shape and features. A culminating moment in Lisa's social shift occurs when she attempts to coerce Skim into going to the school dance because Lisa is worried about her: "Because, Skim, all you do is sit around at home. You don't have to CELEBRATE life or anything... It could be a chance for you to ... find positive things in" (112). A place at the table is accessible to Lisa, but not to Skim, who, like Katie Matthews, can only be the object of surveillance and enforced maintenance.

Skim and Katie Matthews are narratively paired in the various pressures they experience, especially where confession is concerned. They are both called on to perpetually confess their depression, presumably in hopes that the act of confession itself is healing. The GCL and other normative structures spring up around the issues of depression and suicide with a call to confess and to discuss that aims to appear liberal and permissive in comparison with past generations. As with the repressive hypothesis, which takes sex and sexuality as its core example, this call to confess operates such that it sheds a positive light on the one who calls, and frames her as a caring or understanding person. The caller, then, appears to be acting in contrast to the recent history of social stigma and taboo around mental illness, the effective of which has been one of silencing: the caller is framed as addressing the proverbial elephant in the room. In Furedi's therapy culture, the call to confess provokes a slight shift of position between the caller and the sufferer: the caller is now most often either a professional or citing professional authority, and the sufferer is called to confess via public platform. For Furedi, the imperative that one confess is a precursor to help-seeking, which is "a virtue in therapy culture," and one that inherently precedes the public management of personal emotion (42). Furedi notes that

help-seeking, confession, and the subsequent steps in therapy culture all work together in support of the project of eroding "the line between the private and the public" (43). The erosion of discourses of shame from the discussion of mental health has had a compounding effect on the erosion of the same line, which has been aided by the proliferation of institutional, state-sponsored structures designed to promote therapy culture, and on which the GCL builds its case for the call to confession issued to Katie and Skim. Julie Peters, for example, suggests that "if John had had a proper support system, none of this would have happened" (131), and in doing so implies that Katie and Skim are shirking a kind of duty to embed their own grief, their own ugly feelings,[12] into the system of support that the school and GCL have worked together to provide. Furedi's work on the motivation for the systematic approach to confession in therapy culture is illuminating here: he notes that the call to confess is equally one motivated by public hunger for expressions of pain, and one that is bound up in new concepts of heroism that define "the ability to survive potentially destructive experiences like drug abuse or a psychological syndrome" as "an act of bravery worthy of our applause" (43). This hunger for both expressions of pain and examples of heroism under the new paradigm is certainly reflected in the fervour with which the GCL attempt to engage Skim and Katie, as well as in the name of the club itself. This is evident, too, in the framing of the memorial service that is ostensibly for John Reddear, but which is focused on the celebration of life, and presumably the direct celebration of those students who have managed to survive the trials and tribulations of adolescence.

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[12]This is Sianne Ngai's term. I use it both more loosely than Ngai, as is evident here, and later in the more specific sense that Ngai invokes.

Foucault finds a link between the effects of discourse around sexuality, in the case of *The History of Sexuality,* and silence. Speaking about children's sexuality, around which eighteenth century subjects perceived a newly enforced silence, he says:

> Not any less was said about it; on the contrary. But things were said in a different way; it was different people who said them, from different points of view, and in order to obtain different results. Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and relation to them within over-all strategies. [...]
>
> This was only a counterpart of other discourses, and perhaps the condition necessary in order for them to function, discourses that were interlocking, hierarchized, and all highly articulated around a cluster of power. (27, 30)

The bringing together of seemingly disparate elements of this argument hinges on this idea: that every silence fits into, and is perhaps germinal to, the functioning of discourses that all exist in relation to a structure of power. That the school and GCL speak about some elements of John Reddear's struggle (his feelings of sadness and depression), but not others (his queerness) suggests that to "celebrate life" is only to celebrate straight lives, or perhaps to celebrate the lives of queers, but only as separate from their queerness. The silence that the school enacts around members of the school's sports teams in regards to counseling for depression and suicide risk, even though John Reddear was a known athlete, is another example. Discourses of health, including those that circulate

widely and are perpetuated in *Skim* by the school and the GCL, have named athleticism and involvement in team sports a healthy behavior. Silence around the school's athletes, then, serves to further underpin an already accepted discourse of health, and of bodily and affective maintenance that understands mental health to be, at least partially, a symptom of physical health. This discourse further encourages the treatment of affective modalities such as depression with bodily maintenance such as diet and exercise as if there were a simple, one-to-one relationship between them. Additionally, to undercut one piece of the discourse that links overall health to bodily and affective management would be to throw the remainder of it into question. Instead, the norm-as-law is applied to people who exhibit recognizable signs under the same discourse, regardless of their actual relationship to depression and suicide. The foundational work of stereotypes is in service of the perpetuation of these kinds of norm-as-law associations: Skim is stereotyped as being high risk based on her appearance—her clothing and style choices, her fatness, and her melancholia—while athletes, normative bodied students, and even, ironically, John Reddear, are stereotyped as being low risk.

In accordance with Foucault, the other half of the discourses of depression, suicide, and risk in *Skim* is made manifest in that absence, and in that which cannot be said. For Foucault, the unspoken or unspeakable, rendered so because it is taboo or boring or difficult is still part of discourse: it operates as part of a structure of power, undergirds other parts of discourse, and is spoken about exactly as a thing that cannot be spoken about. The challenge, as Foucault points out, is not to merely name or point out silences, but to untangle how they operate as part of larger discourses. In the instance of *Skim*,

there is a notable category of silence that haunts the text: the silence around queerness, homosexual desire, and coming out, as well as the silence around Skim's fatness, and the way that her experience is inflected by race. As Marty Fink notes, "the pathologization of fat bodies cannot be separated from the process of racialization: risks associated with the so-called "obesity epidemic" are dramatized to render fat bodies of color medically unsound and requiring intervention" (np). *Skim* is riddled with instances in which queer sexuality, and the pressure to either name it or hide it, remains just below the surface despite its relevance to a particular situation. In a span of only two pages located more than halfway through the text, the reader learns both that John might have been gay, and that "no one talked about John being gay at the ceremony. Surprise, surprise" (95). This brings my argument, then, full circle: certain traumas are written over others in order to build a particular kind of community, one to which certain bodies belong and others do not, and to which subjects may be offered a belonging based on certain characteristics while having it revoked based on others. The memorial ceremony speaks to this on a certain level: the ceremony is aptly held on the athletics field, but is described by the teaching staff as being definitively *not* in John's memory: "It wasn't just for the victims of suicide, because Mrs. Hornet says we are not here to focus on the negative (dead people)" (92). If the memorial ceremony can be said to act as a kind of trauma, a public revisiting of death and loss made manifest in the act of remembering, it can also be said to paper over the trauma of John's suicide itself, as he is shunted out of the center of the ceremony in the interest of keeping things positive. The result is paltry, and likely ineffective: a

memorial ceremony that refuses to look death in the face, that cannot recognize that which it seeks to remember.

Forgotten in the same moment, relegated to the same place of empty silence, is John's sexuality. While this might be, in part, because John's sexuality is unconfirmed, the narrative works hard to reinforce that the world would much rather account for teen suicide by looking to depression and engagement with subcultures—even when presented with an immediate example for which neither was a contributing factor—than to recognize and name the exclusions that attend queer sexuality, as a possible root cause for such a trauma, particularly in a Catholic context. Instead, traumas that might be survived, and might therefore make one heroic, are, too, understood only insofar as they align with what Lauren Berlant calls the intimate public sphere, of which therapy culture is one example. For Berlant, the intimate public sphere is defined as a "culture of circulation" (*Female Complaint* 5) that becomes available to a discreet sub-group of a population:

> participation [in it] seems to confirm the sense that even before there was a market addressed to them, there existed a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other's experiences of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent, with all that entails: varieties of suffering and fantasies of transcendence; longing for reciprocity with other humans and the world; irrational and rational attachments to the way things are; special styles of ferocity and refusal; and a creative will to survive that attends to everyday situations while imagining conditions of flourishing within and beyond them. (5)

This is the papering over that *Skim* wrestles with most directly: while most of Skim's melancholia is based in unrequited queer desires (she falls in love with Ms. Archer, her English teacher, which is implied to be at the root of Ms. Archer's relocation inside of the school system) and the suturing effect that they have on her relationship to her school community, her symptoms are consistently rewritten as signaling depression by the school. Meanwhile, the school, the GCL, and even Lisa fail to notice that the intimate public offered up by therapy culture as practiced and enforced in response to John Reddear's suicide "claim[s] a certain emotional generality" with which Skim cannot identify (Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 5). And, while Skim's angst, excitement, and eventual sadness over her unrequited love are papered over in her school environment by the presumed trauma of depression due to her gothic "fragility"—her relatively unremarkable teen angst and sadness are overwritten as symptoms of disease by her peers—John Reddear's experience of trauma, quite possibly from either fear of rejection, actual rejection, or fear of the consequences of coming out, is papered over by his actual suicide, and re-framed as an issue of networks of support for depression, as if depression were unattached from the realities of the everyday. The school hurries to frame John's suicide as traumatic event that might have been avoided with the proper application of the operations of therapy culture, rather than facing its likely root in the slow death (Berlant *Cruel Optimism* 102) encouraged by the toxic (sexist, racist, and homophobic) environment of the normative public school, especially in the pre gay-straight alliance days of the 1990s. In enacting such a narrow focus on the event of John Reddear's death—rather than the conditions of life that produced the event—John Reddear is

claimed posthumously as a member of an intimate public that accepts him only on the condition that his death be the result of survivable (read curable) illness ("drug abuse or a psychological syndrome" [Furedi 5]), and not an incurable condition of life such as being marked physically by race, or socially by sexuality. Lauren Berlant describes the process of highlighting the crisis or event in order to encourage a turning away from the impact of harmful environments: this deployment of crisis is often explicitly and intentionally a

> redefinitional tactic, an inflationary, distorting, or misdirecting gesture that aspires
> to make an environmental phenomenon appear suddenly as an event, because as a
> structural or predictable condition it has not engendered the kinds of historic
> action we associate with the heroic energy a crisis implicitly calls for. (*Cruel
> Optimism* 101)

Papering over in this instance is akin to the process of distortion and redefinition that Berlant gestures towards; the GCL club crops up in order to embody the "heroic agency" that the crisis of suicide calls for, and the school, GCL members included, is permitted to enact a crisis response that doesn't involve reevaluating the overall environment, or the violent impact of various exclusions and micro-aggressions that occur within.

Subsequently, the turn towards crisis produces a splitting of community and belonging. John is effectively claimed as an athlete in a manner that will remain perpetually uncomplicated by his sexuality; Lisa is able to align with Anna Canard and to mime her concern about Skim's "symptoms" of depression and suicide risk; and Skim finds herself splintered from her best friend, but aligned with Katie Matthews, who shares her disdain for the GCL and their simplistic application of the norm-as-law to the lives of

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citizens who don't fit within it. Katie and Skim, whose friendship develops after Skim helps Katie exit a GCL organized school dance turned fundraiser for a suicide crisis line (130-132), experience a kind of belonging that comes out of unbelonging: they bond over the site of struggle that is critical to the formation of a community (Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings* 16).

So too, then, does this text points towards the kind of orientation that can come out of disorientation, as Sara Ahmed might say (*Queer Phenomenology* 5). For Ahmed, disorientation comes out of failed orientations. I want to expand that idea to the national, and to Cvetkovich's struggle over the amnesiac quality that the nation, as part of the process through which the nation is continually cast and recast, brings to trauma. One whose identity has, at its root, a trauma that has been subject to the papering over that Cvetkovich calls characteristic of national patriotism, is found to be without a foundation for the self. Ahmed, in her discussion of orientation through disorientation, urges her readers to think about orientation as about more than simply which objects become available, or unavailable, as choices. Rather, she urges her readers to think about orientation as the moment at which consciousness becomes directed towards itself (*Queer Phenomenology* various). For Ahmed, the moment of orientation is the moment when the subject comes into some understanding of herself as a subject, based on her understanding of her position in terms of both the social order, and also physical space. Orientation is paired with an understanding of one's place in a particular society, in relationship to a particular group of people, and to the spaces traversed by oneself and others, making it a kind of spatialised version of Althusser's interpellation. For Skim, this relationship

between social hierarchy, physical space, and orientation becomes cemented in the scene in which she is thrust from a birthday party (85), which I discuss in more detail below. The moment at which she, and the only other racialized child at the party, are pushed into the street by a group of their thin and white classmates is a bringing together of several kinds of not-fitting-in—racially, socially, and in relationship to physical space—that offers up one orientation by stripping away others.

Ahmed points to the possibility of moments of disorientation being allowed to "gather, almost as if they were bodies around a different table" (*Queer Phenomenology* 24), which might cause us to "look a different way" (*Queer Phenomenology* 24). Katie and Skim's respective exclusions are allowed to gather in this way, as they form a bond based predominantly around a desire to be released from the monitoring gaze of the GCL and its impetus toward policing their grief. While all other friendships represented in the text are based on likeness, Skim and Katie's is based in being similarly different; it forms when each girl turns away from the GCL and all that they represent, and spot each other as having also turned away. In this formulation, moments of disorientation become almost like companions, guiding the subject towards other forms of community and belonging, including the kind of belonging that is only accessible to people who have been excised from the normative community.

Part Two: Fiction Meets Form

Thus far, this chapter has approached *Skim* in terms of its textual component; this reading can (and must) be fleshed out by consideration of the visual component as well.

In visual narrative, and in the comics format especially, the relationship between form and content is paramount to the particularities of effective storytelling. In *Skim*, the comics format is further complicated by the inclusion of rendered photographs, and by the framing of the text as a diary. The diary format, like the photograph, signals that the reader is invited in to a "neat slice of time" (Sontag 17). The events of a diary and the photograph alike are contained, or framed as a kind of snapshot: an encounter that equally picks up and leaves off in the middle of a life, but that engender a particular incompleteness by implying time both before and after that which is accounted for in the text. That is, both the photograph and the diary entry speak to their own snapshot-like quality, their own ability to speak only to isolated moments. *Skim* is written in diary format, but in a nontraditional manner: this particular diary is written in images, which compounds its relationship to the "neat slice of time" structure; each image represents a microcosm of the described relationship to time, with the gutters between images bringing to the fore the interpretive work that any reader brings to a text, and especially to a diary. In the case of Skim, the reader must do the work of linking up Skim's expressions of affect, which occur predominantly in prose, with her queer desire, which is expressed only in image (Chiu 30-1), and is thus perhaps a desire that Skim struggles to name, even in her most private writings. Depictions of queer desire in *Skim* speak to the similarity in function that the drawn image sometimes has to the photograph: though queer desire is not named as such in *Skim's* prose, it remains at the fore of critical readings of the text (Chiu, Berndt, Fink). The centrality of queer desire to readings of Skim ultimately speaks to the weight of "truth" that the drawn image, like the photograph, can be said to carry,

even if the "truth" that the drawn image evokes is narrative, rather than "real" or aligning with fact. Monica Chiu notes that the diary format allows readers access to Skim's most intimate thoughts (30), while the images offer additional—and sometimes conflicting—details, including by way of the particular use of the comics form that the Tamakis employ. As the photograph and diary both make a claim to truth and authority beyond their means, so does *Skim* challenge the notion that any singular account can be wholly true; in this manner, the comics form and the diary are good friends, and especially so in their service to Skim's story

Hillary Chute theorizes comics as "representing time as space" (7 & 8). Each panel, much like a photograph, represents a single, distilled moment in time. However, panels are rarely one-to-a page, and where they are, as in splash pages, the relationship to time differs substantially from regular comics time.[13] Instead, frames are laid out in sequence: in Anglophone, American-style comics, panels to the left represent the past, which grows increasingly distant, panels to the right represent a future, and the present is determined by the viewer's place in the text. Individual comics frames have the capacity to operate in a similar manner to a photograph, but when placed in sequence they pose a bit of a challenge to the concept of the "neat slice of time" (Sontag 17): at the same time that comics rely on that "neat slice of time" effect for individual frames, they also depend on the very act of sequencing, of putting slices of time into a particular order, to craft a

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[13] Splash pages deviate from standard comics time in the same manner that they sometimes deviate from the established realism: they are able to represent multiple events, moments, or time periods at once. Some scholars read splash pages as representing the themes or feel of a text outside of its plot (as Monica Chiu does), while others read splash pages as representing anecdotes that flesh out the narrative without necessarily fitting into sequence. Finally, splash pages sometimes represent moments of flashback and/or flash forward.

narrative. However, the fact of narrative in comics, which pulls the reader away from the slowness required for reading photographs, doesn't fully cancel the parallel to the photographic image, but instead enhances it, albeit in moments rather than as a rule. In an interview with Hillary Chute, the renowned photojournalist and comics artist Joe Sacco remarks on the manner in which the comics medium supersedes photographic technology in its precision: "Now, when you draw, you can always capture that moment. You can always have that exact, precise moment when someone's got the club raised, when someone's going down. I realize now there's a lot of power in that. It's a bit scary in a way, because you're capturing moments like that constantly from panel to panel" (*Outside the Box* 146). While the photograph enables the photographer to distill something like truth into a still image, for Sacco, comics allows the auteur to select a moment from reality, memory, or fantasy in order to produce an image that speaks to truth in a more precise fashion, while remaining free of the baggage that comes along with the promise of truth that is inherently tied to the photograph (*Outside the Box* 146).

No page in *Skim* is divided into the "traditional" comics format of nine panels arranged over three lines; instead, pages are divided up in an irregular fashion which, for Chiu, underscores the multidirectional relationship of content to form in *Skim,* and "underscore[s] the confused, alienated, and non-traditional protagonist" (31). The gutter acts as a visual symbol of the meaning-making inherent to reading both comics and diaries: the empty spaces between each image require the reader to piece together missing information in order to access a narrative that feels complete. Something similar is true of the diary: the reader must pull together information between multiple entries—those "neat

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slices of time" (Sontag 17) that often aren't stitched together by narrative conventions such as linking or transitionary scenes, as in prose fiction—at any given time to produce an understanding of the relationships, settings, and conflicts represented therein. In the case of *Skim*, I argue that the gutter represents the link between race, exclusion, fatness, and what Chiu refers to as "teen alienations" (Chiu 31). Splash pages, full page images that interrupt the quick pace of reading common to comics, occur in *Skim* at moments meant to highlight Skim's homosexual desire (40-1, 142) and the race-based exclusion to which she is subject (84, 87), and in those moments brief snippets of diary text are supplemented by detailed images representing either memory or fantasy; the reader is left to determine which.

Skim signals its own engagement with this convergence of forms—with the brief, direct text of the teenager's diary, and with the symbolic, loosely connected frames of the comics medium—in its opening narrative pages, which depict drawings of three fuzzy photographs overlaid with the text, "up until four last night, trying to take pictures of cast. Decided it is impossible to take pictures of your right arm when you're right-handed. (Duh)" (8). The work of these three images is three-fold. First, they draw attention to all images as constructed, witnessed in this instance in the representation of failed representations: the failure of the camera to accurately capture the desired image frames the camera, and also the pen, as a tool to be used by a desiring subject, rather than as a tool capable of neutral viewpoint. Second, they ground the text in the same possibility of failed representation, prompting the viewer to consider each image in terms of both that which is and is not encoded and decoded. Finally, they complicate the relationship of

subject, viewer, and time in the text. The photographs, drawn images meant to represent photographs pasted into a diary, represent a past moment that is both captured in the instance of the photograph, and ordered and narrated in the pages of the journal. The speaking subject, then, is removed from the event twice, as the photographs represent two layers of "past." Further removed yet is the viewer, who must understand the photographs as a reference to an imagined event that is archived, narrated, and, lastly, drawn in that state by Jillian Tamaki.

The opening pages of the text depict a set of relationships and tensions that remain throughout. The main character is introduced as both an absence and intended later recipient of the diary's content. She is not introduced in any traditional sense of the word, but doesn't need to be; the structure of a diary is that it is written, partially, to be read by the author, for whom the subject is both obvious and familiar, at a later date. In this manner, the reader is granted access to material meant to be perused by the narrator and fictional author, and is thus aligned in an especially personal way with the narrative voice, which is directed towards a reader that is equally Skim herself the "empowering and sympathetic other" that she creates in the act of writing (Coleman 1). For Leah White, the journal or diary is a safe space for women writers to explore emotion while resisting the social consequences that accompany certain emotional responses in the public sphere (80-1), while for Coleman the creation of the sympathetic other through the act of writing creates something like an intimate public that operates similarly, which is to say that it creates a feeling of safety of expression (1). Because of the common association of the diary form with emotion and feeling, this framing represents a kind of limited access to

what Furedi might call "the intimate:" the reader is granted partial access to the way that Skim communicates her feelings to her most intimate relation—herself. Additionally, the narrator presents herself as an absence defined in relationship to the character Lisa, who is the narrator's closest friend and represents the margins of the norm, and thus acts as a visual representation of a barrier to access for the narrator, who is excluded from the norm partially because of the ways that her body is marked. Skim's initial point of contact with herself, then, is through an expression of feeling herself being made absent, or feeling her own exclusion: "Dear diary, Today, Lisa said, 'Everyone thinks they are unique'" (5). As an opening moment, there is here reflected an internal tension that Skim grapples with throughout the text. She finds herself butting heads with arbiters of authority that seek to define categories and police movement—if everyone thinks they are unique Skim must not be unique, regardless of her efforts or conception of self—but at the same time finds herself enacting a resistance: she follows this description with the statement that "that is not unique!!" (5). Skim's most intimate moments, those in which she writes a narrative of self directed to herself, almost all circulate around the question of belonging, and always to categories over which Skim has no control.

Both Lisa and Skim want to occupy the category of "unique," or to be outside of the norm, a fact that gives rise to a variety of tensions in their relationship. Skim's relationship to "unique," and by extension to the norm, is mediated, at least initially, through her relationship to Lisa: it is through the same gesture that Skim defines Lisa as one who deems herself capable of identifying the relationship of others to the unique that Skim is able to distance herself by applying the same logic to Lisa in turn. The subtle

clues toward the nature of their relationship operate as a microcosmic example of the relationship represented through the remainder of the text. While Lisa is both assured of and vocal about her right to act as an arbiter of that which is and is not unique, Skim uses the same language to enact a dismissal of Lisa's perceived authority. Skim's dismissal works against both the fact of uniqueness and the impetus towards policing entry into that category. Because Lisa, or perhaps more specifically Lisa's body, is able to move between blending in—her whiteness and blondness allow her access to certain social capital, but also her peers are nearly exclusively white and blonde—and sticking out—she can opt to set herself apart through her actions, words, and dress—she represents a particular hegemonic power. Like the systems of capitalism and culture which are able, through the force of hegemony, to absorb whatever they see fit in order to simultaneously turn a profit and empty cultural artifacts of their specificity and meaning, Lisa is able to move the bar of in/exclusion, even by simply changing her mind about the nature of Skim's character. In the first third of the text, for example, Skim and Lisa cynically joke about suicide (54) together, likely because they are aligned in the eyes of the school as "high risk." By the end of the text, however, Lisa has transitioned to hanging out with GCL members who, it is worth mentioning, don't ever interact with Skim in a manner that might invite friendship. Instead, the GCL, and now Lisa only to speak to Skim in order to express concern about her well being. All of the movement that is allowed to Lisa—between blending in and not, between the background and the foreground—is unstated, and occurs only in the register of the visual.

Part Three: Where Image Meets Affect

Skim opens with three blurry photographs, each of which represents a failed attempt by Skim to photograph her own injured body, and which, in turn, represents Skim's inability to bring her own body into focus. Skim berates herself for her inability to document a particular marker of difference, her cast (8), signaling at once her inability to be as left-handed as she is right-handed—to make her body perform sameness—and her attachment to the marker of difference. More important than the cast, however, is the twofold impact of it. Immediately following the photographs is a frame that depicts Skim attempting to write her name with her left hand, a process that is only marginally more successful than the photographs, and that further speaks to her injury as an impediment to her ability to document herself. Alongside this frame is the insistence that Skim, if given the option, would have chosen a black cast over a white one (8), thus making her injury more visible, though this insistence is tempered by her frustration at remaining illegible because of it. Atop a preceding frame depicting Skim writing in a journal (it becomes clear, one frame later, that she is attempting to inscribe her name), is the text "decided stitches are definitely cooler than broken bones" (8), and, atop the aforementioned image of Skim failing to inscribe her name: "should have fallen on a beer bottle" (8). It is important that even the represented photograph attests to Skim's failure to record those markers of otherness that she chooses, which suggests that the putting on of the markers of subculture doesn't have a substantial effect on the cultural legibility of Skim's body. This relationship to difference and legibility is a tension that remains throughout the text, and one that signals an intersectionality between melancholic attachments, biopolitics,

and race. In an interview with sociology lecturer Vikki Bell, Judith Butler describes the melancholic attachment of survivor's guilt among gay men whose partners have died of AIDS, and links that melancholic attachment to the structures of public mourning that exclude same-sex couples and so prevent a particular kind of closure. Skim's relationship to difference and legibility operates in a similar fashion: to be unable to mourn John Reddear as a fellow queer is, in a way, to be denied closure, and to occupy a racially illegible body is to be without a satisfactory account of history and without an easy fit into the systems that underpin the social order. On the other hand, to be legible is to face one's difference, which is haunted by the history of queer exclusion and of Japanese internment.

In "Out Here and Over There," David Eng points to a shift in Asian American Studies in the 1980s in which the field turned away from a class-based analysis of the conditions of life for Asian Americans, and towards "a new political project of thinking about these concepts in Asian American studies ... [which] would seem to centre around queerness and diaspora—its rethinkings of home and nation state across multiple identity formations and numerous locations 'out there' and 'over here'" (43). For Eng, Asian American queerness—both queer Asian Americans and that work situated at the nexus of Asian American studies and queer theory—is useful for the way that it opens up the field to the study of both identities and locations ("Out Here and Over There" 43). Tamaki and Tamaki's *Skim* is a text focused on being both queer and out of place. Skim is often out of place literally—she finds herself ushered out of a children's costume party, and finds solace in unusual spaces: a parking lot, her teacher's home, or the declared "social black

hole" of a Swiss Chalet near her school, where she can go to be alone in the company of strangers (101). Imagistically, these scenes are depicted such that they echo Skim's feelings of dislocation: in each of these instances, space ceases to make logical sense on the page. Instead, Skim's body and key objects hover over backgrounds that are either devoid of detail, or that depict multiple physical spaces overlaid so that they appear to meld into one another: an digital clock display that jumps by hours or minutes between panels (106), a cup of coffee for Swiss Chalet (101), a doorway that represents an exit point (100), another doorway that appears to open from nowhere onto a parking lot (103). Skim is also out of place figuratively—her obsession with John Reddear's suicide is an obsession with the possibility of total removal, as well as the resilience required to remain when one is so fiercely denied a place at the table. *Skim* asks the reader to weigh the cost of feeling together in the manner proffered by the GCL and in line with Furedi's description of therapy culture, which sees surviving traumatic events including mental illness as heroic, against the possibility that John and Skim are afflicted with something that isn't "survivable" in the same way. This measuring brings to the fore questions about how spaces begin to feel "like home" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 7), especially for those subjects for whom a claim to "home" is already precarious. In the case of *Skim,* the main character is so out of place, so denied the comfort of fitting in, that she actively rewrites scripts of non-belonging, often in order to remake them into alternative models for community.

I take as a starting point Ann Cvetkovich's insight that "the nation [is] a site of struggle," and illuminate the forms of violence that are forgotten or covered over by the

"amnesiac powers of national culture, which is adept at using one trauma story to suppress another" (Cvetkovich 16). In *Skim*, the question of place and person that Eng's work opens up meets with Ahmed's question of access to home in a manner that is particular to the space and history of Canada, and the discourse of multiculturalism especially. In her essay, "On the Dark Side of the Nation: Politics of Multiculturalism and the State of Canada," Himani Bannerji criticizes the current function of the discourse of multiculturalism in Canada, suggesting that the very policies and discourses that appear to promise equality actually entrench white supremacy. Bannerji suggests that it is through the discourse of multiculturalism that the Canadian state names "visible minorities," who are made to "provide the ideological basis for the Canadian state's liberal/universal status" (327). Her specific claim hinges on the ideological divide between Quebec and "Canada outside of Quebec," which is partially maintained in the naming of visible minorities that signals an increased tolerance for diversity in "Canada outside of Quebec." Canada less Quebec is thus able to garner a reputation of liberal tolerance on the international stage, though that reputation requires that visible minorities remain useful to the Canadian state (327). For Bannerji, visible minorities are claimed by the dominant class in service of an appearance of liberalism on the part of the nation. Ultimately, this positioning of visible minorities as a kind of shield against accusations of non-tolerance is one that ignores real histories of trauma, abuse, neglect, and exclusion.

In an attempt to prod that papering over in order to expose it, Bannerji suggests that "if one stands on the dark side of the nation in Canada everything looks different. The transcendent, universal and unifying claims of its multiculturally legitimated

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ideological state apparatus becomes susceptible to questions" (329). The part of the

ideological state apparatus that Bannerji is most interested in is the work of the school in

teaching a narrative of Canada as a utopian space in which everyone has an equal

opportunity for success, where success is defined by middle class measures, and

discrimination based on race is no longer an issue. According to Bannerji, this operation

of the state is variously visible to citizens; while some citizens are able to see the papering

over of traumas that the multiculturalism discourse enables, others are not:

> And yet, when we scrutinize Canada, what do we see? The answer to this question
>
> depends on which side of the nation we inhabit. For those who see it as a
>
> homogenous cultural/political entity, resting on a legitimately possessed territory,
>
> with an exclusive right to legislation over diverse groups of peoples, Canada is
>
> unproblematic. For others who are on the receiving end of the power of
>
> multiculturalism, who have been dispossessed in one sense or another, the answer
>
> is quite different. For them the issues of legitimacy of territorial possession, or the
>
> right to create regulations and the very axis of domination on which its status as a
>
> nation-state rests, are all too central to be pushed aside. To them, the same Canada
>
> appears as a post-conquest capitalist state, economically dependent on an
>
> imperialist United States and politically implicated in English and US imperialist
>
> enterprises, with some designs of its own. (330)

Because Skim's queer desire and racialized body operate as the foundation to her

experience, and put her on "the dark side of the nation," she is less and less able to move

through the world without questioning the operation of the state as it appears through her

limited experience in the structures that crop up around John Reddear's suicide, which seek to gain control of the narratives around both Reddear specifically and suicide and depression generally. There is something else going on for subjects whose place on the "dark side of the nation" gives them a glimpse of the violent root of the Canadian state, even as the state fashions itself from a narrative of kindness and tolerance, and it is that same *thing* that makes Skim's sadness appear to be somehow different than that of her peers. It is what Anne Cheng calls "racial melancholia," and it happens in the space between "grief and grievance," between the moment of "suffering injury" and "speaking out against that injury" (3), and at the site of self-actualisation—of identity—for subjects whose very racial identification has become itself a source of trauma or injury. Racial identity and psychic injury are linked at the site of history, where history is living and complex: history is the event in the past at which subjects may find a nameable trauma—slavery, internment, residential schools—but also the lingering burden of those traumas, and their accompanying narratives, over time. The world of *Skim* speaks to a structure of feeling in which Canada's own violent history remains in traces, attached to the everyday lived experiences of already-vulnerable subjects, including Skim.

Cvetkovich's formulation, in which the nation uses "one trauma story to paper over" another, must be read in conjunction with racialised histories, and with an awareness of the violence of the nation, even in its writing a narrative of non-violence, that Bannerji describes. The Canadian value of multiculturalism, and its particular operation according to Bannerji, is useful for identifying the particular mechanisms of historical forgetting, and thus of racial injury. An official government background paper

on multiculturalism, for example, mentions Japanese internment only in order to say that "in 1988, the Government of Canada formally apologized for the wrongful incarceration, seizure of property, and disenfranchisement of Japanese Canadians during WWII and offered compensation" ("Canadian Multiculturalism" 5), and offers neither details of the extent of that trauma nor to the cause of the decades-long delay in the recognition itself. The distinct impression given by the background paper is that the apology itself has more to do with making the government appear a particular way than with reconciling trauma, or even facing it in a meaningful way. This is one example of the mechanism by which nations perform the amnesia to which Cvetkovich points: rewriting histories in order to simplify them, and especially in order to stress a particular, linear relationship to trauma in which traumas happen[14] and the government responds.

As Amber Dean remarks, internment is "a part of the history of the Canadian nation, w[as] sanctioned by the Canadian state, and yet [is] routinely made invisible, erased in an attempt to (re)present a mythical Canada in which such traumas are insignificant, justifiable, or outright denied" (n.p). Key for Dean is that in the process of Canadian national myth-making, as in Cvetkovich's formulation, personal traumas are often framed as superseding public traumas. National-myth making works in its own favour, writing over public traumas by issuing apologies intended to orchestrate a national turning-away from traumatic events thought to be "dealt with" and therefore reconciled, or no longer requiring attention. Racial injury, then, is swept away in the

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[14]I avoid ascribing agency here on purpose.

popular imaginary, relegated to a past that is no longer, for the white majority, worth mentioning.

The examples described above, including the apologies on behalf of the nation, perform what Ahmed calls a response to the "evocation of pain" in public discourse, which operates through signs "which convey histories that involve injuries to bodies, at the same time as they conceal the presence or 'work' of other bodies"(Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 20-21). The 'response,' demanded by the fact of injury, is often the apology: a gesture that seeks to placate injured subjects without attributing blame or responsibility, a feat accomplished by vacating the perpetrating bodies from historical accounts. State-sanctioned violences are committed, then, in the name of the government, but not by it. If the aim of multiculturalism is to encourage a social contract that demands that everyone get along, national apologies work in service of that project: they are designed to attend to traumas in order for those traumas to cease to impact on the ability of separate social groups in the population to "get along." In simpler terms: part of the function of a national apology is to signal that an event or trauma has been recognised, a perpetrator has been identified, and thus the event or trauma has come to a close.[15] The apology for Japanese internment, issued by PM Brian Mulroney in 1988, is meant to give closure, but closure intended for the Canadian government rather than Japanese Canadians, much like the Multiculturalism Act itself, which is meant to "appease the rumblings of those 'others'

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[15] This is compounded by the impact of monetary reparations on the social imaginary, which tend to bolster the toxic us/them mentality prevalent among many settlers populations ("the government has given out x number of dollars, what more can y community possibly want?"). While apologies cement traumas into histories, reparations operate in public discourse to frame traumatized groups as especially greedy, and as demanding more than their fair share.

standing on the sidelines of the Bicultural and Bilingualism policy" (Miki 106). Such is the potential violence, at worst, and need for critique and caution, at best, of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act.[16]

Effectively, the Multiculturalism Act and the apologies made on behalf of the nation make it difficult to name or talk about the reverberating impacts of historical violence. Scholars such as Anne Cheng and Kenneth Clark (of the infamous 1930s "doll test")[17] suggest that those traumas inflicted on racialized groups that cause lasting psychic wounds can be "inherited across time" (*Racial Melancholia* x), and are woven into the fabric of "the construction of social meaning" made visible at "the site of racial injury" (x). For Cheng, the nation is comfortable with "grievance but not with grief," meaning that unresolved grief becomes inherently tied to "the social and subjective formations of the so-called racialized or minority subject" (x).

Gilbert Caluya extends the productive potential of reading race through the lingering affects of history, through the psychic racial wound, to the work of the photographic image, which sits at the nexus of the simple, loss, and mourning. For Caluya, the photograph, in its melancholic attachments to life and mortality, begins the work of making, a kind of precarious community-assemblage through affective connection made possible by a shared site of injury. For Caluya, photographs have in them an inherent duality, an ability to represent at once a lost, or soon-to-be-lost object

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[16] To clarify: the purpose and intent of the Act—creating a Canada that is more equitable and less racist— is entirely positive. The application and effect of the Act is not, and must not be exempt from critique based on the positive intentions articulated therein.

[17] During the text, a wide sample of children were asked to select a doll from two that were offered—one of which was a black, and one of which was white. The results showed that even black children showed an overwhelming preference for the white doll.

(or subject), and to engage in a kind of "ghostly remembrance" (95) that is not dissimilar from the affective attachments that can move through time, and even across race in the form of racial melancholia (Cheng x). This duality enables a deeper reading of the photographs that appear on the first pages of *Skim* by opening a space in which the unfocused body depicted therein can display its own link to the structure of feeling around Japanese Canadian subjects: is the Japanese Canadian body illegible in certain moments because of a widespread refusal of the dominant culture to be reminded of internment, and the soon-to-be-lost quality that it effectively writes onto both bodies and citizenship status, or does the illegibility of the Japanese Canadian body come from inside of the Japanese Canadian subject by way of "ghostly remembrance"(95)? Caluya's work allows for a reading of images—photographic and otherwise—as inherently tied to a past, even only the scarcely-removed past of the moment of production, in order to find in them both a necessary looking back, and a bringing of the past into the present, or a kind of haunting. Importantly, Tamaki and Tamaki specifically use splash pages to feature hauntings: figure one (Appendix I) features Skim and Lisa leaving a forest after they've failed to summon John Reddear's spirit. A ghostly figure occupies the far right of the frame, mimicking the transference of images that sometimes happens in film photography—a particular kind of haunting that might be a mis-remembered moment, or might be entirely fabricated, and so mirrors the relationship of memory and fantasy in the diary format as much as the photograph. These hauntings—the melancholia that sticks to Skim as historical residue, the ghostly fellow queers that Skim feels for but cannot fully

grieve—speak to the limited and limiting space made available for Skim and others like her within a contemporary Canadian structure of feeling.

Roy Miki finds an historical link between Japanese internment, the work of communities of color in Canada under the Multiculturalism Act, and the newly available aesthetic possibilities for the same communities in post-Multiculturalism Act Canada. Miki reads the Japanese Canadian redress movement, which "developed within ... and perhaps even thrived on the changes" attributed to the Multiculturalism Act, as instrumental in the development of radically transformed, if provisional, cultural spaces in which the voices of people of color are made central. For Miki, these cultural spaces "undermine assimilationist pressures" while allowing "writers of color [to] navigate diversity within the specificity of histories, languages, and subjectivities" (106). The fallout from these developments is in the reactionary voices that crop up in response to the waning credibility of the "rhetoric of a binary centre (biculturalism) with its subordinate 'others' in the margins" (106) inherent to the discourse of multiculturalism, which point the finger at writers and activists of color who perform resistance work as causing the disintegration of national cultural integrity (106). Miki finds a direct link between internment, redress, and the cultural spaces made possible in part because of multiculturalism, and renewed pressures put onto people of color, and Japanese Canadians specifically, whose very push for redress and other resistance actions are framed as threatening to national cohesion. The bodies of people of color that resist the impetus to assimilate, or resist the impetus to cease in their resistances, are framed as being at the root of the very structures of oppression that they resist.

Miki also notes the potential for writers of color, because of their position inside of particular social contexts and histories, to do deterritorializing work, and further finds in the same writing a viable strategy for antiassimilationist work (118). The comics medium, the reading of which is linked in its particular history as a literary medium—through such touchstone texts as *Persepolis* and *Maus*—to traumas that have impacted marginalized groups, is a useful platform for the work of antiassimilation and deterritorialization to which Miki refers. The usefulness of comics as a platform for antiassimilation and deterritorialization is evident in even the opening pages of *Skim*, which feature mainly white, negative space, with only an abstract image that depicts a dozen or so leaves alongside motion lines that give the impression that the leaves are being blown from the top left to about one third of the way up the page on the bottom right. A combination of the stylised leaves—they appear weightless, as if they are being swept about by the wind—and the lines representing wind give the distinct impression of motion towards the next page, where the leaf formation continues, and blends into a concrete image of Skim and her best friend, Lisa. This very simple sense of motion, a subtle imperative to turn a page, does the work of orienting the reader, and aligning her against some norms and with others. This process of orientation is aligned with Ahmed's work on the same subject, which focuses on orientation as a project of the body that "lines itself up with the direction of the space it inhabits" (*Queer Phenomenology* 13). This opening image asks the reader to read the text from left to right, an imperative that acts as a directive that aligns the text with western style graphic novels, rather than their eastern style counterparts, manga, which are designed to be read from right to left. Rather

than operating as a "how to," or an apolitical guideline about reading practices, this particular orientation is indicative of a certain relationship to norms, and functions as an upfront declaration of belonging to a western, and specifically Canadian, in this instance, tradition of graphic novel production. Such signaling is only necessary, and only garners power, because of the text's citation of Japanese woodblock printing. Put another way, the text recognises and responds to its own position as potentially mis-read and as marked as other, and actively works to construct itself as a hybrid text- neither only or wholly Japanese or western/Canadian. It is in this way that the a layer of meaning that this text takes on given its relationship to a multicultural Canada: the text begins the work of signaling its own disorientation, or at least orientation between accepted objects, given its relationship to an ideological lens that does certain violences to the Japanese Canadian community. The text signals its own engagements with multiculturalism and the structure that seeks to read those "others" that Miki refers to, those who are shunted easily to the margins of the national culture, as assimilative within that very structure.

One of Skim's earliest moments of exclusion, in which resistance and the assimilation imperative meet up, or brush against one another, appears as the memory of a costume party that Skim attends as a middle school student. Her costume is appropriately cute and child-like—she dresses as the cowardly lion from *The Wizard of Oz*—but she is marked visibly as other when read against the other girls, who are all costumed as either ballerinas or gymnasts, with the exception of the only other Asian Canadian youth in attendance: Hien Warshowski,who is dressed as a soldier (83). Skim and Hien are thrust from the party by the other party-goers, whose gleeful shrieking of "Air Raid, Air Raid"

evokes the world wars, and perhaps references anxieties about ethnically Japanese persons, including Canadian citizens, inside of Canada's borders in the midst of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The same anxiety eventually led to the internment of Japanese Canadians as enemy aliens based on supposed national affiliations that are perceived to be sutured to Japanese-ness (which remains written on the bodies of even the most staunchly patriotic Japanese Canadians), as well the perception that Japanese Canadians leading up to the war had failed to assimilate, on the one hand, and were "doing too well," on the other. The explicit reason why Skim is cast out, or excluded from community with her peers, is that her costume fails to fit in with the aesthetic of the party. However, to complicate a simple reading of the scene, one must note that the narration in this segment of the text suffers from Skim's inability to bring her body into focus made evident in the three photos.

To frame the event as being singularly about Skim and Hien's costumes would overlook the complicating factors that contribute to the scene, which Skim describes as being the cause of her hatred of birthday parties, her lack of fear of the dark, and her amusement that her peers now worry about her. Although this event likely informs each of those, it remains at its heart about who does and does not "fit it." Puwar Nurmal makes the point in her book, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender, and Bodies out of Place*, that bodies are made to "fit in" (or not) to spaces based on shared histories; bodies that have repeatedly entered, remained, and acted within any given space will "fit in," while bodies that have been excluded from the same space will not, by no will or force of the individual subjects present in the space at the time. Space, for Puwar, is categorical: when

she writes about how black bodies do not fit into the classroom due to the particular history of slavery and the accompanying barriers to education for black people in America (more precisely, she argues that black bodies have only recently begun the insistent repetitions that will lead to fitting in), she describes the way that particular exclusions reverberate in spaces through time until those exclusions are overwritten by new narratives.

Skim and Hien are caught in a double bind based on their inability to fit in to the birthday party. In order to "fit in" they both don costumes, but equally occupy bodies that don't "fit in" to the type of costume that would enable a more meaningful "fitting in." Though it is difficult, and beside the point, to define the exact dimensions of Hien and Skim's respective bodies, it is worth noting that, when placed side by side, they appear to have a similar shape, and one that differs from the lanky bodies of the other girls (84): both are shorter than the others, appear to have broader shoulders, and, as is central to Skim's struggle with otherness, are fat. Their costume choices—the cowardly lion and a soldier—allow them a certain amount of buffer space between their respective bodies and their costumed selves that would not be accessible had they opted to dress in imitation of a human body poised to perform an aesthetic art. Fat bodies have been largely excluded from Western athletic art forms such as dance and figure skating, and though that exclusivity is being increasingly challenged, fat bodies remain a protested exception. Dressing as a ballerina or figure skater would have likely made Skim the object of additional ridicule based on the assumption that there are no fat ballerinas, which

underlines the way that certain bodies interrupt normative notions of particular kinds of performing artistry.

Additionally, the fact of race further compounds the manner in which Skim and Hien fail to fit in, and the comparable inaccessibility of the "right" costumes. Julie Peters, for whom the party is held, dresses as a possible future self; she calls herself a "prima ballerina," and wears her own pointe shoes. At the party, Skim notices an image of Julie Peters hanging on the wall that depicts her in dance attire, presumably at a recital (84). Another, unnamed party-goer exclaims that she is dressed as "Elizabeth Manley" which is met with "Oh my god! I love her!" (83). Not only does this party goer set a certain kind of standard—that one must be a *specific,* named ballerina or figure skater—, but the exchange also signals a shared awareness of a particular kind of cultural production, or insider knowledge. Skim and Hien both appear to be "outside" of this collective knowledge, in addition to lacking race-specific role models, or, at the very least, race-specific role models that might be accessible as part of the media commonly available to the average Canadian household. Just as there are "no" fat ballerinas, girls like Julie Peters might claim that there are no Asian ballerinas.

Notably, the birthday party scene is the first, and only explicit[18] mention of race in the entire book. While Skim seems to view the ousting as personal, or as an inherent part of her regular not-fitting-in, she worries that Hien, recently adopted from Vietnam,

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[18] I debate that this is the first mention of race in the text: an effect of the visual nature of the media is that Skim is drawn such that she is coded Asian, meaning that the narrator doesn't need to identify herself by race in order to make that information accessible to the viewer. It is important that race is mentioned in this instance, as has been noted by Frederick Luis Altima in *Multicultural Comics Today* (8).

will understand the events of this night to be characteristic of Canadian culture: "Maybe she thought that's how people left parties in Canada. Asians first" (86). While Skim clearly experiences trauma in this moment (her list of resulting fears and feelings says as much), she also fails to articulate that the trauma has had any lasting effects on her, save for the fairly benign few that she mentions explicitly. Instead, she focuses on Hien, and the way that Hien's being racialized as Asian makes her both a target of small violences and a potential recipient of racist misinformation in the speech act "Asians first." Anne Cheng's concept of racial melancholia is useful in reading the pages that directly follow this event, during which Skim avoids naming herself as the recipient of trauma while simultaneously embodying a queer relationship to location, or dislocatedness. Cheng mobilizes a reading of the narrator in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* that frames her as acting out in a form of self-loathing as the result of being unable to speak aloud the words "I" and "here." Cheng writes, "who is 'I' when the 'I' can never place herself? And how would that voice lacking a model come to articulation? ... the denigrated body comes to voice, and the pleasures of that voice, only by assuming the voice of authority" (75). The example from Kingston's text is extreme: the female narrator, frustrated by her own inability to conform to American hegemonic standards of beauty, to whiteness, assumes the "voice of authority" by enacting the traumas she experiences onto the body of another Asian American student (Cheng 74-75). Skim enacts no such violence against others. Rather, she assumes the voice of authority in an internalized way, the manifestation of which appears equally in image and text (87). The text from the page reads: "And then I was all by myself in the dark. The pathetic, lonely

lion. At first I was scared to walk home on my own ... But in the end ... it was ~~scarier~~ stupider to sit outside, waiting for Julie and the ballerinas to let me in. The more I thought about it, the less I wanted back in. It was a boring party anyway" (87). Skim makes a claim to authority in her use of the construction "~~scarier~~ stupider," which allows her to assert that her decision to walk home alone was the product of a rational decision rather than fear, an action that retroactively writes-over the fear that she experienced initially.

The particular strategy of the strikeout speaks to the work of deterritorializing to which Miki refers, and thus casts a retroactive light on the kinds of fitting in that racially marked bodies can do inside of multicultural Canada. Marty Fink, in their article "It Gets Fatter," suggests that the strikeout "blurs the distinction between visual imagery and written language throughout the comic" (89), and "calls attention to the inability of written words to express directly how heterosexism and racism inhibit an honest reflection on the embodied experience of trauma and oppression" (89). If the photograph is a tool of ghostly remembering, or an object that haunts (Dean n.p.), Tamaki and Tamaki utilise the comics medium in order to highlight both the limitations of written language as a sole vehicle for meaning, and to suggest that the combination of words and images made accessible as a narrative tool inside of the comics medium is especially useful for subjects whose traumas are diminished when filtered through the racist and heterosexist vehicle of language. The strikeout speaks, too, to the social positions that become closed off when one's experience of particular instances of "trauma and oppression" is tied to the particular bodies and spaces with which one must continue to interact. Skim makes an explicit connection between bodies that oppress her based on

race (the party-goers who force Skim and Hien out of the house) and her later refusal to behave in accordance with norms enforced by those same bodies. She offers the description "why it is funny that everyone's worried about me now" (83) before recounting the memory, a further suggestion that the GCL are more interested in enforcing their norms—norms based on race and the body in the birthday party scene, and later based on mourning rites and behaviours—than on offering any legitimate care or support to suffering parties.

It is via the writing-over that Skim claims her authority, the reverberating effect of which is twofold: rather than enacting a violence against another, she funnels her energy into feeling and writing, and, in doing so, claims the power to tell her own story, including the right to change or edit details as she sees fit. There are limits to Skim's ability to write and rewrite, however: her body is an especially fraught site at which histories and biases play out with or without her consent. This set of tensions play out repeatedly in the visual register, and so race and fatness work at the foundation of the text, exist as ghosts that can't be exorcised, which is most clearly evident in my linking of Skim's sadness to the particulars of Canadian history, and to racial melancholia. For Cheng, racial melancholia is more than a description of the particular complexities of racialized subject formation: racial melancholia "provides the seed for revisiting political thinking in ways that may finally be more powerful than sentimentalizing affective history," and which "unsettles the simplistic division between power and powerlessness" (xi). By framing her own story, Skim signals that her engagements with her world, even those that operate through bad feelings, are agentive: though the mechanisms of

storytelling that she employs are imperfect, they offer up a temporary position of relative

centrality.

"I felt like I was looking into the future … and the future looked really messed up:"

White Monsters and the (Re)Distribution of Risk in Charles Burns's *Black Hole*

"The production of 'human waste,' or more correctly wasted humans (the 'excessive' and 'redundant,' that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment to modernity."

-Zygmunt Bauman, 5
Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts

"Come here, I want to show you something. I want to show you how to make the best sandwich in the world": this is the introduction between primary character and uninfected teen Keith and Eliza, a woman whose tail betrays her status as "infected," and who lives in the squalid home of the college boys from whom Keith buys drugs in Charles Burns's *Black Hole* (102). The "best sandwich in the world" is made from "two slices of bologna, a little iceberg lettuce to give it crunch, and last but not least, miracle whip" (102). Eliza, who is described as having skin "so white it was almost translucent" (100), along with the sandwich, which is made on "soft white bread," offers up a contrast to the dim lighting and overall dirtiness (empty beer cans and cigarette butts litter all available surfaces in the living room [93]) of the house. The same sandwich, complete with fluffy white bread, appears later in the text (234-7), where it again plays a supporting role in an interaction between Keith and a woman—protagonist Chris.

In the latter scene, Keith invites Chris out of the woods, where she has been living, and into a suburban home that he's looking after while its inhabitants are away on summer holiday. Chris, who has accepted an invitation to the home in exchange for an opportunity to wash her clothing is surprised to find that Keith has laid out a full table of

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food: chips and dip and pretzels are flanked by candles and an arrangement of flowers, with a platter of bologna sandwiches as the main course (234). As Chris reluctantly accepts and eats a sandwich she describes, to herself, yet another juxtaposition: her "dirty handprints on the clean white bread" (237). In each of these scenes, the bologna sandwich, a food combination that might be described as "eating American" in the style associated predominantly with "wealthy suburbanites" (Belasco 5) in the 1970s, becomes the site at which the disparity between the presumed cleanliness and safety of the suburb meets up with the precarity of female embodiment, especially as it is written into the social exchange of women's bodies (in the form of domestic labour, but also sex) for material comfort. Eliza's sandwich reinforces the aura of pureness that is attached to her body, and which contrasts the particular dangers that her roommates pose (they gang rape her at a party after she refuses to silently allow party-goers to vandalise her artwork [310-1]), while for Chris the sandwich represents the security and cleanliness promised by Keith and his ties to the suburb, which she might access by giving herself over to Keith (though she feels certain that her status as infected, as "dirty" forecloses access). The centrality of consumption and consumable goods, and the various slippages between goods and (vulnerable) bodies in the process of circulation, tells a particular story about the values of suburban American in the 1960s. Burns's text, with its focus on both the decreasing access to the good life for American youth and the "implications of gender and sexual violence in the Gothic vein" (Whitney 352) ultimately frames the American suburb as a space that offers up a promise of stability on which it cannot deliver, not least

because it is a space in which "violence against women ... is not anomalous but alarmingly frequent" (354).

Charles Burns's *Black Hole* is an episodic graphic novel that follows several white teens as they grapple with a sexually transmitted body-altering disease over the course of several months, the direct consequences of which include excommunication from their suburban community. The narrative follows three distinct communities and their respective relationships to the disease, which remains unnamed through the text: non-infected high school students, infected high school-aged students, and college-aged subjects. Children and adults, though represented in a few scarce scenes, are conspicuously absent from the narrative's focus, which aids in the marking of this text as one concerned primarily with youth culture and coming-of-age. Infected high schoolers can be further divided into the following categories, each of which contains its own element of risk to the community: carriers (those whose bodies bear no signs of the disease), passing (those whose bodies bear signs, but in places not usually on display), and non-passing (those whose bodies are severely disfigured by the disease). Central to the plot is the issue of survival: visibly infected persons are excommunicated from normative society, and thrust to the literal margins, the outskirts, of the city. Those bodies that are centered in the narrative eye find habitable ground in the woods just beyond the city limits, where they are able to set up cooking, social, and living spaces, while remaining close enough to the suburb to make regular trips for supplies.

The continued dependence of the population on packaged and mass-produced foodstuffs, on synthetic fabrics for clothing and housing, rather than the resources that

exist in nature (but require specialized knowledge and skills to access) further

underscores the precarious dependency that is at the root of the relationship between the

margin and the center in Burns's fictional world. Indeed, the final chapter depicts a

coming-together of the infected community and the suburban space that ends disastrously.

At the root of the second bologna sandwich scene is Keith's interest in Chris, which is

filtered through a lens of social stratification and identification that is ill-equipped for

dealing with the new social and spatial divisions that accompany the disease. Keith

presumes that Chris's status as infected will bump her down on the social hierarchy, and

will thus make her accessible to him as an object choice: "I knew she was sick, but I

didn't care. If anything, I thought it would give me a little bit more of a chance with her"

(91). He has no real sense of the psychic damage that the infection and attending

excommunication have caused Chris, and so can't trace out the lines of identification and

community that are newly appealing to, but also necessary for her: when Chris extends

Keith's invitation into the home, with its running water and clean sheets, to her new

community, Keith is puzzled at first, and later angered. Specifically, he is upset by the

pseudo socialist nature of the community of infected teens, whose survival as a group

depends on cooperation and the sharing of resources. Keith's offer, which amounts to an

opportunity to play at having access to the good life, is shaped by capitalist logic: all of

the comforts that come along with middle-class living, which he works hard to make

Chris feel she "*deserves*" (234, emphasis in text) can be hers, but come at a price: Chris's

time and loyalty to Keith. In this particular exchange, Keith also attempts to demonstrate

that his ability to provide a lifestyle that matches the one that Chris deserves to live means

that he, in turn, comes to deserve Chris. This chapter puts forward a reading of *Black Hole* that sees it as one of competing understandings of systems of social and economic organization, and as a reflection of larger social anxieties about shifting systems of value that have become increasingly apparent in the aftermath of the neoliberal moment.

I use the term "neoliberal moment" to refer to the convergences of social factors, alterations to the social foundation, and the downgrading of care and economic responsibility to the individual that have unsettled markets and social relations alike in North America and globally (Giroux, *Cultural Studies,* np). Important to the specifics of this use is the inclusion of "social factors," such as shifts in public support for policies around already-tense issues, such as those around women's reproductive health, that are not necessarily a directly result of neoliberalism. The phrase "neoliberal moment" here refers to something like the structure of feeling that has accompanied the shifts in economic policy and the orientation toward market forces and away from social goods that are benchmarks of neoliberalism. This chapter aims to first dissect the particular critique that Burns leverages, and to then consider the shortcomings of that critique, which are visible especially in its white-washing of the issues it takes up. In order to do so, this chapter will move through four discrete sections: an initial section that builds a framework for thinking through precarity under neoliberalism; a second section that thinks through the diseased body as central to Burns's critique, and concomitant with the creation of monstrousness that is the direct result of the neoliberal chipping away at the social welfare system; and a third section that applies a lens of gender and embodiment. These first three sections will illuminate what I find productive about Burns's text. In a

final section, I will offer critique of the text as enacting a problematic politics of race in order to make its central claims; though *Black Hole* provides a lens on precarity, and further nuances that lens to include a critique of toxic masculinity, it does so in a manner that ignores those subjects that are most likely to experience violence and social exclusion.

Precarious Lives: Social Welfare and the Privatization of Wealth

Contrary to the common understanding of neoliberalism as rooted in the Reagan presidency, Lauren Berlant locates the root of neoliberalism in the privatization of wealth that began in the 1970s, which she links up directly with "the slow and uneven bankrupting of so many localities ... leading to uneven desiccation of the public sector materially, ideologically, and in fantasy" (*Precarity Talk* 166). Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee, too, locate the end of the post-war boom, and subsequent shifts in economic policy, the privatization of wealth, and the globalization of both markets and risk in the 1970s, and especially in the year 1973—not coincidentally, one year after the oil crisis of '72 underscored that the relationship between mid-east oil producing nations and the west had the potential to shift such that day-to-day operations in Western nations might be severely hampered. For Lipuma and Lee, the period following the post-war boom marks a series of changes that point to the re-centering of the workings of late capitalism on circulation, rather than production. Central to this shift is a decrease in surplus value where physical products are concerned, and an increase in surplus value around "knowledge, money, entertainment, and technology" (9). Concomitant to this shift

are networks of circulation, which form a necessary mechanism for the generation of surplus value around newly abstracted goods, and which are designed to support "the geopolitical redirection of flows away from the periphery of capitalism and toward its metropolitan core" in a system in which the reaches of capitalism are increasingly global (9).

Labour, goods, and value in the world of *Black Hole* circulate in a manner that can be read as a mirror to these shifts on a microcosmic level. Only two occupations, artist and grocery store shelf-stocker, are depicted in the text: the former operates as a cog in a mechanism of circulation,[19] while the latter "produces" the kind of abstract good, "art," that Lipuma and Lee see as generating increased surplus value under the new system. Further, the men who rape Eliza jokingly suggest that they've heard she "give[s] blowjobs to pay the rent" (310), which while an inaccurate description of her situation, is unsettlingly close to her actual arrangement, in which she is expected to perform domestic tasks that are both unnamed and of an unspecified nature. These particular forms of labour are telling in the ways that they do and do not represent systemic changes: grocery store shelf-stocking is markedly different from traditionally masculine forms of labour, while the exchange of domestic labour (and possibly sexual favours) for shelter and food bears similarity to the particular kind of marriage arrangement (between a male breadwinner and a female homemaker) that early feminist scholars have critiqued. While the larger system is certainly changing, those changes are unevenly distributed; in this case, masculine labour has been re-defined such that it is safer, while feminine labour

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[19] The food that moves through the grocery store is, of course, produced *somewhere*, but the text maintains a focus its circulation, and is relatively uninterested in production in this particular area.

remains suspended inside of unevenly weighted agreements, or inside of arrangements that favor men and disempower women.

While LiPuma and Lee maintain that the creation of global finance in the 1970s, both as an abstract organization of ideas, and as a system of mathematical tools that allow for the calculation, packaging, and selling of risk as a primary commodity, is responsible for these shifts, they also maintain that the workings of global finance seep into power relations in an increasingly day-to-day manner, and in a manner that is at once increasingly visible—in, for example, the substitution of market flows for nation-states in the governance of citizen-subjects, and less and less locatable: much of the circulation that is now central to the capitalist system happens, effectively, nowhere (8-10). The effects of this convergence of factors span from increased precarity for citizen subjects across the globe, as the increased, and increasingly instant circulation of capital and risk has an increasing potential to undermine national economies, to an increased sense among youth outside of the metropole that an unnamed force with unknowable interests and priorities is responsible for the day-to-day stability and experience of life. Finally, LiPuma and Lee connect the vague feeling that one's life is out of one's control with their description of the period following the post-war boom as defined by perpetual economic crises, suggesting that those global locales that are outside of the metropole, those privileged urban spaces in the global north whose relationship to this system is one of reaping maximum benefit while bearing minimum risk, or which occupy the periphery experience "a deepening economic crisis ... coupled with a rapid deterioration in the ability of already enfeebled states to control their borders, quell violence and terrorism,

deal with the AIDS pandemic, regulate markets, and provide answers to a generation of dispossessed youths who insistently ask why the world appears to resemble a slot-machine tilted against them" (11). Charles Burns's decision to set *Black Hole* in the pre-Reagan era of the 1970s seems much less anachronistic when read against the cultural and political backdrop that Berlant, LiPuma and Lee, and others (Arne L. Kalleburg, William Lazonick) locate in that decade.

In its thinking through of systemic change, *Black Hole* reflects a concept of precarity aligned with Lauren Berlant, who reads precarity as a "loss of faith in a fantasy world" ("Precarity Talk" 166), that comes to light as a politicized issue only when it reaches the white middle class:

> Precarity as a political slogan also seemed to be a continuation of the predictable pattern in which ordinary contingencies of material and fantasmatic life associated with proletarian labor-related subjectivity became crises when they hit the bourgeoisies [sic], which is when crises tend to become general in mass political terms, it seems. (166)

Black Hole represents anxieties over the shifting of social and economic relations in a world that funnels the necessities for life away from the periphery and into the metropole. The ad-hoc community that the infected teens fashion in the forest underscores that the suburb has been, and remains part of the economic core of development, even while it imagines itself as a literal fringe, not least because goods like bologna continue to circulate in the suburb, even as the disease encroaches. And, it is by virtue of merely existing in the space of the forest that the infected teens interrupt the fantasy space of the

suburb, which was once itself meant to act as a border between the dangers of the city and the wild freedom of the forest, but now sits wedged between two distinct dangers. The particulars of the danger in the forest, the community of exiled suburban teen, suggest that the situation has morphed into a feedback loop of anxiety and danger: those who pose a challenge to the values of the suburb, in this case teens whose bodies betray their promiscuity, are pushed out, only to become specters against which the suburb must reassert itself.

Burns's fictional monsters and the relationship between the suburb and the forest space that crops up because of them provides a useful paradigm for thinking through the suburb as an American ideal in itself. Since the Second World War, the suburb has operated as a particularly dense signifier of safety for the white majority from the dangers (read: day-to-day existence) of people of color that has largely been associated with city centers since white suburbanization, or "white flight" peaked in the 1950s, even as the movement of white communities and their relative wealth has produced and amplified the "lower quality of life for the minorities and poor left stranded in the core" (Frey 5). If the suburb from which the infected teens of *Black Hole* hail is haunted by the community of grotesque, trash-eating, fringe-living teens in the forest that appear centrally in the narrative, it is also haunted by specters unseen: the visible minorities and poor communities abandoned and neglected even before the post-war boom was over. Thus, the productive and problematic pieces of Burn's text remain tangled up together. In examining the particular crisis of the pandemic through the genre of horror, a genre that so often finds its content in unknown monsters penetrating into spaces once thought to be

safe, Burns prompts his readers to think about ghosts both seen and unseen, while at the same time white-washing the figure of the zombie, whose roots are in Haitian voodoo, but is otherwise defined "as a dis-possessed monster in human form" (McAlister 475). This chapter seeks to think through the productivity of Burns's critique, especially where it casts a lens on rising anxieties in even the wealthiest parts of an increasingly globalized world, and opens up the possibility of apprehending one's shared precarity with monstrous others, while remaining critical of the way that he takes up a particular monster tradition that originally did the work of thinking critically about race and power. I will consider the manner in which Burns's text cleaves the figure of the zombie from its lineage, as a cultural artifact brought to North America via the slave trade, nurtured and kept living by subjects themselves deemed legally and socially un-human, and will ultimately suggest that the changing shape of global capitalism, and of relations of labour potential, bodies, and surplus value, requires new monsters. My reading aims to balance a turn towards that specific history as germinal to the figure represented in Burns' text with a clear understanding of the cultural, social, and legal distinctions between the non-human (in the eyes of the law) figure of the slave and the dehumanized teens affected here, all of whom are suburban, middle-class, and white. Burns' text offers up a monster that is both familiar and cleansed of its particularity (including its particular critiques), and a threat that comes into a familiar, presumable safe space—the suburb: it is at once a white-washed appropriation, and a reminder that the call does sometimes come from inside of the house.

Disease

Burns's text circulates around the threat of a particular disease and the population that appears most directly impacted by it: as such, Burns sutures youth, and especially the sexual virility that is tied to it, with risk. In doing this, Burns is able to think through the way that risk factors for disease—being in or from a particular location, participating in a particular behaviour, or belonging to a subset of population—begin to move ahead of the disease or infection in question by way of stigmatization and attending hostilities. *Black Hole*, then, is a text about the way that disease (and risk of disease) reverberates in culture by taking on a spreading meaning beyond the individual bodies that are altered. The infection that plagues Chris, and that Keith expects will "level the playing field" in his favour, moves through *Black Hole* in a manner that parallels the historical movement of disease, through discourse and bodies alike, across North America. One of the connections that this chapter seeks to examine is the imperfect reference to AIDS, and especially the manner in which the unnamed disease in the text—like HIV/AIDS—reshapes social relations and communities, and compounds pre-existing relations of power such that certain bodies experience increased vulnerability and decreased access to material and economic resources and capital.

In the same manner that the crisis becomes knowable *as* crisis only once its effects begin to impact on the dominant, white population, diseases are said to "emerge" only once they appear on western soil (Wald various). Priscilla Wald notes a common feature of the outbreak narrative in North America: recurring images of black bodies traveling into the United States, and bringing with them diseases such as AIDS and Ebola (34). As with the crisis, the pandemic can be named only once it has crossed the imaginary line

that divides east from west, and more specifically into the communities of the white majority. North American media coverage of disease outbreaks underscores that this pattern remains, even today. For example, the 2014 western African Ebola outbreak led to increased coverage of Ebola by news outlets in the west, which turned away from the widespread devastation that plagued western Africa in favour of following the personal narratives of the handful of infected persons inside of the USA and the UK. LiPuma and Lee suggest that this perspective is one that "simply assumes the rest of the world to be a financial appendage to the West"(12), while other scholars might issue a reminder that the "West" is unevenly distributed, even inside of those geographically defined "Western" spaces, making minority populations—such as those abandoned in city centers during and after white flight—a different kind of "appendage" to the West.

Black Hole represents myriad anxieties that are best grouped under the umbrella term of "new hegemony" which Lawrence Grossberg uses to describe the situation whereby American citizens are no longer duped into consenting to policies that benefit the state rather than citizens, but are actively aware both that the state is lying to them, and that they have little or no recourse (256-258). Those anxieties, emblematic of the increasing feeling that *something* is responsible for one's place in the world (but what?), cannot and do not remain generalized anxieties that seem to shift just below the surface of each daily interaction. Instead, they crop up in moments, and around specific ideas, especially those that are framed such that they are made to carry the weight of larger unfixed, but culturally important meanings: gender, sex and sexuality, space and movement in space, disease, and, usually, race. What does this have to do with the disease

at the centre of Charles Burns's *Black Hole*? Burn's text circulates around various

anxieties about permeability: disease is a useful metaphor for thinking about bodily

sovereignty, as to be infected is to necessarily have had the boundaries of one's body

permeated. Or, in the words of Donna Haraway, "disease is a subspecies of information

malfunction or communications pathology; disease is a process of misrecognition or

transgression of the boundaries of a strategic assemblage called self" (Haraway 283).

There are two logical trains of thought that will be borne out from this set of ideas: that

the onset of disease provides an interruption to the subject and her way of knowing

herself, and that disease, in being communicable, changes the body and makes it

monstrous by way of revealing that bodily borders are insecure. Or, as Danai Muposta

puts it in her review of Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's book, *Dispossession: The

Performative in the Political*, "the threat, or promise of monsters is the way bodies are

made permeable" (138).

　　At the center of Burns's text is, as mentioned, a disease with no name. What is

known about the disease is that it is transmitted sexually, disfigures the body, and those

teens whose bodies bear signs of the disease that can't be easily masked are ostracized

from the community. I want to think through this particular disease as a problematic,

flawed reference to AIDS, with a particular focus on the way that AIDS spawned

widespread social and cultural anxieties about disease and transmission, which then

became attached to certain subjects and not others. As Priscilla Wald notes in her book

Contagious, AIDS was "discovered" in North America following two sets of observations

by disparate parties that only later became linked: the CDC noticed a slight increase in the

release of drugs for a bacteria-resistant form of pneumonia, and a handful of general

practitioners noticed a pattern of symptoms among patients that were either out as

homosexual, or otherwise presumed to be gay (219-220). North America's "Patient Zero"

was identified only after extensive questioning of the initial men diagnosed with an

immunodeficiency disorder that was originally called "GRID" (gay-related

immunodeficiency): several of the initial group of men diagnosed with AIDS were

located in the same city, and could trace a link to Gaetan Dugas, a flight attendant from

Quebec City. This questioning, about sexual histories and habits, occurred when the link

between AIDS transmission and sexual activity was little more than speculative, but

nonetheless resulted in the linking in the social imaginary of AIDS and something called

"the homosexual lifestyle."[20] Though AIDS in North America becomes associated with

gay men, it does not subsequently become untangled from the discourses of emergence

that locate either Africa or Haiti as the place from which (or where, simply) the disease

originates. Wald describes the manner in which the African-origin theory mutates from

idea to culturally embedded knowledge, or knowledge that is given or passed down, and

the effect of that particular communication, when she points out that "journalistic

portraits of AIDS in Africa ... resemble Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (235), which

betrays a deep-seated North American anxiety about black bodies more generally. Paula

A. Treichler suggests that the CDC's original list of populations at risk for AIDS

("HOMOSEXUALS, HEMOPHILIACS, HEROIN ADDICTS, HAITIANS" [271]),

"developed between 1981 and 1982, has structured evidence collection in the intervening

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[20] I use this phrase to reflect the degree to which AIDS was tied to gay men, and AIDS transmission to sex between men, rather than to the actual set of behaviours that put one at risk.

years and contributed to a view that the major risk factors in acquiring AIDS is being a particular kind of person, rather than doing a particular kind of thing" (271). As such, there is a linking up of particular kinds of bodies, rather than acts, with the risk of AIDS in the popular imaginary, and one that effects predominantly minority groups, including gay men and people whose black bodies are indistinguishable from the specificity of the category "Haitian" to an unknowing dominant group.

This linking is similar to one that occurs in Burns's text, in which the unnamed diseased is tied to teenaged sexual behaviours that serves, as with AIDS, to construct a narrative that links risk to particular groups of people. Overall, the linguistic shaping of this particular narrative—that risk belongs to certain subsets of the population—is an idea that eases anxieties about the possibility of transmission through the right kind of contact between any two people. Additionally, this particular narrative underscores that risk is not evenly distributed, but rather circulates via a complex network of social, cultural, and economic factors. The dominant group generally avoids seeing the social factor in risk distribution, as to recognize it would be to undercut the dominant ideology, which supports downgrading various responsibilities to the level of the individual. Burns's text differs in its particular anxieties, as it moves away from an association with homosexuality, and instead places the nexus of its anxiety about irresponsible behaviours and unhealthy sexualities onto teenagers and young adults in a manner that suggests a larger anxiety around the perceived degeneracy of an entire generation's youth. Chris and Keith's tense relationship speaks to the troubling social arrangements that come out of the extreme vulnerability produced by the hostility that follows stigma around life-changing

(and perhaps life-ending, as with AIDS in the early years of autoimmune research) disease. Keith uses his relative power, and Chris's vulnerability, to offer romantic and sexual advances that come paired with the basics of survival, which Chris, whose community has opted to ostracize her rather than provide care for her, can't afford to shirk.

Chris's vulnerability comes partially out of the linking of perceived risk for disease transmission to what might be called identity categories. Donna Haraway points to the same confluence of factors—risk and identity categories—when she asserts that "disease is a process of misrecognition or transgression of the boundaries of a strategic assemblage called self" (Haraway 283). I want to tease out the connections between anxieties about disease as interrupting the self and about feminism as interrupting the social order, even if to do so is to engage in what Elspeth Probyn calls the "nervous" juxtaposition of feminism with postmodernism (351). In "AIDS as an Epidemic of Signification," Paula Treichler notes that the overall significance of AIDS—culturally *and* medically—rests in the combination of biomedical discourse and cultural narrative. In turn, popular narratives (including that AIDS is a punishment, sent by God, for the sin of homosexuality) and biomedical discourse (which has labeled AIDS variously over time, including as "incurable," and later as "no longer a death sentence") create the site of crisis: the white, male homosexual body, which is discursively constructed as having a particularly intimate tie to AIDS. The white, male homosexual body is, then, an especially illuminating one to read through Haraway, as the discursive construction of that body by biomedical and cultural scripts around AIDS interrupts the "strategic

assemblage called self" (283) for white homosexual subjects by rendering those subjects

legible only in terms of their sexuality, which is directly linked up with questions of both

morality and morbidity. And, while specific white homosexual subjects will find

themselves interrupted by AIDS (in discourse and in lived experience) in specific ways,

the culturally available space for piecing together an "assemblage called self" (283) is

limited by a pre-existing condition: the white male homosexual body can only occupy the

spaces made available to it by the series of meanings that are already circulating in

culture.

I want to extend Treichler's criticism of biomedical discourse by noting that the

language used in communications about disease and transmission often underscores the

existing hegemonic structure of power. *Black Hole* opens with a vignette that illustrates

one such set of interruptions. The opening page features only a thick, irregular, oblong

shape that echoes multiple images appearing later in the text, including both the incision

on the belly of the frog that is the subject of a dissection in a high school biology lab and

the metaphorical gash of the vagina, an ironic reference, perhaps, to the various kinds of

births that punctuate in the text. When made to look at the gash slit into the soft

underbelly of the frog, Keith experiences intense disgust and accompanying

disorientation: he sweats visibly (4, 5) as his view of the preserved, lacerated amphibian

appears to disintegrate into a collage of images pulled from various moments in the text.

What results is a collage-like sequence, in which whole images from later in the text are

divided into geometric shapes, themselves dissected and pinned back together to form

concentric circles further divided by panels (figure 2, Appendix II). The effect is a distinct

impression of circular, dizzying motion, which directly precedes the moment in which Keith passes out. Keith retroactively describes the moment at which he passes out, the moment at which he is unconscious and therefore unable to process the visual, sensory, and memory-induced information that caused his disorientation (the moment at which the disorienting image, in fact, disappears) as like "floating ... in this totally black place. It was kind of spacey but it felt nice ... nice and safe" (6).

The chapter title, "Biology 101," combined with the high school classroom setting gestures immediately towards the cultural figure of the teenager: a young person whose judgement has not caught up with their physical development, and whose hormones regularly cause them to experience extreme responses, even to fairly regular seeming stimuli. "Biology 101" brings to the surface the idea of a "natural order," an organized social context that lays the foundation for its own reproduction via human (hetero)sexual practice: all human adolescents will dissect lesser beings (amphibians) in order to learn about the biological systems hidden away inside of the body, male humans will pursue and conquer female humans in the interest of reproduction. There is, then, a certain logic to the sequence of images that begin to take the place of the frog's belly in the moment of Keith's disorientation. After glimpsing the gash on the frog's underbelly, the following images, all "flash forwards" appear: a gash on the bottom of a foot, skin peeling away from the center line of Chris's back in a similar shape, and an image of a vagina that in covered by a hand, making the labia invisible to the viewer and signaling, perhaps, that the vagina is a biological phenomenon that remains mysterious to Keith.

The narrative description of the moments leading up to the incident underscore something like a natural order, while also signaling that neither Keith nor Chris fits into that order particularly well. First, Keith describes the class splitting into groups of two, and goes as far as to congratulate himself on his lab partner, using language that reinforces a subject/object divide between Keith and Chris: "I lucked out for once and got Chris as my lab partner. Chris Rhodes. She was a total fox" (2). Following this, he describes the behavior that is immediately adopted by his classmates, and which is divided by gender: "all the other girls were squealing and stuff and the guys were sort of taking over and putting on the whole tough guy act. I guess I was trying to do the same thing ... [and then] it happened" (2-3). While the remainder of the class appears to fall into gendered roles—the men perform the "tough guy act" (2), and insist on doing the work of cutting into the frogs, while the women put on a stereotypically feminine squeamishness at the sight (or possibility) of innards—Chris and Keith both fail to take up that performance properly. Instead, Chris sits and watches, stoically (though doesn't try especially hard to prevent Keith from taking over), while Keith becomes struck, "frozen" (2) by the sight of the innards. It is the sight of the innards, too, that makes him sick, and in the same moment infantilizes him in front of his peers (they're all laughing when he wakes up), or shrinks the social space in which he might form an assemblage of self. Normative masculinity is made at least partially inaccessible to Keith in that moment.

This sequence represents a symptom, I argue, of a particular social ill that infects more than only bodies—it extends to the social order, and into the very psyche of subjects

around it. Keith's confusion of images is one that oscillates between desire and disgust. Located at the moment just after Keith begins to sweat, directly following the inner narrative voice that states "I was looking at a hole... a **black** hole" (4), is that sequence of panels meant to represent a quick mental flipping-through of images and associations, a direct precursor to the disorienting image linked to Keith's passing out (the frog, the foot, the spine, and the vagina [4]). These images are linked in two clear ways: they all echo a similar shape, the same shape that sits alone and decontextualised on the pre-chapter splash pages, and they all gesture to the possibility of transgressing the boundaries between bodies. The composite image that follows, the one meant to indicate disorientation and nausea, operates as foreshadowing in a manner so straightforward that it might be discounted as hyperbole on the part of the character: just as Keith is beginning to experience the disorientation that causes him to be made fun of, but also confirms an admiration-verging-on-obsession with protagonist Chris that acts as a catalyst for much of the action in the text, his inner monologue states: "it was like a deja vu trip or something ... a premonition. I felt like I was looking into the future ... and the future looked really messed up" (3). The "really messed up" future (3) is intimately bound up with the possibility of transgressing boundaries, the same possibility that interrupts by way of making Keith ill and by acting as Muptosa's "promise of monsters" (138). So, the disease that plagues Burns's youth interrupts individual subject formation and social structures alike, and equally interrupts the hetero-capitalist promise of reproductive sex with the one of permeability, transmission, communication (of molecules, of DNA): the promise of monsters.

Making monsters, then, is complicated. Patricia Wald suggests that cultural understandings of bacterial infection and biological illness are often slippery, and make their way into the language and narratives that bind bodies to spaces, and bodies and spaces to moral and social failings. The same is true of sociologist Robert Park's "moral areas," which come out of linking up groups of people and particular activities, and then with spaces in order to suggest that particular spaces (especially slums, tenements, and "ghettos") are infected with moral failings, or "social contagion[s]" (qtd Wald 141). Epidemics, then, are as much about social ills as biological ones, and as such are often about constructing bodies, and especially those that signify as other, as threatening, or about making citizens into monsters. Given that the bodies so often designated as threats, monsters, and other others are those of people of color, queers, and non-binary individuals, Burns' decision to write an AIDS parable located in a white, middle-class community of heterosexuals is risky. To do so is to necessarily invoke the social narratives and tropes that bear down on those subjects who carry the greatest risk for experiencing violence, and who are closest in proximity to other negative effects of toxic masculinity, while effectively performing the further violence of erasing the same subjects from the world by "cleansing the visual landscape" (Giroux, *Stormy Weather,* 23) of the bodies most at risk.

Black Hole attempts to rewrite social and affective scripts, only, of course, to have its monstrous utopia pulled apart by the downgrading of risk to individuals that pins social relations to precariousness on the one hand, and the entitlements of the empowered on the other. In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai explores the productive nature of those

negative affects sutured to the suspension of action—irritation, anxiety, paranoia, and so on—which she sees as germinal to art forms that seek to interrogate their own position of suspended agency inside of late capitalism. Keith's disorientation in the frog-dissection scene comes from the double-pull of desire and disgust: the future that looks "really messed up" is composed of a juxtaposition of images that project the possibility of pleasurable boundary crossing with troubled boundary crossing, as the possibility of heterosexual penetrative sex is made to sit side-by-side with a wound to the softest part of the foot, and the exposed innards of a preserved, degraded animal. That double-pull will shape Keith's relationship to the infected teenagers, and to Chris, throughout the remainder of the text.

Burns's text avoids side-stepping the social mechanisms that operate to shield the average citizen from risk, and from the disgusting, and instead brings one particular form of risk—the disease and its attending disfiguration and social ostracization—firmly into view. Ngai notes, of disgust, that unlike the other negative affects sutured to the suspension of agency, disgust does not invoke the confusion between subject and object that are "integral to most other ugly feelings" (333). In the case of abjection, arguably the most extreme instance of disgust, the subject violently rejects the object, even as the object aims to integrate into the subject, as with food on its way to being digested. I want to extend this idea to include risk, even if that extension is imperfect. Specifically, I want to note that the "systemically conditioned blindness to risk" that plagues those with relative privilege and power inside of late capitalism (Beck 60) works as a kind of social affect that mirrors the operation of disgust: the refusal to see that which is distasteful is

not dissimilar from the distinct refusal to turn towards an object that one finds disgusting,

or even, perhaps, to reject the possibility of being integrated with disgusting material. The

rejection of the possibility of integration with disgusting material surfaces via the

spatialization of risk in *Black Hole*, or rather in those moments that previously held

beliefs about the location of risk are revealed to be false. I'm thinking, here, of the

extreme disgust that the (currently) uninfected population mobilizes in their reactions to

the presence of infected teens inside of the suburb, even though the actual spaces in which

people are infected are overwhelmingly inside of the suburb. The spatialization of (the

appearance of) risk—the banishment of the infected population to the forest—doesn't

mitigate risk for anyone, but instead keeps those lucky enough to remain uninfected from

having to think about their own relationship to risk, either in the sense of their own bodily

susceptibility to sexually transmitted infection, or to their own participation in systems

that put particular groups at greater risk than others.

  Burns' decision to represent only white bodies is, in light of this particular

working-through of risk, strategic.[21] Specifically, Burns seeks to critique hegemonic,

white masculinity, and represents only those bodies under critique—white bodies—in

order to illuminate a social ill that, by virtue of being hegemonic, is largely invisible. The

failure to offer the reader the kind of body that is so often made to stand in for moral and

biological ills, has the effect of precluding an easy scapegoat for the reader to blame;

instead, the text insists that the reader turn toward whiteness as culprit for a vast array of

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[21] I don't mean here to forgive Burns for the problematic nature of his text. Instead, I am opting to point out the text's missed connections prior to turning towards the project that I identify as at the heart of the text.

violent actions and structures. While the text side-steps the systemic violences that are perpetrated most commonly against the bodies of people of color, it also encourage readers to contemplate a world in which white bodies pose indescribable risks to other white bodies. And those risks are compounded by the nature of the disease: everyone seems to know how the disease is transmitted, but no one appears to transmit or contract the disease knowingly. This is perhaps the strongest link between *Black Hole*'s disease and AIDS: it is transmitted sexually, but appears to lie dormant in the body for a period of time, which means that one can pass it on without realizing one has been infected at all.

Chris witnesses two people whose bodies have been heavily disfigured by the disease eating from the garbage just outside of a Herfey's fast food restaurant at which she and Marci are eating. Marci's response reveals an underlying cultural discomfort at merely being proximal to infected persons: "eew, look at those guys... it's so disgusting. Why do they have to come here and ruin everybody's good time?" (135). Chris's reaction is much more sobering, and speaks to risk proximity as she is beginning to understand it. She muses: "that's when it hit me ... the awful reality. Sitting there eating food I wasn't hungry for ... while they were out there eating garbage. I was one of them. I just didn't show as much" (135). Chris is so bothered by the fact of witnessing a possible future for herself in which one must eat literal garbage in order to survive, that she is unable to remain at the restaurant, and instead exits the scene to attend a party at which she drinks to the point of passing out.

This scene in particular speaks to the manner in which the self is interrupted by rifts in the social fabric that have been made newly visible, or in this instance, at least

visible to subjects whose formation is effected. As part of a digital round table later called "Precarity Talk," Lauren Berlant describes precarity as "the desperation and violence that have been released when the capitalist 'good life' fantasy no longer has anything to which to attach its promises of flourishing, coasting, and resting" (171). Precarity appears manifest in this scene in an especially monstrous, unsettling way: eating garbage is surely an act of desperation, but Marci's response—disgust that infected persons are present in her line of vision at all—is also troubling, and shows itself as the edge of violence. Chris's response speaks to the interruption to self posed by the presence of these people who are alien to Marci and the other customers at Herfy's, but no more alien than Chris is. Suddenly, the fluid possibility of movement between the categories human/monster, suburb/forest, is visible to Chris as a potential outcome for anyone. Or, the "good life" promise proffered by the wealth, seclusion, and leisure time symbolized by the suburb suddenly appears thin, or even false.

Chris's relationship to precarity is further underscored by what Marci understands to be the real failing in the situation: the transgressing of boundaries. Infected persons are shunted out of the suburb partially because of shame, but also in order to cleanse the landscape of the suburb in order to maintain the illusion that the promise of the good life remains viable. Such movements of populations that are deemed "excess" or "useless" fit into Zygmunt Bauman's framework for understanding human waste populations in a globalized world: populations are produced as excess as a byproduct of the capitalist system, and then must be moved out of sight, and outside of the responsibility of the very governments and states that have made them into human waste, but do not wish to bear

the cost of maintaining their existence. Transgressions of boundaries, or the movement of waste populations outside of the margins to which they've been banished, are important for Bauman, who suggests that:

> as the 'redundant' population stays inside and rubs shoulders with the 'useful' and 'legitimate' rest, the line separating a transient incapacitation from the peremptory and final consignment to waste tends to be blurred and no longer legible. Rather than remaining as before a problem of a separate part of the population, assignment to 'waste' becomes everybody's potential prospect— one of the two poles between which everybody's present and future social standing oscillates. (71)

Thus, the movement of the infected people into the town, and into sight more generally, causes discomfort in the uninfected population because it demonstrates the furthest limits of the possible. The presence of infected persons in the "wrong" place—inside of the suburb—also underscores that the spatialization of risk has been recalibrated. Divisions in macro-space are, of course, still crucial to the maintenances of community, but risk is now located at the site of the individual body, and even potentially at the level of DNA. Subjects, then, carry themselves around inside of "risk zones:" there is no such thing as a "safe" space. Chris's moment of realization, then, is one that highlights the precarious nature of a stable-seeming world, as well as the reality that value-systems are susceptible to sudden change. In the later section on gender, I'll unpack this claim in greater detail, but for now suffice it to say that Chris's moment of realization amounts partially to an

interruption of both her sense of bodily sovereignty, and her sense of the social value attached to her young, conventionally attractive body.

Monsters: Power in the Blood

For monster theorist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "the monster's body is a cultural body" existing "only to be read" (4). That is, the monster's body is a space onto which human societies project fears and anxieties that surface from temporally specific social and cultural contexts, something which, arguably, lends them a kind of power. While I have already demonstrated the ways that Burns's monster disease is disempowering, I want now to consider the ways, limited and problematic as they are, that those subjects in *Black Hole* who come to revel in their embodiment of the monster figure are able to eke out social power. This reading will necessarily bleed into a meditation on gendered monstrosity, as the shape that power takes when accessed from within the body or space of the monstrous depends on one's gender presentation.

In their article "Midnight Movies," J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum read the zombie-image as operating as "the most literal depiction possible of America devouring itself" (125). The zombie figure in popular culture is often a cannibalistic creature created by infectious disease, and is often read as playing on the trope of excessive consumption in late capitalism: the zombie, that once-human thing that now seeks only to devour human flesh, is a mirror to the human population that mindlessly consumes cheap, mass-produced goods to the destruction of the environment, and to the peril of the lives of those forced into the work of production in sweatshops and factories

located mainly overseas. What Hoberman and Rosenbaum's piece points out most effectively is that the zombie-figure brings to the average North American movie-goer a sense of the self-destruction already ongoing in the name of capitalism, the same system that upholds the American economy and therefore position of relative global power. In this sense, the zombie-figure brings the crisis of capitalism into the suburb much in the same way that Burns does. *Black Hole*, however, offers up a narrative in which normative zombie lore roles are reversed, and replaced with a queering of the normative monster tale that makes visible the way that America produces monsters as excess to its process of devouring its vulnerable—youth, the elderly, people of color—in order to produce profit.

If the biopolitical originates, as Paola Virno suggests, as a mechanism for managing and maximizing the labour-potential of citizen's bodies (269-70), then the biopolitical is interrupted by the shift from a production-based global economy to one based in circulation, or at the very least its application onto the bodies of middle-class, white citizens must differ in accordance with middle-class labour, which is so often based in the production and circulation of information rather than goods, and so seldom based in physical labour. Though the infected teens experience increased policing and management of their bodies, that management has little to do with labour power- any of them might still be productive in the sense that they all maintain the physical capacity—if not the mental health—to do labour. Instead, they are ousted from the suburban community because they are *ugly,* and their ugliness is unsettling. Management, in this instance, has morphed into the management of individual or collective aesthetic. Or, the centre of the bipolitical imperative has shifted from its initial focus on bodily ability as

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related to the potential to produce surplus value to a new focus on appearance, wealth,

and human networks, or social capital and its ability to produce further networks for

circulation of information as well as finance. That is: Burns offers up a zombie figure that

speaks to the destruction already ongoing *at home*, and which has the potential to spread

even into the most secure-seeming corners of the American population. A system of

collective and bodily management that has space inside of it for considering such

frivolous factors as beauty and ugliness is one that isn't overtaxed in other capacities: it

is, thus, middle-class, American privilege that is at risk in particular. The decision to

exclude black bodies from *Black Hole* comes, perhaps, out of this exact project. Zombie

movies regularly feature black actors only in the roles of zombies, while white actors

appear as zombie and human alike, in an attempt to depict the closing-in of the crisis that

white Americans have been able to thrust to other parts of the world, or to other parts of

the city in the case of white flight.[22] The world of Burn's *Black Hole* is absent the bodies

so often made to bear the burden of those crises, producing three possible diversions from

conventional zombie race politics: either this particular disease cannot be effectively

quarantined, and so can't be kept in poorer neighbourhoods, where people of colour are

more likely to be found; this particular disease has already exhausted other populations,

and comes, now, for the suburbs without a parade of sick, sub-human zombies signaling

its arrival; or this particular disease is borne of (and in) the whitened suburb itself. In all

of these hypothetical cases, white bodies will necessarily bear the total cost of the disease,

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[22] This discussion is influenced by Steven Pokornowski's "Insecure Lives: Zombies, Global Health, and the Totalitarianism of Generalization," and James McFarland's "Philosophy of the Living Dead: At the Origin of the Zombie-Image."

It is worth noting here that ugliness is not the opposite of beauty in regards to the way that it links up with power: ugliness has in itself a kind of power that is made visible in cases such as that of NuShawn Williams, who was arrested and imprisoned in 1997 for spreading HIV to several women, and whose notorious criminal case amassed massive media staying power precisely because of Williams's ugliness (Shevory 17). Williams also gained his notoriety partially because his body became the site of a particular convergence of the diseased body and the ugly body that came to signify bad or irresponsible citizenship for both its ability to spread disease, and its apparent ability to dupe women into sexual contact: the media and public both had trouble accepting that an ugly black man might have come into contact with several relatively attractive, white sex partners based on mutual interest. Thomas Shevory notes that historically ugliness has been racialised, and thus tied to the already risky business of racial mixing (122), while the diseased body has historically been coded as the amoral body. Both ugliness and disease pose a threat to the well-being of the group, because both ugliness and disease can spread through populations: the ugly citizen and the disease citizen are equally carriers of bad citizenship. The good citizen, on the other hand, is beautiful and healthy, and is both of those to such a degree that they slip between one another: "the good citizen cannot be ugly and therefore cannot be infected by, or infect, members of society with dangerous illnesses, illnesses that would be marked on their physiognomies" (Shevory 123). What I mean to draw out here is more than simply that ugliness and disease slip into one another in their signification of bad citizenship; ugliness and disease slip together, too, in marking bodies as able to disseminate those very features that make them threatening, and there is

(limited) power in being marked as such. One such character exists in *Black Hole*: David, an infected teen whose social position prior to his infection was one of extreme inferiority, such that his usefulness and leadership in the community of infected teens almost represents a kind of perverse version of upward social mobility.

Black Hole's David embodies this particular kind of productiveness of the same type when he uses his own monstrous body to elicit fear in his aggressor. Dave recognises his own monstrosity in both his status as infected, and in the way that his pre-infected self is confirmed as unremarkable: even though he can describe the exact seating arrangement in a class that he and Chris shared, she is unable to conjure a memory of him (194). Dave's experience is thus of being thrust to the margins of every social group to which he belongs. He is enraged at this fact, which in turn leads to his mobilization of that marginal status, the fact of his own monstrous body, in a symbolic gesture of power over others. When Dave enters a local fried chicken restaurant in the suburb, he faces an un-infected, adult man whose reaction to Dave's mere presence is one of violent disgust: "listen, you're scarin' her, man ... why don't you leave? Nobody wants you here ... Listen up, fuck face! You can either walk out of here **now,** or I'll **drag** your ass out!" Rather than cowering in fear or leaving, Dave considers his options ("hmm ... "), and declares that he won't leave without his chicken, while pulling out a gun (287). Following this, Dave assaults his aggressor, giving him exactly what he most fears: Dave's bodily fluids, which are transmitted when Dave spits into his aggressor's open mouth. It is important that in the scene in which Dave forcibly violates the boundaries of his aggressor's body he does so by first pulling out a gun and demanding that the aggressor open his mouth on penalty of

death. Though the disease, like AIDS, cannot be transmitted by spit in this exact way—

the aggressor's life won't be impacted in the way that he most fears—Dave is still able to

assert himself as having power over life and death, even momentarily. That this assertion

of power is tied so closely to Dave's monstrous body is part of the larger critique that the

texts puts forth. Dave enacts the spree of violence that follows this scene—he returns to

the house where other diseased teens have been squatting, and lethally shoots most of

them—based on a recognition of the power that comes along with his monstrous self,

which the spitting scene epitomizes.

The monstrosity of Dave's body is rewritten in accordance with the type of

violence that he enacts: a mass shooting. In the context of the USA, which leads global

statistics in terms of number of mass shootings yearly, and in which the perpetrators of

mass shootings are overwhelmingly white men, Dave's whiteness and maleness are

inscribed as part of the monstrousness of his character. The white male monster reflects

back on the untouchability of the white, suburban teen mentioned earlier, especially so

when read in conjunction with the white male mass shooter. Mia Consalvo deconstructs

media coverage of the white male mass shooter, noting that while violence is socially

inscribed as inherent to masculinity, and to white American masculinity in particular,

only certain forms of masculine violence are made available for critique. When white,

American masculine violence erupts in ways that make visible the violent core of

masculinity that rests just below the surface, those events must be framed such that they

are understood as exceptions to the norm, rather than as indicators of the furthest logical

extension of normative masculinity. So, in the aftermath of America's most notorious

school shooting, Columbine, the shooters are framed most often in the media as monsters—inhuman beings rather than boys or men. Thus the media effectively strips them of gender, and ensures that masculinity itself is never put on trial (35), and so that the particular actions under consideration reflect only a handful of deviant subjects, rather than the larger social group (35). Consalvo points out that "this is a common discursive shift journalists make when portraying men who kill or batter victims whom journalists deem to be blameless" (35). Such framing has a dual, and circular, impact: normative masculinity, or the violence that is otherwise linked to masculinity in North America, is free from critical examination, and the perpetrators of the violence are made inhuman by being called "monsters," and are thus rendered both unable to feel human emotion and undeserving of sympathy.

Burns's text subverts this framing to a certain degree, as it aims to link normative masculinity to the potential of violence in order to critique it. And, while I don't mean to forgive Dave for his extreme violence, I do posit that Burns goes to extreme lengths to enable the reader to feel sympathy for Dave's condition, which is manufactured by his social position; prior to infection, Dave is already an outcast, and after infection he is literally cast out of the community. Burns takes great pains to suggest that if Dave's violent actions make him a monster, he is made thus partially by the violences that are directed towards him, and partially by feelings of being denied the access women's bodies to which he feels entitled as part of normative masculinity. Dave's venture into the KFC is later revealed to be a community-driven action: he brings the chicken back to his friend, Rick, who has remained in the forest, and whose response is one that shows thankfulness

and reliance—"Dave! God, where've you been? I thought something might have

happened to you. Wow! look at that! A whole bucket! That's great! Come on, have a seat!

Mmm ... it's still warm ... so good. I was **starving**" (291). Rick's emphasis on "happened"

serves as a reminder that Dave's venture into the suburb is a known danger, and that Dave

has knowingly put himself into a vulnerable position to procure the necessities of life for

himself and his community. He's so distressed at the course of events that take place in

the restaurant that he can't even eat the chicken, and instead says to Rick "you go ahead,

I'm not hungry" (292). The interaction in the restaurant up to the moment of confrontation

shows that Dave takes active measures to mitigate the fear and discomfort that he

understands his body inflicts in others. He enters the restaurant with his hood up,

obscuring as much of his disfiguration as possible, and is especially polite to the woman

behind the counter, who is clearly unsettled by him: " 'A b-bucket?' 'Yes, please.' 'And

will ... will that be original recipe or extra crispy?' 'Original recipe, please'" (286). When

read next to this careful exchange, the aggressive response of the stranger feels more

inhuman that David has ever seemed—an important facet in the framing of the monsters

here made desperate by social exclusions that are violent at their foundation. Burns is

able, then, to portray the nation as self-cannibalizing, and to mobilize the zombie-image

in service of a depiction of America eating itself that is flipped, or mirrored to the same

narrative as it appears in popular culture. Here, America produces marginalized

subjects—monsters—as collateral damage to the work of biopower, which in producing

life also produces the byproducts of life, such as disease and poverty. Monsters in *Black*

Hole don't represent the manner in which overconsumption turns on itself, but rather, they

represent the way that America is already eating itself, beginning with the ostracized, marginalized, and impoverished.

Gender Trouble: Misogyny and its Critique in *Black Hole*

Burns' mobilization of the figure of the zombie is foundational to his critique of normative white masculinity. Burns's zombie enacts a critique that works partially through the irony of touchability. The infected population's bodies are made 'untouchable' in the popular imaginary by virtue of their grotesque appearances and increasingly fragile, decaying bodies: if monsters are produced when borders are transgressed, borders themselves become volatile, dangerous spaces. So too are the white inhabitants of the suburb often considered 'untouchable,' albeit in a different sense. Livy Visano goes as far as to suggest that the legal system is structured around masculine whiteness to such a degree that it forms the legal system's "untouchable … invisibl[e]" center (210). In the case of Burns's novel, not only are white, suburban Americans 'touchable' in the sense of able to be scrutinized and critiqued, but they quickly come to represent the uncomfortable outside of the machine of capitalism. Whiteness, and the critique of whiteness, is critical to this piece of Burns's argument: the teens whose bodies begin to symbolize the violent other side of capitalism are able, because of their whiteness, to act as an irrefutable mirror to the white, suburban subjects that reject them in the same moment that they fear becoming them. In turn, the comforts of the American suburb are thrown into sharp relief, and begin to appear as cogs in the capitalist machine that is responsible for the very violence of expulsion and its accompanying dangers. After

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all, perhaps the biggest injustice depicted in *Black Hole* is that the people of the suburb have so much, while the teens living in the forest struggle for their day-to-day survival.

It is in the space of the woods, home to the excommunicated population, that Burns's critique of masculinity is made most evident. *Black Hole* follows two male characters, and in doing so hones in on the characteristics that Burns means to critique: an entitlement to women's immaterial and material resources—their attention, time, and bodies—that is so entrenched it manifests in obsessive behavior, and eventually in violence. Burns' world is complex, and his characters varied. Even characters who are meant to be despised have redeeming qualities; none of the male characters are painted as evil, or overtly manipulative. Rather, Burns figures masculinity as manifesting in entitlements against which there is no public outcry, and for which no platform of dissent exists, which makes those entitlements especially volatile. For women in the text in both parts of the world—the city and the woods—men, and men with unspoken and unmet expectations, pose the biggest threat, bigger, even, than infection and excommunication. Women's lives are made especially precarious by the silent nature of the expectations in question: in both major instances of gendered violence, the women at the center of the violence are unaware of engaging with prescribed roles to which their adherence is expected, and equally unaware of transgressing those expectations.

Black Hole examines the ways that violence and trauma are experienced and negotiated in gendered ways, even within communities that are marginalized.[23] He does

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[23] bell hook's *Feminism: From Margin to Center* makes a similar claim that is grounded in the lived experience of women of color under patriarchy in America. For hooks, violences are committed against women of color by white men and men of color alike as a direct product of the

this partially by way of the particular archive of body horror texts that *Black Hole* is in conversation with. Burns's text places women, and their particular experiences of trauma, front and centre without framing them exclusively as victims, which he accomplishes by allowing them to remain both monstrous and sympathetic. Chris is different from the horror genre's trope of the final girl, the normatively attractive woman who manages to evade death by monster even in the face of the murder of everyone around her. The twist in this regard is that Chris dies by suicide; she narrowly avoids being murdered by Dave, but is still put to death by a monster: herself. Chris is different, too, from the most recognizable female monsters, characters like Carrie and *The Exorcist's* Regan, who remain either fully terrifying or entirely unsympathetic. Instead, Chris is aligned with a particular vein of body horror monster that is often (though not always) produced and circulated at the margins via the indie horror film industry, and which circulates around the lives of mostly unremarkable women who are made monstrous: characters like Dawn from Mitchell Lichtenstein's *Teeth* (2007), Jennifer from Karyn Kusama's *Jennifer's Body* (2009)*,* Sam from Eric England's *Contracted* (2013), and Jay from David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2009)*.* At the center of each of these texts is a white woman from a relatively privileged background, who contracts (or, in the case of *Teeth*, is made cognizant of) a disfiguring, life-altering disease through intimate contact. In all of these cases the protagonists are women whose monstrousness seems delayed by either luck or will—all of the women in question regularly "pass" as beautiful and non-threatening— and whose trauma is therefore extended. These texts, and other iterations of the body

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racist function of the system of patriarchy, which disempowers men of color who turn to acts of violence as a mechanism for gaining power and control within that same limited sphere.

horror genre that take women as their protagonists shift the narrative gaze from traditional monster-stories: though the social threats seem to remain the same (death, cannibalism, and the production of more monsters), the focus of monster texts with female protagonists tends to be on the personal experiences of particular women made monstrous. Monstrous women are interesting to cultural consumers precisely because their movement in monster texts breaks the rules: female monsters are the protagonists in their own stories, in contrast to male monsters, who tend to be antagonists only, and so tend to occupy the narrative in a much more peripheral way. Part of Burns' project to humanize the infected teens is that he makes them, like female monsters throughout the horror genre, into protagonists. It is via this humanization that both the particular violences against women that he depicts are exposed as violences, and the male entitlements that precede them are exposed as part of toxic masculinity. The narrative structure of *Black Hole* is feminist in this way.

Justin Shaw names a post-war (1950s- late 1960s) declaration of masculinity in crisis as an American trend, in which the crisis is "attributed to the social conditions of post-war America, which saw a decline in traditionally masculine occupations involving brawn and industry, and a subsequent rise in consumer culture and the conformist suburban lifestyle of the post-war American Dream" (45). Shaw's work is especially interesting for the way that he frames Norman Mailer's representations of masculinity and gender relations—as often tied to narratives of conquest and dominance—which have been described by feminist scholars (Mary Ellmann, Kate Millett) as being mainly

misogynistic.[24] Shaw notes that the outcome of the misogyny represented in Mailer's texts is generally one of failure, deprivation, and negative affect (Shaw 50, 59). Though Mailer's protagonist in *An American Dream* does take up the strategy that Kate Millett calls "fucking as conquest," and which is at its root about achieving conquest over women as a group, individual women in particular, and the male subject's fears about himself (327), he isn't rewarded by his conquest. Instead, Mailer's protagonist's performance of extreme virility and violent rage leave him alienated, and, according to Shaw, destabilises the patriarchal paradigm, rather than reinforcing it. I want, here, to think through the role of the monster figure at the heart of Burns's text, that enables the text to explore the intimate and personal aspects of female monstrosity and monstrously violent men in underscoring a critique of masculinity that finds hegemonic expressions of masculine dominance destabilising, rather than reinforcing.

Burns's attempts to destabilize normative narratives of high school life are front-and-center. Putting aside, for a moment, the fact of the disfiguring disease that funnels young people out of their safe, suburban community and into the slow death of the wilderness, the overall structure of the text attests to the project of humanizing the monster, and of showing the monster to be a symptom of broken systems, with its flipping of the norms of disposability and centrality. The text begins with two protagonists, Chris and Rob, who are both middle-class teenagers with only their respective context (the high school, the classroom, that which is visible about them) for

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[24] Shaw's work builds on Millett's, rather than opposes it. He notes that Millet, in *Sexual Politics* (1970) calls Mailer a "prisoner of the virility cult," and notes that he is "never incapable of analyzing it" (314).

backstory. Rather than repeating the pattern that deems men's stories to be universal while women's are only ever specific (and uninteresting), and only ever concerned with trivial, feminine things, Burns fills out and raises stakes in Chris's narrative, while leaving Rob's relatively untethered. While the first introduction to Chris is via Rob's narrative voice, and leaves her sounding relatively bland, if not attractive, an expected strategy for the kind of narrative that treats women as interchangeable objects (there's no need for Chris to be anything other than bland if her value is in exchange, rather than in her personality)—"I lucked out for once and got Chris as my lab partner. Chris Rhodes. She was a total fox" (2)—the introduction to her narrative perspective, which is executed via flash-forwards, is far more interesting.

The introduction of Chris's narrative voice follows a brief section of Rob's narrative wherein Rob and a group of friends go into the woods for the purpose of smoking marijuana, upon which they find a discarded human skin (shed, as if from an enormous snake), and flee. The interlude opens with a full-page view of Chris's living conditions from above: she sleeps on a very small cot surrounded by possessions and debris (an ashtray full of cigarette butts, her gun, a flashlight, clothing, crumpled tissues, uneaten food) in what is revealed later to be her tent in the woods (23). Following the introduction to Chris's living space is a dream sequence in which Chris relives *not* the moment of infection or realisation of infected status, but the moment (which is still to come in the chronology of the text) when Chris's infected status is made visible, unbeknownst to her—in Chris's case, infection manifests in peeling skin on her back—to her peers when she removes her outer layer of clothing to go swimming at a lakeside

party (24-27). The dream transitions to a metaphoric depiction of the daily conditions of her lived experience: after cutting open her foot on a jagged piece of glass, Chris pulls a scroll of paper from the wound, and opens it to reveal a moving scene depicting herself and other infected teens up to their chests in the lake, hiding in an arch-shaped cave and ravenously consuming garbage. Rob appears in the horde, saying "you don't have to eat that stuff ... look, I brought you something good to eat" as he presents her with a bloody, human-sized kidney that is presumably extracted from a fellow infected person (the kidney is deformed, and has at least three eyes) (28). Finally, the last stage of the dream depicts Rob, now transformed into a snake-like water monster with a human head, suffocating Chris by constriction and insisting "I want to help" (29) after she rejects the kidney.

The interlude swiftly transitions from the obvious visual metaphor—that Rob's insistence on providing care combined with his entirely naive understanding of the affective and cultural weight that Chris's symptomatic, deteriorating body is made to bear, is suffocating—to a thirteen panel sequence that depicts Chris tearing off and discarding her outer skin in a moment of post-dream anguish (31-33). As in *Skim*, what is reified in this moment is the centrality of the body for female subjects, and especially for female subjects whose experience of the world involves being made into objects under the male gaze, an experience that is sutured directly to the female-marked body, and so can't be shirked. Even in the moment when Chris tears off and discards her skin, she is unable to remove herself from the signification of the body that she occupies: such is the nature of her combined monstrosity and trauma. The skin itself is caught in a tangle of bushes and

laid out in a grotesque parody of a seductive pose: its "head" is laid back, its back arched,

hips raised, poised as an echo to the long history of erotic framings of the female form

(16, 33). The skin, being detached from the bodily systems designed to keep it in healthy,

working order is sickly looking, and has the overall appearance of a shredded husk. Even

so, when viewed from Rob's perspective, the skin takes on a different shape: the skin that

Rob gazes at sadly in the woods transforms from a deflated, saggy husk to a pair of

relatively normal looking breasts on either side of a severed line (17). These panels are

nearly side-by-side, and the effect is startling: the discarded skin transforms from a

genderless (save for its grotesque pose), vaguely-shaped mass to a pair of breasts that are

at once horrible and sexualized—the narrative eye focuses only on the breasts, which take

up the majority of the panel, and appear smooth-skinned in contrast to the remainder of

the saggy, wrinkly husk, and grotesque. The whole dream sequence speaks to two kinds

of violence: Chris's body is thrown into sharp relief as a diseased body—it is an

unpleasant resting place that is at once inescapable and ongoing in its particular troubles,

and Chris's discarded skin is made into an object of the male gaze, and is sexualized in

the same moment it is reviled. The dream sequence, when paired with the depiction of

Rob's drug-addled foray into the woods, offers a glimpse into the conditions of life for

Chris: her body is made the root of her interactions with men, as she is both suffocated by

Rob's insistence on access to her private acts of caring for her body (especially through

diet: in life, Rob is insistent in his efforts to feed Chris "the best sandwich in the world"

[102]), and made into an object of sexual desire and lust.

The discrepancy in stakes as they are laid out for Rob and for Chris at the novel's opening is stark. Rob's introduction, which depicts him smoking marijuana in the woods with his friends, figures him as a regular teenager. Not only does his heterosexual attraction to a conventionally beautiful peer, and his desire to be among others of his own demographic and away from the watchful eye of parents, say as much, but he also engages in stereotypically rebellious, but usually (relatively) safe teen behavior, such as consuming alcohol, and smoking marijuana in the woods. Chris's introduction reveals her simultaneously as living a higher-stakes existence than Rob, and as a subject whose bodily integrity and agency are challenged by the degree to which her body is acted upon, or made the object of both the actions of others and her circumstances. Conditions of life for Chris in this moment, the moment at which the narrative eye aligns with Chris rather than with a subject that makes Chris the object of a gaze, are precarious: she works at surviving, lives in a space eerily reminiscent of a refugee camp, and is cut off from the social network and wealth into which she was born. She doesn't have the luxury to be off-put by frog innards. Her ability to navigate inside of an already-precarious life is further hindered by the actions of others (Rob's suffocating presence is the first of many example of this), all of which culminate in a mass-shooting that fells the majority of the infected teens but from which Chris narrowly escapes. The shooting is conducted by the same character who previously mobilized his own monstrosity in the spitting incident, Dave, whose second violent outburst is the direct result of his frustration at not being granted sexual access to Chris's body in exchange for various kindnesses (294, 300, 344).

Burns takes the common feminist critique of popular media—that "men act while women are acted upon" (Berger 46)[25]—and represents it such that it becomes part of the fabric of horror in the text. Thus, Chris's battle for survival, combined with her inner existential monologues on the nature of life, neither of which amounts to a great deal of action, become the force that drives the plot forward. Bolstering this reading is that the actions of the men in the text, including Rob's over-helpfulness and Dave's eventual rampage, are all undertaken in response to Chris's actions, condition, or desires. Though male characters appear to be active while Chris is largely, but not exclusively, passive, they are also framed as always reacting, rather than acting, a plot-position usually occupied by female characters. Finally, though Chris doesn't occupy the majority of narrative time, her narrative perspective is featured more often than any other single character and, because Rob is murdered (224-226), Chris's narrative is the only one that survives the full length of the text.

Precarity, Risk, and the Forest

Emma Jacobs makes the claim that the white teens at the heart of Burns's text make good subjects for the exploration of apocalypse by total (social) system failure because of the particular precarity that they inhabit. Being young, white, and from the suburbs, the teens do not experience the force of the law, or of biopower in the same visible, ongoing way as people of color do. Instead, they are able to represent the invisible norm, the demographic that is served by the system, and so has lived for generations

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[25] Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema," makes a similar point.

without questioning it, the demographic that knows relative comfort *and* relative anxiety, and which "has never known any different" (np).

For Jacobs, *Black Hole* tells the story of the coming-into awareness of the system itself as precarious by the dominant culture in the aftermath of both the Cold War (for the characters) and 9/11 (for the reader), which has lead to "a general and disembodied awareness of danger" (np) that "constitutes the background of their entire lives" (np). Key for Jacobs is that the teens of *Black Hole* are born into a context that is already haunted by a pervasive awareness of a danger that is not tied to any particular threat. Being "born into" this context, when compounded with the estrangement of the teens from their parents (Jacobs notes that adults are present in only thirteen of a total 368 pages) leaves those subjects relatively decontextualized, or lacking historical awareness. Ashley Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva mobilize the work of Avery Gordon in their remarks on a study that found that white women, when asked about race, would revert to language free from any mention of or association with race, as if "understanding that recognizing race might be construed as racist," (213), therefore side-stepping any part of their account that might speak to the way that "we are all involved in the dirty process of racializing and gendering others" (Aida Hurtado 226). Doane and Bonilla-Silva suggest that the race-neutral accounts given by white women are haunted in the manner put forward by Gordon in *Ghostly Matters,* which is to say that their accounts are unsettled by "a seething presence, acting on, and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities" (8). The teens of *Black Hole* are "born into" a context that is unsettled by histories of racialised violence: by the history of slavery that has allowed some white families to maintain enormous

wealth, and especially the history of white flight that shapes the suburb. This particular haunting is part of what, in turn, shapes the sense of precarity to which Jacobs gestures, which is certainly an element that meddles with the "taken-for-granted realities" (8) of late capitalism. Precarity in this case becomes manifest in the disease that seems to only affect those who have bought in to late capitalism's promise of wealth and ease, even if only because it is all they've known. To be precarious is to risk losing something (or everything), as long as that which is at risk of being lost is valued by the dominant (white, middle class) group. Hence both the focus on beauty, which is highly valued in dominant American society, and the fact of being haunted by the absence of those who have rarely had anything the dominant group would consider to be valuable.

There is a further linking up here with the haunting that disrupts what one takes for granted and the creation of both landscape and language that have been cleansed of indicators of race.[26] What haunts the characters of *Black Hole* is that "it," banishment into an existence marked by those conditions of life that Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life" (various) and which are, importantly, reserved for what Zygmunt Bauman calls "human waste"—those segments of population deemed superfluous or useless—can happen to "them." Especially troubling is that no amount of wealth, popularity, or even whiteness seems able to prevent "it" from happening. Indeed, the risk for teens at the heart of *Black Hole* seems to be that to become infected is to drop out of class privilege (visible to the teens themselves), and by extension to drop out of race privilege (visible to the reader);

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[26] While white bodies are not free from race, they are often read and framed as if they were. This framing aids in upholding a structure of culture in which white, middle class people retain dominance: any mention of race can, in this formulation, be framed as "bringing race into it," when in reality race and race relations had been in operation already, albeit invisibly.

that which unsettles is the creeping awareness that the system needs bodies at the margins in order to have a center, needs disposable lives in order to produce material and immaterial comforts. Disposability itself is made visible by way of the absent communities that haunt the text.

Ultimately, Burns' decision to embed his story into the particular community that he does betrays an investment in discourses of whiteness as having the effect of universalizing, though that investment is partially unsettled because his text is also marked by a hesitancy around race that mirrors the one described by Doane and Bonilla-Silva. In simple form, his message is this: the status quo has shifted, and all bodies are now at increased exposure to risk. While the universalized, whitened nature of this claim lends his text a kind of urgency, he also enacts a turning away from the social and historical conditions that have disproportionately made black bodies and women's bodies bear the greatest risk of violence. A generous reader would frame Burns's text as a kind of cautionary tale framed especially, perhaps, for those viewers of comics accustomed to taking pleasure in images of violence enacted against vulnerable bodies. Arguably, however, his work falls just short of success: while the fact that any body, including privileged and white bodies, can be susceptible to production as waste sits firmly at the center of the narrative, the greatest violences are still enacted against women and people of colour.

With a bit more nuance, his text proffers up a tangible example of Ulrich Beck's cultural formation of the risk society: "in advanced modernity the social production of *wealth* is also systematically accompanied by the social production of *risk*" (19). For

Beck, risk is funneled away from wealth where labour is concerned: the riskiest work is outsourced to the most vulnerable populations: to people of colour, women, and the poor, and especially to those located in the global south, while the excess of wealth produced by that labour is funneled away from the space of its production and into the middle and upper class communities of the global north. Even the wealthiest, most developed nations cannot shield against certain risks, among them: global warming, air pollution across the globe, and, to a lesser degree, the increased inequality in wealth and income in the so-called developed world that leaves populations living precariously in increasing numbers, and across stratifications whose historical lines of division (race, gender) are slowly deteriorating. Though the wealthy can better manage their relationship to a changing environment, they can't fully extract themselves from the air polluted by their own gas-burning vehicles.

Beck takes the example of the death and deterioration of forests as an indication of the particular spread of risk to which he refers: forests disappeared in large quantities first as a byproduct of agricultural practice, then because of clear cutting in the logging industry and in order to make space for human sprawl, and now as an extension of the various practices associated with industrialization (21). The historical protections that the wealthiest global citizens have been able to devise to ensure the unequal distribution of risk, partially in the name of protecting themselves from it, are only temporary: advanced global warming, for example, makes it increasingly difficult to predict weather patterns, and to thus plan in advance for certain kinds of natural disasters. There are three pieces of the functioning of risk that can be brought to bear on the disease in *Black Hole*: increased

anxieties about boundaries; the slow creep of risk into all aspects of life, and the attending

violences that arrive and operate in the name of maintaining the status quo; and the

particular relationship of characters in *Black Hole* to green spaces that are increasingly

under delayed attack by the factors of late modernity that create the conditions of their

respective lives.

Though this proposal may thus far seem to be reaching, the connection that I aim

to make becomes more obvious when one realises that the categories of population most

effected in both instances—most likely to be made into objects and rejected from the

social body, most likely to bear the highest burden of risk wherever risk is produced—

have significant overlap: the homeless, the sick, people of colour, and especially people

of colour in the global south, who bear a huge amount of the risk burden of the mass

production required by late capitalism. Human waste populations are, for Zygmunt

Bauman, those arriving out of time, existing in excess to what their home nation can

provide. The teens in *Black Hole* make up a kind of excess, but one that represents a

convergence of Bauman's waste population and Beck's "systemically conditioned

blindness to risk," (emphasis in original 14).

Burns's infected teens are thrust out of the community based on the community's

desire to look away from that which is disgusting, and they are thus produced as excess in

Bauman's terms, though their expulsion has more to do with affect than with material

wealth. The camp that the teens set up for themselves speaks to the production of

excess—a different kind of waste—inherent to the American (and Canadian) suburb, and

to the overall accumulation of wealth in the west. The food made available to the teens

says as much; the group of infected teens, depicted at a "cook out" (as the chapter title

reads), feast on packaged hot dogs, which they cook over an open fire and slather in

ketchup, with the promise of "a couple packs of cupcakes and some Twinkies" (118-9) to

share for dessert. This food, which is collected predominantly by stealing from the gas

stations and corner stores near the outer edges of the city, is underscored as poor quality

by the dinner-time conversation, during which Dave wishes for "buns or something ...

even a loaf of bread," and another, unnamed woman comments that she'd love "eggs, just

plain old scrambled eggs ... with some toast" (119). Though the teens carve out an

existence in the most natural of spaces, the forest, their access to the means of survival is

limited in a particular way that reflects on the impact of widely-available material

comforts for the middle and upper classes. Absent access to a grocery store, the teens can

only subsist on foods that are bound up in the system of industrial food production: foods

made from by-products and flavoured with chemical compounds, or that have been

extruded or otherwise shaped by machines. These foods, too, represent the human cost of

the technological innovation that has made industrial food products so widely available.

While these foods fail at providing a means of survival due to their low nutritional

quality, they also fail as a means of survival in terms of labour potential: industrialized

food plants have been tinkered with and streamlined in the interest of corporate

efficiency, and so employ as few labourers as possible. Thus, the increased availability of

twinkies and processed cupcakes translates to a decreased availability in jobs for the most

unskilled members of the population. The depiction of humans, even monstrous ones,

eating trash gestures to the burden of the neoliberal cycle that produces in the same

gesture cheap consumer goods, increasingly risky labour, waste products, and waste populations. Not only has the infected population been thrust to the literal fringes of the society (the forest), but they've been reduced to survival by scraps.

The circulation of goods, including of low quality food into the suburb, and later the forest, is itself a politicized process. When Chris is offered "something good to eat," (both the material bolgna sandwiches and the mutated dream kidney) it is because of her ability to pass, which can be read as a reference to the multiple ways in which human movement in the world is enabled or restricted based on the ability of subjects to pass. While Chris passes for non-infected, people in the world whose experiences are being, perhaps, spoken to here, must pass as whiter, straighter, and more able bodied in order to receive offers of "something good to eat." Revealed in this brief exchange is that at the core of gifts such as this one is a cannibalistic impulse: to receive "something good to eat" in exchange for passing from the same group that acts as your oppressor is to commit a violence against the minority group.

The particular spaces to which infected people are thrust speaks, too, to the manner in which their bodies are made to bear out the risks inherent to the current conditions of life in the west. For Ulrich Beck, the forest is the location at which "the invisible hazards are becoming visible" most conspicuously (55), or the site at which those risks are becoming manifest in a manner from which it is impossible to look away. And, for Beck, the making visible of risk is inherent to risk itself: Beck weighs risk and the perception of it equally, suggesting that "both sides converge, condition each other,

strengthen each other, and because risks are risks in knowledge, perceptions of risks and risks are not different things, but one and the same" (55).

Priscilla Wald's work on discourses of disease emergence, which suggests that diseases are recognized by the North American public as having emerged when they arrive, usually by way of the bodies of people of color, from spaces recognized as risky, echoes the same sentiment: that risk emerges as risk at the moment that it becomes recognizable, and risk becomes recognizable to some North Americans when it manifests in particular ways, and in certain places on North American soil. The forest is both the place to which the teens are banished, but is also destined to be the site at which the impacts of the global systems of production and circulation begin to manifest in a manner that is impossible to look away from. Or, because the forest is the space to which vulnerable, diseased bodies are thrust, it is also the space from which the disease will eventually emerge: the forest is the site at which the disease will transform in the popular imaginary from one that produces waste populations who must then be made into fringe communities, into a monstrous, pervasive threat.

For Elizabeth McAlister, "the American Zombie is almost always a sign and a symptom of an apocalyptic undoing of the social order" (McAlister 474). Burns's re-writing of the monster story, and especially his refiguring of the spatialization of risk, in which the forest is both the space to which the infected teens retreat and the space from which monsters are said to come, is meant to act as a cautionary tale that reflects the current creation of "monsters" in response to increasingly global circulations of money and power. While Burns's text is effective in leveraging a critique of the dangers of white

masculinity, it falls short in its macro reading of the manner in which space and risk become bound up together precisely because of the same white-washing that makes the first critique so effective.

Space, Place, and Race: Spatial Contagion and the Problem with Burns's Monsters

This brings us to the final intervention that this chapter seeks to make: that space and risk remain bound up, inextricably, with race. Sociologist Robert E. Park was instrumental in the binding up of the concepts of "social contagion" with physical spaces, slums, tenements, and "ghettos" in particular, in the early 1900s, and well before white flight exacerbated the differentials in quality of life for citizens in the American city (Wald 128-133). Park was the first to link up the gathering together of citizens for shared activities "ranging from criminal activities to artistic endeavors" (Wald 141) with "moral regions," or spaces which one might inhabit in order to participate in activities that are named as outside of normative American social life. Key here is evidence that diseases and "ills," be they biological or social, have long been bound up with the spatial in the western public imaginary, and inflected by gender (men's mobility in social space has historically been more widely accepted than women's for example), race (the ghettoization of the American city occurs along lines of race and ethnic difference), and the East/West divide (as in the case of diseases that "emerge" on Western soil).

Moments of crisis emerge, conversely, when biological illness or "social contagions" move across boundaries and borders that are designed to garrison the white middle-class from the same risks that bear down on minority populations; the distribution

of risk, like modernity, is uneven. Though the discourse of emergence is often simplified

such that it seems to represent the movement of disease over national borders, in effect

emergence occurs at the site of the local: AIDS, for example, might be said to have

"emerged" alongside sophisticated understandings of its mechanisms for movement that

made it clear that no demographic was inherently either at risk or entirely safe. Bodies

and communities are both shaped by understandings of emergence and risk: so much is

clear from my reading of *Black Hole.* The particular problem of sidestepping the question

of race, and especially the manner in which discourses of race inflect (and are inflected

by) both emergence and the spatialization of risk, lies therein.

Though Burns's text offers up a critique of social fear and its attending hostility

around AIDS, his critique is isolated from that which might be gained by a careful

reading of the ways in which black bodies in particular have been shaped by cultural and

biomedical discourses around AIDS. In a move designed to critique the fallibility of

biomedical discourse, Treichler lists a series of statements proffered by the biomedical

system in the early days of AIDS research that attempted to grasp the biological and

cultural differences in AIDS transmission between the dominantly accepted risk groups

(white gay men), and the black population. Though the black population was known to be

at increased risk for contracting AIDS, the biomedical system, which in early days had

sutured AIDS to homosexuality, found it difficult to articulate how or why that population

was at risk. The result was a list of statements on the nature of AIDS that undercut

previous (and concurrent to the moment of listing) notions about who was at risk for

AIDS, and why. The list includes such statements as: "AIDS is homosexual; it can only

be transmitted by males to males" (qtd in Treichler 267), "AIDS in Africa is heterosexual but uni-directional; it can only be transmitted from males to females" (cited in Treichler 267), and "AIDS in Africa is heterosexual because anal intercourse is a common form of birth control" (cited in Treichler 267). Black bodies are discursively constructed, then, as inherently at risk for AIDS regardless of gender or sexual orientation, in the same gesture in which black masculinity is denigrated via association with "gay" sex acts (anal sex). The tying together of black bodies in general with the risk of disease that happens in AIDS discourse is, of course, not dissimilar from the tying together of black bodies, poverty, and criminality or danger that led to white flight in the first place: the increased vulnerability to HIV infection experienced by the black community come partially out of histories of impoverishment, segregation, and biopolitical management, which have had multiple reverberating effects. These histories underwrite suspicions of the medical profession, especially in light of the practice of forced sterilization, that increase risk for disease transmission, while also underwriting white flight. Black vulnerability is shaped partially by the effects of, and preconditions to, white flight, including that black and white bodies are rarely in contact.

Risk in Burns' text is clearly shaped, too, by white flight and its effects: the suburb and its associations (wealth, comfort, safety) is itself an effect of white flight, for example. And, as I've demonstrated here, white flight is both a cause and effect of the suturing of black bodies to risk. Additionally, the movement of white bodies into the suburb and away from the city proper has had the effect of abandonment—not by white bodies, per se, but by the wealth and resources that they bring—which, in turn,

compounds the vulnerability of those populations. That is: black and white bodies remain tangled up together in their day-to-day lives, and even such social reorganizations as white flight cannot fully disentangle them. In light of this entanglement, I want to leverage a criticism of Burns's text: mainly that he's missed an important part of the lived experience of risk and anxiety in late capitalism, and his text is marked by that absence. For example, the very suturing of black bodies to risk that *Black Hole* refuses to attend to reinforces a moral spatialization of cities that would complicate, and flesh out the work that Burns begins to do with his suburb/forest divide. Attending to racial difference, then, would strengthen the important claims that *Black Hole* puts forward.

Conclusion: the Place Where the Personal Meets the Political

"When our own individual future is at stake (the future of members of our family, our financial future, our own health), what I call statistical panic can strike with compelling and sustained force."

-Kathleen Woodward, 196
Statistical Panic

In 2005, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Five years later, following her third instance of cancer recurrence, her oncologist recommended that she encourage any biological children to be tested for the presence of genetic markers that would signal a predispositional to certain types of cancer. By some bizarre coincidence, this suggestion reached me in the same week that the affect theory course I was taking for my Master's degree was slated to read Kathleen Woodward's "Statistical Panic," an essay that questions the consequences of reading the human body through statistics, and which is haunted by one statistic, and how it relates to genetic predisposition to disease specifically: 50-50 (206). "Statistical Panic" reads the situation of Alice Wexler who, while in her mid-twenties, learns of her own 50-50 chance of inheriting Huntington's disease from her mother. The parallels seemed uncanny (and unfair); like Wexler, I was "overpowered" by my own relationship to a 50-50 statistic, and, like Wexler, this "translated into uncertainty about [my] own talents for living" (206). I took to heart Woodward's suggestion that statistics are "the quantitative language of our global capitalist public culture, one that we have all internalized. It is the logic and preeminent expression of late capitalism" (208). I did not go to class.

This particular experience, of finding an academic text's exploration of affect to be too raw for certain kinds of engagement, but also of beginning to come to terms with

my own relationship to the languages of disease and late capitalism, was formative: it is from this experience, and the moments and events leading up to it, that the questions at the heart of this project began to take shape. I wondered what it means to be a body in a system, and a person in a community, and if there were ways to reach across the apparent chasm in between. My mother's belief, after being transferred from active medical treatment to palliative care, that her doctors had been instructed to funnel resources to younger patients, reflects a certain relationship to the application of the internalized logic of statistics to health and human life: it is easier to believe that statistical analysis has counted you out, rather than to confront a world in which risk is sometimes unmanaged, and can become wholly unmanageable.

This project began to take shape when two things happened. First, I began to think about the processes through which all that is human is stripped away from subjects in order to reduced people to bodies that can be counted, analyzed, and dealt with according to statistical practice. Second, after years of sitting bedside with my mother as she awaited and recovered from various cancer treatments, I found myself unable to express the variety of emotions that I felt (anger, frustration, sadness, despair), until I read Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and cried inconsolably in public. There was something about Spiegelman's depictions of loss, suffering, and trauma that allowed me to access the affective side of myself. To some degree, it was Spiegelman's work *as comics* that enabled that breaking point: *Maus* was a safe place to put my grief.

Ariela Freedman describes *Maus* as tapping into "the rich established pain vocabulary" (383) of comics in order to "suggest the embodied, material nature of the

telling of history, as if it were the wound itself that spoke" (387). Among the central

claims of this dissertation is that the texts considered herein, like *Maus*, use the

vocabulary of the comics medium to communicate affect and trauma together, and in

ways that are both inextricably bound up in their respective histories, and intensely

personal. In telling histories, the comics medium emphasises the body; the comics

medium translates an insistence that histories, traumas, and feelings are inherently

embodied onto the page, and makes that embodied text accessible to viewers. A further

concern of this project is in the case that it for comics as an effective (and affective)

counter to the statistical, sometimes brutal language of modernity and late capitalism,

which the comics medium accomplishes by making bodies, traumas, and histories

inextricable from one another by representing them together, always, on the page.

In my first chapter, I extended a particular archive of queer theory that attends to

the intersection of national and personal traumas, such as that produced by Lauren Berlant

and Ann Cvetkovich, by using it to illuminate the subtle visual representations of the

national traumas that form the backdrop of Alison's coming-of-age in *Fun Home*. I read

Bechdel's engagement with history as especially queer, and therefore as an especially

powerful counter to normativizing discourses. Alison finds meaningful nodes of

attachment with her deceased father, and in turn with queer history. My chapter reads the

text as equal parts coming-of-age memoir, queer archive, and queer history: I point out

that Bechdel shapes the personal—her own coming-of-age, but also her father's

posthumous history—into a queer archive that she simultaneously expands, and in doing

so produces something of an incomplete history of queerness in American from the early days of her childhood up the late 1980s.

Building on the work of Hilary Chute and Monica Chiu, Chapter 2 makes a case for comics as especially adept at representing trauma as absence. I suggested that Tamaki and Tamaki represent the lingering impact of Japanese internment, and the psychic trauma of racial melancholia in the visual register. Skim's sadness is pervasive, but detached from a concrete object; I argued that her sadness reverberates from a structure of feeling that has already excluded her, which is made visible partially in the way that her world is filled with skinny, white women who predominantly treat her badly, and partially in the fact of the absence of a particular object towards which to direct her feelings, which is underscored as an absence by virtue of being represented visually. *Skim* represents visually the convergence of history, embodiment, trauma, and feeling that this project finds productive: Skim's bad feelings, her melancholia, signify that she carries the traces of both personal and historical trauma on her body.

Finally, my chapter on *Black Hole* provided a reading of risk and risk management, and the suggested that Burns's teens resist the logics of capitalism by forming an imperfectly socialist society. Building on the work of Zygmunt Bauman and Paolo Virno, I considered shifts in the biopolitical imperative under late capitalism that are apparent in the contemporary Western world, and represented in Burns's text: namely that the focus on circulation rather than production has created new spaces and categories for waste populations. In the case of *Black Hole*, waste populations are linked to disease and infection: the teens that contract a disfiguring sexually transmitted disease embody a

literal plague that has befallen only a particular generation within the American suburb, and are excommunicated for it. By humanizing the characters experiencing social expulsion, I argued, Burns allows readers to feel along with the monsters. Or: the text undercuts the cold, calculating frameworks of the market, circulation, and value, by allowing for affective engagement. The closing pages of the text, in which Chris commits suicide by drowning, compounds this effect: though those deemed waste by the dominant culture ultimately do the work of counting themselves out, the empathy that the text demands in that moment undercuts the system of circulation and exclusion, rather than reinforcing it.

A central concern of this project is optimism, though not optimism in the conventional sense; I am concerned with an optimism that does not always feel good, and indeed sometimes feels quite bad. This project has looked for, and foregrounded moments in my chosen texts that highlight optimism as Lauren Berlant describes it, as "the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own" (*Cruel Optimism* 2, emphasis in original). Unlike the statistic, which is static in form, optimism is a verb, a "force that moves you" (2), and which is linked to attachment, including the sort of non-linear, sometimes ineffective attachments at the heart of this project.

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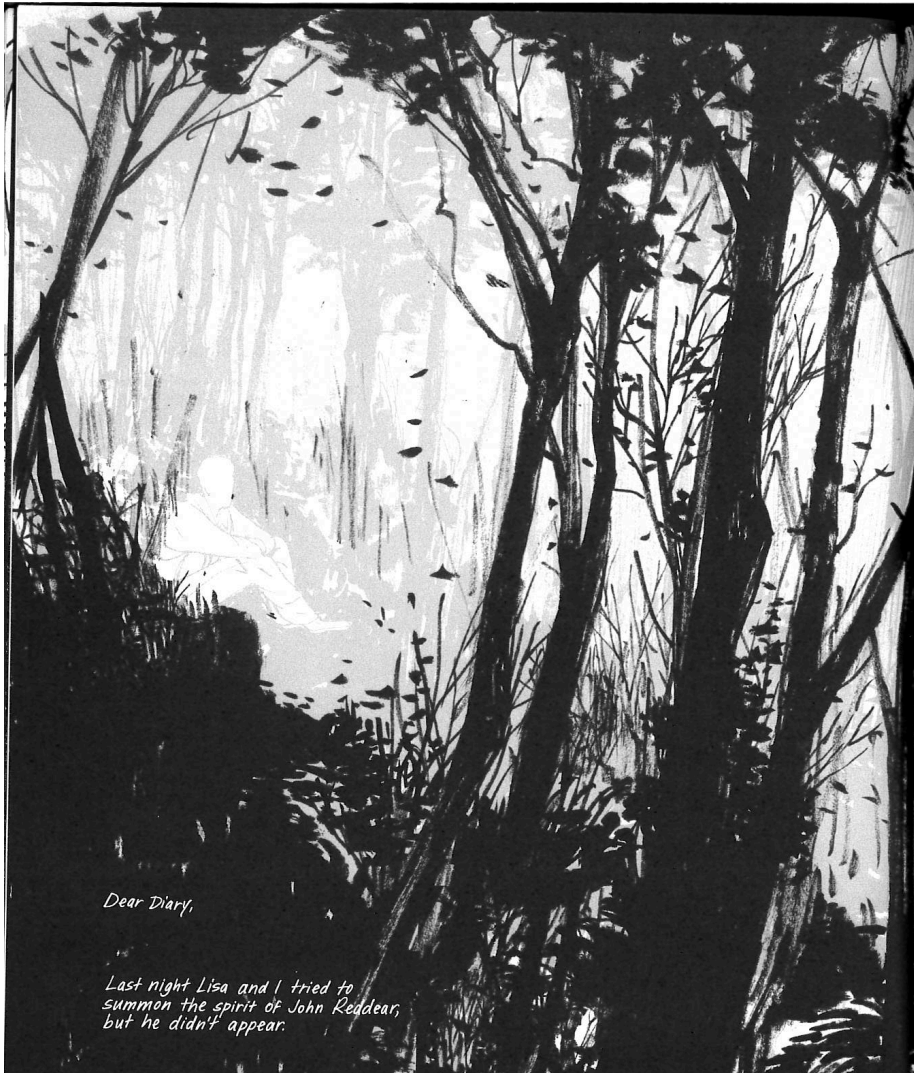
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Appendix I

Appendix II