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**Special Issue: Comics and/as
Rhetoric**

Powerful Marginality:

Feminist Scholarship through Comics

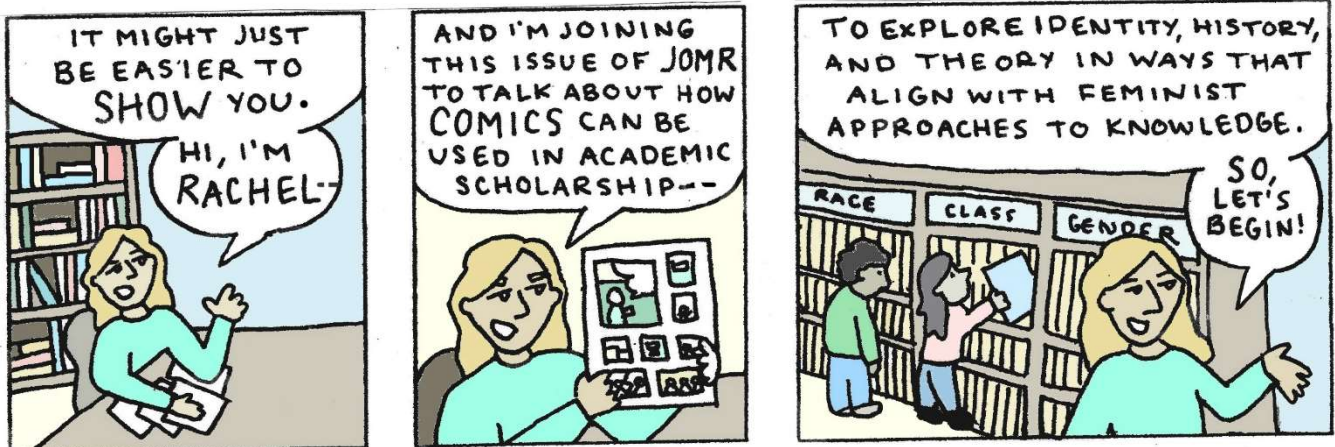
Rachel Rys, University of California, Santa Barbara

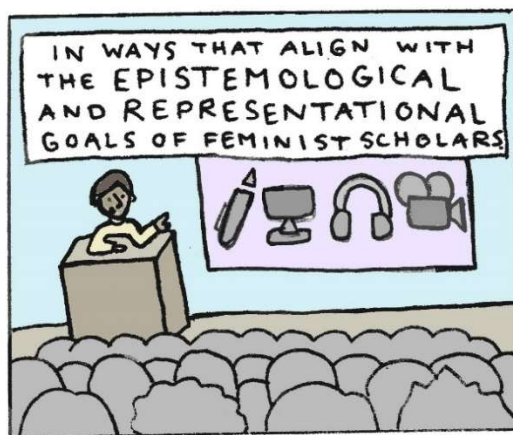
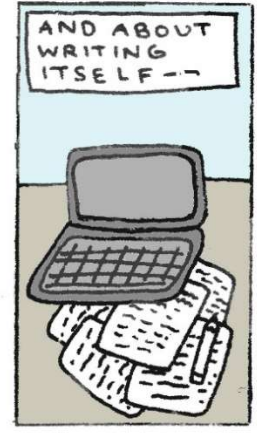
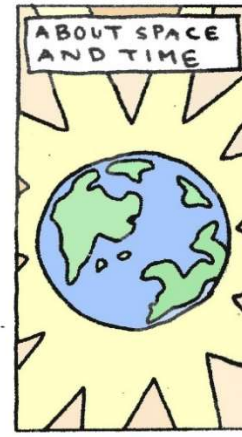
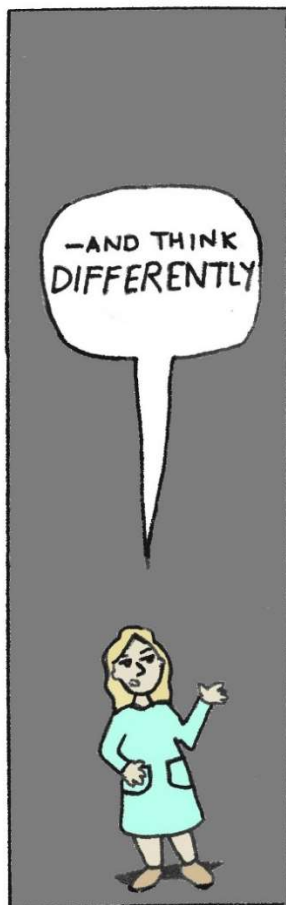
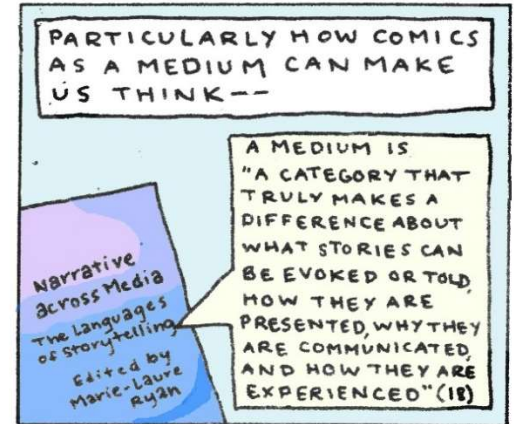
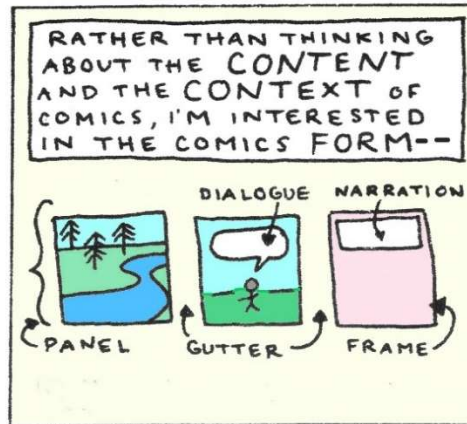


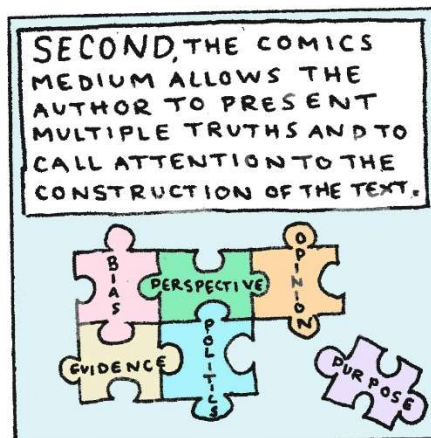
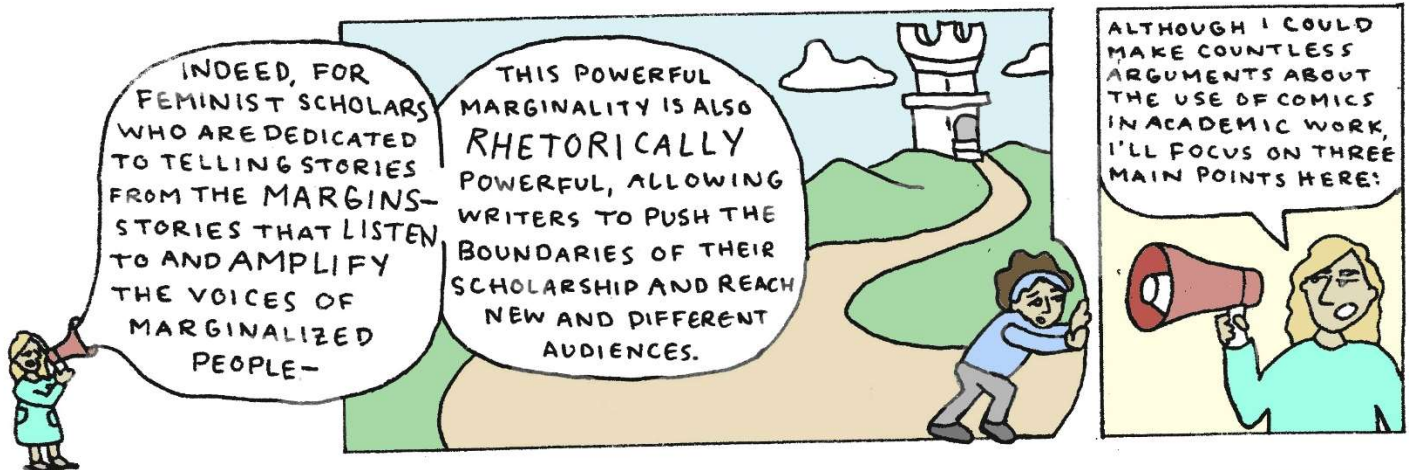
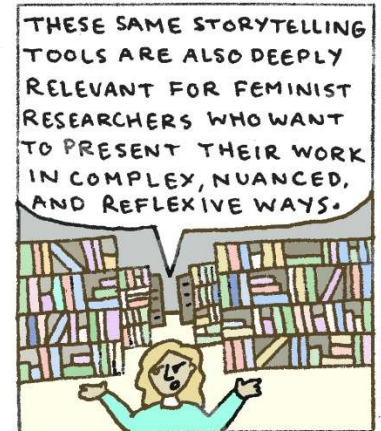
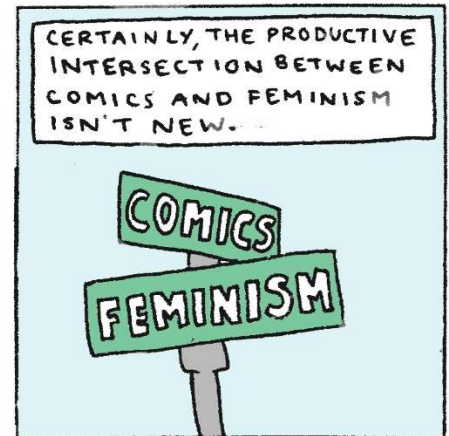
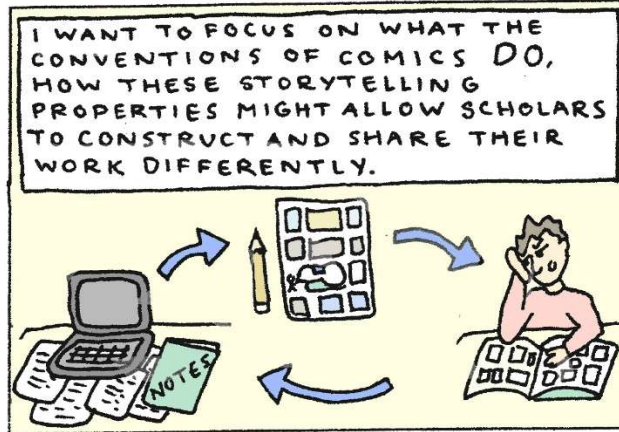
This article examines how the comics medium can be used to address epistemological, rhetorical, and representational concerns raised by feminist scholars. Drawing together feminist studies and comics studies theories, I examine how the storytelling tools of the comics medium can create reflexive and situated narratives that make visible the relationship between the reader, the writer, and the text. Building on a growing body of scholarship presented in comics form, I develop my argument through both comics and prose. Through this graphic argument, I explore potential points of connection between feminist epistemology and comics narrative, examining how the comics medium can help feminist researchers to create meaning in ways that center positionality, subjectivity, and multiple truths.

Introduction

Over the past decade, comics scholars have developed sophisticated frameworks and vocabularies for deconstructing and analyzing feminist comics. By examining feminist comics across a range of genres and eras, these scholars argue that the verbal and visual complexity of the comics medium makes it particularly well suited for telling stories that deal with issues of embodiment, autobiography, and memory. Building on these arguments, I further contend that the comics medium is also well suited for presenting academic feminist research because the medium itself contains powerful storytelling tools that are aligned with feminist approaches to knowledge. In this article, I argue that the comics medium can be useful for feminist scholars who wish to present their research in reflexive and experimental ways. However, rather than just telling you about it—







PART I:
REFLEXIVITY
&
EMBODIMENT

FEM ST 101

FEMINIST SCHOLARS HAVE ARGUED THAT REFLEXIVITY AND POSITIONALITY ARE ESSENTIAL FOR FEMINIST RESEARCH AND WRITING.

SINCE THE EARLY DAYS OF ACADEMIC FEMINISMS, SCHOLARS FROM A RANGE OF DISCIPLINES HAVE ARGUED THAT REFLEXIVE RESEARCH AND WRITING PRACTICES REQUIRE THE AUTHOR TO REFLECT ON THEIR IDENTITIES AND EXPERIENCES AND TO CONSIDER HOW THEIR POSITIONALITY SHAPES THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THEIR ARGUMENT.

REFLEXIVITY (POSITIONALITY)

- Wilkinson (1988):
↳ "Disciplined Self-reflection" (432)
- Look @ how identities 'position' perspective
- Attention to personal involvement and power in research & writing
- England (1994)
↳ Expose "the partiality of our perspective" (86)

KNOWING WHO AN AUTHOR IS GIVES THE READER CRITICAL CONTEXT ABOUT THEIR PERSPECTIVE AND MOTIVATION FOR WRITING.

IN PROSE ACADEMIC WRITING, WE ONLY REALLY KNOW WHAT THE AUTHOR TELLS US ABOUT THEMSELVES IN THE LINE OF ARGUMENT.

OF COURSE, SOME WRITERS MAY CHOOSE TO DISCUSS THEIR PERSONAL IDENTITIES OR RELATIONSHIP TO THE CONTENT IN THEIR TEXTS.

As a queer Chicana woman...

After living in this community for over ten years...

BUT OFTEN, THE ONLY INFORMATION A READER HAS ACCESS TO IS THE WRITER'S NAME AND PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATION.

Powerful Marginality:
Feminist Scholarship
Through the Comics
Medium
Rachel Rys & UCSB

EVERYTHING ELSE MUST BE RESEARCHED OR ASSUMED AND, FREQUENTLY, THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE AUTHOR AND THEIR TEXT...

JUST FADES INTO THE BACKGROUND

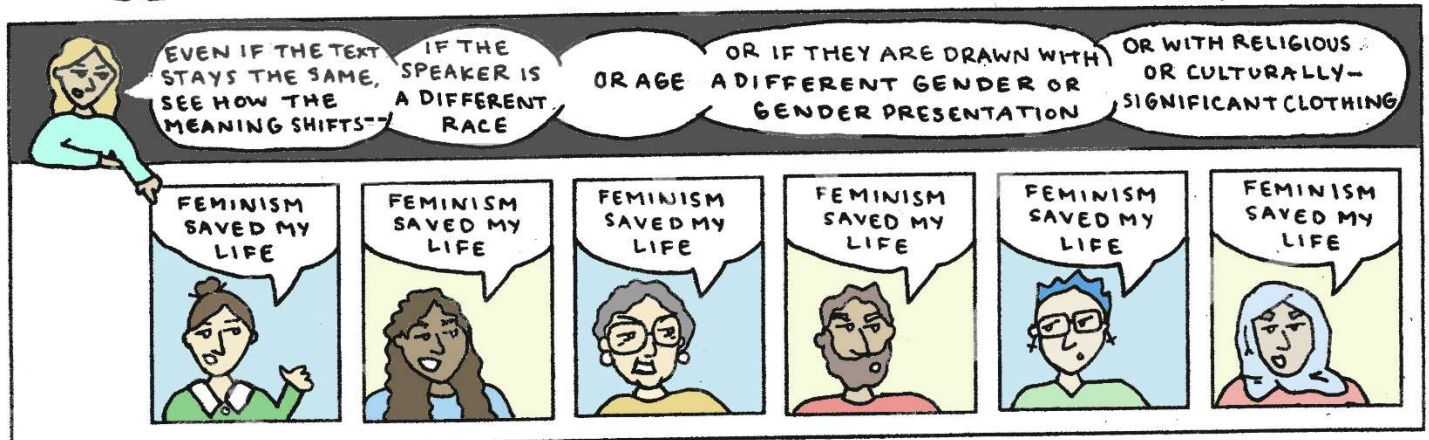
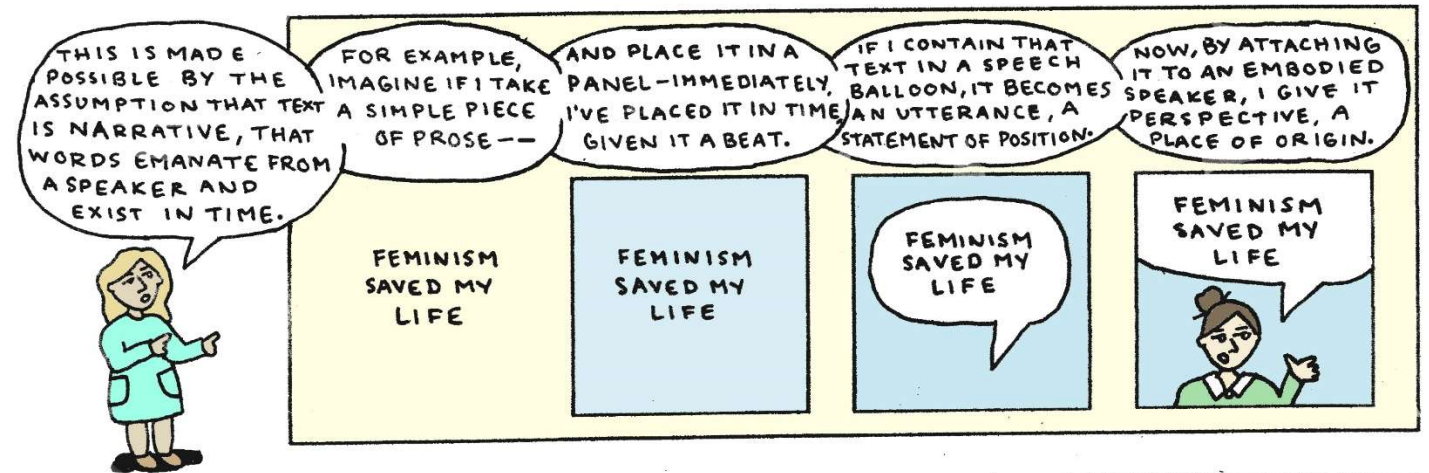
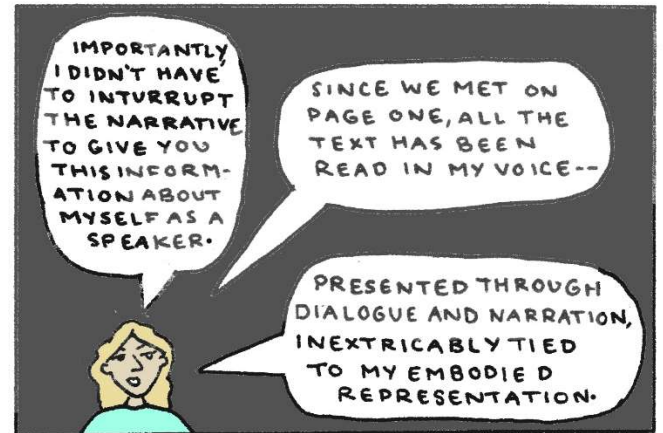
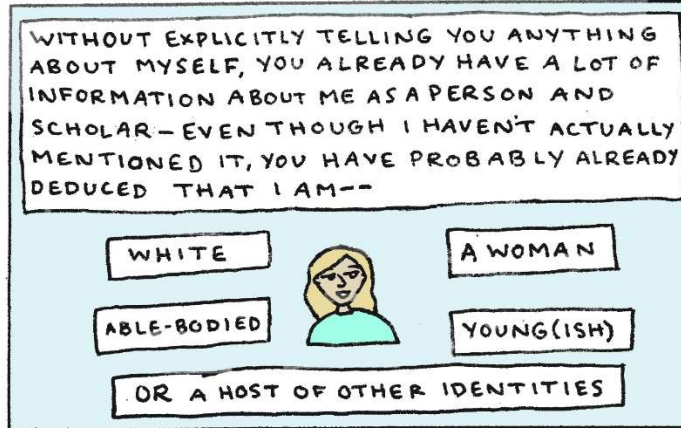
THE COMICS MEDIUM, HOWEVER, MAKES IT SIMPLE—AND OFTEN NECESSARY—TO INCLUDE VISUAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE SPEAKER AND CONTEXT.

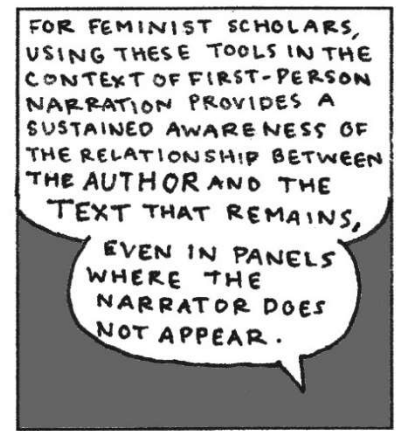
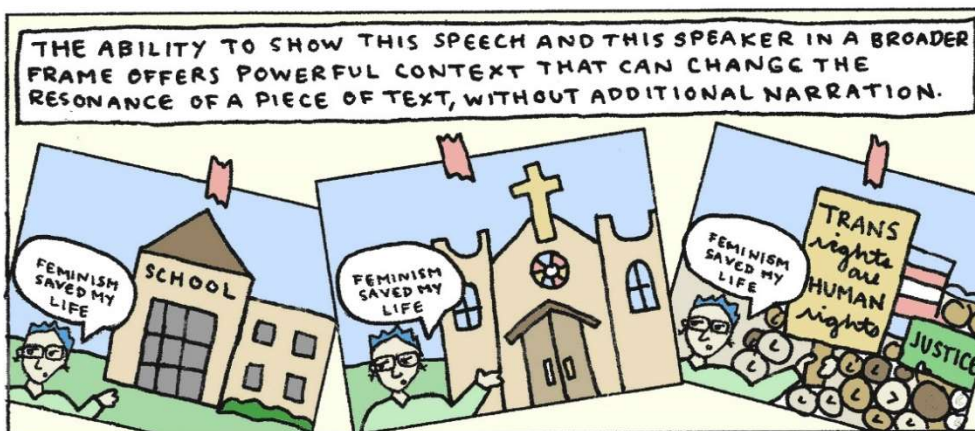
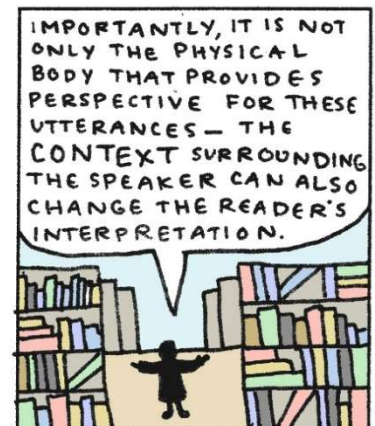
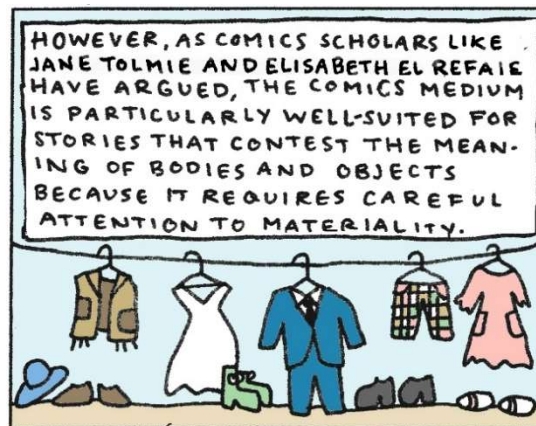
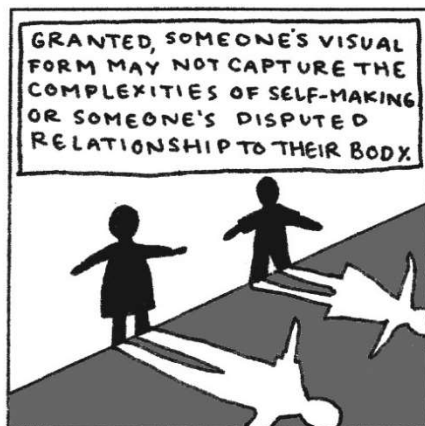
BECAUSE THIS MULTIMODAL FORM TYPICALLY INCLUDES A VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE NARRATOR AND/OR THE CHARACTERS, MOST COMICS TEXT IS DIRECTLY LINKED TO A DISTINCT, EMBODIED SPEAKER.

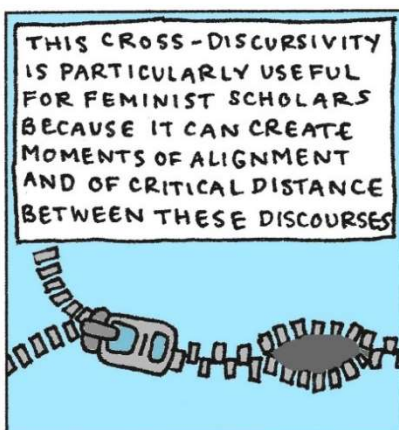
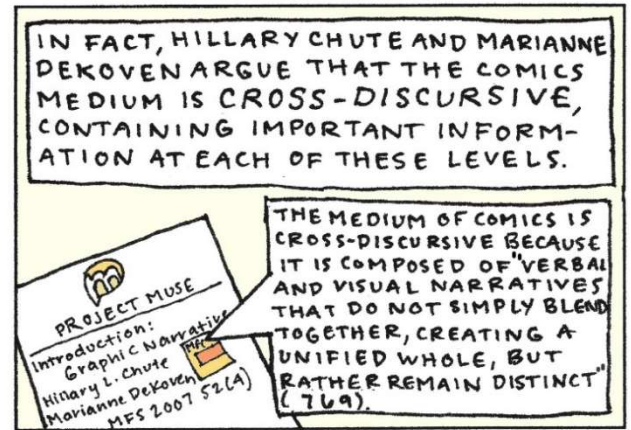
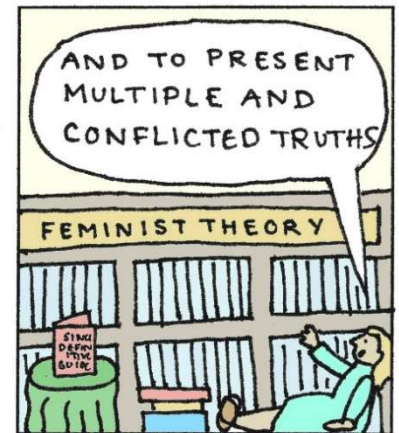
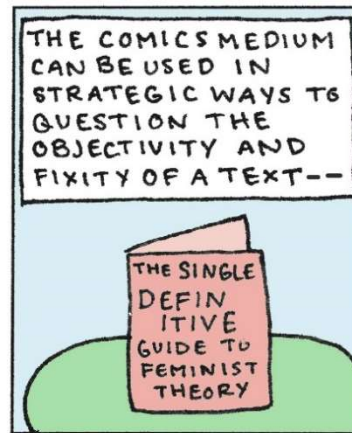
LIKE ME

AND ME

AND ME!







LET'S LOOK AT ANOTHER
EXAMPLE HERE, ONE THAT
HIGHLIGHTS THE FUNCTION
OF CROSS-DISCURSIVITY BY
SLOWLY LAYERING DIFFERENT
ELEMENTS ON THE PAGE.



WE CAN TAKE A PIECE OF TEXT
OUTLINING A COMMON NARR-
ATIVE OF FEMINIST HISTORY (ONE
THAT SCHOLARS HAVE CRITIQUED
AS OVERLY SIMPLISTIC) --

Waves of Feminism

1st Wave - 1890? → 1920s

suffrage, basic rights

2nd Wave - 1960s & 1970s

sex, birth control, work

3rd Wave - 1990s → 2000s

bodies, diversity, represent

4th wave - 2000s - now

Sexual harassment tech

AND PLACE IT IN CONTEXT,
PROVIDING ADDITIONAL
INFORMATION ABOUT THE
RHETORICAL SITUATION IN
WHICH IT APPEARS.

Waves of Feminism

1st Wave - 1890? → 1920s

2nd stage: suffrage, basic rights

2nd Wave - 1960s & 1970s

Sex, birth control, work

3rd Wave - 1990s - 2000
bodies diversity

4th wave - 2000s - main

Sexual harassment, tech

FURTHERMORE,
WE CAN SHOW HOW
THIS PARTICULAR
NARRATIVE IS
MAINTAINED



BY ADDING INTO THE
PICTURE AN INSTITUTIONAL
VOICE AND CONTEXT

THAT DEPICTS HOW
THIS NARRATIVE IS VALUED,
REINFORCED, AND DISSEMINATED:

AN IMAGE LIKE THIS
REMINDS US THAT
THESE NARRATIVES
AREN'T NEUTRAL-
THAT THEY GAIN
CONSENSUS THROUGH
PASSIVE REPETITION
AND ACTIVE EFFORT.

IMPORTANTLY,
BY STRATEGICALLY
MANIPULATING THE
RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN THE
VISUALS, DIALOGUE,
AND FRAMING
NARRATION, THE
WRITER CAN
TELL A STORY
THAT ALIGNS
WITH THE IMAGE
AND DIALOGUE

OR THAT SUBVERTS
THE IMAGE AND
DIALOGUE ENTIRELY
— CREATING A
CROSS-DISCURSIVE
REPRESENTATION
THAT EITHER
REINFORCES
OR DISRUPTS.

IF THEY LEARNED
NOTHING ELSE IN THIS
COURSE, AT LEAST THEY'D
KNOW THIS HISTORY.

THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT-
MAKE SURE YOU STUDY IT!

ALTHOUGH THIS MODEL
WAS NO LONGER POPULAR,
AS A FEMINIST HISTORIAN,
I THOUGHT KNOWING
THIS CONTEXT WAS
WORTH THE EFFORT.

THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT-MAKE SURE YOU STUDY IT!

AT THE TIME, I THOUGHT
THIS WAS ACTUALLY REALLY
IMPORTANT; IT WASN'T
UNTIL LATER THAT I
REALIZED HOW REDUCTIVE
THIS MODEL WAS.

THIS IS VERY
IMPORTANT-
MAKE SURE
YOU STUDY IT!

I DIDN'T REALLY THINK THIS WAS IMPORTANT, BUT I WAS REQUIRED TO TEACH A TEXTBOOK THAT DOUBLED DOWN ON THIS METAPHOR.

THIS IS VERY
IMPORTANT-
MAKE SURE
YOU STUDY IT!

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN THESE ELEMENTS IN A SINGLE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMICS PANEL--

GIVES A GLIMPSE
OF INTERIORITY &
PERSPECTIVE--

ALLOWING THE WRITER
TO CIRCULATE COMMENTS,
CLARIFICATIONS, AND
CRITIQUES ALONG
WITH THEIR SEEMINGLY
STATIC PROSE.

FINAL
DRAFT

FINAL
DRAFT

PART 3:
MEMORY
&
TEMPORALITY

FEMINIST SCHOLARS HAVE ARGUED THAT STORIES ABOUT THE PAST ARE NEVER NEUTRAL BUT, RATHER, REFLECT THE WRITER'S PRESENT CONCERNS AND FUTURE DESIRES.

AS FEMINIST AND POSTCOLONIALIST SCHOLAR GAYATRI SPIVAK ARGUES, "THE PAST IS A PAST PRESENT. WHAT IS MARKED IS THE SITE OF DESIRE" (119).

WHILE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PAST ARE NEITHER NEUTRAL NOR OBJECTIVE, WRITERS OFTEN EMPLOY RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES THAT ERASE THEIR ROLE IN CONSTRUCTING THE TEXT.

WRITING THAT ATTEMPTS TO MAKE CLAIMS ABOUT THE PAST (INCLUDING MY OWN INTRODUCTION TO THIS ARTICLE) IS ALWAYS MOTIVATED, REFRAMING HISTORY TO MEET THE WRITER'S NEEDS--

MARKING TEMPORAL SHIFTS

CATEGORIZING AND COLLAPSING VIEW POINTS

CREATING GAPS IN ORDER TO FILL THEM.

TO CHALLENGE THESE POLITICAL ERASURES, FEMINIST SCHOLAR CLARE HEMMINGS CALLS FOR A TACTICS OF MEMORY THAT WILL ALLOW WRITERS TO FOLD IN AND RECOMBINE TRACES OF ERASED HISTORIES.

"DEVELOPING A TACTICS OF MEMORY...MIGHT ALLOW US TO CHALLENGE SOME OF THE POLITICAL ERASURES THAT THESE STORIES EFFECT. THE INTENTION IS MODEST IN THAT RESPECT, WANTING TO SURFACE WHAT IS POTENTIALLY ABSENT THROUGH RECOMBINATION" (75).

What is a feminist theory responsible for?
Clare Hemmings 2007

OTHER FEMINIST SCHOLARS HAVE CALLED FOR RHIZOMATIC READING AND WRITING PRACTICES, A FRAMEWORK ADAPTED FROM GILLES DELEUZE AND FÉLIX GUATTARI EMPHASIZING NONLINEAR AND NONHIERARCHICAL CONNECTIONS.

UNLIKE A TREE, WHICH HAS A SINGULAR TRUNK AND PROGRESSIVE, ORDERED BRANCHING--

A RHIZOME, LIKE BAMBOO OR GINGER, IS A "NETWORK OF MULTIPLE BRANCHING ROOTS AND SHOOTS WITH NO CENTRAL AXIS, NO UNIFIED POINT OF ORIGIN, AND NO GIVEN DIRECTION OF GROWTH" (173).

SCHOLARS LIKE ELIZABETH GROSZ AND JUANA MARÍA RODRÍGUEZ HAVE INCORPORATED THE RHIZOME INTO A DISTINCTLY FEMINIST PRACTICE, ARGUING THAT IT CAN BE USED TO DRAW CONNECTIONS ACROSS

IDENTITIES
TRAJECTORIES
AND MOVEMENTS.

SUCH READING AND WRITING PRACTICES EMPHASIZE CONNECTION, HETEROGENEITY, AND MULTIPLICITY.

GROSZ (1993)

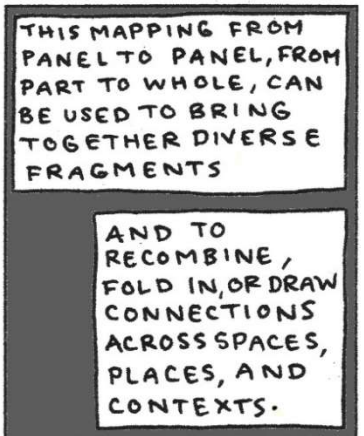
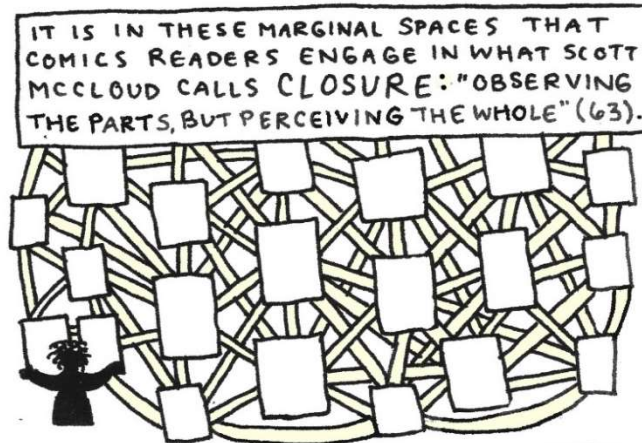
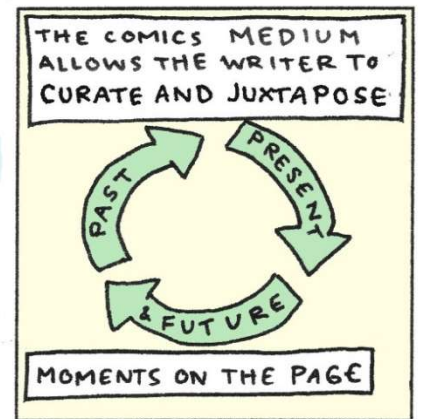
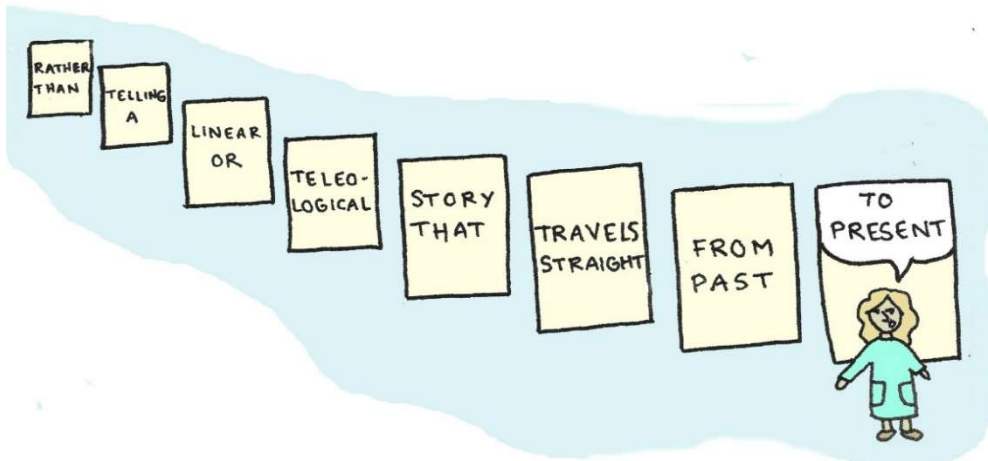
Connection: Bring together diverse fragments theories, objects, and practices

Heterogeneity: Multiple connections across levels, domains, dimensions, functions, effects, aims

Multiplicity: A proliferation of processes

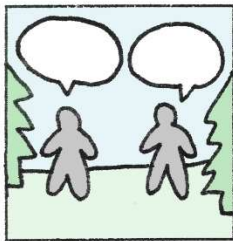
DUE TO ITS FLEXIBLE TOOLS FOR REPRESENTING TEMPORALITY AND SPATIALITY, COMICS CAN SERVE AS A TACTICS OF MEMORY-- ONE THAT IS BOTH RECOMBINATORY AND RHIZOMATIC --

ABLE TO COMBINE AND REARRANGE TEMPORAL TRACES ACROSS TIME, SPACE, AND SCALE.





PROVIDING CRITICAL CONTEXT ABOUT SPEAKER AND SETTING THAT SITUATES THE TEXT--



DEVELOPING RICHLY LAYERED PANELS THAT REINFORCE OR SUBVERT--

CREATING NARRATIVE LINKS ACROSS TIME, SPACE, AND SCALE



THROUGHOUT THIS ARTICLE I'VE MADE THE RELATIVELY VAGUE CLAIMS THAT THE COMICS MEDIUM IS "ALIGNED WITH" FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY OR "CAN BE USEFUL" FOR FEMINIST SCHOLARS.

WHILE I'VE DELIBERATELY LEFT THESE CLAIMS OPEN-ENDED, THE QUESTION REMAINS:

WHAT MIGHT THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

FIRST OF ALL, IT IS A CALL FOR RESEARCHERS TO EXPRESS AND SHARE THEIR WORK IN COMICS--ADDING COMICS TO THE RANGE OF METHODOLOGICAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL TOOLS AVAILABLE TO SCHOLARS--



AND CONTRIBUTING TO A GROWING CANON OF WORK THAT USES THE COMICS FORM TO TALK ABOUT COMICS OR TO PRESENT OTHER RESEARCH.



AS COMICS SCHOLARSHIP BECOMES MORE READILY AVAILABLE, USED, AND DISCUSSED

IT BUILDS A CASE FOR THE THEORETICAL AND RHETORICAL COMPLEXITY OF THE MEDIUM.

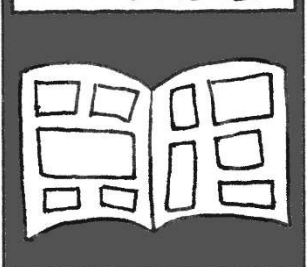
FOR RESEARCHERS WHO ARE UNABLE OR UNWILLING TO DABBLE IN THE COMICS FORM, THIS MAY ALSO MEAN PURSUING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND COMICS CREATORS--



BEYOND THE CREATION OF NEW COMICS, THIS PIECE ALSO ECHOES CALLS TO CONSIDER EXISTING COMICS AS EXAMPLES OF COMPLEX SCHOLARSHIP AND THEORY IN THEIR OWN RIGHT--



OFFERING CONTENT AND STORYTELLING TOOLS THAT ARE BOTH THEORETICAL AND POLITICAL.





Notes

As I hope this exploratory comic has conveyed, my goal here is to gesture to some of the productive possibilities of the comics medium for feminist researchers who wish to create and share knowledge through emergent and experimental forms. Translating research across medium allows us to explore new rhetorical and representational tools—and to reflect on both the strengths and limits of our current approaches. As this is my first foray into experimental writing *and* my first attempt at making comics, these twelve comics pages have opened additional lines of both questioning and possibility.

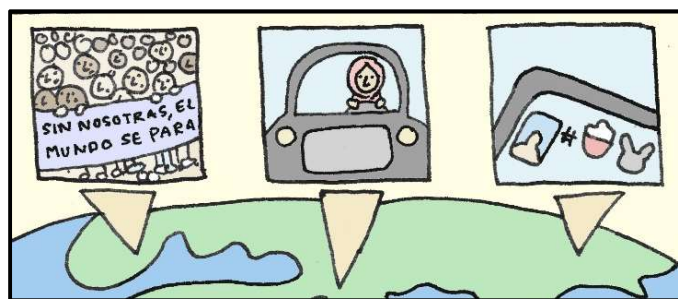
The reference to “lines of flight” in my conclusion draws once more from Deleuze and Guattari, who argue that ruptured rhizomes can sprout anew along old lines or create “new lines of flight... directions in motion” (p. 35). This relationship between rhizomes and comics has been explored in multiple works and ways, including as a theoretical framework for analyzing comic book culture (Jeffery, 2016), as a visual metaphor (Sousanis, 2015), and as a flexible storytelling (non-) structure for the digital project *Rhizcomics* (Helms, 2017).





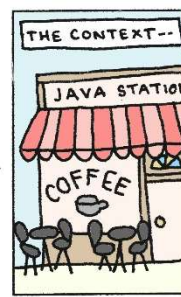
Importantly, metaphors of connection and rupture, of roots and motion, offer powerful metaphors for critically examining identity and identity formation (Rodríguez, 2003, p. 22). Because reflexivity plays such a significant role in feminist studies scholarship, it comes as no surprise that many of the storytelling tools I analyze in this piece have been primarily discussed within the context of autobiographical and life writing comics. In fact, the first sections of my argument refer to a specific subset of narrative tools that are often used in first-person, single-authored comics—those that include an embodied version of the author-narrator on the page.

For feminist scholars, this close attention to the embodiment, practices, and habits of everyday life is essential. As Tolmie (2013) argues, comics are “precisely about matters of essential cultural urgency at the everyday level...” (p. xvi). Hillary Chute (2010) further argues that the ability to visualize the “ongoing procedure of self and subjectivity constructs ‘ordinary’ experiences as relevant and political” (p. 140). This visuality facilitates a political reading of everyday events, such as the panel below that brings together scenes from the International Women’s Day strike in Spain, the repeal of the driving ban for women in Saudi



Arabia, and the covert participation of Chinese women in the #MeToo movement (when the hashtag #MeToo was censored by the government, women continued to connect and share by substituting the characters or emojis for Rice 🍚 (“Mi”) and Bunny 🐰 (“Tu”).

The comics medium offers a tactics of memory that pictures and recombines traces of everyday life. These same narrative tools are also available to feminist scholars—leaving an open opportunity for scholars to share not only their research *products*, but also their *process*: the situated interaction, decision-making, and thought processes that underlie scholarly work.



References

This project is indebted to the important work done by feminist comics scholars to identify specific narrative tools and to initiate conversations about the connections between identity, power, and form. While the comics medium offers incredible argumentative density, I have found it to be spatially and logistically challenging to incorporate the breadth of references expected of scholarly work into the comics form. Undoubtedly, the practices and politics of citation for scholarship written in the comics medium will require additional examination and experimentation—another line of flight perhaps?



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