What’s Queer About Comics?

An Lecture for “Queering Comics”

By Jess Whatcott

Assigned reading: “Introduction: Queer About Comics” By Darieck Scott and Ramzi Fawaz (*American Literature*, 90:2, June 2018)

**A very brief history and scope of queer comics** (elaborate more on this in a subsequent lecture)

1. Queer subtext in early comics including The Batman, and Wonder Woman – or at least interpretations of these comics as queer -- contributed to the creation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954 (more on this in a subsequent lecture)
2. Pushed underground during the cultural censorship and “Lavender Scare” of the Cold War, queer comics, graphic narratives, and sequential art have been an important part of queer culture for decades
   1. From the erotic creations of Touko Valio Laaksonen (Tom of Finland), Wimmin’s Comix and Gay Comix, Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist, and Stuck Rubber Baby
   2. DIY comics have been used to communicate information to queer community.
   3. Gay and lesbian publications and the gay and lesbian bookstores that sold them (remember this was pre-internet! to find queer content people went to bookstores) provided a space for groundbreaking queer comics.
      1. For example, the strip Dykes to Watch Out For by Alison Bechdel ran for 25 years and eventually gained a wide and even mainstream audience
3. After changes to the Comics Code Authority, the narrowing of pornography censorship lies, and the end of the Cold War and Lavender Scare, there has been an explosion in using the graphic medium to tell queer and trans stories, memoirs, graphic non-fiction and histories since the 1990s. With the cultural backlash against LGBTQ+ people in the past several years, graphic narratives depicting LGBTQ+ content have come under fire.
   1. For example, Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe has been censored and banned from multiple school districts in the US, due to claims that it contains sexually explicit content. Where does a conversation about sexual and gender identity end and pornography begin?

**“There’s Something Queer About Comics”**

1. Darieck Scott and Ramzi Fawaz argue “There’s something queer about comics,” pointing to long-term themes within all comics (not just explicitly queer comics) that challenge what we call heteronormativity – the normalization of the nuclear biologically related two-different sex parented family with children.
2. As Scott and Fawaz, point out, there is a long history of representations alternative chosen family formations, of homosocial communities, of kink and BDSM (think Wonder Woman), of critiques of domesticity as bliss, and the “sublimation of desire” within the gender roles of the nuclear family.
   1. Wonder Woman as example
3. Using the methodologies of queer studies which pay attention to subtexts of gender, sex, and sexuality, we can queerly “read” comics: Using “Comics themselves [to] ‘queer’ the archive of US culture.”

**Using comics as a medium for queer and trans studies:**

1. Comics are a way to examine the history of queer culture and community, including experiences with suppression in the mid-twentieth century through in the case of comics censorship;
2. Comics are a way to study the shifts in changing understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality; and
3. Comics are a way to learn about how LGBTQ+ communicates and social movements have formed in resistance to oppression, by going underground, using sequential art to convey information, and also fighting above ground by challenging censorship and backlash.
4. Comics are one way to examine the politics of representation of LGBTQ+ lives and experiences and how representation has changed over time. In this class we will examine:
   1. The consequences of the absence of complex queer and trans representation; From stereotyped villains to subtext of queerness under the terms of censorship to the explicitly out of the closet characters in the twenty-first century;
   2. Assessing both the consequences of the absence of complex queer and trans representation, and their simultaneous inescapable presence that becomes obvious through queer readings, the stereotypes that are reproduced when queer and trans people have appeared, and how queer and trans people have subverted and exceeded these narrow representations.
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   4. How queer and trans people have subverted and exceeded these narrow representations.
   5. In addition to a long history of queer comics creation, after some mainstream comics distributors abandoned the Comics Arts Code, mainstream comics have also gone queer in the twenty-first century:
      1. World of Wakanda’s Ayo and Okoye
      2. Angela: Asgard’s Assassin’s Angela and Sera
      3. Bobby/Iceman gets his first kiss in the All New X-Men
         1. What are the politics of these mainstream representations?
         2. How has mainstream representation changed over time, or not changed?
         3. Who is creating these characters and do they represent actual queer and trans lives?
   6. Intersectional analysis of LGBTQ+ Representation. We can use comics to discuss how white people are centered in LGBTQ+ representation and also in scholarship about queer and trans lives.
      1. Which comics are chosen to stand in for all LGBTQ+ comics? Which LGBTQ+ comics are the most studied by comics studies scholars?
      2. This class will introduce you to less well known comics created by LGBTQ+ creators of color. Examples:
         1. Sexile by Jaime Cortez
         2. Snapshots of a Girl by Beldan Sezen
         3. My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness by Nagata Kabi

**Comics as a queer form:**

1. In addition to queer content, Scott and Fawaz provoke us to read Comics as “a distinctly queer mode of cultural production” (199).
2. In addition to analyzing the content of comics, we will examine how the form of comics is queer communication, one that disrupts linear narratives and visually evokes sensations of the body that the written word alone can’t achieve.