

THE ANIMAL AS QUEER ACT IN COMICS: QUEER ITERATIONS
IN *ON LOVING WOMEN* AND *NIMONA*

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines comics' use of animal and otherwise non-normative bodies to portray queer identities and examine how the portrayal of the queer and monstrous can be seen as a reflection of the medium itself. Comics is a hybrid medium in which words and images coexist, favoring neither and flouting categorization in art or literature. Comics relishes the instability and subversive nature of its form, and has been a tool for challenging conventions of acceptable representation. Comics' refusal to accept a secure, unified definition is analogous to the object of queer theory, suggesting that comics are particularly well suited to depict queer narratives.

Close readings of Diane Obomsawin's graphic narrative *On Loving Women* and Noelle Stevenson's webcomic *Nimona* serve as examples of the possibilities of reading comics through a queer lens. Both texts are examples of queer narratives that use animal, monster, and nonhuman bodies to articulate otherness. *On Loving Women's* anthropomorphic animals represent different lesbians as they recount short biographical sketches. This text layers narrative voice, giving the text a sense of polysemy and evoking the multiplicity of queer identity. *Nimona* follows the misadventures of a shapeshifting sidekick and her cyborg supervillain boss. *Nimona* depicts the threat posed by fluid and non-normative identities to heteronormative hegemonic institutions, ultimately demanding that the binary systems that persecute queerness be abolished. Both texts call into question the nature of identity in terms of sex, gender, and humanity.

As examples of the possibilities of comics to attack exclusionary systems that place queerness as the ultimate other, these texts reveal the diverse ways in which representational space is queered. Comics repositions the body on the page, allowing for iterative acts of queering that cannot be limited to any singular form. The medium continues to develop new modes of representation that challenge and subvert normative systems.

This thesis is dedicated to my family for their love of queer beasts.

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INTRODUCTION

Diane Obomsawin's 2014 graphic narrative, *On Loving Women*, recounts the first sexual experiences of lesbian women in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s. The biographical vignettes follow in the footsteps of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, Art Spiegelman's critically acclaimed graphic narrative, in that Obomsawin portrays her characters as anthropomorphic animals. Like *On Loving Women*, which uses animal forms to portray lesbian and queer narratives, Noelle Stevenson's 2016 comic *Nimona* also puts animal and other nonhuman bodies on the page in order to convey the instability and shifting nature of identity. In *Nimona*, cyborgs and shapeshifters challenge institutionalized norms of identity and sexuality. *On Loving Women* does not adopt the science-fiction fairy tale pastiche that *Nimona* does; rather, it maintains a bold and whimsical cartoon style to depict biographical events. Despite differences in mode and genre, both challenge exclusionary and essentializing prescriptions of identity, pushing against normativity. These texts use anthropomorphic animal forms and otherwise monstrous bodies to portray queer identities; in so doing, they challenge the abjection of queerness, and exploit comics to create a unique representational space for such identities. This thesis examines comics' use of animal bodies to enact queer identities and how such queerness

can be seen as a reflection of how comics operates as a medium.¹ Comics' diverse representations of non-normative and unconventional bodies mirror the medium's hybrid form, and invite a queer approach to reading comics. Close analyses of *On Loving Women* and *Nimona* serve as examples of how reading comics as queer opens a broader discussion of queer representations and narrative possibilities. The queer elements of comics suggest that comics is a medium in which identities and narratives are constantly queering normative institutions. Using hybridity as a source for the destabilization of normative constructs, comics' queer representations and formulate instable, shifting iterations of queer identity. This introduction highlights the queer aspects of comic's form and content in order to demonstrate comic's queerness.

The "Definitional Issue"

Comics rejects and subverts normative and universalized boundaries and has thus far in its history escaped exact definition throughout the ebbs and flows of its popularity. This slippery nature of comics suggests a queer dimension to the medium. In her introductory book *Queer Theory*, Annemarie Jagose states, "part of queer's semantic clout, part of its political efficacy, depends on its resistance to definition, and the way in

¹ Following McCloud's convention, comics is "plural in form, used with a singular verb" because "comics" describes an entire medium (9). Additionally, McCloud intentionally says "pictorial and other images" to take into account the fact that "Letters are *static image*." He continues, "when they're arranged in deliberate sequence, placed next to each other, we call them words;" and thus, McCloud's earlier definition, "Juxtaposed static images in deliberate sequence" blurs the categories of word and image whose distinctness is often taken for granted (8). The plurality of "comics" compliments the argument that comics provides a unique realm for representing plural identities in queer and instable ways.

which it refuses to stake its claim...” (1). Queer’s resistance to definition, “its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics” (1). This is likewise true of comics. Comics and its “gentrified” epithets “graphic novel” or “graphic narrative,” has been described by numerous definitions, some privileging the artistic aspects and some the literary, while others focus strictly on formal characteristics (Beaty *Comics vs. Art* 34). The “definitional issue” is constantly at stake, for within this discussion rests the localization of comics into a specific field or genre, a localization that creators frequently endeavor to resist (*Comics vs. Art* 30). Hillary Chute notes that although the process of defining comics has been dependent on the restrictions of the commercial industry, actual “‘functional descriptions’ fuel an area of comics criticism, which is almost gleefully free of institutionally entrenched definitions” (“Comics as Literature?” 454).² According to Scott McCloud, comics is a variable medium with “limitless and exciting” potential (3). Comics tends to slip out of systems of categorization, and goes further to destabilize those systems in social contexts. This instability has lead Rob Rodi to describe comics as “subversive” (Beaty *Comics vs. Art* 46). Bart Beaty declares:

The idea that comics are inherently subversive is, of course, simply another in a long line of essentialist definitions of the form. Nevertheless, this particular essentialism is interesting insofar as it focuses attention on the social, rather than merely formal, revelations that structure the way in which comics are understood. (46)

Comics and queer both draw power from their ability to call into question hegemonic systems of classification that permeate society, wanting whenever possible to resist

² This is especially true for webcomics, which will be addressed specifically in the chapter focusing on Noelle Stevenson’s *Nimona*.

essentializing definition. Historically, “queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and desire” (Jagose 3). Comics has been equally destabilizing, “challenging and arresting because [it] meditated on the violation of taboos,” such as the social transgressions of heterosexuality and cis-gender into homosexuality or gender queerness, as well as other social taboos (Chute “Comics as Literature?” 456). Chute notes that comic’s transgressive acts allow for a “visual-verbal exploration in which taboos (sexual, violent, villainous) could be explored and outrageousness given form” (Chute *Graphic Women* 13-14). Outrageous, bold, and destabilizing, comics presents an arena in which queer bodies find space and voice.³ The analogous resistance of essentialist definition suggests that comics and queer operate in similar ways, and as a result, comics offers a particularly rich venue for queering ideological and representational systems. Moreover, the transgression of normative systems within comics, an already transgressive medium, allows for the transgressive and destabilizing queering that is constantly at work within the medium. Queer theory and comics are thus ideally paired in terms of ideological discussion.

In their essay, “Introduction: Graphic Narrative,” Hillary Chute and Marianne

³ This type of outrageousness may in some circumstances verge on Camp, of the type Susan Sontag outlines in her chapter “Notes on ‘Camp’.” Certainly, the potentially “unnatural” “exaggerations” that lead to the reading of everything as instable or questionable are significant to comics’ character (277). As Sontag observes, there is “a peculiar affinity and overlap” between Camp taste and homosexual taste (291). Camp style and aesthetics may be a productive addition to the project of reading comics as queer. However, while Camp is “serious” or “innocent,” as Sontag details, Comics is excruciatingly self-aware and often plays with standards of seriousness and satire (283-284). For the time being, further explorations of the Camp-side of comics merit discussion elsewhere.

DeKoven state, “there does not yet exist an established critical apparatus for graphic narrative” (770). In the context of this project, queer theory suggests a way of reading comics, acting as a means of opening discussions of comics’ formal and social potentials, and providing new ways to queer narrative. Applying queer theory to comics allows for the acknowledgement of the medium’s multiplicity and polysemy. As a medium that tends to subvert hegemonic, patriarchal, and even heteronormative narrative systems, comics is well suited to voicing queer identities. Additionally, reading queerness through comics presents similarly diverse and subversive possibilities for queer performances and (re)presentations.

The Convergence of the Queer and Monstrous

Exploring the queer function of monsters in comics is not to say that what is queer is also always monstrous, or vice versa. The critical overlap between monstrous bodies and queer bodies is seen in their ability to push back on and rupture socially prescribed categories once thought of as stable. Queer has its roots in derogatory slang and “homophobic abuse” (Jagose 1). In her article “Critically Queer,” Judith Butler writes:

The term “queer” emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, *within* performativity. The term “queer” has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject *through* that shaming interpellation. “Queer” derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult. (18)

The production of the subject through shaming is a critical point that will merit further investigation later in this introduction. In general, “queer” is a term that has come to describe both “homosexual” and something “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric” or “of

questionable character; suspicious, dubious” (OED). In the context of reading comics, the term also refers to that which is non-normative and decentering (OED). Queer challenges normativity, especially patriarchal heteronormative constructs of gender and sexuality. Both monstrous beasts and queer identities have historically been abjected due to the threat they pose to normative systems. In Judith Butler’s exploration of the abject, she describes abjection as a necessary part of the creation of the subject.⁴ The normatively sexed subject “requires the simultaneous production of the domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subjects” (Butler *Bodies That Matter* xiii). The abjection of the repudiated body is an effort to maintain “symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility” on the part of the subject. However, the abject constantly threatens to disrupt those normative and “self-grounding” fields of sex, gender, and identity (*Bodies That Matter* xiii). What is more, Butler articulates this disruption as moving beyond systems of gender and sex:

Such attributions or interpellations contribute to that field of discourse and power that orchestrates, delimits, and sustains that which qualifies as ‘the human.’ We see this most clearly in the examples of those abjected beings who do not appear properly gendered: it is their very humanness that comes into question. (*Bodies That Matter* xvii)

Comics deploys monstrosity and queerness in ways that question humanness, and those human social systems that create such limiting fields of discourse and power.

⁴ Butler’s use of the term “abject” is related to that of Julia Kristeva. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva defines the abject as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” and is something which instills horror (4). Kristeva’s definition is useful to keep in mind when discussing the history of comics as abjected from society by Fredric Wertham; however, Butler’s approach invites a broader understanding of the abject as it relates to queer theory.

Comics too have been seen as strange and disruptive. Thus, it is no surprise that due to the queer hybrid nature of comics' form, as well as the supernormal composite bodies that they contain, the medium has been condemned. The analogous pathologization and abjection of comics is critical for understanding how comics may be termed queer. Already of dubious artistic or literary value, often deemed the "bastard of the art world," comics was rejected by the patriarchal, heteronormative society in 1954 when Freudian psychologist Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* was published (*Beaty Comics vs. Art* 13). In *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham denounced comics as a provocateur of juvenile delinquency because the medium promoted numerous dangerous inclinations, including "cruelty," "unwholesome fantasies," and "criminal or sexually abnormal ideas" (118). The publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* coincided with the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency's hearing. These two events precipitated the creation of the Comics Code, a strict self-censoring body that banished comics to the world of underground publishing (*Beaty Critique* 155). In his book, Wertham further demonizes comics, stating, "All kinds of monstrous creatures inhabit these comic books" (106). Wertham's critique of comics monstrosity in *Seduction of the Innocent* links monstrosity with deviant sexualities and genders, but can be taken as a critical metaphor for exploring both the form and content of comic as queered narratives. Wertham saw the monstrous comics as a threat to the psychological health of the "innocent." The following sections delineate the way the form and content of comics operationalize the monstrous and the queer, in order to produce narratives that call the stability of identity into question.

Monstrous Forms: Reading Comics

While Wertham made the claim that monsters inhabit comics, he also described comics themselves as dangerous to public health. Wertham declared that the reading of images in tandem with words was nothing more than “picture reading” (139): “an evasion of reading and almost its opposite” (140). For these reasons, Wertham deemed comics “death on reading” (121). In this sense, monstrous creatures are found not only within the pages of comics, but the mediums’ structure also embodies a certain degree of monstrosity. However monstrous they may be, the paired words and images have become a central feature of comics. McCloud famously defines comics as “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). McCloud’s formal definition sheds light on the blurry boundary between word and image. Beaty criticizes McCloud’s definition as too essentializing, stating, “In eradicating history from his definition he moves the issue from what comics have been to what they could be. In so doing, however, he proffers a definition that appears at times to be both too narrow and too encompassing” (34). Ultimately, Beaty sees McCloud’s definition as divorced from the cultural embeddedness necessary for understanding the medium; which is to say, it is unaware of the (often diverse) cultural setting of comics. However, McCloud’s definition forms one of the foundational aspects of comics criticism, allowing Chute and others to refer to comics as “hybrid.”

Hybridity is significant to comics because it is a tool for seeing comics as subversive of normative constructs. Chute and DeKoven refer to the subversive potential as part of comics’ “hybrid project” (769). They write:

We read this hybridity as a challenge to the structure of binary classification that opposes a set of terms, privileging one. We further understand graphic narrative as hybrid in the following sense: comics is a mass cultural art form drawing on both high and low art indexes and references; comics is multigeneric, composed, often ingeniously, from widely different genres and subgenres; and, most importantly, comics is constituted in verbal and visual narratives that do not merely synthesize... The diegetical horizon of each page, made up of what are essentially boxes of time, offers graphic narrative a representational mode capable of addressing complex political and historical issues with an explicit, formal degree of self-awareness. (769)

This hybrid project attacks the binary opposition of words and images, while allowing comics to be subversive on multiple levels. The instability of the term “hybrid,” which denotes a multiplicity and impossibility of definite categorization, suggests queerness to some degree. Additionally, the hybridity of comics has the potential to threaten the stability of the symbolic order (which is also a strategic project of queer theory).⁵ In juxtaposing images and words, comics reasserts that the sign is an arbitrary and polysemic device: the signifier cannot fully represent the sign; nor does the image even directly encompass every element of that which it also signifies. Additionally, the verbal narrative is not synthesized with the visual; instead, it works “cross-discursively,” but is nonetheless “distinct” (769). Comics thus deconstructs logocentrism by repositioning spoken and written word alongside images. Moreover, this gives comics the potential to deconstruct heteronormative, phallogocentric systems when read as a queer. Specifically, the hybrid comic “body” suggests a crucial performativity of identity in general. Butler writes:

⁵ The use of “symbolic order” or “symbolic law” in this text follows Butler’s critique of the term as conceived of by Jacques Lacan. Butler attacks the inherent patriarchal and phallogocentric nature of the symbolic, and scrutinizes the belief that the language is a stable system.

If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it claims to find prior to any and all signification. (*Bodies That Matter* 6)

Comics' hybrid "body" is unstable, being both and neither art nor literature; it exposes the constructed nature of such categories. In the same way "the queer appropriation of the performative mimes and exposes both the binding power of the heterosexualizing laws *and its expropriability*" (sic), the appropriation of the performative by comics challenges systems of symbolic law – often marked by heterosexual, patriarchal, and otherwise hegemonic binaries – exposing them and deconstructing them (Butler "Critically Queer" 22).

It would even appear as though comics uncovers a "graphocentrism" as well as a logocentrism. Wertham's assertion that reading comics was, in fact, the opposite of reading, hinges on the presence of images alongside words. However, comics takes both spoken and written word and inserts it into the realm of drawing, indicating that these divisions are not in binary opposition so much as they exist on a spectrum. The speech "bubbles" through which characters "speak" give the reader the experience of reading sound on a page. Since the speech bubble is part of the visual register as well as the verbal one, the primacy of word, either spoken or written, collapses and is hence forced to coexist with the visual. Instead of taking the symbolic system of language and completely dismantling it – an unproductive if not impossible undertaking – comics, like queer theory, sets into motion subversion from within that system by exposing the intrinsic instabilities within it.

Chute has noted that the reader of comics is far from performing the opposite act

of reading; rather the reader is an active participant in both “*reading* and *looking*” (“Comics as Literature?” 452). In the reading of comic books, the reader is “an equal partner in crime,” perhaps even more so than in reading written words alone (McCloud 68). Because of the hybridity of comics, “that relies on space to represent time” (Chute “Comics as Literature?” 456), comics forces the reader to be a “willing and conscious collaborator” (McCloud 65). McCloud states, “Comics is *Closure*,” by which he means the movement between frame to frame in comics, buffered by the blank “gutters,” allows meaning to be made by the reader (67). The visual differences between frames give the reader the ability to “mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67). Yet, this “unified reality” is contingent on the reader as well as the writer, and the meaning or “reality” depends on the particular instance of interaction with the text. The acts of reading, writing, and looking collapse into the same system and expose narrative multiplicity rather than unity, as McCloud suggests. Through the act of reading, comics reveal how the reader constructs meaning, as well as the role of presences and absences to formulate meaning visually and verbally. Comics is unique in that bodies as well as words are put on the page to be read. Chute claims that due to this complex embodied side of narrative in comics, the medium is “against a valorization of absence and aporia [and] asserts the value of presence, however complex and contingent” (*Graphic Women* 2). The presence of bodies, identities, and their traumas, histories, and experiences are all lived out visually and verbally, and navigated by the reader. However, it should be noted that visualizing presences also requires the present absence of aporia (in complex and contingent ways) that confirms the instability and queer disruption made possible by comics form. Presence and absence are made both by comics’ iterative narratives, which

give way to the reader to navigate spatially and temporally through signs of different types, ultimately confirming the instability of symbolic systems because the reader is interpellated by the text to formulate meaning. The impossibility of a transcendent meaning in the text is celebrated rather than mourned.

Comics accepts its hybrid monstrosity, and the multigeneric nature of the medium. True to its nature, comics subverts even these categories. Beaty notes that not all comics are hybrid in the same way (graphic narratives such as *Graphic Witness* by Franz Masereel, Lynd Ward, Giacomo Patri, and Laurence Hyde, or *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan, which use no words, come to mind)(*Comics Versus Art* 20). However, the characteristic of hybridity is nevertheless useful for understanding what Chute refers to as the “elliptical” nature of most comic works. This characterization describes the ways in which word and image supplement, fill, or perhaps emphasize the ellipses of the other (*Graphic Women* 7). The presence of lack, aporia, and ellipsis of comics is ultimately the critical formal aspect that drives narrative and gives way to contingent presences of otherness on the page. While aporia may not be valorized, it is still a critical formal necessity that produces a source for the instability and multiplicity of meaning. Specifically, Chute declares that comics “use the inbuilt duality of the form – its word and image cross-discursively – to stage dialogues among versions of self, underscoring the importance of an ongoing, unclosed project of self-representation and self-narration” (*Graphic Women* 5). Chute’s suggestion that the project of comics parallels queer theory in that it implies becoming of self, an open and ongoing creation of queer identities that are subject to shift and change over time. Butler writes of queerness:

It will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of

urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively. (“Critically Queer” 19)

This is to say, as Jagose asserts, that the term queer consists of shifts, or openings, and constant iterations (Jagose 129). Queer suggests not only an “unclosed project” but also a troubling of the very possibility of the self that can be represented or narrated. Comics is equally self-scrutinizing of their form and definition. Comics, which displays “an explicit, formal degree of self-awareness,” calls into question the defining features of the medium (Chute and DeKoven 769).

What this semantic instability offers to both comics and queer theory is the ability to subvert hegemonic systems of identity construction. Jagose’s introduction to the term highlights the subversive potentials of queer theory. She states that queerness exposes “the knowledge that identities are fictitious – that is, produced by and productive of material effects but nevertheless arbitrary, contingent and ideologically motivated” (Jagose 130). This troubling of identity goes hand in hand with comics’ form and function. Chute identifies that “Through its hybrid and spatial form, comics lends itself to expressing stories, especially narratives of development, that present and underscore hybrid subjectivities” (*Graphic Women* 5). Although the understanding of comics as hybrid has ironically become almost conventional, it is arguable that hybridity is witness to the ability of comics to straddle different realms of self-representation, and deny any singular categorization. Hybridity of form, bodies, and identities renders comics and its contents as fluid and instable, and allows comics to produce a shifting narrative form viable for the representation of shifting and queer identities.

One final aspect of comics’ “monstrous” form is its appeal to the masses. Wertham saw comics as a threat to public health, and “part of a larger mosaic that

contributed to social inequalities” (Beaty *Critique* 129). Additionally, “like other critics of mass culture at the time, Wertham suggested that the themes of crime comics tended to endorse an increasingly authoritarian society” (*Critique* 136). Returning once more to Chute and DeKoven’s outline of graphic narrative, part of comics’ hybridity stems from the fact that “comics is a mass cultural art form drawing on both high and low art indexes and references” (769). Beaty states, “the wide-scale proliferation of comics went hand in hand with the development and refinement of the mass culture thesis that suggested that the masses posed a revolutionary threat to the established social order... comics served as the classic examples of all that was wrong with contemporary mass culture...” (*Comics vs. Art* 22). Part of comics’ abjection was, ironically, the fact that it seduced to such a huge scale. Comics threatened established social systems because of its appeal to the masses and disregard for categories such as “high” or “low” art. Comics further relishes its position in a indeterminate zone of abjection, reveling in transgressions of standards of art, debasing art for purposes of mass consumption, yet intently deploying absences and presences in multivalent work to create complex and contingent narratives. Beaty notes: “comics have not been recognized as art largely because until recently, with a very few exceptions, they have not actively solicited that form of recognition” (*Comics vs. Art* 24). Instead, comics’ artists tend to promote non-normativity of all kinds in order to push the boundaries of “conceptions of the unrepresentable” (Chute *Graphic Women* 2).

Queer Medium and Queer Message

McCloud has claimed that in order to understand comics, one must do “a little aesthetic surgery” to “separate form from content” (5). McCloud further explains: “the

trick is never to mistake the message for the messenger” (6). McCloud’s definition of comics makes room for comics in arts and literature due to the focus on conveying information and creating an aesthetic event. While this may be somewhat beneficial in light of returning popularity of comics and “graphic novels,” Beaty criticizes McCloud for a definition that “intentionally seeks to obscure the history of the form, its social significance, and notions of aesthetic worth, substituting in their place an essentializing formalism” (*Comics Versus Art* 35). Beaty’s resistance towards essentializing definitions is appropriate when the medium is examined with a queer lens.

While McCloud’s proposed methodology has made strides in making comics intelligible, form cannot be separated completely from content; to adopt Marshall McLuhan’s phrase: “The medium is the message” (1).⁶ The queer body of comics is a reflection of those monstrous and queer beasts that reside within them. The queer body of comics’ form is the message of the medium. Additionally, the queer beasts on the pages of comics are reflections of the comics themselves, for all their abject, monstrous, and hybrid qualities. Chute argues that the handwritten nature of comics is critical for understanding the self-reflexive qualities of the medium (*Graphic Women* 1). Chute writes: “The subjective mark of the body is rendered directly onto the page and

⁶ McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* is the first text to use “the medium is the message” as a phrase. A later publication, *The Medium is the Massage An Inventory of Effects* (1967) was a collaborative work between McLuhan and Quentin Fiore. Supposedly an accident, the title puns his original concept and invites different readings of the word “message,” as it becomes “mess age,” “massage,” or “mass age” (E. McLuhan). The message/massage confusion is appropriate for comics as well: the medium of comics has been accused of massaging the minds of the masses, perpetuating dangerous messages, and, as this argument suggests, the medium and message are two parts of the same whole.

constitutes how we view the page” (*Graphic Women* 11). However, it is important to remember that while the monstrous form of comics reflects upon its monstrous background and identities, the beasts contained in the pages also have the potential of embodying queer identity. Indeed, it seems as though every body in comics, as well as the body of comics itself, has the capacity to perform queerness. The interaction with the comic itself may also be seen as a queer interaction, which is fluid in identity and lacks consistent or appropriate labels.

Monstrous Creatures

Wertham’s claim that comics houses “all kinds” of monsters is a just observation. However, condemning comics for the presence of such strange beasts is a move that others non-normative bodies and identities. The Comics Code of 1954 further supported folding all non-normative identities into the category of “monstrous creatures.” One item in the Code requires “In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds” (U.S. Committee). Additionally, it maintains that, “Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism are prohibited” (U.S. Committee). However, many subfields of comics – from crime comics to silly animal comics – rely on nonhuman creatures to create narrative. Werewolves, and other half-human half-animal creatures, are of particular interest because their shape-shifting bodies and in-between identities are easily mapped onto a queer discourse.

In his article, “Animal Subjects of the Graphic Novel,” Michael Chaney writes, “theorizing the animal has become (and indeed has always been) essential to sequential

pictorial narratives of identity and otherness” (129). The presence of the nonhuman in comics allows Chaney to propose “a model of identity that prioritizes a proximate but affectless other” in which the animal is meant to signify a death of the self (130). This is to say that the nonhuman other that emerges from graphic narrative is a threat to the human self, operating as the abject that destabilizes the security of identity. Chaney writes, “the animal referenced in comics is more generally a ludic cipher of otherness. Its appearance almost always accompanies the strategic and parodic veiling of the human” (130).⁷ Chaney sees the “parodic veiling of the human” as perpetuating the superiority of the human and a normalization of the human identity (132). However, it is arguable that the parodic veiling of the human through animal others, which are often chimerical or hybrid animals, rather than simply animals, reveals the instability of the category “human” or “animal,” suggesting that the border between that binary is by no means “insuperable” (132).

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida argues that the “animal is a word...that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other” (23). This is not unlike the appellation, the interpellation, “queer,” which Butler describes as a tool for identifying and shaming the other. Derrida also relates the concept of the animal to shame – the shame of nakedness,

⁷ This veiling of the human is seen as highly problematic by authors such as Richard De Angelis, whose article, “Of Mice and Vermin: Animals as Absent Referent in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*,” highlights the violence enacted against animals when they are taken as ciphers for humans. This issue is also critically examined by Jacques Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. While not the focus of this work, the argument is a useful reminder of hegemonic rhetorical tools that systematically other those seen as outside the established symbolic order, nonhuman and human alike.

or “of being as naked as a beast” (4). However, the shame of nakedness is confused, drawing out the construction of the human/animal binary. Derrida asks, “would I be ashamed *like* a beast that no longer has the sense of its nudity? Or, on the contrary, *like* a man who retains the sense of his nudity? Who am I, therefore?” (5). The supposed shame of being *like* an animal (or being “queer”) is a device of subject formation through abjection of the other. However, this shaming deconstructs itself, as Derrida notes, and the division between the self and the established “other” collapses. The presence of the animal bodies in comics suggests this very deconstruction. Chaney ultimately concludes:

Even as physiognomy haunts the human in such comics with monstrous excess, it also produces the body as a horizon of infinite translatability, capacious in symbolization, halting in its unreadability. (144)

Queer identities and bodies denote diversity and a similar “translatability” that would be considered “unreadable” in the phallogentric symbolic system. Thus, the way the animal other functions on the comic book page is particularly useful for tracing such queer identities in comics.

An Heir to Myth and Fable

The role of the animal body in comics and graphic narrative has roots in mythic, fabulist, and fairy tale traditions. Although Chaney is reluctant to argue for direct lineage, he notes the connection between comics and fables:

Having always had one figurative foot in the domain of children’s literature, comics routinely partake in that fabular preoccupation with talking animals, humans that become animal, and humans that interact with magic humanoid animals. All of this manifests at the level of the story, that is, in terms of character and plot, but it also occurs at the visual level, where any of the panels of such a comic could be seen individually as representing an animal-human hybridity. (131)

Chaney links comics to fairy tale and fable. Indeed, the medium's hybridity and the exploration of boundaries through animal-human transformations can be traced to the older genres of fairy tale and fable, whose "hybrid human/animal mixes draw surely from ancient myths" (Hoffmann 68). Chaney's stance on the connection between fables and comics drives towards two main concepts, the issue of children's literature, and the resulting hybridity. Chaney makes the claim that comics' tie to children's literature, along with the medium's talking animals, allow comics to be placed with the older traditions. Wertham critiqued this assumption in *Seduction of the Innocent*, saying "the parents, teachers and doctors...spoke of comic books as if they were fairy tales or stories of folklore. Children, however, do know what comic books are" (Wertham 16). Wertham saw this categorization of comics as dangerous, because by placing comics in the fairy tale tradition, it was therefore viewed as innocent and nonconfrontational. However, this is an ironic misreading of fairy tales and fables: myth, fable, and fairy tale are far from the gentle children's narratives that Wertham assumed they were. Myth, fable, and fairy tale offer subtle critiques of social categories, often satirizing institutional constructs. Comics takes after fairy tales and myth not because it illustrates talking or otherwise magical and fantastical beasts for the purposes of infantile entertainment, but because it uses these beasts to address and critique society. Comics holds true to other features of fairy tales. Fairy tales such as those of Madame Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy were considered "excessive" in style, as Hoffman notes, which reflect upon "the excesses of bodies and beasts" of the time period (Hoffman 77). This excess is continued in the comics project, at least according to Wertham, in their excessive representation of

monstrosity, violence, and otherness.⁸

Additionally, comics' use of hybrid animal bodies echoes "an early modern fascination with hybrid Otherness," which serves to move from a fascination with monstrous otherness towards a celebration of the queer instability of identity and transgressive bodies of all types (Hoffman 68). Hybrid otherness appears in the wild transformations, such as those found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius. In myths such as these, the transformations into beasts are often meant as forms of punishment, such as Actaeon's transformation into a stag for witnessing Diana naked (Ovid book III),⁹ or the transformation serves as a mechanism for escape. However, myth also offers a pointed look at the societies from which they come. By exploring hybrid otherness in fantastical form, myth serves to examine the conception of otherness in general. In the case for graphic narratives such as *Dear Creature* by Jonathan Case, *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang, *Black Hole* by Charles Burns, *SuperMutant Magic Academy* by Jillian Tamaki, and *Nimona* by Noelle Stevenson, hybrid and monstrous bodies make appearances as a means of conveying otherness and often as a form of social critique or satire, just as myth and fairy tale did before them.

Chaney notes that comics slips between children's medium and adult literature more fluidly than pure allegory or lesson, consequently adding another effect of comics'

⁸ In *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham's claims that comics revel in "violence for violence's sake," Chute and other critics see comics as uniquely able to explore and even break taboos, regardless of the excessiveness of these ruptures (Wertham 111).

⁹ Recall the significance of nudity and being seen nude by the animal, as Derrida notes. Actaeon's transformation into a stag allows the shame of nakedness to be erased, yet does not remove this shame for Diana, who sees herself seen naked by man and beast.

hybridity:

Thus resistant to maturity the comics are uniquely suited to representing what early anthropology defined as liminality, the condition of being on the boundary par excellence, in the penumbra between youth and adulthood. Of course, we now have so many more sensitive labels for such a condition, and all of its permutations and interstitial manifestations, which comics are no less apt in conveying. ... All of these concerns with being in-between are themselves articulated at a boundary of identity and representation. That paradox is best expressed in the way comics routinely problematize the human by blurring the ontological boundary between humans and animals according to the same logic that both fuses and separates words and pictures. (133)

Derrida indicates the same concept when he writes about the binary opposition set up by humans to situate the animal as other. He states: “All philosophers ...say the same thing: the animal is deprived of language. Or, more precisely, of response, or a response that could be precisely and rigorously distinguished from a reaction; of the right and power to ‘respond,’ and hence of so many other things that would be proper to man” (Derrida 32). The animal, lacking language, can be read as an embodiment of the realm of the image. The man, whose language only “confirmsthe animality that he is disavowing...”, is tied to the unstable realm of the word (31). As such, monstrous creatures in comics directly embody the chimerical queer body of the comics’ form, suggesting once more the instability of divisive terms and identity in general. While this is not to say that myth, fable, or fairy tale lack the potentials of comics, it should nevertheless be acknowledged that comics opens up a realm of possibilities for representing non-normative identities due to their visualization of hybrid bodies juxtaposed with the verbal system. The power of visual presence coupled with the verbal narrative operates differently from comics’

verbal predecessors.¹⁰ Because of the hybrid form, comics plays with the tropes and strategies conceived of in myth, fable, and fairy tale.

In the context of fairy tales, the monstrous is “explicitly marked” (Hoffman 69). Rather than a natural part of the fable or myth, the monsters in fairy tales are marked by their often hybrid difference. In fairy tales such as d’Aulnoy’s *Babiole* and Leprince de Beaumont’s *Prince Chéri*, the beasts are significant because they are non-normative. Nevertheless, the marker of difference is either punishment (*Prince Chéri*), or a point of monstrous curiosity (*Babiole*). While some comics, such as *Nimona*, follow the trends of *Babiole*, Monstrous beings, like *Babiole* and the nonfictional “hairy people” discussed by Hoffman, “were caught in practices of display that turned them into liminal beings, caught at the borders of nature and culture, monstrosity and civilization” (74). Although the animals of comics are used in diverse ways, and their visual representation takes part in pushing them towards liminality, the graphic narrative also takes part in a hybrid movement formally and seems to harbor liminal bodies in an equally liminal space. The bodies in graphic narrative, as it is examined in the later chapter on *Nimona*, find safe space to revel in their monstrosity, fighting against being treated as objects of curiosity rather than acting subjects.¹¹

¹⁰ Comics bears witness to the rise and hegemony of visual culture, particularly in the United States. While visual and verbal representation should not be seen at odds with one another in the context of comics – and hybrid representation may not automatically produce more modes of representation than past narrative forms – comics has become a means of expression that taps into the growing power of the image in our society unlike past forms.

¹¹ The chapter focusing on *Nimona* reveals how resistant monstrous bodies are to such display, yet how liminal aspects of their identity are nonetheless supported in

The liminal being that exists between “monstrosity and civilization” and “nature and culture” finds representation again in comics of the 1930s and 1940s, such as X-Men, Superman, Spider-Man, Batman, and others. Although the queer in-between status of the bodies is sometimes marked, in other cases it is not; these marks are not necessarily forms of punishment. Comics such as *On Loving Women* rejects these roles, and monstrous, queer animal bodies serve a different purpose altogether. Derrida claims that in his pursuit of the animal other:

It was necessary to avoid fables. We know the history of fabulization and how it remains an anthropomorphic taming, a moralizing subjection, a domestication. Always a discourse *of* man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and in man. (37)

While comics may occasionally develop “that fabulous bestiary,” it also rejects it, simultaneously presenting a “discourse *of* man” and that of “other” – that is embodied by animal or chimera, but is indefinably queer (37).

Superheroes as Queer Beasts

Although not always hairy or beastlike, superheroes can be grouped with the monstrous due to their similarly in-between, super-human qualities. It is interesting to note that comics have historically portrayed marginal others. In his article *Jewish Comics; Or, Visualizing Current Jewish Narrative*, Derek Parker Royal declares that Jewish artists were central in the creation of the early comic book heroes (3). The marginalized creators of comics found unique voice in the creation of these types of narratives. In particular, the “‘masked’ ethnic identities of... superheroes” reflect upon

significant ways.

the position of both the genre and creators themselves (8). It was these superheroes that Wertham and the Comics Code attempted to censor. Rather than condemning them for masked ethnic identities, Wertham was concerned with sexual deviancy. Superheroes' special breed of monstrosity was directly linked to their sexualities. The "horror type" superheroes, such as Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and Cat Woman, were accused of causing homosexuality in young readers (Wertham 34). In his article "Gay Sidekicks: Queer Anxiety and the Narrative Straightening of the Superhero," Neil Shyminsky states, "Wertham...was the first to propose that superheroes had a perverse nature" (293). Wertham claimed, "The Batman type of story may stimulate children to homosexual fantasies" due to the close, often ambiguous relationship Batman had with his sidekick, Robin (192). Wertham also refers to Wonder Woman, saying:

Superwoman (Wonder Woman) is always a horror type. She is physically very powerful, tortures men, has her own female following, and is a cruel 'phallic' woman. While she is a frightening figure for boys, she is an undesirable ideal for girls, being the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to want to be. (34)

Supposedly, "the homosexual connotation of the Wonder Woman type of story is psychologically unmistakable" (192). This may also be in part a result of the constant masking and unmasking of the superhero identity. According to Shyminsky, the costume that conceals the civilian identity of the hero "implies at least *two* costumes or masks: the superhero that conceals the civilian and the civilian that conceals the superhero" (296). The homoerotics of some superhero and sidekicks notwithstanding, the instability of the superhero identity threatens the normative stability of heterosexuality. Wertham's fixation on the alleged sexual deviancy of superheroes was supported in the rules established by the Comics Code that had specific regulations for the treatment of sex. For example:

Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at or portrayed... The treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage... Sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden. (U.S. Senate)

These prescriptions against the portrayal of non-normativity can be read as what Butler refers to as an “exclusionary matrix” (*Bodies That Matter* xiii). This kind of exclusionary matrix forces the creation of the “domain of abject beings” that was referred to earlier. What is at stake again is the legitimacy within the symbolic, which the abject threatens to disrupt. Thus, comics’ abjection, a partial result of the presence of non-normative, “deviant,” and “monstrous” beings, offers a constant threat to destabilize and decenter the constructs of that symbolic system.

A Closer Look

In “Coming Out as Gay Superheroes,” George Gustines states, “the growing depiction of L.G.B.T. characters comes at a crossroads of passionate fandom and concentrated efforts by publishers to attract broader audiences” (2). Gustines observes, “a look at the independent side of the comic book industry shows even deeper depictions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender life” (2). The following chapters examine the presence and effects of queer beasts more closely in the context of two comics. In an effort to explore the possibilities of reading comics as queer, each chapter focuses on a different sub-genre of comics. *On Loving Women* by Diane Obomsawin is a biographical piece that depicts lesbian and queer bodies as anthropomorphic creatures. The hybrid creatures suggest multiplicity of identity that substantiates the polysemic narrative. This text demands that readers accept the instability of narrative and identity.

Noelle Stevenson’s *Nimona* is the second comic addressed in this work. *Nimona*

originally began as a webcomic, a comic published independently in serial form on a private blog. Stevenson's success with a wide audience, including LGBTQ readers, as well as the popularity of her comic book series *Lumberjanes*, prompted the publication of *Nimona* in book form. The shape shifting "monster girl," Nimona, pushes against institutionalized binary systems that qualify non-normative bodies and identities as evil others. *On Loving Women* and *Nimona* indicate that while queer identities and comics alike may always be in the process of transformation, by rejecting binary systems of classification, comics provides queer identities with fertile ground for explorative representation.

ON QUEERING LANGUAGE AND DESIRE IN DIANE

OBOMSAWIN'S *ON LOVING WOMEN*

Diane Obomsawin's 2014 graphic narrative *On Loving Women* creates a self-aware biographical narrative with the use of anthropomorphic animals. Obomsawin's graphic narrative consists of ten vignettes recounting the first queer sexual experiences of Canadian lesbians in the 1970s and 80s. Obomsawin transcribes the ten narratives, one of which, "Diane's Story," is presumably her own, and then arranges them into short black and white episodes. Like Spiegelman's animals in *Maus*, the creatures of Obomsawin's piece are anthropomorphic caricatures. However, Obomsawin's bold expressionistic lines present an interesting contrast to Spiegelman's piece, whose minute illustrations and cluttered scenes create a dark reading experience that parallels his subject matter. Obomsawin verges on the poetic in the use of fragmentary language coupled with smooth illustration. Perhaps even more so than *Maus*, *On Loving Women* troubles the categorization of graphic narrative, due to the queer and polysemic subject matter in hybrid form. The "problem of taxonomy" in comics criticism is opened yet again through the blurring of categories in a style reminiscent of Lynda Barry's "autobifictionalography," a term popularized for discussing the mixed modes of graphic narrative (Chute and DeKoven 770). The LGBTQ subject matter would invite a queer reading regardless of the medium of representation; however, due to Obomsawin's use of animal bodies in comics to portray the ten biographical tales, her collection is moved into

an even queerer narrative space. *On Loving Women* uses the animal as a “cipher of otherness” to develop the possibilities of queer representation by and of comics, in particular disrupting the concepts of genre and identity (Chaney 130). *On Loving Women* demonstrates a unique opportunity for the emergence of queered verbal and visual language, one that creatively reflects the queer hybrid language operating in graphic narrative.

“Autobifictionalgraphy”: The Queering of Genre

In “Reading Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* as Postmodern Ethnography,” Rosemary Hathaway makes the observation that “a number of the most acclaimed and commercially successful ‘graphic novels’ of recent years have not been novels at all, but non-fiction memoirs in comics form” (250). *Maus*, arguably the most recognizable graphic narrative of all time, treads the line between a historiography, autobiography, and biography of Spiegelman’s father. The classification of this text is made all the more difficult by the use of animal bodies to represent such serious subject matter. The ability to represent the experiences of the self is queered, in the sense that it is made strange, by the use of animal bodies in such a mixed medium. Graphic narrative supplies a unique approach to biography. Comics is well positioned to express outrageousness, but in particular for biographical pieces, graphic narrative acts as an “idiom of witness” that “sets a visual language in motion with and against the verbal in order to embody individual and collective experience, to put contingent selves and histories into form,” and to do so without pause at the transgression into taboo subjects (*Graphic Women* 3). What is more, Chute acknowledges the significance of autobiographical pieces, declaring that comics

“delves into and forcefully pictures non-normative sexuality, and, for this reason...lends itself to feminist concerns about embodiment and representation” (*Graphic Women* 19). The picturing of non-normativity and taboo identities is queered even further in comics by the destabilizing of the classifications of fiction and nonfiction, as well as other constructed categories (*Graphic Women* 3). *On Loving Women* sets the hybrid form and blurred genre of comics to work to challenge “conceptions of the unrepresentable” and to forcefully picture non-normative sexualities in a non-normative framework (*Graphic Women* 2).

The non-normativity of the art form as well as its usefulness for auto(bifictional)graphy comes down to the literal instantiation of self on the page. The text and illustration are the work of Obomsawin’s hand. While the text is mediated by translation, the stories are also mediated by Obomsawin’s creative visual interpretation of them. Lynda Barry writes that her book, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, is a work of “autobifictionalography,” asking in her introduction, “is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?” (6). The term may be equally applicable to this text: the stories are recounted through several filters, and the nonfictionality is dependent upon the narrators’ retrospective accounts as mediated by Obomsawin’s hand.

Additionally, because it is a “rigorously handmade” graphic narrative, *On Loving Women* also inscribes the presence of the body (Chute *Graphic Women* 11). Chute writes:

Handwriting is an irreducible part of its instantiation. The subjective mark of the body is rendered directly onto the page and constitutes how we view the page. This subjective presence of the maker is not retranslated through type, but, rather the bodily mark of handwriting both provides a visual quality and texture and it is also extrasemantic, a performative aspect of comics that guarantees that comics works cannot be ‘reflowed’: they are both intimate and *site specific*. Comics differs from the novel, an obvious influence, not only because of its visual-verbal hybridity but also because of its composition in handwriting. (*Graphic Women*

11)

What results in the case of *On Loving Women* is the body that is inscribed on the page is at once Obomsawin's, the women whose stories she is cartooning, and the human-animal chimera that is brought to life. The selves that are depicted on the page are performing queerness on the page, and queering the medium of representation. The subjectivity of the reader is also implicated. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud notes that the reader must be a "willing and conscious collaborator" in the process of the comics narrative, in charge of the function of "change, time, and motion" (65). The reader is expressly implicated in the layered subjectivities of graphic narrative.

The generic aspects of *On Loving Women* are further troubled by the function of the episodic vignettes. Like Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!*, Obomsawin's work is "not cast as narratives of progression along conventional narrative arcs" but instead focuses on "inconsequential details" (Tensuan 94-95). These "inconsequential details" are perhaps not all that inconsequential, but rather allow the text to provide witness to "concerns typically relegated to the silence and invisibility of the private, particularly centered on issues of sexuality, and...childhood trauma" (Chute *Graphic Women* 4). The vignettes are told from the perspectives of the adult women looking back on their childhood, giving the graphic narrative, as Chute notes, "a conspicuous, self-reflexive methodology of representation. It is a way to visually present a tension between the narrating 'I' who draws the stories and the 'I' who is the child subject of them" (*Graphic Women* 5). On top of this, of course, is the "I" between the illustrator and the child subject – the "I" of the adult woman who is narrating the story to Obomsawin. This has the effect of calling into question the nature of subjectivity and its supposed singularity.

In “Critically Queer,” Judith Butler writes:

There is no ‘I’ who stands *behind* discourse and executes its volition or will *through* discourse. On the contrary, the ‘I’ only comes into being through being called, named or interpellated... and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the ‘I’... Further the impossibility of a full recognition, that is of ever fully inhabiting the name by which one’s social identity is inaugurated and mobilized, implies the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation. (18)

Butler’s assessment of the instability of the subject is fundamental to the function of the term queer as a means of exposing the instability and performativity of the subject. This is brought to life in *On Loving Women*, which has layered subjectivities to formulate a polysemic narrative. It is also manifested on the visual level as well. Obomsawin’s handwriting has the particular quirk of using all uppercase letters, excluding *i*’s. The text, told from the first person perspective of each woman, is filled with lowercase *i*’s. This textual aspect is visibly demoted, effectively highlighting the self while destabilizing the primacy and authority of the subject. While the text calls upon each woman to tell her story, their existence only comes into being through their interpellation and their fragmented stories. This fragmentation is punctuated by the mark of their “i,” a challenge to the symbolic order that requires an uppercase *I*. The instability of self, both as fragmentary and contrary to conventional representation, denotes the plural and performative nature of identity.

In addition to the fact that the women are narrating specifically lesbian experiences, the plurality of perspectives creates a polysemic history that resists essentializing the experiences or identities of the narrators or the medium, and gives this genre a distinctly queer performative aspect. *On Loving Women* denotes instability of form and suggests a resistance to definition in analogous ways to the term queer: whose power is derived from the defiance of definitions (Jagose 1). *On Loving Women*’s queer

body, both in form and content, exposes the nature of gender and sexuality as being “in some way constructed...” (Butler *Bodies That Matter* ix).

“Zoo-auto-bio-biblio-graphy”: Tracing the Chimerical Self

The instability of identity that is represented by the queer bodies of Obomsawin’s characters, and the polysemy of the text, can be read alongside Derrida’s conception of the “animot.” The animot is “neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals...a sort of monstrous hybrid” (41). Derrida writes of the animot:

The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority, it is also a crime. Not a crime against animality, precisely, but a crime of the first order against the animals, against animals. (48)

If distinguishing humans counter to a category that implies all other animals does not do justice to those animals, then categories such as “animals” pitted against whatever normative standard humans have devised in order to protect their fragile identities (for example nature/culture, woman/man, etc.) is a dichotomy that essentializes the binary categories and does violence to the marginalized group. Obomsawin’s collection of “monstrous hybrid” creatures, which is depicted in a monstrous hybrid form, may thus be seen as this kind of “animot.” Wertham, who wrote of the “monstrous creatures” in comics, feared the corruption of young people both from the “phallic women” (34) and the form of comics that were so deadly to literacy (121). The threat posed by this monstrosity was to the “normalcy” of impressionable children, and the stability and security of the normative social structure. Derrida’s chimera is the symbol of that destabilizing and queer non-normative specter that Wertham feared. Derrida writes of the

chimera's hunter:

Bellerophon...represents, as is well known, the figure of the hunter. He follows. He is he who follows. He follows and persecutes the beast. He would say: I am (following), I pursue, I track, overcome, and tame the animal. (42)

In this sense, it is Wertham, and those who also seek to track, overcome, and tame the animal of graphic narrative that act as Bellerophon. Yet, in so following the beast, the hunter is the beast. This is made all the more clear by Derrida's discussion of autobiography. Derrida's Zoo-auto-bio-biblio-graphy approaches the subject of the animal and, in so doing, discovers the nature of the hunter as animal, too (34). Derrida's text follows the animal, and becomes a chimerical beast in its own right (42) that exposes the instability of the self in the face of the "other" – the "animal" (3). Derrida writes:

Autobiography, the writing of the self as living, the trace of the living for itself, being for itself, the auto-affection or auto-infection as memory or archive of the living, would be an immunizing movement (a movement of safety, of salvage and salvation of the safe, the holy, the immune, the indemnified, of virginal and intact nudity), but an immunizing movement that is always threatened with becoming auto-immunizing, like every *autos*, every ipseity, every automatic, automobile, autonomous, auto-referential movement. Nothing risks becoming more poisonous than an autobiography, poisonous for oneself in the first place, auto-infectious for the presumed signatory who is so auto-affected. (47)

In writing about the animal other, it would seem that Derrida sees his work becoming autobiographical (35). By calling on the animal, Derrida follows it, and sees himself in and as this other. The text becomes more than autobiographical, but zoo-bio-biblio-graphical as he suggests. In so becoming, the text exposes the slippery nature of the self – the safety of the autobiographical animal as distinct "human" is rendered unsupportable. As a chimerical text that zoo-bio-biblio-graphs, *On Loving Women* reflects on the instability of that normative structure of identities.

Queer Bodies and Language

Chute's assessment that comics' "hybrid and spatial form... lends itself to expressing stories, especially narratives of development, that present and underscore hybrid subjectivities" can be extrapolated to this study in the sense that *queer* hybrid and spatial form lends itself to expressing possibilities of queer subjectivities (*Graphic Women* 5). This said, it is necessary to turn to the bodies contained in the text to understand the text as a queer body. In "Of Mice and Vermin: Animals as Absent Referent in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," Richard De Angelis observes that "there are no mice in *Maus*" (1).¹ In some respects, the figures in *On Loving Women* also render the animal as absent in that they are to be read as human women. However, the casting of the women as strange, anthropomorphic animal-women suggests that a normative referent to the gendered female body is never established. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler writes, in the past, "feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women," (1).

However, Butler continues:

The very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms. There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of 'the subject' as the ultimate candidate for representation or, indeed, liberation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women. (*Gender Trouble* 1)

¹ De Angelis does this in order to demonstrate the exploitation of the animal as the absent referent in discussions, which inevitably privilege the human and other the animal. De Angelis' line of questioning should be applied to *On Loving Women* as well. For example, it seems necessary to ask the significance of placing animal heads on otherwise fairly humanoid bodies. If the mind/body binary distinction that privileges reason over body or emotion is being disturbed, it seems likely that the human/animal division (and not just the male/female binary) is also being called into question by *On Loving Women*.

The creatures in “On Loving Women” act as stand-ins for women, presupposing a normative category while simultaneously exposing the plurality and approximation of such a category. They are not quite women, although they capture women’s narratives, and thus the animal-women expose the diversity and instability of the category. The chimerical beasts have a childish stick-figure design, but are frequently depicted nude. The cat-, dog-, cow-, or bird-like figures are suggestions of animals that reject the notion of a stable definition of what it means to be human or “women.” Rather than being threatening, the instability that this produces is central to the text. Michael Chaney observes,

The proverbial one thousand words of a picture’s worth may grandly fail to express the semantic value of even the most mundane of pictures. Imagine how much greater the failure when the picture at issue is a sequential irregularity, a trick rhythm in the imagistic textures of graphic narrative. (130-131)

Imagine also the failure when the pictures at issue suggest the very instability of linguistic categorization through the use of queered bodies in a queered space. *On Loving Women* thus deploys the animal-human body to represent the unrepresentable: the queer, unstable, contingent identity that traditionally has the potential to produce so much anxiety in the reader.

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida writes, “I would like to entrust myself to words that, were it possible, would be naked” (1). This statement acknowledges the symbolic nature of language, which cannot, despite all efforts, expose a naked meaning. The symbolic system of the animal, however, is not sheathed in this way. Derrida explains: “because it *is* naked, without *existing* in nakedness, the animal neither feels nor sees itself naked. And therefore it isn’t naked. At least, that is what is thought. For man it would be the opposite” (5). The beast cannot be ashamed of its own nudity,

and paradoxically, man is only ashamed of that nudity which makes him feel like a beast. Derrida exposes the nature of human identity as a result of often-obtuse constructs of language. Over the course of Obomsawin's sixty-six page text, there are twenty-four frames that depict nude animal-women, usually in the midst of some kind of sexual act. The cover of *On Loving Women* helps to announce this, with its depiction of almost naked animal-women. The two anthropomorphic cats are illustrated, as if in homage to salon style painting, reclining on a draped daybed with a cat-headed cherub playing a trumpet above them. It would seem that, like Derrida, it is Obomsawin's "plan to speak endlessly of nudity..." (1). The proliferation of nudity, and the visual presence of the body, hints at the limits of words to convey meaning with such openness. In *On Loving Women*, the inability to directly access meaning in language is presented before the reader opens the text. The title does not reveal the fact that those who love women in these accounts are queer beings. However, this is brought into play visually by the use of comics. It is not fully realized nudity, as these are not women being figured, nor can the half-animals be understood as naked in the same way as a human might; but the shameless nakedness of the bodies in *On Loving Women* opens the possibility of representing these bodies without any shameful lack.

The ontological gaps in the symbolic system, the inherent lack, are put to work to provide a queer representation in graphic narrative. Acknowledging the presence of naked queer creatures is precisely the foundation required to understand *On Loving Women* as an example of the queer language given voice through graphic narrative. The animals, as Derrida noted, do not exist in nakedness and have no concept of it. The nakedness of the creatures in *On Loving Women* is uncovered without shame; indeed,

there can be no shame. The ability to provide a polysemic and naked account of taboo subjects is a strength of graphic narrative, allowing them to represent the abject. By straying into the territory of the animal, Obomsawin's anthropomorphic beings meld the human with the abject. Chute writes:

The most important graphic narratives explore the conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what can be shown at the intersection of collective histories and life stories.... There is also a rich range of work by women writers who investigate childhood and the body – concerns typically relegated to the silence and invisibility of the private sphere... graphic narrative can envision an everyday reality of women's lives, which, while rooted in the personal, is invested and threaded with collectivity, beyond prescriptive models of alterity or sexual difference. In every case, from the large-scale to the local, graphic narrative presents a traumatic side of history, but all these authors refuse to show it through the lens of unspeakability or invisibility, instead registering its difficulty through inventive (and various) textual practice. ("Comics as Literature?" 459)

The animal is thus not only useful for depicting alterity, but also critical as a tool to explore boundaries. It would seem that the animal or hybrid body transgresses borders that the human cannot, not only within the systems of writing and drawing, but also in the assumed systems of self-identification. The women represented in *On Loving Women* explore queer body and sexuality, historically unspeakable subjects, openly and shamelessly and revealing the constructed nature of such categories. The episodes work collectively, and "beyond prescriptive models of alterity or sexual difference" or regulations on modes of expression.

Chaney has argued that the animal body "almost always accompanies the strategic and parodic veiling of the human" (130). This is to say the human self is somehow exposed as party to an arbitrary system of cultural production. With this assertion, Chaney evokes the possibilities of subversion through parody, which destabilizes set categories of identity. Obomsawin's animal-women do not affirm women as "the horror

of nothing to see, a defect in this systematics of representation and desire” because they have vaginas rather than penises, but instead provide a body that, while still resisting “all adequate definition,” is present, and visually so (Irigaray 24). Thus, *On Loving Women* makes room for “women’s sexuality,” “women’s imaginary... women’s language to take (their) place” (Irigaray 33). However, “women” as such can only serve as a linguistic placeholder for subjectivity constantly in flux. As a placeholder in this text, “women” becomes another recapitulation and deployment of queerness. It questions its stability and celebrates polyphony and contiguity of queer identities.

Subverting Language and Queering Desire

The first story in *On Loving Women* is an appropriate case study for the way a queer comics “language” that implicates both word and image operates in the text. “Mathilde’s Story” depicts the sexual awakening of the young dog-like woman Mathilde. Mathilde narrates that as a child, she “was obsessed with horses” (“Mathilde” 1).² Mathilde recounts drawing horses and her obsession with an older girl “who had a horse face” (2). Mathilde’s affections were expressed through giving the girl horse drawings (2). Eventually, Mathilde recounts:

It struck me that the women I fall for... always have horse faces. It all goes back to Wonder Woman. Her face has something horse-like to it. She has a horse-like body too. The women who turn me on the most always look like wonder woman. My first girlfriend was half horse, half Wonder Woman. (2-3)

Obomsawin cleverly illustrates just that: a half horse, half woman creature. Mathilde’s

² Each vignette begins its own pagination. Therefore, for purposes of clarity when denoting page numbers here, every page number is accompanied by the name of that vignette’s title character unless it is otherwise evident.

narrative is strikingly reflexive of the medium and its history. Wonder Woman, one of the most well-known comics superheroes of all time, was on Wertham's list of corruptive comics. The inclusion here suggests a parallel between comics and the queer experience, both abject monsters of the 20th Century. Wertham called her a "horror type...She is physically very powerful, tortures men, has her own female following, and is a cruel 'phallic' woman" (34). The suggestion of Wonder Woman's homosexual tendencies was disturbing to Wertham, causing her indictment as a bad influence on "innocent" girls. In Mathilde's story, however, Wonder Woman is accepted as object of desire that is mediated by the animal bodily features. The potential shaming or abjection of the queer body is transformed by mapping it onto the queered body of a horse-like Wonder Woman. Her desire is associated at once with a super-woman in the utmost sense, and it is a departure from the norm as established by human and specifically patriarchal society.

Because her identity breaks from this system, Mathilde and her first girlfriend are isolated from the rest of society. Mathilde states, "We held hands and kissed wherever we went. If anybody minded, we didn't notice. We were in our own world..." ("Mathilde" 6). Unfortunately for the two women, this solitary world led them to feel isolated; Mathilde adds: "We felt all alone in the world" (7). However, in Mathilde's case, the isolation of the patriarchal heteronormative system is escaped through a queer experience of language. Mathilde writes, "We noticed some deaf girls at the movies. They'd always go when there were subtitles. They were the only lesbians in town and we wanted to get to know them. We learned sign language so we could talk with them" (7). Sign language provided a "much more subtle" way to discuss sex and sexuality, giving these women a way to subvert normative systems of discourse.

The women seek a way to challenge the normative heterosexual matrix, a move that requires a rebellion against the patriarchal symbolic and a certain degree of intersectionality. Judith Butler critiques Julia Kristeva's casting of female homosexuality as "the psychotic alternative to the acceptance of paternally sanctioned laws" (*Gender Trouble* 87). Butler reads Kristeva as placing "lesbian sexuality as intrinsically unintelligible" in the language of patriarchal culture (*Gender Trouble* 87). However, Butler regards this as a response to a "fear of losing cultural legitimacy, and hence, being cast, not outside or prior to culture, but outside cultural *legitimacy*, still within culture, but culturally 'out-lawed'" (*Gender Trouble* 87). What is at stake is the presence of a queer body in relation to the constructs of normative paternal "law." Butler finds hope in acknowledging the constructed nature of language, stating:

If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its 'natural' past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities. (*Gender Trouble* 93)

Mathilde's friendship with the deaf lesbian couple supports Butler's claim that subversion must occur within the limits of the law. The visual language presented to the reader as both image and word suggests a subversion; the language in use is multivalent, intersectional, and both subtle and destabilizing. Mathilde and her friends never cede their homosexual desires nor queer identity in order to achieve legitimation in the heteronormative matrix. Instead, they employ a visual-verbal mode of expression. Sign language offers a multiplicity of expression not restricted to the constructs of spoken or written language. Nevertheless, it is far from "unintelligible," and for Mathilde, it offers "subtle" modes of self-representation at the intersections of identities. Mathilde's last

statement is one of an opening to new cultural possibilities: “My first gay pride parade was in Paris, on the deaf float” (“Mathilde” 8). Mathilde embraces the multiplicity and instability of identity in a way that is marked by intersectional hybridity and the subversion of (gendered) constructs of representation.

This type of subversive act continues throughout *On Loving Women*. Additionally, a strong sense of reflexivity is maintained in the different vignettes. In “Maxime’s Story,” the presence of queer language, in both image and verbal form, emerges again. She tells of a former lover who visited her in Montreal. This friend gives her *No More Masks! An Anthology of Poems by Women*, to which she responds, “what’s it for?” (“Maxime” 4). As an individual, Maxime seems unperturbed by the masks that she may or may not be wearing. However, on a broader scale, the unmasking of feminine identities and voices is a critical step in feminist history. Maxime’s gift is juxtaposed with a panel, which Obomsawin drew from a photo in a rare moment of archiving, illustrating a chain of lesbians in protest (5). The archival move suggests a multilayered history of experience made clear only through retrospective imaging. This type of archiving, which is akin to Alison Bechdel’s work in *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, brings forth a queer archive that “blurs the distinction between private and public cathexes” (Rohy 341).³ Representing this type of queer archive is a way of evoking LGBTQ history while also queering history so as to “resist] teleology, linearity, causality, and the pose of epistemological mastery in favor of nonidentity, plurality, circularity, and the

³ Valerie Rohy’s piece, “In The Queer Archive: Fun Home,” presents a useful example of how graphic narrative serves to picture memory in an archival way. *On Loving Women* takes after Bechdel’s work in the sense that there are archival moments of memory that depict childhood as well as a broader vision of queer history.

nonsequential narrative” (343). The graphic narrative “and the movement, or act, of memory share formal similarities that suggest memory, especially the evacuation of childhood memory, as an urgent topic in this form” (Chute *Graphic Women* 4). In this moment of Maxime’s narrative, the memory of young adulthood grafts onto the collective memory of a queer historical moment that implicates language, identity politics, and the nonsequential mode of memory.⁴ Temporality itself is queered by the movement through time and space on the page, and in Maxime’s experience, which is narrated retrospectively. Time and space collapse and interact in unfixed and open ways. Maxime states, “I met other lesbians. It was the 1970s. We were starting to come out and claim our rights thanks to legal reforms that decriminalized homosexuality in Canada” (“Maxime” 5). Combining *No More Masks* with the visual image of coming out evokes the history of comics, whose masked superheroes faced discriminatory regulations up through the 1970s due to the supposedly disturbing contents, and spurred the defiant Underground Comix movement. However, it also suggests a rejection of performing sexual or gender “normativity” – casting off the masks of “legitimate” identity to create a new mode of expression. The comic depiction of the 1970s gay pride movement is translated into a queer space, and celebrated in the narrative.

The inclusion of feminist poetry recalls Kristeva’s work on poetics of desire once more, and in no lesser way than Butler’s critique. Kristeva had positioned “poetic language in which multiple meanings and semantic nonclosure prevail” as a feminist

⁴ Nonsequential here is meant to refer to the episodic, sporadic nature of memory and its depiction in the graphic narrative. Comics, which do have a “sequential” form, nevertheless depict this type of fluid memory archiving.

language that has “the potential to disrupt, subvert, and displace the paternal law” (*Gender Trouble* 79-80). Butler’s criticism of Kristeva’s theory, as has been mentioned, is that Kristeva’s semiotics is doomed to function only within the sanctions of the paternal symbolic (*Gender Trouble* 84). Moreover, this casts female homosexuality as “unsustainable” and “psychotic” (*Gender Trouble* 85). Obomsawin’s juxtaposition of feminist poetry (a symbol of poetic language) with the image of out lesbians marching together has the effect of denying the implication of Kristeva’s alleged theory that “lesbianism designates a loss of self” (*Gender Trouble* 87). The possibility of subversion is not foreclosed, but rather, in the relegation of lesbian representation to an “illegitimate” yet mass cultural zone (e.g., comics), the subversive act of female homosexuality and poetic language, with all of its multiplicity of meaning, is visually witnessed and made “culturally communicable” at least for a moment (*Gender Trouble* 88).

The opposing side of Kristeva’s concept plays out in “Marie’s Story” wherein Marie faces the rejection of her identity by the patriarchal symbolic system with no recourse for forming her identity in acceptable ways. Marie states, “Then came the big family meeting...” (“Marie” 8). One of Marie’s family members angrily hands her the dictionary, which can be seen as a symbol of standardized language – and metaphor for paternal and heteronormative law – saying “Here! Look up lesbian in the dictionary!” (8). Marie reads: “Lesbian: A native of the island of lesbos...A homosexual woman” (8). With this apparent confirmation of Marie’s identity, she is exiled from the close family: “My mother sent me to live with my sister in Montreal” (8). It is only in this representation that Marie’s story is given placement. The dictionary is incorporated into the visual-verbal language of comics, giving way to the voice and visualization of the

rejected queer body. The “culturally constructed body” is unavoidable, Marie’s identity is part of the framework of female homosexuality as categorized by language; but Marie does not deny this, and instead of assuming incoherence or irrationality, Marie’s story is made present.

“Against Aporia”: The Presence of Queer Identity

Rather than designating lesbianism as a “loss of self,” *On Loving Women* meditates on presence rather than absence, while nevertheless demanding a queering of identity and a rejection of essentialist definitions of “women,” or even “human.” “Queer” as a term of shaming and pathologization that Butler acknowledges as part of the term’s history, is challenged here (“Critically Queer” 18). However, when the bodies of the humans are cast as animals, reminding the humans of their shameful lack, and when the lack is instead displaced in the graphic narrative form that works “against a valorization of absence and aporia” and that “asserts the value of presence, however complex and contingent” as Chute argues, the shame of the lacking human is bodily embraced; their queer and animal natures are allowed to be present specially and temporally, if “complex and contingent” (*Graphic Women 2*).

One example of a celebration of presence is in “Diane’s Story.” Perhaps the most self-reflexive of the text, this narrative begins with a study of lack. Diane states:

I was always trying to borrow my brother’s Zorro costume. He never wore it. He had a three-story toy parking garage that I thought was just beautiful. My father gave him a hardcover Flash Gordon comic book one day. It was fabulous. I was so jealous it made me sick. I got a set of little silver spoons. And then I couldn’t even keep them. (“Diane” 1-2)

Diane’s childhood is characterized by lack. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Luce Irigaray

declares, “Female Sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters” (23). Irigaray explains, “About women and her pleasure, this view of the sexual relation has nothing to say. Her lot is that of ‘lack,’ ‘atrophy’ (of the sexual organ), and ‘penis envy’” (23). This may in fact be the case for the young Diane, whose brother is given the pleasures of playing because he ascribes to a normative male gender role (interestingly, in one case at least, this takes the literal form of comics), while her own desires are only made sense of by way of comparison to the active male.⁵ The fact that the young Diane desires so strongly to have the Flash Gordon comic suggests, like Mathilde and Wonder Woman, a sense of identification with the superhero. Rather than seeing Flash as an object of desire, however, Diane seems to covet his ability as a superhero to maintain a dual identity. He has a masked secret identity, yet appears to be the paragon of normative gender and sexuality. Diane is not allowed to identify with him. However, as an adult, her main mode of self-representation is ironically through comics.

Ironically, Diane faces the presence of her own body as a sign of lack. She recounts a day on which she wore a sailor shirt: “I always wore it on special occasions. But then one day...I looked down and noticed the outline of two tiny boobs. I didn’t want to be a sailor with breasts” (“Diane” 4). Despite being signs of the plurality of female pleasure and sexuality, as Irigaray would perhaps suggest, Diane is disturbed by her body because it conflicts with socially constructed systems of what different identities should be. In the mind of young Diane, sailors do not have breasts. The uniform of the sailor is

⁵ While comics was formerly viewed of as a male-oriented medium, Chute challenges this in her book *Graphic Women*. However, consistent with the time period in which *On Loving Women* takes place, the comic book would have been an industry dominated by male writers and readers.

rendered unrecognizable by breasts that suggest her gender does not match that of the ideal (“male”) sailor. Diane is disconcerted by her sudden inability to perform gender in the way she sees as proper; perform, here, in the sense coined by Butler, which is to say that it demonstrates the slippery nature of gender performativity and sexuality, and indeed how “marginalized identities are complicit with those identifiatory regimes they seek to counter” (Jagose 83).

Diane also tells how later in life, she saw *Girls In Uniform*, a story of the homosexual transgression of gendered and sexed “uniforms” in its own right, on television: “Just as [the two women] were about to kiss, I felt so troubled... That I shut off the TV. I sat there in the dark for a long time” (“Diane” 5). Witnessing this scene of pleasure between two women was too subversive, as it suggests the possibility of a present and lesbian pleasure in full view. The use of the media of television suggests an element of reflection on the importance of medium in self-representation and visualization of transgression. The visual aspect of the homosexual kiss in *Girls in Uniform* is what was so unsettling for Diane. However, this is remedied later. As an adult, Diane writes:

I fell in love with a woman named Amandine. We’d ride our mopeds along the Richelieu River. One day I saw that *Young Girls in Uniform* was playing at the Repertory Theater... and I finally got to see the part of the movie I’d missed. (9)⁶

The kiss is pictured in the final frame of Diane’s story, but is also accompanied by

⁶ *Girls in Uniform* and *Young Girls in Uniform* are the same film. The original 1931 German film with Romy Schneider entitled *Mädchen in Uniform* is translated in English as *Girls in Uniform* and in French as *Jeunes Filles en Uniform* (which, re-translated, means “*Young Girls in Uniform*”). In the context of *On Loving Women*, a Canadian text translated from French, thus both English and French titles are present.

illustrations of Diane and Amandine in bed together. The realization of the possibilities of pleasure despite what would be termed “lack” by patriarchal heteronormative vocabularies is in fact made very present, in the sense that it is rendered visually undeniable. The conceptualization of female pleasure as an impossibility was partially self-inflicted, as the young Diane followed a heteronormative rule, which denied the possibility of pleasure between two women. Once this possibility is realized, however, Diane seems to be able to fully acknowledge her queer identity. While film accomplishes this visualizing of the taboo, the comic form of *On Loving Women* allows this to be done in such a way as to layer on the visualization of Diane’s sexual experiences with those portrayed in the redrawn kiss scene of *Young Girls in Uniform*.

A similar transformation takes place in *On Loving Women*’s final story. In “M-H’s Story,” queer identity is linked to performativity. Moreover, M-H’s story reveals how “gender operates as a regulatory construct that privileges heterosexuality and, furthermore, how the deconstruction of normative models of gender legitimates lesbian and gay subject-positions” (Jagose 83). The “performance” of gender is not simply a matter of putting on different clothes, as Butler and others agree (89). Even “sex” as a performed social category is nevertheless more than the clothes one wears.⁷ However, in M-H’s story, as in Diane’s, an article of clothing is the symbolic catalyst for disrupting gender. M-H narrates:

⁷ It is commonly accepted that sex is no less a constructed social category than gender. Butler argues: “if gender is the social construction of sex, and if there is no access to this ‘sex’ except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that ‘sex’ becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access” (*Bodies That Matter* xv).

I had a boyfriend for five years. We were always getting trashed. One evening, there was a party in Hull. A friend said: "Here! Wear this tux!" I put on the tuxedo and I felt a little shock. Maybe because I'd done some drugs, too. I went out like that, in a strange state of mind. My sister said: "Are you ok?" And I answered: "Nothing will be the same again." In the tux, I found myself looking at girls. It was like I had a small personality change. ("M-H" 1)

M-H's drug- and tux-induced "personality change" is one that denatures the social expectations of gender. Rather than continue with the night in the traditional position of a heterosexual cis-gender woman, M-H (whose gender identity as a "woman" is never explicitly confirmed, and whose initials are not gender-specific) sees the world from a new perspective and looks desirously at girls. The personality change takes place at the locus of the body. Categories of bodily representation, namely sex or gender, are self-enforcing systems that follow heteronormative patterns. "The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm" (Butler *Bodies That Matter* xvii). M-H's story depicts a fluidity of gender and sexuality that is opened by the small transgression of the boundaries of gender normative presentation. As a result, "nothing will be the same again." M-H's epiphany brings about an "identity crisis" where "I felt like I was outside myself, judging myself" ("M-H" 8). M-H describes the scene as if from out of body, but is unable to place an identity. The identity crisis of realizing the constructed nature of gender and sex cause a destabilizing of the security of the "self" as such. M-H's body (a nongendered and nonsexed bunny-human) reflects the fluid and unstable body of comics that performs identity in such a way as to trouble the confines of genre and form.

On Loving Women makes room for queerness by using chimerical bodies to portray a layered and plural narrative of queer experience in an equally queer medium. While the text acknowledges the slippery nature of identity, which is conceived of

through equally fluid language and memories, the comics form does not allow this to be reason to dismiss the authenticity and presence of the identities and modes of expression.

Chute comments:

An awareness of the limits of representation... is integrated into comics through its framed, self-conscious, bimodal form; yet it is precisely in its insistent, affective, urgent visualizing of historical circumstance that comics aspires to ethical engagement. (Chute "Comics as Literature?" 457)

On Loving Women rejects the shaming of queerness in any sense as a tool for stabilizing the self. Instead, it relishes the possibilities of multiplicity and creates a vibrant and present mode of expression.

SHIFTING BODIES AND IDENTITIES IN
NOELLE STEVENSON'S *NIMONA*

Noelle Stevenson's comic *Nimona* was published in book form in 2015 after it ran as a serial webcomic on Stevenson's tumblr account. *Nimona* is situated in a world where technological advancements function alongside dark magic and medieval courts. The eponymous character is a shapeshifter who can slip between human and animal form as she pleases. Nimona becomes the "supervillain" Ballister Blackheart's indomitable sidekick. Together, they attack the corrupt "Institution of Law Enforcement and Heroics" – or simply "The Institution" – which used Nimona and Ballister's not-fully-human, instable, and otherwise othered bodies as justification to banish them to the margins of society (32). *Nimona* exemplifies comics' rejection of accepted cultural categories of "low" and "high" art. By placing queer hybrid bodies on the already hybrid pages of comics, the text plays with the position of comics as a queer genre to its full extent. Not only do the formal elements of the text trouble perceptions about the role of art and literature, *Nimona* also fuses animal and human bodies, as well as human and machine bodies, to portray otherness and queer identities. This fusion simultaneously evokes traditions of fairy tale and cyborg science fiction, putting queer bodies onto a queered page. The diverse hybrid bodies of this text unfold in myriad ways throughout the narrative, presenting queer alternatives to "institutionalized" constructs of "good" and

“bad” that can be read as a microcosm of the function of comics as queer, in particular the way fiction comics and webcomics add to the possibilities of reading comics as queer. This chapter explores the ways in which *Nimona*’s formal aspects challenge narrative, as well as the ways in which the characters reflect upon the queerness of the medium. Such an investigation reveals the ways in which abjected bodies are pushed into the margins, but more importantly, how those bodies violently revolt against and dismantle exclusionary cultural institutions that other non-normative identities.

“Monster Girls”

Nimona, like *On Loving Women*, *Maus*, and other graphic narratives, is a comic that uses abject bodies to explore otherness. In the case of *Nimona*, animal bodies, alongside cyborg bodies, are the central focus, with both non-normative forms serving metaphorically as others, but in instable and different ways. *Nimona* explores the resulting social abjection of fusing human and animal forms, where her shapeshifting body uses animals to suggest her equally shifting identity. *Nimona* and her “boss” Ballister serve as perfect examples of Wertham’s “monstrous creatures,” because their in-between and non-normative bodies are disruptive. *Nimona*’s shapeshifting body is not ever successfully categorized, and Ballister’s cyborgian form and sexuality retain a certain degree of ambiguity throughout the comic.

Nimona recalls Wertham’s powerful “phallic” woman, the “horror type” he feared had the power to corrupt innocent girls towards lesbianism (Wertham 34). *Nimona* is a powerful “girl” who challenges the Institution, and even the dominant position of her male “boss.” Although she may be what Wertham would have called “the exact opposite

of what young girls are supposed to want to be,” Nimona resists this sort of categorical exclusionary system (34). In a 2015 interview, Noelle Stevenson stated that *Nimona* is a result of Stevenson’s interrogation of “why a male character could be celebrated for negative traits while a woman is crucified for those same traits and how that reflects back on real women...” (“*Nimona Shifts Shape*”). Moreover, *Nimona* is dedicated “to all the monster girls.” Stevenson challenges concepts of gender roles and monstrosity, a generalization meant to encompass many types of non-normative “girls.” *Nimona* thus works against the “exclusionary matrix” of both the Comics Code as well as socially constructed systems of heteronormativity, displacing the division between subject and object object, which Butler sees as “a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility” (*Bodies That Matter* xiii). *Nimona* invites a reading of the text through the lens of queer theory, demanding that the culturally established and regulated roles, such as those of animals and queer or non-heteronormative others, be read differently. *Nimona* lays the groundwork for reclaiming the representational space for monster girls – cruel phallic women, or other “types” who do not fit the mold of the “ideal” girls. By allowing Nimona to be on the side of evil in order to reveal the corruption of the Institution’s hierarchal and harmful binary classifications, Stevenson creates an alternative role model that better reflects the “monster girls” she wants to represent. Nimona’s shapeshifting abilities add to the power of this alternative because she rejects any singular form of monstrosity or hybridity, and resists forming a new hegemonic power structure.

Shape Shifting and Performing Identities

The reader of *Nimona* is able to find an image of the abject other who can reclaim representational space. However, the monster girl is allowed to find presence, if in contingent and polysemic form. Derrida asks: “What animal? The other” (3). This animal other that Derrida observes is rarely recognized as looking back. However, Derrida acknowledges that in seeing oneself being seen by the animal other, the *other* within the self emerges (13). Indeed, Derrida ponders, “cannot this cat also be, deep within her eyes, my primary mirror” (51). Derrida’s example is his cat, who sees him naked. He discusses how one may never be completely alone: “is one ever alone with a cat? Or with anyone at all? Is this cat a third [*tiers*]? Or an other in a face-to-face duel?” (9). The cat serves as a witnessing third-party to the discovery of the “other” within the self. In short, the animal as Derrida reads it is an uncanny, chimerical portent of the other within the self. His decentering of the stability of the self is accomplished by recognizing the otherness that is within the always plural and unstable animal that (therefore) humans are. Along with inviting a discussion of how humans treat animals, this discussion demands a closer look at how otherness is treated in general. For indeed, if Stevenson is concerned with “negative traits,” then recasting her heroine as an othered shape-shifter demands a critique of the use of the animal body to serve as other. *Nimona* follows a Derridian decentering of identity by challenging the general supposition in philosophy that (violently) situates man against animal. Derrida observes that the term “animal” groups “*all the living things* that man does not recognize as his fellows,” thereby dismissing the plurality of the category, as well as the individual possibilities of any given creature (34). *Nimona*’s body bears witness to the participation of humans in the chimera of the

“animal.” By taking on different forms, Nimona transgresses established cultural borders, queering them by revealing their instability. *Nimona* embodies Derrida’s point that these boundaries are not as stable as humans like to believe, and otherness cannot be pinpointed exterior to the self.

Nimona breaks the prescriptive rules of narrative form as well as the boundary between perceived binary social divisions. At the beginning of the text, Nimona asks her “boss,” Ballister, “isn’t that the whole point of being a villain? That you don’t follow the rules?” (4). Nimona is a rule breaker: as someone who is already marginalized, the “whole point” or potential power of being marginalized, or even the vilified, is the critical perspective needed to subvert the rules. Nimona rejects the confines of the “good” society because there is no room for her identity. Specifically, *Nimona*’s reassertion of queer subjectivity happens through a queering of Nimona’s human body with animal bodies. Over the course of the text, Nimona transforms into more than 40 different creatures – sometimes into real animals, sometimes humans (of different genders), and sometimes into dangerous monsters. As a shapeshifter, Nimona rejects a single, identifiable form. Although she begins the text with a completely human form, even concealing the fact that she is a shapeshifter, she ultimately emerges as a more-than-human beast of unknown origin or label (2). The play of the body troubles the constructs of embodiment in general. Butler writes:

Within those terms, “the body” appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself. In either case, the body is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But “the body” is itself a construction, as are the myriad “bodies” that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender; the question then emerges: to what extent does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s)

of gender? How do we reconceive the body no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will?
(*Gender Trouble* 8)

Recalling that the medium of comics invites a reading of said medium as message itself, Nimona's body also questions the prescription of the body as only an "instrument" or "medium" – which is precisely how the Institution, which places Nimona as a villain, wishes to see her body in particular, and indeed, the position that her body is often in. Certainly, Nimona's changes are a factor of her will power; however, as Nimona shifts from body to body, with different mark(s) or even the absence of gender, the message confirmed by the medium of the body is the very constructedness and instability of these marks of gender. The body is not a passive instrument for Nimona, but an active conveyer of meaning that exceeds conventional binary labeling due to its dramatic multiplicity. Nimona's body comes into being through multiplicity, marking the instability of socially contrived categories. The nature of Nimona's body to take different forms is a power in and of itself. After briefly having her powers eclipsed by an energy-warping gadget, Nimona angrily yells, "I have NEVER lost my powers. I DON'T get STUCK" (119). Nimona's ultimate fear is to be stopped from shapeshifting by the Institution, as it would fix her into the confines of a binary society where the body is a tool for sexed and gendered social constructs.

The fluidity of Nimona's body is "useful" to Ballister (as well as the genre), who takes on Nimona as a sidekick. While Nimona's polysemic and beastly form is an asset in the world of "supervillainry," occupied by Ballister, she is monstrous to the Institution (2). During a heated battle with the Institution, the Director confers with the Institution's appointed hero, Ambrosious Goldenloin. He tells the Director, "We assumed she was a

girl disguised as a monster, but she's not. She's a monster disguised as a girl" (162). The levels of embodiment obscure the nature of Nimona's "true body," even calling into question the possibility of a person's "essence." The slip of the performance between girl-as-monster and monster-as-girl is disturbing to the Institution. In this way, Nimona can be compared to Shyminsky's analysis of the superhero. Shyminsky claims that due to the shifting of the superhero between identities, the superheroes "preserve the normative – the dominant of nation, sexuality, gender, race, and ability, among others – even as their presence threatens to collapse the very boundaries of those same normative fields" (Shyminsky 289). However, because Nimona is not hiding her identity, and instead is considered the enemy of the "good" Institution, she freely collapses the boundaries of any normative field. The Director declares, "I know an abomination when I see one" (196). Butler notes that "Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (*Gender Trouble* 139-140). Nimona does not agree to "perform, produce, and sustain [a] discrete and polar gender..." and indeed, Nimona's "abominable" and often not-human form disrupts what Butler refers to as "cultural fictions" (140). Because of this, in the eyes of the Institution, the girl is not dressed as a monster but the monster is dressed as a girl that cannot be humanized. However, the text's dedication denies the difference: "Monster girls" can and do exist in nondiscrete and nonessentialized forms.

These nondiscrete bodies do undergo punishment and censorship. Nimona is placed in numerous cages throughout the text, and is often the interest of scientific exploitation. Before Ballister gets to know Nimona, he asks if he can "run some tests" to "harness" Nimona's powers. Nimona instantly transforms into a small hulk-like creature

and says, “I’m nobody’s lab rat. Got it, buster?” (37). The fear of “harnessing” her encompasses the Institution’s belief of the need to rein in or solidify Nimona’s fluid body because it exceeds the binary structures holding the Institution in control. Nimona insists on the fact that her body is natural, saying “no one made me, I was always like this” (196). Nimona’s denial of being “made” demands a rethinking of the human-made constructs of the human/animal and gender binaries. Nimona’s fluid form defies these constructs and displaces the prescribed hierarchies. However, it is clear from her history that she was the subject of scientific manipulation targeting her shifting body, which denoted her status as not-fully-human (224-226).¹

Even though Nimona claims that her shifting is natural (she was always like this), the Institution wishes to first control, then condemn that which cannot be controlled through scientific rationalism. It is important to note that Nimona’s body is “made” in one significant way: it is inscribed on the page. Nimona’s use of the term “made” is telling of comics’ self-reflexivity. Although she denies it, it reminds the reader of the fact that Nimona is made this way. Stevenson as artist “made” everyone, and Nimona’s disruption of the social constructs at play belies the fact that Stevenson and her medium of expression are playing with these themes. The making of Nimona is a visualized step towards undoing the abjection of the othered and absent body. There is a distinct “risk of representation” in picturing the body that disrupts binarist paradigms (Chute *Graphic*

¹ This can be contrasted to fairy tales such as D’Aulnoy’s *Babiole* and Leprince de Beaumont’s *Prince Cheri* in which the monstrous form of the body is punishment, and in *Babiole*’s case, a point of curiosity. In *Nimona*, the punitive aspect is rejected, as well as the marvelous. Nimona’s unstable and impermanent form is not “corrected” at the end of the story.

Women 3). As Chute refers to it: “The complex visualizing it undertakes suggests that we need to rethink dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility that have tended to characterize our current censorship-driven culture in general” (*Graphic Women 3*). Because comics so effectively “put the body on the page” – of both the character and artist – comics retains a degree of reflexivity (*Graphic Women 10*). It is also useful to remember that McCloud characterizes the reader as a conscious collaborator in comics. In the context of this text, the reader has equal responsibility in creating Nimona, both in accommodating the spatial gaps of the text and Nimona’s own identity, as well as in the act of closing these spaces – a difficult act to accomplish that Nimona herself challenges. These layers of creation and visualization of Nimona’s body reveal the assembled nature of identity. Just as *On Loving Women* suggests, *Nimona* indicates that the queer body has the power to expose the nature of gender and sexuality as constructed.

Bodies and identities are inherently performed and unstable, even in their “making.” In the climax of the text, Nimona is captured by the Institution and splits her body into a dark and unbound creature and a small child. The beast is fluid in form, unlike all the other characters, and appears as a fiery silhouette rather than an articulated cartoon (222). While her one form is fluid and destructive, her other body, the small child, is stuck in its form. Nimona the child explains, “I’m not supposed to split myself like that it makes me...unstable” (229). Normally a strength, Nimona’s instability becomes a danger when her body is forced to unnaturally abject the fluid and unknown “beast” from the “acceptable” or fixed body. Ballister recognizes the danger that this poses to Nimona and the rest of society and tells her, “we’re going to get you back to your other self and put you back together” (229). Ballister’s comment acknowledges the

presence of the other as part of the self. Derrida writes “the wholly other, more than any other, which *they* call animal...” is “there before me, there next to me, there in front of me – I who am (following) after it” (11). Derrida, who sees the animal seeing him, acknowledges the “absolute alterity” but also the presence of the self wrapped up in the existence of the other (11). Ballister’s comment reflects on the fact that there is something “wholly other,” “animal,” or even monstrous within the self. Unlike the Institution, Ballister and Nimona realize the danger of abjecting the other. However, Nimona’s ensuing destructive instability suggests that the Institution’s desire for humans to remain wholly separate from the monstrous other, the binary that is created through abjecting the wild animal other is ultimately highly dangerous. Ballister and Nimona are able to accept their unstable abject monstrosity as part of their bodies and identities, however indefinite this may be.

Cyborg Bodies and Queer Systems

It is the Institution that is desperate to keep the boundaries between bodies clean: not only between animal and human bodies, but the distinction between machine and human as well. Specifically, this distinction manifests itself through the abjection of Ballister as a second queer other. His body reflects on the division between technology and nature that is also muddied in *Nimona*. Ballister, the supervillain, is a science enthusiast, or “NERD,” as Nimona playfully jabs (103). In addition to Ballister’s technological inventions spread throughout the text, Ballister’s body is a cyborg, a subject of scientific manipulation in his own right. Due to a jousting accident with his former best friend, Goldenloin, Ballister lost his arm. Ballister ultimately replaced the

arm with a robotic prosthetic (which, to Nimona, “is pretty cool”) (5-6). However, Ballister observes, “the Institution had no use for a one-armed hero” (6). In short, he is “locked into a system where you can’t win” (6). Ballister is rejected from the Institution because his body does not fit the part of the hero, as the golden-boy Goldenloin’s does. Ballister exemplifies another kind of queer body, reminiscent of Donna Haraway’s concept of the cyborg: “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” that reveals the fact that the “boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (291). As Haraway notes, “contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs – creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted” (291). Evoking Derrida, Haraway’s cyborg implies the “chimerical” (292) nature of everyone in a cyborg world that manifests through the breaking of “the boundary between human and animal...” between “animal-human (organism) and machine” and between the “physical and non-physical” (293-294). Because of his body, which collapses the categories of human and machine in cyborgian fashion, Ballister is forced to play the part of the villain.

Haraway states that her “cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries” (295), which allows for the fall of Western philosophy’s privileging of man and allows that “there may indeed be a feminist science” (310). The feminist science for Haraway is one that enables nature and technology to work together, without distinction. Ballister’s body conveys this very idea, as well as his interests in science. Indeed, when he attends the “Science Expo” with Nimona, he is drawn to the booth of Dr. Meredith Blitzmeyer (Stevenson 107). Blitzmeyer is perhaps the feminist scientist of Haraway’s myth. The white-coat and goggle-sporting Blitzmeyer (in all resemblance to the stereotypical mad

scientist) developed “a new technology” called the “Anomalous Energy Enhancer” (107). Blitzmeyer excitedly tells Ballister “this green glow does not come from electricity, nor flame, nor bioluminescence, nor any energy source hitherto known to man!” (108). Although Blitzmeyer is using “man” to encapsulate all humans in a fairgrounds announcement fashion, the fact that this science is unknown by “man” nicely reflects on Haraway’s concerns about the “pure” sciences of Western patriarchal construction. Blitzmeyer has apparently tapped into the magical “vast field of energy that surrounds us all...” (108). By opening her mind to the natural forces (embodied by sorcerers in *Nimona*), Blitzmeyer is able to identify an ecological energy network surrounding everything. This energy source, too, may speak to the excluded other that is nonetheless part of us, like Derrida’s animal, “since it is before me, it is behind me. It surrounds me” (11). In this respect, Blitzmeyer operates in a world between *Nimona* and Ballister’s, negotiating between the natural and the scientific in a hybrid realm of her own. Her (feminist) energy field transgresses the boundaries that hold the constructed fictions in place. In the end, Ballister sides with this feminist-scientist realm. Ballister acknowledges that Blitzmeyer is one of his only friends (Stevenson 251), and later is depicted surveying a new research lab entitled “Blitzmeyer Blackheart Labs” (255). By occupying this cyborgian space, Ballister chooses not to live by the Institution’s systems of good and evil.

Subverting Institutions

Ballister and *Nimona* present a postmodern decentering of the credulous concepts of inherent truths, one of which is the theme of good conquering evil. In the Comics

Code, one item requires that “good shall triumph over evil” (U.S. Committee). Along with the Code’s indictment of comics that included “walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism,” non-normative bodies could not possibly be cast as “good” (U.S. Committee). In the battle between good and evil, institutionalized norms of acceptability call for good to destroy evil, and anyone whose body is outside of the norm, for example, humans who shapeshift into animals, to be cast as evil. Within *Nimona*’s chimerical text, however, “we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos” (Haraway 310). Thus, the strength of the queer medium and embodiment emerges “from the point of view of pleasure in these potent and taboo fusions, made inevitable by the social relations of science and technology...” (Haraway 310).

In *Nimona*, the origins of the taboos are found in the Institution. The queerness of Nimona and Ballister’s positioning in society serves as a foil to the Institution’s rigid and controlling establishment. The super high-tech Institution is headed ultimately by the unseen King. Knights and the appointed hero, Goldenloin, protect the kingdom under the leadership of the Institution’s Director. Nimona and Ballister break into the Institution’s labs early on and discover that the Institution has been illegally storing the toxic plant “Jaderoot,” that is “pretty much only used in dark sorcery” according to Ballister (Stevenson 41). Aside from putting the entire kingdom at risk, the Institution is “up to no good” (42). Indeed, Nimona excitedly exclaims, “the institution is totally crooked” (43).²

² This is a poetic jab at the Institutions’ potential hypocrisy. “Crooked” can be read as the opposite of “straight,” a common term for heterosexual, suggesting some kind of queerness on the part of the institution itself.

From the criminals' perspective (that is, Ballister and Nimona's), the reader sees the ground on which the Institution's values stand begin to crumble. As Nimona and Ballister go to work uncovering the details of the Institution's illegal activity, people begin to see the falsehood and instability of the Institution itself. At one point, Nimona helps instigate a riot; Ballister's reveals the nature of the Institution's plans, telling the people: "I have only ever fought against the institution, not against you. Your true enemies are the ones who have beaten you down and kept you in compliance through fear... They've locked us into a system where they hold all the power..." (137). The Institution condemns Ballister and Nimona for their otherness in order to maintain the system of control that is in effect. Compliance with the rules only allowed for the internal corruption of the system, however. Ballister's and Nimona's unstable bodies and identities confront the structures of the Institution in the most political ways, questioning the very stability of institutionalized "law."

Ironically, when at one point Ballister is paraded through the halls, he says facetiously, the Institution "hasn't changed at all" (142). While this statement is seemingly a reflection of the decoration, it can be taken to mean the Institution's behavior and mindset. The Institution is archaic and too set in its ways; the jab at conservatism is clear. The Institution demonstrates a constant hostility towards nonbinary and nonconformist bodies. On top of this, homophobic assertions are made clear when Goldenloin is briefed on his assignment to terminate Ballister and Nimona. The Director crisply tells Goldenloin, "Your motivations [to save Ballister] are quite transparent. I know what the nature of your relationship was. I made it quite clear at the time that I disapproved" (126). The Director's opinions on homosexual and nonbinary identities are

signs of the “defining institutions [Institution’s?]: phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality” that *Nimona* works against (Butler *Gender Trouble* xi).

Ambrosius Goldenloin has a flowery name that is appropriately absurd for the man meant to play the hyper-masculine hero of the Institution. Goldenloin, emphasis on “loin,” is the Institution’s counter to Nimona as the “phallic” woman. At one point, Nimona disguises herself as a journalist doing an “exposé on Sir Goldenloin’s codpiece...” (46). She asks, does he really expect us to believe that his junk is THAT impressive?” (46). As the chosen phallic hero of the Institution, Goldenloin is selected to act as the “beacon of heteronormativity” (Shyminsky 288). Goldenloin’s position follows a traditional superhero narrative, “aimed at legitimating normative categories and containing that which threatens them just as easily the heroes would contain an evil madman bent on world domination” (288-289). However, Goldenloin cannot achieve the “heroic masculinity,” and there is no weak sidekick onto whom Goldenloin can scapegoat his queerness (Shyminsky 289). He fails to reach the standard of pure heterosexual manhood set upon him, just as he fails to contain the “evil madmen” he faces. However, this simply exposes the Institution’s hypocrisy, rather than constituting a condemnation of Goldenloin’s sexuality. Goldenloin reveals the queerness of heroes that ethically cannot be put upon the weakling sidekick or abject other.

The censorship of Ballister and Goldenloin’s relationship for the sake of the “cultural fiction” of heterosexual and nondeviant bodies as heroes is made all the more hypocritical when the Director’s identity is revealed. When the Director calls Nimona an “abomination,” Nimona replies, “yeah, sure. What are YOU, a goblin?” (Stevenson 196). Nimona’s reference to “goblin” solidifies the play with genre occurring throughout the

text, as *Nimona* blurs the distinctions between science fiction and fantasy, confirming the cyborg nature of the text as exposing the science fiction and fantasy of “social reality” (Haraway 291). In the subsequent series of frames, the Director says, “That’s none of your business,” and, looking quite disturbed, “Shut up” (Stevenson 196). Nimona attacks the Director for condemning in Nimona’s body what is also potentially true for the Director’s, namely that their bodies are simply witnesses to the fluid and performative nature of identity. Butler observes that by decentering institutionalized constructs and “political syllogism”:

A new configuration of politics of sex and gender might then proliferate or, rather, their present establish intelligible cultural life, confounding the very binarism of sex, exposing its fundamental unnaturalness. (*Gender Trouble* 149)

If Nimona’s shapeshifter body and the Director’s “goblin” form can be read as ciphers for the otherness of nonheteronormativity, then the exposure of their forms allows for the fundamental deconstruction of the concept of sex and gender as inherent to humanness as a discrete concept. The very idea of “human” is rendered slippery.

The deconstructive aspects of this decentering are taken to destructive ends in *Nimona*. In the end of the text, Nimona’s beastly and still-slippery form, divided from her child body, destroys the Institution. The split indicates that in order to fully destroy institutionalized constructs, that which is completely other to the point of indiscernibility must be given shape, at least temporarily. The shapeshifter form confronts Ballister for playing along with the Institution’s rules, saying, “They called you a monster too. But in the end you still took their side” (238). However, Ballister refuses to take the nihilistic route of the unbound Nimona, and ultimately apologizes to Nimona’s beastly form (243). Ballister thinks he has killed Nimona, and desperately tries to save Goldenloin in a last

attempt to change the outcome of the apparent tragedy. In Haraway's cyborg world, "natural" connections are not viable, "only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship" can bonds be formed (296). Ballister's efforts to seek affinity-based relationships by crossing the borders between animal, human, and machine conclude with him walking from the wreckage of the Institution carrying Goldenloin. Although shocking, the deconstruction is part of a queering of rigid and oppressive institutions. Haraway writes that the new cyborg world "means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships..." (316). However, in the destruction scenes of *Nimona*, the two symbols for good and evil, Goldenloin and Ballister, emerge from the blinding "purge" of the Institution (Stevenson 246). Ballister is figured as the ultimate hero. This conversion of the two figures of "good" and "evil" indicates again the contrived nature of such binaries. Good does not triumph over evil, as those categories are no more than institutionalized systems of exclusion. Even Ballister's last name, Blackheart, denotes this idea: connotations of "black" as "bad" and "heart" as a symbol for love and affection are side-by-side. In the epilogue of *Nimona*, Ballister is pictured meeting with Goldenloin, and helping him walk through an archway. Ballister states, "I can only hope that if [Nimona] does come back... she'll know me for who I am. A friend" (256). The focus on friendship and affinity as a result of "building and destroying" institutions is emphasized by Ballister's annotation.

Queer Affinities

Although Nimona's body is not physically permanent in the text, in *Nimona*, "The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public

and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically” (Haraway 302). Her transient form bears witness to the instability of these binary systems, as well as the need to constantly call them into question in queer and variable ways. Ballister tells the reader:

I don't know where Nimona is now. I haven't seen her since. At least I don't think I have. I suppose I wouldn't know. I don't know if I'll ever see her again. It's probably for the best. Of course...I still wonder... about every stranger who gives me a knowing look. About every cat who watches me too closely. (Stevenson 255-256)³

Ballister's question is uncannily like Derrida's experience with his cat. Derrida states that his cat reflects:

My passion of the animal other: seeing oneself seen naked under a gaze behind which there remains a bottomlessness, at the same time innocent and cruel perhaps, perhaps sensitive and impassive, good and bad, uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal, and secret... (12)

Nimona's persona disappears, but the animal other that looks back is both “innocent and cruel” or “good and bad” and reflects back on that which is other in the self is still present. Ballister is inviting of this other, however, and he acknowledges the queer form – that which is “uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal, and secret” – as a friend (Derrida 12).

Webcomics as Queer Cyborg Genre

It is ironic to discuss constructed fictions in a work of fiction; however, true to the self-aware medium, Ballister's body, like Nimona's, reflects the text. *Nimona* was

³ Ballister's final monolog breaks the fourth wall of the text, effectively putting the reader in dialogue with the character. This complements the reader's active role in the formation of the narrative.

originally published on-line before becoming a physical book, giving the text a heightened feeling of cyborg-ness; and it is worthwhile to investigate how *Nimona* thus troubles the standards of literary and artistic representation within the very medium of comics. The fluidity of online publication, which lends a facility to editing and production as well as a freedom of artistic choice, opens itself to a wide audience, even in a niche interest area. Indeed, Wertham may have been shocked by the possible threat webcomics and the Internet pose to public “innocence.” Haraway writes that this kind of cyborg existence “constructs a kind of postmodernist identity out of otherness, difference and specificity. This postmodernist identity is fully political, whatever might be said about other possible postmodernisms” (296). Comics straddles modernism, postmodernism, and avant-gardism, and “position[s] [itself] in terms of an avant-garde sensibility even as [it] simultaneously mock[s] the very idea” (Kuhlman 5). This allows comics to take on the identity of otherness, difference, and specificity so fluidly.

In “Webcomics: The Influence and Continuation of the Comix Revolution,” Fenty et al. state: “Both in tackling taboo subject matter and in the oft irreverent way they do so, webcomic artists are following paths opened by Underground artists” (9). As heir to the Underground Comics bastard legacy, the webcomic is able to push comic art to new subjects and styles without facing negative repercussions from the mainstream industry (2). The webcomic bears witness to the iterative acts of queering made possible by the medium’s resistance to normalization. Webcomics carry out a new queering of comics by rejecting established criteria for the medium, and “webcomic artists are working within the spirit of the Underground movement as reflected in their subversion of comic book conventions and their freedom of expression in content and form” (Fenty et al. 1). For

example, Fenty et al. cite the transgression of the comic convention of having “completely consistent characters,” “stock characters,” and “sequential storylines” (6).

In Stevenson’s archive of *Nimona*-related comics, there are many other sketches that did not make it into the main published book. Stevenson also plays with the requirement of having stock characters. On top of the many physical transformations Nimona undertakes, in chapter nine, Nimona is suddenly pictured with purple hair instead of pink. Ballister states, “I thought pink was your color” to which Nimona replies “I like purple too” (124). While Nimona has a rough character design, her form changes frequently, even within the confines of her individual style.⁴ Nimona’s character design is also slightly modified online from the form she takes in the book. Additionally, “webcomics exactingly question and undermine positions based on gender as portrayed in most mainstream comics and video games,” namely the trope of the “weak princess...” (Fenty et al. 7). This benefit of webcomics is clearly presented through *Nimona*’s strong female characters (whether it is Nimona herself, or the Institution’s goblin-woman Director).

With fewer restrictions on form and size, a webcomic also has the ability to depict the classic frames of comics differently. The frames in *Nimona* are frequently overlapping, and occasionally with small details like cloaks or smoke slipping over the gutters and into the next frame. The webcomic also has the freedom to ignore production and distribution requirements that Fenty et al. argue give webcomics “the ability to

⁴ Although maintaining stock character design is conventional for mainstream comics, this is certainly not always the case, even for non-web-based comics. For an example, see Chute’s discussion of Aline Kominsky-Crumb’s autobiographical comics, which are rarely consistent (*Graphic Women* 29).

explore the comics' medium with an ethical dimension" (9). Due to the wide distribution possibilities of webcomics, it is uniquely positioned to reach more people, even within a niche field such as queer-identified readers. By playing with comics' criteria of form and content, webcomics adds an additional layer of queering that prevents the medium from becoming a prescriptive or otherwise demarcated genre. Webcomics continues to insist that comics cannot be defined in any singular way.

Nimona employs comics' queer structure to demonstrate the productivity of breaking down socially constructed binaries. Stevenson's work establishes the ways in which hybridity and cyborg-ness can work to create a uniquely queer mode of expression. Like Haraway's cyborg world, graphic narrative has new potentials for conveying non-normative identity: "[They] can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (Haraway 316). As hybrids of word and image, graphic narrative has this power of the "infidel heteroglossia," which rejects the idea that there is only one way to express or represent. Additionally, *Nimona* deploys non-normative and othered bodies, "as a strategy to denaturalize and resignify bodily categories" and to "disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasion their subversive signification and proliferation beyond the binary frame" (Butler *Gender Trouble* xii). Although *Nimona*'s shapeshifting body is too unstable to be held down for long, her trace is present in Ballister's life, and the textual destruction of the established Institution's systems of exclusion. Emerging from this text is something akin to Derrida's "animot": "*Ecce animot*. Neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals, and rather than a double clone or a

portmanteau word, a sort of monstrous hybrid, a chimera...” (41). The monstrous hybrid and chimera *Nimona* makes room for the expression of queer bodies in a shifting, irreducible form that is constantly in flux and presents new possibilities for self expression. The presence of these bodies on the comics’ pages is visually undeniable; the ambiguity of shifting forms and hybrid bodies accepts instability and otherness as part of identity.

CONCLUSION

Diane Obomsawin's *On Loving Women* and Noelle Stevenson's *Nimona* employ monstrous bodies to depict queerness and to challenge prescriptive ideologies that assume the stability of heteronormative human identities. In *On Loving Women*, the animal women's fragmented narratives build upon each other to suggest a multiplicity of identities. *Nimona*'s "monster girl" similarly depicts fluidity of the self and indicates a performative aspect of identity. Additionally, *Nimona* reveals the violence and hypocrisy of institutions that seek to delimit, dissect, or abject non-normative individuals. Despite the very different genres of the texts, one being biographical and the other science fiction, *On Loving Women* and *Nimona* both reflect on the status of comics in the world of arts and literature. Comics' hybrid body is matched both by *Nimona*'s and the anthropomorphic creatures in *On Loving Women*. However, the particular type of monstrosity in each text differs, suggesting as well that the queerness of the characters and of comics is diverse and indefinite. *On Loving Women* presents a uniquely lesbian narrative, tinted with a radically feminist flare characteristic of the 1970s. *Nimona*, on the other hand, represents a more contemporary branch of queerness, one that reaches towards cyborgs and gender nonconformity. The monstrous beings at the hearts of these texts operate in different ways that support these related but distinct narratives. As a conclusion, the following sections will acknowledge the differences between the queer

monstrosity depicted in *On Loving Women* and *Nimona* in the hope of opening the discussion of the queer possibilities of comics. This will illuminate the diverse and vibrant potentials for the medium that boldly visualizes queer and monstrous forms and identities.

Animal Women and Monster Girls

Although similar theoretical approaches can be brought to readings of *On Loving Women* and *Nimona*, the queerness of the two texts is presented differently. This difference is mirrored by Obomsawin's animal-women and Stevenson's concept of monster girls. The animal-women offer a sense of presence through polysemy and multiplicity, while the monster girl rips apart the expectations and regulations that delimit identity and prevent the variability of expression. The chimerical aspects of the two types of monsters have been explored, and both meet the criteria of Derrida's monstrous hybrid, the "animot." However, the "animot" serves as a reminder of the problems of grouping all types of othered creatures under the same name. Derrida indignantly states of "animal":

‘The Animal,’ as if all nonhuman living things could be grouped within the common sense of this ‘commonplace,’ the Animal, whatever the abyssal differences and structural limits that separate, in the very essence of their being, all ‘animals,’ a name that would therefore be advised, to begin with, to keep within quotation marks. Confined within this catch-all concept, within this vast encampment of the animal, in this general singular, within the strict enclosure of this definite article... are *all the living things* that man does not recognize as his fellows. (34)

The animal is a category for something outside of the human, not a member or party to that human existence with the capacity to recognize and claim as fellows. Derrida carefully replaces “The Animal” with the “animot” in order to suggest a monstrous

hybrid that challenges the “philosophical or metaphysical datum” that situates man against animal (40-41). The chimera’s “monstrousness [is] derived precisely from the multiplicity of animals” (41). The monstrousness in *On Loving Women* and in *Nimona* is driven by a multiplicity of animals in that the bodies in both texts demonstrate chimerical forms, yet the function is significantly different.

In *On Loving Women*, the animal-like bodies that appear in the text are not only of multiple species (some are rabbits, others birds, horses, and dogs, to name a few), but the anthropomorphism denotes the multiplicity of the animot. This multiplicity includes humans, in the sense that the animals are anthropomorphized, but the humanness is only as an addition to the animal. This addition breaks down the human-animal binary and eliminates that hierarchy as a source of exclusion. The beastly creatures are not quite “women,” and they denote the inability to codify such a category in a concrete way. Like talking animals in fairy tales, or the mice and other animals in *Maus*, the creatures in *On Loving Women* are part of the narrative’s world, and their beastly forms are only made strange by the interaction with the reader who, expecting women, finds hybrid creatures instead. To draw upon Chaney once again, the anthropomorphic creatures are ciphers for otherness only for the reader. *On Loving Women* presents a unique world in which otherness can thrive in its multiplicity, and this is facilitated by the comics’ tendency to violate and blend rules of narrative construction.

The diegetic system in *On Loving Women* bears stark contrast to *Nimona*. Nimona’s monstrous form is similarly chimerical. She is monstrous because of the multiplicity of animals that she embodies. Ballister can also be seen as a chimera of cyborgian ilk with his part-machine-part-human body. However, Nimona and Ballister

are considered abhorrent and monstrous in the society in which they are located. While their particular types of hybrid monstrosity allow them to be cast as the “bad guys” by their society, the reader nevertheless sympathizes with their situation, especially as they uncover the hypocrisy and crookedness of the Institution. Ballister and Nimona’s monstrosity is more obviously a cipher for otherness. This has the effect of making the process of deconstructing binary classifications of good and evil as a function of this comic all the more obvious. The monster girl makes space for the more destructive “negative” traits to find expression. Rather than work within a system of polysemic narrative, Nimona the monster girl forcibly makes readers reconsider binary classifications that privilege normative identities.

In comparing the types of animality and monstrosity, it is not to say that one is good or bad, or that all types of monstrosity are a result of chimerical multiplicity. Rather, the significance of the monstrous bodies in these texts is to demonstrate that there is no singular “monstrous” body, no singular “animot” or “chimera,” or indeed a singular way of enacting queerness in and of comics. The chimerical forms in *On Loving Women* as well as in *Nimona* provide the text with a visual indication of polysemy and fluid identities; however, they do so in ways that avoid fixing what it means to be queer and what it means to be monstrous. As a result, the monstrosity of comics, which is derived from its multiplicity of symbolic systems, also supports many different varieties of monstrosity that can be useful in the portrayal of different varieties and iterations of queerness.

Metamorphosing Queer Theory

Because comics resists categorization so fiercely, just as *Nimona* does actively, and the anthropomorphic women of *On Loving Women* do implicitly, it is possible that the queer possibilities of comics stay true to Teresa de Lauretis's initial desire for the term "queer." De Lauretis, who coined the term "queer theory," was looking for a theory:

To avoid all of these fine distinctions [presented in Lesbian and Gay studies] in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them – or at the very least problematize them. (v)

As Jagose observes, de Lauretis discarded the term quickly "on the grounds that it had been overtaken by those mainstream forces and institutions it was coined to resist" (127). Perhaps to a large extent, de Lauretis is justified. However, because comics treads the line between mass media and completely underground or niche art, and resists any form of mainstream institutional regulation, comics may be uniquely positioned to take on de Lauretis' queer project. Comics' history of transgressing ideological systems (rather than transcending them to formulate a new hegemonic order) offers rich ground for challenging heteronormativity and phallogocentrism. Moreover, there is no single way in which comics takes on this project. Comics is always coming into being in different ways, with different approaches to the medium and to narrative in general. *On Loving Women* and *Nimona* are only two possible examples of how this can be approached, and the texts reveal the diverse application of queer theory that stems from feminist theory of different kinds.

On Loving Women specifically addresses the experience of lesbians in the 1970s in Canada. The piece invites a feminist reading by the bodily presence of lesbians as a rejection of the "horror of nothing to see" (Irigaray 26). Irigaray illuminates the

significance of embodying women against the “masculine parameters” that characterize women by lack (23). The women-animals in *On Loving Women* visually and discursively occupy the text. In one sense, the animal bodies are also nothing to see, as animal bodies are not usually seen as gendered. However, the proliferation of breasts and female genitals in *On Loving Women* visually asserts female bodies as something to see. Not only do their bodies proliferate, but their stories are being spoken (in speech bubbles and by the narrator) and written (in Obomsawin’s careful hand). However, it is important to recall that there are no women in *On Loving Women*, which allows Obomsawin to achieve the embodied (lesbian) feminist narrative that Irigaray may not have. Butler critiques Irigaray’s theories, suggesting that Irigaray’s arguments define the feminine as something that “cannot be figured” (*Bodies That Matter* 21). Butler continues:

This figuration of masculine reason as disembodied body is one whose imaginary morphology is crafted through the exclusion of other possible bodies. This is a materialization of reason which operates through the dematerialization of other bodies, for the feminine, strictly speaking, has no morphe, no morphology, no contour, for it is that which contributes to the contouring of things but it itself undifferentiated, without boundary. The body that is reason dematerializes the bodies that may not properly stand for reason or its replicas, and yet this is a figure in crisis, for this body of reason is itself the phantasmatic dematerialization of masculinity, one which requires that women and slaves, children and animals be the body, perform the bodily functions, that it will not perform. Irigaray does not always help matters here, for she fails to follow through the metonymic link between women and these other Others, idealizing and appropriating the ‘elsewhere’ as the feminine. But what is the ‘elsewhere’ of Irigaray’s ‘elsewhere’? If the feminine is not the only or primary kind of being that is excluded from the economy of masculinist reason, what and who is excluded in the course of Irigaray’s analysis? (*Bodies That Matter* 21-22)

Obomsawin’s polysemic narrative seems to assert, rather than exclude, the presence of “the sex which is not one.” The animal women have morphe, contour, and boundary in the sense that they are drawn on the page. However, reason is not part of the masculinist realm, any more than the feminine stays in the realm of the body. Comics, being of both

word and image, coupled with the animal-women bodies, suggests that these binaries are not supportable. The anthropomorphic characters allow for the both the materialized forms of “women,” as well as the “other Others.” The chimerical bodies serve as the follow through of the metonymic link that Butler sees missing in Irigaray’s writing. The type of feminist writing that Irigaray calls for is taken to a new arena in which other Others are no longer left elsewhere, but are figured on the page in their own terms.

Nimona the monster girl represents a different form of queerness that seems to be constantly fighting for a place in society on new terms. Stevenson’s concern that women were not allowed to be bad guys and her quest for representation of monster girls manifests itself in a step away from the essentializing of “women” and indeed the essentializing of “animal” and “human” as distinct. Shifting identity and fluidity of self, which are seen by the Institution as inherently monstrous and bad, are given the space to find pleasure in their monstrosity and to question such institutional limitations. *Nimona* is a departure from the lesbian feminist style of *On Loving Women* in that Nimona’s monstrosity does not mimic through multiplicity. However, the impact of the body is still significant; in *Nimona*, it forcibly shakes the binary oppositions that exist and rejects any instantiation of a new hierarchy. It is no wonder that while the animal-women of *On Loving Women* are sustained within a single time frame, Nimona must disappear at the end of her own story. In *On Loving Women*, the animal women find a means of representing multiple voices and forging a layered narrative. Conversely, Nimona rends the system set forth by the Institution asunder, but rejects the chance to establish a new binary in which shapeshifters are the dominant power. The cyborg affinities remain, and appropriate to a webcomic, Haraway’s vision seems to emerge:

Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia. It is an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear into the circuits of the supersavers of the new right. It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories. Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. (Haraway 316)

While *On Loving Women* evokes ties to an emerging lesbian feminism, *Nimona* moves towards a queering of the self in many forms, destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, etc., in order to make room for the building of new ones in a queer cyborgian era.

Retrieving the Body? The Reader, the Author, and the Monster

As comics, *On Loving Women* and *Nimona* serve as answers to what Butler sees as one of the questions of feminism: “if everything is discourse, what happens to the body? ...It has seemed to many, I think, that in order for feminism to proceed as a critical practice, it must ground itself in the sexed specificity of the female body” (*Bodies That Matter* 4). Neither of these texts truly relies upon “the sexed specificity of the female body.” *Nimona* goes as far as denying this kind of specificity. The chimerical forms suggest that the body is just as marked by social constructs as any other phenomena. The animal-women’s bodies in *On Loving Women* assert a multiplicity of bodies to resist essentializing woman. *Nimona*’s resistance to take on a specific form also shuns the naturalized category of sex and gender. Butler assures that this is not “political nihilism” but rather that “this unsettling of ‘matter’ can be understood as initiating new possibilities, new ways for bodies to matter” (*Bodies That Matter* 6).

It is useful to understand this as operating outside of the diegesis of the text,

because it is not only the bodies on the page that are materializing, but that of the reader and comics creator. Recall that the function of comics relies in part upon the positioning of the reader, and the reading process is radically impacted by the bodily engagement of the reader. By making their way through the gutters and frames, readers are able to complete the narrative at their own pace. As Chute notes, “representing time as space, comics situates the reader in space, creating perspective in and through panels” (*Graphic Women* 9). The reader’s body also matters in the consumption of comics, because the situation of that body in space uniquely drives the comic. Comics thus requires the body to matter both on the page and from the point of view of the reader. Additionally, the hand of the artist, as Chute has observed, is both creator of the page and present on it in the form of handwriting. This gives comics an aspect of reflexivity on the act of comics’ creation, allowing comics to comment on the constructs of its own system. The monstrosity of the comics form can be seen as being derived from the chimerical multiplicity of bodies at work in the system of creating and reading comics’ words and images.

Queer Space and the Future of Comics

Chute acknowledges that “while all media forms are, to an extent, framings, in its narrative movement across printed pages, comics claims and uses the space surrounding its material, marked frames in a way that, say, paintings cannot” (*Graphic Women* 8). The interaction between frame and gutter emphasizes the complex and variable interaction between presence and absence of symbols to create meaning. There is no standard for how frames operate in comics, nor for how word must interact with image. The choice is

left up to the artist, and the functionality of those frames is left up to the reader. The interaction between frames and gutters puts time into the realm of space, allowing for an extreme sense of layering and the collapse of the conventions of writing and art. Comics demands that readers question the security of systems of communicating meaning, leaving a great deal of the play of signification up to the reader to develop in the gutter. However, comics continually disturbs the conventions of the medium and relies on the reader to help queer the established systems at work with every reading.

Locating the queer space of graphic narrative, which displaces hierarchal binary constructs and shocks the masses, invites readers to take a closer look at the embodied message that comics presents, a message that plays with politics of performativity, gender roles, and otherness. The “monstrous creatures” that Wertham found so threatening to the innocent readers only reveals the restrictive and exclusionary system that treats all kinds of otherness as monstrous. *Nimona* and *On Loving Women*, and the many other graphic narratives, comics, and webcomics featuring bizarre creatures – from sea monsters to mutants – reveal a hugely diverse realm of “monsters” that question the constructs of our society and fight for a shift in the narrative towards a more inclusive, fluid space.

Offshoots of comics, namely webcomics and independent zines, as well as increasing numbers of graphic narratives, reflect the many courses comics is taking. *On Loving Women* and *Nimona* also bear witness to this phenomenon of the multigeneric possibilities of comics. *On Loving Women* and *Nimona* explore the fluidity of gender, but their queer forms reflect upon comics play with *genre*. The two texts touch on the many possible generic modes of comics, from autobiography, biography, historiography, and archive, to science fiction, fantasy, and blog. Comics combine these genres and more to

build narratives that defy specification. What some would consider a monstrosity, the multigeneric nature of comics, can be seen as part of the queer possibilities that the medium has to offer. The word genre is etymologically linked to gender, and comics such as *On Loving Women* and *Nimona* deconstruct the divisions between gender and sexuality as fluidly as they transgress categorical systems of genre. Comics plays with gender, and genre triangulates with another related term, genus, a zoological term for the classification of species of animals. Genera encompass all kinds of (potentially monstrous) creatures, and comics itself both houses and reflects upon the potentials that this diversity brings to narrative. By investigating the ways in which monstrous bodies and queer identities interact in the multigeneric hybrid bodies of comics, it is clear that comics presents a great deal of potential when it comes to representing otherness, and questioning standards of classification and institutionalized exclusionary systems.

Chute notes that the hybrid medium offers particularly rich possibilities for representing hybrid subjectivities (*Graphic Women* 5). This thesis has pushed Chute's idea into the realm of the queer and monstrous. Comics' hybridity, subversive attitude, and deviant approaches to fiction and nonfiction narratives defy closure, as the medium is constantly shifting and opening new space for different narratives. Comics is unstable. What can be seen as queer in comics is the tendency for comics to confront and breakdown binary oppositions. As such, queer narratives find particular power in comics. Not only do comics delight in instability and non-normative art that is often found in comics, but the blurring of word and image that destabilizes the symbolic order offers comics a means of approaching divergent systems of representation. Comics rejects categorization and approaches representation and narrative with an eye towards opening

narrative and constantly transforming and becoming. Comics is particularly well suited to queering narratives due to the medium's tendency to subvert and transgress binary oppositions.

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