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Disidentification, Disorientation, and Disruption:

Queer Multimodal Rhetoric in Queer Comics

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Queer characters must be allowed to live in a queer world doing queer things with the dominant culture playing a marginalized role. —Edward Sewell.

Introduction

Both comics and queerness have occupied the margins, culturally, historically, and academically. While both have made forays to the center, finding value and currency in academia in particular, many consider both comics and queers too outside the realm of respectability to be granted voice and legitimacy. And perhaps they should remain on the margins because, as Harriet Malinowitz (1995) observes, the margin is “a site both of annihilation and actualization, of disempowerment and electrifying resistance,” capable of producing “not only abject outsiderhood but also profoundly unique ways of self-defining, knowing, and acting” (p. 251). In this essay, I suggest that the multimodal affordances of comics are also capable of producing profound expressions of queerness and queer world-making. Indeed, in analyzing several queer comics, this essay demonstrates how comics produced by and for queers become a site of multimodal queer rhetoric, a rhetoric that disrupts and remakes (hetero)normative discourses through combining multiple modes of meaning making.

Scholarship on multimodality and queerness remains scant, but a few scholars have noted the link between the two. In their 2004 webtext, Brian Houle, Alex Kimball and Heidi McKee describe how multimodal spaces and composition can allow for fluid gender expression. Their article presents Alex Kimball’s (their student’s) project which traces Kimball’s transgender negotiation with Robin Hood by his side. Houle and McKee find that “through Alex’s use of multimedia, his composition evokes and challenges simultaneous senses of identity placement and displacement, identity location and dislocation” (Houle et al., 2004, n.p.). In other words, the multimodal and multimedia form of his text help Alex negotiate his identities, past and present, where the form itself demonstrates the fluidity of identity and sexuality.

Similarly, when teacher-scholars Jennifer DiGrazia and Michel Boucher (2005) experimented with queering a writing class, they encouraged students to include multimodal elements in their text, because they wanted students “to experiment with and explore new and more nuanced ways of representing self” (p. 30). They discovered that “in order to write queerly (to represent new identity configurations...we had to expand our ideas of what it meant to write” (DiGrazia & Boucher, 2005, p. 40). Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2011) have made similar arguments:

If queerness means more than just one more static representation of “diversity,” containable in its knowability, then it must *move* in multiple directions at once, embracing multi-modality, multi-genre texts, and even, when available or perhaps necessary, multi-media. (p. 183)

Like DiGrazia and Boucher (2005), Alexander and Rhodes connect queerness with an expanded notion of writing that, like queer, is fluid, transgressive, excessive, multi-faceted, and multimodal.

In “Queerness, Multimodality, and the Possibilities of Re/Orientation,” Alexander and Rhodes (2012a) are more specific, suggesting that multimodality and queerness are inextricably linked, mutually constructed and construed. Alexander and Rhodes (2012a) explore how queer and multimodality intersect in multi-mediated space(s), and to view this intersection, they physically juxtapose two narratives side-by-side: on one side of the book, they offer a narrative of how scholars have examined queerness represented online and through multi-media texts, and on the other side of the page, they offer a narrative of Jean Cocteau as unacknowledged queer and multimedia artist. Ultimately, they see in “multimodal composition of queerness possibilities for reorienting our understanding of sexuality and how it moves in the world, and for how it orients us along certain paths, particular trajectories on which we may, or may not, wish to travel” (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012a, p. 189). Those trajectories, futurities, and dis/re/orientations function as queer rhetoric, as channels for queer expression and queer world-making.

Alexander and Rhodes (2012b) define queer rhetoric as “self-conscious and critical engagement with normative discourses of sexuality in the public sphere that exposes their naturalization and torques them to create different or counter-discourses, giving voice and agency to multiple and complex sexual experiences” (Introduction). Queer rhetoric in action means challenging staid norms and values, especially as they relate to sex/uality and gender. Their webtext forms a queer rhetorical archive, where they collect and describe examples of queer rhetoric in action, like singer Gay Pimp’s “Soccer Practice” video which reworks masculinities associated with the gym and working out into a queer discourse that associates sex/uality and the erotic with those performances of hypermasculinity; too, this video highlights the homoerotic nature of highly masculine realms like sports, frats, and the military (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012, Disidentifying). Gay Pimp’s video, as an example of queer

rhetorical practice, critically engages with normative discourses of masculinity, and it offers a counter discourse that queers and disrupts silent (normalized) boundaries that would cordon off queer sex and desire from such highly masculinized environments. In effect, the video torques masculinity to suggest that desire and sex between men does not eschew the masculine and offers other trajectories or futurities for queer masculinity.

The queer rhetoric of Gay Pimp’s “Soccer Practice,” found in other examples like the ACT UP “Silence Equals Death” logo with a pink triangle on a black background aimed to raise awareness for the AIDS crisis (See Figure 1), and a Lesbian Avengers black and white poster that features a stereotypical housewife holding a bomb next to the phrase, “We Recruit,” have in common that they all convey queer rhetoric through multimodal means. In combining the visual, the gestural, the aural, the textual, and the spatial, these texts engage in queer rhetorical practices that undermine (hetero)normative discourses to suggest other ways of being in the world. Importantly, this queer rhetoric would not be conveyed in quite the same way were these texts largely constructed in the linguistic mode, because, as Gunther Kress (2005) observes, different modes offer different affordances and possibilities for meaning. In other words, writing/typing *queer* versus visually representing *queer* does not offer an equivalent meaning; rather, representing queerness multimodally matters, especially in terms of queer rhetoric. Moreover, queer, multimodal rhetoric, while present in posters, photos, and even material texts like the AIDS Quilt, can also be found in the multimodal medium of comics, a medium that has, at least in/through underground comix, provided “an uncensored, internal conversation within queer communities, and thus provide a unique window in to the hopes, fears, and fantasies of queer people” (Hall, 2013, n.p.).

Queerness and comics have history, which is not all too surprising because they “both tend not to get any respect” (qtd. in Hall, 2013, n.p.). Marginalized by mainstream comics publishers, early queer comics artists had to rely on community support and resources because they lacked the commercial infrastructure of powerhouse comics producers. For example, Mary Wing’s 1973 *Come Out Comix*, the first lesbian comic book, was created much like a zine, “on a photocopy machine in the basement of a local radical women’s karate school” (Hall, 2013, n.p.). Too, LGBTQ comics often were not granted shelf space in many comic book stores and awards ceremonies, and were primarily produced, published, and promoted by LGBTQ people (Hall, 2013). Yet, queer comics—underground comics/comix made for and by queers—have been an important social, cultural, ideological outlet for the LGBTQ community. For example, Howard Cruse’s pivotal *Gay Comix*, with the “x” of comix signifying adult content, critiqued and challenged socio-cultural norms around sex and sexuality. The



Figure 1: Silence = Death poster (1987), created and circulated by ACT UP during the AIDS years.

first issue, published in 1980, includes a man in a literal closet (indicated by the hangers stuck in the door, and the dangling clothing) who, through eye-hole cutouts, ogles a muscular, scantily clad male in the process of eating an obviously phallic hotdog.

Alison Bechdel, who had been cartooning since her childhood and who had been an out lesbian for a couple of years, found the first issue of *Gay Comix* and realized, “You can do cartoons about your own real life being a gay person” (Chute, 2017, p. 358); she went on to create one of the longest running (28 years!) LGBTQ comic series, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, and arguably, one of the most important graphic memoirs of the 21st century, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. The latter explores her own lesbian sexuality vis-à-vis her father’s closeted gayness and subsequent death/suicide, while the former follows a group of lesbian women as they navigate city-life in the 80s, 90s, and early aught years. In this way, *Dykes to Watch Out For* acts as a political touchstone and as a queer archive that collects the histories and experiences of LGBTQ lives over time (Galvan, 2018a). Likewise, queer comics during the AIDS plague years provided a space for rage, sarcasm, political and social commentary, therapy, and awareness raising (Hall, 2013, n.p.). The 1990s ushered in important lesbian comics like Diane DiMassa’s *Hothead Paisan* series and Jennifer Camper’s *Rude Girls* and *Dangerous Women*, with Camper’s comics promoting community and activism (Galvan, 2018b), and DiMassa’s series following “its unhinged lesbian heroine as she wreaks havoc on the White male straight world” (Barounis, 2018, p. 1). In her recent essay on *Hothead Paisan*, Cynthia Barounis argues that the main character—who DiMassa describes as a “Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist”—remains timely as a response to a racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic Donald Trump being elected to the highest office in America.

Since the 1990s, LGBTQ comics have become more and more common, with Hillary Chute (2018) recently suggesting that queer comics might be the fastest-growing area in comics right now (p. 349). More and more mainstream comics, too, are including LGBTQ characters in positive ways. Series like Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine DeLandro’s *Bitch Planet*, a sci-fi prison comic, Marjorie Liu and Sana Takeda’s *Monstress*, and Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staple’s sci-fi space opera, *Saga*, includes non-binary, non-normative sex and sexualities as part and parcel of a well-rounded cast of characters. That is not to say that LGBTQ characters have not been in mainstream comics because they were and are, as Morris E. Franklin III (2001) discovers in his analysis of mainstream comics between 1988 and 1993. Franklin (2001) sees gay and lesbian characters come out in DC and Marvel comics, move from minor to major roles, and be represented as normal people who are not evil, deranged, or abnormal (p. 224). However, this normalization, while it includes queer characters, also has the effect of assimilating these characters, of muting and mitigating their queerness to make them more palatable to mainstream, straight audiences. Edward H. Sewell, Jr. (2001) observes a similar trend in mainstream comic strips, where queer characters “are well integrated into heterosexual society in that they look an act ‘straight’ before coming out as queer, and they

look and act in a manner appropriate to the dominant heterosexual culture after coming out” (p. 253). Moreover, when queer characters appeared in comics like *Doonesbury* and *For Better or For Worse*, some newspapers replaced the strip or dropped it altogether.

In contrast, queer comics made by and for queer people focus not on assimilation, but on representing a queer culture that often directly opposes or conflicts with dominant heterosexual culture (Sewell, 2001, p. 271). Indeed, many of the essays in a special issue of *American Literature* devoted to queer comics demonstrate comics’ “capacity to represent or make visible nonnormative desires, intimacies, and affiliations in ways that might elude other mediums” (Scott and Fawaz, 2018, p. 211). The unabashed, celebrated portrayal of LGBTQ lives and desires in queer comics is what makes them such a rich site of queer rhetorical practice in a multimodal medium. And comics are multimodal texts, as Dale Jacobs (2007) argues in his essay on teaching multiliteracies through comics: “in comics, there are elements present besides words, but these elements are just as important in making meaning from the text. In fact, it is impossible to make full sense of the words on the page in isolation from the audio, visual, gestural, and spatial” (p. 22).

In other words, comics rely on a variety of modes to make meaning: the linguistic in printed words and font choice(s); the gestural in facial expressions and body language; the aural in bolded words, ellipsis suggesting a pause, or onomatopoeias; the spatial in arrangement of panels and the space between panels; and most obviously, the visual in the images and color palette. Comics purposefully combine multiple modes to make meaning, which, as the New London Group (NLG) (1996) has observed, “is of a different order to the other five modes of meaning; it represents the patterns of interconnections among the other modes” (p. 78). But how do queer comics combine these modes of meaning making as acts of queer rhetorical practice? This essay shows that the multimodal rhetoric of queer comics give voice to silenced and elided desires and sexualities, and that reorient viewers through disidentification with normative discourses, disruption of heteronormativity, and depiction of marginalized sex/ualities.

Disidentifying Fairytales and Undermining Heteronormativity

Disidentification is a queer rhetorical practice that, as José Esteban Muñoz (1999) explains, remakes and rewrites dominant, socio-cultural scripts by reworking those scripts to represent and reflect minority lives and worlds. (p. 23). In the many examples Muñoz (1999) provides in his book on disidentification and performance among queer people of color, Muñoz shows how disidentification offers a third avenue for historically disenfranchised groups to make meaning—they neither identify with or counter-identify against the dominant culture, preferring instead to work on or against the dominant ideology by undermining and transforming that ideology’s cultural logics from within (p. 11). The work of disidentification

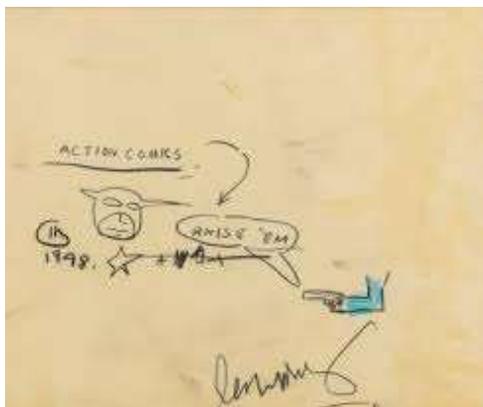


Figure 2: *Action Comics*, Jean-Michel Basquiat (1987).

is accomplished through recycling and rethinking hegemonic social scripts, and “the process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identification” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31). Said differently, disidentification involves remixing normalized, hierarchical structures to both expose their naturalized and unmarked status, and to make space for those individuals who have been marginalized from such structures.

The vast majority of disidentification examples that Muñoz (1999) provides are multimodal texts, ranging from pop art to film to theatrical performances to drag. In one example, Muñoz describes a Jean-Michel Basquiat (1987) drawing titled, *Action Comics*, that is a reproduction of the original cover art for the first issue of Superman. As can be seen from Figure 2, Basquiat’s Superman is not a bastion of white male perfection in muscle-bulging lycra. Rather, Basquiat offers a rough, child-like version where the “disidentificatory strokes here retain the vibrancy of wanting to be Superman, of wanting to be able to accomplish the awe-inspiring feats that only the Man of Steel can accomplish, without retaining the aestheticism of the image” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 41). Basquiat does not disavow Superman entirely, but instead re/presents Superman in such a way as to draw attention to underlying normative discourses inherent in and attached to the figure of Superman over time.

Alexander and Rhodes (2012b) provide another example of disidentification in their analysis of the 1950s muscle magazine, *Physique Pictorial*. These magazines were intended to represent hypermasculine ideals like strength and dominance to a straight male audience, but they were often circulated among gay men, serving as an early form of gay pornography (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012b, Disidentification). Alexander and Rhodes (2012b) perceive of this repurposing as a “form of disidentification—a simultaneous identification with the masculinity represented and yet the use of that masculinity for homoerotic ends and interests, running counter to the starkly heterosexist aims of most muscle magazines” (Disidentification). Gay men reworked the cultural logics of masculinity from within to reveal gender norms and to produce a counter-public suited to their own needs, interests, and lives.

In both examples, disidentification occurs through multiple modes, where visual, spatial, and gestural elements are changed to offer a dissident narrative that “works on or against dominant ideology...a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within” (Muñoz, 1999, p.

11). In the examples briefly outlined here, and in so many other sites of queer resistance, the work of disidentification occurs multimodally. The AIDS Quilt is a material, multimodal example of disidentification that torques the domestic and familial rhetoric associated with quilting to bond the LGBTQ community in honoring lives lost to the plague. Instead of nice, neat squares perfectly aligned to form a distinct pattern, the AIDS Quilt is a hodgepodge of materials and memorials, a multimodal tapestry, colorful and chaotic in its expressions of celebration and sorrow. Again, in this text, and in so many queer texts, the transformative, disruptive effects of disidentification occur through a combination of modes operating in concert to create specific, social, ideological meaning about queer being, living, and dying that could not be conveyed otherwise.

In queer comics like Emily Carroll’s “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter,” for example, the larger message of the comic hinges on a multimodal moment (or more likely, moments) of disidentification. This fairytale-esque webcomic is told in three parts, with the goddess Anu-Anulan disguising herself as a crow, a young child, and a knight to trick Yorenn, Yir’s daughter, into parting with braids of her long, silvery hair. In the final sequence, Anu-Anulan appears to Yorenn as herself and the two end up together instead of the predictable marriage of a damsel in distress to her knight in shining armor. In telling a queer love story where two women fall in love, Carroll disidentifies with fairytales, with the understanding that disidentification aims “to intervene in publicly circulating images and norms to critique and open up alternative pathways for desire and identification” (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012b, *Disidentifying*). Anu-Anulan, in being a female who occupies a typically male role, and in pursuing and falling in love with a woman, works on and against the cultural logics of the fairytale genre to suggest other, queer ways of being in the world. If, as Muñoz (1999) claims, “Disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy” (p. 25), then this queer comic multimodally de/records the fairytale genre from the perspective of a queer woman, a minority historically omitted from a romantic genre so ensconced in the heterosexual paradigm.

This webcomic’s queer rhetorical practice of disidentification—where the socio-cultural

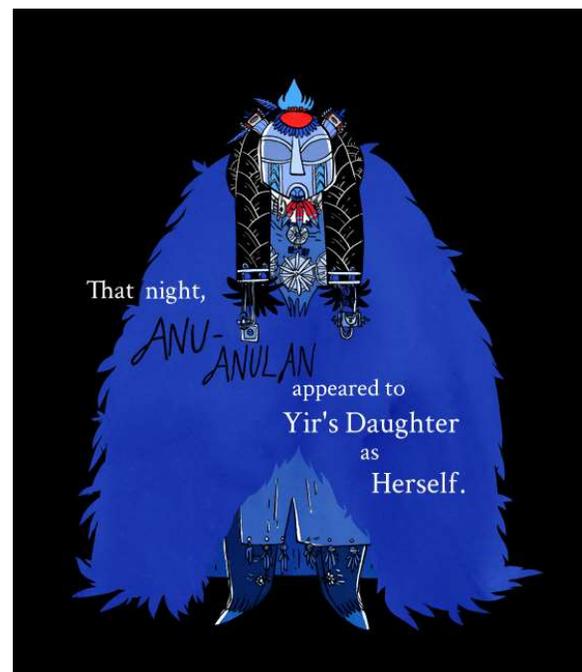


Figure 3: Anu-Anulan from Emily Carroll’s “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter” (2011).

script is flipped—functions multimodally. Readers do not actually see Anu-Anulan until the final sequence when she appears to Yorenn, with the only clues to her gender identity being the first line of the comic, “The Goddess Anu-Anulan was in love.” Readers, like previous students of mine, tend to promptly forget that she is a Goddess and assume she is male, an assumption affirmed by Anu-Anulan’s role in the comic and her masculine appearance (See Figure 3). In contrast, Yorenn, as a typical female protagonist in a fairytale, reads as hyper-feminine with her willowy frame, red dress, and waist-length, silver hair, but Anu-Anulan is the butch to Yorenn’s femme. Anu-Anulan presents as genderqueer, performing as both masculine and feminine and her blurring of gender boundaries is multimodal. Her masculine appearance is accompanied by female pronouns, and Figure 3 shows that juxtaposition as written, quite literally across her body. This contrast requires several modes—the visual, the linguistic, the spatial, the gestural—to create a moment where gender norms are troubled and undermined; this an example of queer multimodality in action. Queer/ness seeks to expose and challenge gender and sex norms, and queer comics accomplish that disruption multimodally.

Reworking these social, sexual values from within the fairytale discourse and through multiple modes of meaning makes sense, considering that multimodal composing is a social, semiotic process where designers draw on available resources to (re)make meaning. According to Gunther Kress (2010), “in a social-semiotic account of meaning, individuals, with their social histories, socially shaped, located in social environments, using socially made, culturally available resources, are agentive and generative in sign-making and communication” (p. 54). Composers create and make meaning using affordances available to them, or what the New London Group (1996) calls, “Available Designs.” These designs—both discursive and non-discursive—are socio-culturally bound, and from which we fashion our sense of the world and ourselves. Judith Butler (1993) explains it from a queer theoretical perspective: “where there is an ‘I’ who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that ‘I’ and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will” (Butler, p. 171). Yet, the NLG (1996) finds that in the process of sign-making, in the process of using available multimodal designs, signers create new designs, or *The ReDesigned* (New London Group, 1996). In “Anu-Anulan and Yir’s Daughter,” Emily Carroll draws on the familiar tropes of the fairytale genre, tropes she multimodally redesigns through the butch/femme dichotomy of Yorenn and Anu-Anulan, to re/present an “I” that reflects queer lived experiences; in addition, her multimodal modifications have the queer rhetorical effect of disidentifying with a genre whose hallmark is heterosexuality.

Additionally, multimodality in this queer comic undermines heteronormativity, which can be defined as the institutions and discourses that normalize and privilege heterosexuality. Challenging heteronormativity is queer rhetorical move that continues to be of import because heteronormativity is often unmarked and invisible, and yet, inflicts violence on the lives of so

many LGBTQ people. Gust A. Yep (2003) likens this violence to soul murder, and explains that it occurs discursively, with “words, gestures, tones, images, presentations, and omissions used to differentially treat, degrade, pathologize, and represent lesbian and gay subjectivity and experience” (p.23). Because “heteronormativity . . . is the quintessential force creating, sustaining, and perpetuating the erasure, marginalization, disempowerment, and oppression of sexual others” (Yep, 2003, p. 18), a number of queer rhetoric and composition scholars have emphasized the significance of recognizing, naming, and disrupting heteronormativity (Sumara & Davis, 1999; Alexander, 2008; Wallace & Alexander, 2009). Carroll’s web-comic accomplishes this queer rhetorical move of disruption through a multimodal montage sequence. After Anu-Anulan appears to Yorenn as herself, she stays with Yorenn, but instead of being told about their relationship, readers are shown it. As can be seen in Figure 4, no words are used to express the intimate moments and love experienced between Anu-Anulan and Yorenn. They share laughter, sadness, the same bed, cups of coffee, kisses, hugs, meals, and those instances are conveyed through multimodal means. Readers experience the gambit of their relationship through facial expressions, body language, gestures, and images collaged together, all of which work together to convey meaning. Indeed, Carroll expresses the sense that time is passing or has passed through the spatial and visual modes in the juxtaposition of images relating Anu-Anulan and Yorenn’s love story. The montage sequence begins and end with a similar image of Anu-Anulan and Yorenn sitting together, with the only difference being Yorenn’s hair is short in the first image and long in the last image, which



Figure 4: Anu-Anulan and Yorenn relationship montage, Emily Carroll (2011).

indicates that time has passed, knowledge of their queer relationship that is only conveyed multi-modally.

Rhetorically, this sequence has the effect of unseating heteronormativity. Instead of a man and a woman sharing a bed, holding each other, and kissing one another, this comic portrays two women loving each other in ways typically attached to heterosexual couples. In one respect, queer scholars might claim that this relationship is homonormative, or to summarize Lisa Duggan (2002), representative of and assimilated into heteronormative values and institutions, domesticated, consumer cogs in the capitalist machine (p. 179). The happily coupled and monogamous Anu-Anulan and Yorenn do seem to represent an idealized queerness that reflects heteronormative values over radical, queer values; however, from another perspective, the multimodal collage of their love affair can also be viewed as an act of disidentification, in that it “is not about assimilation into a heterosexual matrix but instead a partial disavowal of that cultural form that works to restructure it from within” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 28). Instead of identifying with our counter-identifying against the heteronorms of fairytales, Carroll torques those norms to alter them from the inside out, and she does it multimodally.

Sex/uality, Disorientation, and Queer Comics

Although queer rhetorical practices do not have to be wholly sexual in nature or performance, to leave the sex out somewhat sanitizes queerness, partially stripping it of its critical, radical power. It is true that queer theory and praxis “maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal” (Jagose, 1996, p. 99), or as Michael Warner (1999) puts it, “queer gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual” (p. xxvi), but queerness is also about sex and sexuality. Indeed, one origin story for queer theory is it developed as a post-structuralist response to the truncating of alternative sexualities into a lesbian/gay binary (Jagose, 1996, p. 76). Queer resists the essentializing of desire and sexuality and seems most disruptive to understandings of identity and politics when it interrogates norms that have formed around sex, gender, and sexuality (Jagose, 1996, p. 99). A good example of how this disruption can occur at the level of discourse is “Queer: An Impossible Subject for Composition,” Alexander and Rhodes’ (2011) essay that playfully, multimodally performs queer rhetoric in both form and content, and much of that material is sexual in nature. The authors include, alongside their academic, theoretical discussion of queer theory and composition, lyrics from Eurythemics, “Sweet Dreams,” narrative asides, single-sentence paragraphs, multiple genres, the word “fuck,” and their sex/uality. Several images and sentences are quite provocative and disruptive in the academic space of an article, especially considering sex and sexuality have long been excised from school and associated institutions (Alexander, 2009). Yet, when Alexander and Rhodes (2011) say things like “we seduce you” (p. 201), and “queerness is a disruption in the service of nothing, pure in its joyful

enrage body, sexed-up and inappropriate” (p. 186), they intend for their readers to be unsettled and shocked into recognizing the (de-sexualized) discursive norms in which they unconsciously participate and perpetuate.

Alexander and Rhodes also highlight the intimate connection between sex and queerness, wondering “What behaviors, what subjectivities, what possibilities, and what impossibilities are created through the intersections of sex and text?” (Alexander & Rhodes, 2011, p. 199). I wonder what im/possibilities are created through intersections of sex and multimodal texts like queer comics, because undeniably, sex/ualities run(s) rampant in queer comics? But before proceeding, a little about sex in comics and then a trigger warning: mainstream comics that include queer characters do not typically show sex acts. They might show them kissing, as in *Young Avengers: The Children’s Crusade*, #9 (2010) when Teddy Altman (Hulking) and Billy Kaplan (Wiccan) finally kiss, but readers usually see nothing further, and they almost never see genitalia. Of course, there are exceptions like Image’s popular *Saga* series that does show a full-frontal nude shot of a transgender person (issue 31), along with a number of sex acts, gay and straight alike, but by and large, sex, and especially sex associated with queer lives tends to be left out of mainstream comics. In fact, for sex to be represented in comics post the establishment of the Comics Code Authority (1954), they had to move underground, and become *comix*, with an “x.” Robert Crumb and Aline-Kominsky Crumb are well-known for their cartooned depictions of taboo, gritty, and in the case of R. Crumb, sometimes violent sex, for which they have received criticism and their work has even been banned (Chute, 2018). They had to represent sex in alternative comics because mainstream comics tend to assume heterosexuality is the norm and avoid representing or discussing sex and sexuality. On the other hand, queer comics/comix cross a number of (straight) lines to have conversations about queer sex, sexualities, genders, desires, and lives and to speak into the silence surrounding these topics and minority groups.

Now for the trigger warning (that one must be included says a good deal): the following discussion explores the multimodal rhetoric of queer sex and eroticism in queer comics, attendant with images, not to be salacious or titillating, but to demonstrate that queer rhetoric is an embodied, sexual practice that has the potential to disidentify with and undermine (hetero)normative discourses and engage in queer world-making. I offer the trigger warning because sex and desire in queer comics are not linguistically bound—they are multimodally figured, and not ashamed or quiet either. Indeed, the sex in queer comics seems to affirm the queer mantra popularized by Queer Nation, “We are here, we are queer, get used to it!” One of the more well-known sex scenes in a queer comic can be found in Alison Bechdel’s (2006) graphic memoir *Fun Home*, and it is precisely these scenes (along with including a shot of a male cadaver’s genitalia) that have been a source of controversy largely because Bechdel’s text has become mainstream. *Fun Home* has been turned into a Broadway musical, and is often required reading for college courses. When it was required for a freshman class at Duke, Brian

Grasso (2015) wrote a *Washington Post* article to explain why he refused to read the book, describing the oral sex acts in the book as pornographic and in conflict with his religious beliefs. He further remarks, “I think there is an important distinction between images and written words...viewing pictures of sexual acts regardless of the genders of the people involved, conflicts with the inherent sacredness of sex” (Grasso, 2015, para. 4). He is right on one point: images of queer sex do seem to elicit a different affective response compared to reading about queer sex, but this essay is less interested in the morality of these images and more curious about their rhetorical role in queer, multimodal meaning making. How do graphic (in both senses of the word) representations of queer sex function rhetorically to both embody LGBTQ lives and resist discursive norms?

Queer sex and sexualities, simply in being present in queer comics, undermine heteronormativity, but in being multimodally represented, they have the potential to figure queerness in complex, capacious, and disorienting ways. For example, in Howard Cruse’s



Figure 5: Billy and a personified penis in “Billy Goes Out” by Howard Cruse (1980).

(2013) comic, “Billy Goes Out,” a comic that appeared in the first issue of *Gay Comix*, also edited by Cruse, relates Billy’s night out at a gay bar, pre-AIDS epidemic, when many more gay men freely engaged in anonymous sex at such sites. Billy does the same, performing oral sex on a stranger and having a different person, also a stranger, perform oral sex on him. This comic is sexually explicit, depicting oral sex, including many visual representations of penises, and personifying a penis so it is a character in the comic (see Figure 5). Sex is not hinted at, but graphically represented, and is accompanied by no less than a dozen penis illustrations throughout the comic. LGBTQ readers are likely to identify with Cruse’s comic, even if they aren’t a white male who has anonymous sex with other men, because this comic represents disrupts heteronormativity and committed monogamy. However, when straight, sexually seeking, or newly-LGBTQ identified readers, literally see queer sex accompanied by a barrage of personified penises, they might experience disorientation, which is more rhetorically productive than it sounds.

Sara Ahmed (2006) believes “moments of disorientation are vital” precisely because those unsettling occasions not only expose norms by forcing

an encounter with difference, but because they can also allow for re-orientation (p. 157). Alexander and Rhodes (2012a), summarizing Ahmed (2006), clarify that disorientation, usually brought on by the emergence of the queer or that which is not oriented along normative lines, can make us critically aware of how we are all socially, culturally, and even politically oriented to want, to desire, certain things and not others. Disorientation, in other words, reveals the normative and the normalizing in action—the powerful forces that make some lives seem so natural, others seem unthinkable. (p. 201)

With this understanding in mind, disorientation can be considered a queer rhetorical practice as it uncovers sex/uality and gender norms while it simultaneously proposes alternative, queer ways of existing in the world. Representing queer sex through the combined visual, gestural, spatial, aural, and linguistic modes, is rhetorical and affective, with the intended impact being, if not identification, then disorientation. When readers are disoriented by these multimodal representations of queerness in comics, their inclination will be to move toward being oriented, toward finding the ground that has been pulled out from beneath them. Ahmed (2006) warns that “bodies that experience disorientation can be defensive, as they reach out for support or as they search for a place to reground and reorient their relation to the world” (p. 158); however, that they *can be reoriented* is significant. Moments of disorientation offer hope for new directions and richer visions of ourselves and the world around us. Said differently, these moments of disorientation have the potential to expand one’s available designs, either by disrupting norms around sex and sexuality, or confirming and creating space for one’s identity. Cruse, in bombarding viewers with cartoon penises, several instances of anonymous gay sex, and even an illustrated orgasm, simultaneously disorients viewers and engages in queer world-making.

“Billy Goes Out” disorients and reorients through multimodal means, not only in the sexual images present in the comic, but through the juxtaposition of Billy’s thought bubbles with the literal actions he carries out in the comic. As Billy listens to the television, talks on the phone, dresses for a night out, goes out, meets a nice man he ultimately ignores, engages in sexual activities with other unknown men, and makes his way home to bed, he is in constant dialogue with himself, his personified penis, his dead uncle, his mother, his dead dog, Roffo, and past bullies. This multi-layered meaning happens structurally and multimodally: through the spatial juxtaposition of co-occurring narratives, the linguistic text linking those narratives, the visual images that center around queer sex and desire, and the gestural engagement in queer sex acts. Add to this the simultaneous, affective, disorienting experience of these narratives all at once that also include abrupt and quick shifts in time. Billy’s thought bubbles are spatially situated above the actions he carries out, with his actions moving forward in linear time and his thoughts seamlessly shifting among Billy’s past, present, and potential future. The plurality of the concurrent, multiple narratives along with the shifting temporality disrupts readers in asking them to make meaning in non-linear, excessive, and fragmented ways. Alexander and

Rhodes (2011) describe such moves as queer for composition, as work that unsettles readers in being myriad, multi-faceted, mutable, and in this case, multimodal.

Another queer comic that multimodally disorients and disrupts readers is MariNaomi's (2014) "Three's a Crowd." This comic relates the story of a bisexual woman, Mari, who questions her six-month, non-exclusive relationship with a woman, Rachel. They have yet to be intimate, but that all changes at a house party that Mari hosts. Toward the end of the party, Mari and Rachel have sex with another woman, and Rachel later notes that "It's funny, isn't it, that the first time we're intimate, there's another woman there?" (MariNaomi, "Three's" 43). The threesome itself did not create conflict between Mari and Rachel, so much as it exposed how differently Mari and Rachel feel about each other. Post-coital, Rachel tells Mari she loves her, and Mari laughs in response. The comic ends with Mari cleaning up from the party the next morning and apologizing to her cat for last night's activities. "Three's a Crowd," like many queer comics, disrupts heteronormativity in portraying and foregrounding queer relationships. In this way, this comic offers LGBTQ people like myself a text with which we can identify, and for straight readers, this array of identities and sexualities can be disorienting because they call into question staid sex and gender norms.

Perhaps more disorienting for some, however, are the sex scenes in this comic. In addition to representing complex, well-rounded characters, MariNaomi also multimodally represents queer sexual orientations and experiences. Notice these two pages from the comic (Figures 6 and 7) contain very little text, and instead, the meaning is largely conveyed through visual images and the gestures and facial expressions of the characters, including the cat. These panels are what Scott McCloud (2006) categorizes as "picture-specific" because the images carry the meaning and words, if present, only help accentuate that meaning (p. 130). Notice the text that appears in Figure 6 only adds minimal meaning, and if it wasn't there, readers would still understand what these panels mean in sequence because of the meaning-laden images in these two comic pages. The audience doesn't simply read about a lesbian relationship and a sexual situation involving multiple partners, and instead they *view* it. They see breasts, they see three women engage in sexual play, and by position of the woman in Figure 7 above, they can assume the women are engaging in oral sex or more. According to Alexander and Rhodes (2012a), "this sudden, discomfiting engagement with the sexual may inaugurate a critical engagement, and 'disorientation' is designed to play with that engagement by asking us to think about where the erotic is allowed, and where it is perhaps allowed but simultaneously disavowed" (p. 206). Encountering multimodal representations of queer sex has the potential to disorient, which means it has the potential to put a reader in direct confrontation with taken-for-granted norms that erase queer sex from popular culture.

Because so much of the meaning from these two pages combines the gestural, spatial, visual to make meaning, they are heavily freighted with social, embodied cues. Meaning is made



Figure 6: MariNaomi (2014). "Three's a Crowd," p. 41.



Figure 7: MariNaomi (2014). "Three's a Crowd," p. 42.

from color choice, spatial arrangements, facial expressions (especially the cat's), and postured bodies and their gendered representations. Joddy Murray (2009) describes this type of sign-making as nondiscursive rhetoric, "a theory of rhetoric that relies on image (made up of all the sensual inputs) and non-discursive meaning in order to persuade, move, and/or create unsayable (or word-dependent) meaning for an audience" (p. 137); familiar examples of non-discursive rhetoric are bubbles around a character's head signifying drunkenness, or in the case of Japanese manga, blood coming from a character's nose conveys lust while a bubble from their nose signals sleepiness (McCloud, 1994, p. 131). In Western comics, sleepiness is often conveyed through an onomatopoeia (zzz's), which indicates how non-discursive rhetoric is made up of culturally and socially (re)made signs. Non-discursive rhetoric in MariNaomi's comic, in addition to facial expressions and body language, is the heart that appears in both Figure 6 and Figure 7. This small heart, seemingly insignificant and one readers might not register as "language," adds meaning to the panels it occupies. This meaning seems even more apparent in Figure 7 in the line connecting the heart to the nude backside of one of the women, indicating that the sexual intimacy among the three women has reached a new level. The symbol of a heart typically signifies love, closeness, or happiness, and in the context of this sexual experience, suggests these three women are becoming more intimate.

Yet, the heart, which typically suggests love between two members of the opposite sex, is queered in being connected to not only two people of the same sex, but three people engaging

in sex. MariNaomi torques the (hetero)normative discourses associated with symbols like a heart to work with and against those social scripts. Anne Frances Wysocki (2012), in an essay that explores the multimodal possibilities for identities and bodies in comics and graphic novels, particularly through Bechdel's *Fun Home*, explains that because the combination of words and pictures have histories, because they come with attached discourses, "how one articulates words and pictures...can play with—or against—those discourses" (p. 26). Wysocki, like the NLG (1996), contends that words and pictures are combined from available designs, but that play and act of composing can craft new designs which impact one sense of self and the world around them. In this instance, MariNaomi, in attaching the heart to three women engaged in sexual play, plays with *and* against straight discourses to critique them as well as illustrate alternative sexualities and identities.

Furthermore, readers make meaning from symbols like the heart because of their socio-cultural reference. Joddy Murray (2009) concurs with Wysocki, the NLG, and Gunther Kress in viewing language, which he describes as *image* to include both discursive and non-discursive signs, as social, emotional, and multimodal, and as responsible for how composers/designers construct their identities and perceptions of others (pp. 118-120). In MariNaomi and Cruse's comics, identity, sex, gender, and sexuality and more are conveyed multimodally, and the meaning and affect these elements convey, especially the humor captured in MariNaomi's cat, cannot be delivered quite the same way linguistically—they cannot be swapped one-to-one as if their meaning is equal. The multimodality of these comics supports their queer rhetoric: readers disrupted, disoriented, and perhaps reoriented through the purposeful combination of multiple modes. Be it through graphic (literally) images of sex, layered meaning making, or non-discursive rhetoric, these queer comics, and many like them, rely on multimodality to capture and express queer being, lives, and desires.

Conclusion

In this essay, I analyze only a few queer comics with the understanding that rhetorically, these comics include moments and offer experiences, if not identical to, at least similar to those that can be found in many other queer comics. That being said, there are a number of queer rhetorical practices like ambiguity, drag, excess, intersectionality, and even queer rage not explored in this essay, but they are equally important in understanding rhetorical possibilities of multimodally figuring queerness in comics. And the queer rhetoric expounded upon in this essay is but a beginning—what rhetorical possibilities (have yet to) exist for multimodal queerness in comics? Disidentification, or the reworking of cultural logics from within, is a queer rhetorical practice that resists and reframes normative discourses, as "Anu-Anulan and Yir's Daughter" demonstrates, but what are other examples of disidentification in queer comics, what is the rhetorical impact and values of those instances, and what do those moments offer queer composers and the queer community? Multimodal representations of queer sex/ualities can expose and undermine heteronormativity, dis- and reorient audiences,

and support alternative ways of being in the world, but how might other queer rhetorical practices in queer comics simultaneously interrogate norms and build community? There is also a great deal to be said about how queer comics might function in the classroom, but that is another essay. Finally, the comics represented in this essay are not racially diverse, and work like André Carrington's (2018) essay, "Desiring Blackness: A Queer Orientation to Marvel's Black Panther," indicates how much more work can be done at the intersections of race, sexuality, gender, and rhetoric.

Alexander and Rhodes (2012a) wonder, "What kinds of [queer] representational acts figured multimodally and through multimedia contribute substantively and materially to understanding queerness in rich, varied, capacious, and (perhaps most importantly) challenging ways?" (p. 200). Through the multimodal medium that is comics, queer creators can draw on and combine expressive affordances to make meaning queer(ly), sexually, affectively. This essay demonstrates that queer comics figure queerness multimodally in complex and disruptive ways, and in representing queer bodies, fantasies, and sexual experiences, engage in queer worldmaking; they show the possibilities for queer being in the world. Not only do we need to see ourselves in the world and in the texts we encounter, but we need the multimodal means and affordances of expressing ourselves. Queer comics offer LGBTQ composers and readers the means and the medium to craft and represent their own lives and desires. Finally, queer comics are rich sites of queer, multimodal rhetoric, as they expose social, sexual norms, and illustrate (literally) the im/possibilities for queer meaning making through multiple modes.

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