

Women's Experimental Autobiography from Counterculture Comics to Transmedia
Storytelling: Staging Encounters Across Time, Space, and Medium

Dissertation

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Abstract

Feminist activism in the United States and Europe during the 1960s and 1970s harnessed radical social thought and used innovative expressive forms in order to disrupt the “grand perspective” espoused by men in every field (Adorno 206). Feminist student activists often put their own female bodies on display to disrupt the disembodied “objective” thinking that still seemed to dominate the academy. The philosopher Theodor Adorno responded to one such action, the “bared breasts incident,” carried out by his radical students in Germany in 1969, in an essay, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis.” In that essay, he defends himself against the students’ claim that he proved his lack of relevance to contemporary students when he failed to respond to the spectacle of their liberated bodies. He acknowledged that the protest movements seemed to offer thoughtful people a way “out of their self-isolation,” but ultimately, to replace philosophy with bodily spectacle would mean to miss the “infinitely progressive aspect of the separation of theory and praxis” (259, 266). Lisa Yun Lee argues that this separation continues to animate contemporary feminist debates, and that it is worth returning to Adorno’s reasoning, if we wish to understand women’s particular modes of theoretical

insight in conversation with “grand perspectives” on cultural theory in the twenty-first century. I argue that the separation between theory and praxis becomes visible in the history of women’s experimental autobiography across media, in which the boundary between self and subculture can be delineated.

In this project, I look at a contemporary transmedia storyworld that animates this conversation. In Felicia Day’s comedy Web series *The Guild*, six introverted gamers collaboratively navigate both the complex storyworld of a massively multiplayer online role-playing game and daily life in suburban Los Angeles. The Web series is complemented by a series of comic books, which transform the forward-moving, third-person storytelling of the show into open-ended first-person accounts of life as a member of the guild. I argue that these comics represent the characters’ capacity for theoretical insight, and, following Adorno’s concept of the sedimented history embedded in contemporary art, I read *The Guild* comics as a series of invitations into the history of women’s writing since the 1960s. By excavating this history, I find a range of women writers who enact what Adorno calls “think[ing] bodily” without succumbing to the fallacies of essentialism (Lee 7).

In my first chapter, I place underground comix legend Aline Kominsky-Crumb in conversation with *The Guild: Codex*, which uses the logic of autobiographical comics to offer an experimental *künstlerroman* for the digital era.

In my second chapter, I place Audre Lorde’s 1982 biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* in conversation with *The Guild: Tink*, which shows how a woman of color uses her in-game avatar to behave as a pop-culture savvy trickster in a complex media landscape.

In my third chapter, I place Alison Bechdel's 2012 graphic memoir *Are You My Mother?* in conversation with *The Guild: Zaboo* in order to examine the contemporary genre of the "boutique *bildungsroman*."

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Vita

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Introduction

[P]opular culture is no longer confined to certain forms such as novels or dance music, but has seized all media of artistic expression. The structure and meaning of these forms show an amazing parallelism, even when they appear to have little in common on the surface (such as jazz and the novel).

- Theodor Adorno, "How to Look at Television" (160)

Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption. In a world with many media options, consumers are choosing to invest deeply in a limited number of franchises rather than dip shallowly into a larger number. Increasingly, gamers spend most of their time and money within a single genre, often a single franchise. We can see the same pattern in other media-films (high success for certain franchises, overall declines in revenue), television (shorter spans for most series, longer runs for a few), or comics (incredibly long runs for a limited number of superhero icons). Redundancy between media burns

up fan interest and causes franchises to fail. Offering new levels of insight and experience refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty.

- Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling” (3)

When I was a kid, my Mom thought if I got into Dungeons and Dragons I would become a Satanist and commit suicide. She wasn’t even religious. Well finally, in my 20’s, it’s happened. The Dungeons and Dragons part, not the Satanist or suicide.

Yes, I accepted an invitation to a pen and paper D&D game on Sunday, and I HAD A BLAST! TAKE THAT MOM! It was so frikkin’ fun! Anyone who knows me, knows I was a World of Warcraft addict for almost 2 years. I quit cold turkey for my soul last fall, but the pull of RPG video games is strong...I had no idea what I was getting into, I didn’t even know people still did this, but it was such a great social outlet, I can’t wait to do it again! I have a whole back story I wrote for my character, a high charisma and comeliness score (the most important part :D), I’m tracking down the perfect figurine for a redheaded sorceress who worships a fire goddess, I’m totally into it!

- Felicia Day, “Oh no, I’m an official nerd now! And I love it!”

Felicia Day is a contemporary actress, musician, writer, gamer, and entrepreneur, who is best known for her role as a redheaded sorceress who worships at the altar of popular culture. In 2007, she created the Web series *The Guild*, which, over the next six

years, became a sprawling transmedia storytelling enterprise that would constitute a map of contemporary culture, from the perspective of a woman who lives in it. As Cornel Sandvoss points out in his 2005 book, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, “there is no equivalent to satellite and aerial photography when we draw maps of society and culture; we can never step outside the system and look upon it from above. It is therefore all the more important to acknowledge one’s own perspective (4-5).” *The Guild*’s map, built from six seasons of the Web series, three music videos, and nine comic books, begins with a story borrowed from Day’s life, namely, that of her time spent as an active *World of Warcraft* addict. *The Guild* tells the story of how Day’s character, Cyd Sherman, came to live most of her hours as Codex, the name of her in-game avatar. In the first episode of the Web series, Codex and five other gamers have long been part of the Knights of Good guild, and developed a complex virtual social environment for themselves within the confines of the massively-multiplayer online role-playing game they simply call *The Game*.¹ Their lives are devoted to the game, and, although, offline, they lack social skills and a “real-life social support system,” within their shared virtual environment, they live lives much like those of any sitcom ensemble.

The Guild was written for an insider audience, not necessarily of gamers, but of viewers familiar with Internet-based reading practices and subcultures. The series depicts a kind of socialization familiar not just from gaming, but from any online fan cultures, which thrive on long-arc social relationships, forged across a range of media platforms. Although Day originally pitched the show to mainstream television networks, she was

¹ Hereafter I will refer to *The Game* without capitalization or italics, because I interpret the generic name as a gesture toward broad identification, rather than as a hyperbolic claim about this game’s superiority over other games.

repeatedly turned away, both because the show was ahead of its time in depicting the penetration of digital technology into our social worlds, and because the networks feared its audience would be too small (Ohanessian 1). After all, in 2007, Facebook had only just been made available to users without an e-mail address indicating their affiliation with an educational institution (Philips 1). YouTube was still relatively young, and hosted mostly amateur content—that is, home videos, goofy comedy challenges, and “vlogs,” or video blogs (Wesch 1). *The Guild* recalls this moment by beginning each episode with an amateur-style webcam monologue, by Codex, and then transitioning, via the theme song, into a sitcom, with group scenes, music, and, at the end of each season, special effects. When Codex speaks to her webcam, it is her diary and space for introspection, but, during the action of each episode, when characters speak into their webcams, it is simply their communications technology.

The visual quality of the Web series increased with every season, and, as *The Guild*'s audience grew, Day began to expand her vision to include other media, first in 2009, with the widely-circulated music video “(Do You Wanna Date My) Avatar,” and then with the comics, which expand *The Guild*'s storyworld significantly. Whereas “(Do You Wanna Date My) Avatar” showcased *The Guild* cast dressed as their in-game avatars, singing about gaming together, the music video was more of a clever self-parody than an installment in an expanding storyworld. The lyrics to the song joke about the sexism of virtual culture, following the titular line with “she’s hotter than reality by far.” Thus, they poke fun at the male gaze of stereotypical gamers, who expect to experience titillation rather than identification from female avatars.

The second music video, the Bollywood-themed “Game On!” also takes on sexism as the source of its comedy. The plot of the music video is that Codex and Zaboo, played by Sandeep Parikh, are sitting on a bed together, and Codex is worrying that she plays the game too much. Zaboo responds in song, insisting that she play because they’ve got “keyboard chemistry.” Day was inspired to create “Game On!” after seeing the success of “(Do You Wanna Date My) Avatar,” which received one million views in two days. “Game On” premiered at Comic Con in 2010, and, like the first video, went number one worldwide (Aronowitz 1). The video captured the spirit of the Western craze for Bollywood movies, which became more widely available given the advent of streaming video technology and the increased presence of South Asians in U.S. and U.K. popular culture. Patrick Colm Hogan describes the appeal of Bollywood to Westerners in his 2008 book, *Understanding Indian Movies: Culture, Cognition, and Cinematic Imagination*. One aspect of Bollywood’s appeal to Westerners is that, as U.S. popular culture increasingly embraced lewdness and pornography, as we can see in the simple comedy of “(Do You Wanna Date My) Avatar,” Bollywood films represent a serious engagement with romance plots that do not foreground sex. And so, Codex and Zaboo, who are not a romantic couple in the series, can enact a courtship scene in this video, but it is a courtship to convince Codex to rejoin the group in the game, rather than one in which sex is situated as the final goal. The goal of this music video is the pleasure of the elaborate scenery, costumes, dancing, and mash-up of musical styles, which come together to represent the world of the game as multicultural, multimedia, and constantly stimulating.

By contrast to the music videos, the comics represent a different kind of expansion into a new medium. In my interpretation, the comics are where *The Guild* shifts from poking fun at the false promises of virtual life, to an exploration of contemporary contemplation, that is, a reflection on the inner lives of the characters, and the personal archives of material and bodily knowledge they bring to the virtual social world of the game. The comics translate the creative experiment of the Web series into print, shift the focus from the group to the individual, and shift the spreadability of the music videos to a focus on telling highly “drillable” backstories about each of the main characters. Henry Jenkins describes spreadability as “the capacity of the public to engage actively in the circulation of media content through social networks and in the process expand its economic value and cultural worth” (Jenkins 1). *The Guild* comics, by contrast, demonstrate drillability, that is, in Jason Mittell’s terms, they “create magnets for engagement” and invite “a vertical descent into a text’s complexities” (qtd in Jenkins 1).

The first comic, which was the first installment of the three-part backstory of the character Codex, was released in March 2010. The comics were available digitally and in print, and were designed to promote a slower serial reading practice than the endlessly rewatchable music videos. The first comic sets up the story of Cyd Sherman’s life before she creates Codex and becomes a gamer; she is depressed, bored, and lonely in a bad relationship. Because the Codex we know from the Web series is completely committed to gaming, and to her set of in-game friends, it is alienating to see her try to “make it” in the real world. The next two issues of her backstory were released in April and May of that year, and the three were compiled into a volume, to be sold as a graphic novel. In

2011, a one-shot backstory comic was released for each of the five other members of the Knights of Good guild, all authored by Day, with the help of an incredibly diverse set of collaborators, including a few of her fellow cast members. None of the others depict the character's initial decision to enter the game, but rather, they focus on a variety of social and intellectual concerns that inform each character's behavior and personality. The final comic, which offers the story of rival guild leader Fawkes, played by geeky celebrity Wil Wheaton, who also co-authored the comic, was released in May 2012. *The Guild: Fawkes* serves as a fitting ending to *The Guild* comics because, as Andrew Harrison notes,

If you had to choose the dominant political symbol of the 21st century – a single ideogram to rank alongside the hammer and sickle, the CND peace sign or the anarchist circled A – you'd probably opt for the *V for Vendetta* Guy Fawkes mask. (1)

In the comic, the male anarchist falls in love with healer Codex, forging an alliance between the masculine and feminine creative energies that animate the contemporary digital landscape.

My task in this dissertation is to guide the reader through the gendered landscape of contemporary popular culture, using the transmedia storyworld of *The Guild* as an entry point. Drawing inspiration from Adorno's concept of "sedimented history," that is, an aesthetic and political historiography that can be drawn out from contemporary artworks, I traverse the terrain mapped by *The Guild*, asking its inhabitants to show me what to look for, and how to play. Examining their self-fashioning practices, depicted in *The Guild* comics, I find that their ability to thrive in contemporary culture is intimately

related to their ability to manage the archive of popular culture texts they have assembled since childhood as a set of tools. Their reading practices are their greatest asset. In order to progress in game and in life, they must creatively, if not always consciously, combine skills acquired in previous worlds, and older media landscapes to face new challenges in the present. A character may be aware that, since the days of Tetris, computer games have calmed her anxiety, but she may be less aware that, by using new technologies to engage in self-reflection, she is taking part in a long tradition of women's experimental autobiography across media. Another is well aware that she appropriates emotionally powerful scenes from classic literature in order to capture the attention of her friends, but she may be less conscious, and, for the time being, less interested in the history of the racialized female trickster, in which she is taking part. By forging connections between *The Guild* comics and a variety of works of women's experimental autobiography across media, from the 1960s to the present, I model a contemporary feminist reading practice that forges novel, queer connections between women living in different worlds.

Across multiple media, *The Guild* represents an invitation to the reader into a world at once apparently shallow and prohibitively complex. Its world is shallow because the Web series is, in many ways, a formulaic situation comedy; its content is shallow because the participants in the storyworld are unemployed slackers who devote their lives to a computer game. Lack of worldly ambition aside, the characters speak in the contemporary vernacular of insiders in the online gaming subculture, which is often incorrectly assumed to represent a reductive version of Standard English, rather than a combination of creative slang and jargon required for in-game participation. By jargon I am referring to the spoken lines of dialogue that not only reference in-game phenomena

without contextualization, but also the bleeding of these references into the characters' descriptions of their real lives. To take an example from the first episode of the series, in Codex's opening webcam monologue, before she even tells us that she is a gamer, she laments that "there's a gnome warlock sleeping on [her] couch." Because we assume that we are in a realist storyworld, the reader has no suspicion that the gnome warlock is an actual fantasy figure, and because her opening monologue is otherwise lucid, we don't assume Codex is actually delusional. Therefore, the gnome warlock must represent a set of attributes held by the person on her couch. The line translates into a more familiar context if we read her as saying something like "there's a quarterback sleeping on my couch," although, in that context, the implications to the new reader of the nature of the story would be quite different.

The Guild is about a contemporary phenomenon, that of gaming, which seems familiar, but actually represents a complex web of interconnected subcultural histories, and thus a particularly fruitful starting point from which to examine contemporary popular culture. In this way, its storyworld is highly complex. Understanding this complexity requires a generous reading practice, one which views the characters not as consumer "dupes" who have internalized the language of a product rather than of the broader society, but rather as media-savvy interpreters of their world, whose arrested development on some counts enables their creative potential on others. Online gaming itself represents an intersection between the postwar history of digital technology, the history of digital subcultures, from the multi-user dungeons of the 1970s and 1980s to Western media fandom since *Star Trek*, science fiction and fantasy storytelling across media, and, of course, the history of tabletop games, especially *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Like the game it depicts, *The Guild* is representative of the complex set of influences that inform twenty-first-century popular culture. And, like the game it depicts, discrete installments in *The Guild* storyworld bear close relationships to subcultural phenomena that have animated our popular imagination since the mid-century. The fifth season of the Web series provides a useful example of this phenomenon, because it is set at a fan convention, and depicts interactions between the members of *The Guild* and representatives of older subcultures; two of the many prominent cameo appearances are given by the legendary comics creator Stan Lee and Richard Hatch, from the original *Battlestar Galactica* series.

Thus, in order to analyze *The Guild* in this project, one must take on the position of the Knights of Good, and situate oneself in a position to encounter cultural figures like Stan Lee, when they should appear, without bending to their status as masters. Instead, one must actively reimagine their ongoing role in contemporary culture, and take stock of what their works mean now. The mid-century thinker Theodor Adorno offers some guidance here. Although he is routinely misunderstood as a despiser of popular culture and its relation to infantile subjectivity, he is actually the thinker who most rigorously theorized the relationship between past and present as it emerges in the sustained criticism of contemporary works of art. In *Aesthetic Theory*, he argues:

The historical moment is constitutive of artworks; authentic works are those that surrender themselves to the historical substance of their age without reservation and without the presumption of being superior to it. They are the self-unconscious historiography of their epoch; this, not least of all, establishes their relation to knowledge. Precisely this makes them incommensurable with

historicism, which, instead of following their own historical content, reduces them to their external history. Artworks may be all the more truly experienced the more their historical substance is that of the one who experiences it. The bourgeois world of art is ideologically blind even in the supposition that artworks that lie far enough in the past can be better understood than those of their own time. The layers of experience borne by important contemporary artworks, that which wants to speak in them, are—as objective spirit—incomparably more commensurable to contemporaries than are works whose historico-philosophical presuppositions are alienated from actual consciousness. The more intensively one seeks to comprehend Bach, the more puzzling is the gaze he returns, charged as it is with all the power that is his. (183)

The misunderstanding of Adorno's approach to popular culture is rooted in the idea that he idealized great art from the past, and lamented that it was no longer being produced in the contemporary moment. However, this quotation reveals a nearly opposite tendency in his theory. Whatever great art, like the music of Bach, may represent to us, it does not excite our critical capacities in such a way to enable us to develop a serious theory of aesthetics. In order to do that, we must approach all artworks as they appear to us in the contemporary cultural landscape, that is, what remains of Bach, as it is juxtaposed with the cultural reality of 1960s student activism. It is Adorno, rather than his detractors, who insists that it is unethical to worship great masters of the past, as if they could save us from our current situation.

To return to the Stan Lee example for a moment, it is not only that he appears in *The Guild* only for a few seconds in a single episode, thus representing a mere “blip” in

the survey of contemporary culture depicted at the convention. It is that his cameo is one of so many in that season, all with equal potential to inspire excitement in the viewer, represented here by the fannish behavior of each member of the Knights of Good. It is not that this is a series about contemporary comics creators, in which Stan Lee appears to fulfill some particular dream of his latest generation of disciples. That said, because I read *The Guild* comics as representative of a particularly innovative fusion of underground and mainstream comic book aesthetics, the encounter between Lee and *The Guild* provides some satisfaction on that count. More importantly, though, there is the fact that Stan Lee, fantasy author Neil Gaiman, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* actress Eliza Dushku, *Buck Rogers* star Erin Gray, *MythBusters* star Grant Imahara, and Bonnie Burton, author of *The Star Wars Craft Book*, all appear at various points in the season as representatives of the media landscape in an era of “convergence culture” (Jenkins). In this moment, media consumption is driven neither by preconceived notions of who matters, or what medium matters, but rather by a reader’s own openness to the transmedia articulation of phenomena that speak to them.

Again, I turn to Adorno, who, while he was drafting *Aesthetic Theory* in the late 1960s, articulated this openness as a critical practice.

In art, development has multiple meanings. It is one of the means that crystallize in art’s autarchy; further, it is the absorption of techniques that originate socially, external to art, and that, because they are alien and antagonistic, do not always result in progress; and, lastly, human productive forces also develop in art, in the work of subjective differentiation, for example, although such progress is often accompanied by the shadow of regression in other dimensions. Progressive

consciousness ascertains the condition of the material in which history is sedimented right up to the moment in which the work answers to it; precisely by doing so, progressive consciousness reaches out into the open, beyond the status quo. (192-193)

It is the work of the critic to tap into his “progressive consciousness” in order to face the contemporary work of art, and to make note of the human and historical developments articulated in it, and made possible by it. I refer to this consciousness as openness because it requires the critic to occupy a position that resembles the passivity of the consumer, a position he may fear, but is also the sole location from which one can access the pleasures and possibilities of the contemporary artwork. Openness is the first principle of the critical reading practice that I wish to use to read *The Guild*. As I interpret the transmedia unfolding of each character’s development of a critical stance toward the contemporary cultural moment they inhabit, I begin to see how they manage the contradictions of their lives. Simultaneously embodying overconsumption as a contemporary condition and rejecting the false totality of social normalcy, the characters navigate their world critically, holding onto their anchor of self-representation in the game.

There are other equally exciting twenty-first-century articulations of the contemporary media landscape that stand alongside *The Guild* as examples of innovative, theoretically sophisticated transmedia storytelling. One example is John Jennings and Stacey Robinson’s collaborative creation, the Black Kirby avatar, who appears in multiple visual media, including comics and other works on paper. These artists use an Afrofuturist critical sensibility to re-tell the history of comics imaginatively, from an

Afro-centric perspective. This means not only that they imagine one of the star creators of mid-century comics, Jack Kirby, as having been black himself, but also that they infuse the works they attribute to Black Kirby with West African mythology, history, and aesthetics, rather than the Western ones from which Jack Kirby and others primarily drew.

Borrowing from his set of critical tools, I refer to Adorno's critical model for engaging with contemporary culture as "sedimented history," that is, looking at artworks in the present as the top layer of sediment, through which the critic must sift in order to stage his full encounter with the work. Like sedimented history, Afrofuturism looks at the present, which, in a twenty-first-century context means looking at a world infused by technology and media experimentation, and sees in the black experience the most concentrated articulation of broader cultural trends. Mark Dery, who coined the term Afrofuturism, writes in "Black to the Future" that:

African-Americans are, in a very real sense, the descendants of alien abductees.

They inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done to them; and technology, be it branding, forced sterilization, the

Tuskegee experiment, or tasers, is too often brought to bear on black bodies. (180)

The Black Kirby avatar project depicts this insight beautifully and compellingly, using visual media to showcase the connections the artists perceive between the desires that were once excited in them by classic comic books and the politics and aesthetics they have developed as contemporary practitioners. Black Kirby shares much in common with *The Guild* in terms of media experimentation, but its Afrofuturist inspiration and

tactics set it apart from *The Guild* by establishing a connection with living politics, something *The Guild* constantly fails, or refuses to do.

It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that I find it easier to stage an encounter between *The Guild* and the reading practices of Theodor W. Adorno, who, though innovative in his ability to articulate a critical practice for reading contemporary popular culture, is often rightly condemned for careless social politics, especially in his representations of gender and race. Adorno's own theoretical practice asks us to be critical of our desire to locate definitive origin points for contemporary phenomena, and asks us instead to look for the series of sedimented insights by which the artwork reveals itself to us. And therefore, as I take in *The Guild*, I find that, at first, gestures towards Afrofuturism seem absent from within the storyworld; however, in the first comic that depicts the perspective of a non-white character the need for this critical sensibility arises. Thus, I stage an encounter between *The Guild: Tink* and Audre Lorde's time-bending *Zami: A New Spelling For My Name*. *The Guild: Tink* represents the moment in which the vast critical sphere represented by the comics first touches the sphere of Western intellectual history from outside of it, and forges a transformative connection to it. But to get there, I must first use sedimented history to take me on a survey of *The Guild* storyworld, in order to reveal the scope of this transformation, enabled by contemporary acts of creative self-representation.

It may be the case that *The Guild* is a work whose greatest tangible influence will always be contained to the years immediately surrounding its serial publication, from 2007 to 2013. Undoubtedly, it served during those years as a direct inspiration to many other Web series and transmedia storytelling experiments, even creating a coterie of Web

series creators. In 2009, the first year of the Streamy Awards for online video, *The Guild* won in two high-profile categories, best comedy series, and best comedy actress, for Felicia Day. Three more awards, best comedy actor, best directing in a comedy, and best writing in a comedy, went to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator Joss Whedon's Internet musical, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, which Whedon claims he was inspired to create after watching *The Guild* (Vary 1). Whereas Day acted professionally before turning to the Internet, a slightly younger generation has begun to take the opposite approach. One notable example of this phenomenon is Issa Rae, who began to post installments of her first series, *Dorm Diaries*, on YouTube in May of 2007. That series explored her experience as an African American woman at Stanford. In 2011, Rae created *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, which has since become one of the most popular Web series on the Internet, and led Rae to collaborative work with television producer Shonda Rhimes (Gopalan 1).

These lines of direct influence, and my examples only skim the surface of the Web series as an industrial phenomenon, have been comprehensively chronicled by Web series expert Aymar Jean Christian, both on his blog, *Televisual*, and in his dissertation, "Off the Line: Independent Television and the Pitch to Reinvent Hollywood." Because, in this project, I offer a sustained reading of a single Web series, I propose an approach that is complementary to Christian's—and I hope that others will do the same, lending their focus to the many other brilliant Web series, including *Awkward Black Girl*, Dane Joseph's *Drama Queenz*, a series about black gay life in New York City, and Carmen Elena Mitchell's *The Real Girl's Guide to Everything Else*, a series about queer female community and transnational feminism. Like *The Guild*, all of these shows merit

sustained critical attention, alongside credit for the fact that women and queer producers are at the vanguard of this dominant strand of media innovation in the twenty-first-century.

My task in this project is to adapt Adorno's approach of sedimented history to a twenty-first-century transmedia narrative, the first of its reach authored by a woman, in order to arrive at a new sense of how to interpret popular culture in times of rapid media change. Such times provide the context for the series' production, as well as the content of its story. Indeed, by the final season of the Web series, Day and her team had developed the budget and knowledge to depict extended scenes of in-game action, in the underwater environment that was that season's in-game focus. Such scenes were unimaginable during the first season, which was fan-funded, and relied on its improvisational comedy-inspired banter between the actors, as they performed Day's witty script on simple sets. Already, the fact that Day alternated between her webcam monologues and the group scenes represented a storytelling innovation particular to the series' home on the Internet, but it was unclear that she and her team had the potential to turn the series into such a fully-realized transmedia experience, which fulfilled its early promise to capture online life as it is experienced by women and queer subjects.

To realize online life fully required a two-fold approach to storytelling innovation: on the one hand, the budget and special effects to build fictional parallels to digital phenomena; on the other, the moment of transmedia expansion, when the first comic was published. In *The Guild: Codex*, Day and the artist Jim Rugg translated the YouTube aesthetic onto the printed page, in order to tell the story of what drew mousy Cyd Sherman to spend her days talking to a webcam, and portraying a made-up character

in a virtual environment. From there, the series revealed the many different directions in which it could expand, that is, its ability to live, thrive, and reveal new aspects of its creator's vision in print as well as online, or in any art world that intersects with digital-era subjectivity. This storyworld seemed, in that moment, capable of broadening its conceptual focus and expanding at a speed that reflected the reader's own sense of the expanding virtual sphere at her fingertips. Something larger had to be at stake in that parallel potential.

For me, that something larger has to do with the series' authorship by a woman, and its savvy articulation of the landscape of women's self fashioning, both as it stretches horizontally across media, from webcams to social networking sites, and as it invites us back in time, to the history of women's autobiography as a way into understanding the development of women's consciousness over time. Again, one might wonder why I wish to ask a contemporary, socially influenced question about women's self-representation in transmedia storytelling, and its origins in women's autobiography since counterculture, by way of Adorno's sedimented history. The answer is that his interdisciplinary theory offers a rare flexibility that is required by the nature of my materials, which do not fit neatly into a major academic field, whether by constraints of medium, degree of respectability, or by strict constraints of periodization. That said, all my works are undoubtedly contemporary, in the sense that Adorno articulates it.

It is important to note that, just as I am not the first to recognize the importance of the Web series or transmedia storyworld as a contemporary form, I am also by no means the first person to perform women-centered criticism with the inspiration of Theodor

Adorno.² As Renée Heberle writes in her introduction to *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno*:

His context is not ours. However, he predicts and speaks directly to many questions that go to the heart of contemporary feminist theory, including questions about interpretation, the relation between theory and practice, representation, identity, and historical memory. The chapters that follow keep the faith with Adorno's attunement to historicity and offer some insight into how we might continue to think about those questions through the prism of his thought.

(19)

Heberle's collection showcases a series of innovative uses of Adorno for advancing questions of feminist theory and philosophy, ranging from a sedimented Marxist-feminist analysis of the gendering of the commodity fetish, to a new examination of Adorno's uneasy relationship with his students, as they became feminists and activists during the 1960s.

As Lisa Yun Lee describes in her contribution, "The Bared Breasts Incident," much of Adorno's unpopularity today can be traced to certain legends about his personal

² Neither am I the first to offer a queer feminist vision of philosophical thought. Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* serves as a major inspiration for this project. As she says of her own inquiry, "To queer phenomenology is also to offer a queer phenomenology. In other words, queer does not have a relation of exteriority to that with which it comes into contact" (4). She goes on to point out how her approach is strategic, and thus her "aim is not to prescribe what form a queer phenomenology should take, as if the encounter itself must take the form of this book. After all, both queer studies and phenomenology involve diverse intellectual and political histories that cannot be stabilized as objects that could then be given to the other" (5). This strategy is fundamental to my understanding of interdisciplinary inquiry, because the work of telling a story from diverse political and intellectual perspectives is daunting, although I believe it must be attempted.

inability to embody the radicalism that he espoused in his theoretical writings. According to one such legend, when his radical students bared their breasts to him during a lecture, he was so shocked by the sheer presence of their femininity that he had the heart attack that would lead to his death. Although it's true that his students disrupted his lecture, and frustrated him with this action, it is certainly not true that he was annihilated by its sheer embodied authenticity; in fact, it led him to write the response essay "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," which Lee analyzes for the majority of her chapter, suggesting that it articulates those insights of Adorno's cultural theory that speak most profoundly to enduring feminist questions. In her reading, he articulates his own theory of embodied thinking in opposition to the feminist essentialism articulated by his students.

Lee drew this work from her larger work on Adorno, *Dialectics of the Body: Corporeality in the Philosophy of T.W. Adorno*. In this book, Lee takes a brilliant theoretical turn, which will by necessity inform my project, too. At first, she extracts a theory of the body from the work of a man who rarely referred to it specifically. She argues that the body represents a dominant theme throughout Adorno's writings, especially those he produced in exile, when he experienced firsthand the necessity of protecting his body from the physical violence that would otherwise have been inflicted on him by the Nazis. This experience had a lasting effect on his philosophy.

Adorno is perhaps best known in English departments for his statement in "Cultural Criticism and Society" that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34). But this statement is often misinterpreted as representing a damning cynicism, which is too extreme to take seriously. In this misinterpretation, Adorno offers the contemporary world nothing, and only catalogs its failures. While it is true that he keeps a catalog of

the many moments in contemporary culture in which utopia fails to materialize, it is not true that he offers no program for the humanities other than to condemn poetry and American popular culture. Rather, he offers the following, as Lee writes:

Adorno writes in the final section of *Negative Dialectics* that after Auschwitz, the categorical imperative has been replaced with the moral imperative to think bodily (*leibhafti*). This somatic moment is described by Adorno as the only possible way to approach “unimaginable physical suffering.” At the same time, Adorno does not attempt to rescue an authentic body, or a naturalistic body that is unburdened by and free of socio-cultural affects. The assumption of “givenness” upon which a simple materialism of the body proves to be a problem for Adorno's philosophical *modus operandi* of mediation. He rigorously extends this practice of eschewing immediacy and the notion of “first principles” to his reflections on the body. (7)

In other words, redemption cannot, for Adorno, be found in poetry, as we had once understood it, or in the body, where we might reconnect with our humanity on an individual level. Rather, given the ethical imperative to take bodies seriously in a world in which they suffer, and given our cultural landscape, in which our thoughts, experiences, and self-representations are increasingly manipulated by a complex culture industry, it is our task to interpret this world dialectically, taking account of what seems to be embodied, what seems to be thought, and what seems to be presented to us that complicates this dichotomy in the cultural artifacts we encounter.

Lee suggests that Adorno's theory of the body offers a compelling ethical challenge to contemporary queer and feminist theories of the body, which tend to

celebrate the utopian possibilities represented by creative gender performance, as in the theories of Judith Butler, or queer sexual activity, as in Gayle Rubin. It is worth noting that Lee produced this work a few years before disability theorists like Tobin Siebers and Michael Davidson began to produce theories of complex embodiment,³ which one might find easier to align with Adorno's notion on vulnerability as a (potentially universally) shared state. However, her particular intervention offers a sustained focus on women and consumerism that is particularly generative for my analysis of women-authored transmedia and other experimental works of self-representation because it represents where Adorno's theories continue to feel necessary in the de-politicized sphere of contemporary interdisciplinary theory. Lee writes,

As the site of pleasure, lust, desire, passion, and the erotic, the body is a marketer's dream: easily sensationalized and readily commodified...How can we explain this rapid proliferation of work on the body? If it is true that the body is a site of resistance, as so many academics...have claimed, surely the revolution should be just around the corner! Terry Eagleton has observed, in what he reproachfully calls the "body shop" of the academic left, a profound sense of apathy that accompanies the intense scrutiny of the body. Eagleton notes that in the mass production of academic work on the body, generated mostly within the

³ Both published in 2008, Tobin Siebers' *Disability Theory* and Michael Davidson's *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* articulate a theory of disability grounded in aesthetics. Siebers defines complex embodiment as a middle ground between the social and medical models of disability, which "views the economy between social representations and the body not as unidirectional, but as reciprocal. Complex embodiment theorizes the body and its representations as mutually transformative" (25).

discourse of post-structuralism, there is a loss of the political significance of the body. (124-125)

In other words, what Adorno experienced as a profoundly political embodiment, that of exile in the United States, which led him to experience the cultural landscape in a way that involved near-constant dissonance and discomfort, seems in the twenty-first-century to emerge only in the context of pleasurable insight and the differentiation of experience, rather than as pain that could be articulated as shared vulnerability, or some kind of solidarity.

Lee continues, referring, presumably, to the rapid expansion of queer studies to subsume all other forms of politically necessary solidarity,

According to Eagleton, this is precisely why work on the body is so popular today. It is not necessarily anti-capitalist. The politics of postmodernism, according to Eagleton, have moved from a radical politics of the body that revolved around questions of sexuality to a displacement of politics to questions of subjectivity and pleasure, which is often configured as a form of “consumerist hedonism.” “The body...is currently en route to becoming the greatest fetish of all.” (125)

And indeed, this critique speaks to one aspect of my project, namely, the fact that, in my attempt to locate surprising and generative insights in my archive of women’s experimental autobiography, especially *The Guild*, I sometimes veer toward celebrating what might appear to another reader as memoirs of overconsumption, or depictions of tasteless excess. However, I argue that it is only *The Guild*’s top layer that represents each character’s characteristics as a consumer, and that, beneath this layer, the reader has

the opportunity to uncover the complexity of their particular constellation of excesses, and thus what kinds of thinking subjects they might become in time. Ultimately, *The Guild* represents as detailed a map toward embodied thinking in consumer capitalism as Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, or the many women-authored autobiographies I examine in this project.

The most pronounced feature of *The Guild*'s concept of embodiment is the relationship between human gamer and in-game avatar, that is, between author and self-representation. Just as Adorno found that he had to address the minute details of mid-century American popular culture in order to understand his own damaged life, the members of *The Guild* find that they must invest their lives in their avatars in order to understand why they have been rejected by the social worlds they knew before. The reader must begin there, where they are, in virtual space, and observe the characters' backwards trajectories from their world of reflections, back to the world of their social origin, whose deficiencies we can now see more fully. And so I begin with their individual consumption practices including the social practices that sustain these, and then allow these to lead me to each character's self-realization as an individual in the world, whose behaviors inevitably exceed what was forecast both by the designers of their virtual world, and by the designers of their world of origin, who failed to predict their widespread dissatisfaction. It is each character's sustained relationship with her avatar, which reveals this dissatisfaction, and which enables her to navigate the contemporary popular culture landscape critically. To put it in a different critical context, the subject-avatar relation enables the characters to become fans, that is, thinking

subjects, rather than mere consumers. Their “excess” is, in this interpretation, no longer one of material over-investment, but rather of critical capacity.⁴

My approach to embodied thinking differs in focus from Lee’s because I examine mediation as part of a practice of self-representation, which is literalized in twenty-first-century transmedia storytelling culture, as well as women’s experimental autobiography since the 1960s. Lee, by contrast, wishes to explicate a phenomenon internal to Adorno’s philosophy, that is, his insistence upon the body as a potential site of liberation, which could speak to contemporary debates in feminist and queer studies. I agree that Adorno’s words could be helpful in those contexts, but I am especially interested in where that idea intersects with the implications of his theory of popular culture for an era of transmedia storytelling. I turn to Adorno’s aesthetic theory and theory of popular culture in order to articulate a particular reading practice for contemporary texts, one which brings together his insights about mediation and the popular culture landscape, his theory of embodied thinking, and the tactics of creative self-representation I locate within my archive of women’s experimental autobiography since the 1960s. This archive culminates in the present, with *The Guild*, with Day’s fictionalized depiction of her own addiction to *World of Warcraft*. *The Guild*’s two major storytelling components, the Web series and the

⁴ Here I am indebted to Sandvoss, who argues that it is in the “little breakages’ between fan and object of fandom in the relationship, which leaves fans disillusioned and sometimes disenfranchised, that fandom’s progressive negative potential lies” (164-165). Drawing from Adorno, Sandvoss argues that “fandom reflects the conflicting forces of modern consumption – its importance as a symbolic resource in the formation of identity and the integration of the self into the dominant economic, social and cultural conditions of industrial modernity, on the other – it is, in every sense, a mirror of consumption” (165). My approach differs from Sandvoss’ in my willingness to linger over the distance between the formation of identity and the integration of the self into society, which is staged as a transmedial relationship in *The Guild*.

comics, stage a conversation between the appealing social niche available to the eccentric gamers and the potentially radical desires that led them there, rather than to some other social institution.

In order to understand how these two platforms work for *The Guild*, the one to appeal to our desire for social harmony, and the other to gesture toward a solitary practice of embodied thinking, the reader must turn to other artifacts from popular culture. In his 1962 essay, “How to Look at Television,” Adorno suggested that such a cross-media, interdisciplinary approach would be necessary for understanding the contemporary media landscape. Condemning the quantitative focus of “communications research” at the time, he writes that:

Much closer scrutiny of the background and development of modern mass media is required than communications research, generally limited to present conditions, is aware of. One would have to establish what the output of contemporary cultural industry has in common with older “low” or popular forms of art as well as with autonomous art, and where the differences lie. (159)

Again, we must begin with the output of contemporary culture, that is, in my context, the installments of *The Guild* as they guide a story, and an inquiry beneath it.

In the first season of *The Guild*, the action is set in motion when Zaboo, real name Sujan Balakrishnan Goldberg, arrives unannounced at Codex’s doorstep, suitcase in hand, assuming that their in-game intimacy will translate not only into real-life friendship, but into a stable heterosexual relationship. Codex is baffled by his appearance at her doorstep, but, as we learned from the opening sequence, winds up with a gnome warlock spending the night at her house after all. Seeking help from her in-game friends,

and, in the process, inadvertently echoing Zaboo's presumption that in-game intimacy will translate into real-life friendship, Codex asks the other members of her guild for help, but they are preoccupied by in-game concerns, and see no reason for her to feel threatened, or even surprised by Zaboo's arrival. Nevertheless, they acquiesce to her request that they all meet up in person, now that the in-game/real-life threshold has been crossed, and thus take the first steps toward cementing their friendship. By the end of the first season, all six members of the guild stand together, and, by the end of the series, even insecure Codex is confident that they are "real life friends."

The first two seasons stage the guild's management of several different crossings of the in-game/real-life threshold. There is Zaboo's "quest" for Codex's love, which is managed by a financial agreement with guild leader Vork, real name Herman Holden, who demands only in-game compensation for Zaboo's room and board. Bladezz, real name Simon Kemplar, has been disciplined by the game for shouting hate speech, and the guild attempts to manage his misbehavior using their real-world knowledge sets, but ultimately, Bladezz cleans up his act because he can't bear being banned from participation. The real test of the guild's group friendship comes when they face four hours of server downtime, and are forced to interact with one another for the duration of this time, because they realize that they are the only links they have to the game that gives their lives a sense of consistency. The other members of *The Guild* are the only people who see them in the context of their avatars, who, until and unless they find a way to express their desires in another sphere, represent what is most important to them. There is no depiction of in-game action in these first two seasons, although there are a few low-budget special effects gesturing toward in-game logic as a representation of

psychological intensity. That said, however, the anchor for the Web series is always the attachment of the human being to the technology that enables her avatar to live, that is, the computer monitor, internet access, and microphone, which enable full participation in the game, so long as her friends are online, too.

In the Web series, sound effects and descriptive dialogue tell us what is happening in the game, and it is clear in that context that the only thing viewer really needs to understand is whether the in-game action is progressing successfully or not. It matters little whether Tink is mad at Clara for stealing an orb or for stealing her idea for a hairstyle. In *The Guild* comics, by contrast, in-game action is visually incorporated, and so, the storyworld of *The Guild* begins to be more fully realized, as we are invited into the action that drives most of the hours in these characters' lives, rather than simply seeing how frustrated they are by unmediated in-person social dynamics. It is in the comics that we are invited into the world as the characters perceive it, which includes not only dialogue, but also the fantasy-based action sequences in which their avatars participate. Certainly, a gaming community insider might understand from her own background that an orb is a rare item that is attached to particular skills or possibilities for in-game exploration, but it is only in the comics that such phenomena are rendered as part of the story. The in-game action dominates pages and panels, rather than appearing on a screen in the background, which only the hardcore fans would bother to decipher. In other words, as in a computer game, the reader has to participate in the logic of the medium in order to receive the story.

The Guild: Codex initiates the outsider into this particular incarnation of the comics medium, by inviting the reader into the logic of the game by telling the story of a

new player. The reader watches Cyd go through the steps of technical set-up, character creation, seeking out possible actions, and, of course, in-game socialization, which involves action-based collaboration and typed and spoken dialogue. And so, in addition to opening up the storyworld to a sustained exploration of an individual character's perspective beyond verbally articulated feelings and frustrations, *The Guild: Codex* offers readers a guide to the subcultural belonging represented as appealing by *The Guild* storyworld.

The Guild: Codex provides my first primary text, telling a story of the protagonist as she is being led to the game, and advancing an argument about the potential it holds in that moment for her self-realization, both negatively, in terms of the addiction, and positively, in that it would eventually lead her back to creative aspirations. *Codex* begins the comic as Cyd, the musician. She is a back-row violinist, who is in an unsatisfying relationship with another musician, her boyfriend Trevor. She is depressed, and her greatest satisfaction is doing behind-the-scenes work in support of Trevor's success. However, on one of her thankless quests, a journey to the local shops to hang fliers for his band's gigs, *Codex* inadvertently acquires the keys for her self-realization. The manager at the game store requires that she make a purchase, and so she buys the game, in a pivotal moment. Over the course of the three-part prequel comic, she ends her relationship with Trevor, gets fired from her job, meets every member of the Knights of Good, and commits to forming a guild with them. Although, at the time, she understands it only as a necessary distraction, the reader, who has seen three seasons of the Web series by this point, knows that it will become a lifestyle, which will lead her to discover her true talents.

Reading *The Guild: Codex*, I could not help but realize that what I had loved about *The Guild* from the beginning—that is, its sustained articulation of a woman’s subjectivity from inside of a digital niche within contemporary digital culture—was expanding into the broader and more familiar territory of women’s autobiography. Specifically, the comic drew clear inspiration from alternative comics from the 1980s and 1990s, by women writers like Roberta Gregory and Ariel Schrag. Alternative comics were of course inspired by the underground comix that preceded them chronologically, for these had set the stage for the medium’s central focus on psychological complexity and life writing. *Codex*’s webcam narratives in the episodes of the Web series had previously functioned for me as a clever framing device for a story about a group of friends, whose Internet addiction provided a barrier to normative social interactions. The framing device represented the introspection of the Internet addict, and allowed the protagonist to articulate her discomfort with her evolving real-life interactions with her fellow guild members. But in the comic, this introspection became the central focus, and thus became more than a framing device representing the central character’s point of view while she provides the exposition. Now, her whole mental life was on display, in a way it would never be for her virtual friends. Their intimacy is built on selective sharing, but here the reader is invited to see a larger picture of what limits Cyd, that she looks to create in *Codex*. It became clear that the woman-centered storytelling of *The Guild* was not simply a feature of its authorship and choice of protagonist, but rather because of its commitment to a women-centered archive of influences, one not obviated by the sprawling set of influences that inform online gaming as a subculture.

Indeed, the story of Cyd becoming a gamer, first by becoming Codex, and then in the sixth season of *The Guild*, by becoming a full-time employee of the game, is the story of an individual woman's quest for happiness and creative achievement. *The Guild* tells this story in the transmedia language appropriate to the historical position its protagonist inhabits, and in conversation with five other stories of characters who find various forms of satisfaction and social belonging within the virtual environment of the game. All six of these stories are united by the Web series component of *The Guild*, but there readers are only privy to the social relationships formed by each of these characters. Before I can explore the critical excess generated by the comics, I must, following the logic of the series, begin with its depiction of the social order.

To establish intimacy between the characters, the Web series component of *The Guild* takes inspiration from sitcom tropes, as well as video game aesthetics and digital storytelling forms, like Web diaries. Because socializing over the Internet looks so different from socializing over a cup of coffee, as in *Friends*, *The Guild* needs these additional visual cues, like headsets and microphones, to realize the social component of its storyworld. These visual cues are most prominent in the music videos, which parody the lifestyle obsessions of "hardcore gamers," and their resistance to social niceties, but within the Web series, these visual cues further character development and plot, as well as providing comic relief to the viewer dubious of gaming's social value. *The Guild* is successful in this task in no small part because it takes advantage of many of the

innovations of narratively complex television,⁵ in which characters develop in multiple, overlapping contexts, and in episode- season- and series-long arcs.

Making use of a storytelling style made famous by television shows like *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the members of the guild face both “monsters of the week,” that is, episode-length struggles, and season-long battles with foes referred to in *Buffy* parlance as Big Bads. Often, the “monster of the week” episodes offer more space for aesthetic experimentation than the fully serialized episodes, because the latter are often filled with relevant information, action, and dialogue, which propel the story forward. The structure of each season is worth describing in comparison to canonical examples from narratively complex television. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for example, the third season takes on the title character’s senior year of high school, and culminates with a season finale during which she must graduate and also defeat a super-villain. *The Guild* depicts much more compressed conflicts, usually depicting no more than a long weekend over the course of a season, which nevertheless airs over the course of several months. *The Guild* takes place in a time-scale proper to the Internet-obsessive and the unemployed, and the action is driven by the energy of obsession or addiction, rather than

⁵ I borrow this term from Jason Mittell, whose 2006 work on the subject forged a strategic way to talk about trends in contemporary television series without delving into debates about their politics and perceived “quality.” Despite this effort, Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine later argued that Mittell’s willingness to take part in this apparently objectively-grounded cultural legitimation of television came at the cost of the politics that make television so exciting to many of us. The debate is ongoing, and the intervention I wish to make includes both Mittell’s generative concept and Newman and Levine’s valid critique. Because my major inspiration is Adorno’s interdisciplinary approach to cultural history, which dictates that aesthetics and politics ought never to be separated, I provide the supplement of medium-grounded poetics only where I feel it clarifies my broader argument about Felicia Day’s particular innovation in woman-authored transmedia storytelling.

a social calendar shared with outsiders to the game. Indeed, Clara skips a family wedding in order to game, but prepares for days for the in-game “festival of the sea.” One could see this aspect of *The Guild* as a digital intensification of serial storytelling practices more broadly. Robyn Warhol argues that, “In its length, its repetitiousness, its management of suspense, and its resistance to closure, serial form exaggerates the typical narrative deployment of time and space, both virtual and real” (72). And indeed, *The Guild*’s adherence to this principle of exaggeration offers one explanation of its creative manipulations of time, but it is worth coupling this insight with a few thoughts on subcultural representation, and thus, the kinds of lives depicted in the series.

Digital subcultures in the twenty-first century are often referred to as “microcultures” or “nanocultures,” and that concept is helpful here, especially because, in these microcultures, not only is there a contained number of participants and a contained set of activities, but there is also a certain accelerated, but in its own way contained, intimacy forged from the shared eccentric passion that drives participation. The number of hours a group of Internet friends spends together over the course of a few calendar days undoubtedly surpasses the number of hours most people choose to spend in the waking company of others who are not part of their family.

It is also helpful, when imagining this accelerated but contained pace of intimate friendship formation, to think of the emotional logic of *The Guild* in conversation with the critical trend toward a celebration of so-called “minor affects,” which occupy significantly less cultural space, even in narratively-complex television than the major passions that accompany great love or victory. Using the salient example of envy, Sianne

Ngai describes what makes an affect “minor” in her seminal work on the subject, *Ugly Feelings*:

Bartlebyan moments of inaction...thus prepared us for a crucial reversal of the familiar idea that vehement emotions—in particular, the strongly intentional or object-directed emotions in the philosophical canon, such as jealousy, anger, and fear—destabilize our sense of the boundary between the psyche and the world, between subjective and objective reality. In contrast, my argument is that a systematic problematization of the distinction between subjective and objective enunciation lies at the heart of the Bartlebyan feelings in this book—minor affects that are far less intentional or object-directed, and thus more likely to produce political and aesthetic ambiguities, than the passions in the philosophical canon. For just as the question of whether one’s paranoia is subjective or objective is internal to paranoia, the historically feminized and proletarianized emotion of envy has another version of this problematic at its core. While envy describes a subject’s polemical response to a perceived inequality in the external world, it has been reduced to signifying a static subjective trait: the “lack” or “deficiency” of the person who envies. Hence, after a person’s envy enters a public domain of signification, it will always seem unjustified and critically effete—regardless of whether the relation of inequality it points to (say, unequal ownership of a means of production) has a real and objective existence. In this manner, although envy begins with a clearly defined object—and it is the *only* negative emotion defined specifically by the fact that it addresses forms of inequality—it denies the very objectivity of this object. In doing so, it oddly bears a much closer resemblance

to feelings lacking clearly defined objects, such as anxiety, than it does to an intentional emotion like jealousy. Envy is, in a sense, an intentional feeling that paradoxically undermines its own intentionality. (20-21)

Ngai's reclamation of the generativeness of the minor affects, especially in the context of women and the historical subordination of feelings deemed feminine,⁶ serves nicely to explain one aspect of the appeal of *The Guild*'s compressed structure.

For example, in the fourth season of *The Guild*, the "major" conflict is simply a petty in-game competition between guild members. They compete with one another for the rights to design their guild hall, a new feature in the game. Vork wants the design to be practical rather than garish, in case of "future downloadable content" that might make a brightly colored guild hall a target for attack. Clara and Tink, however, want magenta walls and formal gardens add-ons, so that *The Guild* resembles their own digital Versailles. This storyline is a battle between masculine and feminine aesthetics, and both are revealed as being "minor," because the stakes of their creative decision are so artificial. That said, however, it is immensely pleasurable to watch the finale, during which, because of Vork's technical failure, Tink and Clara's vision is realized with flamboyantly feminine special effects.

⁶ Warhol has also written extensively on the importance of feminine affect in understanding contemporary narrative structures. Her book, *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms* explores "reading as a physical act," and proposes that literary criticism ought to take on the task of establishing "a language for talking about the reader's body" (ix). Like Lee and Ngai, Warhol innovates an approach for doing so, in her case, feminist narratology. Warhol's use of contemporary and Victorian examples of "effeminate" serial and repetitive reading practices sets an important precedent for my experiment with Day's transmedia storytelling practices.

The fifth season takes place at a gaming convention, which serves as a living map of the characters' contemporary culture. As they separate in order to explore the convention, they reveal their individual personalities and long-term interests, and find new insight into the paths that led them to the game, and to each other in the first place. In other words, the fifth season embodies the logic of the series by bringing together individual trajectories of consumption and interpretation in a sprawling setting representing contemporary culture. As we see Vork encounter the woman of his adolescent sexual fantasies, an actress from a science fiction television show from the 1980s, we are invited to take pleasure in the fact that it is his friendship with Bladezz, a high school student, that has made one of his lifelong fantasies come true.

However, the game represents more than a particularly complex social technology. It is a media landscape that rewards and inspires critical thought, and, in order to understand how this functions for each individual character, we must turn from the series to the comics, in which each character's perspective is given its own sustained expression in an open-ended medium. From that vantage point, the reader can reconceptualize the entire series as the character at hand has experienced it, which enables better-informed re-watching, and an improved understanding of the complexity of the group dynamics. Furthermore, it offers the excess of information not addressed within the social sphere represented by the Web series component of *The Guild* storyworld, the excess, which can be transformed into critical potential with the help of Adorno's sedimented history.

There are at least three ways to follow the story of *The Guild* as it unfolds. The first one takes Codex's opening webcam monologue from the first episode of the series as

the beginning. In that monologue, we learn that she is depressed, isolated, and frustrated by the physical presence of Zaboo, the gnome warlock sleeping on her couch. She spends her time gaming, and, while she wants to live a fuller life, she refuses to give up her gaming addiction in order to find one. The action of the series leads to the “gaming-positive” ending, in which she finds both friends and employment *through* her involvement in the game, and thus there is a happy, satisfying conclusion to the disequilibrium with which the series began. In this approach, the information that is revealed in the comics is merely supplementary “backstory,” reserved for fans who are so delighted by the gaming-positive storyline that they want to spend more time with its inhabitants.

The second approach to the story of *The Guild* is properly transmedial, and it shares its beginning with the conventional approach outlined above. As in the first approach, we follow Codex through three seasons of increasingly “real” encounters with her fellow guild members and others she knows via the game, up to the reveal of the third season’s finale, when she has sex with Fawkes, a rival guild leader. But this time, rather than waiting for the first episode of the fourth season, which will explore the aftermath of the sexual encounter, we are given an opportunity to speculate on Codex’s behavior in the context of her past. Reading *The Guild: Codex*, we learn that, before she found the game, Cyd had what looked like a more normal life, in which she was employed and in a long-term romantic relationship with a man. More importantly, we learn that she wasn’t happy in that life, either, and so we are invited to wonder what it is that precedes her gaming addiction, which keeps her outside of social normalcy. With this critical question in our minds, the way we interpret the social aftermath of her encounter with Fawkes

throughout seasons four through six becomes much more complex. In January of 2011, when *The Guild: Vork* was released, the reading practice invited by *The Guild* shifted its center away from the very idea of the series as Codex's story, and began to offer every character the sustained interiority that had, up to then, been her sole domain. At this point, the series' narrative momentum became no longer chronologically forward-moving, but rather both backward-moving, that is, incorporating each character's history, and horizontally moving between characters' interior perspectives on the social world they inhabited.

This approach enables a third approach, which one might label fannish, due to its ability to remove itself from the schedule of transmedia storytelling, and focus in on the constellation of information provided throughout the series.⁷ This approach could focus on any ideological aspect of the series, like its depiction of sexual deviance or life during the fallout of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, and it can also focus on an individual character. For example, to extract the chronology of the series from Codex's perspective, then, beginning with her prequel comic, we would have: personal unhappiness and unemployment, followed by finding an escape in the game; using the social outlet of the game to vent about her feelings, followed by the disruption brought on by Zaboo's

⁷ The scholarly version of this approach would be the aca-fannish, a hybrid term popularized by Henry Jenkins. The Organization for Transformative Works hosts a peer-reviewed journal, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, which regularly publishes articles representing a range of aca-fandom, from the single series-focused to the panfannish, that is, reflections on fandom as a phenomenon that transcends responses to any single series or fandom. The single series approach, which I take here, is best represented by Buffy Studies, which has had its own journal, *Slayage*, since 2001, and hosts its own conferences. Buffy Studies scholars have also produced numerous books devoted to the analysis of the series, and its usefulness for diverse fields, such as feminist analysis, sociolinguistic study, and library studies.

intrusion into her real life; a failed attempt at guild leadership, followed by a successful in-game defeat of a major rival; and finally, a burst in individual confidence, which eventually leads to the acquisition of gainful, satisfying employment, and confidence in her friends. The final season of the Web series revolves around her new workplace, and, although she encounters challenges, we have confirmation by the end of the season that she will thrive in this new job, bolstered by her friends' genuine support.

This third version of the story is close to the first reading practice, but the difference is its beginning point. We learn in the comic that Cyd was not happy when she was employed as a musician, and in a heterosexual relationship with a fellow musician. However, she is happy when she is employed by the game, and supported by a group of friends. And so, her happiness at the end of this version of the story is about gaming as fostering a particular creative community, one that transcends conventional artistic and social paths. The reader can use this reading practice to understand the series from the other characters' perspectives, too, and thus find the particular happiness articulated by *The Guild* storyworld to be one that takes account of the twenty-first-century popular culture landscape, and of the diversity of possible paths across it. Codex does not "beat" her friends to the job at the game; they weren't looking for it. What they are looking for is not necessarily articulated within the Web series, but the comics gesture toward some of the possibilities and, by reading these comics alongside various works of women's experimental autobiography since the 1960s, their participation in a long tradition of women's embodied thinking reveals itself.

Her friends, like Codex, are seekers in the world of the game, and they are looking for solidarity and resources that no individual can provide. However, their needs

can be met if they can find a balance between their individual trajectories through the cultural landscape, and their needs as individuals within a complex, mutually supportive, social environment. Acknowledging this latter fact transforms the way we conceptualize their trajectories from the individualistic narrative of a *bildungsroman* or *künstlerroman*, which conventionally relegates the other players in an individual's life to symbolic status. Equally, when we envision their entwined social trajectory, it looks much more complex than the normative social harmony of the sitcom, because, for these introverted and introspective individuals, it is too much to ask that they sacrifice the full expression of their inner lives for social harmony with one another, simply in order to assimilate to social norms. And so, the fannish reading practice I articulated above starts to look more like a queer reading practice.

Although none of the characters is openly gay, contemporary queer studies is one generative method by which we can appreciate the individual's resistance to social assimilation without relying on their embodied status as sexual minorities. David Eng, with José Esteban Muñoz and Judith Halberstam, writes:

What might be called the “subjectless” critique of queer studies disallows any positioning of proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent. Such an understanding orients queer epistemology, despite the historical necessities of “strategic essentialism” (Gayatri Spivak's famous term), as a continuous deconstruction of the tenets of positivism at the heart of identity politics. Attention to queer epistemology also insists that sexuality –the organizing rubric of lesbian and gay studies—must be rethought for its positivist assumptions. A subjectless critique establishes, in Michael Warner's

phrase, a focus on “a wide field of normalization” as the site of social violence. Attention to those hegemonic social structures by which certain subjects are rendered “normal” and “natural” through the production of “perverse” and “pathological” others, Warner insists, rejects a “minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal.” (3)

Indeed, the sitcom tends to operate by precisely such a “minoritizing logic of toleration,” and, although there is pleasure to be found in the social harmony that ensues in its storytelling, there is still the conceptual excess of *what else* the characters might wish to become, beyond behaving virtuously toward one another.

The Guild comics create space for this excess, and allow it to serve as a counterweight to the Web series component of the transmedia storyworld. We are thus only strategically given the catharsis of introverted gamers stepping out of their shells to join the world as the regime of the normal demands, as in the first reading practice I articulated, which showed Codex’s path from unemployment to employment, and from loneliness to happiness in friendship. If we are moved by that experience, we must delve further into the characters’ inner lives, to see whether or not the social harmony they form truly “solves” the questions that led them to seek answers in the game in the first place.

Vork comes to the game because he is a lifelong gamer, and has been since the days of multi-user dungeons (MUDs). He quit his white-collar job to care for his aging grandfather, and fell into it as an all-consuming escape when the man died, leaving Vork his house. Tink comes to the game because she is bored with the academic institution of college, but yearns to expand her knowledge of the world. She is a creative person, who,

we eventually learn, dreams of becoming a costume designer, and so the game gives her a constantly-evolving inspiration for fantasy- and period-derived costume pieces. Bladezz comes to the game because his father left home, and he feels the need to focus on independent pursuits, but, as a young teenager, few are available to him. Clara comes to the game because she is bored with domesticity and family life, and she misses the pleasure-based pursuits of her adolescence. Zaboo comes to the game looking for love, but also because, as a former computer science major, he can enjoy the game as an application of his education. In each comic, the reader is invited into one possible mode of inhabiting contemporary culture, which can lead in many directions.

Of course, we could extract each individual character's story from the Web series even if the comics did not exist. Indeed, the women-centered community of Western media fandom has been producing such narratives in fanworks, especially fan fiction, since the *Star Trek* fandom that emerged in the 1960s. Fan fiction takes characters from film, television, comic book series, and even literature, and places them in new scenarios in order to understand who they are beyond the constraints of the storyworld in which they were first introduced. Individual fan practices and preferences differ in terms of the extent to which they require their own characterization to "fit" the original authors' characterization, and how much they want to be critical, and take what they think is most intriguing or titillating about the characters into entirely new contexts. The best-known example of the latter mode of fan practice is slash fandom, in which canonically heterosexual characters explore queer relationships in fan fiction, as well as in fan art and other forms of fannish expression.

In their work on “slash fandom as queer female space,” Alexis Lothian, Kristina Busse, and Robin Ann Reid write that they wish to:

Expand the scope of [previous] inquiries to include ways in which particular online spaces, cultures, and practices can queer women (and other gendered subjects) in ways not accounted for by most identity narratives. We are interested in the interactions between women which structure online media fandom, specifically the exchange of sexually explicit slash stores which depict relationships between male characters and actors from films, books, and television shows. In the virtual spaces we invoke in this paper, such shared sexual fantasies bring people together from a wide variety of identities and locations. (103)

The idea of slash fandom as a queer female space offers a fruitful parallel to the argument I wish to make about *The Guild* in the queer, women-centered sedimented history I draw from its transmedia storyworld. However, it is worth noting that there is a fandom for *The Guild*, and the works of that fandom are not my object of study here. Ethnographies of fan communities, like Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, have been foundational to fan studies, and continue to appear today. Indeed, one could read one of the texts I examine in this project, namely, Elif Batuman’s *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them*, as a version of such an ethnographic approach. However, my starting point is the transmedia storyworld itself, rather than particular representations of the desires inspired by it as a direct response. And so, in the vein of Adorno, I wish to connect *The Guild*, and specifically the first-person storytelling presented in *The Guild* comics, to another women-centered sphere of cultural production, namely that of

women's autobiography. This approach has its roots in fannish desire, to understand fictional characters more deeply, but also in contemporary scholarship on the evolution of women's autobiography.

In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's recent work on women's autobiography, they describe the afterlife of the first author's insights about the genre from the 1980s. They recall that

Smith, in her 1987 *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*, theorize[d] the linkage of gender and genre in exploring how women engage autobiographical discourse to renegotiate their cultural marginality and enter into literary history.” (210)

In the twenty-first century, the pair has updated this insight to include a more expansive, cross-media vision of contemporary cultural history in which literary history no longer represents the target of women's autobiographical experiments. This insight is fundamental to the conversations I will stage throughout this project, between *The Guild* comics on the one hand, and the history of women's experimental autobiography on the other. It is also an insight that reveals Smith and Watson's proximity to Adorno, when it comes to their vision of contemporary popular culture.

Already in the 1960s, Adorno noted in his essay, “How to Look at Television,” that, “the commercial production of cultural goods has become streamlined, and the impact of popular culture has concomitantly increased” (160). In other words, for him, the vastness of popular culture began to dwarf that of any of the discrete spheres that once constituted the arts, and this new state of affairs necessitated a new critical vocabulary for analyzing artworks and other cultural phenomena. In “The Culture

Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (co-authored with Max Horkheimer), he famously dates this historical process back to opera and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which he condemns for bringing together “word, image and music” by way of “technical process,” rather than working to create the possibility of a genuinely aesthetic encounter, which excites critical space in the reader (97). This argument is of particular relevance to the transmedia storyworld, which could be seen by a cynic as embodying one of Adorno’s worst nightmares about popular culture. In “How to Look at Television,” he goes on to say that:

The more the system of ‘merchandising’ culture is expanded, the more it tends also to assimilate the ‘serious’ art of the past by adapting this art to the system’s own requirements. The control is so extensive that any infraction of its rules is *a priori* stigmatized as ‘highbrow’ and has but little chance to reach the population at large.” (160)

Interestingly, of course, while Adorno worries about the “stigma” of the highbrow in a media landscape in which discrete spheres are conflated under the logic of the market, Smith’s concern two decades later was about the misogynistic minoritization of women’s writing, which failed to recognize the innovations of women writers. However, in the twenty-first century, the two positions are easy to unite in the face of the sheer vastness of the digitally-mediated cultural landscape cultural producers and critics face today. One cannot, in other words, escape *cultural* marginality by entering into *literary* history, in our contemporary moment. If the marginality is cultural, and literature is but one incarnation of the streamlined culture industry, then any cachet afforded a specifically

literary achievement is merely symbolic, and could even, in Adorno's view, hinder the possibility of the aesthetic encounter for which its author hoped.

Given this cultural landscape, I refer to my own genealogy of women's autobiography as "women's experimental autobiography across media." The "experimental" qualifier is intended to mark the work of women who attempt to articulate their cultural marginality in the evolving media language of their historical moment. Experimental autobiography includes thinly-veiled and other autobiographically-inflected modes of self-representation. That I envision the contemporary cultural landscape as being represented by the transmedia storyworld of *The Guild* necessitates that I look at women's self-representation in various media simultaneously, because *The Guild* is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in a contemporary form. One result of its transmedia existence is that its innovations as a sitcom or comic book series are indisputably marginal within the history of those discrete media, if only because either "half" of the story is incomplete without its complementary major component. Further, I argue that the technical innovations of *The Guild*, like those of its predecessors in underground comics and alternative cinema, represent part of its experimental spirit, rather than an aesthetic sacrifice for the sake of spreadability.

Smith and Watson describe one recent innovation in autobiography studies, which will be helpful as I explore this idea, and contextualize it as I introduce my genealogy of women's experimental autobiography across media. Describing the concept of "automediality," they write,

Conjoining *autos* and media, [automediality] redresses a tendency in autobiography studies to consider media as "tools" for rendering a preexistent

self. Theorists of automediality emphasize that the choice of medium is determined by self-expression; and the materiality of a medium is constitutive of the subjectivity rendered. Thus media technologies do not simplify or undermine the interiority of the subject but, on the contrary, expand the field of self-representation beyond the literary to cultural and media practices. New media of the self revise notions of identity and the rhetoric and modalities of self-presentation, and they prompt new imaginings of virtual sociality enabled by concepts of community that do not depend on personal encounter. (168)

This more focused version of Adorno's historical argument about the politics of media change not only provides a vocabulary for defining the first particular innovation of *The Guild*, that is, its incorporation of the webcam monologue, but also sets up the possibility for the encounters I wish to stage between Day, the characters of *The Guild*, and the works of women's experimental autobiography since the 1960s.

Indeed, the "virtual sociality" that is the core theme of the Web series component of *The Guild* is one that I argue can be expanded into a critical practice. In this practice, the reader has the privilege of staging social encounters between women and other gendered subjects across time, space, and medium. To connect these women, as they see themselves, requires paying attention to how they envision cultural progress and memory. It is worth examining both their own memories of their lives, and their memories of historical phenomena they encountered, but also to take note of how they incorporate themselves into cultural history. Some of the writers I examine have been admitted into literary history, but all of them articulated goals of self-archival that transcend that particular achievement.

Smith and Watson suggest that women's autobiography, especially memoir, often shows its greatest innovations in representing techniques and practices of remembering change. How people remember, what they remember, and who does the remembering are historically specific. A culture's understanding of memory at a particular moment of its history shapes the life narrator's process of remembering. Often a historical moment itself comprises multiple, competing practices of remembering. Narrators at the crossroads of conflicting understandings of memory...may explore these competing practices of memory and interrogate the cultural stakes of remembering by juxtaposing a dominant modern mode and an alternative indigenous mode." (23)

One of Day's major contributions in *The Guild* is to provide such a painstaking archive of life in the early days of Web 2.0, or the age of social networking, which would otherwise be relegated to a list of products and public offerings, or, at best, broad social generalizations. Day's archive individuates this story, which makes it comprehensible on a human scale. In a similar vein, her predecessors individuate their experiences via photographs from artsy parties populated by counterculture freaks, transcribed dialogue from a public high school cafeteria in the 1990s, and smartphone conversations in the 2010s. Technology and memory, and indeed, technology and temporality, are intimately linked, and they complement one another nicely in the concept of automediality.

The Internet-based temporality of *The Guild's* transmedia storyworld is significant not only because of its acute representation of the contemporary phenomena of virtual life, but also because of the diverse set of individual reading practices it

enables. Traditionally, the medium-specific understanding of the temporality of film is that film takes place in time, which is determined for the reader by the authorial process of editing. By contrast, comics spatialize time, thus leaving readers creative agency in their movement across the page. As Scott McCloud says in *Understanding Comics*, “comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected movements” (85). But this distinction between film and comics, grounded, as it is, in medium specificity, is complicated by at least two factors.

Firstly, television followed film as a time-based medium, and while, in Adorno’s time, scheduled programming confined viewers to a domestic⁸ incarnation of the cinema-going experience, home recording equipment became widely available in the subsequent decades, and invested viewers gained the ability to pause, rewind, and fast-forward as much as they want. With simple VCR technology, some particularly savvy viewers began to practice editing on their own, producing remixes and fan videos with the material they had recorded, even splicing professional and “home video” footage. Women led this innovation, which came to be known as “vidding,” and that history is important, because film has long been a male-dominated domain. Francesca Coppa notes that the history of women-produced fan vids dates back to the mid-1970s, specifically

⁸ And of course, there are gendered implications to television as the domesticization of the film medium, which have been chronicled by John Fiske in his 1987 book, *Television Culture*. In that book, and in his subsequent work on gender and television, he examined soap opera viewers, among other phenomena. Ultimately, Fiske took the side of the feminists who defended television studies, like Jane Feuer and Patrice Petro, in the spring 1986 *Cinema Journal* debate about the medium’s inclusion in film studies (Wright Wexman). These feminist scholars argued, as Newman and Levine argued again in *Legitimizing Television*, that television is worthy of serious study not only because of its aesthetic innovations, but also because of its social implications, especially the complex reading practices it inspires.

“1975, the year that Kandy Fong made her first *Star Trek* slide shows, [which] was also the year of Laura Mulvey's essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ in *Screen*” (1). What is especially notable about this intertwined history, of feminist film criticism and grassroots women’s art-making via specialized interpretive practices, is how it helps us to locate a thread of women’s collective longing for media forms that can realize their visions of the world they encounter. Whereas Adorno saw a quest for domination underwriting the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the history of women in fandom reveals an alternative approach to the combination of media, and a refusal of the rules of their particular spheres.

It is the second challenge to medium specificity, the Internet, which began to realize this longing in a newly sustained way. The Internet made television series much more widely available, both for linear and creative consumption. Further, home editing technology became easier to use, and so, more and more fannish viewers gained the ability to create fanworks in a variety of media, intended for a real audience full of feedback and goodwill. But, with a transmedia storyworld like *The Guild*, the fan-author has already incorporated this complexity of expression into the official narrative. The episodes of the Web series have been available on YouTube since the series began, allowing endless re-watching and participation in the comments section. The comics, available in print and digital forms, invite readers drawn to the former away from their screens to enjoy the subjective reading practices detailed by McCloud. For readers who prefer the digital versions, endless zooming, and, with a little know-how, copying and pasting is possible, which helps readers to maximize their experience of the detailed images. This digital comics reading practice is finding a home in the contemporary

university, in which Henry Jenkins is turning his attention to the close reading of *Comics...and Stuff*. With the digitization of comics, old and new, readers without access to archives or the technology and time required for the conventional close analysis of material culture, can now engage in a similar experience online. Undoubtedly, some information is lost in the process of digitization, but much more is gained, not least importantly, an increased audience for the material culture objects in the first place.

Like Jenkins, Smith and Watson, too, have turned their attention to reading practices, in their case for autobiography, both by creating an Appendix full of them in their latest book, and by arguing that, in contemporary autobiographies:

Multiple, contesting approaches coexist in a productive ferment and generate new reading strategies, as critics and theorists continue to turn their attention to many kinds of life writing long excluded from the canon of autobiography as marginal. As the corpus of texts and media expands, the debates shift. Redefining the contexts of life narrative situates it as a rhetorical act embedded in the history of specific communities. (234)

In the case of *The Guild*, I had the fortune of being part of its first intended audience, that of the viewer who had devoted much of her young life to Internet subcultures, which, for me, included both participation in an MMORPG and a variety of forays into Western media fandom, online and off-. In this project, I wish to look at *The Guild* from a broader perspective, one that connects the insights of the series to a history of women's experimental self-representation in various media. What these texts share is a desire to create critical space for women's perspectives and desires. Fandom represents one such space, but there are more, including the space of the "gutter" in comics, especially

women's autobiographical comics, and the space of mythology, where it interacts with memory in Audre Lorde's biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Here, I attempt to locate some of the intersections between these critical spaces, noting where they come together via juxtaposition and reference throughout *The Guild* comics, but also taking note of their vast potential to appear in other spheres, and reach new audiences.

One might ask why, in spite of my inspiration from queer theory, and the critic most suspicious of so-called identity politics, Adorno, I feel that "women" represents a category of cultural producers who merit particular attention. Although I believe strongly that the regimes of normalization appropriate to queer inquiry transcend gender and embodied sexuality, I also believe that it is part of the work of queer studies to note the particular effects these intersecting regimes have on particular subjects. On the subject of "women," as popular culture began to subsume other categories of culture, such as literature and art, it also importantly created new demographic divisions of culture, in this case, so-called women's culture. "Women's culture," embodied, as it is, by particular magazines, television series, and books associated with middle-class leisure time, that is, "beach reads," as well as some popular memoirs, represents only a much-reduced version of the phenomena I attempt to describe here. However, it is certainly an evolving historical phenomenon to which the women writers I examine are responding, sometimes with hostility, sometimes kinship, and, throughout, with their own individual experience.

Hélène Cixous focuses on the kinship enabled by women-centered spheres of cultures, which are of course different from "women's culture" as an institution. She describes the experience of individual women finding friendship in sharing the stories of

their own lives in her classic essay on *écriture féminine*, “The Laugh of the Medusa.”

She writes:

I have been amazed more than once by a description a woman gave me of a world all her own which she had been secretly haunting since early childhood. A world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity. This practice, extraordinarily rich and inventive, in particular as concerns masturbation, is prolonged or accompanied by a production of forms, a veritable aesthetic activity, each stage of rapture inscribing a resonant vision, a composition, something beautiful. Beauty will no longer be forbidden.

I wished that that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst-burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. (876)

Cixous connects desire, beauty, and sexual pleasure to the act of writing, and specifically, the act of one woman writing to another. Although she and other French feminists have been rightly criticized by women of color feminists, queer theorists, and others for their inattention to disparities in race, class, and national identity between women, her utopian vision lives on in women-centered cultural spaces today. I believe that Western media fandom, especially the queer slash fandom described by Lothian, represents one such instantiation of the outpouring of creativity that emerges when women create their own

forms of writing and other media experimentation. It connects the autoeroticism of Cixous's essay to the automediality of contemporary women's self-fashioning.

Crucially, fandom is a connection grounded in consumption, specifically reading practices, and so, much of the critique of the French feminists for having been gender-essentialists slips away in the face of this disembodiment. Any embodied social subject can enter into queer slash fandom and experience this contemporary sphere of *écriture féminine*. Further, this community's basis in complex, often transmedia reading practices sets to the side any question of belonging to a political feminist movement, which presumes "agreement" with any given set of principles. The women whose works I examine throughout my project are, in fact, women who come to self-representation in spite of a failure to find belonging in political movements or institutional homes. Indeed, as I read these authors' works in the present, I find that their insights reveal their greatest value when they fulfill Adorno's promise, articulated in "Resignation," that:

What has been cogently thought must be thought in some other place and by other people. This confidence accompanies even the loneliest and most impotent thoughts. Whoever thinks is without anger in all criticism: thinking sublimates anger...The happiness visible to the eye of a thinker is the happiness of mankind.

(203)

This happiness is visible in Cixous's essay, and it is visible in queer slash fandom, although much academic and political disagreement has been registered in the meantime. My goal is not to suggest that this criticism is unnecessary, but that the inter-generational happiness of women writing together takes precedence in the sedimented history I am creating when I read *The Guild*.

In this project I wish to articulate that individual happiness as it appears in the transmedia storyworld of *The Guild*, especially in the comics, and especially when these are read as the top layer of a complex, sedimented history of women's self-fashioning in the fast-changing media landscape we have inhabited since the beginning of counterculture. This happiness is always ephemeral, but in subjects that seem to be entirely engulfed by the digital consumer marketplace, even where their friendships and romantic relationships are concerned, it is one fundamental aspect of the life of the contemporary subject. The happiness of the thinker is distinct both from the escapism that leads the Knights of Good to the game in the first place and life without the game. It requires a balanced engagement with both spheres of reality as they have come to know them.

Écriture féminine has been connected to hobbies other than pen-and-paper composition before, of course. As one example, in her essay, "Rowing as *l'Écriture Féminine*" Shannon Smith depicts her experience as an athlete using Cixous's vocabulary. She writes,

Though Cixous states that "it is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing" because the desire to define belongs to the controlling impulses of the "discourse that regulates the phallogentric system" (2001 [1975], 2046, emphasis in original), it is possible to reach an understanding of *l'écriture féminine* that will aid in locating this mode of expression in other cultural practices; more specifically, a summary of the major concepts that make up *l'écriture féminine* will help demonstrate the affinity between Cixous's idea of writing "women's

imaginary” (2040) and the cultural practice I have called “messaging about in boats,” or rowing as a woman...(Malin 126-127)

Smith finds beautiful symmetry between her experiences as a rower and Cixous’s descriptions of the feminine aesthetic. Messaging about in-game is, for the Knights of Good, most of whom have had Internet access since early adolescence or before, no different from messaging about in boats, and so, when I seek to understand each member’s first person account of that pleasure, I am seeking an account of feminine pleasure as part of a long, if disparate tradition of critics and writers.

Another critical tradition is also worth returning to as I lay the groundwork for my observations about *The Guild* storyworld, and it is the tradition of sex-positive feminism.⁹ The Knights of Good experience sexuality mostly as a metaphor – in the first episode, Tink complains that she was being “raped by goblins” while Codex “was standing there with her staff up her ass.” However, their access to a virtual space in which this kind of conversation is even possible indisputably connects back to the history of sex-positive feminism, which made a new kind of knowing conversation about sex between men and women possible. When it comes to sex, the women writers I examine in my project have varying experiences and politics, but all of them certainly agree that it is a woman’s right to articulate her sexual experience in whatever medium helps her to convey the truth

⁹ Gayle Rubin has worked to develop a sex-positive feminism since 1973, which was also the year that *Roe v. Wade* was decided in favor of legal abortion in all fifty states. Rubin began her career by explaining the origins of the suppression of women’s sexual desire and gay flourishing in her essay “The Traffic in Women,” and later she argued for the cultural value of women-centered queer sexual practices, like lesbian S&M. She remains a leader in archiving those subcultures for future generations, as exemplified by her work with the Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago. For more, see her 2011 collection of essays, *Deviations*.

about it. “Sex-positive” feminism does not imply that all sexual experiences are positive, or that we should strive to be positive about them. Rather, it seeks to value depictions of sexual pleasure as articulations of women’s truth as much as we value women’s honesty about the sexual abuse and shaming they experience. Sexual pleasure cannot be codified, and not everybody wishes to experience it, but where it is desired, sought, and realized, it is as worthy of representation as any other part of women’s experience.

My goal in offering this survey of possible scholarly approaches to *The Guild*, from comparative media studies and fan studies, to queer and feminist studies, is to situate myself within the dizzying interdisciplinarity at the heart of the humanities in the twenty-first century. The story *The Guild* tells is one of sensitive subjects who are genuinely moved by their encounters with popular culture phenomena, and by their encounters with one another. It is this emotional response that attracts me to the story, and the way in which it is transformed in the comics into a sustained exploration of self-representation, which creates the conditions for theoretical insight. As a transmedia storyworld, *The Guild* is a map of contemporary culture, and it can guide us through conversations about women’s self-representations since the 1960s, and enable us to appreciate what virtual sociality and transmedia storytelling make visible when it comes to long-held utopian, feminist, and queer desires.

Each of my chapters represents my exploration of a category of recent cultural history. The categories – counterculture, alternative culture, and micro- or boutique culture – have been widely used to describe the aesthetics and politics of popular culture trends since the 1960s. All of these categories encompass multiple, contested histories, and can be used to refer to a vast range of popular culture artifacts. I use these terms as

provocations rather than as definitions, focusing more on the questions they raise than on the answers they provide. When I talk about counterculture, for example, I do not claim to offer a comprehensive history of its role in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. Neither do I offer an extensive survey of previous academic approaches to it, having finally understood what “really happened.” I cannot even claim to offer a history of any of its substrata, for example, *Wimmen’s Comix*. I look back to counterculture, rather, as an idea, inhabited and experienced by women, that offered tactics for the expression of their desires, and thus, ultimately helped to shape the widespread dissemination of women’s experimental autobiography. Understanding this history helps me to understand how the contemporary media landscape, represented by transmedia storyworld of *The Guild*, came to provide such an expansive vision of women’s consciousness. My goal in locating “friends in thought”¹⁰ from the counterculture era is to stage a back-and-forth, intergenerational conversation between inhabitants of contemporary digital subcultures, represented by the fictional characters in *The Guild*,

¹⁰ I use this Derridean concept as it has been expanded by Claire Colebrook in her feminist account of poststructuralism. She notes that “both Derrida and Deleuze considered the friend to be both factually and philosophically crucial to the possibility of thinking,” and, recognizing that the philosophical tradition of friendship relegates the highest form of friendship to that between two men, wonders what it looks like when such a friendship incorporates a thinking woman (6). Using the example of the historical friendship between Derrida and Cixous, she finds that the two approach a new kind of friendship, one in which they take pleasure in “accus[ing] one another of autobiography,” (in contrast to proper philosophy), and thus perform a mutual seduction, which invites them to exist together without falsehood. She describes this relation as follows: “Deconstruction has always been about philosophical seduction, about the lure both of believing oneself to have broken free, finally, of metaphysical decisions, of violence, of reason, appropriation, of war, and of regarding a text as secure ground for truth, presence and revelation” (9). In this project, I examine the implications of such a friendship staged between two women in virtual space, outside of their time, and in this one.

and women writers of autobiography who have long experimented with the limits of imaginative self-fashioning.

When I turn, next, to alternative culture, it is without a value judgment on the disputed endpoint of the counterculture. My logic is that it would simply be an anachronism to see *The Guild* as a countercultural artifact, not only because it was created in the wrong historical moment, but also because its goals are not particularly defiant. The Web series is “zany,” in Ngai’s terms, referring to a hypercommodified twenty-first-century-specific aesthetic in which characters “oscillate between ‘cultural and occupational performance, acting and service, playing and laboring’” (Barker 82). It is in this constant motion that the series gains its energy. Alternative culture, by contrast, is defined by slowness, a “slacker” approach to life, which prioritizes the authenticity of subcultural experience over momentum and progress. In contrast to the Web series, defined by speed in medium and aesthetic, *The Guild* comics contain the earmarks of alternative culture, and thus, invitations into a previous generation’s self-representation. Indeed, some of *The Guild*’s characters experienced the transition of alternative culture into digital culture themselves, and so it is worth staging conversations across that cultural moment, to see what longings and desires it might continue to represent.

When I reach twenty-first-century media culture, I use the gendered term “boutique” to refer to the contemporary stage of consumerism, in hopes of depicting what women writers do to expand the possibilities of that sphere. I see contemporary women wrestling with the need to embody “cuteness” in their self-fashioning, ranging from the covers placed on their memoirs, to the performances in which they have to engage to maintain their brand. Ngai describes cuteness in the contemporary moment as:

a way of aestheticizing powerlessness. It hinges on a sentimental attitude toward the diminutive and/or weak, which is why cute objects—formally simple or noncomplex, and deeply associated with the infantile, the feminine, and the unthreatening—get even cuter when perceived as injured or disabled...

Cuteness is also a commodity aesthetic, with close ties to the pleasures of domesticity and easy consumption. As Walter Benjamin put it: “If the soul of the commodity which Marx occasionally mentions in jest existed, it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would have to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to *nestle*.” (Jasper 1)

The friends in thought I describe in this final section share the particular task of embodying cuteness in their cultural niche, as Day does for the gaming community. This position is difficult, because on the one hand, it requires a celebration of one’s own powerlessness, and, on the other hand, one risks being accused of being merely the commodity aspect of an otherwise serious cultural trend.

In terms of the reading experience available, each work from these three different cultural moments carries with it equal potential to delight and to make visible the baffling features of contemporary life that send characters like Codex into imaginary and virtual worlds. However, just as it would be falsely nostalgic to ascribe absolute authenticity to underground comix, while lamenting the reduced form in which they emerge as *The Guild* comics, I think it would be falsely utopian to see in contemporary literature a forward trajectory toward increased insight. Our worlds expand and contract in equal measure as history unfolds; whether we are under the influence of LSD in a desert,

surrounded by like-minded friends in an alternative music venue, or hidden in a dark apartment, connected to others only by Internet access, we can only ever perceive the world as individuals. But this particular history of women's autobiographical storytelling since the 1960s reveals our long-standing desire to do more, and to fashion our world in order to maximize our perceptual experience of it.

In my first chapter, I read *The Guild: Codex*, and underlying its logic, I find the tropes of the counterculture memoir. Day depicts Cyd Sherman's life before *Codex*, when she was a lonely, maladjusted young woman, frustrated by the dominant culture, and desperate for kind, creative friends. She had the self-knowledge to recognize that her isolation was unnatural, but she lacked the social knowledge to break out of it creatively, without sacrificing her authentic feelings. The game represents her access to this creative social landscape, and she quickly pours her energy into it, thrilled to have found a world that makes sense to her. In the counterculture memoir, the story was often one of a girl in a dull suburb or small town, who longed for the excitement of an urban environment, not because of the mainstream success that was possible there, but because of the vibrant subculture in which she could find social satisfaction. In women's memoirs of counterculture, the fear of suburban normalcy coincided with a fear of lifelong sexual boredom in monogamous heterosexuality, and counterculture offered enticing alternatives. For Aline Kominsky-Crumb, counterculture included psychedelic drugs, which excited her perceptions, promiscuous and experimental sex, which excited her body, and visual art, especially the underground comics, which would become her medium. In her 2007 graphic memoir, *Need More Love*, Kominsky-Crumb juxtaposes her comics, family photographs, paintings, and prose recollections in order to create a

contemporary access point for underground comics as an intervention in the visual language of popular culture. Reading *The Guild: Codex* and *Need More Love* together, I argue that there is a lingering connection between digital subcultures and the 1960s counterculture that inspires women artists to produce a particular kind of autobiographical narrative. This narrative foregrounds mediation, found in drugs, technology, and ecstatic social experiences, all of which coalesce in the “invisible art” of underground comics, and in the virtual realm in *The Guild: Codex*.

In the second half of the chapter on counterculture, I turn from the starry-eyed young woman, whose life barrels forward into ever-expanding pleasures, to the practically-minded cultural generation before her, who set the stage for her particular freedom. I examine *The Guild: Vork*, which answers the outsider’s inevitable question about gamers: how does an adult man sustain himself as a “full-time guild leader,” when that position appears to *cost* money to hold? The answer is by a savvy manipulation of the consumer landscape, and a simple, principled rejection of social norms that interfere with his access to pleasure. Vork’s careful attention to his budget and his love of rules and technicalities lead me back to another woman writer, this time from one from the cusp of counterculture, a generation older than Kominsky-Crumb. Helen Gurley Brown, author of the self-help book *Sex and the Single Girl*, shares Vork’s practical focus on how to organize one’s affairs in order to maximize her pleasure. In her case, that pleasure is derived from sex, rather than from gaming, but her social strategizing in order to get sex without becoming unpleasantly entangled in complex social systems shares much with Vork’s algorithms of social participation in the game. Whereas *Codex* and Kominsky-Crumb’s experiments are primarily aesthetic in nature, Vork and Brown’s are practical.

They accept the dehumanizing logic of the marketplace, so long as they can make it work for themselves. *The Guild*'s innovation is its insistence upon the juxtaposition of the two approaches, and its related insistence that they are complementary within the supportive social units that give one access to the full range of pleasures offered by the game – after all, it is Vork's commitment that unites the Knights of Good.

In my second chapter, I turn from counterculture to alternative culture, specifically, the alternative publishing cultures of the 1980s and 1990s. I begin with *The Guild: Tink*. As a character, Tink embodies the marginal social position and ambivalent personality that found its home in alternative culture, especially alternative comics and cinema. But because Tink's interest is in storytelling as much as it is in media experimentation, I connect her story to a work of literature, namely Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Lorde's brilliant 1982 genre-bending embodiment of the woman trickster figure reveals layers of socio-political insight that are reincarnated in Tink's sphere of contemplation.

Next, I read *The Guild: Bladezz* in conversation with Phoebe Gloeckner's *A Child's Life*, and discuss their shared experience of having been prematurely sexualized by a male parent figure. Both experience the manipulation of their burgeoning adolescent sexuality by adults, but both reveal an embodied intellectual resilience that will enable them to understand their experience as a result of the adults' limited, pornographic perceptions, rather than internalizing any shame. Gloeckner's controversial depictions of sexual abuse represent a major event in the history of alternative comics, uniting the sexual free-for-all of underground comics with the moral and legal concerns of the 1990s.

Finally, I turn to *The Guild: Clara*, and place her in conversation with Ariel Schrag, author of the 1990s autobiographical series, *The High School Chronicles of Ariel Schrag*. Schrag embodies the do-it-yourself ethos of the riot grrl movement, and Clara represents its suburban incarnation, in her love of her own scrapbooks. These scrapbooks, or “mimentos,” as she labels them, have, in the comic, begun to take over Clara’s family home, but Clara resists organizing them away into a sealed past. She needs the meaning of her family history to remain in flux, because she is unsatisfied by the script that demands her self-sacrifice in wife- and motherhood. Placed in conversation with one another, Clara and Schrag reveal a shared investment in testing the popular culture scripts of romance against their embodied, real-life experience, thus creating critical space for them to imagine what lies beyond them.

In my third chapter, I turn to the boutique publishing cultures of the twenty-first-century, exemplified by the journal *n+1* and the graphic novels of Alison Bechdel. I start by providing a transition from alternative literary culture to boutique bookstore culture, which was thematized in Bechdel’s own strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, as the fictional Madwimmen Books was gradually forced by Medusa.com to close its doors. Next, I look at the development of Bechdel’s career in the twenty-first-century, which spanned a full spectrum of achievement from alternative comics legend, to bestselling long-form graphic novelist, back to the status of producing minor literature, with her latest memoir, *Are You My Mother?* Alongside *Are You My Mother?*, which is a story of the author’s lifelong powerlessness against her critical mother’s aesthetic judgments, I read *The Guild: Zaboo*, which tells the story of how that character came to the decision to leave his mother’s house and pursue a life with Codex. Bechdel and Zaboo both articulate an

anxiety about their own arrested development, which is dually reinforced by their relationships with their respective mothers, and by their extreme reliance on communications technology. Both stories tell of a melancholic loss of origins; Bechdel, the lesbian cultural producer, laments that the category of woman does not really bond her to the woman she most wants to know, her own mother, because their cultural histories of women's progress look so different, and match up so differently with their own embodied experiences. Zabo finds that he cannot easily become the man that he thinks he's supposed to be, because he has spent most of his time with his mother, who has instilled heterosexuality as a value in him, but also worked to protect him from the dangers of white masculinity, and taught him traditionally feminine skills like cooking and providing emotional care.

Next, I turn to *n+1*, a journal or "small magazine" that was founded in 2004 as an attempt to revitalize the polemical discussions about critical theory that had once excited so much utopian desire in the founders, but seemed to dissipate when they left graduate school. Elif Batuman was one of the first female contributors, and, like Day in the world of gaming, for some years represented a primary access point to the world of the journal, for readers interested in women's perspectives on the contemporary critical landscape. Batuman is a Russian literature specialist with no particular interest in feminist history of women's studies, but her 2010 memoir, *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them*, reveals her kinship with the desires articulated by women's experimental autobiography since the 1960s. I then turn my focus to *The Guild's* Fawkes, the only character to be granted a comic from outside the Knights of Good. *The Guild: Fawkes* tells a story of disillusionment with his pursuit of philosophy

within academia, and his frustrations mesh nicely with those articulated by the *n+1* contributors, especially Batuman. Of course, he seeks satisfaction in the game rather than in a small magazine, but his grandiose desires are similar. I liken both Fawkes and the *n+1* contributors to literary “trolls,” that is, figures who test the limits of academic propriety purely to see what phenomena are marginalized by the unstated rules of the institution, particularly in the “growing up” required in order to advance within it.

In my conclusion, I think about global implications of the lifestyle represented by both the fictional characters in *The Guild* storyworld and the mostly middle-class authors of experimental autobiography who provide the insights that build my sedimented history. I look for a possible path forward in contemporary writers like Ruth Ozeki, who, in her novel *A Tale For the Time Being*, fuses a history of women’s memoir, a fiction inspired by the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, and the effects of climate change on the Pacific Northwest. Ozeki and other writers, including Ann Cvetkovich, ask questions about what role autobiographically-inflected writing can have in ethically depicting the setting for individual insights, including the privileges associated with place, historical time, and access to community and cultural representation.

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Chapter 1 - "The Afterlife of Counterculture in Women's Experimental Autobiography"

"I focus on the negative affects--the need, the aversion, and the longing--that characterize the relation between past and present. This decision to look on the dark side comes out of my sense that contemporary critics tend to describe the encounter with the past in idealizing terms. In particular, the models that these critics have used to describe queer cross-historical relations--friendship, love, desire, and community--seem strangely free of the wounds, the switchbacks, and the false starts that give these structures their specific appeal, their binding power." - Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards* (32)

"Like Delany's memoir, [*The Motion of Light in Water*], these histories have provided evidence for a world of alternative values of practices whose existence gives the lie to hegemonic constructions of social worlds, whether these constructions vaunt the political superiority of white men, the coherence and unity of selves, the naturalness of heterosexual monogamy, or the inevitability of

scientific progress and economic development.” - Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience” (398)

Felicia Day's *The Guild: Codex* comic opens with scenes from the daily life of Cyd Sherman. Her social isolation is clear from the first panel, in which she speaks to her webcam from a darkened room, the shade drawn in her only visible window. Any color in her face is washed out by the light of the screen, and her expression is fearful. In her dialogue, she jokes about her predicament. She has her sense of humor, but she might, like Robert Lowell in “Waking in the Blue,” wonder what use it is to her now that she is in a home for the mentally ill. It is a home of her own making. The main light could be switched on, the shade opened, but it is only the light of the screen that draws her in, and her only confidant, so far, is this webcam.

Cyd claims functional status on the grounds that she is employed as a musician, although she concedes her low status by admitting that she sits at the very back of the orchestra. She is also in a romantic relationship, albeit one dominated by her partner's ego, and his desire to “change the world” with his band's sound (2). Cyd reads, plays computer games, and takes naps in the afternoon, and somehow, she always ends up staring down her webcam late at night, asking questions into the void. Her question is not “what is the matrix?” but “can I be happy?” and the webcam has no response. Nor does her therapist, with whom she meets after an orchestra rehearsal. Cyd asks for the “quickest way out of this rut,” and her therapist offers pills, which Cyd accepts, but refuses to swallow, because she is afraid of the litany of side effects listed on the bottle

(5). Not yet ready to face the truth of her life as it is now, she rejects the pills that might balance her emotional state. There is no “red pill” solution available within her purview – she does not yet realize that she wants to know more about the social reality from which she has found herself isolated. She only knows that she feels a sense of longing for something more than bare-bones functionality.

Out shopping later that day, she is compelled to buy a new computer game. She selects the one with the cover image bearing a “stacked” female protagonist, who is slaying a dragon (8). The tagline on the game reads, “escape into a FANTASY,” and Cyd smiles, excited to do just that. That evening, she logs on. She creates an avatar for herself to play, names her Codex, and begins to explore. The first area she explores is a pastoral scene with snow-white mountains as the backdrop, a little girl riding a Pegasus, flying overhead, and a field of green grass and flowers at Codex’s feet (15). Wearing a long white dress, and carrying a staff, Codex sets off walking, towards giant Smurf-like mushrooms, pausing to admire the butterflies and squirrels. Codex feels at home here, comforted by the “realistic and cute” graphics, which ground her in a certain vision of the past. She loves both the realism of the nature imagery, in its detailed rendering, and its “cuteness,” which calls forth a larger popular culture archive of comic strips and animated cartoons presumably encountered in childhood.

The drug-like effect of popular culture she experiences here has become a trope in twenty-first-century storytelling. For example, in *Angel*, the companion series to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, an episode called “Smile Time” features a puppet demon, who extracts children’s innocence by paralyzing them in a smiling state in front of the television, while his show is on. *The Guild: Codex* explores this effect in the highly

sophisticated media landscape of the massively-multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), and attributes the smiles and other embodied feelings the game inspires to the awakening of a critical reading practice. This reading practice is no shortcut to insight, but it contains the potential to lead an attentive contemporary subject in that direction.

One precondition for such insight is full participation in the game,¹¹ which includes the creation of a social unit known as a guild. To that end, on the next page of the comic, Codex encounters other players. One of these characters is Bladezz, who will eventually join Codex's guild, playing with a friend. Codex's idyllic scene is transformed by their violence into an open field for action. Bladezz invites Codex to join his party and "kill everything in sight," and she happily agrees to do so (16). Cyd's longing has, by this point, been articulated in three different ways: she longs for a beautiful environment; she longs for a connection to her past, much of which, we can assume from her geeky hobbies, was dominated by popular culture; and finally, she longs to be included in a social scene in which she can understand how to participate. From this point forward, every aspect of the game seems to meet one or more of her previously-unarticulated desires directly. Cyd exclaims to the reader, "And for killing stuff you get rewards, like *clothing!* Whose idea *was* that?! *Genius!*" (17). As a complement to the cathartic virtual violence, she finds the familiar and feminine pleasure of dressing up and experimenting with fashion.

¹¹ The general term for full participation in media fandom is "FIAWOL" or fandom is a way of life. In gaming, the more common term for active participants is "hardcore," but FIAWOL is just as appropriate in the context of *The Guild*, because the series examines complex, long-arc emotional investment as much as hours logged.

At this point, Cyd has begun to realize that she prefers Codex's life to her own, and so she immerses herself in it. She is happy to be guided by other players' superior experience and skill level, and so she agrees to play with anyone who asks. While in-person socialization has come to make Cyd anxious, through Codex, she is able to be completely open to virtual sociality. Everyone she meets seems welcoming, and they all seem to appreciate having found a new friend with whom to pursue their in-game tasks. The world promised by the cover image of this game, of the beautiful, powerful woman living a fantasy life, is delivered in these first few forays, and Cyd is hooked. From this point forward, in the chronology of *The Guild* storyworld, she adopts the name Codex in as many circumstances as possible, excepting only her increasingly rare attempts to speak with non-gamers.

The game will kill her delusions of functionality by the end of the comic – her relationship ends, and she is fired from her job. But her creative pursuits are just beginning, and they are made possible by the fact that she now inhabits a world and a social subculture that makes sense to her. In Codex, she can see herself beyond the insecure fears she has internalized over the course of her bad relationship and stalled career. And in the other players of the game, she will find both her friends and her audience, the people who are moved by her insights about the world they love. This was author Felicia Day's story of gaming addiction. She had a stalled career as an actress, and a desire to live in a different world. At first, she found that world in the *World of Warcraft*, where she made friends and found daily catharsis. However, as the addiction progressed, she found herself craving a balanced life again, in which she was a more active participant in the greater world. And so, she created *The Guild*, first and foremost

to delight fellow gamers with a story about characters they could recognize, unlike the geeky caricatures that occupied mainstream television storytelling at the time.

But the series also connected with others, including people who were not gamers, but had devoted months and years of their lives to reading and writing fan fiction, or even simply to participating actively in Internet forums about beauty or politics. Day's careful depiction of her autobiographical experience in *Codex* seemed to reveal some more general longing for new forms of social connection that seemed to be possible in the Internet. *The Guild* was at home in its Web series form online, and viewers could watch a five- or six-minute episode in between living their virtual lives, between checking their social networking pages and completing tasks, whether schoolwork, forum participation, or in-game raids.

In the comic, Day explores the preconditions for this storyworld. She depicts Cyd "waking in the blue," and then entering into a fantasy landscape in which aesthetic experimentation and a revolving door of new friends from all different walks of life seem to offer a way out. In the Web series, she depicts *Codex* as the central character in a serial narrative about friendship. This transmedial relationship between the comics and the series replays a literary-historical stage in which the confessional, exemplified here by Lowell's 1959 *Life Studies*, turned to the countercultural, exemplified here by the visual reference to the Smurf colony in the game. That is, while confessional poetry brought an earlier form of virtual companionship to some people with depression and other mental illnesses, counterculture brought a broader social solution to complexly conceived individual alienation. While Cyd may not have asked about the matrix in her first conversations with her webcam, the solution she finds to her loneliness will

gradually introduce her to its workings, as well as providing her with new forms of pleasure, both intersubjective and solitary.

As Codex, Cyd is constantly faced with new stimulation, whether general visual scenes, in the vast environment of the in-game landscape, or objects she can personally acquire for her avatar's use, like clothing, armor, and tools. The game could be critiqued as simply a twenty-four hour mall, bolstered by social pressure to buy as much as possible, keeping players engaged via the pseudoactivity of in-game action. Indeed, considering the monthly subscription fee required to play many massively-multiplayer online role-playing games, the criticism would be fair. But it is also reductive, and representative of a longstanding feature of youth-oriented subcultures, that participants are critiqued by dominant culture experts for their acquiescence to consumerism, as if their failure to defeat capitalism singlehandedly wholly undermined the utopian desires revealed to them by the emerging cultural landscape they inhabit so creatively.

Certainly, this critique dates back to debates held during counterculture about the value of social experiments in artistic collaboration, communal living, and free love. The Marxist critic Thomas Frank writes in *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, that

...Counterculture may be more accurately understood as a stage in the development of the values of the American middle class, a colorful installment in the twentieth century drama of consumer subjectivity. This is not, of course, a novel interpretation: in the 1960s and 1970s it was a frequent complaint among writers who insisted that the counterculture was apolitical and self-indulgent, or, when it

did spill over into obviously political manifestations, confused and anarchistic.

(11)

Frank's argument throughout *The Conquest of Cool* is that "coolness" itself was a concept manufactured by the advertising industry, and that, rather than looking for its authentic origins, whether in beat poetry, or the blues, or, in my context, in the utopian underworld of female pleasure, we ought to look to business culture's false creation of our endless desire for pseudo-differentiated products. Frank's argument is important because of its totalizing implications for the pleasures enabled by counterculture's embrace of difference, but, because it focuses on the myths of counterculture, rather than individual experiences of it, it fails to silence the history I seek here, of women's experimentally-articulated longing.

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, Allan Bloom proposes that there was, previous to counterculture, meaningful activity to be found in American life, and the source of that meaning was to be found in formal education, rather than popular culture. However, as the counterculture grew, and influenced its participants to let go of old ideas and established authorities, the discrete artistic spheres that had previously welcomed subjects into the contemplative life were muddled beyond repair. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, he writes,

The improved education of the vastly expanded middle class in the last half-century has also weakened the family's authority. Almost everyone in the middle class has a college degree, and most have an advanced degree of some kind....But -- inevitably but -- the impression that our general populace is better educated depends on an ambiguity in the meaning of the word education...When a

youngster like Lincoln sought to educate himself, the immediately available obvious things for him to learn were the Bible, Shakespeare and Euclid. Was he really worse off than those who try to find their way through the technical smorgasbord of the current school system, with its utter inability to distinguish between important and unimportant in any way other than by the demands of the market? (5)

In other words, as access to education became more widespread, higher education itself diluted and confused its constitutive elements, thus shrinking the access its participants had to the genuinely liberatory sphere of contemplation. This argument can be countered conceptually, I argue, by a subtle shift in the way one understands history. No one has a more damning assessment of the unconscionable superfluities of mid-century American popular culture than Adorno, certainly not Bloom, but in the unrelenting negative force of his thought, Adorno locates a way out of this fear-based analysis. His ethics of embodied thinking requires the critic to cling to his tightly-held belief in the genuine, if ephemeral happiness still available to the thinker, even in an institutional and cultural environment that discourages contemplation. Bloom and Frank's totalizing historical arguments are both further challenged, by example, in my genealogy of women writers engaged in autobiographical experiments across media, beginning with Day, and then looking backwards to earlier incarnations of the utopian spirit she represents.

While totalizing histories eliminate the ephemera that enable us to humanize the stories we are told, some general terms and statements are helpful in situating the encounters I stage between cultural producers, and between cultural producers and cultural theorists, in this chapter. For example, it is worth being specific about the class

dynamics that determine which subjects are in a position to experience the trends of dominant culture most acutely. In the popular understanding of the term, “middle class” applies both to Day’s demographic origins and the expansive social phenomenon that is the central focus of both Frank and Bloom, when they look back to the subjects that came to participate in and embody counterculture. Bloom’s focus is the simultaneous expansion of higher education and the middle class in mid-century America. Frank looks to the homogenization of that expanded class by way of the rapid spread of popular culture, accelerated by technologies and aesthetics of advertising, which were designed to offer ever-increasing pseudo-varieties of essentially interchangeable products.

Day’s self-representation in *Cyd* is marked as middle-class by her mention of parental support (her father pays her therapy bills) on the one hand, and her fear of poor neighborhoods on the other. However, her full membership in middle-class society is in some jeopardy at the beginning of the series, given the coming precarity¹² of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, and so her perceptions of her own privilege are marked by generationally-specific features of middle-class life on a trajectory of downward mobility. One such feature is her significant debt, and the other is her justifiable fear of long-term unemployment.

And so, Day shares her “middle-class” status with her predecessors from counterculture, which is important to understand, as it represents a stable category that

¹² I borrow this term from Lauren Berlant, who coined the term “cruel optimism” to describe “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too possible*, and toxic” (94). She focuses on how, for example, an economic downturn can affect a person’s perception well before they can articulate what exactly they fear will be taken away from them.

implies certain undeniable privileges, including, crucially, the privilege of leisure time, and the access, during leisure time, to consumption in the public sphere. Day's whiteness amplifies this sense of access and freedom, and this perception is enhanced when her writing is juxtaposed with Helen Gurley Brown's writings from 1962, still three years before the end of the Jim Crow Era. The high-tech leisure time Day enjoyed during her privileged childhood is simply not as freely available to women of color or working class women; therefore, their critical consumption of popular culture takes different forms. The hope expressed in *The Guild* comics is that subjects from any social location can locate the diverse and dynamic origins of the pleasures and freedoms they seek, practicing embodied thinking that propels genuine insight.

In his book, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, Fred Turner looks back to the counterculture of the 1960s as the spirit underlying the "free-wheeling, interdisciplinary" humanities in the twenty-first century (Turner 4). Some of this spirit has to do with forces of the market that have an interest in the simple expansion of the sphere of consumption, and incorporate any product that might excite consumer desire among participants in higher education. Another aspect of it is thoroughly utopian, and has to do with the incommensurability of object-based focus in academic disciplines, like the distinction between literary studies and film studies, and the desire to encounter the insights available to the contemporary subject, given the sedimented history of contemporary artworks in any medium.

Women writers of autobiography during the counterculture era represent a third approach to its history. While Frank undermined the era's collective claims to

originality, and Bloom condemned its collective educational agenda, individual writers found a path to insight that relied neither on absolute originality, nor on the approval of educational institutions. These women sought interdisciplinary, sedimented insight in a way that shares a spirit, but certainly not a particular social politics, with Adorno. In particular, they share his attention to technology and media change, and how these intersect with, and alternately accelerate and hinder social change. This third approach prioritizes the sustained articulation of women's individual experiences over any “objective” assessment of their contribution to a preconceived narrative of history. As Adorno says of works of art in *Aesthetic Theory*, “They are the self-unconscious historiography of their epoch,” that is, revealing an always-evolving process of their own contextual interpretation (183). One might think that the very act of autobiographical writing presumes historical importance on the part of the writer, but for women writers, autobiography serves rather to refract history, shedding light on what is trivialized in its first pass at a narrative.

Section I: Feminism and the Sedimented History of Women’s Experimental Autobiography

Autobiography is an especially important tactic for women cultural producers, because it offers a complete reversal of woman's expected social role pre-counterculture, and, for most people, into and beyond counterculture, too. As Jill Johnston says of women in her 1973 book, *Lesbian Nation*,

A commitment to ourselves as women could only be partially or furtively realized. A woman committed to herself and I mean by that woman as combined image of mother daughter and sister was absolutely at odds with society which

has been in the modern Western world organized around the principle of heterosexuality which in effect means the prime commitment of woman to man who is committed to himself. (Johnston 90)

Johnston makes clear that, even at the stage of internal inquiry, autobiographical thinking represents a step away from convention, and toward evolving consciousness.

Once this evolving consciousness has been realized in an autobiographical work, the reader who encounters it will need a new interpretive practice, one which translates Johnston's insight into that sphere. When reading women's autobiography, the reader does well to foreground the insights of the text as they depict and invite new relations between women. The primary relation articulated by writers I discuss in this chapter foreground the relationship between women's selves and their avatars, whether this avatar is a virtual character in a digital landscape, a comic book character designed to represent a woman's embodied responses to the world around her, or an idealized sexual self, self-designed by its author in the interests of social success. These projects are vastly different in their politics and aesthetics, but what they share is that core commitment of woman to her own life and mind. Following the internal logic of Johnston's lesbian feminism, I deduce that those at the experimental forefront of women's autobiography ought to be read principally in conversation with one another, rather than in conversation with their male contemporaries, even though their own writings often addressed these men by necessity. If we begin with the assumption that there is something particularly compelling about a woman and her avatar, then we gain access to the particular "switchbacks" and "false starts" of women's social progress described by Love in *Feeling Backwards*. These moments of tension live on in the contemporary

legacy of counterculture, because they disallow nostalgia for an imagined time of social harmony, and force us to recognize the vastness of our utopian desires.

Indeed, when I say that the writers I examine here are “at the experimental forefront of women's autobiography,” I do not mean that they are particularly politically progressive. In fact, none of the works I describe in this first chapter qualify as such, and their mixed reception by the public and especially feminists is of significant interest to me. These writers have political commitments, but they are individually selected and based on their particular experiences and conceptual investments, rather than aligning with any single, nameable agenda. Self-fashioning takes primacy over acquiescence to any single ideology. What I mean by the experimental forefront has to do with these writers' ability to articulate their personal experiences in unconventional media, for example, the once-niche medium of the self-help book, underground comics, and, in the contemporary world, the Web series.¹³

When they do this, they invite women readers to locate themselves within the complex media languages that surround them, whether by design or by choice. Thus, women find themselves in a position to access ideas that would once have been beyond their scope. As an example from my own life, by the time *The Guild* was airing, I had

¹³ Kathleen Martindale warns of the tendency in queer theory for scholars to “refuse to cite” lesbian theory in favor of theories centered on male homosexuality (47). Martindale catalogs “four popular ways of ignoring or failing to cite, in the sense of using, lesbian theorizing: define it as empiricist; define it as a reactive polemic; define it as essentialist and homophobic; and most creatively, define it as “formally innovative writing” rather than theory proper” (50). By incorporating sedimented media history into my definition of experimental, I hope that my term, women’s experimental autobiography, will function as a call to a vigorous inter-generational lesbian citation practice, as opposed to another incarnation of the vaguely positive term, “formally innovative writing.”

long since abandoned online gaming in favor of online media fandom. I had found a community of young, brilliant feminists in television fandom, and I was more interested in interacting with them than I was in exploring every new expansion of the most popular game of the day. However, when I first saw a few episodes of *The Guild*, I was flooded not only with memories of my own time spent gaming, but also with unrealized desires I lost when I quit, many, but not all of which I had unwittingly carried over to my new set of Internet friends. Because *The Guild* was a Web series, and I had been devoting my time to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fandom, I found myself in a perfect position to mine this new transmedia storyworld for everything it had to offer me, from its refraction of the recent history of digital subcultures, to its inspiration from an archive of women writers.

The women writers I examine are uniquely well positioned to provide pieces of the historiography of counterculture because the very existence and distribution of their work relied on countercultural tactics. All of them, as women, had to counter the assumption that they could not enter certain cultural spheres simply by presenting an outspoken first-person account of their living presence within them. Counterculture-cusp autobiographer Helen Gurley Brown's major achievement was the simple articulation of her counterintuitive reality as a full participant in the dynamic heterosexual marketplace, not merely a product available to the first man who would have her. Her *Sex and the Single Girl* offers heterosexual women strategies for maximizing their enjoyment of their sex lives, while always prioritizing their own personal independence and success. A decade after Brown published her bestseller, Aline Kominsky-Crumb made a name for herself within *Wimmen's Comix*, a publication which rejected not only the male-

dominated mainstream comics establishment, but also to the male-dominated underground comix establishment, which, while inspiringly innovative in its own refusal of the rules of mainstream comics, had retained the sexist tendencies of the dominant culture to prioritize men's experiences and voices. Kominsky-Crumb offered women a *mini-künstlerroman* of the life she'd embarked on within the counterculture, and told of how it had released her from the confining expectations of mainstream, suburban heterosexual norms.

Brown and Kominsky-Crumb documented their presence in the world, and, in the process of doing so, presented their readers with a map of the culture as it had appeared to them, by way of the individuated passageway through it that enabled them to experience what they had sought. In both counterculture and dominant culture, the individual pathway represents one possibility of opening up critical space, and thus a turn to historiography, rather than history, that is, to those forces, which have shaped one's interpretation of her life, rather than those forces that have shaped newsworthy events she may individually have witnessed.

The complex media landscape that emerged during counterculture, both above- and underground, forced women writers in search of an audience to showcase their mastery of the languages of the dominant culture, as well as the counterculture. Somewhere in the space between these two languages, they were to find pockets in which to articulate experiences that are purely their own. This kind of navigation between media languages is also a requirement for participation in the complex twenty-first-century media landscape. For Day, the languages she must incorporate include the contemporary advertising-related language of "cool consumption," the often-sexist tropes

of mainstream comedy, and tech-insider speak, which intersects with both business culture and academic media studies. For Aline Kominsky-Crumb, these languages include the language of gender and social conformity in the suburbs, the visual language of advertising, and the sexist, and sometimes pornographic language of underground comix. As these writers produce hybrids of these languages in their own voices, a map of their experience of recent cultural history emerges. Facing this map, the reader is invited into a critical position, in which she can start to recognize the intersecting languages and media that form her own world, and begin to develop an idea of how she might respond to these in ways that suit her purposes.

An art exhibition I had the privilege of visiting this past fall serves as a fine parallel for this experience of encountering an individual's map of a culture. The monumental encounter I wish to depict here between the reader and *The Guild* storyworld, or an ambitious, multi-media graphic memoir like Aline Kominsky-Crumb's *Need More Love*, benefits from the more familiar multi-media curation of a life's work in the context of the museum. The Fernand Léger exhibition, which, showed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, took on an interdisciplinary approach to showcase the work of the man who "played a leading role in redefining the practice of painting by bringing it into active engagement with the urban environment and modern mass media" (Vallye 1). Taking Léger's 1919 painting, *The City*, as its centerpiece, the exhibition showed more than 120 works of art, which together revealed the "varied strategies through which artists and designers of the European avant-garde, with Léger in the lead, sought to participate in the complexity and excitement of the metropolis" (Vallye 1). These works transformed the white walls and open spaces of the museum by installing films, including

the experimental classic *Ballet Mécanique*, played on a loop; dioramas representing stage productions; architectural models, and sculptural explosions of color in every visual medium. Of *The City*, John B. Ravenal says:

Fernand Léger has been aptly called the preeminent painter of the modern city. He developed his brightly colored, machine-inspired style at a time when cities, including his native Paris, were taking shape as the dynamic complexes of sensation we experience today. *The City* is Léger's master statement celebrating the vitality of modern urban life. In it he has synthesized identifiable facts of the city's appearance--billboards, apartment buildings, scaffolding, billowing smoke, and a telephone pole--with irregular abstract shapes in vivid hues. (315)

To conceptualize the 1920s from our contemporary standpoint, the art lover can easily immerse herself in this experience of walking through the exhibition, perhaps precisely because the conventions of the museum, such as descriptive placards and the constant presence of security surveillance, prescribes a contained interaction with the works on display.

Women readers are accustomed to life in a “dynamic complex of sensation,” and can take pleasure in its artful reorganization, intended for our critical eyes. When we read *The Guild* comics, our eyes move from panel to panel, from framed work to framed work, sometimes jumping ahead to an image we find particularly compelling, but usually led as much by the text's own logic as by our desires as they are excited by its contents. But in *The Guild* comics, we have lost the original “other” posited by a modernist work like *The City*, whether we conceptualize that other as the country or the slower life. In *The Guild*, there is the hyper-stimulating reality of the outside world, the well-ordered, if

hyper-stimulating virtual reality of the game, and then the “other” of the darkened apartment. From that darkened apartment, our senses become maximally receptive to the digital media landscape we encounter, and it is from that position alone that we can encounter curated art from past generations of masters.

I raise this connection to European modernism in part because Adorno is often accused of privileging European modernism over the contemporary popular culture he encountered, but this represents a misunderstanding of his methodology of sedimented history (Caputi 156). Adorno’s focus is never on creating a hierarchy of which works of art best represent any given aspect of the human experience. Rather, his focus is on articulating the process by which a work of art can, in a particular constellation of historical forces and individual desire, reveal its truth content. And so, the experience I had in the Léger exhibition is not one of “truly encountering modernist aesthetics,” but rather one of seeing my own evolving thoughts about the contemporary transmedia storytelling landscape paralleled by a curator’s contemporary interpretation of a modernist artist. This argument connects the feminized consumer of contemporary culture to the relics of modern art, in a way that reveals one mode of articulating the truth of inhabiting a media-saturated landscape in the present. I cannot encounter modernism authentically, but I can turn to its legacy to understand my critical questions in the present. The same phenomenon holds for the counterculture; I cannot transport myself into the world that made it possible, but I can locate where its residue remains in contemporary thought, and forge inter-generational connections between creative women.

The reading experiences enabled by the museum provide a physical metaphor for sedimented history. The transmedia storyworld of *The Guild* transforms their

conventions into digital space. As in the Léger exhibit, we can have the embodied experience of walking through a media-saturated landscape that is not strictly our own – in its fictionalization, it becomes an object for critique. In *Need More Love*, we can also have a physical experience of reading through much of its author’s life’s work, curated for a reader trained in the conventions of prose memoir. In that book, Kominsky-Crumb’s comics and paintings are placed in chronological order based not on when she created them, but on when the experiences she depicts occurred. Thus, family photographs from the 1940s are juxtaposed with her representations of her earliest memories. Party photographs from the height of the underground comix movement invite us into the comics written in the haze following them. This approach asks for the reader’s flexibility in traversing multiple media, but offers the stability of periodization, that we might recognize the *künstlerroman* narrative contained in the book.

Paintings and print comics have a historical process written into them, even when we are looking at reproductions. The materials used, the years worked, the locations depicted, have real-world referents, which can be catalogued. But how does one manage something as vast as “time spent online,” if that is the subject we wish to see reflected and refracted in a work of art? So much of what happens in that space is ephemeral, and prone to disappear.¹⁴ Day accomplishes this task in two ways. Firstly, she selects a

¹⁴ Alexis Lothian describes the trouble with archiving digital phenomena in her article, “An Archive of One’s Own: Subcultural Creativity and the Politics of Conservation.” She says, “Sometimes ephemeral digital interactions do cultural work as important as that which can more easily be archived for the future. In ‘Ephemera as Evidence,’ José Muñoz describes the unquantifiable aftereffects of performances and experiences as ‘traces, glimmers, residues and specks’ that ‘maintain...experiential politics and urgencies long after those experiences have been lived (Muñoz 1996, 10).’ No matter how rooted in cultural communality, an archive framed as a deposit library cannot

single MMORPG as her focus in *The Guild*. This digital neighborhood, occupied by members of an identifiable subculture, provides structure for the virtual portions of *The Guild*'s storytelling. Secondly, she focuses on a group of gamers who are more committed to the game than they are to any other aspect of their lives, and so, all she really needs to depict from real life are bedrooms with computer monitors, and some evidence of biological sustenance and income.

She repeatedly inserts into her dialogue self-aware jokes about her characters' inability to tolerate embodied feelings. For example, in the sixth season, Tink describes "something freaky going on in her chest area," to which Zaboo responds, "Tink, those are feelings." Kominsky-Crumb's expressionistic aesthetics focused intensely on feelings, and both she and Brown were driven by immense sexual desire. The Knights of Good live in a different context, one in which sexual desire plays a smaller role than the baseline desire for embodied existence, and this transition is worth untangling in order to reveal what is shared between the generations of women writers I encounter.

One of the most straightforward myths about the counterculture era was that it awakened sexual desire in subjects, especially women, who had previously repressed it. In this myth, the overnight sensation of this awakening led to an outpouring of activity and thought, which had been trapped in the collective unconscious for many generations, and needed to be released in the interests of collective cultural catharsis. This myth relies on the assumption that sexual desire is universal, and that the satisfaction of sexual desire is inherently linked to progressive social politics. However, this myth is easy to counter

account for the traces, glimmers, and residues that give the experience of subcultural participation its meanings and its feelings" (3.1).

by simply looking at the social history of social movements organized to unleash sexual desire, which, being composed of individuals with particular desires, only some of which are actually sexual in nature, have a tendency to reinscribe sexual norms that erase some members' experiences. Thus, in Kominsky-Crumb's memories of the feminist spirit underlying the creation of the Wimmen's Comix Collective, for example, she articulates a discomfort with the connections feminists like Trina Robbins drew between sexual and artistic practice. The ability to perceive one's own life as sexually satisfying is as complex as the ability to perceive one's longed-for independence of thought, and thus, neither of these phenomena can be articulated in isolation from the other, or in collective terms.

This kind of ambivalence about collective narratives progress has become common in academic approaches to cultural movements grounded in identity politics, especially in queer studies. From that standpoint, scholars do not wish to replicate Bloom's snobbery or retro assumption that the diversity of the classics (showcasing Greeks, Romans, and Englishmen) was more cognitively stimulating than the diversity promoted by radicals in the 1960s. Rather, queer cultural historians like Love and José Esteban Muñoz focus intentionally on the failures of queer cultural progress in order to get closer to manifestations of queer experience in all its complexities, rather than becoming mired in particular images of the "big moments" of progressive movements, which must always be re-envisioned as the object of queer social solidarity expands and contracts (Muñoz 43).

The fact that these movements' big moments were passed down as slogans and photographs, which are by their nature partial, or hypocritical, or oppressive in

themselves, is a starting point for the work of cultural historians, rather than a call to return to a past before any missteps were taken. Feminist critics like Joan Scott have further proposed that we should not only go deeper into the microhistories surrounding the movements that defined the counterculture, but that we should specifically value those who wrote about them on their own terms, in various autobiographical forms, thus insisting upon a new mode of historical evidence, still unavailable to those who insist on totalizing narratives of history: experience as evidence. Feminist and queer critics have heeded this mandate. I see the critical significance of autobiographical writing as a value descended from the identity politics of counterculture. Such politics called for new voices to be heard within our narratives of cultural creation and progress, and this has happened in an uneven two-part process, firstly, in the broad experimentations undergone by women writers of autobiography since the 1960s, and secondly, in the critical reassessment of these writers' contributions, currently being undertaken by a diverse group of scholars in a variety of subfields of literary study.

Taking my cues from these scholars, in this chapter, I will focus on one central issue from the counterculture of the 1960s, namely, the feminist reimagining of desire, inclusive not only of sexual desire, but also of the realization of desire in the sphere of the aesthetic. When it is realized in that sphere, including in representations of intimate relationships, it is mediated in ways that contribute to my interdisciplinary sedimented history.¹⁵ I focus on mediated female desire because it represents an intersection of important questions about the legacy of counterculture and the most generative way to

¹⁵ Of course, even when it is “only” mediated by reproductive technologies, including the birth control pill, its mediation is still historically significant.

read women's accounts of their experiences of it. Desire without mediation is an expansive concept that risks repeating the mistakes of overgeneralization made by the middle class feminists of the 1960s and 1970s. Women's desire remains at risk of being simultaneously discounted and manipulated by individuals, and, on a larger scale by marketers, who have an interest in increasing the amount of unmet desires women feel they have, but never in actually meeting any of these. Mediated desire is a phenomenon that contemporary autobiography can articulate, in its careful juxtaposition of moments that excite desire with moments that excite the emerging consciousness of the autobiographical subject.

Feminists have long expressed concern about bad mediations of desire, that is, large-scale or abusive manipulations. These concerns are often based on the pornography industry, the sexualization of youth culture, and the apparent simplicity of minds struggling to develop in contemporary culture. To counter these fear-based claims, I strive to locate sustained articulations of critical self-awareness and surprising realizations of desire in contemporary women writers and their antecedents. In my examination of these twenty-first-century texts, I look for tactics of self-fashioning that linger from 1960s counterculture, and for more recent innovations, grounded in recent technological changes, that respond in new ways to longstanding questions about female desire. All the works I discuss in this project share the autobiographical insistence on the complex existence of female desire, but they differ in their approaches to mediation, evidenced by the aforementioned representation of multiple languages and materials, ranging from those clearly not their own, like the visual language of mainstream pornography, and some incontrovertibly their own, such as the particular regional dialects

spoken by the authors' families. Adrienne Rich described her personal encounter with this phenomenon in 1971, based on an excerpt from her private notebooks:

Paralyzed by the sense that there exists a mesh of relationships -- e.g. between my anger at the children, my sensual life, pacifism, sex...an interconnectedness which, if I could see it, make it valid, would give me back to myself, make it possible to function lucidly and passionately.

Yet I grope in and out among these dark webs. (24)

It is not omniscience that results from women writers' ability to combine languages, but rather a precise countering of the assumption of women's passivity with evidence of their active interpretive ability. As they lay bare the sheer variety of inputs to which they are expected to respond, as they shift between dominant culture and subculture, and between feminist meetings and day-to-day married life, they must build for themselves a sense of coherence across these spheres.

This sense of coherence can only be arrived at by developing a vast and flexible set of reading practices, which are set up first as a critical apparatus, to counter incomplete or toxic logics, and secondly as a generative apparatus, as a way to establish one's individual voice within an open-ended medium, which exposes one woman's "dark web" to another, her reader. Open-ended media are represented in this chapter by graphic autobiography, which fuses the verbal and the visual within one creator's hand and prose memoir, which fuses memory and reflection within one creator's style. I argue that the reader of memoir prioritizes the creative coherence that can be found within those media of self-fashioning, and, in the process of seeing one woman's complexity articulated, can begin to see the strongest of her own memories as belonging to a coherent series, too, one

unlike that suggested by a résumé of demographic categories and celebrated achievements.

Some feminist critics in the 1970s suggested that we must fully remove ego from literature by disconnecting the author-genius figure from the work at hand, and also by turning our focus away from objective measures of audience, like the number of copies sold. Referring to the status of art after women's liberation is realized, Germaine Greer said at the Town Bloody Hall Debate in 1979:

You see, I strongly suspect that when this revolution takes place, art will no longer be distinguished by its rarity, or its expense, or its inaccessibility, or the extraordinary way in which it is marketed, it will be the prerogative of all of us and we will do it as those artists did whom Freud understood not at all, the artists who made the Cathedral of Chartres or the mosaics of Byzantine, the artist who had no ego and no name. (Greer 5)

This sentiment calls for work on the part of readers and interpreters as much as it calls on women who wish to be artists themselves, to be open to participating in the new cultural landscape as Greer envisions it. While members of the male-dominated literary establishment, for example, Norman Mailer, to whom Greer expressed the above sentiment, countered her hopefulness by accusing her of political naïveté (“diaper Marxism”), women writers found hope in the idea that their small works, cobbled together from disorganized notebooks and records, compiled on borrowed time, could find a place within a future version of cultural history (Greer 5).

While critics accustomed to the conventions of the male-dominated literary establishment may have wished to find beauty, satisfaction, and teleological narratives in

women's writing, even when it is explicitly and primarily autobiographical, instead they found in women's autobiographies from counterculture guides to ephemeral subcultural belonging, maps of overloaded mind states without any indication of a forward trajectory, and a masochistic depiction of the harshest possible critiques of their work, without any sustained attempt to correct misunderstandings or adjust the terms of the debate. Some writers, like Town Bloody Hall participant Jill Johnston, even went so far as to concede that they are “crazy”:

Going crazy has always been a personal solution in extremis to the unarticulated conflicts of political realities, a way of transcending these conflicts by going into orbit and settling the world to some terribly private yet collective and archetypal satisfaction through the imaginative construction of interrelated unified systems. I had indeed become a dreamer awake. I slept deeply and dreamlessly and woke each day to spin out my symbols and associations of names, numbers and concepts in vast constantly changing webs of multiplying interdependencies and frightening cancellations. The many and the one. I could talk myself outward in circular expanding ripples that included everything and then back again by cancellation to the void in the center. My terminology was a mix and jumble of whatever I had stored in my head from all the disciplines I knew and when I met somebody with an unfamiliar discipline like say diamond cutting or watch mechanisms I would press the secrets of their crafts out of them plying them with questions until I felt satisfied that one more discipline was subject to the great immutable laws of related unified systems. (84)

While critics seeking formal acquiescence may have wished for women's writing to be comprehensively constrained by space, time, and what others allowed them to do, experimental women's autobiography consistently presses against all of these constraints, stretching space, reorganizing time, and articulating the author's social role(s) as significant by virtue of having happened and been remembered authentically and artfully.

Misogynistic critiques like Mailer's acquire a certain venom when women make pronouncements about reimagining the sphere of literature itself, because such critics know that, as long as they control the terms of that sphere, most of what women write will be subordinated to minor sociological interest rather than a challenge to what "major" writers are saying. Ultimately, this approach reduces the time and attention members of the literary establishment need to devote to most of the experimental writing being produced by women, because literary specialists read items of sociological interest more shallowly than items of aesthetic interest. Without a deeply engaged reading practice, seeking to marvel at the authors' articulation of their intersecting social worlds, even the most complex works of women's autobiography are doomed to minor status.

This phenomenon occurs not only in the translation from a masculine form (Franklinian autobiography, for example) to a feminine one (the less robust-sounding memoir) when new media experimentation is introduced, especially when there is a visual element, for example, in graphic memoir or film. I argue that this is so because technological innovation is so often thought of as masculine, and because, in the context of publishing, although there have long been many women prose writers, the forms in which women wrote have been consistently subordinated to male dominated forms -- see for example the status of romance novels as compared to detective fiction (Radway 13).

When the form stretches the constraints of the book itself, by incorporating the visual as a primary language, as in comics, the field (in this case, underground comix) becomes even more male-dominated, because snobbery about feminized genres of storytelling overlaps with snobbery about women's artistic abilities. Painting and film, too, are fields dominated mostly by men, although they rely heavily on women as audiences. Add to the aforementioned anxiety about women, media experimentation and visuality the masculinity acquired by figures like Mailer in their own status as major countercultural producers, and it becomes easy to see why they were so reluctant to respond seriously to the deeper claims of women-authored experiments in cultural production.

At the same time, there have long been talented women in every field of cultural production, and one of my core tasks in this project is to demonstrate that the misogynistic critical apparatus fails to serve its role of keeping these women out of the archives of innovation, and instead, their works must not only be incorporated into that archive as evidence that they were always present. Rather than insisting on their presence according to the masculinist model, however, with its fetishization of individual achievements, I prefer to heed women's own desires for a model of expansion of the field of art to include new articulations of increasingly intertwined languages of experience. In this way, women writers' own concept of the purpose of aesthetic innovation must work on the teleological masculine aspect of that concept in order to provide a framework in which we can understand the gendered challenges facing the contemporary worlds of art and publishing, as well as the adjacent critical conversations that make art and literature matter.

Section II: Aline Kominsky-Crumb, and the Documentation of Life Inside, Outside, and After Counterculture

As an example of a woman with a fully-articulated artistic and critical vision, grounded in her experiences at the center of 1960s counterculture, I turn to Aline Kominsky-Crumb, whose 2007 graphic memoir *Need More Love* is a model of experimental women's autobiography, both in the sense that it is experimental in terms of medium, and in the sense that it requires a reader willing to foreground the author's desire, rather than to search for information or evidence of any pre-existing assumptions about the time periods or individuals depicted within the book. I turn to Kominsky-Crumb because her *künstlerroman* generates many of the same possibilities for the reader as those generated by *The Guild: Codex*, but here, it does so providing a physical object that contains its author's interdisciplinary and multi-media story. Reading *Need More Love*, one gets the same sense of sifting through the layers of history as one does, of sifting through the layers of Internet culture in *The Guild*. But I begin with the history, because it represents its own longing. The afterlife of counterculture is one of longing for itself, for its own unrealized desires, and, in order to understand *Codex's* longing for counterculture, we must first understand how unrealizable desires were theorized from within the counterculture.

Kominsky-Crumb presents herself throughout *Need More Love* as a woman full of desire, who found the best language to express that desire within 1960s counterculture, especially in the comics medium, which led her to the forefront of innovation in the autobiographical comics of the underground. She cements her insider status within hippy culture by describing acid trips and other recognizable origin stories of her

countercultural belonging and success, and the story she tells moves gradually across time and space from the suburbs, to acid trips on the Lower East Side, to Peyote-fueled paintings of the desert, to new suburbs of post-counterculture California. In these new suburbs, she feels that the emergence of monoculture in the United States in the 1980s is closing off avenues to the regular expression and experience of her fullest desires, and so she moves to the South of France, where she and her husband can teach their daughter about the good life without the destructive influences of omnipresent crass consumerism and its concomitant rigidified approach to gender norms. Counterculture still lives in the world after its heyday, in Kominsky-Crumb's mind, but to live a life according to its principles requires some degree of nomadism, which became clear to her as U.S. culture started to become so aggressive in filling each individual life with the same bland popular culture. For her, that moment came in the form of a shift in media consumption practices, especially the rise of consumer electronics like compact disc players, and the invention of MTV. In this media landscape, American popular culture began to fulfill Theodor Adorno's nightmare that, without free time for open-ended thought and critical inquiry, people's perspectives would become entirely functions of their social roles. Mailer already thought that women were victims of this phenomenon in the 1970s, but, as a woman who was also an insider to the counterculture, Kominsky-Crumb knew that this was not the case for women she knew. However, she developed fears that it could be so for the next generation, women who lacked a clear path to access countercultural living. Kominsky-Crumb did not want that for her daughter Sophie, born in 1981, and, because her husband Robert had fashioned his own private world a long time ago anyway, and was, as a result of his privilege of being a full-time artist, relatively immune to these

increasingly aggressive forces of monoculture, she found him easy to convince to move to a place where his wife would feel more free to be herself.

Need More Love has the added advantage of providing the reader both with what Rich might term its author's notebooks, that is, her prose memories, but also the author's experiences of counterculture, as documented in her comics from the time, which were published for an audience of comics fans and women who were to become comics fans, when they found her comics, and others by women. But before I get to those comics, written from within the languages available to participants in counterculture, I want to begin with the way she contextualizes the countercultural experience from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. She offers the long view of her engagement with counterculture, across several stages, and I believe that Kominsky-Crumb criticism ought to take her lead on offering an even longer view, too, here incorporating a third register of scholarly insight into the social phenomena the author describes. Incorporating this insight could risk a Mailer-esque approach to her work as sociological rather than artistic, but it is my hope that, incorporated as it is as a supplement to her work rather than a necessary complement to its own insight, which is complete on aesthetic terms and requires no such complement, this critical apparatus can ideally confirm her work's value in contemporary debates about gender and literature.

After an extensive discussion of her childhood, during which Kominsky-Crumb felt unloved by her parents, and early adolescence, during which she felt unloved by her peers, the author confesses her bout with Beatlemania, her first specific fandom, which culminated in her throwing herself at George Harrison, and having to be escorted away by the police. She describes this period of her life as “one of the bleakest moments of

[her] adolescence,” because she was “like millions of pathetic girls with no lives of their own (92-93).” In the long view, on her own terms, the story of the author's Beatlemania is rescued by the fact that, now that she is a famous comics artist, George Harrison's son actually keeps a copy of the comic she drew about her incident with his father, but I would argue that time reveals a possibility for a more reparative assessment than that.

Kominsky-Crumb reveals herself as a believer in the model of the artist as an individual, according to the pre-countercultural sense of the term. As a critic of monoculture and consumerism, the author saw in her childhood and teenage years that she wanted to distinguish herself from the people that surrounded her by becoming a particularly strong individual, one with a unique artistic vision, who could see past the lies of advertisers and prefabricated consumer products, to greater truths. At the same time, she was a woman full of desire, both heterosexual desire, for partnership with men, and, to a lesser extent, for acceptance from her female peers. Her bout with Beatlemania represents, for her, in retrospect, a moment of allowing her heterosexual desire to be misdirected to a prefabricated consumer product, that is, whatever masculinity was represented for her by The Beatles' members' celebrity image, rather than a moment of solidarity with the other girls who shared that same desire.

One reason she was not yet ready for such utopian solidarity is revealed in the framing of the story within *Need More Love*. The story that precedes the Beatlemania story is that of Peggy Lipton, a girl from Kominsky-Crumb's high school who ended up as a famous actress. After a heartbreaking comic about the omnipresence of nose jobs among girls at the school, Kominsky-Crumb shows a glossy publicity shot of Peggy Lipton, “Miss perfection,” with her co-stars from the television show *Mod Squad* (89).

Next, she switches out of “celebrity scrapbook” mode and into her art, presenting a comic that tells the story of her telling her husband and daughter that she went to school with the beautiful woman on television in front of them (90). In this comic, the author is ultimately grateful that she did not see herself reflected as desirable within popular culture at the time, because the counterculture was coming, and there, she could be sexually desirable and an artist, rather than “marr[ying] a dentist,” which would surely have stunted her vision (91). In the final panel, Kominsky Crumb draws her contemporary self alongside a school pride banner; she is contemplating attending her 25th high school reunion, in order to see “what happened to the rest of us...schlubs!” (91).

On the next two pages, she offers the prose description of the Beatlemania story, followed by the aforementioned three-page comic representing the ill-advised encounter with George Harrison at the airport. Finally, bookending this section of her book, “Post-war jerks,” and transitioning into the “Escape!” section, she places a photograph of a Beatles bubblegum wrapper, representing the consumerism that was a dead end for this particular version of herself. That version of herself knew that she was not like other girls, partly because of her great desires, and partly because she simply couldn't be accepted as she was, and so it led her to seek a grander destiny.

I'm interested in supplementing this moment with scholarly insight, in part because it is the first of many moments in which Kominsky-Crumb insists on differentiating herself from utopian versions of feminism, and in part because it speaks to a recurring strand in my project, that of valuing women-centered reading practices and women-authored autobiography simultaneously. I was led to this project by a long-term

personal investment in women-centered Western media fandom. As was the case with Beatlemania, media fandom is often formed by a majority-female community in response to a male-authored (and performed) media artifact. That said, however, this community has proudly continued significant feminist legacies of self-publishing, non-capitalist gift economies, collaborative reading environments, and politically and aesthetically creative uses of dominant popular culture. For my purposes, these provide evidence of intelligent presence counter to the condescending assumptions made by male critics and some female artists about women consumers being “duped” by business strategies, and thus misdirecting their desire towards consumption rather than, from an aesthetic standpoint, original creation or, from a political standpoint, solidarity with one another. This argument for the value of women-centered fandom often relies on a conception of contemporary fandom as transformative, that is, of creating responses to popular culture that transcend the simple purchase of a bubblegum wrapper. However, there is a continuum that always involves consumption, whether of the songs, the bubblegum, or the celebrity image, and the bubblegum cannot be discounted entirely.

Thinking back to the Town Bloody Hall debate, referenced earlier, Greer articulated the utopian feminist desire that, in the future, artists could let go of the ego that led them to create art with fame and individualism in mind, and instead understand themselves as workers in a collaborative creative landscape. Greer uses the example of the creation of Chartres cathedral, which has been used more recently to describe the creative work undertaken by fans of the online role-playing game, *World of Warcraft* (Leith). WoW has little in common with the Beatles in terms of media of origin, but I argue that we can apply Greer's hope for a utopian feminist literary sphere to the past, and

find it in a utopian vision of Beatles fandom, in which women's desires were just as much fed by the carefully-marketed boy band as they were by one another's presence at concerts and in record stores. From there, we can begin to see a trajectory from what once looked like women's passive consumption, to widely-known individuals participating in feminist literary spheres, to the present-day fandoms in which a new generation of women creators is emerging. As they did before, whether or not they claimed it as an origin story, these women will build upon the insights gained from their consumption habits in order to participate with maximum insight in a highly commodified marketplace of ideas.

That said, however, the Chartres Cathedral analogy is imperfect, and understandably, it is not one that would speak to Kominsky-Crumb. After all, she was dissatisfied with her social world, and was unable to access these abstract connections utopian feminists theorize are always possible among women until she found the social world of counterculture, the medium of comics, and the sexual attention of men whose countercultural values she could admire. The remarkable feature of autobiography I noted above comes into play here, that is, its ability to present its author with an opportunity to take what she got from each cultural language with which she was presented along her journey, and construct a coherent vision of life from all of these in her own order, and to her own structure. For Kominsky-Crumb, fandom represented only a perversion of the desire, which could find fuller expression as counterculture developed, and as she found herself belonging to it. However, I still think it's worth pausing over these two moments of cultural critics professing an admiration for the collective authorship model of Chartres cathedral, and using the analogy as a way to

express what seems incomplete in the artistic vision of any individual, proposed as a model of any particular historical moment of subculture. (And, if one wished to look further back in time to find kinship in other fields, there is the example of Henry Adams's 1905 experimental work of history, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, in which the author engages with history by reimagining the creative lives of those collective authors.)

Returning to the present, Sam Leith says of the fictional universe of WoW:

Azeroth's architecture is a glorious space for glorious things to happen in. And, like a cathedral, it is above all a *social* space, for communal experience. That's what has given it its longevity. Five years isn't long in terms of the life of a cathedral; for a computer game, it's an eternity, given that you can finish most in a matter of hours. The people who stay in WoW join guilds, make friends online, go questing in groups and spend hours (with only a bit of giant-slaying) talking in the chat channels. It's as much a social networking site as a videogame. You log on and gossip in its pews. Gone are the days when families gathered round the wireless. Inconceivable, now, would be the simultaneous nationwide toilet flush during the break of the final MASH episode. Art is increasingly consumed in isolation – through earplugs, on the computer, on demand. Yet there's still a thirst for a communal experience of culture. Hence the boom in live music, and in interactive, watch-on-the-night shows like *The X Factor*. And then there's *World of Warcraft*, perhaps the daddy of them all: a cathedral without a god, where you and your gang can hang out – dressed in leather, killing goblins and eating ribs.

Along with Leith, fan studies, founded in earnest by Henry Jenkins with his publication of *Textual Poachers*, has done much work to analyze and value the practices of those

millions of pathetic Beatles fans, suggesting that they were, at best, designing innovative interpretive practices for new forms of popular culture, forging new intimacies with one another, and creating women-centered spaces where women's desires were taken seriously, which of course, Kominsky-Crumb's work has continued to do throughout her career. Even without this reparative work on Beatlemania and related excesses of popular culture engagement, there is also the fact that women's overconsumption was prefigured and designed by forces much larger than the Beatles, and as part of their social labor, already disproportionate compared with the expectations for men, rather than a second option after the failure of the preferable story of fitting in and training for marriage. That said, if, for Kominsky-Crumb herself, the creativity of this moment paled in comparison to what she found later, then it's worth following her own trajectory, and accepting for the time being the idea that fandom was not a place that satisfied her craving for love and artistry.

After finding and rejecting fandom, Kominsky-Crumb finds college, which is equally unsatisfying, for several reasons. She describes these in prose, not finding any aspect of the experience significant enough to draw out in graphic narrative. Firstly, her parents offer no financial help with her living expenses, and so, she has to take a low-paying job, which she likens to "torture" (100). Secondly, she spends as much time as possible drinking, partying, and meeting men in New York City, and so, she winds up pregnant and with a series of hazy memories of ill-advised sex. Thirdly, she finds herself unimpressed by her roommates, one of whom is too interested in conforming to gender-normative standards of femininity, and the other of whom, not interested enough, and therefore just as an unsuitable a companion for self-discovery in sexual freedom. On the

page following this prose description of disappointments, there is a photo of Kominsky-Crumb playing guitar at her parents' house in 1966, waiting for a better audience and better scenery.

A harsh reader might insist on noting here that the privilege of attending college, and of having the relative freedom to spend so many nights drinking and drugging in the city, was not available to many women during this period, and that it makes sense that the author found herself underwhelmed by her classes, considering that she did not prioritize the educational aspect of her college experience. In other words, this is a different narrative than the one provided in Betty Friedan's 1963 feminist classic, *The Feminine Mystique*, in which that author is disappointed that her friends, who were deeply engaged in their studies at colleges like Smith then had no way of using the knowledge they'd gained once they left the world of education for the all-consuming world of marriage. Friedan discounts the misogynistic idea that a college education “gives women ideas” about rights they deserve but are unlikely to be granted in family life, but she concedes that “education festers in...women,” leaving them with an unhappy awareness of their stunted intellectual development (29).

Kominsky-Crumb did not get into a college like Smith, and, furthermore, she had already chosen the life of the artist over the life of the scholar, and the life of the artist, with its more generous concept of cognitive engagement, rescued her from any truly long-term stints as a bored housewife. Kominsky-Crumb is one of several writers I look at in this project who are ultimately unmoved by higher education, which, in my view, reveals how vibrant intellectual life within counterculture was for these free thinkers. For some, admittedly a few crucial years older, like Betty Friedan, education itself was key to

creating the desire for self-knowledge, that is, for the possibility of becoming a genuine individual, like male poets and artists. For others, education is merely another institution for replicating social ideologies and welcoming new generations into mainstream culture and success. Kominsky-Crumb's critique was not this one, but, as in the case of her disappointment with fandom, she didn't find any of the phenomena we might romanticize today about college during the 1960s.

What Beatlemania and college both failed to inspire in Kominsky-Crumb, so-called flower power, the subject of the next full pages, accomplished handily. On the left-hand page, there is a comic, which reads: "And into the seething lower east side of Manhattan!" Kominsky-Crumb's avatar appears below a series of apartments with cracked windows, wearing a short, flowery dress and a goofy, wide-eyed expression, and opening her arms to the world, proclaiming, "I'm free at last!" Next to her, two hippies stand in front of the "Psychedelicatte Head Shop," where they smoke joints and browse dream catchers and evil eyes, next to a book shop called "Peace Eye Books" (102). On the facing page, there is a prose description of 1966 as "the year of flower power, psychedelic drugs and social unrest" (103). Kominsky-Crumb concedes that she "had no political savvy, and was too naive to understand [her] plight in any kind of sociological perspective" (103). Where college might have helped to provide her with this context, the institutional framing of the information was simply out of line with her desires and instincts, and so, she found what she was looking for in the "alternative culture [of] music, art, newspapers" and other alternative modes of packaging information and experience (103). Crucially, she even found that people within the hippy movement were not judgmental of her early, unintended pregnancy, and men were interested in dating

her. Even the adoption agency she found was kind to her, and “happy to have a white Jewish baby to place” (103). Once again, it's important to note that many women's experiences of early, unintended pregnancy pre-Roe v. Wade were much more fraught than this one. That said, however, Kominsky-Crumb's privilege coincides with her insatiable drive for self-expression and a life lived according to her own desires, and so, while the story predictably lacks sociological insight, it is nevertheless a representation of how much more crushed she felt by the expectation to conform to dictates of mainstream culture, as enforced in the suburbs, than by the actual challenge of dealing with an unwanted pregnancy while trying to make an alternative life for herself.

Looking back now on those years, she remembers them as “idyllic,” and formative (104). She even lists the “philosophical ideas [she] developed at that time” to which she's “stayed true”: “free love, experimental lifestyle, love for old stuff, contempt for bourgeoisie values...I still have long hair + no hair do...I don't shave my armpits, and I don't wear a bra!” (104). She doubles this point in her drawings of the time, displaying her younger self making art and wearing a miniskirt she still wears today, and creating thought and commentary bubbles that reveal her enduring faith in her ability be an artist, a lingering weakness for men, and a lingering weakness in the face of criticism of her art. Counterculture, for Kominsky-Crumb, serves as the solution to her life, one she's held onto since she was first welcomed into its loving arms – “I had a giant extended family of kindred spirits and I had fun all the time, and I was never lonely!” (104). Her absolute sense of belonging filled such an important need that it would not be undermined when the sexism underlying counterculture was revealed to her at various points, or when she was chronically under-appreciated for her work.

Of course, there were more steps along her path to finding her role as a producer, and not just consumer of counterculture. During art school, which she attended in Tucson, Arizona, she spent the bulk of her time “working on [...] two addictions...male attention and alcohol” (110). Her degree does not make any sense to her until she discovers Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* comic, which inspired her to make comics of her own, and create her avatar, the Bunch (111). Something about the medium of comics resolved her desire to be an artist, coupled with a scene she felt she could belong to, much like, in contemporary writer Kate Losse's case, something about writing a memoir in a desert town known for its minimalist art tourism seems to resolve her feeling of having been consumed by online social networking.

Finally, we get to see the steps that enabled Kominsky-Crumb to commit herself so wholeheartedly to counterculture for the rest of her life. First, she met and committed herself to the man who would become her second husband and major love, Robert Crumb:

The energy and mental connection between us was always very clear, but everything else around us was a chaotic mess. Robert's celebrity, his passive nature and the conflicting desires of everyone in his life created a special kind of craziness. We were all very young, drinking and taking a lot of drugs -- we were constantly stoned on marijuana. We were open to almost any new experience, and there was the excitement of being part of a cultural and social revolution. But at times it was very disorienting. All the codes had been swept away, and no one was sure of how to behave anymore. (131)

What would become the codes of counterculture were still being written in this moment, and so Kominsky-Crumb and others had to follow their desires for the opportunities they felt were most in line with living a good life as a full-time cultural producer. She contemplated graduate school, but “fled” for San Francisco, where “the first *Wimmen's Comics* was just being put together” (134). As had been the case with the countercultural scene in New York City, she is easily accepted into the first issue of *Wimmen's Comics*, but her fellow artists' assumption that her work will undoubtedly “reflect a strong feminist consciousness” did become a point of contention (134). Kominsky-Crumb describes her initial admiration for the comics artist Trina Robbins, who “seemed to have suffered countless indignities at the hands of male chauvinist pigs” (139). In the same issue in which Kominsky-Crumb's first story, “Goldie: A Neurotic Woman” was published, *Wimmen's Comix* No. 1, Robbins published a story about Robert Crumb's sister, who came out as a lesbian. Kominsky-Crumb “didn't know at the time that Sandy and Trina were building a real case against Robert, allegedly because of his sexist comics. But people's motivations, as always, were more complex” (139). Essentially, Robbins, who would devote the rest of her career to celebrating women's achievements in comics, in a series of significant anthologies, was working in that moment to develop her political agenda alongside her role in the art world, while Kominsky-Crumb was developing her own version of the autobiographical sensibility that had so moved her in Justin Green's work. Both are to be considered pioneers in underground comix in general, and in women's comics more specifically. That said, Robbins' feminist approach was, and has remained, primarily in the archival representation of a broad range of women comics artists, and ultimately in adjusting the popular perception of the social

value of women's contributions to that medium's history. Robbins asserted the presence of women collectively, that is, while Kominsky-Crumb was always striving for the individualistic artistic achievement, which has enabled her to hold onto her unique multi-media aesthetic. Kominsky-Crumb's contribution is thus autobiographical rather than archival, and it showcases her decades-long commitment to building a language to represent a life following desire, not to match the production patterns of men, but rather because she is moved to create in this way.

As an example of Kominsky-Crumb's evolving language of graphic narrative, I offer a reading of her first “Goldie” comic, published in the first issue of *Wimmen's Comix*, in 1972, which is a story of an avatar of the author, and how she found counterculture. The story begins with a happy child, who succeeded in school and in making friends, and whose life takes a turn for the worse when puberty arrives. This story is already less complicated than the story Kominsky-Crumb has told us about her actual childhood, and fits more neatly into certain tropes of life-stages for women, especially the idea that girlhood can be a charmed, innocent period, but with sexuality, emerging womanhood becomes socially dangerous, and self-image is likely to fall apart. Drawing inspiration from the radical sexuality of the comics of Robert Crumb and Justin Green, Kominsky-Crumb depicts Goldie's sexual awakening literally, for example, saying that her “father's affection made [her] sick,” and imagining him naked and with an aggressively erect penis while he tries to hug her (141). She then shows Goldie masturbating with vegetables, hating herself, wearing makeup, and trying too hard to impress teenage boys, who, she now sees, had open contempt for her. Next, she describes teenaged Goldie as “a giant slug living in a fantasy of future happiness,” and

draws herself with hugely exaggerated nose and an even more exaggerated lower half, with wide jeans grazing the floor, walking the school hallways (142).

After high school, Goldie has a brief foray into fun with drugs and sex on the Lower East Side, which is depicted as having been empty and shame-filled, in contrast to the she compassionate way in which she depicts the period in prose in *Need More Love*, and she describes her lackluster first marriage as an escape from having to continue to live that kind of life. She concedes that the desert setting of their early married life was “idyllic,” but shows herself in a “state of despair,” with only promiscuity to distract her from the tedium (143). Specifically, she says that her loneliness was caused by the fact that the women in the desert town resented her for sleeping with the men in their lives, and that this new reality was too much to bear, and so she ended up alone, which Kominsky-Crumb represents with a close-up on Goldie's brain. In this panel, the anxieties occupying her mind over the course of her life thus far are represented in sections. Years 0-17 were constituted by pressure from her parents, in the form of praise, demons, brainwashing and values. Years 18-22 were defined with pressure from her first husband, to which she responded with dependence, paranoia, and despair. The next years, “me now,” are merely a “void of fear and uncertainty,” but one which ultimately sends Goldie off in a car to San Francisco, where, as we now know, Kominsky-Crumb will find great artistic success and, eventually, happiness (144).

Already here, we can see the ways in which sexism at home set up her experience of sexism in counterculture, and the venues in which it was possible for her articulate this experience. First, the compulsory social reproduction of the family, then, the sexist assumptions underlying her first ill-advised marriage, and then, the dream of something

different -- where her husband saw himself as an artist from the beginning, she had to work to see herself as independent and her story as being one worth telling while learning how to tell it. That said, because her chosen subject is autobiography, which generically requires an increase in reflection over time on the part of the subject, it makes sense that this turning point panel, which led Goldie to San Francisco, is the one in which her “mind began to analyze the past events of [her] life” (144). It is the acquisition of self-consciousness, and the ability to turn crushing self-critique into vibrant social critique (even in ways as simple as revealing the ugly thinking of teenage boys for what it really is), which gives Goldie the confidence to “set out to live [her] own style!” (144).

This 5-page story is a fascinating capsule of what would become almost 150 pages of *Need More Love*, and a mix of photographs, new color comics, old black and white comics, prose, paintings, and photographed sculptural works at an intersection with painting, due to their mixed-media 3D collage aesthetic. The stories both ultimately carry a happy-go-lucky message, in one reading: once you develop a coherent sense of self, you will be able to transport yourself to a social location in which you have room to be appreciated for who you are and what you can offer. But at the same time, both reveal a social critique that requires more than everyone's self-awareness to resolve, namely, the fault line of sexism. Sexism negatively impacts every stage of Kominsky-Crumb's life, including the one she fails to mention, perhaps because the very existence of *Wimmen's Comix* already speaks to the fact, of sexism within the mainstream art world, which led to her particular treatment at art school, and which was now being replicated in the underground, where artists were more interested in troubling the hierarchy between “high” and commercial art than women's and men's art (Crumb 239).

We can see from Kominsky-Crumb's life raising an adolescent daughter that she still feels that the pain that women suffer during adolescence is unreasonable, and that is one of the reasons that she rushes to move to the south of France while her daughter, Sophie, is still young enough to enjoy a less-gender normative youth, or at least one in which she won't be expected to be a suburban girl in the way her mother was. This had to do with "the rising tide of Christian fundamentalism" in California, which gave Kominsky-Crumb images of "lynch mobs and burning crosses," and not out of paranoia, as people had started to accuse her husband of being "a child pornographer" (227). If this was not terrifying enough, the idea of Sophie's childhood activities being organized around churches and malls was, and so the family moved to France. Her husband was less worried about all this because, and one can only assume this is connected to male privilege, and the lack of expectation that he have lunch with the other moms from the school, he lived in "Crumbland," his "self-created womb of old records, toys, pictures and books, in a 1920s decor with heavy drapes to shut out the ugliness of the modern world" (232). He could transport Crumbland to France, but he didn't have to face the particular fear of Sophie growing up miserable in the suburbs (suburbanizing small town) in the same way that her mother did.

The many years depicted in *Need More Love* offer a research- and experience-based assessment of the longevity of the excitement of escape into counterculture depicted in "Goldie: A Neurotic Woman," and the final verdict is one of ambivalence. Kominsky-Crumb lived according to her desires within the material context of her marriage to a successful and famous artist, but she remains under-appreciated in her own right, both because of lingering sexism in comics culture, and because her social critique

ultimately required her to move her family out of the United States, rather than attempt to wrestle the coming monoculture of the 1980s and nineties, which favored “wealthy ‘rednecks,’” and had little room for a woman who was also a “Jewish anarchist pornographer,” like Kominsky-Crumb (227).

Kominsky-Crumb was right, it turned out, about the crushing effects the McMansion culture she saw in Winters, California, would have across the country, over the next few decades. Sarah Schulman describes the parallel phenomenon in New York during the 1980s, in her book, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, which describes the monoculture that capitalized on the loss experienced during the early days of the AIDS crisis, in order to transform Manhattan into an island too expensive for real art. Further, she describes the crushing effect that this material change, the actual pulping of the archives left by gay men, and the exponential increase in the rent on their old apartment that soon followed, had on mental life in the city, once the center for intellectual life in the United States. She writes:

Gentrified thinking is like the bourgeois version of Christian fundamentalism, a huge, unconscious conspiracy of homogenous patterns with no awareness about its own freakishness. The gentrification mentality is rooted in the belief that obedience to consumer identity over recognition of lived experience is actually normal, neutral, and value free. (721-723)

With the added context of Kominsky-Crumb's description of the Christian fundamentalist gentrification of her formerly alternative neighborhood, and her greater attention to the dynamics of anti-Semitism, Schulman's argument, grounded in class politics and sexuality, comes to life on the national stage in an ugly vision of the decades to come.

Section III: Felicia Day, and the Documentation of Life Inside and Outside Digital Culture

Of course, the 1980s and nineties were also home to some of the most exciting alternative and feminist publishing cultures seen to date, as I will discuss in Chapter Two. But before I get there, I want to connect Kominsky-Crumb's origin story for Goldie, and its broader context within her autobiographical writing, to a contemporary version of the story of finding one's subculture, in this case, Felicia Day's story of finding gaming in her transmedia universe, *The Guild*. While at first, this move appears to constitute a forty-year leap in history, in fact, it does nothing of the sort. For one thing, *Need More Love* was published in the same year, 2007, in which the first episode of *The Guild* Web series aired. And so, while “Goldie: A Neurotic Woman” may first have been published in 1972, its autobiographical context is as much a product of our contemporary literary moment as it is an extension of Kominsky-Crumb's long-arc aesthetic development. For another thing, Kominsky-Crumb's multi-media aesthetic is even more notable in its insistence on the fusion of comics, sculpture, painting, and print photography, in 2007, because this insistence on print culture has, in the popular imagination, shifted from the radical status it had during the years of counterculture, to the retro tactics of old-timers and nostalgics.

The Guild, in my view, represents the multimedia aesthetic in its conventional sphere for the contemporary publishing world, that of the Internet, although, just as Kominsky-Crumb was a pioneer in autobiographical comics, Felicia Day is undoubtedly a pioneering individual artist in autobiographically-inflected digital storytelling. In other words, the term “conventional” ought to be read as descriptive rather than as an allusion

to artlessness. For Kominsky-Crumb, however, it is more than descriptive. As she says towards the end of *Need More Love*, she believes that computers represent “isolated island[s] of comfort with every kind of stimulation possible,” and opportunities for the misdirection of “depressed” spiritual feeling (339). This disconnect, between, on the one hand, my critical insistence that there are similar pleasures to be achieved in contemporary readers from *Need More Love* and *The Guild* storyworld, and the authors' highly divergent politics, reveals what Heather Love earlier called a “wound” or “false start” of the solidarity I'd like to locate between these writers (32). I am deeply invested in the intergenerational conversations happening across archival and autobiographical storytelling, and I believe that, by staging that interaction, between *Need More Love* and *The Guild*, and then, in the remainder of my project, between other radical autobiographies and other installments of contemporary storytelling in *The Guild*, I can gesture towards the complexity of that interaction, and reveal its promise for the next stage of women's autobiographical self-fashioning.

In *The Guild: Codex*, Day tells an origin story for Cyd's interest in gaming, and her subsequent creation of Codex and willingness to co-create the Knights of Good. This origin story, per convention, shows Cyd's life before she even knows about the game, as well as the psychological underpinnings of her desire for a fantasy life to replace her inadequate real one. It would undoubtedly be a stretch to read online gaming communities as contemporary versions of counterculture because the historical conditions are so different, although it is worth noting that major figures from 1960s counterculture, such as Timothy Leary, saw the Internet and cyberculture as belonging on the same continuum as, but further along than, psychedelics such as LSD (Leary 1). And

so, if these communities are not incarnations of counterculture, then they are what comes next along a particular historical path followed by young people who crave self-expression, and often articulate this desire within autobiography in various media, as these emerge at particular historical moments. And so, if we read *The Guild: Codex* with some help from Kominsky-Crumb's visual language, I argue that a similar structure to the first Goldie comic reveals itself. Further, the packaging of this *künstlerroman* portion in the broader storyworld of *The Guild* in some ways parallels the packaging of “Goldie” into the first issue of *Wimmen's Comix*, because of the sedimented pleasure made available to the reader who wishes to access the whole collection, and get the sense of a constellation of women’s writers who share a vision of this particularly generative moment in the history of cultural production.

Disappointed by her boyfriend's interest in getting “all kinds of wasted” rather than going home with her after his show, Cyd enters the world of character creation in the game (15-16). Here, she tells her own origin story with counterculture, a mere blip on the radar of her emerging self-consciousness. She recalls that, “when you're a kid you're allowed to play around being different people. Find yourself. But when do you get to reinvent yourself as an adult?” (16). Reproducing the trope she shares with Kominsky-Crumb, that, especially for women, there is only a limited time during which one can be free, and after that, there is only a limited set of options in order to remain desirable, Cyd recalls her brief attempts to be “goth, hippie, and hip-hop, for about ten minutes each” (17). She has continued to experiment with fashion, she says, but no one has noticed, or interpreted her experiments as an invitation to take her creativity more seriously, or indeed, pay her much attention at all. But now, with the game, she has what seems like a

much larger set of opportunities, and much less social constraint on what she may become. As with Kominsky-Crumb and the counterculture of San Francisco, of course, Cyd will discover that these limitations are frustrating as well, but undoubtedly, Kominsky-Crumb and Day share the experience of having found greater freedom in their respective subcultures than in the dominant culture, by far.

Where Goldie, having arrived in San Francisco, smiled from her car, staring finally straight at the reader (144), Cyd looks up at her avatar, Codex, and smiles at the new audience for her self-exploration, and her new companion, who looks as much like her as the game's graphics make possible (19). This image could be read as narcissism, that charge perpetually leveled against women in search of self-knowledge by misogynists, or self-fetishization, narcissism's more specific incarnation within gentrified consumer culture, or indeed, as evidence of conceding to the model of self as consumer product, that is, narcissism as it emerges within the culture of online social networking. However, in my reading of *The Guild* comics as belonging to the tradition of women's autobiography, I would argue that this act of looking to one's created avatar as the organizing object of self-reflection reveals utopian desires for the Internet to function as a space which can recover various progressive hopes from counterculture and beyond. One's visual or photographic image is simply an aspect of one's contemplative reality in our contemporary media landscape. The power to reproduce or manipulate it, for example, by dividing it into multiple characters, is one way to enter into the discourse of vision as it informs the sedimented history of popular culture.

Cyd does not receive the insight of the game's liberatory possibilities like a lightning bolt, however. While her avatar, Codex, finds pleasure after pleasure in the

game, including her first female friendship in the storyworld, with Clara, Cyd makes a serious attempt to work on her relationship with Trevor, and to contribute to the live music scene he's claimed as his own, although she has equal musical talent, if considerably less interest in a “cool” image. Echoing Goldie's masochism and desperation, Cyd says, “Trevor let me do a bunch of research for him. I downloaded old melodies, started working them into songs...and we did it all together!” (32). As she tells this story, Cyd is shown smiling, hard at work at her desk, while Trevor sleeps in the background. In the next panel, she continues, her knees bent as she tries to pose herself to continue writing in mid-air, while Trevor sits on the toilet and asks her to close the door. “We can use the counter-melody from the Palestrina piece,” she continues, as he reads the paper (32). She even successfully rebrands his band with a new name, which they end up using, “The Randy Bards,” transforming the lazy hipster group into a clever image of the contemporary moment in music history.

Cyd's extreme desire to please her male partner here connects easily to Goldie's experience of low self-esteem and an untenable desire to find fulfillment through obedient heterosexuality. Fortunately, both transcend this thankless position during their midtwenties. For Kominsky-Crumb, whatever the criticism she has received for the dynamics of her marriage to Robert, this mode of sacrifice for a man's superior vision is not the appropriate parallel. Cyd's experience with Trevor is closer to Kominsky-Crumb's surplus of unappreciated and unarticulated artistic energy during her first marriage, which led to its demise. Once she entered into a relationship with Robert, the two became a genuinely collaborative team, despite the criticisms of feminists, for Kominsky-Crumb's purported selling-out to her husband's misogyny, and solo Crumb

fans alike. Hillary Chute describes the “Crumb family [as] *the* defining example of this double standard at work” (3). Criticism has a lot of power in cultural history, and unfortunately, the only way to confirm the pair's collaboration is to return to the work itself, and become overwhelmed by the generative effect the divide has had in the impressive variety of work they have produced together over four decades, all while pursuing independent work, as well. The quality and range of their shared frustration with the general critical misunderstanding of their shared contributions is especially visible in *Drawn Together*, the *Need More Love*-sized collection of their collaborative work. That collection opens with a set of romantic photos of the two of them, on the inside front cover, and then, after a brief, co-authored introduction, their co-created 1979 cover of Aline and Bob's *Dirty Laundry Comics*, in which a naked Crumb faces a naked Kominsky, who proclaims, “If you can do it buddy so can I!” (9).

In Cyd's story, however, Trevor, because of his lack of a self-reflective apparatus, cannot see that he is simply stealing her work, and acting it out on stage, and so he gets all the credit, and she must turn to a different medium in order to express herself as more than a ghostwriter. Cyd finds her happiness not just in the game's high-quality graphics, and seemingly endless possibilities for Codex's growth and exploration of a vast world, but also in a new social organization, namely the guild she forms with her new friends. They form the guild not because they find that they are kindred spirits, but rather to gain access to the world that is calling to all of them, for many different reasons, as the other comics will reveal, and that friendship at least seems reciprocal and grounded in shared space, in a way that a friendship with Trevor and his circle does not. For Goldie, it was San Francisco, and for Kominsky-Crumb, it was comics. For Cyd, it is the game, and for

Felicia Day, it is the contemporary transmedia storytelling landscape, including Web series, which she pioneered, and comics, particularly the tradition of women's autobiographically-inflected comics, which she entered, bringing with her the insights of digital culture, as well as the social critiques made possible by her immersion in it.

Cyd's teenage flirtation with counterculture was just that, a flirtation, as cursory as her attempt to explore the predominantly black sphere of Hip-Hop, but still, coupled with her self-sustaining reluctance to acquiesce to her role in mainstream culture, it reveals a hopefulness about difference that places her firmly on the side of the melancholic and nomadic. Her influences into which she delves deeper are those to which she has access because of technical skill, acquired over years of practice. And so, music history is her way into past and present, not by way of "scenes," such as they were or are, but by way of the technical components and tropes of musical compositions. She uses this academic and professional skill, as well as her interest in language, evidenced by her reading habit, and her hobbyist's love of game play, as evidenced by her Tetris screen, to enter the game as Codex, who represents her desire, excessive to the requirements of mainstream culture, to explore a vast world without being held back by social anxiety, where the etiquette of friendship and collaboration are explicit, and where people's needs are better-articulated than they are in the real world (8).

Of course, when, in the Web series, her guild forges a real world six-way alliance in non-game-related tasks, she must finally gain those skills that conventionally confirm psychological wholeness in our world. This gesture towards wholeness is actually the more predictable part of the story, sort of like an actual play-by-play of the endless parties attended by the stars of the underground comix movement. The heart of *The*

Guild storyworld is the bridge between gentrified mind and real life. The bridge itself is fantasy life, articulated for the characters within the game, and for the reader within the whole transmedia storytelling apparatus. That said, the virtuosity of the twenty-first century transmedia storytelling style is paralleled, in my view, within the history of women cultural producers, only by writers like Kominsky-Crumb, and by Ilene Chaiken's pioneering lesbian drama series, *The L Word*, which created a whole "official" social network in response to its show (Russo). The mere blip that counterculture represented in Day's narrative mirrors the blip that is Internet culture in Kominsky-Crumb's twenty-first-century compilation memoir, and the two miss each other in a way that must be explored if we are to locate the boundaries of contemporary women's memoir as a field. To be cynical, Day has absorbed the contemporary suspicion that counterculture was always about a certain kind of consumerism anyway, rather than a critique of it, and Kominsky-Crumb has stubbornly stuck to nostalgic assumptions about the mass media, refusing to buy into utopian rhetorics of the global reach of the Internet, and the creative playground it could provide even to people who don't fantasize about being artists. In order to delve more deeply into this "blip" (non-) encounter, I offer some additional historical context for the relationship, historical and contemporary, between counterculture and computer technology.

Section IV: From Faceless Technology to Digital Identity, A Brief History

In his 2006 book, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, Fred Turner offers an account of the historical phenomenon in which computers shifted from being perceived as threats to countercultural life, to being its home and representing the most utopian of its hopes.

Turner argues that, during the 1960s and 1970s, computers were seen by members of the counterculture as threats from the military-industrial complex to humanity, art, and more authentic living. As evidence, he offers the slogan developed by UC Berkeley students that, “At Cal you're little more than an IBM card” (12). Students proclaimed that this was so because they “feared that America's political leaders were treating them as little more than abstract data” (1). According to the conventional historical wisdom, with a slogan like this at the heart of the student movement, “the 1960s seem[ed] to explode onto the scene in a Technicolor swirl of personal exploration...much of it aimed at bringing down the cold war military-industrial bureaucracy” (3). For me, the key term in understanding the counterintuitive shift that took place somewhere between that highly cynical view of technology, and digital utopianism, which reached its height in the mid-1990s, but lives on, both in leftist politics and in some fields of the humanities, including fan studies, is “personal exploration.”

While the celebrated path in the 1960s towards self-knowledge was LSD, communal living, and the rejection of conservative cultural scripts, in the twenty-first-century, these have been largely replaced by an obsession with information. This replacement has to do with broader cultural forces, including both the technologically-enabled reality that makes so much information available, but also the continued rise of consumerism, which insures that the information is available in the context of intensely personal computing, which requires a significant personal investment in one's set of tools. In other words, the information is available *for us* in new ways, specifically in ways that invite us to connect ourselves to the technology in the hopes that our selves-with-access will have a superior capacity for enacting our desire. Rather than taking LSD to release

our stale conceptions of our own bodies and minds, we can simply translate our desires onto digital space, creating avatars, like in *The Guild*, or engaging in other forms of creative digital-self-fashioning. In this way, as a generation of “playful, self-sufficient, psychologically whole” subjects, even if we do achieve these qualities by way of consumption -- of electricity if nothing else -- we have the opportunity to alter our identities with only minimal social consequences, for better (interpersonally) and for worse (politically) (Turner 1). Just as Cyd Sherman ultimately finds herself as she works on making Codex a good member of guild society, the tools of digital self-fashioning can helpfully break down the process of self-exploration for many people otherwise dulled by monoculture.

That said, something is surely lacking from digital utopianism, and there is a reason that its influence has waned as the corporatization of the Internet has increasingly become a matter of common knowledge. Even if “the Internet” still sounds like an open, potentially democratic place, those with even the vaguest of countercultural inklings know that billionaire corporate CEOs invest in different kinds of social organizations than the Whole Earth Network. One thing that is lacking in our general conception of counterculture, as well as our general conception of digital utopianism, is a serious attention to gender. Women appear only as a sidebar in Turner's account, and feminism appears briefly, only to be discounted as an inadequate methodology for assessing changing social worlds online (152). Further, and this offense is more forgivable, given Turner's focus within the book, no serious attention is paid to autobiographical or otherwise literary accounts of experiences of counterculture or digital culture. I believe that women's experimental autobiography is a rich source for better understanding the

stakes of technology's changing reputation within countercultures and subcultures, and that it can help us to elucidate what exactly the utopian thinkers themselves, as often women as men, wanted when they demanded self-expression. Some wanted more authentic lives than they could live in the suburbs, and so, like Kominsky-Crumb, they sought communal living and pencil-and-paper based experimental art. Others, like Day and her characters, found the real world to be less inviting than the world of the game, which allowed them to create identities and explore social questions in a safe, communal environment.

Section V: Dogmatic Programs in Counterculture and Digital Culture – the Letter of the Law

With this context in mind, and the “blip” meeting between Kominsky-Crumb and Day raising more questions than answers, I turn to another major woman writer from the earliest moments of counterculture. This time, it is a conservative defender of consumerism and heterosexuality, namely Helen Gurley Brown, long-time editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, and author of *Sex and the Single Girl*. It is the latter book from which I garner my impressions of Brown-as-autobiographer here, because, although it is a self-help book rather than a literary memoir, it relies more heavily by far on the logic of consistent self-fashioning than on broad empirical evidence of any of its claims.¹⁶ As I

¹⁶ Brown’s particular position in the history of women’s writing, and her life’s work in women’s culture, are the subject of several full-length studies. In one of these, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown*, Jennifer Scanlon writes: “One of the few elements of the old *Cosmopolitan* that Brown maintained was a commitment to fiction, although she immediately placed more commercial authors like Danielle Steel alongside literary writers such as Joyce Carol Oates...Brown reinvented the women’s service magazine by addressing the thousands of women who grappled with outdated definitions of womanhood, femininity, sensuality, and sex” (154).

rethink the legacy of Brown's experiment, I look to another of *The Guild* comics, namely *The Guild: Vork*. Although Codex is undoubtedly the protagonist of *The Guild* storyworld, Vork is the most recognizable assemblage of gamer stereotypes, as well as the leader of the Knights of Good. Like Brown, he is resigned to the social rules of the world as they are, as long as he has his preferred outlet, which is gaming. Therefore, just as I characterize Brown as a defender of heterosexuality, I characterize Vork as a defender of Internet culture as it is. Both Brown and Vork see it as their job to maximize the imperfect systems available for their own pleasure. For Brown, this means accepting gifts and expecting expensive meals from male sexual partners. For Vork, this means continuing to accept his deceased grandfather's social security checks and stealing his neighbor's wireless Internet service.

In some ways, their shared acquiescence to greater systems makes them both into masochists, and, in the case of Brown, the term retains its primary sexual resonance. Dana Densmore, a “prowoman antimasculinist feminist,” asked Brown if, “in the heady joy of the sexual encounter” she describes in *Sex and the Single Girl*, she was “reveling in masochism euphemistically calling [her] surrender 'womanly'?” (Yates 65) The stakes are high when it comes to the question of female masochism during the sexual revolution, because, if what they were experiencing was not “reveling,” then it starts to look like “victimhood” before a “compulsory sex ethic,” advanced, however inadvertently, by writers like Brown (Hogeland 56). In contrast to the feminist consciousness-raising novels which are her focus, Lisa Marie Hogeland suggests that Brown's book serves an agenda that “extend[s] consumerism into women's personal lives” and bolsters “heterosexual normalcy,” using the limit case of psychiatric malfunction to suggest what

ought to be done with women who do not get their pleasure from masochistic engagement with men, whether because these women are lesbians, or simply because they wish to have sex on their own terms, which will inevitably differ from those set by men (56). While the stakes might seem lower when it comes to Vork's kind of masochism, when it comes to the most serious question posed by first-person storytelling, that is, the question of the fullness of this individual's experience, it is incontrovertible that Vork suffers from at least as much self-delusion as Brown. He believes he is going after what he wants because he loves playing the game, but actually, he just goes after new goals as they are presented to him as possibilities, wishing to succeed on the terms of the game, and otherwise simply subsisting on bulk hash browns and ketchup. Fortunately, as was the case in *The Guild: Codex*, the seeds of freer development are planted early on in the friendships he forms with his fellow guild members, and we know that Vork's life will become fuller and more complex in time.

In order to understand how this happens, I will first present his “base characterization” in *The Guild*. In the Web series, Vork represents the mainstream stereotype of the gamer. He is white, male, heterosexual (if not very interested in sex), and experienced in white-collar work, which complements his gaming because of its requirement of immersion in computer technology. His predictable personality flaws include a need to control other people and a fear of unpredictable social situations, which include interactions in which serious questions about personal identity and desire emerge, in a way that does not fit into his compartmentalized approach to the world. On the positive side, he escapes many of the ugly sides of contemporary culture by prioritizing his gaming above the desire for upward mobility (or, indeed, any mobility -- although this

is more understandable if one starts from his privileged position), and is therefore thrifty and apparently self-sufficient. This self-sufficiency is incomplete because, as I mentioned above, he steals utility services and accepts government checks to which he is no longer entitled, but he works hard to keep his negative impact on others minimal. Indeed, he is the man who insists that the Knights of Good choose that name for their guild, and commit themselves to performing good acts within it.

Day's *The Guild: Vork* comic reveals that Herman, the man behind the Vork avatar, strengthened his attachment to gaming as a way of life while he was caring for his grandfather before the man's death. We only meet his grandfather within the comic, because he dies at some point between the end of *The Guild: Vork* and the first episode of the Web series. We learned in *The Guild: Codex* that Herman had been a gamer since 1980, when he began using text-based multi-user dungeons. He continued in the nineties, and moved to graphics-based games, and then finally conceded to the culture of compulsory socialization in gaming in the early twenty-first century. By that point, he was committed to gaming in general, and so he was willing to sacrifice his reclusive tendencies to continue to follow the field's trajectory (75). Just as Cyd moved from Tetris, alternated with fantasy novel reading, to an immersion in the game, Herman has enjoyed the pleasures of online gaming too much to give it up because of cultural changes. Fortunately, he does not fulfill one stereotype of the old-time gamer, that of misogyny and related social resentments, which, for some, increased when socialization beyond one's immediate circle became an expectation within new games. Gamers who had believed that some of the value in gaming was acquired by its exclusivity, especially its exclusion of women, explicitly lamented during this medium-based transition that

gender and other aspects of social identity were becoming more visible. Vork, by contrast, acquiesces to this new reality, and attempts to incorporate his newly-acquired social knowledge about his fellow players into game play only where it seemed to be directly relevant. As we see in the action of his comic, he struggles to face the fact that a greater diversity of players leads to a more expansive sphere of what constitutes gaming, now inclusive of social realities from which he'd once wished to hide.

As the border between gaming and the real world grew fuzzier, Vork needed to become willing to adjust his stale notion of what it would mean to lead his guild well, and acquire a sense of deliberative communalism. Fortunately, this communalism meshed well with his passivity before the media transitions that keep gaming interesting to a “lifer.” Here we can see that, as a complement to male gender entitlement, the idea of masochism before the established order helps to illuminate some positive attributes in Vork, although still it prevents him from the self-realization that a utopian reader might want to detect. Whereas Codex's transformative energy is located in her mental fantasy life, which she can articulate within the game, and her masochism tempered by her self-reflection, Vork is more of a gamer by discipline, that is, somewhat committed to the field of gaming because he believes in its founding principles, and remains moved by its generational transformations.

On the one hand, then, these characters reiterate the gendered stereotype of the man as technician, the woman as consumer. But, because in gaming, the technician is a kind of consumer rather than an owner of the profitable enterprise of the game, the two share a certain powerlessness, and both are necessary to quality game-play within the MMORPG. This last fact is beautifully articulated within *The Guild: Vork* when Vork,

frustrated by the dilly-dallying of his fellow guild members, tries to form a guild on his own, which ends up being six versions of himself. Not only does this guild look ridiculous exploring the game, because they are all scarcely-differentiated versions of Vork's own main character, in a game in which different skills are necessary to tackle major obstacles, but he cannot physically control them. When he tries to order his own guild of clones to “ride north!” two members fall into a ditch before they can even get going (11). Here Vork's inability to ventriloquize the value of communalism on his own reveals his need for others, who specialize in other fields, to help him navigate this complex world of the game.

Herman, tellingly, has no articulated relationship to counterculture. His mode of rebellion is one of retreat. He retreats from the real social world, into gaming, and, preferring that abstract sphere of living, he retreats from compulsory sexuality. Herman is turned off by the sex and alcohol that turned Kominsky-Crumb onto counterculture, because he had to watch his grandfather accelerate his own demise by obsessing over these vices, and Vork wishes to live a quieter, sober life. His grandfather represents the world of gender relations before counterculture. Indeed, he represents a pinnacle of U.S. male privilege, that acquired by the generation that fought in World War Two, many of whom had life experiences in Europe and elsewhere abroad, and came home to acclaim and success for having achieved the nation's victory, both militarily, and culturally. This cultural superiority, which was cemented for many during that historical moment, was aggressively heterosexual in nature, and included the sexual conquest of women abroad, during the war, and women at home, when the soldiers returned. Herman, appealingly for a queer reading practice, is unimpressed by this model of masculine success, although

he does not go as far as Kominsky-Crumb to condemn “post-war jerks” and to try to find a material alternative. Instead, like Cyd, he turns to the virtual, hoping at least within that sphere to articulate to himself a different set of human relations.

While it may seem strange to connect Vork's mostly-virtual, asexual life to Brown's prescriptions for high femininity and promiscuous sex, articulated in *Sex and the Single Girl*, I believe that the parallel illuminates a shared possible response to consumer culture, whether in its guise as counterculture or as cyberculture. Herman and Brown share the socially naïve belief that, if one is logical, independent, and moderate in one's material desires, and asks nothing without offering something in return, one can spend her life as she chooses without guilt or stigma. In the case of Brown, the hobby she undertakes is seeking a husband by way of promiscuous sex and a constant attention to a highly feminine self-presentation. This self-presentation extends to her work life, in which she finds a feminine mode of ambition. In that mode, she can delight her male bosses, while enjoying her thriving sex life as a “single.” Her enjoyment of heterosexual promiscuity overlaps at some points with Kominsky-Crumb's experience, insofar as both enjoy male attention as a reward for hard work and their own creativity and intellect. However, Brown is closer to a suburban Peggy Lipton than to an artist/”schlub” like Crumb, which means that the sexual subcultures in which the two end up participating take shape quite differently. Kominsky-Crumb was (and still is, by her own admission) constantly seeking love, validation of herself and her art, and new experiences through which to understand herself. Brown was, in the end, seeking a successful, good-looking husband who would love her for the successful and hard-working person she was,

without old-fashioned expectations about female sexual purity or lack of interest in a career. Brown begins her book as follows:

I married for the first time at thirty-seven. I got the man I wanted. It *could* be constructed as something of a miracle considering how old *I* was and how eligible *he* was.

David is a motion picture producer, forty-four, brainy, charming, and sexy. He was sought after by many a Hollywood starlet as well as some less flamboyant but more deadly types. And *I* got him! We have two Mercedes-Benzes, one hundred acres of virgin forest near San Francisco, a Mediterranean house overlooking the Pacific, a full-time maid and a good life.

I am not beautiful, or even pretty. I once had the world's worst case of acne. I am not bosomy or brilliant. I grew up in a small town. I didn't go to college. My family was, and is desperately poor, and I have always helped support them. I'm an introvert and I am sometimes mean and cranky.

But *I* don't think it's a miracle that I married my husband. (3)

Brown wishes to demystify romantic success as a series of gender-based decisions about self-presentation, financial independence, and negotiating strategies, in order to inspire women still operating according to obsolete scripts of heterosexual romance to become keener observers of contemporary social reality, and thus, more adept participants within it. Brown's version of gender equality looks a lot like Sheryl Sandberg's contemporary career advice for women, articulated in *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. She asks women to work with men as they are, and, by way of their own example, encourage men to respect them, so that they will eventually participate more fully in the

social labor of heterosexuality, including child rearing, as much as women are willing to do. Brown suggests that women and men are both looking for sex and fun, and, as long as they are honest with one another and don't sacrifice the niceties of gender norms, they can enjoy the technology that enables the democratic spread of the promiscuous lifestyle, namely the birth control pill.

Like Vork, Brown struggles to recognize that many people, especially women, desire something substantially different from the game she is playing, that of heterosexuality in its 1962 incarnation. She hurls disbelief at the notion that many might wish for something different from their sexual encounters, ranging from the simple ability to refuse them altogether to the queer and polyamorous possibilities, about to be popularized within counterculture. She offers advice only to those already playing in the same field as her. *The Guild: Vork* is initially similar, offering the gamer's practical advice about how to devote oneself to the lifestyle one desires without allowing oneself to be persuaded by antiquated scripts, which, in the case of gaming, suggest that an overinvestment in it represents a state of arrested development. Both Herman and Brown are defenders of the right to develop at the pace one desires to do, and not be constrained by arbitrary markers of adolescence versus adulthood, but only to a point. Both are willing to make concessions when these do not challenge the commandments of their field as they see them. Pleasure is the goal for both of them, although the pleasures of heterosexuality and the pleasures of MMORPG participation are of course differentiated by the social status at stake in the exploration of the former, and the eccentricity of the pursuit of the latter.

The similarities between these two “guides to life” reveal an uncanny similarity between the sphere of sex as the representation of individual freedom during the 1960s, and the sphere of the virtual as the representation of individual freedom during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Both Brown and Vork are, for example, obsessed with food and rent as major costs of living. Herman developed this obsession because he had to feed himself and his grandfather on a fixed income for a long period of time. Brown developed it because she wished to save money, and because a key part of feminine self-presentation can be summarized in two of her rules for single girls, that “Roommates are for sorority girls. You need an apartment alone even if it's over a garage,” and that “Your figure can't harbor an ounce of baby fat. It never looked good on anybody but babies” (10). These insistences of bodily regulation are not exactly a call for a room of one's own, but rather a call for the mental space required to live on one's own terms, and in one's own body. These obsessions reveal a practical side to living an individuated existence when one does not feel the need to join a pre-existing countercultural community, or there is none currently open to being joined. Sometimes this is the case for historical reasons, as in Brown, where the only option for communal living among sexual single women was confined to the life-stage and class-connected ability to attend college. In the case of Herman, his introversion leads him to his default mode of retreating into himself, and into his grandfather's small house, because his social sphere can be lived entirely through Vork, virtually, and to some extent, promiscuously -- even if the Knights of Good reject him, he can continue to play, and find another guild.

Social expectations come and go over the life course, but Brown and Herman both make the point that, in order to have any sense of control over them, and any sense of

one's own space, one must actively determine one's living conditions, rather than simply following an expected course of development, especially if that life would have denied one many opportunities anyway. Both *Sex and the Single Girl* and *The Guild: Vork* take place outside of the resistant logic of counterculture, although they share with *Need More Love* and *The Guild: Codex* the articulation of individuality, held onto against the stated desires of the broader mainstream culture.

Because the narrative arcs of *The Guild* storyworld tend toward friendship, and because counterculture values the communal, these lessons about individual retreat are only instructive to my argument insofar as they complement the narrative of individual women moving into communal, counter- and subcultural spaces in order to discover themselves and find an authentic role for their creativity and desires. However, such possibilities are decreasing in our technologically-dominated world, and *The Guild: Vork* archives a moment as significant to the history of the Internet as that archived by *Sex and the Single Girl* is significant to the history of women in counterculture, because it takes up those steps taken outside of established counter-and subcultural scripts to enact lifestyle desires not yet bolstered by slogans or an official history. It is these traces of individual work, unrecognized outside the sphere of autobiographically-inflected, experience-based cultural production, that help us to understand counterculture and resistance in ways that are inevitably obscured by packaged images and slogans, which imply a generational homogeneity that never was.

Because autobiographical inflection inspires a natural suspicion on the part of readers, who worry that historical narrative is obscured by individual psychological investments, there is a distance created that I believe we can mobilize. We ought to use

this distance, between self and collective archive of historical experience, to find and bring to life new points of connection with the past, and become better able to articulate our sense of what has been lost from any given moment, and what lingers, asserting disproportionate influence, based on powerful archivists, and what we might work to keep. My investments in this approach are strengthened by my observations of digital culture, the dominant components of which strive for a superficial seamlessness of self-preservation, but obscure the differences inherent in history. (Here I am thinking especially of Facebook, in which the “blips” and negative encounters of one's life are censured by the social order.) In this context, our ability to remember and record the pace and nature of changes over a short period of time, that is, to self-fashion using the new media of our day, becomes fundamental to active participation in the shaping of the legacy of contemporary culture. My concern is analogous to Thomas Frank's concern about counterculture -- I believe that self-fashioning represents the communicative articulation of genuine, historically situated desire, broadly conceived. It represents a key site for understanding women's lives, especially since its expansion across media in the 1960s, and into the present. However, I worry that the self-fashioning impulse could be distorted by its pseudo-democratization into vast social networks that demand a homogeneity of structure. While I am confident that experimental self-fashioning is thriving, I am anxious to assert its value for understanding recent cultural history.

Section VI: Two Facebook Memoirs, and the *Work* of Self-Fashioning

In order to delve into the effects of contemporary digital culture on self-fashioning, I turn to two recently published books about the experiences of women in Silicon Valley. These complement *The Guild* comics' account of the user experience of

the twenty-first century Internet, by offering the experience of the wealthy owners of the social networking companies. While these two books, Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* and Katherine Losse's *The Boy Kings: A Journey Into the Heart of the Social Network*, describe their work at Facebook, rather than at, Blizzard Entertainment, the company that owns *World of Warcraft*, I believe that, because the focus of *The Guild* is on the social experience of gaming, the story of Facebook is indeed complementary.

I read Sandberg's *Lean In* a Facebook *memoir* because, although she insists that it is not a memoir at all, the story that emerges most strongly from its pages is one of how she reconciled her particular life experiences, especially in government and business, with the demands of her latest employer, Facebook. Specifically, she models her ability to conform to Facebook's corporate strategy of appearing to be intellectually dynamic workplace, by encouraging transparency and ambitious creativity in all of its employees and partners (9). In other words, the questions she answers for the reader are, from my perspective, less “how to succeed” than “how to become even more successful in the contemporary marketplace.” Just as Brown discounted those women whose sexual desires did not match up with hers, especially lesbians, and focused on women who could mimic her privileged position in the heterosexual marketplace, Sandberg discounts those women who are structurally excluded from careers with high earning potential. However, her personal story provides a valuable window into the historical circumstances that have enabled her to become a “Facebook billionaire.” The numerical achievement happened after *Lean In* was published, but the news came as no surprise (Vara 1).

Reading *Lean In* as a memoir enables me to track Sandberg's encounters as they are mediated by a quickly-evolving New Media landscape specifically, rather than simply a broad reflection of our shared historical moment. This specificity helps me to attend to the uneven impact of New Media on the social world, in which Sandberg is situated as a winner. As a self-help book, *Lean In* can be summarized by its advice: women ought to let go of the fear that focusing on their career will prevent them from having fulfilling family lives. Believing that it is the fear of being unfeminine that leads women to make disproportionate career sacrifices to maintain their families' well-being, Sandberg offers comfort and encouragement. As a memoir, however, *Lean In* must be summarized differently, and in a longer form: As a young woman, Sandberg had many opportunities to succeed in male-dominated fields, including her education in economics and her work in the corporate world. In addition, she cultivated a family life, not without some complications, including time wasted on adolescent insecurities about her desirability in the heterosexual marketplace, as well as an ill-advised early marriage. When she got the job as Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, she found herself in a position of power, both financially and as a potential role model for women seeking high-powered careers. Being image-savvy, she chose to demonstrate the Facebook platform's value for disseminating her message, which, fortunately, as Losse and other critics have noted, coincided with CEO Zuckerberg's goal of developing a gender-progressive image for his company. The fact that their goals coincided does not definitively undermine Sandberg's claim to insight and success, but it does present an opportunity for the critique of her as an "embedded feminist," who believes in working within the power of large institutions, rather than forming alternative social organizations. Losse herself makes this argument in

her critique of *Lean In* in *Dissent*, pitting individual experience against individual experience (1).

It takes less conceptual work to read Losse's book as a Facebook memoir, perhaps partly because her academic work was in literature rather than economics or business, and she takes naturally to the form. She herself foregrounds her five years as a Facebook employee as the organizing principle for her story, which provides a clear temporal division between her experience of life, online and off-, before Facebook grew powerful, and how she struggled to incorporate its power into her worldview. Like Sandberg, she espouses her views on the quickly-evolving landscape of gender and technology, but she does so according to the conventions of the memoir, at moments in which she herself recalls formulating questions for the first time. This approach contrasts with Sandberg's self-help approach, which describes only those moments of change, which prove instructive, that is, in which a career advice message can be packaged for the attentive reader. (If there is a career message in Losse, it's "find wealth and then quit.")

Within the conventions of the memoir, there is room for varying levels of distance between the author in the present, who addresses the reader, and the author in the past, who is addressed by the author in the present throughout (Kohlert). In a self-help memoir, like Sandberg's, this distance is consistent, between a series of moments of equal size in which the author in the past was saying no to something she should have said yes to, and the author in the past hammers home that things will always improve if she says yes, so long as she doesn't break any cardinal rules. In a literary memoir, by contrast, the author in the past and the author in the present have a more fraught relationship, and the

author in the present is not presented as an authority on anything except her own experience (Harman 76).

Losse's Facebook memoir tells a story about a humanities graduate student at Johns Hopkins who, lamenting the loss of genuine public space in Baltimore, becomes entranced by Facebook, which seems like a hopeful space for a new commons. She drops out of graduate school to work for the company, in the capacity of communicating directly with the site's users, many of whom share the author's excitement and trepidation about this experimental social networking space. In summary, after a few years, Losse comes to the conclusion that her job is no longer helping anyone to accomplish the utopian goals with which she began it, and so, after trying on two more roles within the company, she quits. The first of these roles is a job in translation, which both allows her to earn more money and to travel more, as well as to reach a goal she can still stand behind, that of making Facebook functional in its increasingly international user base's native languages. The next comes at the beginning of the end of her time at Facebook, when she becomes Zuckerberg's ghostwriter. On the one hand, this role represents a huge promotion, but it also takes her to the heart of the problem with the site, namely, its CEO's obsession with his own image, and his prioritization of that image over his stated goal of helping people to connect in ways they might actually want to.

When she quits, she is happy for the freedom that Facebook's money has given her to return to her passion of writing seriously about social issues, in this memoir. Losse wishes to de-romanticize Facebook, and she does so by making use of the memoir form. Sandberg, by contrast, wishes to *use* Facebook to expand her *Lean In* from self-help book

to campaign, which takes advantage of social networking, viral marketing, and streaming video testimonials.

Sandberg's move to expand access to her ideas has structural parallels with the transmedia storytelling approach of *The Guild*, both in terms of taking advantage of multiple media platforms, and in being strategically inclusive of different kinds of stories. However, because each story bolsters the already-powerful Facebook, rather than one contained narrative artifact, its function is as different as a Beatles bubblegum wrapper from an original Kominsky-Crumb sketch.

Both Sandberg and Losse look back to counterculture to describe their inspiration to become women whose stories were worth telling. Whereas Sandberg turns to Friedan as a representative of a brave feminist from the 1960s and finds contemporary companionship with personal trainers and actresses, Losse turns to Joan Didion as her foremother in California storytelling, and finds contemporary companionship with Faludi, who seconded her evisceration of *Lean In*, and with Emily Gould, founder of the feminist publishing start-up Emily Books, which features “one-of-a-kind books by women and other weirdos” (Autostraddle 1).

Losse's cynical approach to Facebook is meaningfully grounded in her experience of the website over time. As a user, she was so inspired that she decided to work for the company. As a low level user-oriented employee, she began to see the unequal value the site was bringing to people's lives, which became clearer to her as she began to be required to become an even more active user in order to promote an image of the company. As a Facebook user, Losse entered with a high level of experience and passion, having experienced the Internet in many stages. As a teenager, she had

experienced the Internet primarily as “an anarchistic sphere devoted to wielding technology against corporations,” based on the savvy of her hacker friends, met on message boards (125). Next, “[a]fter the boom of the late 1990s ushered in the consumer Internet,” she established a pseudonym and began to frequent “forums devoted to fashion and style” (136). Pseudonymity was especially important in these spaces, as it had been in the previous stage for political reasons, but here for reasons of sexism -- it was a way of avoiding “empty exhibitionism,” and keeping one's information from “search-engine crawlers” and “predatory men,” the latter being a particular concern for women in the women-centered spaces of the Internet, including consumer-oriented beauty advice sites, like those Losse joined, and also media fandom (136).

Facebook, established in 2004, marked the next stage in Losse's Internet history, as, in her terms, it filled two nationally-felt needs, established after 9/11, first, for people to “know that some critical event, somewhere, was occurring, however distant,” and secondly, the need for “public space” in light of increasing wealth inequality and precarity, even for the “Ivy or near-Ivy” college students who were the site's beta users (76, 105). As a user, Losse experienced three stages of development in Internet culture, each of which excited one of her fantasies about life: in the anarchic, anti-corporate phase, the Internet excited her feeling, common among people who value intelligence over social equilibrium, that institutions with undeserved power could be outsmarted and undermined by increasingly accessible technology.

In the consumer phase, the Internet brought women's culture to life, in a way -- what was already a parasocial space, the letters pages and testimonial stories that intersperse the advertisements in women's magazines, became forums, in which people

could more efficiently determine the actual best methods of beauty product application and consumption, in order to decrease the margin of error associated with consumption based on advertisements and glorified advertisements (such as beauty tip segments in fashion magazines). Even more valuably, these forums set up women-centered spaces, in which, undoubtedly, as in media fandom, women's lives (filtered through pseudonyms and fictionalizations) became the subject of conversation, and the inherent value of a potentially international community of women communicating about what they share by living under that category is, for me, indisputable.

And then, in the Facebook phase, Losse's hope for a public space that would unite her campus (Johns Hopkins), those with her training (other graduate students in the humanities, and other highly-educated people generally), and, eventually, "the world," seemed possible. It would not be like the corporate-owned news ticker that Losse criticizes in her thoughts on life post-9/11, but rather a space in which people could learn what their loved ones and peers were doing, without having to feel like they were being overbearing or displaying inappropriate interest in others, as in the more sexually-oriented social networking sites like MySpace (75). Facebook's early achievement was to mirror real-world social structures, not merely call them forth at moments deemed interesting to an audience of outsiders, like newscasters do. As Losse says, "It was the first Internet site I had ever used that mirrored a real-life community" (168). In some ways, that is a good thing, or at least, understandably exciting in the moment when it first appeared as possible, but in it, the fantasy of the beauty forums or media fandom is lost -- wasn't the Internet supposed to help us to articulate new modes of socialization, not just replicate the ones already expected of us? I should note that this particular women-

centered fantasy is mine, cemented in queer feminist work in fan studies, and not Losse's memoir (Hellekson).

Losse's particular fantasy was not about the absolute interconnectedness of women, but rather “world domination,” which she had articulated to herself as a teenager as her desire for how she would use her Apple PowerBook, in response to its advertising campaign's slogan, “What's on your PowerBook?” (179). She had:

a sudden fantasy of me, in ponytail and sweatshirt, remotely manipulating the world from a laptop, armed with ideas about how the world should be and the new ability to distribute them. From the laptop, I could write and distribute information faster than ever before. It was intoxicating to imagine, and Facebook's sudden, faithful rendering in 2004 of the physical world into the virtual felt the same. (179)

Losse had retained some of the fantasy of the anarchic days of the Internet, when users imagined toppling corporations, and reversing the whole hierarchical relationship between owners of the means of consumption and consumers, but her fantasy was also power-hungry rather than liberatory -- it was an image of personal success within a newly emergent counterculture. In the end, Losse realized it, but it turned out that the most valued work within Facebook was to serve its creator, not to serve its mission, and so Losse turned to the dream underlying so much women's autobiographical writing, to transcend dominant logics (here of corporate success and individual power) in order to tell the truth about how cultural shifts happen, and artfully archive the language in which past utopian visions came to be handed down as simplified versions of themselves. The shortcomings of these moments in cultural history are always most visible to those in the

know but structurally disempowered, and Losse, by virtue of being a long-term Internet user pre-Facebook, and then a low-level user-oriented employee, satisfies both criteria. Combined with her training in the humanities, she emerges an example of a fully-articulated individual encounter with Facebook.

Memoir -- the only genre in which Losse would be given an audience's full, extended attention, while she disclosed what Facebook really looked like from her perspective -- became necessary early on. From his first encounters with Losse, it was clear to Facebook co-founder Dustin Moskovitz. She describes:

It often felt like this at Facebook, like I was the only one who was watching, seeing what was happening not as a privileged participant but as an observer.

Dustin, the most critically astute of the Facebook founders, did not fail to notice.

A year after I started working there, we were talking at a smoke-filled party somewhere in the Stanford hills when he said to me, matter-of-factly, "You're going to write a book about us," as we descended the stairs into a crowded den to watch a band that had just begun to play. (20)

To Moskovitz, Losse's turn to memoir seems obvious because she has "privileged information" about a subgroup of a privileged class of people, who are gaining celebrity status among an audience that grows each day that Facebook acquires new users. This is an example of the misogynistic critique of women's experimental autobiography -- because women are perceived as lacking in technical or otherwise marketable skills (in even more misogynistic terms, women's primary value is as beautiful sex objects anyway), they turn to emotional manipulation -- confession as blackmail, revealing

women's lack of humor, as well as their lack of real independence -- someone else must be wrong in order for them to be right.

Conservative memoirists, like Sandberg, and, earlier, Brown, are subjected to different critiques than these, because they acquiesce to so many of the terms laid out for them by misogynistic critique -- they don't reveal the cracks in heteronormativity by speaking about family dysfunction or queer sexuality, they understand the value of trade secrets and corporate logic, and they smile for the camera, projecting an image of confidence and a oneness with the purportedly objective camera eye (Ahmed). Losse articulates the latter part of this misogynistic request below, after describing an incident in which she's taken on a tour of Facebook's headquarters by an engineer, who goes out of his way to point out that a few women have already started complaining about the images of objectified women that the boys in charge initially chose as decor. She learns quickly that “[j]ust because a few women might be let into their Palo Alto clubhouse, we weren’t supposed to complain about things like sexy images of women on the walls. This was their kingdom and their idea of cool, and we shouldn’t mess with it” (5). On the primary critique of memoir, that it is trivial and grounded in gossip and non-technical knowledge that is undeserving of a significant place in the archives, or, of course, of high-level pay, Losse describes her first lesson in how the jargon of Silicon Valley specifically excluded her and her humanities background (coded as feminine) from the outset:

Scaling [...] was fetish of the valley, something that engineers could and did talk about for hours. Things were either scalable, which meant they could help the site grow fast indefinitely, or unscalable, which meant that the offending feature had

to be quickly excised or cancelled, because it would not lead to great, automated speed and size. Unscalable usually meant something, like personal contact with customers, that couldn't be automated, a dim reminder of the pre-industrial era, of human labor that couldn't be programmed away. Though I didn't quite realize it on this first day at Facebook, I was in possession of a skill set— that of the English major— that was woefully unscalable as far as Facebook was concerned, more of a liability than an asset. When I perused Mark's profile on Facebook after we had become virtual friends, I noticed that in the Favorite Books field he wrote, "I don't read." Okay, I thought, gearing up for a long battle to be appreciated in my new role, this job might work out in the end but it is not going to be as easy as I had first thought. (5-6)

It is undoubtedly Losse's privilege as a once-near-Ivy insider, and a beautiful straight white woman that made her think that her job at Facebook would be "easy," but the lesson about the humanities providing one with a skill set that is a liability in the increasingly corporate world of technology is a crucial one for understanding the path to self-fashioning via autobiographical experiment.

Finally, she speaks about her experience as a high-level ghostwriter for the CEO of the company, from which point she can see how he addresses his employees and users, using a particular minimalist style and "boyish cadence" (186). When she first sends Zuckerberg a letter she's written in his voice, he's delighted by her Facebook-like ability to mimic him. At last, it seemed, her humanities training surprised him with its value, and confirmed Losse's status as an insider in his world.

"How did you know how to write like me?" he asked with disbelief, once I had

situated myself at the white table, my arms folded. “When I read this I thought it was something I wrote.” A slight smile appeared on his face, finally. When he smiles, you know he feels comfortable, among bros, like you’re at the fraternity house and someone has said something particularly funny. I have worked hard, I suddenly realized, to hone myself into a proxy bro to these boys: nonchalant, stolid, avoiding the appearance of caring too much about anything, but especially about the wrong things, which are anything too girly or nontechnical or decorative, things that in this world do not scale. All the girls who acted like girls (and who didn’t have social connections to the founders and early engineers) were still stuck down in the lower tiers of the company, largely ignored except when they appeared at company parties or in the tagged photos of them that appear on Facebook after parties. “I don’t know, I guess I’ve just spent a long time listening to you speak.” “Okay, well, you’ve got the role,” he announced. Facebook tended to refer to jobs, especially the loftier and more outward-facing ones, as “roles.” (186)

Once Losse's mastery of Zuckerberg's minimalism was complete, she began the process of leaving the company, making sure that she left with enough money to continue to enjoy the luxuries of the “San Francisco tech bourgeoisie” (222), but with the power to tell the story of what she'd learned about Facebook on her own terms, rather than writing an embedded book, like the one Zuckerberg proposed that they co-author, or like Sandberg's *Lean In*. She did not trade in Facebook's world of ugly social hierarchies for a return to a more low-key lifestyle. Life was already low-key at Facebook in her ghostwriting job, in any case. She moved away from San Francisco, rather, to exchange

the interconnectedness of constant conversations and News Feed stories, for an escape into low-technology art. She describes the move:

In January 2011 I said goodbye to San Francisco and moved to Marfa, Texas, to write this book. Marfa, unlike San Francisco or Palo Alto, has no great need for the connectedness that we experience now over the Internet and on our phones, and perhaps that is why I was drawn here. In Marfa, it is the land and the sky, rather than any human enterprise, which scales, extending farther than the eye can comprehend, creating nightly sunsets that seem unworldly, even in contrast to any other sunsets one has been fortunate to watch. In Marfa, the ephemera of the social web recedes; it is the land and the art, like Donald Judd's one hundred sculptures in mill aluminum, that ask you to pay attention and consider them daily. (226)

She exchanges the life of the San Francisco tech bourgeoisie for that of the traveling art bourgeoisie, trading the scene of high-speed information consumption for the material neighborhood of Marfa, an isolated town, which draws tourists seeking authenticity in cultural experience. Losse's final thesis, then, is that Facebook addiction had become a poison against humanities and arts-grounded insights, and so she returned to these. Here she mirrors Kominsky-Crumb's turn to recycled material sculpture and low-technology living.

What has been lost for Losse was her admittedly naive utopian hope for the website as a public space in which people could commune, even in the architecturally divided cities of the postindustrial United States (very much grounded in her experience living in Baltimore), rather than something specific that was written out of the website's

code or user base. It was an engineered change, whose particulars are worth rehearsing before I turn to my analysis of the phenomenon's effect on other works of contemporary literature, like *The Guild* comics. She laments the transition in the structure of Facebook profiles from open-ended text boxes to more codified and visibly networked lists of interests and products, which marked a transition from an opportunity for self-fashioning into an opportunity to display public approval and free advertising for celebrities and products already on the marketplace (186). Of course, this transformation from a humanities-friendly approach to an advertising demographic is merely one part of the company's vision, which was particularly visible to her as a writer and lover of the open-endedness of literature.

After she published her book, Losse agreed to do an interview with *LQOK Magazine*, an online science fiction magazine, in which she was asked to elaborate on her views of the importance of the humanities in the era of Facebook's unprecedented penetration. Succinctly, she said, "I've found that literature and philosophy can give us space to understand what is happening in the world in a way that an instant news update doesn't" (Losse *LQOK Magazine*). This statement is significant because she notes how the News Feed feature on Facebook, the release of which she outlines in impressive detail in her book, reduces personal sharing, for whatever performative components it has always had, to "news" (41). Those stories which count as news, in perfect parallel to those in the mainstream journalistic outlets that Facebook and other social media have nearly replaced, are those that people think they want to hear, about babies rather than sex, promotions rather than layoffs, and narratives of overcoming rather than

succumbing. Here Judith Halberstam's concept of "shadow feminisms," articulated in *The Queer Art of Failure*, can be helpful. She says:

I am proposing that feminists refuse the choices as offered -- freedom in liberal terms or death -- in order to think about a shadow archive of resistance, one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing. This could be called an *anti-social feminism*, a form of feminism preoccupied with negativity and negation. (129)

It is not only a problem that the success stories give us an artificial sense of our own importance and ability to transcend whatever social problems may worry us because they exclude the kinds of news that may most accurately reflect the increasingly dire conditions for many in our historical moment. It is perhaps even more dangerous that they are custom-tailored for rapid consumption in a way that prevents us from the rigorous thought processes that might help us to see through their rhetoric of success. This is anecdotally clear on an individual level, but Losse is bold enough to transform it into a general pronouncement on the state of letters, namely, that woman-authored literature and philosophy become more important than they had been before. Because we are currently so saturated with poisoned writing, the idea of good writing, produced for a different purpose than product placement and social climbing, becomes precious.

To put it differently, one could even say that, where Sandberg wishes to revitalize feminism, Losse wishes to revitalize philosophy and contemplation, particularly, by her example, among women. Further, she thinks that by telling the story of women in Silicon Valley, as well as often female Facebook users who bear the consequences of its rapid

expansion, transformation, and disregard for privacy settings, is a way of calling us all, but especially women, to a kind of attention from which we have long been excluded, that of philosophical contemplation, asking questions about the good life as a whole that have long been relegated to the apparent anachronisms of philosophy.

Perhaps the simplest way to articulate the differences between Losse and Sandberg are in their respective approaches to counterculture as a formative influence in their lives. Losse's relationship to the legacy of counterculture is absolutely central to the way in which she presents herself in her introduction. Describing the fact that, although she grew up in Arizona, people always assume that Losse is a California native, she says:

Being so close, and yet still a half-day's drive away from us, California was exciting, exotic, a dream of American perfection that we could actually touch. When school was out, my best friend Dana and I would drive the long desert highway to San Diego, entertaining ourselves by searching for the Hotel California, which legend said existed somewhere on the highway. "Is that it?" one of us would ask, upon seeing a white building silhouetted against the sky. "I don't know," the other would say, and we would drive on, searching. I think that we almost prayed that we would never find it, so that we could keep searching, forever. (227)

Just as Losse speaks of being instantly attracted to the anti-corporate politics of pre-consumer Internet culture, she speaks of being drawn to a particular image of the United States, which became universally beloved by the big-hearted during the heyday of counterculture, and then was tragically destroyed by greed and commodification. This is a personal example of Turner's argument in *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, and a

story of how she held onto her hope for the legacy of counterculture in its West Coast incarnation to guide her to her artistic vision, which indeed it did, by way of granting her close access to its second coming, tech culture's waves of romanticization and lamentation, which took place in that same Northern California landscape.

Sandberg, by contrast, did not grow up romanticizing counterculture or feminism as inspirations for sustained critique of the system, but rather “headed into college believing that the feminists of the sixties and seventies had done the hard work of achieving equality for my generation” (2109-2110). She describes her contradictory reluctance to embrace feminism beyond a gratefulness to the past for having happened:

On one hand, I started a group to encourage more women to major in economics and government. On the other hand, I would have denied being in any way, shape, or form a feminist. None of my college friends thought of themselves as feminists either. It saddens me to admit that we did not see the backlash against women around us. We accepted the negative caricature of a bra-burning, humorless, man-hating feminist. She was not someone we wanted to emulate, in part because it seemed like she couldn't get a date. Horrible, I know— the sad irony of rejecting feminism to get male attention and approval. In our defense, my friends and I truly, if naïvely, believed that the world did not need feminists anymore. We mistakenly thought that there was nothing left to fight for. (2118-2123)

Although she concedes now that the belief was a mistaken one, it is a different trajectory onto which we must map this later insight, than, say, Losse's disappointment with the realization of Facebook's vision over time, which, like feminism, began with certain broad, utopian hope, that later revealed itself to suffer from its prioritization of scalability

and growth over genuine human connection. Sandberg tells us the story of how she came to her beliefs about what is necessary for women, now, to develop “the will to lead,” while Losse reveals for us the logics by which we are prevented from doing so, and insists that what is important is not leading within these logics, but insisting upon our own.

Sandberg shows us how she learned to work in a way that was appreciated by the system, with increasing rewards parallel to those of high status men, while Losse shows us how she retained her capacity to think for herself, not always “correctly,” necessarily, but always on terms that she values. *The Boy Kings* does the work of articulating the limits of adaptability within the constraints of individuality, and offers a way out of reductive versions of individuality and by describing a movement across media in which truth can be articulated at a series of intersections of personal and technological/cultural histories. The focus on the limits of the individual and her attachment to difference connects *The Boy Kings* to the history of women's autobiography since the 1960s. Additionally, the comparison between Losse and Sandberg reveals a new incarnation of old debates about women and autobiographical storytelling. It is worth noting that sex is almost entirely absent from both stories -- in Sandberg, it is merely reproductive, and in Losse, it is merely an extension of friendship and ephemeral closeness. However, the desire for fulfilling human connection remains central, and, as in the sex-centered autobiographies from counterculture, this desire is represented as the driving force of the individual woman's trajectory through life.

Conclusion: Shadow Feminisms, Queer Cross-Historical Relations and Women's Experimental Autobiography

I hope that, in my exploration of counterculture and its afterlife, I have demonstrated the generative possibilities of a mode of criticism focused on women's first-person writing. In my upcoming chapters, on the alternative publishing cultures of the 1970s and 1980s, and the boutique memoir of twenty-first-century intellectual development, the encounters made possible by this approach will continue to multiply in number and deepen in the intimacy they create between the recent past of experience and the chaotic present of interpretation. Counterculture provides the perfect starting point for my genealogy of women's experimental autobiography, because it represents a moment full of reversals. If the expectation is that I will be acquiescent, then I will speak. If the expectation is that I will try to compete with men on the terms they have established, I will instead create my own terms, and challenge them to work with me in dynamic fields defined by the interplay of multiple field languages. If the expectation is that I will shop, then instead I will create. These sentiments linger throughout the recent history of women's culture, sometimes aligning with the major drives of dominant culture, sometimes diverging from them. The task for us as readers is not to divide individual works into the two categories. The task is rather to grasp women's self-fashioning practices as an approach to the interpretation of contemporary life alongside approaches like sociology, market research, and the classics-based study of the humanities. Because the focus the women's experimental autobiography is on connecting multiple fields, it represents an important critical standpoint alternative to the purportedly objective, whose power the very idea counterculture sought to deny.

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Chapter 2 - The Alternative Literary Cultures of the 1980s and 1990s: Black Feminism,
Girls' Lives and Queer Comics

“Gentrification in the seventies, eighties, and nineties replaced urbanity with suburban values from the sixties, seventies, and eighties, so that the suburban conditioning of racial and class stratification, homogeneity of consumption, mass-produced aesthetics, and familial privatization got resituated into big buildings, attached residences, and apartments. This undermines urbanity and recreates cities as centers of obedience instead of instigators of positive change. Just as gentrification literally replaces mix with homogeneity, it enforces itself through the repression of diverse expression. This is why we see so much quashing of public life as neighborhoods gentrify. Permits are suddenly required for performing, for demonstrating, for dancing in bars, for playing musical instruments on the street, for selling food, for painting murals, selling art, drinking beer on the stoop, or smoking pot or cigarettes.” Sarah Schulman (28)

“Ann Taylor Allen writes that in the 1980s women’s studies practitioners began to work from within the university, changing the ‘emphasis from outsider to insider strategies’ (1996, 153), and Messer-Davidow reads the danger in such an insider strategy: ‘feminist studies became a discipline contained by the academy it had set out to transform’ (2002, 86). Feminist bookstore documents, however, record women’s studies as an uncontained discipline by mapping out the new relationships forged between academic and community feminism...At feminist bookstores, books taught in women’s studies courses appeared outside of the women’s studies section. That is, the bookstore itself, as Arditti claims, was women’s studies. The designation Women’s Studies, then, was significant as a section title marking institutionalization, while questions about what to put in the section seemed vexing in a bookstore filled with texts by women. Ultimately, the bookstore refused to discipline its women’s studies and instead used the section primarily for reference books.” - Kristen Hogan (606-608)

“Like a spilt glass of milk, my life. A white pool shimmering on the floor. My corrupt womanhood: a waste. I feel the same way about being a writer. Staying up all night burning my brain cells, for years, swallowing tons of cheap speed, also for years, eating poorly, pretty much drinking myself to death. And then not. Contracting whatever STD came to me in the seventies, eighties, nineties, smoking cigarettes, a couple a packs a day for at least twenty years, being poor and not ever really going to the doctor (only the dentist: flash teeth), wasting my time doing so little work, being truly dysfunctional, and on top of that, especially

my point, being a dyke, in terms of the whole giant society, just a fogged human glass turned on its side. Yak yak yak a lesbian talking. And being rewarded for it. Not only wasted, but useless, rancid, a wreck. It has come to me slow. Ten years ago Jane DeLynn said let's face it, Eileen, we are ruined. She didn't mean by some romantic sadness. She meant in fact. Jane's a little older. I wasn't ruined yet." - Eileen Myles (1681-1689)

Ron Chan's primary cover for *The Guild: Tink* comic shows the young woman's avatar, bravely going about her work of hunting within the game. Tinkerballa is a character any gamer would want on her team – she is committed, focused, and ambitious. Peter Bagge's variant cover for *The Guild: Tink* comic depicts an angry girl, with a red face, bloodshot eyes, and an enraged expression, hurling arrows at her computer screen. Before the release of this comic, fans of *The Guild* knew Tink to be a temperamental person, who resisted social harmony at every turn. In *The Guild: Codex*, she insisted on being bribed to join a guild in the first place. In the first season of the Web series, she was resistant to joining the Knights of Good at their first in-person meeting, at the restaurant Cheesybeard's. In the end, she participated, having brought a personal gaming console with her as a distraction, and having left a suitor she calls her boyfriend in the car, waiting for her to be finished with the meeting. During that meeting, while the other members of the guild are introducing themselves with real names and occupations, Tink offers only the most cursory summary of her background story, which, as Zaboo points out, she appropriated from the television series *Ugly Betty*. Tink threatens to leave whenever she is pushed to reveal more about herself than she'd like to, happier to burn

bridges with other gamers than to allow the game, her means of escape, to be converted into another social world over which she has no control. Bagge's alternate cover depicts an exaggerated image of this antisocial aspect of her personality, which will be explored in the comic.

Bagge is an alternative comics creator, who got his start during the late 1970s, creating comics about the emerging punk subculture for *Punk Magazine*, which has been described as "the only magazine to truly capture the music, the personalities, the inventiveness, creativity, and especially the humor that pervaded the early days of punk rock, well before it was codified" (Kemp 152). In the 1980s, Bagge worked with Robert and Aline Kominsky-Crumb on *Weirdo*, and, in the 1990s, he created the series *Hate*, which was published throughout that decade and the early 2000s by Fantagraphics Comics. In *Hate*, he depicts avatar Buddy Bradley's life in Seattle, especially his engagement with the alternative grunge music scene. *Hate* takes on the stereotypes of Generation X and the debates about the authenticity of the alternative music scene. For example, in *Hate* #13, Buddy is angry when he reads an article in a friend's zine that depicts him as a slacker and an enemy to the success of his generation's otherwise promising alternative culture (presumably exemplified by the zine itself). The article reads,

a case in point would be someone I had the misfortune to share an apartment with a while back, who went by the name of 'Buddy'-- ...that there are so many of these 'Buddies' among us represents not only a failure of our mass culture and educational system, but a failure by the more enlightened among us for even tolerating the likes of them, with their negative attitudes and reactionary

opinions... if we are to have a constructive future we must first purge these cancerous beings from our own ranks before they poison us all. (5)

Buddy responds to this malicious misrepresentation of his coolness with rage, developing an exaggerated expression that presages Tink's – the zine in Buddy's hands is crumpling as a result of his nervous energy, just Tink's purple socks are coming off because of vigorous foot-shaking. Here are two alternative comics "types," who are wrestling with their subculture, which, on the one hand, represents their chance at belonging and the realization of their insights, and, on the other hand, represents the source of their greatest frustrations. If their subculture could just function as the escape it was meant to, then their happiness in self-expression could flourish. However, because their self-expression relies on a socially-mediated milieu, namely, a subcultural one, they find themselves enraged as often as they are delighted by their aesthetic sphere.

If the afterlife of counterculture continues to define the large-scale, heavily politicized culture wars of the twenty-first-century, then the afterlife of so-called "alternative" cultures, which came to be defined at different, intersecting moments for literature, music, comics, and film, continues to define the limits of individual consumer subjectivity.¹⁷ In the twenty-first century, and especially the era of Facebook, these limits have all but disappeared, except as historical referents. Counterculture represented the

¹⁷ In the history of media studies, the period of the early 1990s was marked by an unprecedented celebration of the fan as resistant reader and participant in alternative culture. Looking back to the era of *Textual Poachers* from the Twenty-first century, Matt Hills argues that media studies scholars wished "to preserve the fiction of 'linear progress', i.e. that we definitely now know better than the theorists of the past. However, this version of moral dualism (past views of the passive audience=bad; current views of the active audience=good) resembles an academic version of 'popular memory'" (7). The fiction of linear progress is undone by the sedimented history of media change.

hope that a different lifestyle than the postwar suburban one was possible, and it came with a community, an explosion of experimental aesthetics, and a unifying desire to transform all facets of life, from work to sexuality, into genuinely expressive spaces. Alternative culture, by contrast, is already more cynical about the possibility that the expansive desires of one group of people -- say, performance artists, or poets -- could be fully articulated, given the hegemonically-imposed limitations on the spaces and venues artists could access. Whereas the Crumb family lived life according to Aline Kominsky-Crumb's "own style" in Winters, California, until gentrification and the encroachment of monoculture made this impossible, alternative comics artists like Phoebe Gloeckner had to establish mainstream careers for themselves, and relegate their art-making to hobby status, because such "outside" living was already impossible. Perhaps because of the by now near-universal acknowledgment, reluctant though it may be, of the power of mainstream culture over alternative arts movements, the latter were able to host more complex dialogues across social differences than much of the counterculture had been. As I explored in my discussion of Kominsky-Crumb, within counterculture, special interest groups like the Wimmen's Comix Collective often demanded declarations of allegiance, lest one member be stamped as a sell-out, and thus undermine the broader cause in its public representation. Such insider power dynamics exist in many cultural movements, and certainly throughout the history of political activism and feminism, but these were, during the historical transition from counterculture to alternative cultures, transformed into a new general acquiescence to consumerism, out of which new alliances and juxtapositions were forged.

When I say acquiescence to consumerism, I don't mean that these artists lacked meaningful critiques of consumer capitalism -- quite the opposite is true. However, their specific lived experiences showed no “outside” to consumer-based participation in U.S. public culture, and so they shifted their focus from a romanticization of that “outside” to a sustained grappling with how to hold onto one's values and broader subjectivity within an increasingly homogenous cultural landscape. Taking cues, again, from Heather Love's “backwards” approach to cultural history, like her,

I want to recall a queer tradition that focuses on the lived experience of structural inequality. I realize that this might position me at the margins of a discussion that focuses on capital (rather than class as a dimension of social and psychic life). It's also true that I probably have less to say about crisis than about making do and getting by. Because of its emphasis on everyday life and intimate experience, the tradition I am pointing to can seem to lack a revolutionary horizon. But for me this refusal of the choice between revolution and capitulation is what makes this tradition queer. (Crosby 131)

Beyond being queer by nature, I suggest that this tradition is also multi-ethnic by nature, revealing to readers that it was in fact white privilege all along, at least in large part, that enabled counterculture's apparent “outside” spaces.¹⁸ In this chapter, and, without that romantic myth of the “outside,” artists share more common ground with one another based on their shared intimacies and difficulties of daily life under the dynamics of a

¹⁸ As Stuart Hall writes, “Hippie society is, therefore, strikingly, a part of white America... There are black faces on the Haight Ashbury sidewalks, and organized black militant groups, like the Panthers, in other parts of California, but by and large the Hippie scene in San Francisco is separated from the largely black slums which surround it by high, though invisible walls” (7).

conservative political culture, an expanding requirement for consumption-based participation in normative culture, and gentrification. I trace these phenomena of everyday life, particularly as they coalesce to represent some of the last pre-Facebook vestiges of individual consumer subjectivity, by looking at the complex interplay between institutional and extra-institutional reading practices enabled by women's alternative publishing cultures during the 1980s and nineties.

Section I: Audre Lorde's *Zami* and the Feminist Bookstore Network

I begin by reading Audre Lorde's 1982 book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, which has for decades now been understood as a central work of contemporary U.S. literature, which contributes to the traditions of women's autobiography, African American literature, postmodern literature, the black lesbian *bildungsroman*, and black feminist theory (DiBernard 195). I begin here because Lorde's biomythography, a term she coined to describe the complexity of her approach to the autobiographical task in *Zami*, offers readers a kind of first-person handbook for approaching alternative literary cultures, just as *Need More Love* offered us a scrapbook of one experience of counterculture. The approach offered here continues to place women's experiences at its center, but insists that these are never contained to an individual seeking her own place within the world, but rather are always grounded in the self-understandings achievable by women in relation to one another. The term “zami” embodies this idea, meaning, in Lorde's understanding, “*A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers*” (255). And so, while it was up to me to stage the encounters I did between Kominsky-Crumb and other women writers drawing inspiration from counterculture, including Day, here a parallel approach to alternative culture is demanded by the

founding text itself. This demand necessitates a more expansive set of encounters than were present in the previous chapter, which may at times feel unwieldy, but it is my hope that the reader can take pleasure in this series of juxtapositions, rather than longing for the utopianism underlying the counterculture that came before, or the asymptotic approach to the infinite brought to life by the digital culture that came later.

In *Zami*, Lorde chronicles her experience inside and outside of educational institutions, and inside and outside of social institutions of feminism. Beginning with her early years in Harlem, her narrative maps her experience as it has been shaped by travels to Grenada, to Washington D.C., to Stamford, Connecticut, to Mexico City and Cuernavaca, and always back to New York City. By taking this approach, Lorde challenges the narrative of counterculture that suggests that it is locatable on a map, and that, once the queer subject has found his fellows, or in this case her sisters, a countercultural existence with them will be possible.¹⁹ That narrative was bolstered at the time by white gay men, who told coming out narratives with predictably happy endings, in which the alienated queer child found gay community in the Lower East Side or in the Castro. Lorde's representation of her years living on the Lower East Side is different, and without a particular focus on counterculture, focusing indeed on her survival as a black lesbian during the pre-counterculture 1950s. What she saw during this period was the political infighting that would come to undermine the efficacy of counterculture, as it revealed itself in her small social worlds. Drawing her own wisdom

¹⁹ Pre-AIDS, the cultural representation of this phenomenon was closely tied to the availability of public sex spaces for gay men in urban centers. José Esteban Muñoz recalls this “queer sex utopia,” as well as the way in which Leo Bersani and others later saw through what really represented “elitist, exclusionary, and savagely hierarchized libidinal economies” (34).

from the creative fusion of childhood memory with adult experience acquired at different moments, and in different places, Lorde's story is never reducible to a formula of finding what was missing, and then becoming whole.

In order to become whole on her own terms, Lorde must assemble “the journeywoman pieces of [her]self,” cataloguing the relationships with women that have made her who she is, and “Becoming. / Afrekete.” which involves tapping into, and transforming a Yoruba mythology underlying global black womanhood (5). Lorde's genre-transcending approach to her autobiographically-inflected novel embodies much about the alternative publishing cultures that were coming to be defined when she published the book in 1982. She represents subcultural life at the intersection of global culture and politics on the one hand, and everyday existence in U.S. urban centers on the other, and because her approach is women-centered, it represents the perfect starting point for my genealogy here. But before I offer my reading of *Zami*, I offer two of these intersecting publishing contexts: first, the context of alternative comics, and secondly, context of the feminist bookstore as the embodiment of the alternative space, which thrived in the 1980s. Jared Gardner says, of that same year in which *Zami* was published:

Alternative comics as we know them began with the historic partnership forged in 1982 between the Hernandez brothers and the small independent publisher Fantagraphics, run by Gary Groth and Kim Thompson (who passed away this year following a struggle with lung cancer). Over the course of the next three decades, Fantagraphics would grow to be the most influential institution in independent comics, while the Hernandezes' *Love & Rockets* became the most important and understudied work in American literature of the last generation. (1)

The “alternative” of alternative comics is different from the “alternative” of the alternative publishing cultures represented by feminist presses and bookstores, but they share both a strategic approach to the publishing marketplace and some similarities in terms of content. With the example of *Love & Rockets* especially, in which everyday life in Los Angeles connects to Latin American and chicano politics and mythologies, alternative comics reveals its kinship with alternative women's experimental autobiography.

Both exist in the interim between counterculture and digital culture, keeping the spirit of the former alive, and paving the way for the latter. In the context of comics, just as the undergrounds of the late 1960s and early 1970s provided an alternative artistic and political approach to the medium of comics, which had been dominated since the 1950s by conservative and heavily-censored superhero and newspaper comics, the alternative comics of the 1980s and 1990s showed how the medium could fuse that independent spirit with the changing contemporary culture. Aware of the flaws of the inside/outside dichotomy laid bare by counterculture, and newly relieved of the harsher constraints of the comics code, alternative cultural producers believed that comics could address serious and fringe topics realistically, complexly, and creatively, all while reaching a larger and more widely-dispersed audience than did the undergrounds. In a parallel history, the publishing tactics of counterculture feminists revealed themselves to suffer from that same inside-outside dichotomy, which kept important stories from being disseminated, and so new tactics were born. Feminists in the 1980s saw the need for more venues for

different kinds of writing,²⁰ especially presses focusing on the writing of lesbians and women of color, because these writers continued to be insufficiently-served by the first feminist presses and by major presses, especially when it came to their autobiographically experimental work. (Lorde had published poetry with Norton, but could not find a major publisher who wanted *Zami* (Lewis 1).)

The unifying goal of these alternative publishing movements was to translate everyday life, as experienced by marginalized characters, onto the page, for an audience who craved these stories. One trait these characters shared was their deep craving for authenticity. To represent everyday life authentically, the writers of alternative culture sought to depict the grand emotional scale of their characters' inner lives, as these contrast with their seemingly circumscribed outer lives in monoculture. For Art Spiegelman, whose *Maus* was published serially between 1980 and 1991, the task was to extract his father's story of having survived the Holocaust, and then to represent the multi-generational pain of survival in the late Twentieth Century. Spiegelman alternates between representations of himself in conversation with his father in Rego Park, in New York City, and his own graphic depiction of the stories his father tells him about the past. Within one sustained aesthetic approach, Spiegelman connects his own daily turmoil to the collective trauma of the Holocaust, revealing the living moral uncertainty that results from a thorough grappling with family history. Hillary Chute connects this drive to the

²⁰ One way they met this need was by publishing the “multi-genre anthologies by marginalized groups of women” that are the subject of Cynthia G. Franklin’s *Writing Women’s Communities: The Politics and Poetics of Contemporary Multi-Genre Anthologies* (5). Writing in 1997, she finds that such anthologies were, in the 1980s, “proliferating rapidly, and that they were becoming a privileged site for marginalized groups intent on theorizing and putting into practice communities founded upon a powerful but inherently unstable politic of identity” (5).

general trend in women's autobiography, also emerging during this time period, of authors, having experienced some kind of trauma, usually sexual, during childhood, seeking “alternative jurisdiction: in place of suing in court, of engaging the legal system to petition for official redress, the subject seeks a different kind of public forum in which to testify; the subject expresses agency not only in bearing witness but also in the literally productive public act of constructing representation” (79). This idea can be extended, too, to the broader desire for social justice articulated by many of the texts published by feminist presses. The space of alternative jurisdiction is found in the work itself, here, a book like *Zami*, which grapples with trauma both historical and personal, and is propelled forwards by way of the desire for creative survival. But the work demands company, and it finds it in the feminist bookstore, one of the institutions that blossomed in alternative culture, and in the catalogs of the feminist presses that published many of these bookstores' holdings.

The feminist bookstore, as a material representation of alternative culture, is notable for its negotiations with “mainstream” culture in several ways. Firstly, it is a space for consumption, which marks it as belonging to the mainstream pursuit of a successful commercial district, but it is also a space for gathering, where customers could reasonably expect to avoid the aggressive sales tactics of mall department stores. The feminist bookstore network believed strongly in providing free information to everyone who should come in, in the form of bulletin board postings, and would not, in principle, hassle those unable to purchase the books they looked at. There is a more cynical interpretation of this “hanging out” allowance, namely, that it enabled a shallow trend for people who wished to be seen as belonging to subculture without committing themselves

wholeheartedly to the politics of the movement. This interpretation represents nostalgia for countercultural modes of commitment, one that is insufficiently updated for the media landscape of the 1980s. In order to commit to a stance on the politics of the day, whether pro- or anti-pornography feminism or black feminist politics, one had to commit to alternative reading spaces. Indeed, one incarnation of black feminist politics, womanism, incorporated in its self-definition the significance of choosing to inhabit women's cultural spaces rather than others (Walker).²¹

Secondly, the feminist bookstore is alternative because, while its practitioners and advocates saw early on that many of their customers would come from university women's studies curricula, as these became more widespread and popular, the bookstores refused to be "disciplined" by institutionalized women's studies. Instead, they maintained their own independent theory of women's texts, enacted on the shelves, and it was one that relegated academic women's studies to a subject heading referring to reference books. This decision did not represent an attempt to reduce women's studies, but rather offered an opportunity for feminist bookstore practitioners to demonstrate the particular value of their own space, rather than allowing an academic field to subsume other sections of the bookstore, whether fiction, sociology, or aging (Hogan 608). In contrast

²¹ Women's cultural spaces are important to foreground both in the context of dominant cultural spaces and in contrast to male-dominated gay neighborhoods. Sy Adler and Johanna Brenner explain the "absence of visible lesbian urban neighborhoods" in the early 1990s by "consider[ing] the differences in capacity to dominate urban space, a variable reflecting available wealth as well as restrictions placed by male violence on women's access to urban space. The creation of visible, distinct neighborhoods requires more than residential concentration and the development of a network of voluntary and service organizations. To take over urban space also requires the control of residential and business property (25-26)." They further discuss how gender privilege enabled gay male access to such property ownership well before it would become possible for women.

to feminist bookstores, universities represent the long-standing institutions of credentialization and interpretive practices, which have a history of housing and reproducing privilege. The large bureaucracy that the university represented seemed to inspire its embedded employees in women's studies to focus on insular work, reflecting their own hierarchies and institutional concerns, rather than work, which speaks to a community as large as the utopian community of feminist readers imagined by the feminist bookstore. The university-based meta-critique is important to those who work in education at any level, but has little to offer those outside it, whereas the feminist bookstore network only serves as one series of enactments of feminist culture and politics for academic feminists, and is insufficient to meet their demand for the lives and contributions of women to be taken seriously by academic institution, and thus, ideally, the official public culture. The complementary relationship between the feminist bookstores and the academic departments represents one of the institutionally-dialogic possibilities available under the conditions of alternative culture.

Thirdly, the feminist bookstore is an alternative space because, just as it represents a space between consumerism and free social association, and the university and “the real world,” the feminist bookstore existed somewhere between the “leftist and progressive bookstores of the 1960s” and the general decline of all physical bookstores that came with the success of Internet commerce (Hogan 596). While, happily, this later technological transformation led to women's digital spaces, like online fandom and women-dominated message boards, these suffered much more than the feminist bookstores from inaccessibility and esotericism. In between the heyday of the feminist bookstore and the heyday of the Internet came the chain mega-bookstore, which offered a

larger selection, and larger discounts, to a larger audience, but lacked any investment in alternative canons and categorizations, and let the market research determine the selection and organization of the stores.

As independent bookstores, especially feminist bookstores, lost their ability to compete with these chain bookstores, what had once been their revolutionary use of a small space for many purposes -- hosting readings, guiding research, selling zines²² and self-published comics alongside major press publications, providing a way for feminists and emerging feminists to see and meet one another and forge alliances -- some of them lost some of their identity as literary spaces, and succumbed to their social identity as coffee shops. While it would undoubtedly reveal some kind of intellectual elitism, grounded in any case in old cultural hierarchies, to suggest that print culture provided a more serious basis for feminist engagement than a coffee shop likely would, this cynicism nevertheless emerges in stereotypical accounts of alternative culture from the early 1990s. As such, it bears reckoning with. As James L. Haley said of the early independent film classic, *Slacker*, which depicts this culture:

Richard Linklater's *Slacker* could not have been made anywhere but in Austin, Texas. Oh, sure, a crew could film such footage on any urban location. But that would be fiction. Only Austin--and more specifically, only the eight blocks of the

²² Martindale points out that some women's bookstores came to represent the "older and assimilationist lesbian-and-gay establishment" by refusing to sell lesbian sex magazines, like *On Our Backs* and *Bad Attitude* (61). This decision is precisely the consequence of trying to negotiate between consumerism and free social association. If one's goal is the simple maximization of available pornography, then the Internet deserves its utopian reputation, and the bookstore, its museum-like status in cultural memory. As of 2014, the full archives of *On Our Backs* are available online, courtesy of Duke University's Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture.

Guadalupe Street Drag that skirts the University of Texas--could open its collective trench coat and flash its vitals at an unsuspecting audience--and have it be *true* in revealing its netherworld of space cadets, goonballs, punk groupies, gently aging iconoclasts, coffee-shop-feminists-gone-round-the-bend, conspiracy dweebs lurking in used-book stores, artists, anti-artists, and a whole purgatory of other refugees from the world of productive sanity.” - James L. Haley (Linklater 5)

The culture depicted in *Slacker*, like the feminist bookstore, relates to the university, but is not incorporated into it. It provides space for true slackers, those “townies” who simply hate work, and slacker professors, who are actually quite powerful, relatively speaking, just as the feminist bookstore provides space for lost girls, as well as girls bound to make a living from their contributions to feminist print culture. The film depicts “conspiracy dweebs” who love information, but don't believe that it needs to be converted into new peer-reviewed publications, and “anti-artists,” who believe that their art should call into question the current modes of art distribution and interpretation, just as the feminist bookstore houses women who are, say, feminist erotica fans, as much as it houses women in search of the best antipornography manifestos; women who are lesbian pulp completists, but uninterested in theories of the novel, and, to modify Haley's phrase, refugees from the world of (re)productive patriarchy. Haley's reference to “coffeeshop feminists gone round the bend” is condescending, but also revealing, in my reading, of the moment of relative stability represented by feminist print culture as it could be contained by the feminist bookstore, in contrast to feminist print culture's necessarily oppositional mode as evidenced in the Wimmen's Comix Collective in the 1970s, and its

devolution into coffee shop culture in the 1990s (or its evolution into more discrete strands, like feminist fan culture, no longer reliant on feminist bookstore for the distribution of their texts). And from such a moment of relative stability, emerged a canon of feminist texts, *Zami* centrally among them, for future generations of women readers to grapple with, regardless of their particular investment in literature in general, or autobiography specifically. These texts require an evolving contemporary reading practice, which requires an evolving public culture of contemporary literature.

As Gloria Anzaldúa says of another book from this generational moment, Every generation that reads *This Bridge Called My Back* rewrites it. Like the trestle bridge, and other things that have reached their zenith, it will decline unless we attach it to new growth or append new growth to it. *this bridge we call home* is our attempt to continue the dialogue, rethink the old ideas, and germinate new theories. (qtd in Lee 792)

With this historical context, and generational mandate in mind, I turn to *Zami*, in order to reread it, and look for its ideas to be incarnated again in the current generation of young feminists, exemplified here by *The Guild: Tink* comic. Author Day describes *The Guild: Tink* as the work she's "proudest" of having written, and while she herself does not attribute this pride to its articulation of a feminist consciousness within her storyworld, I believe that the two are connected (Emerald City Comicon).

Lorde's work depicts daily life as she knew it with a dual focus on the realization of her lesbian desire, and concomitant self-understanding as a woman-identified woman, and the lived experiences of inequality that necessitated the feminist movement, the gay liberation movement, and the Civil Rights movement. Her desire to love is shaped both

by her artistic vision and coming of age and by these experiences of inequality, and so the love she establishes asks something not only of the individual who might represent her match in a more conservative genre, but of the whole global society of women that surround her. Of feminism, she demands that it constantly grow and alter its self-conception in light of women's insights, especially the insights of women who directly experienced the consequences of the movement's racism and homophobia. When Lorde depicts her own experiences of these moments, she creates a space in which the reader can begin to connect with her woman of color feminist standpoint, and understand why it is central to the history of the movement, and not merely a footnote. In this way, the reader becomes a participant in rewriting her own genealogy of feminist writing, as well as her own internal chronology of the recent past.

Although Lorde is speaking in the passage I quote below about her memories of the first half of the 1950s, I believe that her observations resonate into the alternative publishing cultures of the 1980s, and into the gendered, racialized hierarchies of twenty-first-century digital cultures, as articulated in *The Guild: Tink*, as well. She describes the formation of her first lesbian community in New York City, which she and her girlfriend, Muriel, enter as a couple, as follows:

I met the few of Muriel's friends that she could remember from the old days, and she met mine. There were Mick and Cordelia, whom I had met in high school. Nicky and Joan, friends of Suzy, Muriel's old lover. We were poor and always hungry, and always being invited to dinner...There were Dotti and Pauli, two skinny blonde artists from our neighborhood whom we met at Laurel's; Bea and Lynn, her new girl; Phyllis, who wanted to be an architect, but only talked about it

when she was drunk; and, of course, there was Felicia, my adopted little sister, as I called her, and the only other Black woman in our group. Together, we formed a loosely knit, emotionally and socially independent set, sharing many different interests, some overlapping. On the periphery there existed another larger group of downtown gay-girls, made up of congenial lovers, known by sight and friendly enough, but not to be called upon except in emergencies, when of course everybody knew everybody else's business anyway.” (203)

To an outsider, this series of descriptors could seem to match up a laundry list of participants in many different subcultures. Connecting either to the blasé descriptions of group sex among famous mid-century writers in Diane DiPrima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* to Aline Kominsky Crumb's sets of party photos from the 1970s, archived in *Need More Love*, we recognize the mainstay participants of counterculture articulated here. Connecting to Samuel Delany's theoretical assessments of truck-stop sex and celebrity acquaintances in *The Motion of Light in Water*, or even Margaret Price's circle of independent scholars of disability studies, described in *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Daily Life*, we recognize the interwoven desires for solidarity-in-difference and intimate friendship in Lorde's description. However, its particular references are significant, particularly given the experience Lorde is about to describe of the contested status of racial identity within this group. This particularity will also be significant for my reading of *The Guild: Tink*. For Lorde, as she remembers herself, and as she writes, it was a clear enough fact that, while the group “shar[ed] many different interests,” only “some [were] overlapping” (203). However, there is an important distinction between the suppressed desire to become an architect in a group of

permissive, if disenfranchised, dreamers and being one of two black women in a group of mostly white women. Lorde goes on to say that,

But the fact of our Blackness was an issue that Felicia and I talked about only between ourselves. Even Muriel seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsiderhood. 'We're all niggers,' she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it. It was wishful thinking based on little fact; the ways in which it was true languished in the shadow of those many ways in which it would always be false. (203)

While Muriel saw herself, presumably, as forging solidarity with Audre by refashioning the racist terminology of white supremacy into a tool for recognizing oppression grounded in homophobia, and while the other white women in their set simply denied racial difference because they felt so profoundly connected through their love of other women, it was a task for Lorde herself to bear the burden of the “secret pain” that they touched when they did this (204).

It is that pain that Lorde speaks, from her memory of the Greenwich Village of the 1950s, recalled and recurring through her poetic coming of age in the 1960s, and then into the intra-feminist debates of the 1970s, which, into the 1980s, often focused on the need for independent publishing houses as well as feminist bookstores, to distribute the emerging literature and theory of lesbians and women of color. Because the pain was not only one of not being heard, but of being talked over before one could begin to articulate her own position, the need for new outlets for thought, including new genres, and publishers, and sections in bookstores, was paramount. Indeed, it was a pain that directly interfered with her ability to love other women, in several ways.

For one thing, although the lesbian culture of the bars was just beginning to flourish in the 1950s, normative tendencies within the subculture seemed to have entrenched themselves quickly. Lorde describes the bars as having been, on the one hand, the only place she knew of where lesbians from thoroughly different social spheres would intermingle, but, on the other hand, a scene in which one was expected to conform to a certain subcultural norm. She says,

Always before, the few lesbians I had known were women whom I had met within other existing contexts of my life. We shared some part of a world common to us both--school or work or poetry or some other interest beyond our sexual identity. Our love for women was a fact that became known only *after* we were already acquainted and connected through some other reason.

In the bars, we met women with whom we would have had no other contact, had we not all been gay. There, Muriel and I were pretty well out of whatever was considered important. That was namely drinking, softball, dyke-chic fashion, dancing, and who was sleeping with whom at whose expense. All other questions of survival were considered a very private affair. (196)

As a couple, even one with their own large gaps of understanding, Lorde and Muriel find themselves united by their shared seriousness, and reluctant to give themselves over entirely to this version of women's connections, which, given its focus on alcohol²³ and gossip, seemed shallow, if socially necessary.

²³ Lillian Faderman describes the “hazardous” culture of alcohol present in the gay bars during the mid-century: “You could not stay unless you had a drink in front of you, and bar personnel were often encouraged to ‘push’ drinks so that the bar could remain in business. As a result, alcoholism was high among women who frequented the bars, much

The two also rejected another stereotypical aspect of lesbian life in the mid-century, namely the butch-femme dynamics that were ever-present in the bars. In contrast to their unarticulated conflict over race, the debate about the value of role-playing in lesbian relationships offered a site of solidarity for the couple. Lorde explains,

Being gay-girls without set roles was the one difference we allowed ourselves to see and to bind us to each other. We were not of that *other* world and we wanted to believe that, by definition, we were therefore free of that *other* world's problems of capitalism, greed, racism, classism, etc. This was not so. But we continued to visit each other and eat together and, in general, share our lives and resources, as it were. (205)

As writers, Lorde and Muriel's love was grounded in the intersection of desire and intellect, and each valued the other's private world. Just as the drinking and social obsessions of the bars seemed, to them, like a pale imitation of what insights women could find together, the butch-femme dynamics seemed to reproduce the more limiting aspects of white heterosexual culture, without offering women the recognition of their private worlds they sought.

Perhaps Lorde and Muriel over-focused on their internal worlds, not just because they were writers, but because they lacked experience in long-term romantic relationships. As Lorde says,

more prevalent, in fact, than among their heterosexual working-class counterparts. Not only did lesbians have pressure to drink while in a gay bar, and, as the cliché of the pulp novels suggested, take to drink because of the daily pain of the stigma of lesbianism, but they also had to endure the socioeconomic difficulties of their lives as self-supporting women in low-paying jobs at a time when females were not supposed to work” (163).

Each one of us had been starved for love for so long that we wanted to believe that love, once found, was all-powerful. We wanted to believe that it could give word to my inchoate pain and rages; that it could enable Muriel to face the world and get a job; that it could free our writings, cure racism, end homophobia and adolescent acne. We were like starving women who come to believe that food will cure all present pains, as well as heal all the deficiency sores of long standing. (209-210)

The intensity of their love relationship, and their rejection of the available social circumstances to contextualize it, eventually dooms Lorde and Muriel. However, the critiques Lorde offers of those social circumstances call for more than simply an expanded laundry list of character possibilities beyond butch and femme. Indeed, they call for a genuine re-thinking of where the private and the social intersect in love, and how a writer, specifically, can enact her love as a black lesbian. This specific question, of what the conditions look like in order for that subjectivity to emerge on the page, and then in the bookstore, and then wherever it may emerge in the subsequent digital era, is the central question of *Zami*. The answer is in a biomythography, that is, a hybrid prose genre that connects the content of black lesbian life to the long arcs of mythology in a uniquely-realized prose style. Packaged as a book by a feminist press, and sold at feminist bookstores, *Zami* reached its readers on shared terms that had been unavailable to Lorde and Muriel in the mid-century. In this context, *Zami* revealed a path toward self-realization for budding feminist readers, and, importantly, it was not one contained to any particular institutional affiliation or success.

Section II: Gaming Culture, Difference in Digital Culture, and *The Guild: Tink*

And so, traveling forward through time, through the gentrification of the 1980s and 1990s, and through the concomitant decline of the feminist bookstore, and indeed, most physical bookstores in the United States, we reach the digital culture. Specifically, we reach digital consumer culture, which has positive and negative effects on the afterlife of *Zami*. On the positive side, digital utopianism reminds us that, in digital culture, an unprecedented number of readers have access to the book, because it is now available in online versions, which can be acquired privately by anyone who encounters it. The book still costs money, but its existence as a digital text means that savvy consumers can find a free version, and disseminate it among their friends. But this omnipresence also means that the book is often ripped from its radical context, sold alongside a dizzying series of mainstream products, without the creative shelving practices of the feminist bookstore practitioners to guide readers in its direction. And this decontextualization is not the only negative effect of digital culture on the afterlife of *Zami*.

There is a context peripheral to the official marketing of the book, which is its connection to the social networks that have begun to define online reading practices, for decades now for early adopters, and for latecomers to the Internet, at least since the rise of Amazon.com. In this context, to replace the paths to consumption offered readers by the feminist bookstore and other bookstores, Amazon offers peer-authored guidance in the forms of star ratings, reviews, and keywords. These manage to reproduce the flaws of both subcultural and mainstream distribution culture, as well as knotting readers to their consumer decisions, taken over a series of years, in order to create a reductive profile for them. This profile takes its shape based on two factors; firstly, their participation in

digital consumer culture, and secondly, any demographic information they may provide. In this way, their consumption practices are tethered to their pathways of access to contemporary culture.

Just as was the case when Bloom feared that the logic of the market was coming to dominate the organization of fields administered by the American university, some nostalgia underlies the pushback I articulate here. It is reasonable to ask why it is a problem for readers that the first interpretation of a new book they encounter comes from a fellow consumer, rather than from a feminist bookstore practitioner. Why should we who are interested in promoting access to diverse cultural stories condemn what looks like genuinely democratic participation in their marketing? If major and minor cultural institutions both reproduce norms that relegate individual experience to the periphery, why then would I not celebrate the officially-sanctioned periphery as represented by Amazon's social marketing?

The answer comes from the knowledge, articulated by Lorde as well as by a number of other writers, social theorists, and queer theorists, that it is not only institutional hierarchies, which fail to serve our desires; social communication, too, is limited in its ability to inspire our personal development. That knowledge forms one basis for my decision to focus as much on dissidence within subcultural movements as adherence to their founding principles. Lorde saw that Muriel, for example, conceived of sexual queerness as a category analogous to racial otherness, which led to a fundamental difference between their experiences of belonging to the emerging lesbian subculture. Even in that context, while Muriel claimed to belong, she resented the sexually-normative culture of the lesbian bar scene in the 1950s, and so she, too, registered dissidence to the

social expectations of the subculture. *Zami* preserves the record of these feelings, both those they shared and those they didn't, in order to preserve the complex legacy of lesbian history in the United States for future readers. These experiences were possible for Lorde to articulate in the biomythography because it was a genre born of dissatisfaction with the conventions of the autobiography and the status of the mythological in contemporary American life. The feminist bookstore created space on their shelves for her vision, because it was born of a goal shared with many of their authors, namely that of valuing women's experiences and lives on their own terms.

By contrast, contemporary digital consumer culture only values *Zami* in terms of the number of copies it sells, which is, they hope, increased by the keywords they attach to it, and the user reviews that offer only short-form impressions of what it might offer the next reader. If nothing else, this mode of relating between peers assuredly pales in comparison to the genuine relationships between women, writers and readers longed for in the title *Zami*. My concern about the implications of this new context for *Zami* brings me to the social worlds of contemporary digital culture, in which there exists a particular set of forces, which both block previous paths of solidarity-seeking, and open up new ones, made visible by women's creative articulations of contemporary life in experimental autobiography.

But first, I must describe the mainstream culture against which these women writers fashion their lives. To demonstrate the depths of the contemporary influence of the social over the private, I turn from Amazon, whose goal is to sell us products, to Facebook, whose goal is to establish our stable online presence. As I discuss in the first chapter, in the view of Facebook administrators, this stability of identity promotes a

harmonious and manageable social world of coherent subjects. They may change profession or location over time, but their social circle will connect the adult they become to their family of origin, their friends found in adolescence, and their network of colleagues. Who they are as a social being thus becomes visible, and encourages them to behave in ways that are consistent with their long-arc social commitments.

In other words, Facebook represents one normative antithesis to the genealogy of women's experimental autobiography as I am creating it in this project. Facebook places primary emphasis on one's legal name, one's educational background, with the presumption of college education, one's workplace network, one's self-reported gender, chosen from a menu of two, and one's relationship status. All of these categories are explored more complexly in women's experimental autobiography. To take the name as the simplest example, *Zami* famously includes two scenes of liberating name change, first when Audrey becomes Audre, because she is drawn to the aesthetic of the five letters, and secondly, when she turns from self to self-with-others, becoming *Zami*. Facebook strongly discourages name fictionalization, connecting it to the seedy underbelly of anonymity found elsewhere on the Internet. Indeed, this policy encourages one kind of social harmony, but it limits the intellectually exciting possibilities of self-fashioning across media. Combined with the site's expectation that one post a real photograph of oneself, it discourages the creation of avatars, like the Bunch and Codex, who depict visually one or more facets of the subject's self-perception.

In general, I argue that Facebook's limiting script for self-fashioning brings with it a potentially high degree of social anxiety for people without high status in the professional or heterosexual marketplace. For those of us who lack the aforementioned,

whether by virtue of failure or rejection in one or both spheres, this disconnect opens up the entryway to the history of women's experimental autobiography. Just as mainstream publishers' rejection of Lorde's manuscript for *Zami* led to her decision to publish it with a feminist press, and thus cement its embodied place in a radical genealogy of women's writing, contemporary women writers must turn to venues that provide an alternative both to mainstream distribution and mainstream social networking.

Day, whose script for *The Guild* was rejected by mainstream television, turned to YouTube and fan funding to produce *The Guild*. Fortunately, the series' successes led to a sponsorship deal with Microsoft and Dark Horse Comics' interest in publishing the prequel comics, but *The Guild's* original home on the Internet will always make the series recognizable as part of a genealogy of experimental digital storytelling (Milian). It is telling to me that in *The Guild: Codex*, as we learn about Cyd Sherman's past, we see that she was led to love digital self-fashioning in the context of the game, because it looked so different from her social and professional life, both of which were failing at the time. In the game, she was allowed to select her name, and, like most of the characters in *The Guild*, she started to respond to it during in-person interactions as well. She was also allowed to choose her gender. Codex chose to play a female character because she identifies with female characters, but there was no social requirement to do so. Indeed, in the rival guild, the Axis of Anarchy, a character named Valkyrie is a young man who plays a female character, and it paradoxically represents one part of that guild's commitment to the game's openness to experimentation. She also chooses attributes like race, here from a selection of races like gnome, human, night elf, and class, here from a selection of classes like hunter, rogue, priest. These reflect particular personality traits

and desires, rather than given attributes. In this way, the game requires that players rethink their identities gained from their families and social locations of origin, and connect identity to a deeper kind of desire.

In contrast to *The Guild: Codex's* focus on Cyd's creation of her avatar, in *The Guild: Tink*, Tink's transition from real-life human into in-game ranger is not depicted. Indeed, her real name is not even revealed until season five of the series, which aired after her comic was released. Instead, Tink's comic tells the story of how she kept the Facebook-level facts of her identity hidden from her guildmates for so long, and offers insight into her storytelling practices rather than revealing the “truth” behind them. Like *Zami*, *The Guild: Tink* comic uses experimental storytelling to articulate a female character's complex consciousness. Rather than representing her introspections and internal monologue, the comic elucidates Tink's character by showing her conversations with her fellow guild members. These conversations reveal the depths of her attachment to her own private life, and, when she meets resistance, she articulates a critical skepticism about their apparent solidarity as gamers. Her felt difference is not contained to the personality quirks her friends articulate in their own origin stories, and thus she is suspicious of their desire to identify her as one of them. What they may not realize is that this is her approach to everyone she encounters in her life at present. She ignores and avoids her family and fellow college students, but, as was the case with Vork, the social requirement of full participation in the game has forced her into these extended conversations with her guildmates.

Based on their shared investment in the alternative digital subculture of online gaming, the other members of the Knights of Good ask Tink to join them in mining the

game for all of its exploratory possibilities, including the creation of their emerging real-life social group. Even though fully social sharing is not a strict requirement of gameplay, as hardcore fans, the other members of the Knights of Good have come to see that working as a group leads to more satisfying in-game victories, as well as built-in strategies for diversion while they are engaged in repetitive tasks sometimes required by the game. Discussing their real lives is an automatic recourse in these contexts, and so they have all made the decision to be vulnerable and open with her, assuming that reciprocation was a given. But Tink has enough natural resistance to social requirements to reject the argument that, by increasing the connection between their in-game lives and their out-of-game desires, they can improve their game-play. To the problem of necessary diversion in the virtual environment, she develops a more creative solution than the reproduction of real-world social dynamics.

Specifically, she chooses experimental autobiographical storytelling. Over the course of the comic, Tink tells each member of her guild a story about a part of herself, grounded in real emotional experiences, but strategically fictionalized to distract them from their nosy social desires. She selects the genre and reference points for each story based on the nature of the other character's question, her known storytelling preferences, and the overlap between their popular culture interests. Unsurprisingly, during a group discussion as to Tink's whereabouts, the guild realizes that she's told them all a different story about who she is. Together, the stories could not compose any coherent subject they can imagine, and so they feel cheated. Even though Tink was careful to tell each of them stories that would move them, and they were as titillated as they'd hoped to be when they first asked the question, they resent that she broke the social contract to tell the truth

about oneself. Even though they all have fictional avatars in the game, none of the other characters had thought that the pleasure they took from playing these roles was possible to translate into a different kind of socialization, one not governed by the constraints of the game.

Before she tells the stories in *The Guild: Tink*, the only information the Knights of Good have about the character is her voice, and her in-game personality. Her voice reveals that she is fairly young and female, and her in-game personality reveals her mercenary tendencies in killing and gathering loot, as well as her sarcastic sense of humor and refusal of social niceties. The personality of her avatar reveals much more than would a Facebook profile, and it is a much more promising set-up for an origin story than a list of credentials. Already, Tink represents part of the 13% of MMORPG users who are female, and she has shown through her dedication that she is a more hardcore player than many.

That said, her guild members' yearning to understand her better makes sense given their excitement at having found companionship in one another. After all, they all feel like misfits for various reasons, and “real life” identity information seems like it would confirm for them the diversity of experiences that can inspire someone to inhabit the majority of their social life in alternative digital space. But they underestimate how differently their interior lives might be shaped, and to what extent their desires for social relationships might vary. After all, Lorde's lesbian friends in Greenwich Village all felt like misfits, too, and they were, but that didn't prepare them to deal gracefully with one another's differences in other areas. Like Lorde, Tink is one of two people of color in her guild, and the only woman of color. Unlike Lorde's, Tink's ethnicity is not grounded in

the family history she grew up with because, as we learn in season 5, she was adopted by a white family as an infant, so has long been expected to bear racial difference in isolation.

Tink tells her first story of the comic to Clara, a white woman who is the only married member of the guild, as well as the only parent. Being a parent, as well as a woman in search of friendships with other women, Clara often takes on a caring role for the group's younger and more insecure members. As the representative of a kind of success in heterosexual womanhood, she even plays yenta/wingwoman for Codex. Tink is not interested, however, in acquiring a new mother figure or a new romantic guide, particularly not one who gets distracted while playing the game by “centaur nipples,” which inspire her to overshare the details of her sex life with her husband (5). In their first interaction within the comic, Clara's incessant talk has been triggered by the game graphics, and she insists that Tink tell her about her romantic life, specifically, whether she has a boyfriend (5). The generous reading is that Clara is a bored mother and wife who wants to share intimacy with her female guild members. After all, her first interaction with Codex was similarly aggressive and “girly,” a trait perhaps enhanced in an environment in which women are so clearly in the minority. However, Tink's sexual orientation and romantic life deserve the privilege of privacy, a privilege perhaps taken from Clara in the real world by her admittance into public heterosexuality and reproduction, but nevertheless held onto by Tink in that sphere, and, she hopes, in the in-game sphere of her life as well.

Lorde talks about how, even in the 1950s, she and Muriel “talk[ed] about love as a voluntary commitment,” which is a helpful term for describing what Tink cannot yet

articulate about the purpose of her resistance to normative expectations (214). Under the terms of voluntary commitment, love represents what one wishes to volunteer from oneself, not what another feels entitled to based on a pre-existing script, whether by an assumption based on self-presentation, or simply desire on their part. Friendship, too, is best understood as a voluntary commitment, one that will eventually become desirable to both Tink and Clara, but is not yet at this point in the story. When it begins to form, their friendship will not find its strongest basis in their shared heterosexuality, but rather in their shared love of feminine aesthetics in subcultures.²⁴ Just as the fact of lesbian desire proved insufficient to shape a nurturing social world for Audre Lorde, so the fact of heterosexual desire cannot design friendships within *The Guild* storyworld, because many of the guild members turned to pseudonymous gaming precisely to get away from the stresses and expectations of the heterosexual marketplace. (Here it is no surprise that Clara is the only member of the guild who uses her real name as her handle in the game.) And so, to forestall the development of their friendship until their genuinely shared interests emerge, Tink tells Clara a melodramatic story about why she refuses to have romantic entanglements with men, claiming that the ones she has had were too painful to bear repeating (6).

Considering that the comic begins with a coffee shop employee asking for Tink's phone number "as a tip," an act she likens to assault, we can assume that it's less the case

²⁴ Mimi Thi Nguyen uses the term "multisubculturalism" to describe what women of color pursue together in subcultures, thus embodying the fantasy encounter described by Lorde as an encounter with Afrekete. In the subcultures that formed Nguyen, namely punk and riot grrl, women of color "assembled compilation zines...made documentaries...reclaimed the too-often unobserved significance of pioneering women of color" and "travers[ed] punk, hip hop, and other scenes to trace their entangled genealogies (186)."

that she's been traumatized by sexual violence, and more likely that she regularly encounters unwanted male attention, and has had to spend more time fighting it off than fantasizing about it (1). While Clara loves the male body, and occasionally finds herself bored by her marriage, to a man she met while she was still in high school, Tink, at this stage, can only see dating as transactional, and has no interest in the conventional woman's role. However, she is familiar enough with the cultural scripts that are designed to make that role seem appealing, to find a loophole. That is, that even avidly heterosexual women like Clara, who think that male attention is universally flattering to women, will respond sympathetically to sentimental stories about "being wronged," and so Tink quickly concocts one.

This story connects the following folkloric and literary tropes: the gothic setting, the poor ward (Tink's role for herself in the story), Fabio Lanzoni (of romance novel covers), who "plays" her boss and suitor, Igor, the hunchbacked assistant figure, a secret garden, a Jekyll/Hyde response to alcohol, a walled-up wife, the threat of a brand to mark the beloved as belonging to the man, and finally, a reference to Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven." This last reference appears when Tink, having escaped the alcoholic, sociopathic Fabio figure, sits alone wearing a long, black dress, and proclaiming, "nevermore." She is surrounded by gothic branches and ivy, flowering skulls and bones, cementing the connection between heterosexual romance and death. The tropes, connected in the quick, sarcastic, in-character voice of Tink by author Day, are unified visually in a gothic aesthetic by the artist, who, for these three pages, is Jeremy Bastian. The previous five pages, drawn by Kristian Donaldson and Evan Bryce, drew from the style Day had established in *The Guild: Codex* and *The Guild: Vork*, alternating between

alternative realism and in-game action, and so the three pages that make up Tink's first lie are clearly designed to be attention-catching within this already-complex storytelling situation.

Tink must deflect Clara's desire to see past their shared in-game action to Tink's life of alternative realism behind the screen, and she does so by turning Clara's attention instead to a different virtual world, here one not pre-codified by a digital aesthetic, but one that draws on a lifetime of acquired interpretive practices, from fairytales as told in children's movies to literature encountered in formal education, to leisure reading. Indeed, while it is Tink who gives Clara the cues, the full gothic realization of the story is as much Clara's as it is Tink's, because it is her intense desire to sympathize with the young woman that inspires her to dramatize the events as they are told once the story has begun, rather than ask questions about unlikely details, or try to pinpoint the geographic or temporal location of this traumatic incident.

While there is much that Clara and Tink will never fully understand about one another, like their different approaches to sexuality, the world of fantasy is something that engages them both at a high level. Tink employs fictionalization to keep their conversations on that plane, and along the negative axis of knowledge that this comic archives so artfully, by way of its complex referential structure. This referential structure responds to the stated desire for personal information with stories that tap into a deeper logic more genuinely sought. Tink's storytelling reveals the kind of intimacy for which she will volunteer, which is a playful, if manipulative, communication via cultural tropes. This practice is a game she is confident she can play endlessly, having grown up loving stories and costumes. If Clara's deeper desire is to gain a picture of Tink as being more

like herself, a person with an offline identity that is limiting in some way, parallel to Clara's monogamous marriage, then she can be satisfied with Tink's story. By the end of the comic, we will see that Tink's offline life is indeed limiting in a way that could be seen as defining, that is, that having been adopted, she has been alienated from her racial identity. However, it is worth respecting her own vertiginous path towards sharing that information, rather than prioritizing our nosy discovery of it as an overdetermined “key” psychological puzzle piece. The complexity of interaction enabled by Internet friendship ought to be celebrated for its ability to host stories that were untellable under previous storytelling constraints. In her in-person interactions, Tink does not bother to tell people complex stories justifying her refusal to acquiesce to their requests; rather, she simply displays hostility. But in the game, although she disagrees about the extent of the social requirement of full participation, she concedes that she must communicate on terms that connect with others, even if her stories are fictional. It is also worth noting that, despite the creative social practices enabled by the innovative digital environment of the game, the key tension around secret feelings articulated by Lorde in *Zami* thirty years previous remains intact as a block to large-scale social harmony in diverse subcultures.

After the story for Clara, we return to the alternative realist aesthetic, to Tink's off-screen life, where, it turns out, she is a college student. Not surprisingly, considering her fast thinking in the interaction with Clara, she has enrolled in a Nineteenth-Century English Literature course, but she immediately decides to drop it when she sees that there are only three other students in the class, and that one of them is already asleep, before the class session has even begun. In its place, she signs up for “Pop Culture 101: Cinema,” which is held in a large lecture hall, and has only one seat remaining. Partly,

the antisocial Tink presumably wishes to evade the teacher's notice, but it is also worth pausing over the fact that, in order to be invisible, as she wishes to be in public, Tink must abandon her clearly serious interest in literature for a secondary interest in film. As a gamer and general popular culture aficionado, she will find much to love about the study of film genres (the focus of the course indicated by the professor's lecture), but it is a shame that the in-person intimacy of the upper-level literature classroom proved so alienating. It is instructive to see Tink shifting so nonchalantly across media based on class size and technology, both because it is a metaphor for the flexibility required to engage transmedia storytelling as a reader, as well as because it reveals some of the ways in which the purposes of the humanities, whether canonical literary study or creative approaches to popular culture, are unified to much of the contemporary audience. Where discrete media diverge is strategic, much like the sections in the feminist bookstore. Just as one feminist bookstore established sections on "Health and Aging rather than Biology, emphasizing the lived implications of science," the space of a full popular culture classroom may understandably seem closer to the kind of communal interpretation of contemporary storyworlds available on an MMO, that is, to lived interpretive practices, than a nearly-empty literature classroom (Hogan 610).

Further, Tink is a student who is particularly sensitive to other people's expectations of her self-presentation, which are significant in a humanities classroom, in which participation will likely form some component of her final grade. In her 2011 book, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability*, Margaret Price harshly critiques the conventional expectations of participation in English departments, suggesting that these are ableist, and therefore bound to undervalue the contributions, potential and articulated,

of students who communicate in unexpected ways, and also that they overestimate university teachers' ability to provide a genuinely open space for all different kinds of students to feel welcomed into. Price writes,

We are accustomed to thinking of classroom accommodations in terms of measurable steps that help “level the playing field”: note-takers; extra time on exams; captions on videos; lecture slides posted online; Braille and large-print handouts; the presence of a sign interpreter. But what accommodations can be offered for the student who is earnestly participating, but in ways that do not fall into the (usually rationalist) pattern of classroom discussions and activities?

Although the notion of a classroom “discussion” implies that it is open to all perspectives, this setting is in fact controlled by rigid expectations: students taking part in a “discussion” are expected to demonstrate their knowledge of the topic at hand, raise relevant questions, and establish themselves as significant, but not overly dominant, voices. (1352-1357)

Price's discussion goes on to suggest that the requirements of “participation” mirror expectations of collegiality and conference attendance among faculty, both of which, if assessed by colleagues operating on ableist assumptions, can affect the ability of faculty with mental disabilities to advance in their field. With such high stakes, the way “participation” is represented at the university level is significant in understanding what a marginalized position within that university might look like. Like many students, Tink is often interpreted by fans of the series as angry or closed-off, but *The Guild: Tink* opens up the possibility that she is simply uncomfortable in social situations in which she is expected to proclaim her identity before speaking. Because she is still constructing her

identity, Tink is aware that better conversations are possible when people speak as a voluntary act, to modify Lorde's view on love.

That Tink's social identity affects her ability and desire to participate in higher education is no unique experience. Lorde recalls having trouble at school because of the stress of her social role, in which she had a high desire to connect with others, but lacked access to a community that could really sustain her. Combined, these factors left her unable to focus on school. She writes,

When I found out that I had failed german and trig in summer school that year, it never occurred to me to think that it was because I had spent the summer wetnursing the girls of The Branded in my tiny tenement apartment.

It never occurred to me that it was because every evening when I came home from work, instead of doing the assignments for my classes the next day, I was serving us coffee and cinnamon ice cubes in powdered milk with dexedrine chasers...I told myself I had failed in summer school because I just could not learn german. Some people can, I decided, and some people can't; and I couldn't. (118-119)

Fortunately, Lorde, like Tink, had the sense to recognize that the social scene at college failed to live up to her desires for what a truly thriving intellectual community might look like. She continues,

Besides, I was very bored and disappointed with Hunter College, which seemed to me like an extension of a catholic girls school and not at all like Hunter High School, peopled as it had been with our exciting and emotionally complicated

lives. For most of the women I met in my freshman classes at Hunter College, an emotional complication meant cutting class to play bridge in the college cafeteria. I was also beside myself with sexual frustration, given the presence of all the beautiful young women whom I was sheltering like a wounded banshee. The abortion had left me with an additional sadness about which I could not speak, certainly not to these girls who saw my house and my independence as a refuge, and seemed to think that I was settled and strong and dependable, which, of course, was exactly what I wanted them to think. (119)

Lorde is frustrated by the privilege and small-mindedness that makes her fellow students so uninspiring, and again, she is troubled by the depths of her own desires, sexual and otherwise, for a community of conscious, adult women, genuinely connecting. Her racial otherness, her abortion, and her early attempts to foster a women-centered community have given her an understanding of herself as a woman, specifically, as a black lesbian, which has created her demand for a more engaging community she will create only later. (Indeed, it will take her to far-flung places like Mexico, Nigeria, and Germany, but it will be created). We have access to a much smaller portion of Tink's life than Lorde's, but I believe that, with the foundation Lorde has set up for the articulation of a complex long-arc development of a woman's consciousness, we can imagine an equally compelling story for a twenty-first-century subject like Tink.²⁵

²⁵ Education theorist David Williamson Shaffer has used “multisubculturalism,” a coinage at which he arrives by different means than Nguyen, to describe a new approach to education using virtual worlds. He writes, “a reorganization of the educational system based on valued practices has the potential to support a multisubculturalism of ends as well as means: a way for education to speak to students from a range of cultural traditions; to connect, as Dewey suggested, with their intrinsic interests; to guide those

Indeed, we can glimpse it in the character's fictions of self. After her story for Clara, and the scene at college, Tink goes on to tell stories to Vork, Codex, Bladezz, and Zaboo, each story wildly different from the last. In her story to the youngest member of the guild, Bladezz, Tink depicts herself as a Japanese pop star, drawing from her own knowledge of Japanese popular culture and manga/anime fandom, and playing into his predictable sexual fetish for Asian women. As the guild members assemble the stories she has told them, in her absence, Tink's image as a coherent subject who belongs to their guild begins to falter. It is, tellingly, Zaboo, the other non-white member of the guild, who finally interferes at a particularly far-fetched detail, allowing the stories to unravel themselves as false. This is, at heart, a story about white gullibility, which is, on the final page of the comic, revealed as something Tink knows a lot about. On that page, we see the family photo that reveals that her adoptive family is white. Thus, we can assume that she has long been required to maintain her own secret truths about the realities of why her life is different from theirs, in spite of their friendly insistence to the contrary. Along with the small family photo, the final pages of the comic depict Tink's smile at having tricked her fellow guild members, even after they found her out as a storyteller. She stood up for her desire to play the game as whatever self she wishes to be, over succumbing to specific modes of social pressure. She insists on a complex identity when she says, in her penultimate line of dialogue in the comic, that her guild must accept for the time being the possibility that she is “a mother of ten, living in Samoa...a forty-three-year-old man with a very high voice...speaking to you from a space station...” or whatever the case

interests towards meaningful activity in real and virtual worlds; and by linking students with important communities of practice, to help develop valued ways of thinking” (17).

may be, until the conditions of possibility arise for her articulation of a self they are more likely to recognize (21). We, the reader, are treated to an image of her real-life self, surrounded by the stuff that embeds her stories so easily in others' minds -- classics of Western literature, narratively complex video games, college textbooks, DVD sets, and manga series. Like her, I, the reader am formed by a complex genealogy of literary and popular culture texts, exemplified by the genealogy of women's experimental autobiography I am creating in this project, and these both excite and guide my desire for a community that requires creative movement across time, space and media to imagine.

Section III: Queer Feminist Evolutions of the Sexual Revolution: Phoebe

Gloeckner's A Child's Life

In opposition to Tink's playful evasion of origin, and its genealogical antecedent in Audre Lorde's self-fashioning, I turn to a more familiar aspect of memoir, namely, the confession of childhood trauma. Just as my interpretation of the articulation of one woman's sexual desire and individuality in *Need More Love* benefits from the context of *Sex and the Single Girl*, my interpretation of the woman-identified woman in *Zami* will benefit from the context of the confessional memoir. And so, from the sphere of alternative comics, I turn to Phoebe Gloeckner's autobiographical comics about childhood sexual abuse, collected in *A Child's Life and other stories*. *A Child's Life* focuses on the author's recollections of childhood, and depicts its stories visually, constantly reminding the reader of the innocence of the child self, now an avatar, the predatory nature of the adult man who abused her, and the avoidant collaborator he found in her mother. In her forward to the collection, Gloeckner says that she “never intended this book to be published,” but that, as time passed, she got more comfortable with the idea, in part

because comics remained such a minor form, in contrast to the tell-all prose memoir of abuse, like Christina Crawford's *Mommie Dearest* (7). Of her own book's moment of publication, Gloeckner writes that

The hippy days were long over, and the “comic renaissance” of the mid-eighties had not gathered much steam. In fact, “comix” were considered pretty embarrassing, uncool stuff, a nasty artifact of the “filthy hippy” era. This didn't bother me -- after all, I'd never been a hippy, and the more reviled comics were, the safer I was to do work that was whatever I wanted it to be. (7)

Here again we have a contrast to Lorde, whose *Zami* was published at a moment when black feminism and other forms of coalition politics were becoming increasingly necessary, especially considering the advent of AIDS in 1981, which would have a disproportionate effect on the black queer community, and become a focal point for queer politics for years to come.

Gloeckner's work, with its intensely realistic depictions of sexual violence, finds itself in genealogical conversation with that history, which forced gendered sexuality into the public eye, and connected sexual realism to progressive politics. Although Gloeckner focuses intensely on her individual experiences as a child, she contextualizes the experience historically, depicting the permissiveness of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s as one factor that contributed to her complex feelings about the abuse. Telling the whole truth about this history, with a focus on sexualized experience, contributes to the queer and feminist archives of the 1980s and 1990s, which countered the mainstream fear-based approach to sex during the AIDS epidemic, and connected diverse subjects

through their shared experiences of sexual objectification across multiple historical periods.

That said, the focus is so sharply on the real historical experience of the author that the child avatar she created was connected in a legal sense to Gloeckner herself, and not merely to her literary-artistic persona. Minnie of the book is so deeply connected to the author's real-life background, in time and place, that “her mother mobilized an official juridical language against her representation in Gloeckner's work” (Chute 80). Chute argues that Gloeckner's work represents memoir as alternative in the mode of providing a space of alternative jurisdiction where the courts ultimately fail survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Predictably, Gloeckner's mother felt that it was her daughter's duty to keep silent about the abuse she endured, because it resulted not from criminal malice, but from a complex family situation. When Gloeckner refused to do so, her mother retaliated, assuming that her parental authority would transcend her daughter's dubious right to experimental self-fashioning. Unlike the vindictive spirit underlying a prose *exposé*, Gloeckner sought an artful rendering of truth in the then-minor form of alternative comics, but still her mother was angry.

Of course, there is another reason that Gloeckner chose comics as her medium, which has to do with her personal archive of reading and interpreting popular culture. She had met the Crumb family and other major cartoonists from the underground movement when she was just a child. Genealogically speaking, it is precisely their achievements in revolutionary depictions of sexuality, created under the rhetorical conditions of the sexual revolution, which provided the context in which she was asked to understand her own experiences. Allying herself strategically to one mainstream

narrative of cultural history, she recalls the counterculture they, especially Robert Crumb, came to represent as having been “filthy,” an accusation he does not dispute in his glowing introduction to *A Child's Life*.

To bring my reading of Gloeckner to the twenty-first century, I also turn to *The Guild: Bladezz*, the prequel story for the guild's youngest member, whose own arsenal of popular culture reading practices helps him to survive his sexualized childhood. I use the term childhood here where “adolescence” might be the preferred term for some critics, because, for me, the experiences of Gloeckner's Minnie and Bladezz speak to a reluctant prematurity of adolescence, foisted on children by the adults in their home, via sexualization. I do not wish to idealize the childhood innocence of either avatar, but rather to interpret their stories of development from their own perspectives, rather than acquiescing to the narrative of growing up that is arbitrarily placed on them by adults in positions of authority. In terms of chronology, the story that I have chosen from Gloeckner's collection is “An Object-Lesson in Bitter Fruit,” which is the seventh story in the eight-part “A Child's Life,” and precedes “Other childish stories,” “Teen stories,” and “Grown up stories” in the structure of Gloeckner's collection.

The representation of childhood sexuality is always controversial in contemporary U.S. culture, in part because of the logic Lee Edelman calls reproductive futurism, which demands that adulthood be defined by sacrificing queer or otherwise utopian political agendas in order to care for the next generation within the present context (22).

Paradoxically, that logic requires children to be trained early on for their gendered roles within heterosexual society, but also demands that their innocence be fetishized and protected until the time comes for their social debt to be paid. In this context, to

represent her childhood sexual experiences with adults, Gloeckner must be seen either as a pornographer, who is allied with the queer excesses that distract people from paying their social debt, or as an artist. However, this latter possibility is all-but-foreclosed by the sexist double standard that calls Robert Crumb a radical and censors *A Child's Life* (Chute 77). Chute reads *A Child's Life* as a “political, feminist project explicitly addressed to a collective witnessing 'we': for all the girls when they have grown. The project...is not to confess, but rather the even trickier work of *showing*--complicating without evading the power of spectacle--what happens in the laundry room, what happens when a girl is raped” (89). In this act of showing, Gloeckner defies the binary distinction between pornography and art, and lays the groundwork for her readers' ability to enter not just a woman's perspective, but that of a girl who defies our simplistic demand for idealized innocence.

Further, Chute reads comics as “a counterregister of sensuality,” which provide an alternative space, both to art and pornography, and in the storytelling of *A Child's Life*, for our assumptions about the recent history of sexuality (85). Given Gloeckner's damning depiction of her mother's silence about her daughter's sexual abuse, we must revise these. Progressives who romanticize a culture of permissiveness must acknowledge the child's real, conscious suffering, and conservatives who self-protectively assume that family life is a sphere of safety must acknowledge the danger that exists at home. Minnie, however, is established neither as a conservative, nor a progressive, but simply an emergent subject. What already belongs to her, in place of politics, is her popular culture archives, which, like comics, represent an alternative register of thinking. In my reading, these popular culture objects represent one of the

most generative paths towards the reader's connection with Minnie. Once that connection is established, the reader can recognize, with Minnie, the value of alternative cultural spaces for developing alternative ideas about life and self that will enable survival.

“An Object-Lesson in Bitter Fruit” opens with Minnie, sitting on the floor of her bedroom, surrounded by her popular culture archive, including books, school and art supplies, knick knacks, and objects of femininity -- dolls, a flower power desk, and an E-Z Bake Oven. In the lower left-hand corner of the page, Minnie's eyes are focused on reading Nabokov's *Lolita*, reminding the reader that precocious youths always already have access to stories of their own corruption and abuse by the adult world, and that they are often drawn to them. Next to Minnie, is another book, left open and spine-up on her pillow; it's Poe's collected works, further evidence of the darkness to which bright children are often drawn, or choose to read in order to understand the darkness they've already experienced.

As for the objects of normative gender behavior, Minnie's dolls are stripped of their presumably feminine clothes, and one has limbs removed. One is on her back, breasts pointed at the ceiling, and legs splayed to represent sexual submission, and, at the same time, childhood carelessness with objects. Another doll has actually been dismembered and had her limbs removed, but still she smiles the same big-eyed, innocent smile that Minnie offers, an implicit condemnation of those who abuse them. This doll's dress hangs on a hanger alongside a long vertical calendar for the year, representing the time-scale of transition from dress-wearing child into stripped adolescent. Above Minnie, we see a beaded curtain, and below it, books and more art supplies, reminding us that her passion for reading and writing will eventually find their expression in the comics

medium we are reading. The beaded curtain also frames a view of the outside world, obstructed only by the curtain and a dying leafy plant. A dialogue balloon from a disembodied authority figure reads, “Minnie dear, please come into the living room” (47).

The next page offers us a larger view of Minnie's room, which, it is revealed, she shares with her younger sister. Her corner now seems bare, the books and toys having lost their identifying details, and made from revealing symbols into a conventional representation. Minnie's sister jumps on her bed, maniacally laughing: “Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha you have to talk to *them!*” In the next panel, Minnie's book is given a title again, although this time it is *Naked Lunch*, indicating a more developed and autonomous interest in counterculture on the part of Minnie, rather than the status of victim indicated by *Lolita*. The disembodied authority figure screams her name again, after her little sister has announced that Minnie “deserve[s]” to get in trouble (48). In the next panel, on the next page, Minnie is reading the “Aa” volume of the *World Book Encyclopedia*, reminding us that she is still at a fairly early stage in her education, and that our adult associations with various choices of reading material do not map onto the child's particular search for a vocabulary that could describe her life at all. In the next panel, Minnie arrives in the living room to see her stepfather and mother drinking from wine glasses and holding one another on a chair. Her stepfather's menacingly large hand covers his wife's leg in a gesture of ownership and sexuality, which clearly makes Minnie uncomfortable, as does the full pitcher of sangria beside them (49). On the next page, the purpose of their invitation is revealed: her stepfather wishes to talk with her about adolescence. His wording is, of course, lascivious: “So Minnie! You're almost nine years

old now, nearly a *woman*. Your body will soon begin to change -- you'll get *breasts*, like your mother. It's an exciting time for a girl!" (50). Minnie's face grows red with rage as he pressures her to tell him about the developing status of the breasts of her classmates at school, and, on the next page, he asks her to compare them to various fruits, as her mother giggles and smokes (51). Minnie finally leaves, telling her stepfather that she hates him, and, when she returns to the room she shares with her sister, she begins to strangle her, and threatens aloud to kill her, acting out the response she wishes she could unleash on her stepfather (52).

"An Object Lesson in Bitter Fruit" offers an excellent example of Gloeckner's experimental, and autobiographically-inflected graphic storytelling. Her work has been alternately celebrated and condemned for its painstaking depictions of sexual abuse. The condemnation has been leveled not only at the emotionally harrowing storytelling, but also at the detailed depictions of male anatomy not present in this particular story. This story functions a prequel to those more graphic events, although it certainly contains the seeds of immoderate adult sexuality directed towards the child. Also importantly, her work is controversial because it depicts the reality of Minnie's precocious reading habits, and thus, complex emerging consciousness. Her complexity contrasts with what I called the stepfather's immoderate sexuality not because it should be "innocence," which is not a mode of reality for Gloeckner, but rather because it is the necessary complement to the stepfather's actions in a story about human encounter, one in which each party has complex motivations and desires to know the sensual world.

In the juxtaposition of Minnie's status as a savvy consumer, as well as her status as an object of male sexual attention, *A Child's Life* sets up a language for talking about

sexual abuse without falling prey to the nostalgic desire for idealized innocence, or other false ideas about contemporary childhood. The visual language of *A Child's Life* inspired charges of pornography, which is taboo in our culture, but Gloeckner redirects this critique through her alternative feminist aesthetic. Depicting one concrete example of the articulation of the male gaze within the story, Gloeckner places the reader in the novel position of an alternative gaze. By doing so, she argues that, within a heavily visual culture, readers and survivors at all levels deserve to see their reality reflected in terms that take them seriously as gazing subjects, as well.

This particular manipulation of gendered visual culture and consumption practices is one that Aline Kominsky-Crumb has also explored through her recent work in sculpture. This work critiques the perversion of girlhood by corporate media. In sculptural works like “The Unobtainable Perfection of Barbie” (2003), the artist asks us to experience the dissonance between the objects of gendered popular culture and the world as we actually experience it. She writes,

When I'm painting objects that are supposed to be cute--dolls and other toys designed for children to play with --I feel they're imbued with evil and treachery. They have a terrible quality of fake innocence, manufactured by middle-aged men who just want to make money. (341)

A large part of her project is as much anti-capitalist as it is anti-masculinist; Kominsky-Crumb wishes to transform the “material glut” that keeps us “politically asleep” into “a sacred object” (340-341). Speaking from the twenty-first century, Kominsky-Crumb looks back to the tactics of counterculture, which, especially in feminist comics, were always concerned with making visible the ways in which lifestyles and identities were

constructed by way of consumer products. Feminist comics creators held onto the hope that the worst of these could be resisted in favor of the alternative visions available through the underground marketplace. However, because that marketplace was so thoroughly marginalized by the various forces that led to the development of alternative culture, like the gentrification of urban centers and the institutionalization of radical ideas, artists have since turned to alternative registers that call on readers to reimagine our relationship to these toxic objects. For Gloeckner, this means depicting Minnie's consciousness as being formed as much by her personal archive of popular culture as by her experiences of abuse. For Kominsky-Crumb, it means re-contextualizing discarded objects from mass culture for aesthetic contemplation. In both cases, readers must develop a critical perspective on objects presented to us in the marketplace as innocent and desirable, and become familiar with an alternative visual vocabulary of our world. For me, this means a regular engagement with women's experimental autobiography across media, a category that expands with each generation's innovations in visual culture practices, and in self-fashioning.

Section IV: *The Guild: Bladezz* and its Digital Culture Incarnation of Gloeckner's Object Lesson

The latest incarnation of the intersection between visual culture and sexual politics is exemplified for me in *The Guild: Bladezz*, a comic about the youngest member of the Knights of Good. Like Minnie, Bladezz is the subject of his mother's boyfriend's lecherous gaze, but here, the gaze is more directly connected to capitalist exploitation, and merely paralleled with sexual exploitation. Specifically, Collin, the boyfriend in question, is a photographer, who takes advantage of Bladezz's mother's frustration with

the boy's lack of direction, by offering him a job as a commercial model. Without Bladezz's knowledge, the photographs Collin takes are to be part of a viral marketing campaign, which will humiliate the boy, first and foremost by feminizing him before the eyes of his peers, who assume that modeling is women's work.

The section of the Bladezz comic I wish to explore here begins on page 4, when Bladezz's mother, who is six months divorced from his father, arrives home from a date with her new boyfriend, whom she now wishes to introduce to her children, Bladezz and his sister Dena. Bladezz and Dena are wrestling on the floor when their mother arrives with Collin, in a scene that has much in common, visually, with Minnie's attack on her younger sister in *A Child's Life* -- the two are aggressive with one another because they can't fully express their emotions and changing relationship with the sensual world to the adults in their life, even though the children are aware that the adults are frustrated, too. Their mother stands in a flirty pose and a revealing cocktail dress, hip cocked toward the new boyfriend, Collin, who wears a large camera on a strap around his neck. The camera works like Minnie's stepfather's hand to indicate a menacing new presence of masculinity that has no place, in the child's view, in the home they now share with their mother. Of course, this particular response to displacement will differ for children according to their emerging understanding of gender roles -- while Gloeckner's Minnie has to face her stepfather's excitement about her developing breasts like her mother's, Bladezz simply wants his original figure of male identification, his father, to return. Dena, by contrast, is savvy to Collin's creepiness in a different way, and registers this fact by way of demonstrating her self-protective precociousness -- she asks if he's a photographer "in the style of Leibovitz, Mapplethorpe, or value-mart photo center?" (5).

Collin, like Minnie's stepfather, presents himself as a representative of an established model of mature gender relations, but he fails to impress Bladezz and Dena. After a mere few minutes in their home, he begins giving Bladezz advice about life. Specifically, he speaks on behalf of consumerism, suggesting that Bladezz owes it to his family to get a job, specifically one as a commercial model for Collin's upcoming shoot (5). Bladezz tries to counter the suggestion by explaining that he is already occupied with the game, where he had a successful day, but this argument fails. Dena, playing to her brother's insecurity, reminds him that he is already embedded in consumerist logic, because he pays to play the game, further undermining whatever success Bladezz felt he had found there earlier in the day. Like Minnie, Bladezz wants to be left alone in a space defined by his objects -- like her, he energizes and occupies himself with soda and reading material, although he chooses comic books rather than novels for the latter. But his space is not his own, and neither is his time, and so, his mother tells him, he will have to take the modeling job. At the photo shoot, Bladezz looks in the mirror at his model self: he wears jeans and a red and grey checked shirt, with a white apron tied around his waist. Already feeling insecure, Bladezz is crushed when Collin enters and insists that he hold his prop, which, it turns out, is a giant sausage on a barbecue prong. Humiliated, costumed, and holding the phallic object, Bladezz continues to reiterate the complaints he's been trying to register about how much he misses his father and does not want a new one. Fortunately, Dena is on his side here, but sadly, the two cannot match their mother's authority, and so the shoot is set to take place (6). While it is happening, Bladezz explicitly accuses his mother of child abuse, in his words, because "it's an *oven* in here," but because he cannot articulate his accusation more persuasively, she ignores him (7).

What Bladezz is actually upset about, which he articulates in the next panel, is that “posing is exhausting,” which we can read more sympathetically, especially when we consider that he is being asked to linger in humiliating poses, and even moreso when we consider what will happen next, which is that his photographs will be distributed virally and used against him by his peers (7).

On the next page, Bladezz has actually passed out and blacked out as a result of all the hard day's work posing, which I read in parallel to narratives of sexual exploitation, cued both by the fact that Bladezz wakes up in his bed, as well as the fact that the posters on his bedroom wall are of nearly-nude women performing affected and sexualized poses, just like the ones Bladezz just discovered. Bladezz has so strongly identified with the female victim of the sexualized male gaze that, although he presumably chose to purchase the posters, he has completely internalized the negative expectation when that gaze, represented by the camera flash, was directed at him. This comic being an installation of the comedy Web series-based storyworld, *The Guild*, rather than Gloeckner's fairly high art graphic narrative, Bladezz and his sister do, by the end, manage to convince their mother to break up with Collin. That this ending is achieved so quickly after the menace is introduced is significant to our interpretation of it. Bladezz is left with an embarrassing memory, which raised questions about his surprising talent for visual self-exploitation (only surprising if one assumes that hours a day on a game celebrated for its sophisticated graphics will have no effect on one's mind), and thus, perhaps, his femininity, but he is not left with trauma in the way that Minnie is. He even gets to undermine Collin in his professional context, as well as in a sexual context. By taking “selfies,” that is, amateur self-portraits that display the same youthful smile at the

camera that Collin extracted from him, the man's bosses realize that it is Bladezz's talents that deserve to be rewarded, not Collin's (19). Even more satisfying is the fact that Bladezz is able to leave the bedroom he shares with Dena, who tends to pick at his insecurities, and set up his new gaming lair in the basement, where he can, at least sometimes, genuinely be alone, socializing only on exactly his terms as the complex world of the game allows (13).

The Guild: Bladezz, in other words, gestures briefly towards that staple of confessional memoir, the moment of sexual exploitation that often, especially for women, marks the unwelcome transition from childhood into adolescence. But, because it is part of a comedic storyworld overall, this moment is made palatable by the readerly delight that can be taken in Bladezz's tech-savvy reversal of his fortune, and the fact that justice is served within the “episode” of action of the one-shot comic.

To tell her story, Gloeckner trained as a medical illustrator, which helped her to master the detailed representations of anatomy that make her work so shocking for some readers, visited therapists for years, and in any case started off as something of an insider to underground comics as a young teenager. Day, along with co-writer Sean Becker, wrote *The Guild: Bladezz* at a much lower level of expertise -- while the two had gained experience in the world of the independent web comedy by the time they conceived this comic, both can best be understood as pioneers of transmedia storytelling rather than comics insiders. Indeed, a third contributor, Andrew Currie, was responsible for the art in *The Guild: Bladezz*.

Thus, the way we read this story is different from the way we read *A Child's Life* - here, our focus might, on the first pass, simply be on establishing continuity between the

character of Bladezz as we've gotten to know him in the Web series, and the character as he is depicted in the comic, both as the middle school student Simon, brother to Dena, the in-game Rogue Bladezz, member of the Knights of Good, and the model Finn Smulders. Any deeper reading is only available to the reader who is particularly concerned with developing empathy for Bladezz, who, after all, was introduced to us in the Web series as a troll who shouted homophobic slurs at other players in the game when he was bored. But for that reader, the open-endedness of transmedia storytelling allows for transmedia fan practices that allow us to take seriously the worst possible scenario for Bladezz -- the scenario in which he felt genuinely violated by Collin. As one "key" to his origin story, we find we can now understand both his negative personality traits, which sympathetic readers could in any case write off as immaturity, and his hopeful creativity with technology. This creativity confirms the generative power of the game as it is articulated within *The Guild* storyworld, both as a means for individual character development, and for strengthening relationships between characters.

Using the Gloeckner parallel to strengthen the case admittedly translates a conversation about a political, feminist, aesthetically significant work of graphic narrative, tied to an alternative jurisdiction for serious crimes, onto what could be seen as an offshoot of a minor, corporate-sponsored web comedy, which tells a highly-exaggerated story, sexualized only for comedic effect. Indeed, it turns a reading of the real sexual exploitation of a young girl, artfully rendered, into a reading of the fictional semi-sexual exploitation of a young boy, and thus, it could be argued, changes the stakes of the reading beyond recognition. However, I argue that, where the legacies of counterculture, alternative publishing cultures, and digital culture converge, there is a

strong connective tissue to the past where these serious questions of representation, consumption, and consciousness converge. In a complex consumer landscape in which the expectation of the dominant culture is that we are all easily conned into buying whatever is presented to us, and even making ourselves into appealing products, it is important to locate signs of more complex individual perspectives formed by this world.

To return to the prose memoir, *Zami* is not only valuable because it was the first biomythography, or one of the first full-length accounts of black lesbian existence in Twentieth-Century U.S. culture. It is valuable because it serves as dynamic evidence that new aesthetic tactics and publishing tactics are often necessary for telling new stories, which reveal new truths, which are true for new audiences in new ways. As readers, we crave the illumination of perspectives genuinely different from our own, or those we have seen articulated in the past -- we wish to see the world articulated to us in language that calls attention to our perceptual filters, sensory and ideological, and that reminds us that the very same objects and phenomena we encounter daily must once have looked different, and even served a different purpose. *A Child's Life* is not only valuable because it contains such a brave, virtuosic depiction of sexual exploitation in a particular historical context. It is significant because, in it, Gloeckner makes use of her illustration skills to depict her memories of the 1960s and 1970s, with their dirty hippies. In the process, she reveals the fraught sensuality of childhood to readers in a way that we had never seen before, not in lurid, confessional memoir, or in any other genre. And so, while *The Guild: Tink* will not soon become a mainstay primary text for critical race studies, and *The Guild: Bladezz* will likely not enter the conversations about visual technology and the sexualization of children, both comics use the power of first-person

storytelling to depict creative cognitive responses to a complex world. These first-person stories, written by an insider in the world of online gaming, document what has been important to the gaming subculture, and what might be worth carrying forth to new incarnations of counter-culture, whatever their preferred technologies of self-expression.

While these stories appear in various forms in the contemporary media landscape, the critical renaissance currently surrounding comics as an art form provides some backing for my suspicion that contemporary comics provide a particularly fertile alternative space for the depiction of contemporary women's consciousness. *The Guild* comics mediate between popular visual culture and the handcrafted, individualistic articulations of experience central to women's experimental autobiography across media. Thus, they represent one significant microculture's attempt to document itself, focusing on the first-person storytelling that makes visible the possibility of individual consciousness in a world that seems governed by heavily-circumscribed spheres of consumption.

The Guild storyworld's depiction of popular culture archives has something of a real-world digital parallel in the Organization for Transformative Works project "Archive of Our Own." That archive stores over 1,000,000 works of fan fiction, fan art, and fan meta, or critical essays born in a fannish context. In these fanworks, thousands of archive users creatively respond to popular culture by transforming it, by taking characters from one medium, and depicting them in another, and by subtly altering storyworlds to incorporate new social possibilities, often, but not always, sexual possibilities. The archive is important because it draws from a women-centered history of media fandom, and especially one that values the contributions of girls as much as women. In the

Archive of Our Own, there is no shortage of fictionalized accounts of childhood sexual abuse, as well as a complex tagging system that is a tribute to its users' savviness when it comes to the tropes of abuse narratives, and the ways in which these underserve survivors of abuse and queer subjects. Fans are aware of the vast landscape of human perversions, and they are attuned to the ethics of its representation in fiction and popular culture, desiring to create a space in which a broad range of women's desires can be virtually realized, but also a world in which the simplistic objectification of women and children by the dominant culture is never simply reproduced.

However, by virtue of *The Guild's* relatively small cast of characters, and its consistent adherence to the emotional rules of the situation comedy, a reader's experience of the storyworld is less like the same reader's dizzying exploration of the vast Archive of Our Own, and more like her experience of reading any of the purportedly all-encompassing narratives of contemporary digital life found in contemporary novels. Dave Eggers's "Facebook novel," *The Circle*, is one example of these, and its example is one reason I am careful to describe *The Guild* storyworld's affinity to the Archive of Our Own as well as the contemporary bestselling novel. Telling the story of a Facebook employee, Eggers's apparently unresearched novel actually serves to cover up the history of subcultural documentation by insiders, whether Felicia Day, or Kate Losse, who has claimed that *The Circle* seems to draw from *The Boy Kings* without citation. Whether or not Eggers's novel is plagiarized to any degree is not the final question, of course, but the suspicion connects it to the inadequacies of mainstream approaches to the questions of contemporary life in the contemporary techno-social landscape.

Further, *The Circle's* appropriation, however inadvertent, of Losse's story, confirms a historical trend toward gentrification within publishing cultures. The situation has a widely-discussed precedent in Jonathan Larson's musical *Rent*, which borrowed without citation from Sarah Schulman's novel, *People in Trouble*, which was produced by an insider to queer community as well as AIDS activism. She suggests in *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America* that one of the reasons that Larson's production was incorporated into the mainstream account of AIDS history, and her novel was relegated to the margins of gay and lesbian publishing cultures, the genuinely alternative, was that Larson's production lent itself better to an ideology that made gay people into a niche market, rather than seriously attempting to document their history or contextualize broader recent history with the knowledge it provides. Again, the specific act of plagiarism is not the point -- it is not merely the case that Schulman wished that her book had continued to sell more copies after the advent of *Rent*. It is the point that her book led readers to a serious engagement with the diverse experiences and artistic and political responses to the AIDS crisis, while *Rent* offered a simplistic narrative that was designed to make gay life palatable to a straight audience, and not implicate them in any way in the ongoing discrimination and gentrification that have emerged in large part as a result of the mishandling of the AIDS crisis by authorities and opportunistic real estate developers and other businesspeople.

I believe that *The Guild* comics consistently gesture towards the diversity of gamer life, and the ways in which its full expression is prevented by the gentrification of the Internet, and the opportunistic businesspeople who capitalize upon it, including mainstream authors of literary fiction. Connecting *The Guild* storyworld to women

writers like Lorde, Gloeckner, and Schulman, enables me to articulate a woman-centered history of alternative culture, which lives on in contemporary digital culture. I turn now to Ariel Schrag's *The High School Chronicles of Ariel Schrag*, which provide a long-arc articulation of a teenage girl's emerging lesbian consciousness in the 1990s. Alongside Schrag, I read *The Guild: Clara*, allowing that character's voice to speak beyond the tropes she represents, most of which represent some part of hyper-femininity.

Section V: A Teenage Author's Self-Exploration of Sexual Development: The Comics of Ariel Schrag, and the story of *The Guild's Clara*

Ariel Schrag's comics represent the author's queer adolescence, which she lived in a much more permissive social and historical environment than that depicted by Audre Lorde, namely that of Berkeley, California in the mid-1990s. Schrag's whiteness, her academic and social legibility at school, and her relative lack of family responsibilities enable her to focus her teenage mind almost entirely on her own desires. Her comics thus represent an entirely different approach to sexual experience than the work of Phoebe Gloeckner, namely, one grounded in her own agency, rather than her sexualization by someone more powerful. In some ways, Schrag's experience represents a queer utopia; while in high school, Schrag not only had the privilege to live as an out lesbian, but she also had the time and focus to write long-form comics about her experiences. Whereas Lorde and Gloeckner both faced serious struggle to publish their works once they had been composed, Schrag had the freedom of youth and access to alternative culture, which led her to self-publish her comics. She had encountered zines, that informal mode of circulation popular among feminists since counterculture, because of her privileged social location. Firstly, she lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, a place nostalgic for

counterculture, and which was still in the 1990s populated by ample comic bookstores and feminist bookstores; and secondly, because she lived in the 1990s. By the time she was writing her comics, zines had been popularized for the otherwise normative gentrified middle classes,²⁶ not least by the Riot Grrrl movement.²⁷

That said, Schrag's collected comics, published eventually for a larger audience by Slave Labor Graphics, have few parallels in terms of broadly-acclaimed representations of teenage life authored by teenagers themselves. Schrag's project, of documenting her four years of high school in a consistent medium and evolving voice, is uniquely comprehensive, and provides a wealth of material for readers, like myself, who seek to understand recent cultural history through the perspectives of individual women. The only contemporary writer I can name who has acquired such a broad audience for her serial documentation of her teenage experience is Tavi Gevinson. Gevinson is a master

²⁶ Thomas McLaughlin examines one example of the gentrified status of zines in his 1996 book, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular*. Reading the zine *Bad Attitude*, McLaughlin comes across a caveat for middle-aged and middle-class readers of the zine, revealing its author's "generational anger at sellout former freaks," whose existence undoes the fantasy of the zine as "an imaginary safe haven for the imaginary hip subject" (62).

²⁷ In her article, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," Nguyen "argue[s] for displacing the given history of riot grrrl for another yet untold that understands this movement instead through the continuing presence of problematic investments in progressive time, or possessive selfhood" (191). In that vein, it is important to recall the ways in which that movement's "girl love" both enacted a "liberalist fantasy" of communalism and continues today in its self-archiving practices to marginalize the disruptions to this fantasy posed by women of color participants (176). Nguyen's innovative historiographical approach contextualizes the "authenticity" of D.I.Y. culture against a backdrop of gentrification and privilege. It is equally worth noting, however, that Schrag herself espouses no fantasies of communal praxis, but rather a desire for individual expression, and so she cannot be held accountable to the hypocritical politics of her forebears in D.I.Y. media.

of digital self-fashioning, partly because she began sharing her life publicly via her fashion blog at age eleven, quickly garnering the attention of cultural elites in the fashion world, as well as fans of her writing. Her expansive approach to digital self-fashioning is currently represented by her digital magazine empire, *Rookie*, in which she continues to share her writing and photography, but also provides a venue for other teenagers to explore their own voices, in whatever medium suits them best. A savvy self-archivist who is familiar with the history of women's alternative publishing tactics, and at the helm of bridging these, Gevinson has even created print offshoots from the magazine empire, which she calls “yearbooks.” These yearbooks are published by the Canadian comics press Drawn and Quarterly, which, like Fantagraphics, specializes in alternative comics, and also publishes Schrag. As one reviewer said of the second *Rookie Yearbook*:

With *Yearbook Two* (and its predecessor, *Yearbook One*), Gevinson has found a novel way to bridge the worlds of Web and print. Writing on the Web is routinely undervalued, in part because it’s ephemeral. We live in a golden age of cultural criticism, but much of it slips through the cracks. Hundreds of thousands of words by original voices like Jacob Clifton and Gabe Delahaye are available exclusively (for free!) on the Web. But with so many outlets publishing at a breakneck pace, the half-life of a successful Web item is maybe 36 hours. If you aren’t actively monitoring the Internet during that brief window, well, too bad—you’ll become aware of a given post only, if at all, by fluke. (O’Connor 1)

Like many of the other writers discussed in this project, especially Felicia Day, Gevinson's particular achievement has as much to do with creating a bridge connecting multiple media as it does with her artistic vision, which is appealing, feminist, women-

centered, and also commercially savvy. But this ultimately technical accomplishment of cross-platform innovation is unlikely to be attributed to Gevinson in the history of digital culture, because it is authored by a woman, and women are less often associated with innovation than they are with the sentimental, excessive feelings that drive self-fashioning, even in its most spectacular incarnations. Even positive reviews fall prey to this binary thinking opposing the technological and the feminine. As O'Connor continues her review, focused on the difficulty of archiving digital-era culture, "Since *Rookie's* aesthetic traffics so heavily in nostalgia, a yearbook—a sentimental format specifically designed to capture things that are fleeting—is weirdly the ultimate iteration of the Web magazine" (O'Connor 2). It is worth pausing over the "weirdly," here, because, as I have suggested throughout this project, women's creative self-fashioning, especially when it is born of experiments in publishing that transcend discrete media and genres, is often at the forefront of significant cultural developments, and is often, in retrospect, a useful focal point for understanding how those changes came to pass. In other words, there is nothing weird or accidental about Gevinson's savvy choice of medium -- she is, like others working in the shadow tradition of women's experimental autobiography, at the forefront of cultural innovation because of her experience as a highly perceptive young woman.

Both Gevinson's "yearbooks" and Schrag's *High School Chronicles*, packaged separately as *Awkward*, *Definition*, *Potential*, and *Likewise*, represent year-long narratives of female adolescence. The differences between the two authors' visions reveal much about the generational shift from alternative self-fashioning, and its focus on the incredible varieties of individual experience that define alternative culture, to the self-fetishization and -promotion of the digital era. I should clarify that this trend has more to

do with media change than with any handwringing on my part. I differentiate myself from those critics who worry endlessly about the public sex lives of contemporary teenage girls, arguing instead that these have much in common with a long tradition of feminist self-fashioning. If anything, I argue that contemporary women writers benefit from their complex relationship to the contemporary marketplace, in which the sinister nostalgists continue to produce Barbie dolls and endlessly pseudo-differentiated beauty products. Gevinson and Schrag bring their critical perspectives to bear on their own recent pasts, trusting in the long-practiced work of diary-keeping to keep them close to the truth of their experiences. Further, they have the patience and vision to transform these experiences into narratives that might mean something to a broad audience of women readers, who are moved by what they share with those experiences.

The major difference between the works comes with the presentation of the author's likeness throughout: while Schrag often draws herself crudely, focusing on the range of emotions one can express via exaggerated facial expressions in graphic narrative, Gevinson presents herself first and foremost via fashion photography. Her beauty has enabled her to work as an actress, which creates a radically different career track than one nurtured solely by writing and drawing. Schrag has also found much success, for example, writing for the Showtime series *The L Word*, but her role has always been one of writer and artist, rather than of celebrity more broadly, which is indicative of one of the downsides of the transmedia storytelling world we inhabit in the twenty-first-century: it reinscribes the importance of physical beauty, and with it, the mainstream demands of whiteness, able-bodiedness, and gender-conformity, to fields in which the physical has no relevance. Women's writing from alternative culture stretches

from the literary experiment of Lorde's biomythography, to the near-pornographic depictions of sexual abuse in the work of Phoebe Gloeckner, to Schrag's depictions of her materially comfortable, popular culture-obsessed adolescence in comics. Of these three examples, it is only in Schrag's work that the author displays a desire to be beautiful, because, without the lived experience of having been fetishized for her beauty, she can enact this desire on what seem like her own terms. This desire for beauty sets the stage for the obsession nurtured by the twenty-first-century visual culture obsession with photographic self-portraits, and marks a step away from feminist critiques of the obsession with female beauty articulated by Gloeckner.

We can see the seeds of this increased focus on beauty in Schrag's depiction of high school dating, which is crystallized in one story from *Potential*. That story, which, in mainstream media appears as a milestone cliché of gender and heterosexual conformity, is the story of the high school prom. Schrag depicts her experience at the prom during her 11th-grade year, during which her thoughts become dominated by her desire to be recognized as beautiful, sexually attractive, and lovable. While this desire is not unique among adolescents, it feels like a departure from Schrag's broader focus in the previous installments of her *High School Chronicles*. Here, it is worth noting that *Potential* represents Schrag's third book-length representation of a full academic year in graphic narrative. In the first two, the author found a voice and artistic style, selected stories worth telling, and found the balance between revealing the differences between her queer experience and the scripts of dominant culture, and representing her universal desires for love, friendship, and belonging.

In *Potential*, Schrag develops a more complex aesthetic than ever before, alternating between the crude, exaggerated drawings that defined her first two books, and long dream sequences in which the visual effect of whole pages is filtered through nightmarish anxiety, states of intoxication, or sexual frustration. These filters, constructed entirely by Schrag's own hand, showcase her development as an artist, and, for the reader, their virtuosity almost makes up for our heartbreak at encountering the many emotional blows she suffers during the year depicted (Kohlert). They reveal that there is variety even in repeated experiences, for example, the repeated frustrations of unrequited love, because, as feelings grow and change in character, and new elements are incorporated, the situations take on new characteristics, even while the underlying desires are constant. In addition to these filters, which add psychological depth to Schrag's storytelling, there is a single ideological filter, namely, that of the author's queerness. It is her queerness that makes her “prom fever” so notable, strange, and worthy of discussion here, for it comes to represent the one way in which the author's drive for success and self-actualization on terms she can access as a teenager will be thwarted.

Schrag's depiction of her prom, which she attended with another woman, is already subversive of normative cultural expectations, but only on that count, and, because of her liberal social environment, she is reluctant to accept it as a transformative feature of the trajectory of her own desires, despite her palpable self-awareness. She begins her story of her prom by citing one of the origins of these clichés in her own popular culture archive, which was the high school soap opera *Beverly Hills, 90210*. She says that, “ever since the thrill of 6th grade's 90201 season finale with Brenda losing her virginity to Dylan and Donna and her dress drunk downstairs, prom had been the

embodiment of all teenage classicism” (180). Schrag's desire to depict her high school experience comprehensively reveals itself as a social experiment here, one which is about to go too far, and remove her too much from her universal desires, into the territory of acquiring prefabricated experiences, rather than seeing them as opportunities in which she can connect more deeply to others in her social environment.

And so, just as teen magazines would tell her to do, Schrag spends a full month preparing for the prom by crash dieting, working out excessively, and focusing on looking “pretty in [her] prom dress for Sally,” her date (180). All of these are connected to the labor of performing gender appropriately in order to fulfill a commodified ideal of appearance, for a single moment, namely, the moment of the prom photograph. Although restricted eating might seem like a sensible avoidance of overconsumption, in fact it is part of a self-contradictory beauty regimen, and thus complemented by the purchase of many products other than food, including professional beauty services and the squandering of time. If it were complemented instead by an increased attention to one's social environment, and an awareness of her privilege, it could be presented as virtuous, but in this case, it is a perversion of the desire to experience a moment of beautiful love at the prom.

As part of her diet and beauty endeavors, Schrag is hoping that assimilating her own image to the idealized image of womanhood she sees in popular culture will make her more sexually desirable. But, on the final panel of this first page of the prom chapter, Schrag depicts the first of several obstacles to her perfect night at the prom, namely, the crucial fact that Sally doesn't really want to go with her. Schrag and Sally have, by this point in the story, had many a fight about whether or not Sally is “really” a lesbian, and,

while Schrag loves her and craves her approval, their relationship appears doomed by sexual incompatibility. There is not necessarily an incompatibility based on Sally's heterosexuality, but there is an incompatibility based on how much sex she'd like to have with Schrag. Although there is no reason to believe that Sally's sex drive will increase when she sees a slightly thinner and more beautifully-decorated Schrag, the flawed thinking of normative female adolescence has convinced Schrag that it will.

Schrag reveals another, more sinister effect of this thinking on the next page. As she continues to catalog the anxiety-causing events leading up to the prom, she complains about a manicure gone wrong, and depicts the manicurist, presumably Vietnamese, as a racist caricature, without comment. It is worth pausing over this panel to note this point at which the limits of winning naïveté are revealed, and the point at which absolute adherence to popular culture tropes actually does shut down one's imaginative space, and lock one into destructive clichés. The author, who once seemed so creative and individuated, has found herself trapped in a spiral of internalized misogyny, which is enacted here as racism.

On the final panel of this page, Schrag depicts herself, fully made up, in the mirror, admiring the work that has gone into making her into a beautiful icon for a night (181). Of course, on the next page, she returns to depicting herself as a person, in motion, and so the momentarily “perfect image” is already revealed for its relative insignificance, given the time and space of her long-arc narrative trajectory. Following this transition from stillness to motion, Schrag begins to depict the moment's sensuality, a time-based phenomenon, and thus she returns to her mode of brutal honesty about emotional experience. Specifically, she depicts Sally offering more intimacy to their

friend Rowina's pet chinchilla than she will offer to Schrag, cooing "He's cuter and softer than you, Ariel (182)." However, Schrag, running on her script, is undeterred by this indignity, and insists that they drive to the high school to get their prom picture taken together.

It turns out that Sally actually does fear the violence that could be ignited by their queer appearance at this heterosexual event. She says, "I hope you realize we're gonna get our heads kicked in when we take our picture" (183). Schrag is not afraid, but she doesn't know how to comfort Sally, and so she simply shrinks back behind her, saying that they won't -- as with her racist depiction of the manicurist, she shows how much social reality she must shut off for her white femininity to achieve realization. They do get their picture taken, and it is depicted outside of time, the panel tilted to distinguish it from the sequence of events on the rest of the page: like any prom picture, the two look beautiful and happy according to the standards they've tried to reach, and, although they are both in dresses, the pose is indistinguishable from that taken by a heterosexual couple (184). Finally, Schrag and Sally arrive at the prom event, which is depicted as a set of anonymous, happy people dancing and having fun (189). At close-up range, we see that this group is in fact composed of misfits, like any other large group of teenagers. Schrag and Sally even find another lesbian couple, but don't find much to talk about with them.

Here we begin to expect that a queer couple really is beyond the considerations of this ritual of the prom. The other lesbian couple stops by Schrag and Sally's table to announce that they are leaving, because "there's nothing for gay people to do" (192). Schrag tries to rescue the evening by inviting Sally to the bathroom to have sex, which is undoubtedly something queer they could do, but Sally gives up quickly, and so they

leave. Schrag depicts homophobic remarks from teenagers across the street as she and Sally walk to the car, and unfortunately, she again delves into racial caricature, both in her depiction of likeness and language, to make clear that the homophobic teenagers were black (193). These moments of failed solidarity pile up to reveal Schrag's self-centeredness, brought on by prom fever. Rather than having sympathy for the other students marginalized by the stereotypical nature of this event, Schrag can only focus on her own failure as an emergent queer sexual agent.

Paradoxically, because Schrag's cultural fantasy requires that her desire be the focus of the evening, she is unable to interact with her fellow students in a way that makes Sally feel more relaxed, which might endear her to the idea of fulfilling Schrag's intimate desires. The night goes on, and Schrag continues to try to have sex with Sally, so that her narrative of prom night feels complete, but the lingering impression left by her narrative is one of failure all around, although commercial archival culture would suggest that the pretty picture of Schrag with her smiling, beautiful date constitutes a lasting success. Together, the story of Schrag's prom night and the scrapbook-inspired rendering of the formal prom photograph, showcase the success of her project to speak about high school as it happened, in a visual language that allows for emotional and social insight. Using this language, Schrag invites the reader to inhabit her perspective, even at the uncomfortable moments of her distorted thinking, and falling prey to cliché. Her status as a queer outsider does not mean that she is prevented from the consumption of objects and experiences related to femininity and romance, but it does mean that these will comically fail to connect Schrag's desires with her lived experience.

To contextualize Schrag's depiction of her flirtation with femininity and heterosexual ritual, I turn now to *The Guild: Clara*, which tells the story of that character's prom night, which came to define her identity as a successful heterosexual woman. Clara's success on this count contrasts with Schrag's queer failure, but both stories depict what is masked by the scripts of heterosexual culture, made official by commercial archival culture. This excess of what is masked ends up becoming the imaginative space that turns Clara to gaming as an adult, because heterosexual life does not deliver the fulfillment it seemed to promise in adolescence. By contrast to Schrag's auteurist approach to her own experience, in which the author's individual vision is articulated at the level of word, image, and content, *The Guild: Clara* is defined by mediation and inconsistency. While reading Schrag, we are asked to view her world through her eyes; in *The Guild: Clara*, we are asked to put together an idea of Clara from a series of elements of Day's transmedia storyworld. We have information about Clara from the actress Robin Thorsen, who plays Clara in the Web series, and also from series creator and writer Day, who devised the character, and, with Kim Evey, wrote the comic. Another cultural producer, Ron Chan, did the art for the comic, and still more additional hands lettered it, produced cover art, and provided series-level editing, streamlining the issue for publication by Dark Horse Comics, managing the letters page, and selecting advertising to be incorporated. This complexly-distributed management of first-person storytelling serves as a generative counterpoint for Schrag's autobiographical diary comics.

That the reader is distracted by the many different pieces of information we are given about Clara is one intellectual state that allows us to inhabit her perspective. After

all, as an adult, Clara does not have the privilege of hiding in her bedroom and journaling until she achieves catharsis about the recent events in her life. In fact, the story told in this comic is about Clara trying to organize her sprawling boxes of photographs and mementos from her past, so that she and her husband can finally have their family home in order. She has put off the task for a long time, it seems, both because of her consuming gaming habit, and because of the unceasing responsibilities of even low-level participation in family life. With her life in this state, the past cluttered all over the floor, and the present unfolding quickly, Clara seeks escape in her virtual environment. Unlike Schrag, who focused for weeks on making her prom night perfect, Clara wishes to postpone indefinitely the task of actually making her home functional. She is resistant to the idea that, once functional, it will have to keep functioning, and probably mostly by her hand, because her husband works full-time. And so, she lives in the game, where small achievements are immeasurably satisfying, and the work of cleaning-up is magical. One could write Clara off as a simple escapist, but there is more underlying her resistance to domesticity than that. The clumsiness of character revealed by her clutter only looks like clumsiness because Clara's archive fails to be organized entirely into a family home, but this excess is representative, in my reading, of imaginative and social possibility. Clara has yet to articulate this possibility -- indeed, her conscious self-knowledge is far from Schrag's, which was so beautifully articulated in the latter's expressionistic hand-drawn aesthetics. However, Clara shares a central feature with Schrag, namely that of potential.

On the theme of deceptive shallowness, it is worth noting that Clara is the only member of the Knights of Good who uses her real name for her avatar. This choice

reveals her lack of interest in creating a character who fulfills some latent desire to be more powerful, beautiful, or strong. This one-to-one correlation between real-life Clara and in-game Clara represents the opposite end of the spectrum of pseudonymity theorized by *The Guild: Tink*. Because of her white, middle-class, heterosexual privilege, Clara's desires can seem simple and, because she is a woman, trivial -- she wants distraction from the constant demands of her young children; she wants friends, and she wants an entertaining spectacle with which to occupy herself. Clara is the anti-capitalist's stereotype of the feminized consumer, who wishes to fill every pocket of spare time within her day with consumer culture-approved activity. When her husband goes out of town for a wedding in season two, and takes the children with him, Clara hosts her own telling orgy of consumption, in which she stays up all night gaming, drinking, eating, and chatting with her friends. While, to her, this feels like freedom, from the outside, it looks desperate, and like an inadvertent revelation of some kind of emptiness.

In a world like the game, in which the creation of a unique, pseudonymous character is celebrated, there is some suspicion around a player like Clara, who seems so perfectly in line with a stereotype. She seems to be simply a bored housewife who loves the game's "girly" features -- she and Tink fight over an orb with which you can change your character's hair color at will, and who plays the game and eats compulsively while her husband is away fulfilling social responsibilities like work, and even family event attendance. Naturally, it is misogynistic to level these critiques with any particular venom against a member of the small minority of women who represent the game's user base, and to find something particularly sad in a woman who drinks and distracts away her pain, or, more trivially, her boredom. It is especially unfair if one simply nods in

recognition at nerdy celebrity men like Wil Wheaton, who brew their own beer and spend their weekends playing tabletop games.²⁸ Both in masculine and feminine incarnations, these are equally pre-determined consumer lifestyles, but the critique of Clara's is bolstered by our gendered expectation that, because she is a mother, she should devote all of her energies to nurturing her children.

My preferred reading of her shallowness is that Clara, like all the other characters in *The Guild*, has a currently-under-utilized space within her mind and life, which could theoretically be used to embody motherhood more completely, but is generative for storytelling precisely because of its situated open-endedness. Clara is not a good candidate for “leaning in,” either to bolster her career, for which her aspirations are in any case vague and exclusively game-related, or into her family life, because she already devotes so much of herself to loving them in her own way. In the end, it is Codex alone who is able to translate her passion for gaming into a profession, and Clara is left to her devices as her privilege and other duties allow. Eventually, operating on the logic of flourishing inherent in the sitcom, we expect that Clara will develop her imaginative space, reveal some of her skills, and become a more complete and individuated character. *The Guild: Clara* enables us to examine how she came to deny the full expression of her subjectivity in the first place, and speculate on how she might recover a sense of her own particular desires that transcend her social role.

²⁸ It is perhaps telling that Wheaton's memoir, *Just a Geek*, which tells the story of his coming of age as a writer in the era of digital self-fashioning, is framed by two separate encounters with female servers at the Pasadena Hooters. In the first encounter, the “cute-but-not-beautiful” server, Destiny, recognizes him as someone who “used to be an actor,” which fuels his feelings of inferiority (Chapter 1). In the final encounter, which takes place in the epilogue, the “classically beautiful girl in her early 20s” recognizes Wheaton from his website, and validates him by telling him he is a “great writer.”

Clara's emotionally-driven overconsumption of food, alcohol, and the game is her set of escape hatches from the all-consuming domesticity she, like her feminist foremothers, fears instinctively. This fear is tempered only by her desire to connect with others. With a husband, children, and a number of increasingly needy friends in the game, her social role is expansive, even if her attentions are, admittedly, carelessly distributed. Desire, enacted only as a social act, has a tendency to bloat in this way, a phenomenon long-critiqued by feminists who lament women's prioritization of social harmony over individuated desire.

In spite of her carelessness, however, Clara has social insights that the other members of her guild lack. First, she possesses the genuine virtue of loving others as they change, which makes her *The Guild's* only participant in a long-term romantic relationship. Secondly, when she takes the time to reflect on her own life, she does so without judgment, directed at herself or others, knowing that there is value in remembering stories as they really happened. By revealing the care she takes to preserve her past honestly, with affection for her particular missteps, she reveals herself as a responsible member of a collaborative storytelling community, of which she belongs to at least three: her biological family, her guild, and the genealogy of women engaged in experimental self-fashioning.

And so, as *The Guild: Clara* begins, Clara's husband, George, cuts off his wife's access to the social distraction of the game, artificially creating a situation in which she must do the house cleaning. At his insistence, and having lost her main distraction, she begins sifting through her personal archive in order to prepare her family home for more streamlined daily functioning. The time has come, he suggests, for her to take stock of

her possessions and create space in the house for a better-organized family life. Living alone, one might have the privilege of surrounding oneself with one's own clutter, perhaps even fooling herself that the clutter represents an artistic sensibility, but a family home is supposed to be ordered, and not populated by reminders of a parent's ongoing attachment to her own childhood and adolescence.

In her archive, Clara finds diplomas, brand-name toys, school pom-poms, and childhood art. She shows these to her children, telling them stories about her life as she goes, and, notably, failing to reorganize anything. At one point, Clara's son digs up her prom picture, recognizing his father. The picture is funny -- the pair is bookended by palm trees, and Clara wears a large, frilly pink dress, while George wears a trucker hat, baggy jeans, and a tight tank top. Clara is holding him up, as he slouches drunkenly. This photograph is subversive within a heterosexual context, revealing the silliness of the prom ritual, as well as showcasing the gender-stereotypical idea that men have to be dragged to the rituals of public heterosexuality. According to this stereotype, men lament leaving behind their days of youthful pleasure-seeking, and women see heterosexuality as a way into the pleasures they want, like setting up their own house and being prized, if only structurally, as full, worthy adults by their husbands.

Although such gender-stereotypical ideas form the primary basis for the ultimate narratives of compulsory heterosexuality, romantic comedies, they also reveal its internal contradictions, articulating a concept Judith Butler calls "heterosexual melancholia." Intuitively, this concept makes sense of heterosexuals' over-identification with gender stereotypes, particularly as they are exaggerated in comedy, like romantic comedy films or a comedy Web series like *The Guild*. After all, what distinguishes comedy from

tragedy is its drive toward a happy, reproductively successful, heterosexual ending, like the one Clara and George find themselves in here. But as Butler famously described it in 1990,

As a set of sanctions and taboos, the ego ideal regulates and determines masculine and feminine identification. Because identifications substitute for object relations, and identifications are the consequence of loss, gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition. This prohibition sanctions and regulates discrete gendered identity and the law of heterosexual desire. (85-86)

Of course, heterosexual melancholy is often gestured toward within contemporary stories, especially the gendered form of women's autobiography, because it provides the central tension of heterosexual love stories. We expect that both George and Clara will resist their roles at various points, and to varying degrees, over the course of their marriage, and George's resistance at the prom parallels Clara's resistance now. However, because of our high expectations of women in the sphere of family life, conventional critical practice expects that we will be less sympathetic to Clara than George.

On heterosexual melancholy and women's autobiography, Barbara DiBernard says that we must distinguish between both the conventional narrative of life development, in which men are the protagonists, and the conventional narrative of women's life development, which is often articulated within autobiography, in order to create space for the experimental narratives of women's development created within alternative culture and afterwards. Of the most conventional male-driven narratives, she quotes Maurice Beebe as saying that "Narrative development in the typical artist-novel

requires that the hero test and reject the claims of love and life, of God, home, and country, until nothing is left but his true self and his consecration as artist” (Beebe, quoted in DiBernard 196). Naturally, women's experiences of gendered labor reveal why they are unlikely to experience this reality, and so, “women’s novels usually, and *Zami* certainly, show the woman artist fully engaged with others. Hers is most often an artist-in-relation rather than the 'artist-as-exile' posited by Beebe” (DiBernard 196). In *Zami*, but also, in all of *The Guild* comics, we can see a contemporary incarnation of this “artist-in-relation” subjectivity. Clara is not yet an artist, but she is a subject seeking artistic expression, and the way she will do it will speak to her experience as a heterosexual woman *and* as a member of her guild and larger storytelling community, because her expansive social identity is part of how she enacts her desires.

This is the point where an understanding of privilege becomes paramount to an understanding of one's path toward self-realization within a pre-existing, and also continually expanding community. While Clara benefits significantly from white privilege, from class privilege, and, as DiBernard helps us to see, from heterosexual privilege, it is in her approach to her gender, and her wholehearted embrace of the feminine, in every sense except for that of social assimilation, that we can see her unique path begin to be articulated. To clarify the place where feminine interests and aesthetics diverge from the social role of the feminine, I return to the early characterization of Clara as a “bad mother,” as well as, more prominently within this comic, as a bad wife, who dawdles and tells stories while, in her husband's view, she should be cleaning up their house and making it more conventional. DiBernard sees in the history of women's life narratives that:

A woman with a traditional heterosexual relationship or marriage experiences tremendous pressure, from inside and outside, to be a proper “helpmeet” and put aside her own physical and emotional needs for those of her man. Not surprisingly, then, a main theme of feminist criticism on the *Künstlerroman* has been the irreconcilability of the protagonist’s identities of woman and artist. In order to be an artist, the woman has to go against her socialization as a woman, as primarily someone who cares for others and puts their needs first. (197)

But, as *Zami*, DiBernard's core example of experimental women's storytelling, and my central example of the best aspects of alternative literary culture, counters the aforementioned social expectation of women:

In this portrait of an artist as a black lesbian, Audre Lorde shows us how to claim all the parts of ourselves. She is not like the female protagonists of the *Künstlerromane* who feel or who are made to feel they can’t be both women and artists. For Lorde there is no dichotomy between the woman and the poet, “one’s art and purpose in living being the same...” (Cornwell, 39). In insisting on an identity that encompasses all the parts of her self, Lorde claims the parts that make her an outsider, despised, or politically incorrect to others. She is black, she is lesbian, she is fat when she is growing up, she is an artist in the bar crowd, she is a Lesbian among the Left. She will later come to claim even other despised or politically incorrect identities — she is the lesbian mother of a son, a black woman in an interracial relationship, a survivor of a mastectomy who will not wear a prosthesis. (209)

While Clara does not achieve her sense of self in anything like this diversity of experience, at least not within the confines of this comic, her insistence upon a life outside her marriage, represented by her obsession with her “internet blinky thing,” which her husband will return to her only once she has finished cleaning, represents a step towards this kind of genuine self-knowledge, which she will eventually articulate to others with a subcultural vocabulary.

After the reader has a chance to enjoy the embarrassing photograph of Clara and George, the comic flashes back in time to the moment George picked her up at her family home, which, in the context of heterosexual women's memoir, signifies the moment when some ties to the father are severed, and the young woman's desire gets transferred onto her love object, with whom she will design her adult life. Clara thinks back to the moment when George arrived at her door, and it became clear that he was a misfit, who'd met Clara's cousin in a juvenile detention center (16). As Schrag did with Sally, Clara set aside concerns about his off-script behavior because she thought he was “like, the coolest guy *ever*,” and ignored her father's disapproval. Worse still, from her father's perspective, this was no momentary lapse of judgment -- she was initially attracted to him in his mug shot, in which she could only see an attractive man, rather than the criminal her father (and, presumably, the state) assumed she would see in such an artifact (16). Here again, heterosexuality reveals its instabilities in the unruly excesses of women's desires.

They arrive at the dance, and George decides that he should “bring the party” by pouring two full bottles of liquor into the punch (17). Clara is impressed, saying that he “spreads joy wherever he goes,” although she fails to notice that the friend to whom she

is bragging about her “find” is feeling sick from the alcohol (17). Clara's level of self-involvement here, that is, her complete focus on the sexual success of the evening, is familiar from Schrag's comic. The difference here is that George and Clara find themselves wanting the same thing, and so they embrace each other on the final panel of this page, both drunk, but Clara at least feeling that they were “meant for each other” (17). Here alcohol is represented as a lubricant for apparently inevitable heterosexual coupling, which is a much more seamless and consumer-friendly account than Schrag's, in which the author represents herself and her friends suffering both physically and emotionally under the impact of their script-inspired binge drinking. Indeed, in Schrag, it is actually the alcohol that brings out the author's specific fear that Sally does not want to have sex with her because she is straight, leading Schrag to write “I hate Damian,” referring to Sally's ex-boyfriend, obsessively on random sheets of paper (200). Although Clara announces mid-embrace that she “really *really*...gah go pee,” which provides the scene with a moment of much-needed realism, the mood stays comedic, and even the most horrified reader is disinclined to come to any serious judgments, not least because they know that the night really did result in a productive heterosexual marriage.

Clara goes on, on the next page, to tell her son the wildest part of the story, in her own estimation, in which she is forced by circumstances to relieve herself on George's leg, which had caught fire from a tiki torch mishap. Her smile fills the final panel on this page, and she tells her child that she “pretty much *saved* [...] daddy's *life*” (18). But just as the story risked becoming too heroic to bear, George walks in and brings the story back to the present day, telling Clara that she has no business telling their children this particular story. He can see it in retrospect for a night that turned out better than it had

any right to, and is appropriately embarrassed about the actions of his former self. Clara does not take him seriously, however, because she wants their children to grow up happy and without shame, like she did, which is a hopeful goal, and one which indicates how relatively happy she is in her marriage, even if the work of sustaining domestic life bores her.

In the final gag of the comic, George realizes that, rather than actually tidying away any of the boxes, Clara has hidden them all in the bathroom. She is still operating on a logic of escaping her problems rather than solving them, but she has reminded George in her impassioned storytelling that their love is built on excess, and that she is committed to him as a long-term partner. She needs a role beyond that, though, and that is what she is beginning to find in the game. Clara's love of the game indicates that she wishes to exercise her imaginative capacity -- now, she simply needs to continue to work on the fusion between the formal and social components of the game in her understanding of herself, the selves she could be, and the others she could speak to more authentically, and form more genuine friendships with. And from Clara's example, we can see that the serendipity that defined her young life, which we can reasonably associate with privilege, translated into something more meaningful in the alternative digital culture represented by the game, specifically, something that offered her the tools to find her own meaning in life.

By staging this encounter between Clara's heterosexual melancholia and Schrag's uneasy acknowledgment of the social implications of her queerness, I believe that both stories gain impact for readers of women's experimental autobiography and first-person storytelling. Both Clara and Schrag can see, looking back at their respective prom nights,

that their sexual desires set the stage for a series of confusing decisions about their relationships with other human beings. For Clara, these decisions will take shape over the course of a monogamous marriage, and for Schrag, these will take shape over the course of the series of relationships she will undoubtedly form as an adult, but in both cases, they will benefit from a willingness to be creative about forging friendships with others that sustain these desires as much as their partners.

Conclusion: Women's Experimental Autobiography as Alternative Canon

Autobiographies from alternative culture, like Lorde's, Gloeckner's, and Schrag's, provide contemporary readers with a set of conceptual tactics that can be used to step outside of dominant culture, if only strategically, and temporarily. In their books, these authors create spaces where the self can be articulated as a subject formed by a complex social environment. This social environment reveals its flaws over time, and, as these subjects grow as a result of these realizations, they gain the tools to expand their sphere of mutual social influence to sustain their lives as women. Tapping into Lorde's vision of love as a voluntary commitment means both that toxic love can be condemned, and that new relations can be sought, which take women's desire, stripped of ego-driven consumption, as their starting point.

The Guild comics stage an experiment with one contemporary incarnation of the creation of alternative social worlds, and, when placed in conversation with the wisdom of women writers from alternative cultures, the imaginative possibilities inspired by these seem endless. Contemporary fan cultures, especially those created in response to *The Guild*, represent one set of tactics through which to explore these possibilities, for example, in fan fiction about the friendships and romances possible among the guild

members. My approach, of staging these cross-generational encounters between *The Guild* comics and women's experimental autobiography across media since the 1960s, represents another possible set of virtual social encounters.

Here, these encounters take place in the imaginative space created by the comics medium and in the imaginative time created by the biomythography. In my next chapter, I turn my attention to the status of women's experimental autobiography in the twenty-first century. There, I will stage encounters between writers who miss each other not because they belong to different generations, but because they belong to discrete social spheres in the thoroughly gentrified boutique culture of contemporary cultural production.

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Chapter 3 - The Twenty-First-Century Boutique Memoir of Intellectual Development

“Although some teens still congregate at malls and football games, the introduction of social media does alter the landscape. It enables youth to create a cool space without physically transporting themselves anywhere. And because of a variety of social and cultural factors, social media has become an important public space where teens can gather and socialize broadly with peers in an informal way. Teens are looking for a place of their own to make sense of the world beyond their bedrooms. Social media has enabled them to participate in and help create what I call networked publics.” (Boyd 5)

“Don’t get me wrong. I don’t believe in the long run that the traditional comics store can or will survive the next twenty years, again with the exception of some well-placed boutiques. But as we see the loss of serial comics books and comic book shops, we see the loss as well of the spaces and the places for collaborative interpretation and shared ownership that is very much at the heart of comics. Certainly, this should be something the internet can find a way to replace, but I

am not convinced that Disney (Marvel) or Time Warner (DC) have much interest in nourishing collaborative readers with a sense of shared ownership in their serial narratives.” (Gardner 3)

“The knitting store has now joined the feminist bookstore of the 1970s and the sex toy store of the 1990s as a public space for feminist thinking and activity...The domestic textile arts that once gave women many forms of creative outlet but gradually became defunct (at least for middle-class housewives) because women were too busy going to work and buying for convenience have now been reclaimed as a way of indicating that one has leisure time for hobbies and for creativity.” (Cvetkovich 3137-3166)

The Guild: Zaboo comic represents the kind of escape Zaboo, real name Suján Balakrishnan Goldberg, seeks in the game. In the opening sequence, a flashback to his childhood, an older incarnation of the avatar Zaboo is shown, slaying dragons in a PC game from the 1990s. The avatar is both hyper-masculine and heterosexual, with a princess character “prize” at his side. The in-game action is disrupted by his classmates, who bully him because of his excessive attachment to this game. His mother comes to rescue him from the bullying, but her stunt only increases the distance between Zaboo and the bullies, inadvertently confirming their suspicion that he has an over-attachment to female attention. This turns out to be the personality trait that leads, on the one hand, to his stalking of Codex, and, on the other hand, to the eventual formation of the Knights of Good as a group of real-life friends. In other words, it is Zaboo’s very perversity that

invites the Knights of Good into an alliance based on their shared outsider status, and it is a perversity that is grounded in the desire to identify primarily with the women in his life, rather than the male bullies.

Flashing forward to the near-present, we are shown an in-game sequence in which the Knights are at work in their MMORPG. This scene must have taken place at some point during the months of 2007, leading up to Zaboo's arrival on Codex's doorstep. Codex has hit her emotional bottom. Zaboo recognizes her state right away, because, when he asks her to heal him, her character is so weak that she falls to his side, mimicking the behavior of the automated princess character in the flashback to the 1990's PC game. Having been trained to protect this character, Zaboo asks Codex to join him in a private chat channel, where she dumps her problems onto him, and he asks if he can help. She says no, but her beautiful avatar winks at him, and he is hooked on the fantasy of living out his childhood script of romance. The script is so ingrained in his consciousness that he does not recognize the origins of his response, but rather acts instinctively.

Silvia López offers an interpretation of the social function of art in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, which provides us with one way to think about Zaboo's interaction with Codex here. López writes,

The proper aesthetic response is not based on feeling (*Gefühl*) but on a sense of concern (*Betroffenheit*). Concern is not some repressed emotion that is brought to the surface of the receiver via aesthetic presentation; rather it 'is the moment in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the work; it is the moment of being shaken' (1996:244). The recipients lose their ground and at this moment

the possibility of truth, embodied in the aesthetic image, becomes graspable. That shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet becoming subjectivity is the act of being touched by the other. (68)

In this context, the avatar Codex functions as the art object for Zaboo, and, when her words reveal a particular dissonance between image, action, and rationality, in which Zaboo recognizes his own history, he experiences concern. The concern leads him to wish to transcend the contained encounter, and ask for the artwork's promises to be fulfilled, not just in the simplistic thinking that drives him only in part, that is, the desire to consummate the relationship sexually, but rather the thinking that drives him to translate the experience beyond the communications technology that first enabled it. López goes on to insist that this concern, embodied by the

[s]hudder does not provide a satisfaction to the ego and is removed from desire: 'Rather, it is a memento of the liquidation of the I, which, shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude. This experience (*Erfahrung*) is contrary to the weakening of the I that the culture industry manipulates' (1996:245). (69)

But this aspect of Adorno's theory speaks to a moment in cultural history when ego representations had not yet fully eclipsed the ideal of the critic who could strive to transcend his bourgeois subjectivity. The way to transcend the limits of one's subjectivity in the transmedia storyworld of the game, requires paying sustained attention to the particular articulations and fictionalizations of self that constitute participation. Whereas, in Adorno's formulation, there is still some kind of individual encounter with an artwork, in which a mind formed by a sedimented history encounters an expressive form, in the game, the encounter takes place entirely within the logic of the culture

industry. Further, the subject does not encounter the object, that is, a painting, or poem, or film. Rather, avatars formed into commodities by sedimented histories encounter one another, and, in recognizing their shared weaknesses, it becomes possible for them to see their shared potential for insight.

When Sujan, acting in his capacity as Zaboo, asks Codex to join him in a private chat channel as Cyd, and she reveals her hopelessness as her avatar winks at him, he sees beyond the game for the first time. Yes, his desire is excited. More importantly, though, he sees the shaky foundations of self that bond him to his fellow gamers, both negatively, in their shared addiction to a virtual world, and, more positively, in their shared capacity for queer self-articulation. The capacity for queer self-articulation does not lead inevitably to utopian forms of queer community, of course. In Zaboo's case, his vulnerability and lack of defined sexuality lead him to stalking, a suicide attempt, and an abusive S&M relationship with Riley. However, it also eventually leads him to a sense of belonging in a women-centered creative community. *The Guild* comics offer readers the opportunity to linger on the possibilities of recognizing shared weakness as shared potential, rather than asking us to sanction the full course of action ultimately undertaken by the individual fictional character. Even if we are reluctant to *identify* with such a flawed character in this world, as we might have identified with the cool individuals of alternative culture, we nevertheless have the opportunity to experience a shared vulnerability with him when we encounter him on his own terms, and it is a vulnerability that is transformed into a generative reading practice when we mobilize the sedimented history of the avatar.

After Zaboo experiences the awakening of his concern, he turns to the other women in *The Guild*. Clara encourages him, while Tink is baffled by his interest in Codex rather than her. Neither is particularly fazed by his interpretation of the situation. And so, Zaboo frees himself from his mother's house, and seeks love with Codex, but, as we already know from the series, he ends up becoming a friend among friends in the Knights of Good, and one who is especially close to Codex and Clara. Zaboo's story is important because it transforms masculinity from its most reductive form, exemplified by the mainstream rendition of the fairytale romance, to a component of one's personality, which is one aspect of one's contributions to a social group. The game is neither the comic book store of the past, nor the knitting store of the present. It is neither a virtual mall nor a D.I.Y. discussion forum. It represents, rather, a creative space for the ambiguity of identity and desire to fuse along the axis of friendship. Like the sitcom, the game thrives on social harmony, but, because this harmony is achieved first and foremost in virtual space, outsiders can find a satisfying sense of belonging within it without sacrificing their origins entirely. For Zaboo in particular, because his mother represents his origin, and his separation from the social pressures of his peer environment, part of his task is to give himself over to new social pressures strategically, before finding himself in a position to proclaim his as yet-unformed individuality.

Polemicists have argued for decades that we are reaching a point of media saturation, and it seems increasingly likely that, given the near-ubiquity of Internet access in the United States, it has arrived. Nick Couldry describes this historical process as one in which, increasingly, "media disseminates the *formats* required for everyday performance" (54-55). Being constantly online maximizes our fantasy of our own

subjectivity by making each task, from the clearly consumerist (making purchases) to the crypto-consumerist (contributing to our projection of success and happiness on social networks, guided by tailored advertisements), appear in succession, so that we are never bored, and never lack the opportunity to confirm our sense of belonging. Sarah Schulman describes this new reality as a “gentrification of the mind.” Taking a critical stance toward the consumerist focus of online social behavior, she argues that “gentrification replaces most people's experiences with the perceptions of the privileged and calls that reality” (161). In other words, inevitably for a queer subject like Zaboo, some dissonance will arise between the sense of self he embodies online, and the self he constructs in the real world. His friends, who share that experience of dissonance, will help to guide him toward bodily thinking. This superficial and constant affirmation of a limited demographic's reality, posited as the norm against the lived differences of those who might wish to change things, is exactly what Aline Kominsky-Crumb feared would happen at the tail end of the counterculture. Her solution was expatriation and so she left the United States for Western Europe, a solution followed by others, including Audre Lorde, who lived out most of her last days in Berlin.

Zaboo's story begins and ends in games, and his growth as a character, and the development of his perspective on the social world he inhabits, begins and ends with the game as a given feature of his life. Kominsky-Crumb and Lorde took an alternative path, following the alternative print cultures of the 1980s and 1990s as far as they could take them, and refusing to acquiesce to the new compulsory sociality of gentrified consumerism. Although the alternative feminist print culture of the 1980s and 1990s thrived on its own terms within the United States, it sadly reached its own tail end as a

result of two related historical phenomena. The simultaneous rise of corporate-owned media consolidation and the encroachment of digital technology into daily life led many queer and feminist publications to fold and bookstores to close. Some of these survive, of course, but for the most part, their time has passed, and their reading publics have reconfigured themselves in digital spaces, organized around different principles.

There are many queer and feminist networked publics, to use boyd's term, online, and my goal in this chapter is to model a reading practice that enables us to see connections between women writers working in contemporary print culture, both in prose and in graphic narrative, and in digital space, again using examples from the sprawling transmedia universe of Felicia Day's *The Guild*. As in previous chapters, I am not suggesting that the authors I have selected are writing the most politically progressive work of their time, or that they are perfectly embodying any given set of queer or feminist principles. Rather, I suggest that, in the act of representing their own experiences for us, in the tradition of women's experimental autobiography, they cut across multiple languages and fields of inquiry, to reveal possible paths of individuated female subjectivity in our world.

Section I: The Swan Song of the Slacker and the Raising of Stakes

A 1997 panel from Alison Bechdel's long-running serial comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For* provides a nice transition from alternative culture into digital culture.²⁹

²⁹ Martindale points out that, especially in comparison to Diane DiMassa's *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* (1991-1999), *DTWOF* represents a family-friendly set of "luppies," or lesbian yuppies, and thus neglects "leather dykes, butch daddies, [and] femme tops" (63), as well as other representations of working-class lesbians. *DTWOF* also lacks the fantastical violent content of DiMassa's work, Martindale argues, and thus one crucial aspect of the spectrum of lesbian feelings. It would be interesting to

Here, we see fictional characters, some of whom had been present in fans' readerly imagination for fifteen years, facing the ways in which their commitments to alternative culture clash with the emerging realities of digital culture. This installment of *DTWOF* is titled "R&R," in reference to the military term for recuperation from the trying work of being a soldier. These characters are soldiers in the war for lesbian culture's survival, and their day of R&R turns into an opportunity for each character to vent her frustrations, all the while failing entirely to take the break they would need to recover.

Bechdel's main avatar, Mo, is depicted spending a day at the beach with her girlfriend Sydney, and her friends, Ginger and Sparrow. The exposition reads, "Our preoccupied pals have packed up all their cares and woes and brought them to the beach" (185). The first line of dialogue, however, reveals that these cares and woes cannot be packed away, because the beach's deceptive appeal denies the reality of its laptop-infiltrating sand, carcinogenic sunlight, and social irritations, from crying babies to smelly dogs. Appearing first, at the bottom left-hand corner of the first panel, is Sydney, whom we know by this point in the story as an English professor on the tenure track. Here, she is hard at work on her first book at a laptop in a beach chair. As Mo shakes off her towel to create a sitting space next to her girlfriend, Sydney reprimands her: "Mo! You're getting sand in my keyboard!" (185). To Mo's right side, we see Ginger, who is also an academic. She is currently seeking a position in a difficult market, and she is shown catching up on *Women's Studies Quarterly*. She gently chides Sydney through her sunglasses, suggesting that that perhaps she shouldn't have come to the beach if she

draw comparisons between that comic's depictions of violence and Day's depictions of female fantasies of violence in *The Guild* comics, but it is precisely the tendency of gentrification that I wish to outline here, rather than that particular strand of radicalism.

wanted to be working the whole time. To her right, completing the group for the day, we see Sparrow, who works at a women's shelter, which is currently facing budget cuts. Spending her beach day under a hat, she is shown reading about operational strategy, and does not offer her opinion on the intra-academic debate about work-life balance. In the next row of panels, however, Sparrow does ask respectfully that Mo and Sydney stop bragging about their thriving sex life in front of her, because she has just experienced a breakup. In this group, it is more important to be respectful of one another's desires, realized and thwarted, and distributed unequally over time, than one another's work lives, in which they all contribute meaningfully, and mutual respect is presumed by their shared commitments.

Mo laments to the perked ears of Ginger and Sparrow that she is “worried sick about Madwimmen [Books],” which is the independent feminist bookstore where she's worked for most of her adult life. She continues, “if that Bounders Books and Muzak store moves onto our block, I don't know if we'll be able to survive.” Throughout *DTWOF*, we witness the battle between Madwimmen Books and “Bounders,” representing the corporate-owned chain bookstore, and later, “Medusa,” an online book emporium. Madwimmen Books must gradually change its mission, for example, from hosting radical lesbian literary readings to events in honor of the latest releases of the young adult series *Harry Potter*, which serves both their own profits and their increasingly suburban clientele. Mo, the character most resistant to change, and most attached to a nostalgic image of lesbian feminism, tends to represent the primary voice of frustration with this issue. It is this particular investment Mo has in the living intersection between lesbian feminism and print culture that enables me to see her so

clearly as an avatar for Bechdel. The author has also worked in print culture for her entire adult life, although, in her case, she published a comic strip about lesbians, in independent media directed at a queer audience, rather than working in a feminist bookstore.

In the second to last panel, Mo complains that she's "just so anxious. I'm thirty-five years old and I don't even have a net worth! How'm I gonna retire?" She clutches her chest, staring hopefully at Ginger and Sparrow, with her back turned to Sydney, who is telling her to "keep it down" anyway. In the final panel, the sun is setting, and Ginger remarks that she has "a dim memory of coming to the beach being a fun thing." Rather than agreeing wistfully, however, Mo only comments hopefully that there might be acid reflux medicine at the bottom of a beach bag she hadn't checked yet. In the final panel, the four women are in silhouette at sunset, and Sydney's laptop still glows. Ginger can no longer read her journal, nor Sparrow, her book, but Sydney labors on, taking the lead from her friends in organizing what she hopes can be sustainably preserved at this moment of lesbian culture, that is, a highly theoretical academic account, and the book which will lead to her own eventual position as a tenured professor at a university.

The glow of the laptop must be read with some ambivalence, however, because, in order to serve as the voice of lesbian life and queer ideas, Sydney must forego days like these as opportunities for genuine engagement with her friends, which will inevitably shrink her perspective to some extent. In other words, the conditions for her to complete and publish her work in this context are such that her relationship with her laptop becomes as present in her life as, for example, her romantic and sexual relationship with

Mo, which would, in a smaller-scale form of storytelling, like the queer *bildungsroman*, constitute a whole lesbian marriage plot.

In contrast to the queer *bildungsroman*, however, *DTWOF* takes advantage of a complex serial storytelling style as well as a highly-individuated graphic narrative aesthetic. In this way, the series serves as an excellent basis for comparison with *The Guild* Web series. *DTWOF* focuses primarily on friendship and social harmony, grounded in the principles of queer kinship, rather than on narratives of individual success or creativity. Although *DTWOF* is not, strictly speaking, an example of transmedia storytelling, Bechdel is very attentive to revealing contemporary life in a media-saturated landscape. She incorporates, for example, believable NPR monologues as soundtracks overlaying characters' long drives, newspaper headlines revealing the broad range of positions taken on geopolitical controversies as they are unfolding, and, as the strip enters the twenty-first-century, the emergence of social media use among her characters. I take her adept depiction of media saturation as one of the key tactics Bechdel uses to create a sense of real-time engagement with her characters, as well as a sense of capturing the “universal” element of the social changes she describes from the perspectives of lesbians, which might otherwise only appeal to a niche audience deeply invested in the particular politics of sexuality.

In this way, Bechdel has much in common with Day. As I have discussed in previous chapters, all of *The Guild* comics but one are primarily influenced by women's experimental autobiography -- they represent the first person perspective of characters we've already met in the context of an ensemble cast Web series. These first person

perspectives reveal to the reader that each character experiences the social action of *The Guild* storyworld differently, and that each experiences a complex interior life, of which they reveal differing amounts to one another, from the reticent trickster Tink to the oversharing Clara. “*The Guild: Beach'd*,” the outlier comic, represents a different kind of installment in *The Guild* storyworld. It is told from no one's perspective in particular, and it is taken out of the show's timeline. Whereas each of the character prequel comics contains seeds of insight that are to be taken up within the Web series, “Beach'd” stands alone. I will compare it here to “R&R,” which shares the storytelling approach of omniscience and repetition with “Beach'd,” as well as the central image of the glowing laptop computer at the beach.

The storytelling approach has to do with the publication context, both of long-arc seriality in the case of both narratives, and of Day's complex transmedia seriality specifically. Day wrote the “Beach'd” comic for Free Comic Book Day in 2012. Free Comic Book Day is an event created to generate interest among comic book readers in ongoing series, and to draw attention and customers to comic bookstores, in an era in which comic bookstores are in decline, much like feminist bookstores were during the late 1990s.³⁰ In this publication context, *The Guild's* free comic served both as an advertisement for the Web series, which was already available for free, in full, online. The prequel comics are not available for free, and so, in order to possess the full series

³⁰ Former executive vice president of Marvel Entertainment Shirrel Rhoades writes in *Comic Books: How the Industry Works* that Free Comic Book Day “generates significant interest in comics,” but also notes that it is specifically planned by “leading comics publishers” to coincide with the opening weekends of blockbuster films, like Sony’s *Spiderman 3* (21). The event is also controlled by Diamond Comic Distributors, which Rhoades concedes has a “monopoly on North American comic book distribution” (154).

run, fans have to purchase them, in comic bookstores, collected in trade paperbacks at chain or independent bookstores, by mail order or online, directly from the distributor. Alternatively, fans can acquire the comics by illegally downloading them online, in which marketplace every day is free comic book day. However, one must seek out that opportunity, whereas Free Comic Book Day represents an attempt by creators to hook potential fans onto their serial narrative, and also onto the pleasures of going to the physical store to buy comics.

“*The Guild: Beach'd*” offers what might in other context be called “bonus” content for fans, as a reward for visiting the comic bookstore. While the comic contributes little action to the storyworld proper, it offers both an extension of the characterization of the main guild members, and a reflection on the social worlds created by gamers and fan communities more generally. “*The Guild: Beach'd*” offers humorous enactments of each character's main personality traits, as well as offering an enactment of *The Guild's* primary storytelling question, which is how to represent the real life/virtual life balance as it is experienced by gamers, in a way that celebrates the critical space the dissonance creates between the two.

For Free Comic Book Day, *The Guild* partnered with the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season Nine* staff, also at Dark Horse Comics, in order to publish “*The Guild: Beach'd*” as a flipbook with an installment in that series. Like *The Guild*, *BtVS* is a transmedia storyworld, although its transition, after seven years, from television to comics is more representative of the process of translation across medium, that is, a spinoff comic series, than a complementary storytelling style. The title character of *BtVS*

is easily recognizable to comic book fans as one of the most famous female superheroes, even though the character's longest run in any medium thus far appeared on television, from 1997 to 2003. Whether or not fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have chosen to engage with the series' comics continuation, they may pick up the comic bearing her name and likeness in a fit of nostalgic curiosity. On the cover of the free *Buffy* comic, the slayer appears, hands on hips, holding a wooden stake, looking directly at the reader. The title reads, "In Space No One Can Hear You Slay!" Readers who arrived at Free Comic Book Day unsure of what they might wish to acquire, but who are unfamiliar with, or uninterested in male-dominated superhero titles or children's comics, might recognize in *Buffy* a story they might enjoy. On the back, they would see the cover of *The Guild* comic, which features the main characters from that series, including the recognizable likeness of Codex, and be amazed at their luck, finding two female protagonists in one of their allotted free comic books. (That number is determined by the individual store one visits.) Compared to Bechdel's auteurist achievement of hand-realizing an all-woman ensemble-driven serial narrative 1990s, the amazement I describe here may sound superficial. *The Guild* reveals no fundamental attachment to lesbian feminism or the feminist roots of its storytelling practices, but given a strategically women-centered transmedia reading practice, the storyworld of *The Guild* guides its reader to that sedimented history.

The concerns of the characters of *DTWOF: R&R* parallel those of the Knights of Good in *The Guild: Beach'd* neatly. For example, whereas Mo worried about her lack of a retirement plan, and the financial difficulties her workplace was facing, Vork uses a metal detector to try to find money on the beach, hoping to extend his subsistence-level

living as long as possible. Further, the two stories share a final scene, which displays the light of laptops against the backdrop of a sunset. In “*The Guild: Beach'd*,” the guild members find a peace in this juxtaposition that was lost to the characters in *DTWOF*. In the fifteen years since *DTWOF*: “R & R,” laptops have taken on a much more social role than they had when their primary function was word processing. While undoubtedly, Sydney's labor of producing quality academic writing remains more valued than the social labor that constitutes in-game fishing, it lacks something that the Knights of Good have found. In the virtual space of the game, they have established a found family with one another, and they collaboratively and strategically accept the status of virtual life in their social activities. This social innovation represents both progress and loss -- progress for those whose identities are realized only with the help of the virtual, and loss of communities grounded in physical and social principles, like the ideal of the lesbian feminist community. In the twenty-first century, the beach becomes once again available as a site of the utopian possibilities of leisure for the guild, while it was no longer for Bechdel's lesbians in the late 1990s. The members of the Knights of Good are relaxing in a cultural sandbox, a common metaphor for the creativity enabled by digital technology, while Bechdel's lesbians must witness the sun set over the culture they had worked to preserve.

For the Knights of Good, getting together at the beach with their laptops streamlines one component of online gaming; it means that they can focus their screen energy fully on their avatars and their in-game pursuits, while chatting with one another according to the contemporary convention, with eyes on screen but attention theoretically focused on the person with whom one is sharing physical space. In “*Beach'd*,” the

Knights of Good are blessed with layers of self-awareness. They know that their friends are busy with pursuits other than fully-engaged conversation with them, but they also know that they are co-creators of the thriving sphere of their shared sandbox, reading and telling the story of the game to one another over time.

The widespread access to collaborative and autobiographically-inflected storytelling is unique, I argue, to the twenty-first century. Of her coming-of-age online in the mid-1990s, Internet scholar danah boyd writes that she was driven by a fiction-making impulse in that period.

When I embraced the internet as a teenager in the mid-1990s, I was going online to escape the so-called real world. I felt ostracized and misunderstood at school, but online I could portray myself as the person that I wanted to be. I took on fictitious identities in an effort to figure out who I was. I wasn't alone. Part of what made chatting fun in those days was that it was impossible to know if others were all that they portrayed themselves to be. I knew that a self-declared wizard was probably not actually a wizard and that the guy who said he had found the cure to cancer most likely hadn't, but embodied characteristics like gender and race weren't always so clear. At the time, this felt playful and freeing, and I bought into the fantasy that the internet could save us from tyranny and hypocrisy. Manifestos like John Perry Barlow's 1996 "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" spoke to me. Barlow told the global leaders at the World Economic Forum that the new "home of the Mind" enabled "identities

[that] have no bodies.” I was proud to be one of the children he spoke of who appeared “native” in the new civilization. (37)

Boyd's fictional identities allowed her to embody temporarily her political goals, but the fiction proved unsustainable when the Internet became more widely used, and corporations realized that Internet users' desires could be exploited more thoroughly.

As Kominsky-Crumb articulated back in Chapter One, there is a dark side to 24-hour Internet access in all places. That dark side is that it leaves us vulnerable to the whole social sphere, to consumerism, and to work, all the time, leaving us no “beach” moments of perfect leisure in which we can simply exist in the physical world. In 2011, the editors of the small magazine *n+1* reflected on the Gmail interface as a metaphor for this new reality, specifically as it turned what we thought were our desires (the ability to say whatever we wanted, to anyone, especially our full range of sexual desires) into a space in which we would no longer be able to feel them:

Gmail is an open loft, wallpapered with distractions. PROTEST HYDRO-FRACKING! says one email. Another is from our grandmother (grams31@aol.com): she misses us. Hard to picture anything less erotic than the inbox, that cluttered room whose door can never be locked. Imagine having sex and someone from the alumni association bursts in to ask for a donation.

Everywhere the professional intrudes: a former coworker signs in; a friend's status message links to his latest article (Congrats, dude!). And as the virtual setting is all wrong for eros, so too is the actual one, because most of our Gchats happen at the office. We chat all day as we work, several windows open at once—

windows into all the offices in all the cities where our friends spend their days Gchatting. Or we chat with coworkers, carrying on an endless conversation that sounds, to the half-aware ears of our superiors, like the soft tip-tapping clatter of real industry...Time is misspent twice: we talk about life as thoughtlessly as we live it. (*n+1* editors 1)

In the context of the Knights of Good, it is worth pausing over this final sentence. One could say that their beach gaming day represents exactly the idea of talking as thoughtlessly as we live. Whereas the wise person with an orderly life visits the beach either in order to have a sublime experience with nature, or to convene with his fellows in a celebration that is rare in their otherwise work-filled lives, the Knights of Good get neither experience. They are neither properly alone, nor properly together, neither properly on the beach nor properly living the intellectual life theorized by the utopian cyber-theorists of the 1990s. But one can also choose to give them credit for recognizing that, given the ways their individual consciousnesses have formed, they lack access to sublime experiences with nature or simply fulfilling social experience. The game gives them a sense of self, through their avatars, a sense of purpose, through their questing, and a sense of belonging, through their membership in the guild.

In this way, the game comes to represent a storytelling boutique, easily juxtaposed with the boutique graphic novels that have become so popular in recent years, the highbrow television of premium cable channels, and the other packaged cultural narratives in various media that arrive at our doorsteps in Amazon boxes. I borrow this term boutique from several sources. The first is Marxist criticism, which Gerald Graff summarizes below:

Marx's account of the subversive power of the commodity looks forward to twentieth century consumerism, which scrambles traditional alignments between class and ideology by turning ideas into fashion-items in a vast Cultural Boutique. Ideas become marketable commodities, to be picked up quickly, worn for a season, and disposed of when next season's models come in. The very profusion and confusion of ideas simultaneously competing for attention mean that most of them are tolerated while few have much impact. This muffling effect of the Cultural Boutique as a whole may neutralize critical thinking more effectively than either overt repression or conservative argument could do. Moreover, professedly radical ideas are among the prime commodities in the mix, and these pseudoradicalisms create constant distraction by politicizing issues in terms of false polarities - i.e., youth vs. age, hip vs. square - which make it harder to penetrate to real issues. In such an atmosphere, determining what counts as a truly radical or conservative idea becomes increasingly difficult, though this hasn't prevented many intellectuals (including literary critics) from continuing to apply such labels with great facility.

(104)

The second is a more recent use of the term, which is specifically applied to Multiculturalist theory. In his 1997 article, "Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech," Stanley Fish contrasts boutique multiculturalism with "strong multiculturalism," associating the former with "ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals, and high profile flirtations with the other" (378) and the latter with "a *deep* respect to all cultures at their core" (382).

Thirdly, Ronald Milne uses “boutique” to contrast small-scale publishing and archival projects with “mass digitization” (5). As his primary example, Milne takes up the Oxford Digital Library, which has digitized special collections, including “political cartoons from the period of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars from the Bodleian’s Curzon Collection, and Sibthorpe and Smith’s *Flora Graeca* (1806–1840) illustrated by Ferdinand Bauer” (4). He contrasts the ODL’s series of “boutique activities” with the Google Library Project, which

in contrast, involves digitization on an industrial scale. Books are digitized en masse rather than cherry-picked. They are “selected” only in as far as they should be in a fit state, in conservation terms, to undergo the non-invasive Google digitization process and they should be of a format with which the Google scanning technology can currently cope. (5)

In Milne’s account, the “piecemeal” progress of the pre-Google ODL, with all its loving attention to particular historical periods and literary forms, simply cannot compete with the Google project, which promises to fulfill “the Bodleian ethos of facilitating access to all to the ‘Republic of Letters’” (8).

The term “boutique” is gendered feminine in all of these accounts, in ways that are instructive for my own intervention. While I share Marxist concerns about the muffling effect of the cultural boutique, which are best articulated in Adorno’s mid-century masterpiece *Minima Moralia*, I cannot acquiesce to the implied masculinity of truth accessible outside the boutique. In Adornian fashion, all I can access is the muffled world, and I must interrogate it as it presents itself to me, rather than nostalgically longing for the original forms of today’s inadequate products. I also share Fish’s

contempt for relativist platitudes, when they are substituted for genuinely respectful encounters with difference. However, I cannot side with him on the idea that the sheer domestication of the multicultural encounter, when it appears as a restaurant dish rather than an animal sacrifice (his example) is the site of its dilution.

In the readings that follow, I use “cultural boutique” to describe an intellectual landscape in which ideas function according to the same principles as digital images, material artifacts from popular culture like books, and celebrity personalities. They are presented to us, that is, in a transmedia landscape; when we hear about a book, we can look up reviews and the author’s social media presence, and, likewise, when we hear about an idea, it is upon us to draw out a trajectory of how that idea might become part of our critical arsenal. Here, sedimented history is part of the task, but it is inevitably complemented by a sense of the status of the idea, the community formed around it, and the sphere of popular culture to which it grants access. That is, we will not, in the age of the cultural boutique, encounter the book we might want to read without a social introduction – whereas feminist bookstores used the logic of marketing to trouble institutional hierarchies, by refusing to discipline women’s studies, in our contemporary moment, we won’t get to the cultural products we want without the social knowledge of who might have them.

For this reason, the concept of the boutique is especially relevant for the twenty-first-century texts I discuss here, because the history of the immediate present is so difficult to capture, but the microcultures currently attached to certain prominent ideas are easy to describe, given that they are in the heyday of their own self-promotion and self-analysis. We know, in the present, which boutiques we can enter in order to find

something we are looking for, and we know where we can feel at home. The whole enterprise of present-focused criticism, whether reviews, long-form journalism, or polemics and clickbait designed to attract attention, is about describing the degree to which a certain kind of person should feel at home with a given idea. At its experimental forefront, contemporary literature takes us to the limits of our comfort zone, not by shocking us by breaking taboos, but rather by asking us to sit with others we don't instinctively like, and whose behavior we cannot condone, but who nevertheless share the microculture we've claimed as our own. In our discomfort, we are forced to clarify core social values, and, ideally, get a glimpse of the social scaffolding around our chosen boutique. Thus, we begin to notice the thought patterns and trajectories we can follow, thinking bodily in the present, we can open ourselves beyond what is enabled by our present social location, to enter into the imaginative sphere enabled by reading well, and with a sense of purpose.

Section II: Maternal Surveillance in Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* and *The Guild: Zaboo*

When critics express contempt for the domestic, it is often specifically a form of contempt for the maternal, (over-) protective forces that seem to hinder the development of a bold, individualistic critical sensibility. Adorno's writings on the infantilizing effects of popular culture make use of this maternal metaphor, as do inter-generational feminist conflicts.³¹ Maternal overprotection, specifically, maternal surveillance, is the core

³¹ Julia Creet described the "repressive feminist mother/subversive sexy daughter" dynamic in her 1991 article, "Daughter of the Movement: The Psychodynamics of Lesbian S/M Fantasy," and suggested that it was precisely this dynamic that "fueled the sex wars for so long" (Martindale 50).

concept at work in *The Guild: Zaboo*, the final comic to tell the story of one of the Knights of Good. (The final comic Day wrote for *The Guild* storyworld tells the story of Fawkes, rival guild leader for the Axis of Anarchy, and I discuss it in the final portion of this chapter.) Each member of the guild shows some signs of arrested development, in conventional psychological terms, and each is arrested by something in particular: depression, for Codex; agoraphobia, for Vork; anger, for Tink; familial instability, for Bladezz; and finally, for Clara, resistance to motherhood. Zaboo's story is different because, until the age of twenty-six, he was literally restrained by his mother, who, after losing her husband, could not bear the thought of losing her son, even to the adult world.

Alongside *The Guild: Zaboo*, I will examine another work of graphic narrative by Bechdel, this time, her second graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*. Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* brought the author acclaim for her ability to articulate the fullness of contemporary lesbian life in alternative comics. Her 2006 graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* brought the author acclaim for her ability to tell an intergenerational story of queer sexuality, focused on her relationship with her father, a closeted gay man who committed suicide shortly after his daughter came out as a lesbian. Her follow-up memoir, *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*, tells the story of the Bechdel family once again, this time focusing on the author's relationship with her mother. This time, she received mixed reviews. *Are You My Mother?* is undoubtedly her most complex work to date, easily outdoing both the sheer formal complexity of *Dykes to Watch Out For*, and the emotional complexity of *Fun Home*. One constant shared by all three works is the author's mastery of graphic narrative to convey the complex referential structure at work for all subjects engaged in contemporary life. *DTWOF* incorporates

topical news stories and pop-culture phenomena on every page, and the well-chosen mythological, literary, and psychological references that populate the pages of *Fun Home* ensured the experimental memoir's eventual status as high art.

It is telling that Bechdel's book was received by many as being weighed down by its investment in psychological metaphor, in spite of the universally-admired auteurist vision of its creator, and in spite of the potentially enlightening content of the story, for the many readers who were intrigued by *Fun Home*. By contrast, *The Guild: Zaboo* was, for the most part, ignored, by virtue of looking like bonus content for a minor Internet television show about gaming. The comic is difficult to assess on the terms of its medium, being as it was produced collaboratively for a large publisher, rather than by an auteur like Bechdel – while Day is a multi-talented author of a complex transmedia storyworld, she cannot create the visual art required to produce comics. On its own, *The Guild: Zaboo* is too minor and superficial to address; it gains its meaning from its participation in a vast transmedia storyworld, and in the sedimented-historical reading practice that forges the connections between the pieces of that storyworld and the history of women's experimental autobiography since the 1960s. We perceive excessive darkness in the psychological, and thus we are made anxious by Bechdel; we perceive superficiality and lightness in the colorful rendering of contemporary life in contemporary languages, including those of video games and real-time surveillance technology. For me, both perceptions cohere around an anxiety about the author's ability to reveal to us a particular possible location at the intersection of multiple languages. As these languages start to look more and more like one another, filtered through the coherence required for publishing and advertising, the differences become harder to perceive, and aesthetic

judgments become more difficult to make. It is a task for readers to develop new strategies and update our own methods for encountering contemporary literature, methods which leave us open to perceiving insight in constellations of ideas and art forms we couldn't previously have imagined.

Zaboo's escape from his mother's house mirrors one path through this conundrum, and into unfamiliar territory. He must physically leave in order to achieve his next goal, which is the embodied encounter with Codex. But once he has escaped, he realizes that his only skills are based on the logic of computer games. And so, he behaves as if he were being chased by an animated villain. After having broken free from the house, Zaboo passes a surveillance garden gnome, representing the extended grasp his mother still has on him in the outside world. However, he continues to run toward the street (14). Still at street level on the following page, Zaboo steals a child's toy vehicle, and continues to flee (15). He finally arrives at the bus station, and then has to follow a mental flow chart to figure out how he can convince the ticket-seller at the bus station to give him a ticket to Codex's part of "So-Cal Land" (16-17). His mother catches up to him, sadly, and they have a video game-style "fight incident," but Zaboo wins and restrains his mother, insisting that "my soul is my own" (20). There is a final map, which pokes fun at the Greyhound bus's convoluted path through the towns, ending at a large X, which leads Zaboo to Codex's front door-step (21). X is the starting point for a genuinely new kind of connection for Zaboo, albeit not the one he imagines when he arrives there.

On the next page, Zaboo looks at his mobile GPS device, which depicts exactly the view he also sees in front of him, of Codex's door, which represents a cathartic matching-up of virtual and "real" reality, the goal of any surveillance operation (21). Of

course, Zaboo has temporarily forgotten that his mother is the true master of surveillance, and so, on the final page of the comic, she is revealed behind a still-larger surveillance operation, still looming. Zaboo has accomplished his goal of physically leaving his mother, and taking his first step towards establishing his independence, but he has forgotten that his abilities in surveillance are learned from her, and thus she can still undo him. Independence, here, is not absolute, but rather a choice to make an experiment of transcending the constraints of one's given situation, and designing a new one.

Bechdel approaches her own separation from her mother using a much more nuanced emotional vocabulary. Ann Cvetkovich sees in Bechdel's work an articulation of an "archive of feelings," which she shares with queer cultural producers like Allyson Mitchell (111). Bechdel and Mitchell transform the ephemera of lesbian culture into static expressions, which offer readers their own experiences of trends they might have missed by virtue of age or geographic isolation. Faced with the collection *Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, for example, contemporary readers can develop their own understanding of lesbian history since 1982, sharing the characters' reverence for established writers like Adrienne Rich, whose status was cemented by that time, and engage empathetically with the characters' fumbling through the changing terrain of political correctness. The reader comes to see the ways in which lesbian culture comprises dynamic networks of cultural production, distribution, and interpretation, which must be constantly reinvented as the community's borders expand and contract.

The complexity, veering on unapproachability, of *Are You My Mother?* is instructive in the context of Bechdel's career, because it imposes her formal complexity onto a claustrophobic cast of characters, namely mother and daughter. Bechdel interacts

with others throughout the book, mostly female therapists and girlfriends, but she understands all of these relationships in terms of the maternal. A full formal analysis of the work does not fall within the purview of this project, but I would like to situate it within its twenty-first-century literary context, as well as extract its primary critical insight, that of the dissonance between maternal presence and self-fashioning.

Fun Home transformed lesbian comics from a minor form into compulsory reading in higher education, which it achieved in its packaging as a graphic novel, to be placed alongside the rest of the reading material of the day, and by its author's beautifully-articulated belief in the power of literature to connect us. *Are You My Mother?*, by contrast, was received as an intellectual experiment on the part of the author, which can easily be relegated to "supplementary material" next to her more significant achievements. The sheer concept of serial memoir can strike readers as simultaneously excessive and reductive; excessive of self-indulgence, on the part of the author, and reductive, of whatever more expansive visions the author might otherwise have developed. But I believe that there is more underlying the critical insistence on relative insignificance of *Are You My Mother?* Writing for the *New York Times*, Dwight Garner pans the book, suggesting that the very element that connects it to the tradition of experimental women's autobiography, its ability to situate itself at the intersection of multiple languages and disciplines, marks it as a failure:

As if it were a deck of playing cards, "Are You My Mother?" deals many hands. In part it's a memoir of Ms. Bechdel's mother's life. She's a brainy woman, very much still alive, who was forced to put her career aside (she'd been an actress) for her husband's.

In part it's a meta-memoir, a meditation on the ethics of dumping your family's darkest secrets onto the page for strangers to sort through.

In part it's a stroll through the literary history of thinking about mothers and daughters. In part it's a book about the therapeutic process. There are many, many drawings of Ms. Bechdel, head in hands, engaged in the talking cure. There is a whole lot of emoting about literature's least interesting subject, healing. (Garner 1)

It was precisely the complex referential structure of *Fun Home*, as well as its auteurist rendering, that gave that book its critical weight, especially among academics. In *Fun Home*, that structure was drawn from a bold fusion of family artifacts and great canonical Western literature, including Greek mythology, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway. As such, it fit neatly into the overlapping categories of the personally important and the literary, for any reader who crossed the hurdle of accepting the autobiographical inflection. In *Are You My Mother?*, by contrast, the author and her mother bicker about the conservative lesbian journalist Norah Vincent, joke about literary critic Helen Vendler, and find their most lasting adult peace in a conversation citing the contemporary memoirist and biographer Dorothy Gallagher. (283) That said, the "major references" in *Are You My Mother?* are major figures, one literary, Virginia Woolf and one, Donald Winnicott, from psychology. However, the role these thinkers play is much more open-ended than the Romantic referential role played by the authors that offer *Fun Home* its contextual weight. In *Fun Home*, the child understands the father at the same moment she understands the Icarus myth. In *Are You My Mother?*, author and reader are forced to reckon with the possibility that Greek mythology (via Twentieth-Century

authors) does not account for the emotional complexity of relationships between women, and so we are forced to accept our lives in the embodied present.

I suspect that the focus on the psychological complexity of the father depicted in *Fun Home* is more palatable to many readers than is the complex depiction of the fraught relationship between the mother and daughter who outlived him. Garner confirms this suspicion when he says that,

In “Fun Home” Ms. Bechdel’s father strode across the page like a metrosexual and pint-size Patton; he was a force of nature. Her mother is a mere mortal: a kinder, less complex, less riveting figure. She mostly functions here as an object off which Ms. Bechdel can bounce her angst, as if the author were engaging in strenuous mental parkour.

Put differently, *Fun Home* reveals that heterosexual romance is founded on a lie, but a lie that has animated Western cultural history -- the idea that the self-absorbed male individual must serve his social function while still striving for achievement beyond it. The leap to male homosexuality is not far from the idea that individual greatness already requires social sacrifice.

In *Are You My Mother?*, by contrast, a menopausal lesbian is bickering with her mother about contemporary women writers unfamiliar to most non-specialists. Such debates are indisputably esoteric in their appeal, from the perspective of the male-dominated literary establishment, and the general public for whom it claims to speak. However, they are central to an understanding of the contemporary world from a queer feminist perspective that places women's relationships with one another, in art and in life, at the forefront of their complexly interwoven concerns.

Turning away from questions of reception, I examine how Bechdel approaches the depiction of her mother within the text. In the opening pages, Bechdel outlines her technique for accessing her mother's unique voice in graphic narrative, which is to document their conversations in their full context, as they progress over time from handwritten letters to distracted cell phone conversations. She also outlines her primary psychological goal in writing the book, which is to free herself from the incredible influence her mother has had over her mind, not by outliving her, as events made it possible for her to do to her father in *Fun Home*, but rather by composing her on the author's own terms, giving her room to breathe in Bechdel's storyworld, articulated in serial graphic memoir. This is an adult artistic version of an adolescent goal, which finds a parallel in *The Guild: Zaboo*. In that comic, it is Zaboo's goal to leave his mother's house and surveillance in order, he hopes, to start an adult life with his heterosexual love object, Codex. Zaboo is not actually an adolescent, although he is nearly thirty years younger than Bechdel, and the two adult child subjects share much in their representations of arrested development and mental life in the twenty-first century.

Both of their mothers are widows, and this shared status is significant because it offers insight into both adult children's unusual level of anxiety about their mothers' ongoing happiness, as well as their need to be heard. Bechdel and Zaboo have a structurally limited perspective on their mothers, but both represent them as powerful figures, possessing an all-consuming intelligence that their children can never surpass. Added to this imbalance of power, Bechdel and Zaboo fail to bond appropriately with their mothers under the real-time constraints of social norms, and this failure creates space for the virtual composition of their mothers, which drives their stories.

Within social conventions, Bechdel says that she talks to her mother daily on the telephone. She represents one of their conversations in the first chapter of *Are You My Mother?*. In this conversation, her mother is complaining that one of her neighbors wants to make tasteless improvements to her house, and that the town has agreed that she can, “because she's a poor widow” (11). On the next page, she continues, “Well, I'm a poor widow, too, and I don't want to look at vinyl siding!” (12). In a prose memoir, we might wonder what this focus on home improvements means about this mother character. Does it remind us of the home restoration obsession that dominated Bechdel's father's married life in *Fun Home*? Does it indicate a certain shallowness, and, does her cutting remark about the woman's plea for sympathy reveal her lack of empathy for others?

However, here, we are soon distracted from these questions by a flaw more glaring than a passing lack of empathy. Depicted in the drawings as well as in Bechdel's narration is the fact that Bechdel is transcribing the entire conversation on her computer while her mother is speaking. Bechdel admits, depicting herself looking guilty, that she cannot possibly be “listening properly” while she is engaged in the transcription. However, she knows that her mother is not listening properly to her, either. Her explanation for her mother's behavior is that she “suspect[s] that [her mother] was not so much talking to [her] as drafting her own journal entry out loud” (12). We learn that Bechdel's mother is indeed an avid journal-keeper, and that it is likely from her that Bechdel's own “compulsion for keeping track of life” was created (12). To keep a journal of one's own experiences is considered acceptable under social conventions, because it is understood as private writing. By transparently relating her own journal entry under the guise of conversation, Bechdel's mother has set the stage for the disregard of social

conventions. Bechdel takes this breach of contract one step further by recording the conversations, and then a great leap forward when she converts the conversations into art under her own name. This breach of contract was implicit in *Fun Home*, but it was directed toward solving an inherently intriguing mystery. Here, it is the substance of the story, and therefore, we are asked to think about it outside of that purpose-driven context.

As I discussed earlier with regard to Phoebe Gloeckner, the detailed, graphic depiction of one's mother's role in one's development, inclusive of a complex sexuality, is as threatening to the mother's sovereignty as an individual as it is freeing for the adult child artist. In Bechdel's case, she reveals family secrets about sexuality, but she differs from Gloeckner because she does so from a perspective that is empathetic toward her closeted gay father, even to the point of trying to understand his desire for high school-aged lovers. Further, she tries to understand her mother's strength in managing the family under the stress of enduring an unhappy marriage, and never condemns her silence about her husband. Even so, the fact that *Fun Home* reveals so much, to so many readers, serves as an intensification of a long-standing disagreement between Bechdel and her mother, about sexuality and public life, and about privacy and writing.

We learn more about Bechdel's mother's approach to writing and convention when we see in the first chapter that she is an obsessive reader of “another journal,” the *New York Times*, and that she refuses to read the online version (12). It is here that we encounter the formal thread that will most profoundly connect Bechdel's mother to Zaboo's. Both live comfortably in the present, using the available reading technologies to access the knowledge they want from the world. Bechdel's mother likes to read the news from a consistent, established source, and allow her ideas to grow and change only as

new information is revealed and accepted by trusted critics. Zaboo's mother, too, is focused on the present, watching soap operas, keeping constant tabs on her son via surveillance technology, and watching his daily life unfold in real time. Whereas Bechdel's mother engages with the New York City-centered cultural sphere, focusing especially on theater and literature, Zaboo's mother focuses on keeping his parents' Indian and Jewish cultures alive for her son, especially through cooking. This daily, present-focused approach to life is a mystery to Bechdel and Zaboo, who long to transcend the daily and find the transcendent happiness or wisdom that evades them.

In both comics, the images and words work together to offer us a fuller picture of the mothers' lives. Bechdel's mother finds vinyl siding crass, and she refuses to read online newspapers, and so, Bechdel depicts her articulating these ideas surrounded by classic (and beautifully-rendered) home decor, sitting relaxed on a couch in front of a coffee table, on which unspecified objects from print culture are stacked. It is perhaps no coincidence that Bechdel's mother speaks at length of her chlorine-*resistant* swimsuit during this conversation, as she is represented as living a level above the crassness of twenty-first century life. Looking at this panel, the reader shares Bechdel's simultaneous feelings of admiration and irritation with her mother's graceful trajectory through life. Zaboo's mother is depicted on the cover of her comic as a six-armed woman, a reference to the many arms of the Hindu deity Ganesha. Her six arms brilliantly manage the domestic sphere, and her beautiful Indian clothing represents a lived connection to her origins. At the same time, she is King Kong-sized, towering over the helpless Zaboo, and from his position, she holds in her arms the oppressive tools of motherhood: cooking

materials, comically oversized to function as weapons; gefilte fish and a giant dreidel, to represent the weight of two cultures she impresses upon her son.

Whatever their reasons, Bechdel and Zaboo focus next on escaping their mothers, into whose lives they simply cannot fit without sacrificing their drive for some transcendence of their own. Their flight paths are depicted in series of maps, which represent the shared aesthetic tactics at play here. In *Are You My Mother?*, the maps represent pathways to epiphanies, especially those that free Bechdel from her feelings of inadequacy on her mother's terms – childless and a cartoonist, she cannot survive them. These pathways toward possible epiphanies are fascinating on their own terms, but they are especially fascinating in conversation with the maps that animate Zaboo's physical path away from his mother's home and surveillance grip on him.

The first of Bechdel's maps is a fantasy depiction of a meeting between her two major secondary sources for this project, namely Virginia Woolf and Donald Winnicott. She describes how Virginia Woolf achieved her own freedom from her mother by writing *To the Lighthouse*, and she realizes that she wishes that the kindly-seeming psychologist Donald Winnicott was her own mother, because of his insights into a child's needs. Both Woolf and Winnicott lived in London at the same time, and Bechdel painstakingly depicts a historically accurate and beautiful version of a specific street in the London they must both have known. If she could connect the woman who accomplished her psychological goal, and the psychologist who articulated it abstractly, then Bechdel hopes, she could achieve another catharsis like the one she pieced together in *Fun Home*.

A full two-page panel, this mapped encounter marks a signature moment in the aesthetic progression of the book, because it animates the process of forcing associative

connections that form the basis for psychoanalytic thought. The map makes such associations material. On the first page, we see Woolf, walking through the park, and on the next page, we see her again, from a different angle, and we see Winnicott walking in her direction.

On the lower left-hand corner of the second page, Bechdel has added a map of the London Underground to assert the legitimacy of her fantasy, as well as to make visible the technology that enables surprising intimate and intellectual connections across time and space (25). She also represents that reality in narration about the press that Woolf founded with her husband, in which some of Winnicott's writing was later published. On the next page, Bechdel depicts a street map in the first panel, and a return to the street level perspective in the second, in which only Woolf and Winnicott appear, separated by a fence, and joined only by a dog and a cyclist passing by (26). This is the closest they get to one another. And finally, within this maps sequence, Bechdel depicts a bird's-eye view of the meeting, which can only recall Google Maps for the contemporary reader. This connection is cemented not least because she gives their home addresses here, and by doing so, depicts how, regardless of the fantasy encounter they now "have left the outside world," in favor of their safe, isolated, and personal home-spaces (27). For Bechdel-in-the-book, alone in her apartment in Vermont, this means that both Winnicott and Woolf have failed to provide her with the catharsis she needed, by meeting, and thus resolving her desire to rid herself of her own mother, or to find in Winnicott the mother she's long desired. The spaces these subjects share are visualizable, but not inhabitable, and thus, Bechdel returns to a state of unfulfilled longing.

The Guild: Zaboo comic also depicts Zaboo's associative processes using maps, representing its influence by the contemporary world of visualized information access shared by Bechdel and Day. Although *The Guild: Zaboo* and *Are You My Mother?* were released within six months of one another, in December of 2011 and May of 2012 respectively, the resemblance they bear is not one of mutual awareness, but rather a twofold reflection of shared cultural context, and shared autobiographical investment. Day's subject matter is primarily the Internet as a social technology, while Bechdel's sincere investment lies depicting the complex referential structures that inform the domestic spaces and family relationships of the twenty-first century. Both authors must face each other's investments, however, as both the Internet and domestic life are posited as unavoidable in the contemporary culture they share.

Like Bechdel's mother, Zaboo's mother uses her child as a sounding board for the daily events of her life. While Zaboo is engaged in playing the game with his guild, and also sharing with them about his feelings for Codex, his mother interrupts, offering to set his bath (7). He tells her that he'll handle it himself, because he's twenty-six years old, but she refuses, "No. We have to discuss today's *General Hospital* episode. Five minutes. No pouting!" (7). Already, we can see one of the key differences between the world of Bechdel's mother and the world of Zaboo's. While Bechdel's mother looks out her window and reads the newspaper, Zaboo's mother is herself a media obsessive, and wishes to discuss the events of her favorite soap opera with her son. In their shared media obsession, the relationship between Zaboo and his mother is not only claustrophobic because it represents an unnerving closeness between mother and adult

child, but also because there is a claustrophobia in inhabiting a shared, finite media universe, from a shared house.

Bechdel's comic is claustrophobic, because it is entirely about an adult woman's relationship with her mother, and how it has affected her every other relationship with women, both romantic partners and therapists. This claustrophobia creates readerly anxiety in large part because it is entirely about relationships between women, for which we have limited scripts. Whereas the relationships Bruce Bechdel might have had with any number of male lovers seems as varied as the relationships we might draw between the great male writers of the Western literary canon, and thus beautifully open up queer historical possibility, the story of one woman's lived relationships with other women, grounded in the mother-child relationship, seems to function on a repetitive logic of infinite need. This effect is intensified by the fact that only one of the women depicted, Bechdel's mother, is reproductively successful, and, Bechdel argues, ambivalently so.

On the other end of the maternal spectrum, it is undoubtedly disturbing that Zaboo's mother wishes to bathe him at age twenty-six. It is presumably just as disturbing that she insists on sharing her interpretations of soap operas with him, while not wishing to hear about his own forays into the game. The psychological narrative here is a bit simpler than in Bechdel, as Zaboo's mother's desire to protect her son is depicted as directly correlating to her failure to protect her husband before his fatal heart attack. Her status as a widow is complicated only by the retrospective wish that she could have prevented her husband from the unhealthy behaviors that led to his death, which is a conventional response to evidence of the frailty of the human body. Zaboo's desire to leave is not framed as a rebellious quest, but rather as a conventional adult desire to

replace his mother with Codex as the “new woman” in his life. Stereotypes of gamers include arrested development like *Zaboo's*, which has as its necessary complement an enabling parental figure, possibly one who shares her child's desire to escape the harsh world by maintaining the family order, and entertaining herself in virtual worlds. In *Bechdel and Day*, mothers relate their daily perceptions to their adult children, and their adult children acquire a taste for such a daily exploration of themselves, whether in diaries or in in-game avatar creation. *Bechdel and Zaboo's* approach to life, as represented in these works, thus takes autobiography to its limits, and asks the contemporary reader to locate what, at this point, lies beyond it, if our domestic spheres can be so claustrophobically contained by this all-consuming self-fashioning process.

The simplest answer would be an embodied enactment of love for another, whether according to queer or heterosexual convention. And indeed, *Bechdel and Day* explore the attempts undertaken by their characters to channel their emotional energy into love. But somehow, their scripts for love are difficult to “update” to the present, to use a software metaphor, and must undergo some rewriting before they can be effective within the characters' respective social spheres. *Bechdel's* script of love, acquired from her mother, relies on self-sufficiency and ideas about others, rather than the conventional idea of love in both queer and heterosexual scripts, that it is a true encounter with another person, where we learn to see them as they are, and love them for it. She describes her “investment in the mind,” which includes her desire to document her life and those of her family members, as one of several examples of her experiences with “narcissistic cathexis” (218). She “relate[s] to [her] own mind like it's an object...like it's an internalized parent or lover” (152). Because both of her parents were artistically-

inclined, and because both of them were invested in extending the value of artifice into their domestic life, which is part of the work of a front marriage, narcissistic cathexis was Bechdel's model for love. This script was difficult for her to transcend in her romantic relationships, and led to a series of missteps along her path of serial lesbian monogamy.

Zaboo has learned to love via surveillance technology, just like his mother. In the beginning of *The Guild: Zaboo*, we learned that his mother could not bear to see him suffer. When Zaboo's mother sees that he is being bullied at school for being a computer geek, and that he is in emotional pain, she overreacts. She decides to put a leash on him and tie him to a chair in his bedroom, in her house, so that she can keep him safe. When he grows up, and has started gaming with the Knights of Good online, he faces a similar situation with Codex, who is depressed and in pain. He overreacts. He researches her, and finds out everything he can, compiling the information into his database of profiles, which include “people,” specifically, “family, guild, school, just met, famous, every1 else” (8). Like Bechdel, Zaboo takes pleasure in the personal lives of others, and specifically, in documenting them digitally. While the Codex prequel depicts her digital self-improvement along a continuum from self to avatar, the Zaboo comic is about his growth from imposed-isolation to physical departure, and reaching out. Because he is a heterosexual man, he does this, in the end, by way of the most familiar dramatic gesture, which is the gesture of courtship. This gesture misfires in the Web series, because, although Zaboo was correct in his assessment that Codex needed empathy and validation, he was incorrect in interpreting sexual chemistry from the fact that she vented her negative feelings to him in particular. She was, at that point, using her online friends as a sounding board for her daily reflections, rather than opening up to them in a way that, on

her terms, invited long term friendship. Fortunately, Zaboo's misfired courtship gesture sets the action of the Web series in motion, and gets Codex the support network she was looking for, in spite of missteps along the way.

The maps in *The Guild: Zaboo* are more self-consciously high-tech than those in *Are You My Mother?*. The comic's maps sequence begins with an infrared map of the hallway Zaboo must traverse in order to get past his mother in the bathroom without being noticed by her (11). On the next page, the floor-by-floor map of their house shows a series of paths Zaboo could take, which one must follow like a maze in order to find the one that gets him out of the house without being stopped by a dead end (in the basement), a flood (in the attic), or family friends (in the living room) (12-13). It is perhaps worth forging an associative connection with Bechdel here, given the symbolic weight of the basement. Bechdel depicts various dreams throughout *Are You My Mother*, which she reads as representative of her struggle to complete her book, in which she is trying to escape from basements, caves, and other situations of being trapped. The line between a dream sequence, rendered in Bechdel's own hand, using only black and red ink, and a full-color cartoon maze, represents the line between pre-digital psychological metaphor and the visual imagination of a subject defined primarily by contemporary popular culture. This line is not firmly generational, as the impact of popular culture is uneven, and there is no particular virtue attached to Bechdel's family being moved, as a group, by literature, and no particular vice attached to Zaboo's family being more popular culture-oriented. The resemblance between these modes of thinking is uncanny, and leads us to the question of what genuine insight might look like, guided neither by psychological nor digitally-mediated associations, nor even by the power of myth and the Western literary

tradition, but rather by the complex relationships between women, and between women and queer subjects.

Writers of women's experimental autobiography today continue to wrestle with conventional gender expectations, a complex web of feminisms, moral struggles between the desire to tell the truth and the desire to protect one's loved ones, and storytelling and medium expectations. What is new about their struggle is that they must somehow convince an audience with endless options for entertainment, including a constant stream of “news” about, and performances by their friends, coworkers, family members, and favorite celebrities, to read about the individual life of a woman still somehow unsatisfied by this state of affairs. Once again, I do not turn from shallowness to depth here. I am not suggesting that readers turn off their shallow attention to their friends' lives, and focus instead on the thoughts of credentialed thinkers, or politically superior thinkers. Rather, I suggest that there is a particular value to engaging with a sustained articulation of an individual woman's desire that potentially reveals something about the web of information and social life we encounter in the present.

Section III: Thinking Bodily in Graduate School in Elif Batuman’s *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them* and *The Guild:*

Fawkes

Turning to credentialed thinkers is, however, one strategy for creating a critical distance between ourselves and the webs in which we are entangled, and it is one undertaken by Elif Batuman in her collection of autobiographical essays, *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them*. In *The Possessed*, Batuman tells the story of her intellectual development, specifically, how her love of

Russian books led her to spend her twenties in a doctoral program, and as a participant in the broader scene of Russian literature fandom in the twenty-first century. As a graduate student, she developed her expertise in literary theory and criticism, which helped her to articulate, as a critical writer, the seemingly magical insights she had consistently found in literature since childhood. As a participant in the scene of Russian literature fandom, Batuman came to understand herself as a cosmopolitan reader and traveler who cared about the sedimented history of the cultural tradition that had produced her beloved favorite books. Voracious reading and autobiographical writing are complexly intertwined for her, and their particular intersections come to life in the embodied insights that she describes in *The Possessed*. The process by which she arrives at these insights is non-linear, as she finds that the scripts for becoming a credentialed critic or a creative writer both miss the opportunity offered by women's experimental autobiography, to connect literature to life in the present.

There are similarities between Batuman's archival approach and Bechdel's, but because Batuman is a credentialed literary critic, and because she is writing prose, rather than creating graphic autobiography, their tactics function differently. While both authors look for moments of serendipity that connect life and literary archive, Bechdel's archival process is primarily grounded in the personal, while Batuman's is, to some degree, pre-determined by her academic field.³² Especially in *Fun Home*, Bechdel's

³² In the U.S. context, the study of Russian literature occupies a much more contained sphere than the vast, interdisciplinary English department. A 2013 roundtable discussion in *Russian Studies in Literature* posed the question of whether Russian literature is “interesting to the foreign reader or is the attention to Russian prose and poetry circumscribed within the Dostoevsky-Tolstoy-Chekhov-Pasternak-Solzhenitsyn-Akhamtova-Brodsky perimeters?” (7). Participant Olga Bugoslavskia responded that,

literary archive is drawn from physical objects in her family home, where her English teacher parents had compiled a high-quality library. Batuman's archive is drawn from her chosen object of study, Russian literature, which has little to do with her upbringing as a first-generation American, born to Turkish immigrant parents. For Bechdel, literature forges a connection to her parents, in which she locates evidence of an emotional life that is otherwise masked by the relative coldness of their everyday conversations. For Batuman, literature is the object of her desire, her way forward not just to a career as a writer, but also to an expansive self-understanding. In other words, the critics and writers around whom the study of Russian literature is organized in the U.S. context serve for Batuman as parental figures, who help her to situate her generational insights.

She also draws significant inspiration from the subculture she discovered and formed among writers who share in some aspect of her esoteric passion. Central to Batuman's entering the literary scene was the set of friends in thought she found at the small magazine, *n+1*. There she found a venture that was devoted in equal parts to global contemporary fiction, including some fiction in translation, contemporary criticism, and the cultivation of a market alternative to peer-reviewed scholarly journals and mainstream news outlets alike. The first issue of *n+1* was published in 2004, and its contributors quickly gained a reputation for contrarianism. The founders, mostly highly-educated men from immigrant and Jewish families, expressed dissatisfaction with the

although many contemporary Russian writers are “fashionable” (7), general interest in these writers is “lackluster,” especially in “the Anglophone world [which] is culturally self-sufficient and even somewhat insular,” and enjoys “worldwide cultural dominance” (8). In other words, to engage with the circumscribed canon of great Russian writers is already an eccentric pursuit in the Twenty-first-century United States, and so, even specialists focus their attention there.

contemporary novel, life in the age of social media, and the state of higher education.³³ In the first issue, *Negation*, for example, the editors chastised critic James Wood, *The New Republic*, and the practice of exercise in gyms. “Against Exercise,” authored by Mark Greif, suggests that working out in gyms represents a mimicry of factor labor, and is thus essentially ridiculous, sort of an embodied version of digitally-created music, in which something fundamental to the pleasure of being in one's body must have been reduced by contemporary culture. It is a polemical piece, as is his 2007 article in the *Correction* issue, “Against Food,” which laments the fact that many people in the twenty-first century have replaced the simple, human fact of thirst with the scientized idea that they are “dehydrated,” and replaced hunger with “low on blood sugar (87).” He wonders what the point of this jargon is, and if it unnecessarily abstracts us from our lives. It is no wonder that this journal was the first host to Batuman’s polemics about the inadequacies of the contemporary American short story – there was something just a little bit wrong with everything people were enjoying in the gentrified twenty-first-century culture they inhabited, and so the time had come to revitalize critical language in order to ask serious questions about the present, in a language that transcends ephemeral institutional trends.

Like Batuman, *The Guild's* Fawkes (real name Marion) energetically pursues a cosmopolitan education in order to acquire cultural capital, understand the social world, in which he often feels like an outsider, and contextualize the particularity of his perspective. *The Guild: Fawkes* tells the story of his path through the dissertation stage

³³ In Emily Gould’s autobiographically-inflected novel *Friendship*, the protagonist, Amy, works at “Yidster,” which, though based more directly on *Jewcy*, shares with *n+1* both its Jewish cultural affiliation and its relationship to the Twenty-first-century hipster subculture. (Kirkus Review)

of a doctoral program in philosophy. As he begins to crumble under the pressure of serious academic work, he finds that the game he'd once relied on to bolster his sense of a coherent identity is no longer satisfying his desires. In the game, he travels a constantly-expanding virtual world. Having mastered rule-based game-play long ago, Fawkes became a troll³⁴, which is one mode of extending one's critical appreciation for the virtual environment. As a troll, he argues with anyone who will listen to him about any subject, and cries for attention with disproportionate displays of power, to the deliberate detriment of social harmony. By negating the simple pleasures offered by the game as it is written, Fawkes and other trolls use their contrarian tactics to embody what they see as a rigorous, experimental approach to life. However, when Fawkes's advisor suggests to him that the attitude of thinking he has acquired as a troll has caused him to stray from truly philosophical thought, Fawkes faces an identity crisis, which requires him to reorganize his cultural archive and social world.

³⁴ Internet trolls are the Twenty-first-century's most prominent descendants of hackers, those hardcore early adopters of computer technology who made the contemporary Internet possible. E. Gabriella Coleman describes hackers in her article, "Phreaks, Hackers and Trolls: The Politics of Transgression and Spectacle." They are people who "tend to uphold a value for freedom, privacy, and access; they tend to adore computers—the cultural glue that binds them together; they are trained in highly specialized and technical esoteric arts, including programming, systems administration, and security research; some gain unauthorized access to technologies (100)." In the Twenty-first-century, as the Internet became much more densely populated, such hackers became "endangered" and a new class of "trolls" arose in their place (109). On trolls, Coleman writes: "Trolls work to remind the "masses" that have lapped onto the shores of the Internet that there is still a class of geeks who, as their name suggests, will cause Internet grief, hell, and misery; examples of trolling are legion. Griefers [are] one particular subset of troll, who roam in virtual worlds and games seeking to jam the normal protocols of gaming (110)."

He thought he had found friends in thought in other trolls. With them, he had formed the Axis of Anarchy, an in-game guild that represents a sort of dark shadow of the Knights of Good. Together, the Axis used their high skill level and supplementary tactics of intimidation to push others out of the game. For Fawkes, this ideology is closely tied to his views on sexuality, which are pro-individual pleasure and anti-family. Early in *The Guild: Fawkes*, he preys on players whose digital identities fail to take advantage of the game's opportunity for sexual experimentation. Proudly, he says, "A guild called 'The Thompson Family' could not pass without slaughter" (3), as his guild attacks another. The game is a specialized space in which people ought, in the view of the Axis, to be up to the challenge of being "called out" on their old-fashioned or provincial views.

The Axis concedes that, in the real world, these views are hegemonic, but they believe in the game's potential to represent an experimental social order. In other words, participants in the game must remain open to such call-outs in the name of establishing it as a carnivalesque³⁵ space in which the rules and hierarchies of material social power can be rewritten, at least temporarily. It is worth noting that every member of the Axis is sexually deviant in some way: Venom and Riley are queer women; Valkyrie, a male character, plays a female character in the game; Bruiser begins a sexual relationship with

³⁵ Scholars studying Internet-based phenomena often use the word "carnivalesque" to describe the play component of what we might otherwise call the pseudo-activity that takes place in digital spaces. Rachel Shave, for example, applies Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of the carnival to the primarily female sphere of slash fandom, focusing especially on *Harry Potter* slash fandom's interest in re-writing masculinity through gender-bent fan production. Weihua Wu, Steve Fore, Xiyang Wang, and Petula Sik Ying Ho extend this idea to examine how the carnivalesque operates in the male-dominated sphere of MMORPGs, focusing their analysis on "In-Game Marriage and the Chinese Internet."

Bladezz's mother simply to shake things up, and Kwan has an ambiguously-compensated hand masseuse, who is always by his side.

Language serves as another symbol of the Axis's particular kind of openness to the game as a vanguard sphere of creative expression. While the Knights of Good all speak English as a native language, the Axis easily incorporates Kwan, a South Korean player who speaks no English, into their guild. This simple act of cosmopolitanism opens up their access to the storyworld of the game significantly. The Knights of Good reveal as the foundational pleasure of *The Guild* storyworld that misfits can find friends and confidence in gaming, even in spite of inevitable social missteps. But compared to the Axis, their social world has barely expanded as a result of their gaming. Indeed, what they see as their "goodness" also locks them into a comparatively provincial mindset, in which they are vulnerable both as consumers, to the external logic of game expansion, dictated by the company, and, as smaller-scale players, to the logic of the Axis, who see them as weaklings. The Axis thrives on social destruction, both of casual players and of each other. They hold one another accountable to their shared mission to keep the game open to genuinely individuated journeys through it, and not merely reproduce the limiting social niceties and limitations of any pre-existing sphere of the real world. These journeys will only be available to players willing and able to achieve elite status, based on acquired skill level, intellectual flexibility, and emotional investment.

The queer, cosmopolitan, contrarian resistance potentially represented by the Axis comes up against its limit when Fawkes is unable to articulate it in conversation with the field vocabulary of philosophy, that is, with his advisor. Lacking the mastery of a particular field vocabulary (e.g. properly political resistance) with which to counter his

advisor's concern that he has strayed from philosophy, Fawkes falls apart. As readers of *The Guild* comics, we can locate radical possibilities in the action depicted on the page, but we must also recognize that Fawkes's identity crisis reveals the half-formed nature of his theoretical approach. Sedimented history reveals the path toward the insight Fawkes must reach, which is that the terms on which his advisor imagines the realm of the properly philosophical have changed irrevocably.

In the first chapter, I argued that the interdisciplinarity at the heart of twenty-first-century humanistic inquiry can be traced back to Adorno's postwar aesthetic theory, and the history of women's autobiography since the 1960s. But there is also a particular formal connection between Batuman's approach, and indeed, the approach taken by the *n+1* contributors more generally, and Adorno's innovations in the critical rendering of daily life for the thinking subject.³⁶ In his *Minima Moralia*, which I read as one of the foundational autobiographical accounts of postwar life in the United States, Adorno develops his critical approach to popular culture after historical tragedy. By way of a series of reflections on artworks, artifacts from popular culture, political slogans, and even fairy tales, he wrestles with the question of how the thinking subject can put the cognitive dissonance he experiences in daily life to use. For Adorno, serious contemplation is the only way to claim access to the sphere of imagination, in which a better world seems possible, but he warns that philosophy carries no resolutions to the unthinkable and ongoing tragedies of history. In his introduction to *Minima Moralia*, he

³⁶ Adorno critics like Simon Jarvis use "the autonomous thinking subject" to describe the participant in negative dialectical thought (150). The alternative to the thinking subject is the unthinking consumer, but neither of these categories describes any individual at all times. The point of this kind of criticism is to focus on moments in which we are made into thinking subjects by our interactions with our surroundings.

writes that “What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence and now of mere consumption...without autonomy or substance of its own” (15). And so we must turn to melancholic contemplation, insisting upon the wrong realities of our own lives, in order to create space to perceive clearly those vestiges of goodness, which make life worth living. Sometimes cruelly, Adorno catalogs the mechanisms by which people fall prey to false thinking.

Advertising and the omnipresent logic of the marketplace are central to this catalog, and resistance to the cultural boutique is central to trolling, hacking, and other modes of contrarian thought. Johan Söderberg describes how the contemporary politics of play subvert the logic of advertising in *Hacking Capitalism*:

Similar to labour in that it is a productive engagement with the world, play differs in that it is freely chosen and marked by a high degree of self-determination among the players. At its heart, the politics of play struggle consist in the distance it places between doing and the wage relation. Play is a showcase of how labour self-organizes its constituent power outside the confines of market exchanges. (165)

In other words, whatever happens in the name of trolling that transforms the stimulation of consumption in which gamers are supposed to be engaged, into something else, contains properly political energy that can be repurposed. Söderberg continues, “the motor of this development is a gut reaction against alienated labor (165).” Anytime that gut reaction registers on a social level, it has the potential to foster solidarity. Further, turning from the social effects to the aesthetic trajectory created by trolling, there is an experimentally-minded trickle-down effect made possible by trolls like the Axis, and

made famous by real-life activists like Anonymous and the Yes Men. Their pranking makes our world bigger, pokes holes in faulty or outdated assumptions, and corners people, sometimes powerful people, into making visible the logic by which they operate. This effect is meaningful, whether or not it is underpinned by progressive politics.

In fact, I argue that the Axis unwittingly draws as much inspiration from the 1960s group the Merry Pranksters, and prankster-performance artist Joey Skaggs, as they do from the hackers who are their more obvious subcultural precedent. Like Skaggs, the Axis “exemplifies pranking as a strategic mode of engagement with commercial media and consumer culture in general” (Harold 76). In the 1960s, psychedelic drugs and media experiments converged to reveal the homogeneity and stodgy bureaucracy that defined normative consumer-driven life in the United States. To counter these, they proposed the truth and, sometimes, utopian alternatives, accessible through sensation if not sustainable changes in living conditions. “Politics” in this context is absent in its conventional sense, except for anti-consumerist politics, which have little formal representation in the United States. That said, one progressive effect of these pranks is that they reach comparatively powerless individuals seeking to understand their complex world, and they undermine powerful entities' ability to cloak their structures and intentions.

Put differently, just as *The Guild's* Codex can be seen as a descendent of Kominsky-Crumb, although she lacks any of the latter's political conviction, Fawkes can be seen as wielding a power descended from counterculture, that is, the tactics of pranking. Although his primary *claimed* intellectual forebears are philosophers, based on his academic discipline, the media-rich contemporary world in which he lives enables him to fuse the long arc of Western philosophy with the technological innovations of

hackers and the pranking practices from counterculture, in the virtual gaming environment.

In order to understand how Fawkes's resistance came to appear in a form so divorced from its potential political power, we must return to questions of medium and history. In *n+1* issue 5, *Decivilizing Process*, the magazine's editors tell how they, like Fawkes, looked for relief from their excesses of intellectual curiosity in the Internet, enchanted, in their case, by their utopian hopes for the literary blogosphere. But what relief they found was only temporary, they write:

The blogs salved this ennui and created nourishing microcommunities. Yet criticism as an art didn't survive. People might have used their blogs to post the best they could think and say. They could have posted 5,000-word critiques of their favorite books and records. Some polymath might even have shown, on-line, how an acute and well-stocked sensibility responds to the streaming world in real time. But those things didn't happen, at least not often enough. In practice, blogs reveal how much we are unwitting stenographers of hip talk and marketing speak, and how secondhand and often ugly our unconscious impulses still are. The need for speed encourages, as a willed style, the intemperate, the unconsidered, the undigested. (Not for nothing is the word blog evocative of vomit.) "So hot right now," the bloggers say. Or: "Jumped the shark." The language is supposed to mimic the way people speak on the street or the college quad, the phatic emotive growl and purr of exhibitionistic consumer satisfaction - "The Divine Comedy is SOOO GOOD!" - or displeasure - "I shit on Dante!" So man hands on information to man. (6)

Part of what the *n+1* editors miss here is that the Internet is not merely a new environment for prose. They are right that criticism as they knew it did not survive, but they are the critics who must transform their own critique into an updated mode of engagement. Their attachment to literature proper must update itself to the twenty-first-century, in which it is a transmedia storyteller like Felicia Day who best represents that polymath who shows “how an acute and well-stocked sensibility responds to the world in real time.” A well-stocked sensibility in the twenty-first-century is not just a person who is well read. Throughout *The Guild* comics, we encounter a series of well-stocked characters, although admittedly, none of them would count as well-stocked by the literary-hierarchical preferences of the *n+1* editors, and none is yet in a position to articulate her greatest insights. One would think that Fawkes would be in a better position to do so, but where he supersedes the *n+1* writers in his savviness with a New Media landscape, he lags behind in field-level confidence with his philosophical vocabulary.

Fawkes has seen the power in game-play and pranking, but is, at the midpoint of *The Guild: Fawkes*, unable to transform it into thinking bodily as a philosopher. Batuman, by contrast, finds a way to articulate her contrarian insights well within the bounds of the marketplace; while she transcends what was expected of her in graduate school, by converting her literary-critical insights into a program for thinking bodily, she packages them successfully for publication by a major press. In other words, Batuman gains freedom from the strictures of academic writing, but only by acquiescing to the all-consuming logic of the market, and creating a boutique product. However, her particular approach, which comprehensively and humorously depicts the means of production that

enable her writing labor, articulates aesthetic autonomy from within, which would not have been possible in a conventional object-driven dissertation. Lambert Zuidervaart describes Adorno's approach to artistic production inside the culture industry in his piece, "Feminist Politics and the Culture Industry: Adorno's Critique Revisited." He writes,

[Adorno] acknowledges, of course, that the artist's market-mediated freedom is also a "freedom to starve" (DE, 104, DA, 157) and contains an element of untruth. Yet the proper way for artists to counter this untruth, he says, is neither to deny nor to flaunt the commodity character of art, but to assimilate the contradiction between market and autonomy "into the consciousness of their own production" (DE, 127; DA, 185). (265)

What Adorno calls for is not simply a page of acknowledgements that lists sources of funding and otherwise unacknowledged laborers in the chain of publishing production. Rather, he calls for the artist to develop a consciousness of the contradiction between market and autonomy, which informs the whole work of art. Batuman demonstrates evidence of such consciousness, but she is ultimately ambivalent about its connection to the transcendent literary sphere that is her love object. Still, however, her ability to describe the social location that is created by the intersection of the academy and the broader marketplace sets her apart from writers plagued by the constraints of either sphere, and thus marks her innovation.

In *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel produces an innovative and realistic representation of contemporary writing practices, given the omnipresence of digital technology. Bechdel represents herself at an Apple computer, with earbuds, typing away while talking on her smartphone. Her inspiration for creating such a detailed approach is

not Marxist aesthetic theory, but rather lesbian history, as revealed by her citation of an Adrienne Rich essay. She quotes Rich:

[the woman writer] meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salomé, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together. (Bechdel 171)

This image of the woman writing is central to the history of women's autobiographical experimentation, and has been taken up in some way by all the women I discuss in this project. Kominsky-Crumb represents herself surrounded by the objects of her creative process throughout *Need More Love*, both in photographs of herself in her beautiful studio in France, and in panels depicting her posed avatar, brush to canvas, working to transcend the distracting male attention that surrounds her. Brown describes the importance of an apartment of one's own, in which one can find the peace to lead a successful work life, while also having the good grace to host gentlemen callers when the need arises. Lorde describes the collaborative poetry-writing process of “adapting songs from Pablo Neruda poems” with her friends as they commune in the city (89). Gloeckner depicts the avatar of her child-self trying to read while she is being called away to delight her stepfather with her body. Schrag depicts herself taking notes at the prom. Day depicts Codex untangling microphone wires so that she can begin to communicate orally with Clara and the others who will become the Knights of Good.

Batuman, too, works to de-romanticize the writing process, not out of any spoken feminist solidarity or agenda, nor out of allegiance to Marxism, but rather because of her

personal disdain for the subculture of credentialed creative writing in the contemporary United States. In her view, that subculture seems to reject literary history, which for her is writing's proper sphere, in favor of brilliant individual observation and workshop-based "craft." She poses the following question in her introduction:

What if you read *Lost Illusions* and, instead of moving to New York, living in a garret, self-publishing your poetry, writing book reviews, and having love affairs--instead of living your own version of *Lost Illusions*, in order to someday write the same novel for twenty-first-century America--what if instead you went to Balzac's house and Madame Hanska's estate, read every word he ever wrote, dug up every last thing you could about him--and *then* started writing?

That's the idea behind this book. (25)

In other words, Batuman poses the question of how we can update our reading practices as seriously as writers of the past have altered their lives to accord with lived literary conventions. That is, how can we work in the theoretical sphere, rather than hastily literalizing the first fine insight at which we arrive, and turning it into public performance? Without sifting through the sedimented history left by the books that inspire a writer, it seems fruitless to engage in anachronistic mimicry of their production.

Batuman does not address the Internet in her discussion of contemporary writing, which might seem like an oversight for a book published in 2010. However, the culture of writing she addresses overlaps significantly with Internet culture. Self-publishing one's poetry, for example, is much easier and more tempting with the Internet, as is writing book reviews for an audience, however small. Researching Balzac is, of course, also easier with Internet access, but Batuman clearly believes that this research should be

materially-grounded, not just for authenticity's sake, as it was in Bechdel, but also because research on literature from a different national tradition than one's own requires some level of immersion in that tradition's contemporary presence. It would be fair to assume that Batuman is a savvy user of the Oxford Digital Library, in other words.

In fact, I argue that the afterlife of danah boyd's mid-nineties fantasies of dis- or creatively-embodied intellectual life in the virtual sphere can be found in the sphere of contemporary cosmopolitan literary analysis. The excitement boyd felt at communicating with people who did not impose predictable cultural assumptions onto her has much in common with the excitement of immersing oneself in a new language and culture. As a child of immigrants, Batuman grew up with a critical distance from U.S. culture that she acquired through her parents' perspectives and her own visits to Turkey, and so she was well-prepared to open herself up to Russian and, later, Uzbek literature and culture.

This kind of cosmopolitan embodiment enables politically-savvy thinking in a way that surpasses the technical mastery of multiple languages. One of the most prominent examples of false thinking that Adorno wished to debunk, in the wake of the postwar political landscape, was the idea that the United States was a place of democracy and freedom, which must save Europe from itself and its totalitarian Nazis and communists. Certainly, totalitarianism needed to be stopped, but the replacement of, for example, Nazism, with U.S.-style capitalism provided no assurance of a comprehensive restoration of human dignity. Like Adorno, Batuman looks back to postwar history to understand U.S. culture, especially its nationalistic claims to superiority over European culture and traditions. When discussing her college experience, for example, Batuman

quips that she initially majored in linguistics rather than literature because “[she] grew up during the cold war, and you were supposed to be creative, unlike the people in the Soviet Union, who read books (*No Regrets* 73).” Her point here is not that American individualism has nothing to offer her -- after all, she is writing a series of autobiographical essays about her U.S.-based education, for a U.S. audience. However, she believes that “creativity” is a widely misunderstood and misapplied term, especially in writing, and so she turns to a reference point from an earlier era to reveal one reason behind its inflated importance. It is one that seems to imply individualism and liberation, but actually, as Amy F. Ogata argues in her 2013 book, *Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America*, is intimately tied to consumerism, particularly a kind of women's consumerism that involves the virtues of child-rearing and domesticity.

As I have discussed in previous chapters, Adorno is especially harsh when it comes to women's overconsumption and gullibility before popular culture. He says of such women that “[t]heir lives are constructed as illustrations, or a perpetual children's festival, and such perception does no justice to their needy empirical existence (169).” Wishing that these women could reveal “any impulse of their own,” Adorno comes across as intensely misogynistic (169). However, his observations of women's acquiescence to the ridiculous social expectations they face are incisive. He handily condemns “patriarchal control” for violating the dictum that “no man shall make another his object,” but he also finds the “misshapen bourgeois form of sex, murkily enmeshed with every kind of material interest” worthy of serious critique (171). His devotion to melancholic critique is too thorough for him to find anything redemptive in the

untheorized category of women, and this is a feature he shares with a particular set of contrarian contemporary writers, including Batuman.

Like her mid-century forebears, Batuman espouses contrarian views on feminism. For example, in an all-woman discussion of formative reading experiences, she says of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, "That book did nothing for me. Nothing" (Tortorici 93). Her disavowal of Butler is part of her insistence upon a social location determined by a complexly-interwoven set of influences, which guide her self-definition in the present. Her extensive knowledge of Russian literature, for example, may offer her high culture cachet and a path to cosmopolitanism, but in order for her to demonstrate the particular value of the field, she must separate the progressivism inherent in the arts and humanities from progressive social agendas. Writing for the *New Yorker*, Rebecca Mead describes *The Possessed* as "like Eat, Pray, Love for the PhD set," referring to the Elizabeth Gilbert memoir that described the author's travel narrative through Italy, India, and Indonesia (1). In that book, Gilbert searches to contextualize her flagging sense of self as a woman, after her marriage ends in divorce. Batuman does incorporate love affairs into *The Possessed*, but they are not redemptive for her, as they are in Gilbert, whose memoir was easily turned into a romantic comedy in its film adaptation. For Batuman, literature is the only possible site of redemption, and there is no teleological endpoint to the questions it raises for the subject who lives reflectively and reads as well. Just as Kominsky-Crumb always longed to be an "aahtist," Batuman has always longed to be a reader, for whom the work of experiencing literature was an end in itself, as well as the only possible inspiration for literary production.

Like many women writers of autobiography, Batuman grew up feeling out of place, and craving a more artful life. She found it by reading literature, especially in an early and formative experience with *Anna Karenina*. She recalls noting, “Nobody in *Anna Karenina* was oppressed, as I was, by the tyranny of leisure. The leisure activities in Tolstoy's novel--ice skating, balls, horse races--were beautiful, dignified, and meaningful in terms of plot” (7). She feels that it is “a perfect book, with an otherworldly perfection...so big and so small--so serious and so light--so strange and so natural” (8). The inadequacy of everyday life is replaced by the vastness of literature she will soon have at her disposal.

The whole Russian canon starts to make itself available to her as she makes her first conceptual connection between two classics: “It was as if all of [Pushkin's Eugene] Onegin had been dreamed by Anna, who in her own life fulfilled Tatyana's unresolved fate (8).” Like Bechdel, Batuman has recourse to the associative logic of dreams in order to describe the forces underlying her intellectual trajectory in this memoir. But these dreams are not confessions of the author's subconscious desires, which require working-through with a therapist. These, instead, are a world that revealed itself to Batuman through her years of reading and study. For her, “the riddle of human behavior and the nature of love appeared bound up with Russian,” both the language and the literary tradition, and it became her task to immerse herself in it, trusting her own emerging critical voice to guide her to the beauty she seeks (12). And so, as a complement to her voracious reading, she travels to Harvard, Hungary, Stanford, Russia, Uzbekistan, and all around Western Europe, in order to complete her education so that she can finally be in the position to write a novel (17). But this riddle of human behavior can only be

untangled if we come to understand the ways in which critical practices are gendered in the contemporary moment.

That her friends in thought at the beginning of her writing career were mostly men is undoubtedly related to Batuman's initial reluctance to think of her work as part of a women-centered tradition. In 2007, *n+1* founding editor Keith Gessen published the autobiographically-inflected novel *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, the title offering a nod to a short story collection by F. Scott Fitzgerald, but also an easy shorthand for *n+1* detractors wishing to point out the magazine's particular masculine self-pitying and nostalgic tendencies. Many of these detractors have been women writers and feminists, curious about the magazine's majority-male writing staff, and the majority-male-authored works they address in their literary criticism and theory. Mark Tracy titled his review of Adelle Waldman's satirical novel, *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.* in *The New Republic* "All the Sad Young Literary Men Are Jerks." Others have simply been dismissive because the magazine's focus seems so willfully esoteric, and its writers seem to see themselves at the center of some significant generational debate. As an example of such critiques, the celebrity and media gossip blog Gawker tags all *n+1*-related posts "The Most Important Literary Magazine of Our Time," the capital letters indicating the hubris they ascribe to the magazine's contributors.

Like Gessen, Batuman also writes from a melancholy position. For her, failed experiences and individual alienation are both part of comic writing, and part of undoing the predigested narratives of contemporary culture. In this way, failure differentiates itself subtly from negation, enacted as lashing out. For example, as she nears the time in her graduate program when she will have to teach, Batuman's department faces a scandal

in which a graduate student is removed from her teaching position as a result of a minor linguistic mistake. Made nervous that she, too, could face this kind of embarrassment, Batuman begins to pursue an alternative possible teaching opportunity, which would both allow her to work at a different school, and would also enable her to pursue a recently-developed research interest in the Uzbek language. The language had become interesting to her at this stage of her education because it “seemed...like a harsher, more naïve, more Russian version of Turkish,” and thus represented the possibility of fusing the culture into which she was born with the culture, which enabled her intellectual development (97-98).

In order to qualify for the teaching opportunity, she must complete an immersive language program in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. After she has received approval to undertake this endeavor, the teaching opportunity disappears from her. Just as Fawkes backed away from his thesis topic when he lost his way, Batuman tries to back away from her ambition to study in Samarkand. However, as she tries to back out, the administrator in charge tells her that she should think carefully about doing so because it will make her look bad, and significantly reduce her chances of being granted departmental funding in the future. Responding with her typical measured contrarianism, she writes,

My first instinct was to tell them exactly what they could do with their departmental funding. But three things changed my mind. First, departmental funding and departmental goodwill are really, in the cold light of reason, nothing to sneeze at. Second, I was at that time greatly under the sway of *The Portrait of a Lady*, a book in which one finds the following line: “Afterwards, however, she always remembered that one should never regret a generous error.” As a result, I

was constantly rethinking all my conservative decisions and amending them in favor of “generous errors,” a category which surely included going to Samarkand to learn the great Uzbek language. Third, I was unhappy in love and wanted to get some distance. (101)

It is in this line of thinking that Batuman reveals the inadequacy of the position of the masculine contrarian subject; she needs the support of either the cultural boutique or the institution in order to continue her educational pursuits, and so she must transform herself into a more receptive subject. Once she has done so, she can put her critical faculties to use transforming the experience into a record of bodily thinking for the contemporary literary scene. When she does so, she will enter into the tradition of women’s experimental autobiography. But before I explore how, I offer the parallel of Fawkes’s response to his own academic failure, which also coincides with his unhappiness in love.

Fawkes attempts to counter the problems of contemporary culture, including its tendency towards “exhibitionistic consumer satisfaction,” with two theses. The first, which is also his first attempt at a graduate thesis, is “Planting destructive social philosophies in online gaming” (18). In this experiment, he works to reveal the structures underlying online gaming communities, and to test their strength against real world expectations of social cohesion. However, he becomes “too invested...recreationally” in that thesis, and so he must devise a new one (18). The second attempt is his epicurean thesis, in which he tries to live according to the idea that “the true Epicurean must sample freely and liberally, taking what he wants and moving along to the next” (13). To complete this thesis, he brings his trolling behavior to real life, for example, having a one-night stand with Kwan's girlfriend, Nik, so that he can check “betray a friend” off his

list of desired human experiences (13). However, he grows frustrated with this approach, too, and his advisor accuses him of not being “a real philosopher,” because, “perhaps [his] heart is stronger than [his] mind after all...” (18-19). Fawkes is disturbed by this feedback, lamenting that his fun has been taken away from him by virtue of his own character growth away from simple trolling and contrarianism.

The Axis of Anarchy represents a counterpart to the Knights of Good in that, until *The Guild: Fawkes*, we only see them as antagonists, who start fights with other players, rather than as gamer-subjects who come to the game from complex internal worlds, reflected by *The Guild* comics. For the Axis, deviance is part of their gameplay, and Fawkes’s epiphany in *The Guild: Fawkes* is that he must turn his critique inward, in order to realize its true purpose. Baring one’s breasts to shock the gentrified mind, as Adorno’s students did, does not bring about the transformation for which the activist longs; here, he must articulate the more satisfying mental life he imagines, or else his negative energy will lose its transformative political potential.

When, inspired by his unrequited love for Codex, Fawkes first decides to give up trolling for a differently-embodied existence, his life seems temporarily reduced. As he converts the negations he once enacted on those he encountered in his social environments onto a self-critical project, he loses touch with what he once saw as the power of negation. Thus, he locates his third thesis, this time, an unofficial one, which I see as a foray into experimental autobiography. To transition from an Axis mindset to a moral-individual mindset seems like a downgrade at first, until he can replace it with a new understanding of his investments. Visually, this apparent downgrade is represented by way of a two-page montage sequence. In the first page-wide panel, at the top of the

first page of this sequence, Fawkes and his advisor are shown, with Fawkes insisting that he is a philosopher, and his advisor, back to us, doubting him (19). In the final third of that panel, on the right-hand side of the page, Fawkes is shown walking away, transcending the scene with his advisor, head above the upper panel border, kilt below the lower border. His grandiose thinking is at stake here. In the next page-wide panel, Fawkes walks down the stairs towards the street, quoting something, surrounded by falling leaves. In the next two panels, which occupy the bottom third of the page, Fawkes steps in gum, and then looks up to see rain. He continues his monologue, to the visible amusement of students behind him. It is only raining on him, which seems to emphasize his internal melodrama.

However, on the next page, we see that, in fact, a groundskeeper was using a hose, and thus, like the gum, disrupting the seamlessness of Fawkes's narration of his own life. He continues to narrate in beige text boxes in the next panel, but there is also guidance for the reader from a blue text box, which suggests a soundtrack for this moment, not only a specific song, but a specific second at which to start it. The reader accesses the popular song, and continues to follow the action. Working to “relearn himself,” Fawkes tries to eat a steak, although he is a vegetarian, and ends up vomiting outside the steakhouse (20). Next, he tries listening to pop music, which he clearly doesn't like, which result he could reasonably have predicted. On the next page, as his montage has drawn to a close, he writes in his diary that he “preserved the voiceover track of [his] introspections for future generations” (21). Although his journey was wildly unsuccessful, he maintains the autobiographer's insistence that its having happened is worth something.

Over the course of their forays into experimental autobiography, both Batuman and Fawkes are forced, by virtue of the expansiveness of their autobiographical vision, into new critical positions. Batuman, having transcended internal debates between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, between Russian and Turkish cultural identification, and between charismatic and steady lovers, becomes an autobiographer. Fawkes has just begun the process of reassessing his personal archive of popular culture, but his goal is noble; he wishes to reverse the artificial power he has won for himself by acquiring the vocabulary of high culture, in order to see himself at last on the same playing field as others, particularly Codex.

Section IV: Chris Kraus and A New Genealogy of Women's Experimental Autobiography

Having produced her first book-length autobiographical work, Batuman acquired an identity quite distinct from that of credentialed essayist for *n+1*, the *New Yorker*, and *Harper's*, who happened to be female. Now that her book has been published as a memoir, and even compared to *Eat Pray Love*, she is called on to participate as an invested party in all-women discussion spaces about literature. One such discussion is recorded in *n+1*'s "small book," *No Regrets: Three Discussions*, which is a 2013 follow-up to the contributors' 2007 pamphlet *What We Should Have Known: Two Discussions*, in which a male-dominated group of men and women discuss the failures of their own education. Editor Dayna Tortorici decided to include only women in *No Regrets* because she found that the "should" of the previous pamphlet was specifically gendered. She "wanted to know how these pressures on women as women did or didn't intersect with

their lives as readers, writers, artists, and thinkers; how the *should* that stalk women through life influenced the *should* of what we should have known” (ix).

Batuman’s method of essay writing, showcased throughout *The Possessed*, is informed primarily by cosmopolitan literary criticism. Her criticism becomes ingenious in her final chapter, at which point she works to understand her friendship with her charismatic one-time lover Matej by way of Girard's theory of mimetic desire and Dostoevsky's characterization of Nikolai Vsevolodovich Stavrogin in *Demons*. Based on this essay alone, a reader might be tempted to place Batuman into a genealogy of writers like David Foster Wallace and Don DeLillo, who explore interpersonal dynamics through the machinations of theoretical concepts.³⁷ But in *No Regrets*, in discussion with other contrarian women who have authored similarly complex projects grounded in the life-art balance, like Emily Gould and Astra Taylor, Batuman’s specifically female critical vision becomes clearer.

So, too, does an alternative genealogy of her particular mode of intellectual self-expression. This genealogy is U.S. women-centered, and best exemplified by Chris Kraus, author of one of the boldest works of theory fandom in recent decades, namely, *I Love Dick*. In that autobiographically-inflected work from 1997, Kraus and her then-husband, Semiotext(e) founder Sylvère Lotringer, bring excitement to their marriage by

³⁷ When individuals not considered great novelists take this approach to graduate school, they become the subject of mockery. Gregory Colón Semenza contrasts the “everyman and everywoman” who “manage to do their jobs effectively and without complaining” to the “theory boy or girl” (27-28). He warns that one “should never date them” because they insist, “desire and affection are social constructs” (27). Here Semenza usefully catalogs one aspect of the subculture of graduate school, but without noting the specific gender dynamics that lead to the queer challenge posed to the possibility of scholarly objectivity by the “theory boy or girl.”

developing a shared erotic and epistolary obsession with British semiotician Dick Hebdige, author of *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.³⁸ Tortorici describes *I Love Dick* as belonging to the “secret canon,” the canon that Carla Blumenkranz says “will tell you so much about the microculture you’re in” as a reader, in this case in institutions of higher education (59-60).

Just as *Need More Love* provides insight into the Crumb marriage, which provides the emotional center of the underground comix legacy, *I Love Dick* provides insight into the marriage of intellectuals at the heart of the U.S. subculture of boutique theory aficionados. For example, Kraus tells the story of a dinner party at a friend’s loft with Lotringer and Negri, the celebrity twenty-first-century Marxist theorist. Worrying that all of the major theorists being discussed are men, Kraus interjects:

“What about Christa Wolf?” I asked. (At that moment she was founding a neo-socialist party in Germany.) And all Félix’s guests—the culturally important jewel men, their Parisianally-groomed, mute younger wives just sat and stared. Finally the communist philosopher Negri graciously replied, “Christa Wolf is not an intellectual.” I suddenly became aware of dinner: a bleeding roast, prepared that afternoon by the *bonne femme*, floating at the center of the table. (227)

³⁸ At the end of that 1979 classic theoretical text, in which the author explores the class-grounded semiotics of the punk subculture in Great Britain, Hebdige concedes that theoretical work on subcultures is doomed by its own proximity to the work of definition that creates deviance in the first place. He writes: “We are...producing analyses of popular culture which are themselves anything but popular. We are condemned to a ‘theoretical sociality’ (Barthes 1972) ‘in camera’ to the text – caught between the object and our reading” (139-140). By entering into theoretical sociality with him, in her own way, Kraus ultimately heeds Colebrook’s call to invite women into the philosophical concept of friendship in thought.

It was the night, Kraus writes, that she became a vegetarian. This anecdote comes from a 38-page letter Kraus wrote to Hebdige in 1995, and it appears at the beginning of part 2 of her book, “Every Letter is a Love Letter.” The anecdote, point numbered 8 of 36, is preceded by a description of an “operatic, cinematic moment, everything locked into a single frame that gets you high” that Kraus experienced while she was taking a break from composing her letter (226). The Negri anecdote is followed by a description of “the poet’s right to project himself into another person’s psychic situation” (227). It is by way of such juxtapositions that she reveals herself to Hebdige, her fantasy version of the theorist who fulfills the promises of his liberatory thought in his body, as a person, as well as in prose.

Kraus's influence on Batuman functions differently from, say, Dostoevsky's. Dostoevsky provides her with the central metaphor for her description of the love of reading Russian literature, which is the metaphor of possession, by some force greater than the self, but not exactly another person. That this possession is revealed in her story as being made possible both by literature and the charismatic Matej both connects her perspective to that of Stavrogin's followers in *Demons*, who are taken in by the man's intellectual and moral manipulations, and to Kraus, who is taken in by Hebdige's indescribable appeal, which she sexualizes and converts into a creative testimonial of her own vast desire. Kraus concedes that “fan-dom is an engineered psychosis,” but insists that her Hebdige fandom was inspired by the “singular and private” time they shared (233). Both Kraus and Batuman spend much more time theorizing the intellectual underpinnings of their desires, sexual and artistic, than they do on representing any fulfillment of them. As Kraus describes it, “Reading delivers on the promise that sex

raises but hardly ever can fulfill—getting larger cause you’re entering another person’s language, cadence, heart and mind” (207). Inevitably, the desires illuminated by literature and other people cannot be fulfilled in any one moment or operatic, cinematic experience; rather the point is to follow a path they create toward bodily thinking in the present.

The way to do this is to assemble a genealogy of illuminated desires, and to find their limit. In *The Guild*, for example, Day explores all six stories of the Knights of Good, starting with the character most imbued with the author’s own experience, and then finds the intellectual limits of this circle in the goodness of their motivations for gaming. While Bladezz is immature, Clara flaky, and Zaboo overly forward, the psychological narratives of *The Guild* comics offer reasons for these personality traits, and reveal a sympathetic portrayal of every character. These portrayals allow them all to transcend the social logic that foregrounds their flaws, and offers avenues to creative expression that transcends their weak social positions.

Playing the role of critic, first in bad faith, and then differently, Fawkes reveals a challenge to the idea that gamers are generally good people, who simply overinvest in virtual reality. Acting in bad faith, Fawkes games in order to show intellectual dominance over others, and then, in real life, manipulates people into behaving in particular ways, like sleeping with him, purely as a social experiment. A Stavrogin-like figure to his friends in the Axis, Fawkes is half-formed, just like the Knights of Good in their early characterizations, but without a moral compass. *The Guild: Fawkes* does not explain why he lacks a moral compass, but it shows instead how he gets one, by facing failure, and seeing his own rationalizations fall apart before his eyes. This experience

inspires him to seek a different kind of life, not yet good necessarily, but different from the chaotic, pranking life he has lived thus far.

In this new life, he ends up being helpful to the Knights of Good, because, unlike his undergraduate students, they share a lot of his investments in the overlapping subcultures that constitute the broader sphere of the game. These are represented in season five of the Web series, in which the Knights of Good and Fawkes attend a gaming convention, and participate in various activities proper to their long-arc investments in the game. Vork meets his childhood fantasy woman, Madeline, who played his favorite character on a 1980s science fiction series in which he found his first fandom. Thus, his former lack of sexual interest is converted into an adult relationship, and indeed, one with a beautiful celebrity. Tink reveals her love for out-of-game self-fashioning by unveiling her handmade costume collection, and confronting her family with the information that she plans to be a costume designer rather than a doctor. Bladezz makes money from merchandise related to his second viral marketing campaign, one he made for a fast food restaurant, by his own direction. Clara joins up with a steampunk enthusiast group, where she gets the opportunity to dress up and explore femininity from a new angle, one which gives her a sense of self as an adult woman with an aesthetic of her own, not over-determined by her status as a mother of young children. Zaboo uses his coding skills to create an application for seat-saving at the convention, which gains him the admiration and appreciation of a large community. And finally, Codex's period of unemployment ends when her critiques of a new game extension are overheard by the creator of the game, and he asks him to come work for them. The Knights of Good have found their way, but they cannot be publicly recognized for their shared achievements until Fawkes

uses his pranking skills to help them win the costume contest at the end of the convention. In other words, it is the critic and contrarian who wields his power for good, to bring recognition to the women-centered community that represents one crucial component of the gaming subculture.

This ending does not resolve all the lines of inquiry opened up by *The Guild* comics, of course. By the nature of their medium and experimental spirit, their set of questions could be explored in a vast range of interpretations, and, in a different genre than the comedy Web series, their darker potential could be unleashed. *The Guild's* most visible critics, who are fans, have already explored many of these possibilities. In fan fiction, fan art, and meta essays, fans have expanded, explained, and transformed *The Guild* storyworld, much to the delight of its fan-savvy creator. But fan practices offer no more comprehensive an approach than any particular historicizable critical sphere can offer its object, whether that of Twentieth-Century English-language Russian literary criticism, as it complements Nineteenth-Century Russian literature, or Western Marxism as it complements high modernism. And so, many questions raised by *The Guild* storyworld still exist only as possibilities for potential future readers, who will undoubtedly see aspects of the text illuminated in hindsight that were not available to the series' first audiences.

Just as Batuman and other critics are still asking questions about novels published over a century ago, future readers may find in *The Guild* comics new vantage points from which to understand the many different individual trajectories through contemporary life that overlap in its storyworld. Batuman's particular achievement is to answer one large, conceptual question through Russian literature, in a series of essays about its canonical

texts' illuminations of her own desires. Her question is about the boundary lines around the individual person, masked, as they often are, by arbitrary and ephemeral social hierarchies. Her answer is contained in the articulation of her individual perspective, an impression of which is created at the intersection of women's autobiography, literary criticism, travelogue, and polemic.

The through-line of women's experimental autobiography that I draw throughout this project, connecting *The Guild* comics to a variety of texts, is of course a limited approach to the major conceptual questions raised by each of these examples. One could undoubtedly find much of value to say in an analysis of many the same works by focusing on the history of graphic narrative in particular, or the history of popular and mass psychology, or even a much more long-ranging history of women's autobiographically-inflected writing, which finds connections between Early Modern English Women's polemic and contemporary memoir. That said, the through-line as I describe it in this project, constrained by publishing dates, nation, and gender, reveals a complex web of contemporary articulations of women's desire, women's intellect, and women's contributions to literary culture, from within and from outside.

And so, I argue that Day's vision comes to life in light of its intersections with women's experimental autobiography, in a way that perhaps it wouldn't in structural analogy with, say, the sit com. Equally, I believe that Batuman's contribution to contemporary literature comes to life with particular force when the author is contextualized alongside her counterparts in contemporary women-centered writing subcultures. In this context, her analysis of the male-dominated Russian literary tradition, as well as its complementary English-language critical sphere, reveals itself as

complexly gendered and informed by a particular strand of women's writing. In *I Love Dick*, Kraus articulates a female gaze at the afterlife of male-dominated critical theory, which was embodied in the limpid male intellectual living in the United States in the late 1990s. Like her, Batuman sees through those social phenomena that keep the questions of humanity raised by Russian literature cloistered in old reading practices. It may have been Oprah Winfrey who brought *Anna Karenina* into U.S. women's culture by way of her book club, when she selected a new translation of the classic for its members in 2004, but Batuman brings its most serious questions inside contemporary literature in an entirely different way, by connecting with the sedimented history of experimental women writers.

Section V: Book Clubs, Publisher's Series, and Other Women-Centered Approaches to Contemporary Literature

The difference between Oprah's Book Club and Batuman's work as a literary microcelebrity³⁹ is subtler than it might appear. By creating a new canon of Western literature for her audiences through the book club, Winfrey also breathes new life into established literature by connecting it with contemporary writing. For her, Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature connects to contemporary African American and postcolonial literature, including debut novels and celebrity memoirs. Between 1996 and 2000, four novels by Toni Morrison were chosen for the book club, cementing the author's status as

³⁹ In the words of Alice Marwick and danah boyd, "Micro-celebrity can be understood as a mindset and set of practices in which audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others... 'celebrity' has become a set of circulated strategies and practices that place fame on a continuum, rather than as a bright line that separates individuals" (140).

the nation's best-known African American woman writer.⁴⁰ Winfrey offered all the books she selected to readers as an extension of their engagement with her talk show; if they could extend their empathy to guests on the show, it seemed they could also extend their emotional lives by engaging with literature, in a structured setting that gave them lists of discussion questions and opportunities to connect with one another.

Day created a similar, albeit much smaller-scale version of this phenomenon when she debuted her book club, *Vaginal Fantasy*. *Vaginal Fantasy* began as an offshoot of Day's YouTube channel, *Geek & Sundry*, as an opportunity for Day and three of her friends, also cultural producers, to discuss the flamboyantly heterosexual fantasy romance literature, mostly authored by women, that they like to read in their spare time. They met live on Google Hangouts, and, after the meeting, a full video was retained on YouTube, so that book club audience members could watch it on their own time. As with Oprah's book club, the effect of *Vaginal Fantasy* was viral, and people set up their own clubs in countries around the world, inviting Day to visit their meetings when they knew she would be in their city. *Vaginal Fantasy* is, in a variety of ways, much more contained than Oprah's book club or, as I will discuss, Batuman's coterie. For one thing, members only read genre fiction, and the focus is shamelessly on sex, hence the book club's title. The book club is clearly intended for an intelligent audience, who is Internet-savvy, but nevertheless an audience without significant investment in the broader literary sphere.

⁴⁰ In his 2000 book, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America*, Joe Moran notes that “Morrison’s transformation over the last 20 years into what the *New York Times* calls ‘the nearest thing America has to the national novelist’ has been supported by...critical discussion of her work within the academy...the huge media interest surrounding her Nobel Prize success in 1993...and her promotion on Oprah’s Book Club,” which he describes as “one of the most important innovations in book promotion in the 1990s” (50-51).

They are invested in fantasy narratives across media, if only because all four of the original members of the book club have worked in that industry, whether writing *Star Wars* craft books, like Bonnie Burton, or hosting television segments about gaming, like Veronica Belmont.

Like Winfrey and Day, Kraus took it upon herself to create a new context for contemporary women's writing, but in her case it appeared in the form of a publisher's series,⁴¹ one which would feature her own experimental critical writing. The Semiotext(e) Native Agents series would feature women and queer writers who articulated their critical position at the intersection between high art, especially visual art, where Kraus herself worked, and high theory. Ultimately, Kraus is at least as important for her work promoting and publishing other women writers as she is for her own brilliant literary and artistic achievements. She founded the series, which publishes writers like the lesbian poet Eileen Myles, the punk postmodern feminist Kathy Acker, and the queercore spoken word artist Michelle Tea. This series presents these women writers, along with other queer and trans writers, in an associative web with those texts that were initially the lifeblood of the press, namely those that represent the afterlife of "high theory." In the genealogy established by Semiotext(e), high theory begins in the

⁴¹ In his useful 2011 collection of essays on the history of publisher's series, *The Culture of the Publisher's Series Volume 1: Authors, Publishers and the Shaping of Taste*, John Spiers writes, "The series is one geological accumulation of past lives and cultures..The series has everywhere been a carefully crafted, particularized and instrumental means of publishing" (10-11). He further describes series as "indexes of alternative cultures and of competencies, of a social hierarchy of writers and audiences, and of the social universes...they represent" (11). Finally, he argues that series have "helped to shape the visual aesthetics of commerce in modern culture," which is certainly true of the cool small books released as part of the Native Agents series, and one reason they are such an apt representation of the contemporary cultural boutique (11).

intellectual wing of the 1960s radicals in Europe, especially the French poststructuralists, who were brought to the U.S. readership in large part by the publisher. Describing the Native Agents series in a review of Kraus's *Where Art Belongs*, Elizabeth Gumpert says:

Native Agents sought to recover a different line of feminism, publishing female authors who used what Kraus described as “the same public ‘I’ that gets expressed in these other French theories . . . a personal ‘I’ that is constantly bouncing up against the world—that isn’t just existing for itself.” (3)

The distinction between this complex “I” and the “I” that is presumed in women's literature, usually by misogynists, represents fraught critical terrain. In order to understand what it might look like, the analogy to the French theorists' “I” will be helpful.

Founded by Lotringer as a journal and independent publisher, Semiotext(e) brought thinkers like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to a larger English language readership in the United States, both by publishing translations of their work, and by bringing them, physically, to the United States, so that their readers could experience their intellectual charisma firsthand. It is worth noting that these thinkers, which, collectively, became known as “French theorists” to their U.S. audience, represent a version of “high theory” that is complementary to the Frankfurt School thinkers above, but developed in entirely different circumstances, and met entirely different receptions in the U.S. Both are formative influences for Batuman, I argue, but that has to do with a contemporary fusion of their different histories into a newly all-encompassing sphere of “theory.” To return to the French theorists, Gumpert quotes Foucault on the 1975 Semiotext(e) Schizo-Culture conference that brought him, Deleuze, and Guattari, among

others to Columbia University; he described it as “the last counterculture event of the 60s” (1). If “counterculture” represents, in a romanticized way, the pre-*Simulacra and Simulation* era in which embodied connections still seemed charged with energy, then this historical description seems to make sense.

In any case, the publisher lived on after this high point, which was eventually converted into the heyday of theory fandom in graduate seminars across the United States. Lotringer and his co-editors continued to follow an independent trajectory, inspired primarily by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s rhizomatic thinking of the 1970s.⁴² The Semiotext(e) team located thinkers from various disciplinary spheres, speaking to issues of political importance, which were marginalized in the emerging “arborescent” U.S. academic approaches, which “constricts the assemblage to a particular territory of thought and action” (Wolfe 321). For example, they brought together writers from the Black Power movement and writers from the Italian *autonomia* movement, both of whom offered theoretical innovations grounded in concrete political actions.

Semiotext(e) sought to create an alternative “high” culture, that is, one that rejects the foundationalism of the Western canon, but one deeply invested in critical rigor and authentic attempts to grapple with postmodern reality. The relationship between the field of women's studies and the practices of feminist bookstores is a good analogy for the relationship the U.S. academy had with Semiotext(e) -- undoubtedly complementary, but the latter insisted upon its own organizing principles, which they felt were fundamental to

⁴² Dylan Wolfe argues that rhizomatic thinking provides an “alternative model” to the Twenty-first-century metaphor of the viral, one that “takes technology and the social milieu seriously” (319). Rhizoanalysis enables the critic to see how any given text “territorializes with innumerable and diverse connections, including those relating to the dissemination of the text” (324).

maintaining a bridge between the non-professional thinker and the embedded intellectual. Like the feminist bookstores, Semiotext(e) saw what was not only unavoidable, but maybe even redemptive, in the logic of the marketplace.

Kraus's Native Agents series, an imprint of Semiotext(e), focused the power of the brand on an evolving women-centered coterie of writers, whose work offered depictions of another so-called "line of flight" from the assemblage of high theory and contemporary culture. It was a contrarian and contradictory project, given the misogyny endemic in "theory" and the shifting politics of women's literature.⁴³ Kraus sought to compile those rigorous articulations of first-person female subjectivity that did not fall into clichés of prefabricated women's culture, especially those aspects of it that discourage a critical sensibility surrounding cultural consumption.

In her recent work, Kraus focuses on one particular aspect of the cultural marketplace, specifically, the increasing importance placed on costly academic credentials in the artwork. Unlike Native Agents writers like Eileen Myles, for whom working-class politics were as much a part of her vision as poetry, autobiography, political commentary, and the philosophy of lesbian desire, many contemporary artists seem to have their expansive subjectivity eroded by the credentialization process.

Gumport describes this phenomena, quoting Kraus:

As the lives of artists started to look ever more alike—high school, college,

MFA—they decreased in value. "The artist's own biography doesn't matter much

⁴³ Kraus saw early on what Susan Cheever would later describe as the phenomenon by which women's memoir became "the Barbie of Literary genres. It exaggerates the assets and invites the reader into an intimate alternative world, sometimes complete with a dream house (BR12)."

at all. What life? The blanker the better. The life experience of the artist, if channeled into the artwork, can only impede art's neocorporate, neoconceptual purpose. It is the biography of the *institution* that we want to read." (5)

Batuman's work skirts the edge of this critique. Undoubtedly, her Harvard and Stanford credentials have much to do with her savviness with high culture and high theory, and her legibility to the *n+1* set, who try not to overvalue institutional approval, but locate the outside of it not really at the street or grassroots level, but rather at the merely intellectually dissident. The "merely" only works as a caveat here if the intellectual sphere is presumed to be less significant than, say, the political or social sphere, and the kind of intellectual dissidence the reader finds in Batuman is obviously only one instantiation of a thought process that can be enacted in other spheres, too.

However, in Kraus's view, which is in line with the genealogy of women's experimental autobiography I create in this project, one must locate a creative intersection of multiple spheres in order to articulate individual subjectivity. Batuman does this, but, to the reader seeking the signs of political authenticity or social belonging, almost imperceptibly. One reason her critique is so subtle is that both the sources from which she draws and the writing she creates are entirely prose. Her polemic is against the short story, and so she writes in the more open form of the essay. Her essays describe literature, and other essays, mostly academic essays performing literary criticism. She finds pleasure in words, and she describes it in words. Her work thus requires a reading practice that can appreciate the critique she incorporates into her description of life in academic institutions, and the virtuosity with which she wrestles with different genres of

writing. Such a reading practice requires the vocabulary of the rhizome and the assemblage, and it is thus that the Kraus genealogy can come to be seen as central.

In *The Possessed*, we find the limit of prose as an experimental form. In *Need More Love*, Kominsky-Crumb's varied archive of images and words, photographs, comics, prose sections, and sculptures combine to bring the history of counterculture alive through one vantage point. In *Sex and the Single Girl*, Brown represents a lifestyle oriented around sexual pleasure in two ways; she describes alternatively how she's lived it, and how others might do the same by making the same lifestyle choices, which prescriptions spiraled into her reign over the empire of *Cosmopolitan* magazine as a woman's magazine. Both Kominsky-Crumb and Brown represent themselves as whole, complex individuals, with an independent vision, the evidence of its value being in their shared success at living the way they'd always wished to. Both insist, in a general sense, that women's desires matter, deserve to be articulated, and can be fulfilled. More specifically, both explore a range of promiscuous heterosexual women's desires, and the ways in which these can be met in urban centers of cultural production.

In *Zami*, Lorde writes a black lesbian *bildungsroman* in which postwar American life as a racialized, gendered, and sexualized subject is realized on the scale of the mythical, the poetic, and the micro-historical. Much as Kominsky-Crumb's assemblage of documents makes her "archive of feelings" visible, Lorde's co-articulation of these three spheres of self-fashioning articulates the author's yearning for a form of storytelling that can speak to her experience of the world. In *The High School Chronicles of Ariel Schrag*, the author offers a semi-comprehensive account of her adolescence through comics, which reveal her asymptotic queer approach towards the iconography of

adolescence she has encountered in the mainstream media. Gloeckner, too, uses comics to take ownership of her sexual coming of age, which, marred with abuse, she can only make truly visible by asymptotically approaching the pornographic, which is the limit-case reference point for heterosexual assumptions about the world.

Are You My Mother? takes advantage of author Bechdel's decades of mastery of graphic narrative in order to tell a seemingly untellable story, that of the lesbian artist's complexly-mediated relationship with her mother, a brilliant actress. By making use of the practice that attempts to make everything tellable, namely psychoanalysis, as well as saturating herself in her mother's perspective by recording all of their conversations, Bechdel faces the limits of her own individual perspective. She finally realizes that something external must seal one's perceptions in order to open them for examination by a reader. This "something external" is more arbitrary than, say, the iconography of adolescence that Schrag faced, and by necessity; Bechdel's commitment to women-centered storytelling leaves her with fewer scripts against which to compare her mature experience. Batuman's *The Possessed* asymptotically approaches literature, coming as close as possible to mastering it without ever offering a false impression of having done so. With bravado she shares with Kraus, Batuman lays herself bare before established literature, masochistically accepting its mysteriousness as a perpetual invitation to its enjoyment and rereading. In twenty-first-century women's experimental autobiography, the major task undertaken by the authors is to represent their own mastery of the art of reading well, which grants us access not only to our recent past, in previous generations of women's experimental autobiography, but also to our own increasingly unnavigable sphere of textual production. In the hyper-consumerist, post-feminist bookstore era (and

indeed post-bookstore era), reading itself must be defended, and women's reading and literary cultures in particular.

The Guild comics, including “Beach'd,” depict a world in which fantasy and reality intersect in a way that can strategically be spatially separated into the virtual and real worlds. Like the fantasies of sexual freedom and charismatic mentors (Afrekete for Lorde; Matej for Batuman), the fantasy world of *The Guild* is strategically life-affirming, but temporarily so by definition. Unlike the physical spaces the characters from *The Guild* encounter, like the university for Tink and Fawkes, or the commercial sphere for Bladezz, the game really does allow them a large degree of open-ended self-exploration, as well as a constantly-expanding space to explore and master. Within the holding pattern of their shared gaming addiction, the members of *The Guild* work to postpone or deflect the reductive fantasies imposed on them by others.

Conclusion: The Stakes of Women’s Self-Representation

In her 2014 memoir, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, and So Much More*, Janet Mock articulates the high stakes of being given these kinds of strategic fantasy spaces. As a trans woman, Mock grew up experiencing gender scrutiny and policing from family members, teachers, and classmates, and it was those exceptions, in which friends gave her the space to experience her “fantasy” of womanhood, that Mock became herself. One such “friend” was her television. She was so thoroughly engaged by popular culture that it offered her a name (Janet, from Janet Jackson), a path (attending New York University like the title character from the WB series *Felicity*), and a hairstyle (borrowed from Beyoncé Knowles). Others were individuals, like Mock's friend Makayla, who invited Mock to reject male suitors over the

phone on her behalf, creating a female persona, Keisha, in order to do so. Of the experience, she says, “I let myself inhabit the life of the teenage girl I yearned to be. Talking on the phone was my first bit of storytelling, and Keisha was my heroine” (69). Mock's cousin Mechelle also is open to Mock “playing” Keisha when the two visit the swimming pool together. These fantasy role plays enabled Mock to become both the woman she is today and the self-aware writer, who articulates the complex journey undertaken by so many trans women of color, in a way that it had not been articulated in public before. Fantasy, in this case, represents a simple historical transition between a world unaware of, or hostile to the possibility of trans existence, and a world in which trans women are acknowledged as full and complex individuals.

But history does not always align with brilliant self-fashioning, hence the aesthetic theorist's concept of the avant-garde. Mock represents one point in a several genealogies within U.S. Literature; that of black woman's experimental autobiography, that of LGBT experimental autobiography, and of course, at least since her first profile appeared in *Marie Claire*, women's experimental autobiography. Of the importance of self-definition, Mock says:

Self-definition has been a responsibility I've wholeheartedly taken on as mine. It's never a duty one should outsource. Of this responsibility, writer and poet Audre Lorde said, “If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.” Self-definition and self-determination is about the many varied decisions that we make to compose and journey toward ourselves, about the audacity and strength to proclaim, create, and evolve into

who we know ourselves to be. It's okay if your personal definition is in a constant state of flux as you navigate the world.” (Mock 172)

For Mock, the consequences of other people's fantasies are as tangible as her experience in sex work and pornography, as well as the incredibly high incidence of hate-based violence for trans women of color.⁴⁴ For all of us, the consequences include the gentrification of the mind, as described by Sarah Schulman, and the concomitant loss of our history, even our fairly recent history. When we lose our recent history, we lose some of our ability to connect with one another in the present. An approach to literature that values women's creative ability to connect with one another in an increasingly complex world represents one way to counter this trend.

⁴⁴ Mock writes: “Fortune and luck were the elements separating me from the hundreds of vulnerable women killed every year for being poor, trans, feminine, and of color. I later learned that trans women of color are disproportionately affected by hate violence. In 2012 alone, the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) documented twenty-five homicides of people in the United States who were murdered because of their gender identity and/ or sexual orientation. Thirteen were trans women, all of whom were women of color, comprising an astounding 53 percent of all anti-LGBTQ homicide victims, despite representing only 10.5 percent of survivors who reported incidents of hate violence to NCAVP. These stark statistics point to the disproportionate and deadly impact of hate violence against trans women of color” (214).

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Conclusion

Pseudo-activity is provoked and at the same time condemned to being illusory by the current state of the technical forces of production. Just as personalization offers false consolation for the fact that within the anonymous apparatus the individual does not count anymore, so pseudo-activity deceives about the debilitation of a praxis presupposing a free and autonomous agent that no longer exists. – Theodor Adorno, *Critical Models* (270)

For [these] writers...education is a crossroads where mobility is fraught with the dangers of assimilation even as it offers the potential for new cosmopolitanisms. They use the critical memoir to question school as the only site of education and research and to craft new kinds of knowledge—based on archaic natural history methods, emotional inheritance, impossible archives, and spiritual practices—that acknowledge vulnerability and rupture. They offer forms of knowledge that can move out of the blockages and dispossessions of depression, including the framework of an indigenous epistemology that starts from the question “Whose

traditional land are we on?” The answers involve intimate histories of displacement and loss the acknowledgment of which can become a part of the practice of radical self-possession. – Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2823-2830)

Women’s experimental autobiography has, since the 1960s, offered artful responses to the philosophical problem of agency in contemporary culture, which I articulate simply as “when do I function as something other than a consumer?” Firstly, in response to the problem of representing individual agency in a world that denies its full expression, authors of women’s experimental autobiography have offered avatars, hybrid identities, and vertiginous depictions of the self in conversation with the mother. These tactics enable women writers to foreground mediation without allowing it to eclipse their own insights. Secondly, as a concrete (or praxis-based) response to the problem of living well in a world full of injustice, these authors have offered expatriation, attempts at modern-day asceticism, and participation in transnational feminist alliances.

Autobiography dramatizes the problem of American individuality in the twenty-first-century: how do we manage the forces vying for our attention in a complex media landscape, while still retaining some sense of attachment to the specific places we inhabit and the histories in which we participate? Such an attachment provides the necessary conditions for the communication of our insights to others, in the present and in the complex, non-linear trajectories of queer history. In the digital era depicted in *The Guild* comics, this attachment is depicted in the messy bedrooms of each member of the Knights of Good; the clumsily strewn-about objects therein represent the excesses of

desire and drive that transcend the game as an all-consuming pastime. In *The Guild* comics, the characters creatively and constantly translate the physical world into a digital world, but the leftovers of the former invite the reader into parts of the characters' lives that remain unexpressed. In terms of a critical apparatus to understand this phenomenon, I have not encountered a better model than Adorno's sedimented history, which allows, and, indeed, requires us to face every object we encounter with a serious desire to understand its inner workings, and how those contribute to the damaged life we live today.

Just as Adorno surveyed the landscape of postwar U.S. popular culture, and extrapolated a new philosophy of everyday life from his findings, women writers of autobiography have since the 1960s sought to articulate the expansive visions they derive from their particular experiences. Adorno reminds us to heed the primacy of the cultural objects we encounter; our insights lose their meaning when they are divorced from the encounter that illuminates them. As Ulrich Plass describes, "'the primacy of the object' means that the subject-object relation called the 'experience' is completely free of subjective control over the object—the object does not become detached and objectified" (21). In other words, when we avert our eyes from our computer screens, and reach for an object at our bedside, we must be open to the possibility that the object bears meanings we did not anticipate. In *Notes to Literature*, Adorno describes this phenomenon as it occurs in personal libraries, specifically the "resistance books put up the moment one looks for something special in them: as though they were seeking revenge for the lexical gaze that paws through them looking for individual passages and thereby doing violence to their own autonomous course" (25). *The Guild* comics

represent a sophisticated navigation of the relationship between thinking subject and evolving cultural archive that simultaneously captures the seriousness of Adorno's ethical reasoning and the particular embodiment of contemporary digital life.

The seeds of Adorno's experimental philosophy both flourish within his own philosophical trajectory, and migrate into other cultures of writing, like the outpouring of multi-genre, multi-media, pop-culture-savvy experimental autobiographies produced by women since the 1960s, all of which foreground the living relationship between a thinking, evolving subject and the increasingly complex world she encounters. In the case of *The Guild*, the evolution of this thinking subject is so thoroughly mediated by various forces from popular culture that her very depiction requires a transmedia storytelling practice that can manage multiple visual vocabularies simultaneously. I hope that, in this dissertation, I have demonstrated the fruitfulness of the triangulated encounter between Adorno's prescient theory of popular culture, the history of women's experimental autobiography, and the complex contemporary storyworld of *The Guild*.

In the twenty-first century, experimental philosophy and women's experimental autobiography also comfortably co-exist within the genre of the critical memoir. Saidiya Hartman, citing Benjamin as her friend in thought from the Frankfurt School, explores the sedimented history of her cultural archive in her brilliant scholarly memoir,⁴⁵ *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. In that work, the bulk of which

⁴⁵ Cynthia G. Franklin outlines the "academic memoir movement" in *Academic Lives: Memoir, Cultural Theory, and the University Today*. On the one hand, she argues that we must critique academic memoirs that "[exhibit blind spots] regarding their practitioners' institutional privilege," and turn our attention to those that represent "a wide-reaching humanism that insistently seeks not to transcend, but rather to make use of and transform the academic and other institutions in which we are all unequally located" (2-3). Hartman's work belongs to the latter category in my reading.

takes place during Hartman's travels in contemporary Ghana, the author recalls childhood memories of the Black Power-run summer camp she attended, reflects on emotional moments in which she disappointed her mother as an adolescent, and concocts striking stories inspired by the absent archive of slavery, that is, the absent voices of the vast majority of those who traveled the Middle Passage. On a visit to Asante in South Ghana, she thinks of Benjamin:

“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” writes Walter Benjamin. The spoils and cultural treasures of the victors could not be separated from the lives of the vanquished who were still lying prostrate. This was no less true of Asante than it was of Rome. (213)

Throughout her travels in West Africa, Hartman finds herself thinking as much of her U.S. academic training and the popular culture she grew up with as she does of the absent archive she seeks. This experience of visiting the slave dungeon at Elmina Castle brings her into contact with Phyllis, a local teenager. The encounter dramatizes the sedimented history through which Hartman is trying to sift:

As we moved through the rooms of the fort, she told me that she loved American movies and ran through the list of the films she had seen most recently. Phyllis was delighted to hear that I lived in California and asked me if I'd ever been to Hollywood. When I said no, I could sense her disappointment in me. Her favorite film was *Waiting to Exhale* because the women were beautiful, independent, and had lots of money. She said I reminded her of those women. I knew she intended it as a compliment so I tried to take it as one. When I asked her if she had been in the castle before, she replied she had. She had visited the castle on a class trip and

again on her own. Well, what do you think about what happened here? I asked.

“It’s a sad story what happened to the slaves,” she replied. “We should go to the canteen for lunch.” (117)

In the face of this response, Hartman’s critical task becomes all the more pressing, because she realizes how much cultural weight is attached to her simple presence in that castle, in excess of the overwhelming source of her virtuous inquiry. There is no way outside of time and the task of daily living, represented by Phyllis’s focus on the canteen, and thus, no way to generate the space required to face the absent archive of slavery as an isolated critical question. As a theorist trained in deconstruction, Hartman finds her opening question there, but her subsequent associations sprout everywhere, into the living encounter with her sought-after object that it is her task to depict.

Bich Ming Nguyen turns to the novel to expand the Midwestern Asian American subjectivity she first elucidated in her 2007 memoir, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*. Just as Hartman’s training in theory prepared her insufficiently for the particular tasks required by autobiography, Nguyen’s experience in autobiographical writing led her to pursue the complementary work of critique. Thus, she transforms the particularized experiences recorded in her memoir into the conditions of (im-)possibility for credentialed academic insight. In *Pioneer Girl*, Nguyen explores her childhood obsession with Laura Ingalls Wilder and the *Little House on the Prairie* books through her Vietnamese American protagonist, Lee. At the beginning of the novel, Lee has just finished her PhD at the University of Wisconsin. Having failed to secure academic employment, she must return home to the Chicago suburb where her family lives, so she can live with them, and work at the family restaurant. While at home, Lee discovers the stuff of a literary mystery

among her mother's possessions, namely, a pin that may link Rose Wilder Lane to her own family. The woman who had actually penned much of the *Little House* series had, both in fact, and in the novel, visited Vietnam on assignment during 1965, and Lee wonders if she was the American woman her mother and uncle remember meeting during that time, just before they moved to the Midwestern United States.

As in Hartman's interaction with Phyllis, and as it was in Proust long before that encounter, food is again a central source of the layers of memory and history through which Nguyen's Lee must sift in this novel. On a Wilder-related road trip with her old friend Alex, Lee thinks about the role of the Chinese buffet restaurant in the cultural landscape of Middle America. She relates,

I remembered reading somewhere that the birthplace of American deep-fried cashew chicken was Springfield, Missouri, an hour west of Mansfield. A little shiver went through me, as it usually did when I saw these kinds of restaurants. It felt like a secret, some sort of private knowledge or shame. In grad school, no one I knew would have dreamed of eating at such a place; everyone wanted authentic food, street food, real food, none of this boneless almond chicken bullshit. It still felt embarrassing to admit that, for me, these kinds of buffets had been an authentic American experience. (136-137)

The shame of having her Asian American experience invalidated both by the affected sophistication of her mostly-white peers from the university and by her Vietnamese family is an ongoing source of stress. Lee's U.S. experience has not been adequately represented to her, neither by the gentrified multiculturalist consumption habits of her fellow graduate students, nor by the survival strategies of her immigrant mother. She has

information about both of these social positions, but she is unsure about how to name her own. She feels like she is simply a lesser version of both halves of her Asian American identity. Struggling to define her position, she continues,

In my anxiety dreams I often find myself back in one of those buffets, unable to find entrance or exit. I wake up with the sound of the interstate in my head— cars muffling past, the rush of them, in darkness, going right past us, the drivers missing us entirely with blinks of the eye. That's what I wanted to do, what I wanted to be: the person in the car. The driver driving past. I had come all this way so as not to think about my family, the Lotus Leaf, the way they paired and weighted me with obligation. (137)

Lee wishes she could access the clear, uncluttered critical space, in which she could find the answers to her new mystery, and return to the joyous spirit of inquiry she had had as a child, reading for pleasure. As the driver driving past, she would be free, mobile, and untethered to the unromantic places that seem to trap her. Her critical apparatus, installed by the complex interaction of her graduate education with her childhood memories, requires her to seek out the reasons that the freedom she craves is illusory. In order to come to any kind of satisfying insight, she must work to create a space to see the present critically without giving up on it.

In the present, her major frustration is with Alex, who, as a white man, simply cannot connect with Lee's particular quest, beyond the fact that he is excited to take a road trip with his old friend. Their recently-revived sexual relationship represents a slide into nostalgia rather than a corporealization of mutual understanding in the present. Whereas Alex comfortably embodies the position of the driver driving past, Lee is in

pursuit of answers to a complex human question, which does not allow her to ignore the social context of the phenomena she encounters along the road. She continues,

Mansfield, Missouri, reminded me of how the past will not be banished. So many small, dying, basically dead towns in the Midwest looked like this. Where once-graceful, ornate courthouses and libraries— back when libraries meant something important, something civic— had been, if not torn down or boarded up, converted dozens of times over into shops and offices and apartments and barely surviving historical societies. There might even be the remains of an ambitious opera house. The nicest building in town was likely to be a funeral home. Main Street had been built broad, to accommodate horses, buggies, and hitching posts. And surely local efforts tried to preserve the “historic downtown” area. Surely there were sad little parades on Memorial Day or the Fourth of July. In Mansfield a few local “shoppes” offered “olde-fashioned ice cream” and “sewing notions,” but it looked like most of the money was flowing in and out of the paycheck advance and pawn shops. It was all claustrophobically familiar, but because I didn’t know how to explain this to Alex, didn’t know if our relationship— whatever it was— could sustain that kind of talk, I kept it to myself. Alex had grown up in the suburbs of Northern Virginia, where his point of reference was D.C. and the bustle of power it represented; he’d gone to Urbana-Champaign because his father had. He had no expectation of staying in the middle of the country forever. (140)

The twenty-first-century university was instrumental in validating Alex’s gentrified worldview, in Lee’s understanding, and in making him feel at home in academia.

Describing the location of his prestigious M.F.A. program, she continues:

For the time being, Iowa City, with its multitude of coffee shops, vegetarian restaurants, and boutiques, with its writerly quotes embedded into the sidewalks, was a novelty. The Midwest itself was quaint and charming— two words that, to me, had come to signify a deception that went both ways: while the outsider might deign to peek in, the midwesterner knew the darker isolation that waited behind Victorian facades and re-created soda fountains. As we drove through Mansfield, Alex was startled, then fascinated, by signs that read Communities Against Meth and stores with names like Farm King and Smokes for Less. He had never really lived, and never would, in this kind of waning small town. (140-141)

In this passage, we are offered a glimpse at the constellation of social forces that create the contemporary Midwestern landscape. This is no story of nostalgia, insisting that once things were well-ordered, and now they are in disarray. Rather, there is a long history of disarray and dissatisfaction, which infuses the landscape, and which was actually the substance of Lee's self-recognition in the *Little House* books. Here, literature is the site of both the veil and the lived experience that sees through it, and the official institution of literary criticism, the English department, seems to Lee to be ill-equipped to illuminate this crucial element.

While Hartman seeks her absent archive in the contemporary remnants of the Atlantic slave trade, Nguyen must linger in the contemporary Midwest in order to depict her vision. Kraus, in her autobiographically-inflected 2012 novel, *Summer of Hate*, looks to her intimate history with the U.S. prison system to understand the writing life in the twenty-first century. Like the novel's protagonist, Kraus fell in love with a man who was

sent to prison, and continued their relationship while he was incarcerated, learning much about the system as she struggled to show love to a man whose freedom had been taken from him. The book's title is an intentional reversal of the nostalgic fantasy of the 1960s "Summer of Love," with its fantasies of revolutionary communalism in art (315). In Kraus's understanding, "love" today is most commonly shorthand for "ugly, mutual self-interest. Consumption a deux" (Heti). Truly reciprocal intimacy, that is, friendship in thought, requires autonomous thinking subjects with access to their own sedimented histories. These are taken from us, Kraus argues, both by gentrification and its institutional affiliate, the prison system.

In an interview for *The Believer*, Sheila Heti asks Kraus to describe the reading practices available to subjects of the contemporary culture industry, especially those who are denied representation in its stories. Heti says,

I keep having in my head this image of prisons—the prison of the art world's institutions, the prison you experienced when no one looked you in the eye or said your name, and the imaginative prison of the working class without access to working-class history—

Kraus responds, "Yes. I guess for me the greatest injustice is to see people robbed of that interiority and process of association." She describes the degradation of prison in terms of being taken away from access to the imaginative sphere, and, if one bypasses that, by sheer resilience, then of having the tools of self-fashioning required to actualize it being taken away, too. She continues,

For example, I was given a pen that they give out to inmates at the Greenlee County Jail, in Clifton, Arizona. And it's thinner than a straw. You can't grasp it in your hand. There's no reason, security-wise, for the pen to be this shitty—it just *is*. You would have to hold it like a chisel, and even *then* you could barely write with it.

This prison, metaphorical and actual, is the “outside” of the art world, which is Kraus's domain, hence her need to reach out to its limit. The prison is one “outside” to self-fashioning as I explore it in this project, and it is necessary to describe it, in order to contextualize the archive I have begun to assemble here. For people to find each other, they must also find themselves, and both of these processes are impeded by social forces like gentrification and mass incarceration.⁴⁶

The self-fashioning impulse takes on various forms in various gendered subjects, even when they share a high social status and degree of freedom. An exchange from Emily Gould's novel *Friendship* illustrates the distinction between heterosexual men and women, as it emerges among New York City-based “creatives.” In this conversation, Amy, a writer, is surprised to learn that Jason, a magazine editor, gets endless enjoyment from reading his own work. He says,

⁴⁶ Christopher Glazek co-articulates these two phenomena as follows: “As African American Brooklynites are exported upstate for involvement in petty drug crimes, twenty-somethings reared in prison towns migrate south and reoccupy the same areas vacated by prisoners. Often, of course, the new inhabitants proceed to consume and sell the very same drugs that got the previous tenants into trouble. Since they're white, they do so with impunity.”

“When I do a layout for the magazine, I want to look at it again and again. I’ll wake up in the middle of the night and flip through back issues to lull myself to sleep. It’s like: I exist, I exist, I exist.” Amy grinned. “I do that too, compulsively, but all I ever feel is disgust. Like, I exist, I exist ... ugh.” (167)

In response to her insecurity, Jason tells Amy that he finds her “youthful,” “impressionable” and “unformed,” which she takes as an insult, but also a truthful reflection of her relationship to her own work (168). What he sees as evidence of her incomplete development as an artist, I read instead as part of her striving to keep alive the relationship between herself and the world she encounters. For her, becoming a writer is not an attempt to answer all the questions she has about the world, but rather to articulate the sheer complexity of the web she encounters, so that she can face the present. While Jason takes satisfaction in representing high-class domestic spaces for an upwardly mobile readership, Amy worries that the social position she occupies, that of the downwardly-mobile woman over thirty, is of decreasing interest to any potential readership. The only person who really understands her, her best friend Bev, has recently decided to have a child and quit publishing to work in an upscale baby boutique. Without someone to share it with, Amy worries that her bohemian lifestyle is increasingly out of reach, both financially speaking, in her gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhood, and in terms of the friendship in thought that she fears she has lost. Thus, when she sees her representations of the life she knows in her own work, she feels a sense of disgust, which is also a sense that the life she can put on the page is too “unformed” to achieve the

market recognition of her male counterpart, or her heterosexually successful female friend.

Amy's disgust with her own writing, like Kraus's frustration with the crappy pen, represents the point at which self-fashioning becomes critical. Becoming conscious of our reading practices, that is, the interpretive mechanisms by which we encounter objects in the world, is the first step along the path to Cvetkovich's radical self-possession. The physical and social environments we consciously inhabit form the pre-conditions for our ability to act in the present. In the contemporary cultural landscape, we require more than functioning pens in order to develop these interpretive practices, and thus the media-savvy fan comes to contain some of my utopian desires for contemporary criticism. The media-savvy fan, like Gould's Amy, craves female friendship and readership, but, unlike Amy, she has found a network of women who offer just that. Fandom, especially women-centered media fandom, represents one particular incarnation of the possible formation of the gendered critical individual in conversation with like-minded others. In fandom, one learns to read carefully, paying attention to narrative, medium, genre, questions of cultural representation, and ideology. Because the stream of content available for analysis is constant, so too is fannish criticism, and so it becomes an immersive learning environment.

Fandom also offers endless opportunities for participants to try their hand at new expressive forms. The fan produces long- and short-form responses to the texts she grows to love and hate; she makes art and writes criticism for an invested audience. Through her contributions, her interactions with other fans become more intense. She

finds friends in thought from different cultural backgrounds, different countries, and different educational systems. Each time she does, she arrives at a more expansive understanding of her own history of perception, which she translates onto her fannish persona or avatar. As she starts to inhabit her fannish persona more completely, she develops a fluency in the queer language of virtual friendship. Together, subsets of fans form an anarchic microculture within the broader subculture of fandom – they collaborate on art projects and awareness campaigns, some members meeting in real-life to actualize their friendships and romances. Such encounters transcend, if only temporarily, what is frustrating in encounters like Hartman’s, with Phyllis, Lee’s, with Alex, or Amy’s, with Bev – the lack of a shared, embodied interpretive goal. Although fans certainly disagree on individual points, their shared investment in friendship as a mode of critical development provides the basis for intellectual solidarity.

Given time, fandoms, like all friendships and relationships, fall apart. A new gathering place replaces an old one, leaving some members behind, and longstanding theoretical debates fizzle out into space, given new real-life concerns. Even in an inter-generational community, the young eventually replace the old, the media landscape expands and transforms, and the community takes shape in memory, as one part of each member’s individual worldview. Having seen the possibility of critical and collaborative transmedia storytelling, the fan’s insights enter into the language of the sedimented present, and so, then, do her critiques. Felicia Day is a case study of this transformation as one from fan to author. Day quit playing *World of Warcraft* in order to create *The Guild*, which required critical space and time in which to understand what she had gained from her time as a gaming addict. In *The Guild* comics, Day found a language in which

to represent the “unformed” aspects of the fannish lifestyle as the components of a complex, gendered identity. Allowing oneself to remain unformed in the eyes of the dominant culture functions in *The Guild* comics as a ticket to one’s own subcultural history, one’s own self-understanding, and critical queer self-expression in the present. As Adorno argued during the heyday of counterculture, there is an infinitely progressive aspect to the separation of theory and praxis; then, as now, the drive to serious critical inquiry had to be defended, if thinking bodily was to become possible.

Georgina Kleege offers another particular embodied perspective on the process of coming to insight in a subcultural context in her 1999 book, *Sight Unseen*. Both a scholarly memoir and a contribution to the fields of film theory, visual culture studies, and disability studies, *Sight Unseen* tells the story of Kleege’s “coming out” as blind (5). She describes her approach:

I show first how the weight of negative cultural associations once compelled me to conceal and deny my blindness, and then how a precise examination of my visual experience, free of myth and misconception, has allowed me to accept blindness and acquire the skills of blindness, such as reading braille, as part of a new, blind identity...[s]ome general insight can come from introspection. I also hope to turn the reader's gaze outward, to say not only 'Here's what I see' but also 'Here's what you see,' to show both what's unique and what's universal. I invite the reader to cast a blind eye on both vision and blindness, and to catch a glimpse of sight unseen.” (5)

Kleege reminds us that, whenever we encounter an account of another person’s perceptions, we are invited to notice the gaps in our own. Rather than seeing them as

“unformed,” we come to see our own perspectives as partial. In the context of disability studies, self-fashioning is always critical work, because it reverses the able-bodied assumption that the gaps are to be found and fixed in the disabled subject, rather than in the dominant culture. A book like *Sight Unseen* invites all seeing subjects to reimagine the whole history of our perception, offering us the opportunity to identify our own imaginative potential. This transformative process, if we learn to take it on when we encounter difference, cements our status as voracious readers in the contemporary cultural landscape.

Ruth Ozeki’s 2013 novel, *A Tale For the Time Being*, dramatizes the autobiographical form’s capacity to enable this kind of inquiry. Its central character, Ruth, is working on a memoir about her mother’s final years, which they spent together on a small island off the coast of British Columbia. Ruth and her geologist husband Oliver live on the island, and, while she writes, he works on large-scale public art installations that represent geologic time to an audience accustomed to the rapid pace of life in the twenty-first-century. There are two major relationships in the novel; one, between culture and nature, dramatized by Ruth and Oliver’s marriage, and the other, between women across generations, time, and space, dramatized by Ruth’s relationship with her mother, and also with Nao, a Japanese girl whose diary Ruth finds washed up on the shores of the Pacific.

The world Ruth and Nao inhabit in their reader-writer relationship is a damaged one. It has been damaged by environmental crisis, in the 2011 Fukushima Daichii nuclear disaster; financial crisis, especially the speculation that led to the dot-com bubble of the 1990s, which led to Nao’s father’s unemployment; and of course, historical crisis,

especially, the political instability following September 11, 2001. As Ruth begins to intertwine her life with Nao's, by reading her diary, and trying to piece the other fragments of her life together, she sees all these events in a new light, one united by the two women's shared Japanese-American history. The process of reading Nao's diary brings Ruth into the present, a process that she formalizes by reading only one day's diary installments per day, and thus experiencing time virtually with the girl.

This practice of entering into the present is a spiritual metaphor for both Ruth and Nao, one that is undoubtedly influenced by Ozeki's own status as Zen Buddhist priest. Nao spends a summer at her great-grandmother Jiko's Buddhist convent in the hills, finding refuge from the damning logic of female adolescence in the present-focused practices of the spiritual life. The "outside" Nao encounters is, on the one hand, a rural escape from a media-saturated landscape in Tokyo, but it is also the new state of desiring life, as opposed to suicide, which dominates her thoughts in the city. Her melancholia is inherited from her father, who attempts suicide several times throughout the novel. Nao's desire for life is not robust, even in the hills, but it is fueled by her desire to share her great-grandmother's life's wisdom, in the form of writing, which would be one way to redeem the pain she has suffered from living with her father's instability.

Living attentively in the present by pursuing their questions about one another teaches Ruth, Nao, and their shared reader to honor the women from previous generations who have enabled our contemporary flourishing, and the upcoming generations who will benefit from it, knowing that we can witness only what is before us. And even then, we can only witness what is before us with the help of friends in thought, whether we find them washed up on a beach, assigned in a class, or in the complex media landscape of an

MMORPG. Rather than the superficial solidarity we are asked to find with one another, based on our shared status as consumers of women's culture, we can, with access to our sedimented history, find genuine solidarity based on our shared status as critical readers of the world we inhabit. In theory, that is, in our hard-won truthful insights about the world we share, which can, to paraphrase Adorno in "Resignation," also be thought "in some other place and by other people," we access the happiness of the gendered subject, and begin to think bodily (203).

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