



**Comic Elements as a System of Queer Expression: A Close Analysis
of Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer: A Memoir***

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Abstract

The paper analyses the relationship between queer and comics, with a particular emphasis on Maia Kobabe's graphic memoir *Gender Queer: A Memoir*. It explores the narrative significance of comics and the convergence of queerness within the medium, framed within the theoretical frameworks of Scott McCloud, Richard Walsh, Ramzi Fawaz, and Darieck Scott. The primary objective of the study is to demonstrate how words and images interact to communicate Maia's gender and sexual identities in a way that defies accepted cultural norms. It analyses and exhibits the ability of the visual narrative to convey nuanced facets of queer identity, ranging from representations of physical discomfort during medical exams to the presentation of romantic fantasies defying binary gender norms. The paper concludes that Maia employs an effective tool to convey the subtleties of her queer identity through the symbiotic relationship between words and pictures, based on a careful analysis of her narrative. Beyond the confines of conventional language, a more comprehensive expression of gender and sexuality is made possible by the interaction of words and images.

Keywords: Queer comics, graphic memoirs, gender identity, sexuality

Introduction

Generally, a graphic narrative can be defined as a narrative crafted within the framework of comics. This term encompasses various narrative forms, including graphic memoirs and superhero tales, all realised through the medium of comics. With its distinctive cross-disciplinary structure blending words and images, comics serve as a narrative medium akin to a receptacle capable of containing a multitude of concepts and visuals (Chute, McCloud 6).

In the realm of graphic memoirs, the narrative's significance is not solely attributed to the story it conveys; the medium itself assumes a vital role. As noted by Richard Walsh, the narrative medium acts as a semiotic tool, facilitating the articulation (separate from mere expression) of cognitive image schemata within a narrative framework. "The idea of representation is not intelligible

without a medium: the media of narrative mental representations, then, are the mind's own perceptual and conceptual systems" (Walsh 4).

Expanding on this understanding of the narrative medium, Ramzi Fawaz and Darieck Scott outline a trilateral framework to illustrate the convergence of queer and comics, pinpointing three distinctive arenas. To begin, the marginal status of comics as literature thrusts the medium into the role of an outlier, thus beckoning counter-publics. Subsequently, the medium's expansive representational prowess, exemplified by its portrayal of non-normative genders and sexualities, spanning from the figurative to the literal, imbues it with queerness. Lastly, the very structure of the medium assumes a queer quality due to its narrative's inherent unpredictability evolving with each iteration, akin to the fundamental essence of queer identity, characterised by its fluidity concerning gender and sexuality. Queer and comics are thus inseparably connected to each other, and a study of one cannot be separated from the other. Utilising the second and third facets delineated in the trilateral framework of convergence of queer and comics as the overarching research methodology shaping the present study, this paper undertakes an analysis of Maia Kobabe's 2019 literary creation, *Gender Queer: A Memoir*.

In the graphic memoir *Gender Queer: A Memoir*, Maia recounts childhood and adolescent experiences, grappling with questions surrounding gender identity, sexuality, and the coming out process. Reflecting on a retrospective perspective, Maia embraces a genderqueer, non-binary identity and reconciles with asexual orientation, using personal pronouns like "e," "em," and "eir." The graphic memoir employs both visual and textual elements to revisit the complexities of early experiences, highlighting ambivalence toward body, gender, and sexuality.

Within the pages of *Gender Queer: A Memoir*, Maia delves into the challenges faced during early years and adulthood, navigating uncertainties related to gender identity, sexual orientation, and the process of coming out. The narrative unfolds later, as the protagonist acknowledges being asexual and non-binary genderqueer.

Despite possessing female anatomy, Maia rejects a female identity, expressing discomfort with physical attributes such as breasts and menstruation. The prospect of top surgery, including breast removal, emerges as a necessary step due to severe discomfort during a pap smear examination involving a speculum. Notably, Maia's aversion to feminine organs coexists with a reluctance to adopt a male identity, highlighting a nuanced approach to gender identity (Tom 3).

The paper does a close analysis of selected comic elements from the book by employing the techniques of comic writing put forward by Scott McCloud. The study's main objective is to illustrate how these elements serve as instrumental tools for the author in facilitating eir gender and sexual identities that deviate from the conventional cultural norms upon which the society is structured using the methodological framework put forward by Ramzi Fawaz.

History

Delving into the history of Queer Comics in the US popular culture, one can trace its roots back to iconic comic strip characters that challenged traditional gender and sexuality norms, starting with the notable Krazy Kat, created by George Herriman for the comic strip *Krazy Kat* which ran from 1913-1944. The character's gender is fluid, varying from one strip to another and is in love with Ignatz, a mouse. Another comic strip that portrayed queer characters was *Better or For Worse* by Lynn Johnston. The narrative takes a turn when a friend of a son in a suburban family was introduced as gay in 1993. This introduction of the character caused an extensive response, with nineteen newspapers cancelling the strip's publication in a week. The author faced several criticisms, including death threats. Matt Groening's *Life in Hell* presented a narrative featuring two inseparable characters, Akbar and Jeff, who were initially introduced as brothers or lovers and later openly acknowledged as a gay couple. Throughout its remarkable 35-year run, which began in the late 1970s, the comic strip offered a consistent and innovative portrayal of a same-sex relationship in the context of popular media, helping to gradually normalise and accept a variety of sexual orientations in society.

The early 1970s was a turning point in the history of gay comics as a separate and self-aware subgenre within the larger comic book industry. The deliberate attempt to portray a range of sexual identities and orientations in the medium defined this transformative phase. Particularly, Trina Robbins was a pioneer with her powerful three-page story "Sandy Comes Out," which appeared in *Wimmen's Comix*, a magazine run by a group of female cartoonists.

Mary Wings' *Come Out Comix* was released in 1973, adding to the genre's growing popularity. With Roberta Gregory's *Modern Romance* and Mary Wings's *Dykes Shorts* the narrative landscape expanded. Both offered complex analyses of queer themes. The debut of Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* in 1983 marked a turning point in the history of lesbian representation. It was praised for its wit and social commentary, but it was also crucial in increasing

the visibility of lesbian characters. When taken as a whole, these achievements highlight the development and diversity of gay comics and show a deliberate attempt to increase the visibility of LGBTQ+ voices in the field of comic art.

The oldest LGBT interest magazine in the nation, the *Advocate*, served as a platform for the rise of gag cartoons in the late 1960s that had a long-lasting effect on the LGBTQ+ comic scene. Joe Johnson's "Miss Thing" and "Big Dick," which offered humorous insights into the queer experience, are noteworthy examples. At the same time, Rupert Kainnards' Cathartic Comics pioneered the inclusion of African-American gay characters in a significant way, providing an invaluable intersectional viewpoint for the LGBTQ+ story.

The groundbreaking anthology series *Gay Comix*, created by Howard Cruse, first appeared in the 1980s. This series developed into an essential platform for various queer voices to use comics to express themselves. Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, a graphic memoir that deftly examines themes of identity, family, and sexuality, is another noteworthy addition to LGBTQ+ literature. Diana DiMassa wrote *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* in the 1990s, which was a satirical book that widely challenged stereotypes and social conventions.

With works like *SubGirly*, *Ride Girls*, and *Dangerous Women*, Jennifer Camper left a lasting impression and added to the expanding body of LGBTQ+ comics. The representation of LGBTQ+ experiences in comic art has been enriched and diversified by these creators' varied expressions of queer narratives, which range from gag cartoons to thought-provoking graphic novels (Chute 306-338).

Several notable works in the field of 21st-century queer comics have added to the rich tapestry of LGBTQ+ storytelling. *Pregnant Butch* by A.K. Summers offers a perceptive story that delves into the singular viewpoint of a pregnant butch lesbian. *On Loving Women* by Diana Obomsawin is a graphic novel that explores women's various love and relationship experiences. Through portraits and anecdotes of their crushes, Elisha Lim's *100 Butches, 100 Crushes* offers a visual celebration of people who identify as butch. The book *Sexile* by Jaime Cortez delves into the relationship between sexuality and exile, highlighting the difficulties that LGBTQ+ people encounter when migrating and relocating.

Calling Dr. Laura by Nicole Georges skillfully combines graphic storytelling and memoir to provide a personal story that explores themes of self-discovery, family, and identity. International praise was bestowed upon Jul Maroh's *Blue is the Warmest Color* due to its poignant examination

of a same-sex relationship. Dylan Edwards' *Transposes* is an anthology of interviews featuring transgender men who share their distinct life narratives and help advance a more inclusive portrayal of gender diversity in the LGBTQ+ community.

In mainstream comics, Wonder Woman in DC Comics has become a symbol of LGBTQ+ representation, with recent storylines delving into her bisexuality. Marvel introduced the transgender character Sera in *Angela: Asgard's Assassin* and Archie Comics debuted Kevin Keller as an out-gay character. These incidents demonstrate how mainstream comic narratives are becoming more and more committed to diversity and inclusion.

Analysis

The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex and desire or sexuality generally does not seem to follow from gender - indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another. When the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force. That regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe (Butler 173).

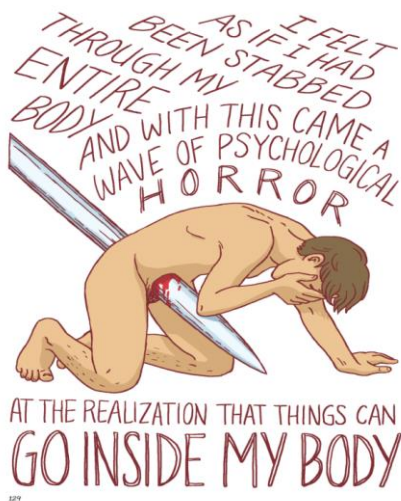


Figure 1.

Building on this historical foundation as well as on the theoretical foundation laid out by Butler, the paper closely analyses the combination of words and images that the author has used and illustrates how these elements become instrumental to the author in articulating their gender and sexuality, thus challenging the societal norms of cisgenderism and heterosexuality. The interdependence of words and images is one of the author's essential graphic elements in communicating it. This alliance represents a symbiotic relationship where "both words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone" (McCloud 128), highlighting these two

communicative modalities' mutual reliance and coalescence. This analysis thus focuses on specific

graphic elements, particularly the interdependence of words and images that define Maia's narrative while bridging the historical trajectory of queer comics.

Fig.1 symbolises Maia's visceral response to eir first pap smear examination for cervical cancer screening, wherein the use of a speculum elicited excruciating pain and psychological distress stemming from the realisation that foreign objects could enter eir body (129). The lettering in the figure, arranged parallel to the stabbed position of the author, visually reinforces the pain experienced during the examination. The imagery of a spear penetrating Maia's body, accompanied by blood, corresponds with the textual depiction of the author feeling stabbed through eir entire body, triggering a wave of psychological horror. This poignant representation consciously challenges societal norms regarding a woman's expected submission to penetration, highlighting the gendered construction of bodily autonomy (Eisner 10).

In a patriarchal context, women are often regarded as chattel, their bodies subject to male possession for fulfilling sexual desires (Dworkin). Maia, confronting the societal expectation of accepting penetration, resists this notion even within a medical context and, later, in eir romantic relationships with females, emphasising eir autonomy over eir body (McKinnon). This resistance disrupts heteronormative constructions of gendered exchange and erotic possibilities associated with bodily orifices. Despite being assigned female at birth (afab), Maia's defiance challenges the idea that her body must conform to accepting external intrusion. This resistance echoes a broader narrative within queer culture that seeks to redefine and resist normative expectations surrounding bodily autonomy (Kobabe 169).

The graphic illustration used with the textual account explains the dual dimension of pain. Maia's physical and mental suffering during the examination is symbolically represented by the illustration of a crouching, bleeding human figure being stabbed in the pelvis from behind. The narrative that surrounds this visual element is cohesive because of the well-chosen words, which convey a clear understanding of the complex interactions between physical pain - represented by the bleeding figure - and mental distress - indicated by the spear imagery and Maia's resistance to the invasive procedure. Thus, the interdependence of words and images helps Maia articulate the body dysphoria Maia experienced when e grew up. To further compound Maia's confusion about eir sexuality, in Fig. 2, e developed eir "worst crush" on a punk girl who identified as a butch and went by a traditionally masculine name. This girl's stereotypically masculine features, such as short hair and an open flannel shirt worn over a tee, are depicted in the pages. Maia had a hard time



accepting eirself as a lesbian even though e had a huge crush on a girl. A thorough comprehension of this internal conflict necessitates the simultaneous examination of words and images. If one were to rely exclusively on one format over the other, Maia's emotions might be interpreted incorrectly. In response to eir friend's query, "Are you still FREAKING OUT about being a lesbian?" for example. "No," is Maia's response. However, if readers do not consider the illustration, they could misinterpret Maia's mental state because eir raised eyebrow in the picture represents eir continued confusion about the situation.

According to the traditional model of sexual identity, the formation of a sexual identity requires emotional and sexual attachment to another person. Although Maia felt deeply connected to other women, she could never imagine two women having an intimate relationship. Instead, Maia has always fancied eirself the one with male sex organs with another male whenever e has had feelings for two people.

Figure 2. *I FOUND MYSELF TURNING TO METAPHORS OF MILD PHYSICAL DISCOMFORT. I TRIED TO ARTICULATE 'ANTED NEW PRONOUNS.*



Figure 3.

continued in the next panel with the phrase, "Or getting scratched by the tag at the back of my

shirt." With the help of special effects, the close-up of a shirt with the tag sticking out conveys Maia's annoyance and irritation at people misusing her preferred pronouns. The caption, picture, and special effects work together to powerfully convey Maia's feelings of invalidation and dismissal due to being misgendered.

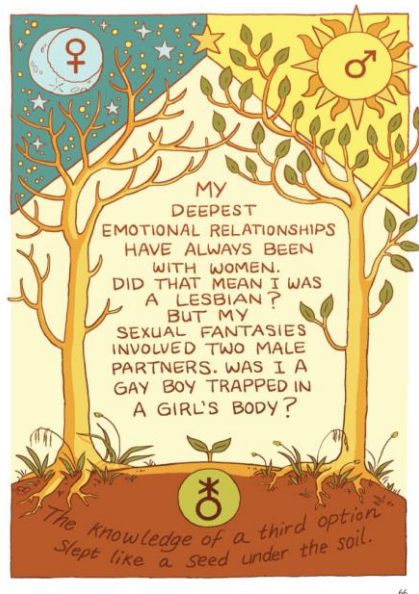


Figure 4.

gender system.

Through close examination of the text and images in Fig. 4, the complex connotations surrounding entwined gender and sexuality become clear. The figure is shaped like a house and comprises four panels in total. The two roof panels, divided by a roof ridge, display gender-specific symbols for men and women within depictions of the sun and moon. The drawings of two trees, one bare and the other covered in leaves, are used to construct the walls on either side of the roofs. The house's interior blends Maia's written reflections with an illustration of a developing seed sprouting its first real leaves. The fourth panel, which represents the house's foundation, has walls formed by meeting tree roots, and a seed inside represents "the knowledge of a third option" that goes beyond the binary

The growth of the plant inside this structure represents a break in the binary system of heteronormative cis-gendered relationships. The combination of male and female symbols forms the house's frame, and the plant reaches into it. With the help of words that serve as the primary framework, Maia contemplates eir romantic fantasies involving two male partners and eir emotional relationships with women, illustrating the complexity of eir gender identity.

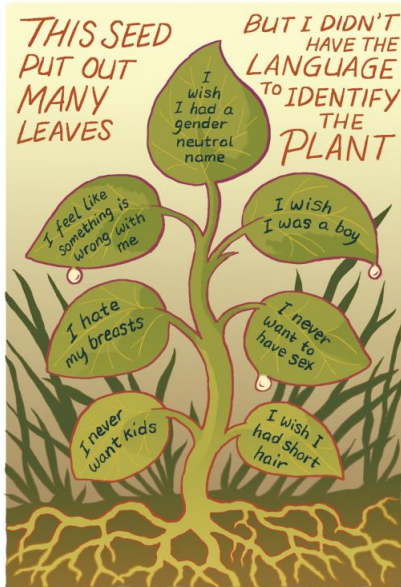


Figure 5.

Fig. 5 represents Maia's thoughts, feelings, and desires regarding the pain or distress e feels in eir body, which are expressed through each leaf of the plant. Unlike the previous figure, this one has no buildings that could hinder its expansion. It is implied that the plant originated from the traditional, separate structure linked to male and female. Maia did not have the words to name the plant, but e knew what it was made of. Different leaves attached to the stem emphasise the discord e experienced in eir body by highlighting its lack of independent existence. The development of the plant represents the breakdown of the

conventional home structure and its replacement by a fully realised plant that encompasses different facets of Maia's non-binary gender identity.

Conclusion

Employing a balanced fusion of carefully composed visuals and words, Maia skillfully conveys to the audience the subtleties of their queer identity. In this situation, Kobabe's use of visual representation becomes crucial because e cannot verbally express the complex experiences that shaped eir body and mind during eir formative years. Instead, e has relied on the ability of images to capture the complexity of eir genderqueer identity. The use of images proves invaluable, enabling Maia to depict the complex nature of their experiences in a manner that words alone might not have been able to. Through the mutually supportive connection between text and images, Maia is able to go beyond the bounds of spoken language and explore the complex facets of their queer identity. Maia portrays a narrative in which gender and sexuality are intrinsically linked, making them inseparable in their lived realities, by skillfully fusing written language with visual elements. By painting a vivid and accurate picture of eir queer identity that goes beyond any

limitations that traditional language might impose, Maia is able to effectively explain the connections between gender and sexuality through the interdependence of visual and verbal narrative.

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