

DESIRE WITHOUT END ON THE QUEER IMAGINATION OF SEQUENTIAL ART

ALISON HALSALL AND JONATHAN WARREN
IN CONVERSATION WITH RAMZI FAWAZ

In January 2020, we enjoyed a lovely afternoon with the literary scholar and comics critic, Ramzi Fawaz, at Stanford University's Center for the Humanities where he was a 2019–20 Visiting Fellow. That setting was as splendid as our conversation about comics was dynamic, thought-provoking, and wide-ranging. Beginning over lunch among the center's other researchers, we chatted about queer families, superheroes as mutant outcasts, queer maneuvers in comics, comics pedagogy and way-finding, *Watchmen*, camp, "Designing Women," and, within a few idea-packed hours, we found ourselves happily knee-deep in shared queer and comics sensibilities. Indisputably a powerhouse teacher whose students are very lucky, Fawaz was our magnetic tour guide to comics' queer history and historicity, reception and fandom, affect and force, and importance. Fawaz's current research is focused on the women's and gay liberation movements and their influence on American popular culture in the 1970s and after. He is a gracious host and generous thinker. What follows here recounts many of the topics we covered during a memorable afternoon together.

Alison Halsall and Jonathan Warren: You've written that the history of sexuality and the history of comics can be thought of as mutually constitutive. What kinds of sexual history do comics propose? Readers of superhero comics will be familiar with the ages, Silver, Golden, Bronze, and so on. Do LGBTQ+ comics specify their own periods of sexual history? Which examples stand out most for you? What kinds of history do they propose?

Ramzi Fawaz: When I first made this claim, it was meant as a provocation to scholars of visual culture and sexuality to think about the ways that comics form has participated in expanding how readers imagine or conceive of desire, intimacy, and erotic attachment across time. Historically, comics have either been studied for the ways they directly represent sex, especially in pornographic ways (think of the Tijuana Bibles or Tom of Finland's gay male erotic utopias), or else been understood as an unsophisticated form of lowbrow culture that reproduces dominant ideas about normative gender and sexuality (think of

the stereotype of the superhero genre, which is commonly thought to celebrate white, muscular, virile male bodies, and hypersexualized female ones). I aim to shift the focus of these approaches by asking how distinct uses of the comics medium at different historical moments allowed artists to depict emergent or developing social transformations in sexuality—the increasing visibility of gays and lesbians, for instance, or expanding interests in alternative sexual practices like BDSM—and to experiment with new ways of representing what it means to be a desiring subject. In other words: how has comics form allowed readers to refigure sexuality—what it is and can be—in the mind’s eye? I think that a predominant focus on sexual representation and ideology (what kinds of bodies and desires are represented in comics and what is their presumed political message) often obscures the *imaginative* potential of comics to shift how people think, see, and feel sexuality as a lived experience.

Central to my claim lies the idea that comics, because of their formal investment in seriality, frequently present sexuality itself as an unfolding experience. Sex and sexuality are only occasionally punctual: we may experience an intense or powerful sexual act, or be able to identify critical moments when our sexual identity was influenced or shaped by immediate events (coming out to a loved one, being bullied, meeting someone with the same desires, etc.), but ultimately, sexuality takes shape over time. In this sense, sexuality—understood broadly as the entire realm of intimate and erotic relations and identifications—is a fundamentally serial experience. Sequential or serial movement is a central formal conceit of comics that articulates beautifully to a view of sexuality not as a fixed essence but as a ceaselessly unfolding arena of intimate or erotic possibility. Now, every particular expression of this is different, so when I claim that the history of sexuality and the history of comics are co-constitutive, my point is not to say that the history of comics tells *one* story about the history of sexuality, but that the affordances of the comics medium allow for telling and showing what sexuality and eroticism can be in numerous ways at different historical moments.

Perhaps the most celebrated example is William Moulton Marston’s *Wonder Woman* comics of the late 1930s and 1940s, which famously depicted countless scenes of bondage and submission between its Amazon warrior with a Golden “Lasso of Truth” and her many opponents. In part because of historian Jill Lepore (2014), it is now widely known that *Wonder Woman*’s creator was a Harvard-educated psychologist who believed that social harmony could be achieved through the complete sexual and emotional submission of men to women; scandalously, Marston was also part of a long-term polyamorous BDSM relationship with two women, Elizabeth Marston and Olive Byrne, with whom he raised his children. Comics artist Phil Jimenez (2018) and cultural critic Noah Berlatsky (2017) have brought critical attention to the fact

that Marston's ideas and lived experiences with nontraditional heterosexual intimacy appeared everywhere in the *Wonder Woman* comics, particularly in his frequent representations of the hero using her lasso of truth to bind or tie up both men and women in scenes highly reminiscent of bondage play—the serial quality of comics allowed Marston to represent bondage as a recurrent or unfolding experience of pleasurable submission that was never permanent or fixed but enacted by all parties over time. Wonder Woman often finds herself chained, caged, and bound, always seemingly energized by these brief but exciting moments of danger before reversing roles and tying up those who would attempt to contain her. Marston's comics circulated to Americans during the last years of the Great Depression, a period that saw women increasingly taking on service work and odd jobs to make up for men's lost income, and in which perceived "feminine" values like sharing, caregiving, and mutual aid became widespread in the face of collective economic deprivation. Seen in this context, Wonder Woman both captured the increasingly powerful role that women were playing in American social and cultural life, but also allowed Americans to imagine this transformation as tied to a pleasurable change in heterosexual relationships. In other words, Marston's own idiosyncratic erotic desires collided with comics' serial form to present sexual bondage and submission not only as an individual kink, but as a desirable and playful metaphor for shifting social relations: in Marston's serial narratives heterosexuality starts to evolve into something approximating queerness.

The key here is to see that a comic book series like *Wonder Woman* did not merely reflect dominant sexual mores. BDSM was not a dominant or publicly celebrated sexual practice in the American 1930s, if it ever has been. Rather, *Wonder Woman* actively participated in shifting how people imagined what heterosexuality could be in a moment when every entrenched idea about proper familial roles was in flux.

Other historical moments are also instructive. In the 1970s, the serial anthology *Gay Comix* collected the comic strip work of numerous gay and lesbian comics artists who had vastly different aesthetic styles, political commitments and stories to tell. In *Gay Comix*, gay identity and experience were presented as kaleidoscopic not only by the variety of stories each issue included but in the different ways that creators would draw or give shape to queer affect, same-sex emotional and sexual intimacy, and gay social life. Consequently, the real-life sexual diversity of queer people was formally captured in myriad approaches to drawing gay and lesbian lives on the page: from highly stylized cartoonish representations of flamboyant gay male sexuality, to hyper-realist depictions of gay and lesbian sex, to quotidian or ordinary renderings of conversations between same-sex couples about their sex life, social calendar, and careers. These comics were obviously responding to contemporary social

transformations in American society catalyzed by the movements for women's and gay liberation; but they were also trying to visualize many other possible configurations of what gay sexuality could be beyond either activist circles or dominant straight stereotypes.

We need to study comics as a key site where contemporary conceptions about sex, sexuality, and gender expression (among many other identities and lived experiences) are literally *redrawn* or rendered in new and surprising ways. I'll give one more example: in a fascinating essay on gay erotic superhero comics, Darieck Scott briefly analyzes the pornographic comics of Japanese artist Gengoroh Tagame. Tagame's stories represent extremely explicit scenes of domination and sexual submission between muscular, hairy Japanese men—the comics are surprising because they depict pornographic encounters that are at once highly violent and disturbing, but also erotically thrilling because of their sexual intensity and aesthetic beauty (2014). Tagame is an extraordinary craftsman, and he manages to illustrate the messiest exchange of bodily fluids, hard fucking, and bondage in ways that make every sexual act look like a work of art. Scott focuses on a single aesthetic innovation in Tagame's oeuvre: through the comics form, Tagame frequently represents a dominant male "top" ejaculating inside his sexual partner. This image is often drawn in the form of a visual cross-section of the receptive bottom's anal canal flooded with semen. As queer theorist Tim Dean has discussed, internal ejaculation remains the impossible fantasy ideal that real life gay male pornography can never capture with cameras (2014). As a medium that requires every image to be fabricated from whole cloth, comics allows for this intensely intimate (or up close) drawn depiction of the exchange of semen. These scenes open up a world of erotic fantasy, allowing readers of any sexuality and gender expression to picture fluid exchange in the mind's eye, potentially expanding their affective relationships to sex as a kind of primal act, as a vulnerable opening up to another person, as an intense exchange of bodily matter. Tagame's work doesn't simply tell us something about gay male sex, but visually transforms how readers can think about erotic encounter altogether.

All of these examples stress the importance of moving away from a "reflective" study of comics that sees comics art as a mirror for already formed historical realities, cultural trends, or subcultural practices. No doubt, comics reflect the historical conditions of their production, but they also invent or create that world *anew* in the ways they shape, inform, or influence how people see themselves, their bodies, desires, and attachments. We need a much more robust understanding of how comics *constitute* social relations—in the ways they expand people's imaginations, draw together unexpected publics, produce new kinds of aesthetic projects and artistic communities—rather than simply reflecting existing ones.

Because individual comic strips or series are circulated in print or digital formats, they frequently get reproduced across historical time, so that audiences re-encounter the same stories and images in completely different contexts. Like the serial quality of comic strips themselves, the frequent reprinting of various comics texts allows them to unfold in new ways, accruing unexpected meanings and responding to new sexual histories. So Marston's Wonder Woman of the 1930s *returns* to the cultural scene in the 1970s when feminists like Gloria Steinem take up the Amazon superhero as an icon of women's liberation; but in this new context, feminist activists and cultural critics conveniently overlook the series' representation of bondage and submission, focusing instead on Wonder Woman's ability to exercise agency and her sisterhood with fellow Amazon warriors.

Consequently, I think it's crucial for us to talk about how particular expressions of sex, sexuality, and gender expression in comics have many lives across time and space. Comics capture the recursive quality of embodied experiences of sexuality and gender. What happens when a nonbinary trans* man living in rural Texas reads reprints of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *The Fantastic Four* series from the early 1960s? What kind of meanings are produced when an Asian American feminist reading group in San Francisco decides to include the work of Tagame and his gay erotic manga contemporaries among their selections? What kinds of aesthetic possibilities are opened up when a gay male artist in 1970s New York City reinterprets the classic 1930s comic strip character Nancy as a butch lesbian? These kinds of questions make it impossible for us to ever claim that any comic strip, series, or character ever means one thing, or reproduces a single ideological understanding of sex, sexuality or gender; instead, we can study how different comics proliferate a range of ideas about erotic and intimate bonds and sexual and gender identity in various contexts. As a result, the way we study the relationship between comics and sexuality can itself be modeled on the serial, open-ended, multiplicitous quality of our objects of study.

I think this is why there is still so much more to be illuminated about comics generally, but especially about LGBTQ+ comics. Not only do we need to explore various comics in their original contexts of emergence and circulation, but we must endlessly follow their travels across time and space, through their cultural adaptations, reproductions, appropriations, and reinventions in venues big and small, in the hands of a single reader or circulated among millions.

AH and JW: With that call for more studies of LGBTQ+ comics reader reception in mind, we're curious to hear about your own experience as a reader, as a critic of these comics. Do you find that comics have mapped the history of your sexuality? You've written about the significance of *X-Men* in your

childhood and early adolescence. What do you think about your life *after that* in relation to particular comics as modes of imagining sexuality?

RF: This is a very significant question for me, as I suspect it is for most people who end up studying comics. This is because for many of us, at some point we chose to research and write about a cultural object that we originally formed some of our most powerful childhood and adolescent fantasies around. I've now spent more years studying superhero comics than I was a childhood fan of them; but that first period when I read superhero comics purely for pleasure, from the ages of thirteen to twenty-one, was also a hugely formative time when I came out as being gay but also struggled to translate that into significant gay relationships. I was a late bloomer in a lot of ways: I wasn't deeply connected to gay community and didn't have any serious gay male romantic relationships until my mid-to-late twenties. In that sense, I often say I felt I had a gay *identity* for years before I had a gay *sexuality*. Rather, I lived my gayness as an affective orientation toward queer family or kinship.

As you mentioned, the most foundational relationship that my sexual orientation had to comics was in my teenage years when I was reading *The X-Men*. And I think that has everything to do with my sense of being a member of a queer family. My mom is a lesbian, my brother is gay, my uncle who passed away when I was six was gay—we were queer Middle Eastern migrants to the US, bonded not only by blood but also by a shared experience of multiple forms of minoritization. As a teenager, I was very invested in the value of queer kinship, of chosen bonds, which I understood as a rebellious alternative to the socially sanctioned heterosexual nuclear family. And the superhero team was the most potent metaphor for that kind of social relationship that I'd ever encountered in American popular culture. The idea of a collective of people bound together by mutual outsidership was incredibly compelling to me. And that's one example of the recursive circulation of comics that I mentioned earlier: a comic book about mutant outcasts that only metaphorically referenced gayness in the 1960s and 1970s, could land in the hands of a gay Lebanese boy in suburban Orange County, California, in the 1990s, who would immediately read the *X-Men* as a story about queer family and go on to write a book based on that experience (2016). The series allowed me to make sense of the family I was growing up with, but it also introduced me to an imaginative world where my own queer commitments could come to attach to an incredibly diverse range of fictional characters whose bodies appeared in wildly divergent shapes, sizes, and colors. These were characters whose queerness hinged less on their sexual orientation or gender expression *per se*, but inhered in mutant bodies that shape-shifted, teleported, regenerated, merged, and sometimes wholly dissolved on the comics page.



Figure 5.1. "The Fantastic Four Pin-Up Page," Stan Lee (writer) and Jack Kirby (penciler), *The Fantastic Four*, no. 15 (June 1963): n.p.

When I was growing up, I didn't understand my attachment to these bodies in erotic terms; instead, I felt deeply affectively or emotionally attached to mutant bodies in flux. The distinctly gay or queer dimension of that attachment actually became more visible to me years later, when as a scholar, I discovered a glaring gap in my knowledge of superhero comics: like a charlatan, I had never read *The Fantastic Four*! When I read the first hundred issues of this brilliant series, I couldn't believe that it was even more of a story about queer family than *The X-Men*. Every member of the Fantastic Four—the stretchy Mr. Fantastic, the translucent Invisible Woman, the fiery Human Torch, and the rock-like Thing—exhibited bodies that were completely out of joint with their “proper” or presumed gender and sexual identities. You have a patriarch, Mr.

Fantastic, who is supposed to be symbolically “hard” on Communism and the staunch leader of the group, but he’s literally a flexible rubber band, endlessly soft and pliable. You have this hardened rock person, the Thing, who is supposed to be the paragon of virile masculinity but is a blubbing (yet lovable) emotional mess. You have a putatively straight male teenager who’s supposed to be a lady’s man but is quite literally a “flamer.” And you have a woman who can turn invisible, but who, over time, becomes the most visibly powerful and indispensable lynchpin of the group.

These incredible contradictions around sexual and gender roles and identities were exhibited directly on the page in the visual clash between how each member was drawn and how they behaved—this mapped onto my own sense of being someone who combines a variety of masculine, feminine, and androgynous qualities in my manner of dress, my voice, my affect, my performative style. And so there was a way in which I felt incredibly *seen* by *The Fantastic Four* because it was a narrative about living in a body that projected competing internal desires and identifications, which is really what the experience of gender and sexuality is about: negotiating an endless series of contradictions about your relationship to those categories and how society enforces them. When I read *The Fantastic Four* for the first time, it felt like a deep exhaling: I suddenly understood that the Marvel universe and the countless superhuman bodies that inhabited it had been central in helping me define a queer sense of self because it was a fictional world that allowed for, even visually celebrated, endless bodily contradiction and multiplicity. *Unstable molecules* are what the Fantastic Four’s bodies are made of, right? Reading that comic book, I began to see that my own desires and fantasies about superhuman bodies had to do with fictional characters that were deliciously unstable and always in flux.

AH and JW: Are there comics that you read now that don’t fit into your academic or critical, intellectual practice, that you read for pleasure or that you wouldn’t write about? Where do comics fit into your life, more broadly?

RF: After years of reading only mainstream superhero comics, and then spending nearly a decade writing a book about them, I now have a much more curated relationship to comics: I no longer follow any regular series or read contemporary superhero comics. I read reprints of classic superhero stories, and I am fascinated by abstract, avant-garde, or experimental comics. I selectively seek out comics that are aesthetically unrecognizable to me like Edie Fake’s *Gaylord Phoenix* (2010), Jesse Jacobs’s *Crawl Space* (2017), or Rodrigo Muñoz Ballester’s *Manuel no está solo* (1985). Each of these creators render fictional worlds that combine seemingly contradictory aesthetic styles like hyper-realism, minimalism, abstract expressionism, surrealism, and psychedelia to tell stories about gender transitivity, unrequited gay love, travels to higher dimensions, and all kinds of queer intimacy. I find these aesthetic

adventures to be really dazzling. For me, comics used to be an imaginative escape; then they became cultural texts to theorize and think with. They are now more objects of aesthetic curiosity and enchantment. I sometimes get lost for hours online researching weird comics that “break my brain,” as I like to put it: they might scramble my perception of what comics are supposed to be by eliminating the use of traditional sequential panels (I love comics like David Wojnarowicz and James Romberger’s *7 Miles a Second* [1996], which are almost entirely composed of massive full-page spreads so that each page is a “panel” unto itself); they might mix collage with drawing and photographs; they might have no representational figures or dispose of narrative storytelling altogether. I really like seeing how people push the medium to its absolute limits, which allows me to expand my own ability to read and make sense of texts that don’t fit any ideas I already have about what comics are and can be. And in that sense comics usually serve the purpose of bringing *beauty* into my life, which feels incredibly necessary in dark political times.

Of course, I also have collections of all the comics I loved when I was a child and that I studied to write my book, *The New Mutants*. But ultimately, I’m not invested in comprehensiveness—I think comic book reading becomes rather dull when the aim is to absorb every page, every issue, every series in its entirety. I believe in a committed eclecticism, an energetic jumping around between texts; you might say I take an associational approach to reading comics, following the trail from one set of comics to another that allows me to make surprising connections between series, characters, creators that would never be apparent through a linear approach to reading.

JW: Would you say that there’s something queer about the style or aesthetic that you’re drawn to?

RF: I’ve written extensively about the queer affordances, or aesthetic possibilities, of comics form. By this, I mean the ways that the formal qualities of comics—like sequential visual panels, the combination of image and text, and the ability to draw anything one can imagine—*lend themselves* to representing sexual and gender nonconformity. None of the formal qualities of comics are *inherently* queer; rather, they share a variety of features that allow them to be articulated to queer investments, experiences, or sensibilities. As I mentioned earlier, for instance, the serial quality of comics lends itself to a queer view of sexuality or desire as a series of unfolding erotic possibilities with no obvious end or terminal point. Similarly, the necessity of drawing a character multiple times across many panels in a sequential comic strip means that every depiction of that figure will be slightly different, multiplying or proliferating representations of a single body across visual space. Queer and trans* comics artists often exploit this feature of comics form to underscore the socially constructed nature of gendered bodies. For example, Fake’s experimental trans*

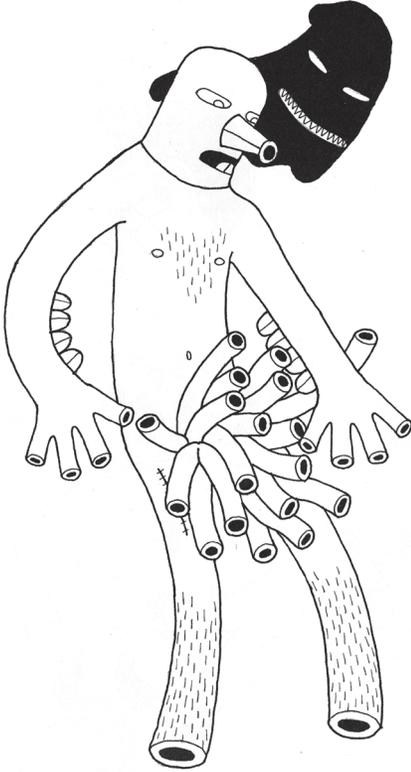


Figure 5.2. *Gaylord Phoenix*, Edie Fake (Secret Acres, 2010), 117.



Figure 5.3. *Gaylord Phoenix*, Edie Fake (Secret Acres, 2010), 149.

comic *Gaylord Phoenix* features a title character who is a mythical genderless wizard and sexual trickster. Across the arc of the narrative, Gaylord embarks on a painful but transformative adventure of sexual and gender self-discovery, that involves countless bodily transformations, surreal erotic encounters with magical creatures, and psychedelic travels through different lands. On nearly every page of the two-hundred and fifty-page epic, Fake depicts Gaylord taking on a different bodily shape. In each image, they appear with new appendages and orifices that completely confound traditional male or female genitalia and multiply or reorganize traditional human limbs. In one instance, Gaylord appears as a floating cloud with eyes; in another, they sprout a bouquet of tubes from where we would expect to see a penis or vagina; in another, their arms grow small wings that allow them to float across magical landscapes. This visual disorientation allows us to imagine gender transitivity as a thrilling kind of shape-shifting that can take numerous forms and expressions, even in the same body.

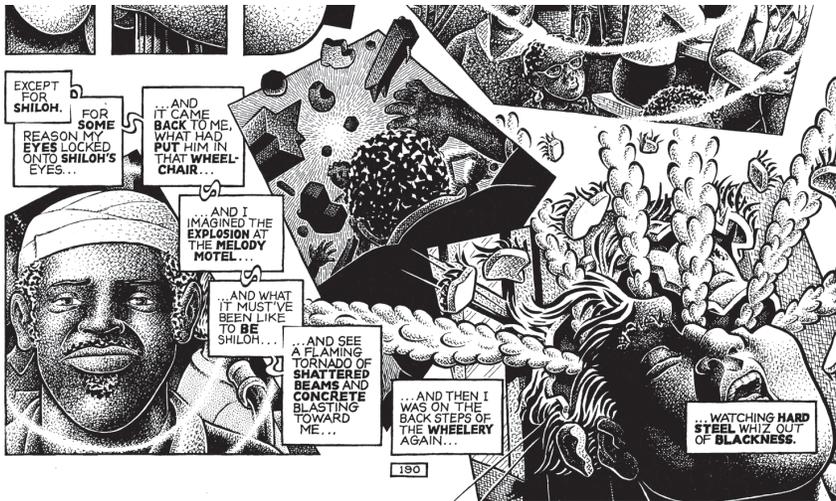


Figure 5.4. *Stuck Rubber Baby*, Howard Cruse (Paradox Press, 1995), 190.

In terms of my own personal fascinations, I am increasingly obsessed with how comics artists innovate visual metaphors or analogies for real-life erotic or intimate experiences. How do you draw *the feeling* of same-sex erotic desire? How do you give shape to the visceral experience of gender transitivity in drawn form? How do you formally capture the affective weight of seeing your friends die of AIDS? What shapes or forms adequately convey or translate what it means to be queer, to be trans*, to be nonbinary in various contexts?

Two instances always stand out in my mind. I've written before about a scene in Howard Cruse's monumental graphic novel *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995), which narrates a gay white man's coming of age in the civil rights South: the white protagonist Toland Polk stares into the eyes of an African American friend who has barely survived the racially motivated bombing of a local motel. In a series of adjacent panels, Cruse first draws Toland's face as he locks eyes with his friend, who wears a bandage around his head, followed by a surreal image of Toland's head shattering apart like a broken jigsaw puzzle with long rebars radiating outward from its center. Here, Toland encounters white supremacy not as an abstract ideology, but as the murderous obliteration of Black bodies, an encounter so horrific that it prompts an immediate identification with the body of someone who has experienced and barely survived such brutality.

That identification is materialized in the form of a literally fractured head, indexing Shiloh's actual head wound and the psychic shattering inflicted by racist violence (2019, 592). The scene captures the affective intensity of a cross-racial and cross-sexual identification between a white gay man and a straight Black man; it is distinctly queer not only because Toland is gay but because it

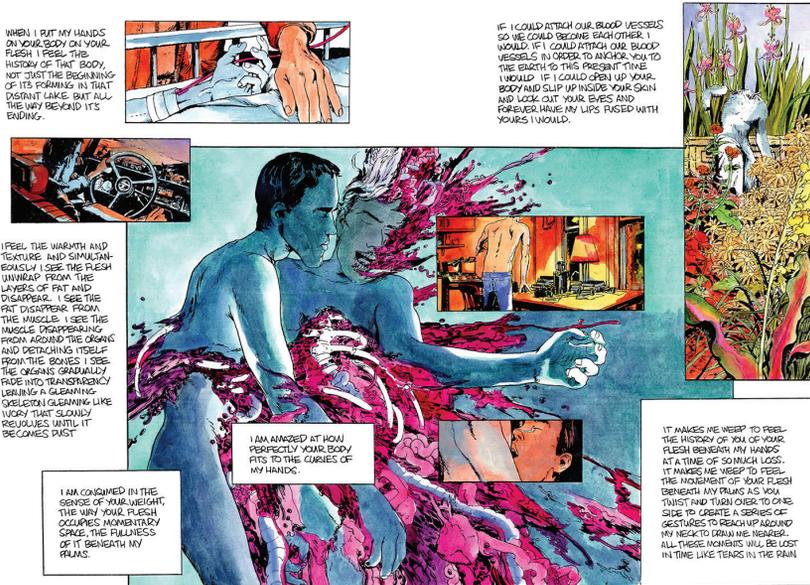


Figure 5.5. *7 Miles a Second*, David Wojnarowicz, James Romberger, Marguerite Van Cook. 1996 (Fantagraphics, 2013), 60–61.

visualizes a moment of such heightened psychic intimacy that it destabilizes Toland's sense of self to the point of annihilation.

Similarly, in Wojnarowicz's graphic memoir *7 Miles a Second*, drawn by James Romberger and painted by Marguerite Van Cook, the creators represent the devastating moment when Wojnarowicz witnesses his lover Peter Hujar die of AIDS in a hospital bed. At the center of a double-page spread, Romberger draws a surreal image of Wojnarowicz and Hujar's bodies exploding into one another. It is a visual rendering of Wojnarowicz's fantasy of a final union between himself and his former lover. Around the central panorama are a series of smaller panels depicting moments of quiet intimacy, including Wojnarowicz grazing Hujar's limp hand, and presumably later sitting alone to eat. Here the artists use representational *density*, the frantic accumulation of smaller panels around an explosive fantasy scenario, to capture the affective experience of rapidly losing lovers, social communities, and one's own physical health in the face of the epidemic.

When I first read *7 Miles a Second*, I was completely disoriented and emotionally unraveled by the experience. With the exception of Bill Sienkiewicz's art in *The New Mutants* series, I had never encountered a comic book story told with such visual ferocity, intensity, and rebelliousness. It formally captured the disorganizing experience of being psychologically shattered, and physically degenerated, by the twin traumas of homophobia and AIDS. The story is largely

told in bold, double-paged panoramas that depict hallucinatory episodes or dream sequences where Wojnarowicz imagines drowning in a tsunami; fantasizes riding a massive train toward the end of history; dreams he is a dog being eviscerated by the police; and experiences his body decomposing under the eyes of a woolly mammoth skeleton. In many of these displays, people's bodies are depicted violently colliding, exploding, smashed, broken or dismembered. Van Cook paints the narrative with watercolors that frequently bleed across the borders of Romberger's drawings, blending into one another to produce odd and surprising hues that are often not "appropriate" or natural to the scene (in one instance Wojnarowicz's skin appears purple, while in another the sky is painted bright red). Alongside the charged images of bodily disintegration, Van Cook's watercolors affectively invoke the feeling of drowning or hallucinating. When I first read it, I remember thinking: "What I'm seeing on the page is making me viscerally feel what it must have been like to live during the height of the AIDS epidemic." This particular reading experience catalyzed my fascination with the ability of comics artists to transmit the affective force of a distinctly queer experience, but to do so *non-representationally*. *7 Miles a Second* doesn't always directly or explicitly *represent* people with AIDS; rather, it provides a vast range of visual metaphors or analogies that seem to formally describe what living with, and fighting against, the disease might feel like. For instance, many of the panoramas in *7 Miles a Second* present elongated diagonal panels that cut through an entire page at odd angles like an X-acto knife finely slicing a scene into jarring segments. This formal strategy visually invokes the feeling of being fragmented, cut up, or disarticulated by the violence of government neglect or mistreatment by medical professionals.

In sum then, I am less invested in any single distinct queer comics style and more invested in any aesthetic *sensibility* that attempts to translate queer affect, embodiment, or lived experience into visual form.

JW: So, comics are a portal to a historical sensibility. Not a representation of one.

RF: Yes.

JW: And you're drawn to those that have the most affective power.

RF: Absolutely—after all, the combination of text and image in comics is intended to pump up the volume on the affective or emotional force of whatever is being displayed on the page. If you could convey the same intensity of an idea, story or image with only words, or only images, then you'd do that. In comics, the intentional concatenation of multiple modes of visual representation—not only text and image, but colors, the texture of the paper, the different scales of comic book panels, the shape and size of the material text in your hand—creates a heightened affective intensity that is a unique and powerful feature of the medium. Reading comics is mentally straining

because of the number of variables you are juggling as you process visual and verbal information simultaneously. But it is also thrilling because so much is happening all at once—the rush of visual information through your mind can be made to articulate with an endless variety of lived experiences of bodily intensity or heightened states of consciousness. Sex, sexuality, and gender are deeply embodied and viscerally felt, whether they are linked to immediate material experiences (like having sex or taking hormones) or social identities and performances. To my mind, the most exciting comics art harnesses the visual intensity of the medium to transmit or translate particular felt, lived, or embodied experiences of gender and sexual nonconformity to wide audiences.

At a conference presentation by queer comics scholar, Michael Harrison, I remember being blown away by Ballester's *Manuel no está solo*, an astonishingly beautiful Spanish comic about a gay man's unrequited love for his handsome, straight male friend Manuel (2013). Though the two men become socially intimate, they never have sex. At one point, the protagonist (an avatar for the author) sees Manuel out on a date with a woman. It emotionally obliterates him. Ballester depicts a hallucinatory scene in which Rodrigo runs to an ice cream store, buys a massive banana split sundae, and quite literally "eats" his emotions—with each bite, the panels wobble, melting like ice cream, while Rodrigo's own body contorts, liquifies and *becomes* melted ice cream. At some point, we can no longer tell if Rodrigo's body looks like the soupy remnants of a banana split or an ocean of tears. Perhaps he becomes both. Ballester's visual style repeatedly combines a precise, *hyper-realistic* depiction of bodies and urban landscapes with a hallucinatory, *surrealist* depiction of feeling states like this one. In so doing, he attempts to capture the passionate queer emotions that roil beneath the surface of one gay man's body—in other words, comics form becomes a space for visualizing the interior psychic life of queer desire on the page. After all, the page literally looks like the wet, messy, porous liquidity of the tears we shed over unrequited love; Ballester then provides a potent visual metaphor for the way our minds and hearts can become figuratively porous or lose their boundaries in the face of our love and attachment for another. Through this visual metaphor, the scene makes the particularity of one gay man's emotional struggle translatable to many other affective contexts and experiences regardless of one's sexual identity or gender expression.

AH and JW: So many of the comics that you discuss are about diversity. Are they for, or do they imply, a readership that is *not* as diverse and that needs to be instructed on the value of diversity, or do they take a queer readership as a given?

RF: Let me just say unequivocally: I don't believe in the idea of instructing audiences about anything. I just don't think it works. People do not read comics to be taught how they are *supposed* to view the world; they read comics to

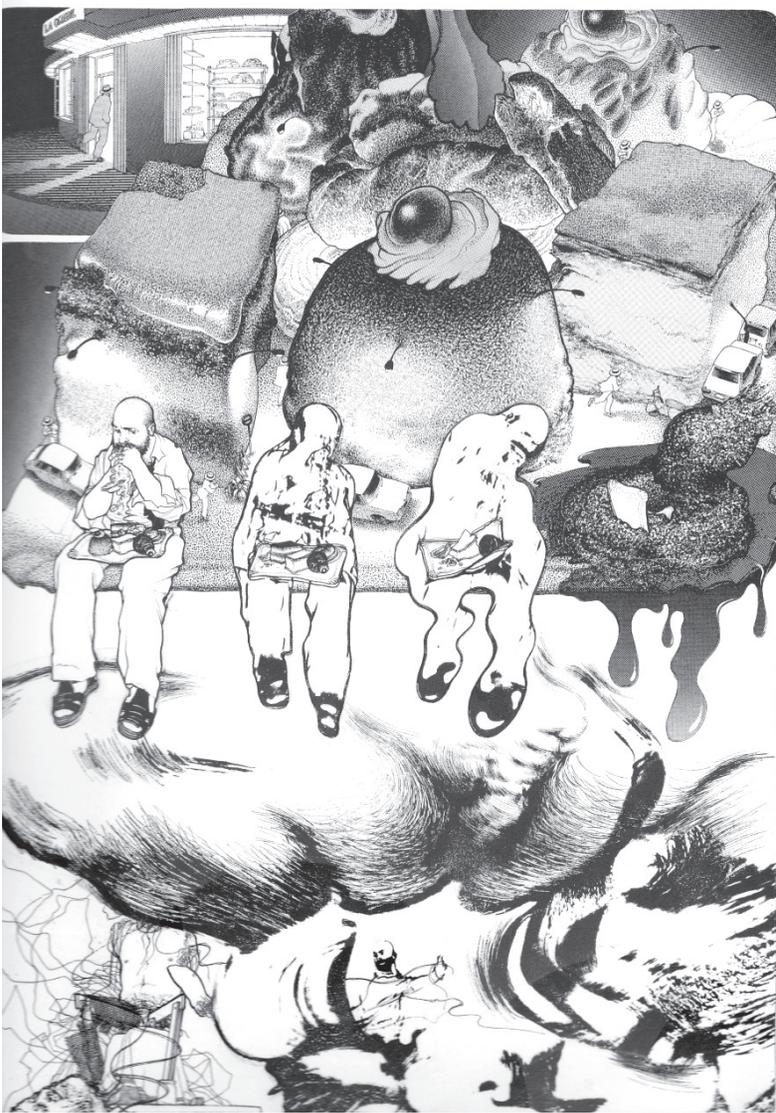


Figure 5.6. *Manuel no está solo*, Rodrigo Muñoz Ballester (Ediciones Sinsentido, 1985), n.p.

discover new ways of interpreting, making sense of, or *imagining* the world otherwise. The distinction is a fine but important one. One mode of storytelling is didactic or aims to inform, the other aims to expand the imagination. I believe cultural production has the most impact on audiences when it works on readers' imaginations, allowing them to see and think differently. Consequently, comics are at their best not when they provide a clear definition of what diversity is, but offer readers unexpected, enchanting, or unusual creative

frameworks for understanding the *idea* of diversity anew. For instance, I've published on the masterful superhero comic book series, *Legion Lost* (1999), which I often consider to be a case study in comics diversity: this twelve-issue miniseries tells the story of a team of teenage superheroes who find themselves lost on the other side of the universe. There, they discover a genocidal god-like being, the Progenitor, who is intent on wiping out all life in this uncharted galaxy. The genius of the series was that it addressed the problem of diversity from numerous angles—not only are the characters diverse in terms of their gender, race, and even species identities, but each issue of the series is narrated from the perspective of a different character. The series then not only depicts a “legion” of superheroes but trains readers how to *think like a legion*, that is, to approach questions of collective concern from multiple, competing perspectives. At the same time, by centering the value of complex character development alongside rip-roaring space adventure, the series showed readers how a variety of differences between the teammates—including those of temperament, spiritual belief, emotional responses to stress, and past life experiences—are as important to their struggle for survival as their distinct gender, racial, and species identities. Finally, by pitting this heterogenous team against a singular genocidal monster, the series presented the Legion's collective fight as a struggle against a god-like force intent on *reducing or eliminating diversity* from his part of the universe. In *Legion Lost*, then, diversity comes to have multiple meanings, and is addressed at every level of text: in its cast of characters, its plot, its narrative address, and its formal elaboration on the page. To read the text is to imaginatively conceive of the problem of diversity from a kaleidoscopic perspective.

Similarly, when I was growing up, my attachment to the Marvel Comics universe had everything to do with its innate heterogeneity. Diversity, understood as the simple fact of human variety, was a totally organic part of the Marvel universe—every character looked distinct from all the others and there was an endless font of different species, superhuman types, geographical locations, intergalactic conflicts, teams and alternative families that comprised this creative world. But more than that, the *ethos* of the Marvel universe was one of cosmopolitan encounter between unlike people who were always productively transformed by meeting strangers from across the globe, the galaxy, and the universe. The ongoing discourse on representational diversity is often concerned with the *underrepresentation* of minoritized people in fictional comic book worlds. And lest I sound equivocal on this, I will say without reservation: it is absolutely imperative that comics directly depict the widest range of queer, trans*, Black, Asian American, Latinx, Indigenous, and disabled characters and lifeworlds, and that the comic book industry highlight the creative talent of equally diverse writers and artists. Beyond simply being nice or ethical, this is

a necessary step in making comics accountable to the world we actually live in. With that said, if you introduce “diverse” characters to a creative world largely lacking in an ethos of cosmopolitan encounter and exchange, their presence will mean nothing more than the mere numerical fact of depicting lots of different kinds of people on the comics page. Merely nominal diversity would have no meaningful impact on the ways characters respond to and negotiate their differences.

I’ve remained attached to classic Marvel comics for so many years because the fundamental conceit of the Marvel imaginative universe was simply that it is filled with different kinds of people and it’s awesome to get to know them. When you hitch that to an *ethos of care for the world*—which is a central value of superhero comic books—then you are linking a diverse cast of characters to the value of negotiating, making meaning out of and responding to human difference. In other words, you create a fictional world that is organically diverse, filled with many kinds of people (just like the world we actually inhabit), and you set them to dynamic interaction. By its very structure, this kind of cosmos hails or draws in a diverse readership, that includes self-identified queer people, as well as others who simply see or interpret the world in queer ways regardless of their sexuality or gender.

AH and JW: Your introduction to your special comics issue of *American Literature* (2018) proposes that there’s something queer about comics in three ways. As an outsider medium, comics elicit attachments from outsider audiences, outcasts and minorities. Comics’ representational capacities enable them more than other modes of art to make queerness visible and believable. And comics’ serial narrativity—repetition with a difference—fosters opportunities for queer stories to emerge. So, if *all* comics are always queer in these ways, are there useful ways to distinguish the queerness of LGBTQ+ comics in particular?

RF: There are numerous ways to distinguish the queerness of LGBTQ+ comics: you can reconstruct the history of self-identified LGBTQ+ comics creators, identify distinct styles, track representations of characters, study reception by self-identified LGBTQ+ readers, compare visualizations of LGBTQ+ sex, sexuality, and gender-expression across time and place. The list could go on. Each approach is necessary and valuable. And yet, in order to capture the capaciousness of queer gender and sexuality we cannot presume a stable ground of “gay” or “lesbian” or “bisexual” or “transgender” identity; all of those terms have multiple meanings in different contexts. I agree with Eve Sedgwick that whatever we call “queer” must in some way be grounded in the lived experience of self-identified LGBTQ+ people; but *also* her follow-up claim that queerness will always exceed the particularity of LGBTQ+ lives to describe a range of experiences of gender and sexuality that do not follow the line of

heterosexual normativity. Queer is elastic, evolving, and ultimately not hitched to any specific identity.

You can look at comics texts written and drawn by anybody, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender expression, in which questions of alternative gender and sexuality are either central to the text or circulate peripherally at the edges of the narrative. I often think of Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's beautiful and strange graphic novel *Skim* (2005) as a queer text in the most potent sense of the term. It is a story about a precocious Asian Canadian teenage girl who identifies as a witch and is struggling to be seen and heard by her friends and family. The queerness of the text is extremely subdued: in a shocking and unexpected moment, the character Skim shares a kiss with her English teacher, a beautiful, intelligent middle-aged woman who is one of the only people who admires and recognizes Skim's brightness. This moment is brief but powerful, and it is never described or talked about in the terms of "lesbian" identity. Skim feels more attached to her identity as a witch than to any other social category including lesbian, Asian or Canadian. If we expect a coming out story, or a clear articulation by Skim that she is an "Asian Canadian queer girl," we won't find it. Queerness appears instead in the breaking of inter-generational taboos, in the surprising intimacy and recognition between a student and her loving mentor, in Skim's disinterest in almost all identity categories. The brief kiss never blossoms into a romance. It is ephemeral and fleeting, yet transformative; this is also an accurate description of the way the text is drawn. There is a fine-art quality to Jillian Tamaki's rendering of each scene, using long flowing lines, a black-and-white color palate, and depicting bodies and faces in a distinctly Japanese style that invokes the theatrical make-up of Kabuki theatre and Geisha culture. The delicate, extremely detail-oriented, and, dare I say, self-consciously "feminine" quality of the art feels intensely *gay* to me, but it can't be described as "camp" because it is so restrained and lacking in excess (for example, see figure 14.4 on page 223).

You couldn't easily categorize *Skim* as an LGBTQ+ comic if you were committed to the idea that its author has to be a self-identified gay or lesbian person. So, we need to leave room for different versions of queerness in comics production, circulation and reception, from the most self-consciously gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and nonbinary comics to the most ephemeral, fleeting, and even completely unnamed expressions of *queer being or affect* in sequential visual art. This might simply involve producing many different kinds of genealogies, reading lists, and definitions of queer comics that deploy different criteria for what counts as a distinctly *queer* aesthetic intervention in sequential art. I think this work is already happening in comics studies and it is making for an incredibly exciting moment when the entire field of international comics production is being reappraised as a vast archive of queer aesthetic

practices. I am basically of the mind that, if you can provide a compelling description of what you mean by “queer” and make an argument for the value of one comic or another as uniquely so, then I’m here for it.

To paraphrase Sedgwick: if what we want is to create a world in which a vast range of queer desires and embodiments are valued and celebrated, then why shouldn’t we have endless definitions of what counts as queer? I think the point is not to ultimately decide what is and is not an LGBTQ+ comic (frankly, I think *The Fantastic Four* is one of the queerest comics ever produced and there isn’t a single self-identified LGBTQ+ character in the original run). Rather, our task is to continually *extrapolate what could be a queer aesthetic act or practice* in a given comic text, and then to see what theoretically unfolds from naming it as such. In this sense, I am less interested in identifying what is distinctly queer about LGBTQ+ comics and more invested in thinking about queerness as an experimental, theoretical, or conceptual possibility that unfolds from comics’ seriality. A queer sequence if there ever was one.

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