COMPOSING(MEDIA) = COMPOSING(EMBODIMENT)

bodies, technologies, writing, the teaching of writing

Edited by

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Logan, Utah
2012

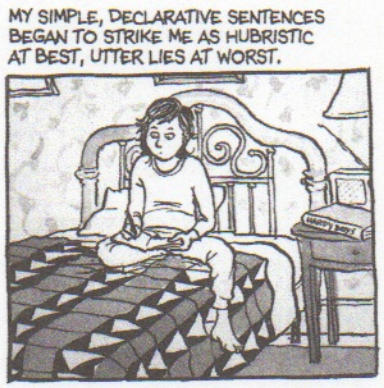
PART 1

MEDIA = EMBODIMENT

How do differing media encourage—or discourage—particular senses of bodies in the world and bodies in relation to others?

How have changes in media, over time, entwined with differing possibilities for bodies and relations with others?

How can we work with available media and media technologies to open new possibilities for embodiment?



1 DRAWN TOGETHER

Possibilities for Bodies in Words and Pictures

Anne Frances Wysocki

A few years back, in an interview published in *JAC*, Stuart Hall suggested one reason production has always mattered to writing studies: Hall ties production to identity. He says that "there is no final, finished identity position or self" to be reflected in one's writing; instead, as he describes the process of producing a written text, he says that

> while it's true that you may have a very clear notion of what the argument is and that you may be constructing that argument very carefully, very deliberately, your identity is also in part becoming through the writing. (qtd. in Drew 173)

For Hall, that is, "We therefore occupy our identities very retrospectively: having produced them, we then know who we are" (qtd. in Drew 173). It is not that we find our selves in our work because there was a unified self that preceded the work and that only needed being made present somehow in the work; it is rather that what the work is—its status as a shaped object in front of us—makes visible to us "what we are." "I think only then," continues Hall, "do we make an investment [in the produced position], saying, 'Yes, I like that position, I am that sort of person, I'm willing to occupy that position" (qtd. in Drew 173). One could also just as easily say, "No, I do not like that position . . . how can I rework it?"—but in either case the position has had to be constructed—produced—before it can be so judged.

That is, we see ourselves in what we produce. We can look at what we produce to ask, "Is that who I (at least in part) am? Is that who I want to be? Is that a position through which I want to be seen?"

■

In this chapter, I want to consider (altogether too quickly to be anything more than suggestive, given the space here) what kinds of identities and bodies can be constructed when one can use not only words but also pictures—as in comic books and graphic novels—in composing.

In composing the selves-to-be-considered that Hall describes, we can only work with available cultural categories for shaping texts if we wish to be understood by others, as the New London Group describes when they argue that any composition must begin in "available designs" (the existing social systems of conventions, grammars, and genres upon which all text composers rely) or as Kaja Silverman describes when she writes, drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic structures, that "all subjects, male or female, rely for their identity upon the repertoire of culturally available images" surrounding them at any time (295). The argument I build here about words and pictures as available designs or culturally available images depends on understanding words and pictures not as having essential, formal functions but as having histories. And because of the particular histories words and pictures have had relative to each other, and because of how then comics and graphic novels have come to have a particular cultural place at this moment, certain kinds of visible identities—and questionings of identities, and understandings of bodies—are possible, for now.

The available designs of words and pictures, that is, come with attached discourses. How one articulates words and pictures, then, can play with—or against—those discourses.

■

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, published in 1962, Marshall McLuhan argues that the serious and repeated look of printed book pages homogenize (some) people. In the book there are men who build nations together because they see similarities in themselves as they learned to see book pages; in the book there is abstraction, but nothing of bodies; there is science and philosophy, but nothing of the quotidian; there are men and words, and men and words only. It is in McLuhan's earlier *The Mechanical Bride*, first published in 1951, that there appear women, children, class distinctions, cars, nylons, Mennen Skin Bracer, pictures, advertising, and "sex, gunplay, fast action" (14); in this second book, McLuhan claims that

> A huge passivity has settled on industrial society. For people carried about in mechanical vehicles, earning their living by waiting on machines, listening much of the day to canned music, watching packaged movie entertainment and capsulated news, for such people it would require an exceptional degree of awareness and an especial heroism of effort to be anything but supine consumers of

> processed goods. Society begins to take on the character of the kept woman whose role is expected to be submission and luxurious passivity. (21)

Whether or not one agrees with McLuhan's claims (which align with the media theorists discussed in the introduction) that mass media encourage passive receptivity, McLuhan articulates words, when they are alone, to thought and men; pictures align with no thought and women.

These particular dichotomous articulations were not new with McLuhan, of course. The dichotomies were presaged even by the Pythagoreans and their list, quoted by Aristotle, of the ten pairs of opposites the Pythagoreans believed shaped all existence—

> limit and the absence of limit
>
> odd and even
>
> one and many
>
> right and left
>
> male and female
>
> rest and motion
>
> straight and curved
>
> light and dark
>
> good and bad
>
> square and oblong
>
> (John Robinson 119)

In *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, W.J.T. Mitchell discusses the shifting tensions among conceptions of word and image in the writings of G.E. Lessing, Edmund Burke, Karl Marx, Nelson Goodman, and Rudolf Arnheim. For one example, Mitchell offers a table that shows the "oppositions that regulate Lessing's discourse" (110):

Poetry	Painting
Time	Space
Arbitrary (man-made) signs	Natural Signs
Infinite range	Narrow Sphere
Expression	Imitation
Mind	Body
Internal	External
Eloquent	Silent
Sublimity	Beauty

Ear	Eye
Masculine	Feminine

And Mitchell characterizes Lessing's position toward these oppositions:

> Paintings, like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designed for the gratification of the eye, in contrast to the sublime eloquence proper to the manly art of poetry. Paintings are confined to the narrow sphere of external display of their bodies and of the space which they ornament, while poems are free to range over an infinite realm of potential action and expression, the domain of time, discourse, and history. (110)

Or, as Mitchell writes in a later work, under such tradition the "image is the medium of the subhuman, the savage, the 'dumb' animal, the child, the woman, the masses" (*Picture Theory* 24).

And here, finally for now, is not another list but a description of a solitary reader set off against a group of television watchers, as Robert Romanyshyn turns a psychologist's perspective to how the word and picture opposition shows itself in our actions and attentions (while adding new terms to either side of the above dichotomizing lists). Romanyshyn's work, from 1992, echoes McLuhan:

> Distraction, triviality, and passivity are the judgments . . . of a book consciousness watching television. They are the diagnosed symptoms of the serious reader who has distanced herself or himself from the vulgar. The headless nuclear family watching television is the nightmare of the bodyless reader, the terrible image of what we become when we lose the book. We need to remember, however, the kinship between the two, the connection between that kind of thinking which, in splitting off the serious from the vulgar, the mind from flesh, reason from emotion, first creates a mindless body and its needs for distraction, and then produced the means to do it. (348)

My quick travel through Western takes on word and picture, male and female, mind and body, reason and emotion, is quick, but establishes, I hope, that conceptually, these terms have been treated as connected essentials with ethical weight: word and picture are not simply conceived as neutrally different available choices for communication; they are conceived as discrete and unitary kinds of objects that articulate to highly valued categories that have been and are used to define what and who we might be and do in our lives with others. The reach of the articulations encourage us to judge others in relation to how well those others fit to one side or the other

of these lists. If one chooses only words for composing a self, then and for example, it is not that there is something inherent in words that makes one look smart or male; it is that a cultural history supports one in so believing, seeing, and making sense of one's body.

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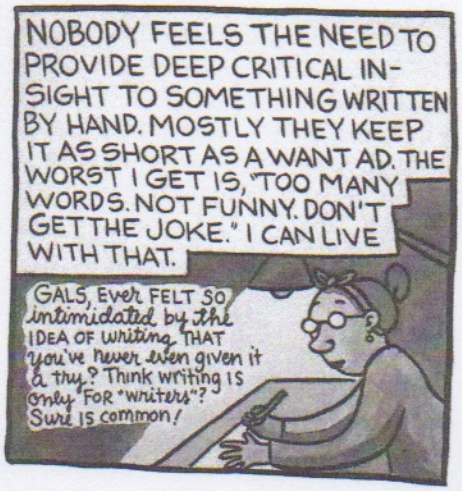

Comic strip panel from the chapter 'Lost and Found' in *One! Hundred! Demons!* by Lynda Barry, © 2002 Lynda Barry, published by Sasquatch Books and used courtesy of Darhansoff & Verrill Literary Agents.

In response to his considerations of how others have conceived word and image, Mitchell argues that any tension or difference we see between words and images is a "struggle that carries the fundamental contradictions of our culture into the heart of theoretical discourse itself. The point, then, is not to heal the split between words and images, but to see what interests and powers it serves" (*Iconology* 44). Precisely because one of their defining characteristics is that they hold words and pictures together on a page (on this defining characteristic, see, for example, McCloud; Hatfield; Varnum and Gibbons), comics offer a site for exploring how the historical and particularly valued articulations of word and picture move beyond the conceptual and into questions of interests and powers. Several snapshots from the history of comics can show, then, how these media are not inherently less serious than print-only texts but how their mediating potentials can be shaped by political and social decisions.

■

"The marijuana of the nursery, the bane of the bassinet, the horror of the house, the curse of the kids, and a threat to the future" is how John Mason Brown, a drama critic for *The Saturday Review of Literature*, described comics in a 1948 radio debate called "What's Wrong with Comics?" The name

of the debate (which was sponsored by the ABC radio show *America's Town Meetings of the Air*) suggests that the direction of the debate was shaped beforehand: those speaking against comics could be on the attack from the start but those speaking in favor had to be on the defensive, needing to prove nothing was wrong with comics. In addition to calling them the "marijuana of the nursery," Brown also called comics "the lowest, most despicable, and harmful form of trash," because they made reading "too easy" (Nyberg 44).

This debate was not an isolated event, but rather part of an on-going concern in the 1940s and 1950s in the US—and around the world—over the effects comics were having on youth and, implicitly, on adult readers. (See both Lent's "Comic Debates," and the edited collection for which that article served as an introduction, for a sense of just how international the debate over comics was in the 1940s and 1950s.) I want to consider such criticisms of comics against the backdrop of the word-picture articulations I outlined previously, to argue that when comics are criticized for not being serious enough, for not teaching serious reading and writing abilities, or for not teaching serious thinking, it is not because the pictures have somehow won out over the words; it is instead because their critics fear comics are too serious. Comics have come under attack, I argue, not because they necessarily cause people to think poorly or live as though they are bodies only but because their appeal to large audiences can potentially make them a threat to the existing social order if their content is not controlled. Because arguments to decide means of social control rarely claim social control as their explicit end, however, the arguments about comics instead get focused on their formal aspects, on their uses of words and pictures together: comics are argued to be demeaning and infantilizing and then are made to be so, their words and pictures simplified and reduced from what they could otherwise be.

A dip into the history of comics will thus help make clear how the potential mediations of comics—of words and pictures—are not fixed.

Although some writers find the origins of comics in cave paintings, Egyptian hieroglyphics, Mayan illustrated books, or old European tapestries that show sequences of illustrations with words explaining what is in the illustrations (McCloud; Nielsen and Wichmann; Jerry Robinson), some pages that look like what we now call comics appeared in illustrated educational magazines of the first half of the nineteenth century. These magazines, such as *Penny Magazine* and *Penny Cyclopedia* produced by the Society for the Diffusion of Really Useful Knowledge, were published for the working classes. As Adrian Johns, a researcher into book history, argues, the society

> was founded out of a long-standing fear that even books innocuous enough in restricted settings could take on dangerous, even seditious, meanings in the hands of a mass proletarian audience. So [the Society] resolved to swamp the country with cheap periodicals containing "nothing to excite the passions." (630)

Worried, that is, that working-class people who read the same books as the upper classes would get ideas about what their lives should be, the society provided to the lower classes magazines with simplified information (which relied more heavily on illustrations than on words) about (for example) natural history and mathematics; by 1832, the magazines had one million readers. As for the story magazines—called "penny dreadfuls" because of, as Roger Sabin describes, "their lurid subject matter" about wild boys, criminals, and murderers—these too were "designed for a working class audience" and "were read primarily by young men" (*Comics* 14). Sabin writes that they were at one time in the nineteenth century

> feared to be so politically subversive that a censorship campaign was initiated to ban them. Officially, the reason for the clampdown was given to be their violent nature: in fact, anti-establishment story lines were considered much more of a threat. (*Comics* 14)

Similarly, Kress and van Leeuwen understand processes of cultural—class—differentiation in the nineteenth century to have included differentiation between the value of word and picture; they connect this differentiation to the entrenchment of capital at a particular time and to the development of more visual texts explicitly for mass consumption:

> This development beyond the densely printed page began in the late nineteenth century mass press, in a context in which the ruling class, itself strongly committed to the densely printed page, attempted to maintain its hegemony by taking control of the popular culture, commercializing it, and so turning the media *of* the people into the media *for* the people. Their own comparable media—"high" literature and the humanities generally—became even more firmly grounded on the single semiotic of writing. Layout was not encouraged here, because it undermined the power of the densely printed page as, literally, the realization of the most literary and literate semiotic. The genres of the densely printed page, then, manifest the cultural capital ("high" cultural forms) controlled by the intellectual and artistic wing of the middle class, to use Bourdieu's terms. (185; emphases in original)

Kress and van Leeuwen thus argue that pages attentive to layout and variety are aimed at "'the masses,' or children" (186), so that pages of words only can be used by others—the "ruling class," "the middle class" that is aspiring

"upwards"—to show their particular and happy social positions and their maturity. From the first mass reproduction of printed texts, then, the formal content of pages—their proportion and arrangements of words and pictures—became visual markers of class differentiation and, as Johns and Sabin argue, their formal content was shaped to be less stimulating or complex than it could have been; so shaped, their purpose became educating particular bodies toward passivity.

In Britain the first mass-market comic to use a recurring character, *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*, told of a man who liked to drink, who avoided both work and the rent collector, and who therefore, according to Roger Sabin in his history of comics in Britain and the US, "articulated a side of working-class life rarely touched upon in other publications" (*Adult Comics* 17–18). This comics magazine was inexpensive, and became "the largest-selling penny-paper in the world"—in part because, Sabin argues,

> as an expression of the new working-class culture, it was ultimately quite conservative. There was no suggestion of class struggle, and the depiction of the rich was comic rather than hostile, with no reference to the source of their income. (18)

Ally Sloper, Sabin writes, was the "'little man' who 'knows his place'" (19). Because it allowed working-class people to see hard aspects of their lives but in a way that didn't threaten the social order, Sabin argues that this comic was allowed to continue from 1884 until 1923—and its popularity gave rise to many competitors and to the printing of comics in newspapers as well as to comics for children.

Comics developed similarly in the United States. There were, first, comic magazines; newspaper publishers then starting putting comics into their papers. In the United States, the comic strip that started the boom is considered to be the Yellow Kid, which appeared in 1895 in the *New York World* newspaper: the Yellow Kid was "big-eared, bald, and beady-eyed" (Daniels 2) and the "setting was the city slums, squalid tenements and backyards filled with dogs and cats, tough characters and various ragamuffins" (Jerry Robinson 12); according to Daniels, the Yellow Kid

> existed in a world that was crude, noisy, sordid, and eccentric, and he commented disdainfully on it, first with wry expressions on his idiot's face, later with phonetically rendered slang inscribed on his expansive nightshirt. (2)

That the Yellow Kid was no threat to any person or social order is clear in how his creator, Richard Outcault, described him:

> The Yellow Kid was not an individual but a type. When I used to go about the slums on newspaper assignments I would encounter him often, wandering out

> of doorways or sitting down on dirty doorsteps. I always loved the Kid. He had a sweet character and a sunny disposition, and was generous to a fault. Malice, envy, or selfishness were not traits of his, and he never lost his temper. (Wood)

The Yellow Kid was such a success that his picture was "soon on buttons, cracker tins, cigarette packs, and ladies' fans; eventually he was a character in a Broadway play" (Becker, qtd. in A. Berger 24). The success of the strip led to other newspapers developing similar strips, to the Sunday comics sections, and—eventually—to bound editions of these comics. This led to comic books, standing on their own as continuing stories about children, animals, families, spies, detectives and crooks, ghosts, and superheroes.

In the 1940s, various surveys reported that anywhere from 83% to 100% of children between seven and seventeen years of age in the United States read comic books, some reading two comics "regularly," some twenty-three (Lent, "Comic Debates" 14–16). In the mid-1950s, sales of comics approached 60 million per month—with some fair amount of those sales going to adults, many of whom, according to a 1954 government-sponsored survey in one Ohio town, averaged eleven comics a month; in 1949 there were 120 different romance comics one could buy; in 1953, 130 horror comics (Sabin, *Adult Comics* 144, 147, 152, 154).

In the early days of comic strips in US newspapers, there were, as Sabin reports, complaints about the comics similar to those in Britain: comics

> were accused of being crass, ephemeral, and detrimental to reading: that they were often more popular than the actual news-pages in the papers was considered by some a national outrage. . . . Because Hearst, Pulitzer, and other tycoons were using the strips to reach an ever-wider audience (often an immigrant audience), they were branded as "low-class" and accused of "dragging the press down." (*Adult Comics* 137)

Just as earlier, comics were designed with simplified words and pictures in accord with how some perceived the immigrant and other feared or denigrated audiences; for neither comics nor audience did the words or pictures reflect any essential qualities—but they instead were worked to create a sense of the essential.

The years between World War I and World War II are often considered the "golden years" of comics in the US. In those years, as conditions lead up to World War II, the actors in comic books shifted:

> Superman and Batman were born . . . . They mirrored the spirit of the era and America's attitude towards political problems; they expressed the idea that America was the savior and preserver of all true social values, guardian of democracy, deliverer of the oppressed from the bondage of Fascism and National Socialism. (Reitberger and Fuchs 117)

During World War II, comics about military life and the war proliferated. One survey estimated that 44% of men in military training camps regularly read comic books; comic books outsold other magazines ten to one at military stores. The army approved 180 periodicals—of which almost 50 were comic books—that could be distributed without having to be checked for political content (Zorbaugh 198–199). After the war, however, comic books again came under attack, as the radio debate that opens this section shows.

In 1954 psychiatrist Frederic Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he argued that there existed a direct connection between reading comics—and being exposed to the violence in them—and juvenile delinquency. To support his claims, Wertham used examples:

> A fifteen-year-old boy was accused of having shot and killed a boy of fourteen (the authorities chose to consider this accidental), of having thrown a cat from a roof, of having thrown a knife through a boy's foot, of sadistic acts with younger children, of having shot at a younger girl with a BB gun. After a full study of the psychological and social background, we came to the conclusion that the fact he was an inveterate reader of comic books was an important contributing factor. (qtd. in Nyberg 51)

Wertham's criticisms helped galvanize concerns over the effects of comics to the extent that congressional hearings were held. Some who have written about this situation argue, however, that it was more than fears about the effects of comics on children that underlay the criticisms. Les Daniels, for example, describes what brought disfavor on crime comics:

> The documentary-style crime comic books depicted without restraint the gang-life of the Depression and the psychopathic aberrations of the postwar liberation. In a medium where fantasy was the standard fare, the crime comics exposed some unpleasant truths about our society. Their honesty, we may assume, made them unpleasant. In any case, they came under attack for what they were only reporting, even as bearers of bad tidings might be executed by resentful rulers. (86)

In response to the attacks and hoping to avoid external censorship, the comics industry developed its own self-regulatory Code of the Comics Association of America, Inc. to govern what could and could not be shown in comics and how what could be shown would be shown. The code stated, for example, that "in every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal shall be punished for his misdeeds," and "although slang and colloquialisms are acceptable, excessive use should be discouraged and wherever possible good grammar shall be employed." (The full original 1954 code is easily found online; see Lavin, "Comics Code," for example.) As a

result, comics were sanitized to pose no threat to the proper ethical or educational upbringing of the young. Many comics publishing companies went out of business, the industry consolidated into the hands of a few companies, and—some argue (see Daniels or either Sabin book, for example)—the subject matter of comics became more juvenile than before.

The historical sketch above focuses on class: comics have been shaped to meet producers' notions of what was appropriate for readers perceived not to need intellectual stimulation or challenge. In matters of gender, perceptions of audience desire are suggested by lines in the Comics Code—"Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities" or "the treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage"—or by this summary about the appearance of women in Golden Age Comics:

> Powerful super-heroines like DC's Wonder Woman or Marvel's She-Hulk may easily overcome the most overwhelming threats and obstacles, but they are invariably depicted as alluring objects of desire, wearing the scantiest of costumes. These twin themes of dependence and sexual desirability have permeated the comic book medium from its earliest days. . . . (Lavin, "Women")

How audience desire was perceived in matters of ethnicity is suggested by these lines from Leonard Rifas's article "Racial Imagery, Racism, Individualism, and Underground Comix," in which Rifas describes how *Seduction of the Innocent*, mentioned above, contained

> an extensive section condemning American comic books for indelibly impressing on their young readers that there exist "natives, primitives, savages, 'ape men,' Negroes, Jews, Indians, Italians, Slavs, Chinese and Japanese, immigrants of every description, people with irregular features, swarthy skins, physical deformities, [or] Oriental features" who are inferior to tall, blond, regular-featured men, and are "suitable victims for slaughter."

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I wish to repeat that it is not because words and pictures have some essential form or mediating function that the portrayals above appear.

■

The alternative comics movement that started in the 1960s—giving rise to what many label "comix"—is "defined by its insistent, even strident, opposition to the normative practices and clichés of 'mainstream' comic books" (Hatfield 18) that resulted from the Comics Code. These alternatives to

the mainstream—epitomized first by the work of R. Crumb and then by Art Spiegelman's *Maus*—oppose themselves to publishing practices of the large commercial comics presses: published by independent presses, they are most often both drawn and written by one person instead of a company-built team of writer, artist, and inker, and they emphasize "corrosive reexamination of familiar tropes" (18). These books and the production practices behind them are originary for "graphic novels," first so called by Will Eisner in his 1985 book *Comics and Sequential Art*. In spite of the opposition of both comix and graphic novels to the more traditional comics publishers, however, they are still most often analyzed in the United States in terms of their formal linkings of word and picture: consider the title of Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons's edited collection *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, for example, or look through Scott McCloud's highly influential *Understanding Comics* or *Making Comics* to see the emphasis placed on the possible formal patterns of word and picture interaction.

from Moore and Gibbons's *Watchmen*. © DC Comics

The passages I quoted from Hall at this paper's beginning encourage us to imagine a writer mediating him- or herself in the content of the words on a page—but what I have written following that beginning suggests, I hope, that such content cannot be separated from the physical material without which we cannot communicate. To compose a words-only page

here and now is to take up, along with a keyboard and a white surface, the whole set of articulations and attitudes outlined above for words. Through the look of our pages and our splittings between words and pictures, we make visible cultural beliefs about the places and representations of class, gender, ethnicity, and other identities and embodiments. But what if one fits into none of the received possibilities of words or pictures?

The dichotomies of mind and body, male and female, reason and emotion, and light and dark to which words and pictures have been articulated *have* been questioned for how they limit and constrain those identified with one side or the other. But if words and pictures themselves continue to be considered as standing in formal opposition, performing essential and dichotomizing functions, then we carry all those other articulations—as they have been conceptualized but also represented in the pages of comics—along with them.

And when we can so cleanly hold these terms apart, (as David Carrier asserts in his book considering how words and pictures work together in comics) "breaking down seemingly essential boundaries is often thought to be unnatural, and so morally pernicious" (70) because

> we expect the world to fit our preconceived stable categories, and so what falls between is easily felt, depending on our temperament and politics, to be either exciting or menacing. Hence the fascination with, and fear of, cross-dressing, androgyny, people of "mixed-race," comics, and other forms of in-betweenness. (70–71)

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> *Not surprisingly, Wertham objects also to another kind of what might be called inbetweenness encouraged, so he thinks, by comics—homosexuality. (Carrier 69)*

In our place and time, then, the history of words and pictures and comics I have just presented helps make sense of the retrospective construction of identity that is Alison Bechdel's memoiristic graphic novel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic.* Because of the articulations of words and pictures we've inherited, and because the mix of words and pictures in comics has been used to signify what hasn't been considered serious or proper, Bechdel can construct identities not by dissolving dichotomies but by working across them, stirring up their previous articulations.

On one page in *Fun Home,* Bechdel uses word captions to describe how her father's

> shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany. In fact, the meticulous, period interiors were expressly designed to conceal it. Mirrors, distracting bronzes, multiple doorways. Visitors often got lost upstairs. (20)

In this graphic novel, Bechdel reconstructs her growing up as though it were a re-enactment of the myth of Icarus and Daedalus. The house that her father so carefully restored becomes his labyrinth, the place where he can hide himself, "a maze of passages and rooms opening endlessly into one another . . . and from which, as stray youths and maidens discovered to their peril . . . escape was impossible" (12). Underneath the last three words, however, Bechdel draws herself as a child running out the house's front door, evading her father's anger after she accidentally broke something.

In an article on the work of several comic artists, Frank L. Cioffi argues that comic artists can arrange words and pictures together to create different disjunctive effects. For example, Cioffi argues, R. Crumb sets words and pictures to "work at absolute cross purposes" (112) in a "continual assault on middle class values" (111); with his use of cartoon animals to tell a Holocaust story, Art Spiegelman "sets up something like a cognitive or emotional dissonance within readers" (116–117). In *Fun Home*, however, it is dissonance that the father is working so hard to hide: "He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear what they were not. He appeared to be an ideal husband and father, for example. But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?" (17). Within its own labyrinthine temporal structure, the book retells how Bechdel came to know about her father's life and its connections to her own sexuality, and in the process the book hides nothing. On the pages of this book, words and pictures (and, along with them, the often-hidden matters of gender and sex and families) are made visible in their articulations—but dissonance is not the point of it. If the words and pictures suggest opposing possibilities—as they do in the frame sequence I described above in which the child escapes the house—it is not to show conflict but rather to make visible certain identities that can only be lived across the clean boundaries that separate the dichotomies I discussed several pages back.

Toward the middle of the book, just before the book's only two-paged spread that holds a single frame, Bechdel writes that

> Proust refers to his explicitly homosexual characters as "inverts." I've always been fond of this antiquated clinical term. It's imprecise and insufficient, defining the homosexual person whose gender expression is at odds with his or her sex. But in the admittedly limited sample comprising my father and me, perhaps it is sufficient. (97)

and

While I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him . . .
He was attempting to express something feminine through me. (98)

But it is also the book *Fun Home* itself that is an inversion of the father's life—as well as of the mother's. The book, hand drawn but mass produced and highly public, describes the child's attachment to reading and art, learned from her parents, and makes visible—and visibly claimed—her

own sexuality and her own artistic abilities. In *Fun Home,* words and visual display are the devices through which her parents both understand but also reshape and so obscure their desires (one reviewer calls the book "a comment on the architecture and ornament of emotional obfuscation" [Bellafante]): her father has the house and garden, her mother the local theater productions, they write letters (her mother a master's thesis), and they read, and they read, in many drawings. The family goes on one trip to Europe together, when Alison is young:

> It was a thrilling trip. In Switzerland I talked my parents into buying me hiking boots. In Cannes, I argued compellingly for the right to exchange my tank suit for a pair of shorts. Such freedom from convention was intoxicating. But while our travels widened my scope, I suspect my parents felt their own dwindling. Perhaps this was when I cemented the unspoken compact with them that I would never get married, that I would carry on to live the artist's life they had each abdicated. (73)

As in the panel I placed at this chapter's beginning, Bechdel draws herself as a child who doubted her abilities to think through writing. She shows the writing system she devised to question all her thinking, a system that eventually almost blots out her diary's words, and she shows how she followed algebraic convention to refer to her menstrual period so she wouldn't have to name it. But then she describes learning about orgasms while drawing, describes her own coming out (drawing herself looking up *lesbian* in a dictionary and finding relevant books in different libraries), and draws panels of herself masturbating (while reading) and having sex with other women (sometimes also while reading).

In *Fun Home,* the fraught household is described as resulting from the tensions of people trying to live as though "male" and "female" were cleanly defined by lists of dichotomous qualities like those I quoted some pages back. In the logic of the book, then, if the dichotomies are to be dissolved, words and pictures cannot be aligned with male or female or with thought and emotion, internal and external, time and space. Instead, male and female or thought and emotion come to be *across* words and pictures—and the words and pictures get complex as a result.

In *Fun Home,* the few frames that do not have a caption lettered above them have word boxes inside of them, often serving as labels to name or further explain what is pictured—and there are a considerable number of frames in which words are what's pictured: newspapers, magazines, and novel covers; graffiti; the pages of novels, dictionaries, police reports, passports, childcare manuals, calendars, and bird identification guides; memos; memorial stones and markers; letters both typed and handwritten;

diaries. There are also labeled maps and drawings of televisions showing movies and the news. Words function multiply in this book, in other words, and so these variously reproduced bits of paper and pages—in addition to suggesting that these events did indeed take place, as various commenters and Bechdel herself have argued—make visible how the lives in the book are composed from many bits and pieces, are visible from many perspectives but not from any single or simple list.

The pictures in the book are straightforwardly drawn in what Bechdel calls her "regular cartoony style" (Chute 1009) that makes visible the careful action of a drawing hand. Carefully redrawn photographs open each chapter and are placed within chapters, including one large enough to be the subject of the only two-page spread in the book. Most panels showing people are presented as though the reader/viewer were looking on from a middle distance, a framing device Bruce Block, in a book on the aesthetics of visual texts, describes as potentially encouraging reflection; the panels showing the pages of writing and type or photographs are drawn at close viewing distance, as though a reader/viewer were holding them. This viewing movement from middle to close distance keeps readers close, moving more or less closely in and out of the emotion and thought of the book. And, as with the preceding paragraph, what needs to be noted is that the pictures show how hard the word "picture" (or "image") has to work if we are to make it stand for all that can be pictured: the photographs, television screens, book pages, maps—everything else listed above—show that, in this book, there is no single visual representation, or kind of visual representation, capable of holding the complexity of identity the book constructs.

Overall, the book's pages show no regular pattern to how words and pictures can be connected. The visual field of the pages, as one scans over them, shows none of the regularity of (for example) the 3x3 grid of evenly sized panels that characterizes Moore and Gibbons's *Watchmen* or of the four-panel spreads that characterizes Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons*! Every page in *Fun Home* has its own arrangement of captions, labels, and drawings held together within the overall constraints of the page margins. The possible relationships of words and drawings in this book are also multiplied, not endlessly but well beyond the restraint of what word and picture or male and female can be in the lists from the beginning of this paper.

I want to be clear, however, that the identity Bechdel makes visible in this book is possible only because of those earlier lists. Like us all, Bechdel inherited an understanding of word and picture that separates them out and articulates them as in those lists. The identity that comes-to-be in this book, across word, picture, gender, and sex, might cross those lists, and complicate them, but is still in response to them.

> *The creators of these characters are in the vanguard of artists who are exploring the forms and conventions associated with comics as a means of revisiting and revising the conventional narratives that inscribe one's political, social, and gendered roles. (Tensuan 951)*
>
> *In black graphic narratives, characters' negotiations of the complexities of racial categories also engender a self-reflexivity whereby they comment on the very form they inhabit as a means of openly challenging both narrative conventions and social norms. (Ryan 924)*
>
> *The comics form is forever troubled by that which cannot be reconciled, synthesized, unified, contained within the frame; but it is in being so troubled that the form defines itself. (Gardner 801–2)*

Word and picture can't be arbitrarily yanked out of the lists with which I began this essay. What makes it possible for Bechdel to construct the identity-to-be-tested in *Fun Home*—just as what makes possible the narratives told by Howard Cruse about growing up gay in Civil Rights era Alabama, by Phoebe Gloeckner about childhood sexual abuse, or by the contributors to *McSweeney's Thirteen* about sexual melancholy—is that comics and graphic novels come out of a history of attempted holding on to the keep-your-place positions in the dichotomous lists about and histories of words and pictures, male and female, high and low.

As comics and graphic novels take on such topics—precisely because they can, given their history—what new (potentially normalized) relations are being established between and among the terms of the dichotomies? How are the dichotomies being questioned and pummeled?

How, too, might we encourage people in our classes to work across words and pictures in order that they too might question the identities available to them? How might we encourage people in our classes to work across words and pictures in order that they too might engage with new mediations and hence new embodiments?