Accessibility for Whom?

Teaching Graphic Novels to Represent the Embodied Experiences of Neurodiverse AFAB Intersectional Identities

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Introduction

The novels that a student is exposed to in school play a monumental role in both initial engagement and the overall lasting impact that students feel towards literature and learning. Often, these impactful works contain some element, usually a character, that readers feel they can identify with to some extent. But what happens when readers can't find themselves in the books they study? In such scenarios, students may come to the conclusion that their unique experiences in the world are not as worthy of conversation as others and, in turn, less valuable, or perhaps feel alienated in the false belief that their positionality in society is much less common than it actually is. Not only are these beliefs detrimental to one's self-worth, but this level of disconnect with such novels can lead to an overall disconnect with reading in general when students become overwhelmed by efforts to relate to characters they can't connect with, forming a major accessibility barrier. This barrier is built up even higher when a student has multiple identity facets that are not being adequately represented in the classroom.

As concepts of accessibility and representation have increasingly come to light, topics such as feminist theory have been making their way into more intersectional conversations, and scholars now consider a multitude of identities in conjunction with gender. Like intersectional feminism, neurodiversity[1] has become more prevalent in scholarly discussions and is finally recognized as yet another identity often coinciding with oppressed gender identities. However, this is a relatively new focus of study, and much work still needs to be done, especially in terms of pedagogy. Graphic novels have long been used to engage neurodiverse learners; however, most of this focus has been on cisgender boys. Therefore, I plan to use graphic novels as a way

[1] Harvard Health defines neurodiversity as "the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways." More specifically, "neurodiversity refers to the diversity of all people, but it is often used in the context of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as other neurological or developmental conditions such as ADHD or learning disabilities" (Baumer).

not only to break gendered boundaries in neurodiverse education but also in the comic book community by increasing their usage in differentiated classrooms. Since the aim of my writing is to open up engagement for assigned-female-at-birth neurodiverse learners, it is essential that these students see themselves represented in the work they are consuming.[2] Graphic novels have long made an excellent tool for the differentiated classroom since they rely on both words and images. Unlike the conventional novel, the visuals offered in comics help not only to draw in neurodiverse learners but to add to their overall representation, using images to depict a variety of neurodiverse characters accurately. The combined visual learning benefits with illustrated portrayals of intersectional neuroatypical characters offered in select graphic novels work to provide the most engagement for these underrepresented learners.

Significantly, mental disability is not the sole theme of the works being taught, as it is crucial that representation of neurodiverse women, trans folks, and all genderqueer individuals are portrayed in a way that is inclusive rather than othering. In addition, representation should be depicted not only in the characters studied but also in the books' authors, allowing students to see that they can both live and write the stories. In my thesis, I will focus on how the images in two select graphic novels work to represent and engage neurodiverse readers. The graphic novels in conversation will begin with a classic work often taught in high school classrooms, *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel. It will then address the importance of visuals in a more modern neurodiverse feminist graphic novel, *Delicates* by Brenna Thummler. After discussing the merit and representative analysis of the graphic novels, I will then move into a pedagogical discussion detailing the process of teaching such works with the inclusion of lesson plan examples. An

[2] In her groundbreaking essay, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop addresses the idea that students need to see themselves mirrored in the books they are reading as a form of self-affirmation. While at the same time, children from dominant social groups need books as "windows" to connect with the lives and experiences of others and see "their place as a member of just one group" (Bishop).

important aspect of my thesis to note is language. It is true that "many autistic people and scholars prefer identity-first language,"[3] however, "this is not the case for all disability communities, wherein a lack of person-first language may perpetuate stereotyping and the marginalization of these populations" (Aspler 326). Therefore, I will use both person-first and identity-first language when addressing neurodiversity in conversation with feminist disability studies and the pedagogical benefits of comics.

Integrating Neurodiversity Into Feminist-Disability Studies

In her piece "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," Rosemarie Garland-Thompson raises the fundamental argument that "integrating disability as a category of analysis and a system of representation deepens, expands, and challenges feminist theory" (3). She discusses how frequently both women and disabled individuals are described in a way that insinuates an excess or lack of something. These descriptions work to "police variation and reference a hidden norm from which the bodies of people with disabilities and women are imagined to depart" (7). It is significant to note the constructive nature of such norms. "Constructing Normalcy," by Lennard J. Davis, further elaborates on the ridiculous and arbitrary nature of who we as a society deem as the standard and who we don't by focusing on the construction of normalcy and how it works to dictate meanings of disability. Davis writes that the word 'normal' as 'constituting, conforming to, not deviating or different from, the common type or standard, regular, usual' only enters the English language around 1840." He goes on to discuss how the modern sense of the word "norm" "has only been in use since around 1855," with "normality" and "normalcy" first appearing around 1849 and 1857" (Davis 4). And while the

[3] Identity-first language puts the disability first in a description; for example, "autistic girl." Person-first language refers to putting the individual before the disability; for example, "girl with ADHD."

topic of "normal bodies" and feminist disability studies has since been studied in more depth as of late, not enough emphasis has been placed on mental disability. Much of this is due to the fact that mental disabilities are often less visible. Nonetheless, they heavily impact a person's life due to strict societal constraints on what constitutes appropriate behavior and thought processes. Like the concept of gender and physical disability, neurodiversity has been deemed different from the norm, especially in the last hundred years, which is about how long the notion of the "normal" child has existed, according to sociology professor and scholar Hanna Rosqvist (15). Rosqvist maps out the construction of the "normal child," beginning with early American psychiatrist Aaron Rosanoff, who taught and popularized the idea that "a stable norm existed, and any personality type that deviated from that norm was to a lesser or greater degree pathological." To him, "normal" personalities were categorized by their "inhibition, emotional control, a superior durability of mind, rational balance and nervous stability" (Rosqvist 17). Not only is the idea of a "superior durability of mind" ableist, but the ideas behind it are also biased, leaning more in favor of the neurotypical minds more likely to withstand the capitalist nature of our American society. Many of the qualities Rosanoff refers to as superior and typical are traits that specifically exclude many neurodivergent individuals that often struggle with emotional regulation and stability. These qualities work to the benefit of a capitalist society, which thrives on the notion of product over person. Hannah Simpson is a scholar who has put neurodiversity into the conversation of feminist disability studies and places the topic of neurodiversity into dialogue with the university system and how it "often values its workers, and particularly its precarious graduate and early-career workers, almost entirely on the basis of our productivity, presuming a constantly and perfectly functioning body and mind that will tolerate any demanded workload, any degree of mental or physical stress" (Simpson 81). Such expectations are not just a problem

in our universities and workplace but begin as early as elementary and secondary school, which is why it is so crucial that we address them in our pedagogical studies. Because the world now comes to expect these qualities from the "normal" population and has worked to create systems around them, neurodiversity is a disability in our neurotypical world. Yet, it is not getting the same amount of attention that more visible disabilities get.

When attention is drawn to neurodiversity, it often only takes into account a very particular description, relying heavily on stereotypes and appealing to one specific demographic, cisgender men, usually white and usually upper class. Hannah Simpson writes how "disability and neurodiversity are gendered concerns" since "women with autism, for example, are more likely to be diagnosed later in life than men, and thus do not receive appropriate support mechanisms. In addition, the diagnostic criteria for autism skew toward stereotypical male behavior (81). Like autism, other types of neurological disorders, like ADHD, are less likely to be diagnosed in girls since their behavior may look different from what is stereotyped and, therefore, often expected. Because of the stereotypes associated with maleness, both popular and professional representations often depict autism as such (Aspler 327). Aspler explains that "while individual stories of white autistic and disabled men are indeed important, the collective focus on white men's experiences misses an opportunity to represent the diverse experiences of disabled people" (343). This missed opportunity only adds to society's ignoring of other co-occurring identities that impact one's existence and treatment in society, thus invalidating such multidimensional identities and contributing to their othered experience.

Gendered Notions Behind Graphic Novels

Like the popular gendered perception of neurodiversity, people often have a preconceived notion of graphic novel audiences. Alison Bechdel has stated in an interview with *Rookie Mag* that the reason she started writing comics is because “I didn’t see images of people like us out in the world, and I felt like I needed to see a reflection of myself” (Quoted in Lancaster). If images of girls, especially girls with diverse intersectional identities aren’t readily advertised and taught in the graphic novels assigned then why would these readers feel drawn to comics in the first place? In her study, “Aren’t These Boy’s Books?” Robin A. Moeller tested preconceived notions of graphic novel audiences by teaching comics in a class and gauging student reactions. She notes that in her sample classroom, “the majority of graphic novel readers were male,” and when she “approached different girls in an effort to persuade them to read graphic novels, they would often say, ‘Those are boy books.’” (476-477). More specifically, the most commonly associated identity correlated with graphic novels was what the study participants referred to as a subculture of “nerds.” While nerds have no explicit gender ties, it is essential to note that students in her study “indicated that they held certain subconscious beliefs about nerds— that being that they are male, which implied that the popular perception of the graphic novel reader is, in fact, associated with gender” (480). The stereotype that nerds consist of straight, white, cisgender men is present in many communities, such as the video game industry, computer science and tech-related fields, and, as we see here, communities of comic book fans. No doubt this false stereotype acts as a barrier to further keep girls away from such hobbies or, as insinuated by Moeller, causes them to feel like they should hide their interests for fear of ridicule. Once all study participants were given graphic novel reading as a school assignment, Moeller saw that “rather than affirming the notion that graphic novels are boy books,” the participants in the study “experienced various levels of interest in this sample of graphic novels, depending on the extent to which they

identified with characters from the stories" (479). Of course, more interest in graphic novels would be shown and expected in boys if they were the only group of people being represented in the books. The fact that many other students showed interest in graphic novels once they could view themselves in the stories given to them conveys how representation leads to overall engagement. Unfortunately, too many educators still can't get past these gendered ideas regarding comics, which, as Moeller writes, "seems to continue to limit the educational potential of this format" (483). Such gendered stereotypes about graphic novel consumers continue the unfortunate cycle of educators buying and promoting graphic novels with cis boys in mind, leading to an uneven interest in graphic novels based on gendered expectations.

The Pedagogical Benefits of Graphic Novels

As mentioned previously, the gendered notions of graphic novels limit their educational usage; thus, when graphic novels are used in the classroom as a way of engaging neurodiverse learners, their usage often relies heavily on stereotypes revolving around needing to grab the attention of specific male students who are usually deemed problematic and hard to control. Because of this unfortunate stereotype surrounding graphic novels, their usage is not only limited but also sometimes viewed as work solely for entertainment without scholarly merit, leaving many children without a tool that could positively impact their education. In my thesis, I will show how through visuals, graphic novels can be beneficial to not only the select few students that fit into the very specific societal expectation of neurodivergent children but how they can be used to appeal to and benefit learners with the intersectional identity of both assigned female at birth and neurodivergent. Visual learning has long been thought of as a way to engage a wider variety of learners. "The use of graphic novels within the formal curriculum creates opportunities

for students to engage in practices of media literacy or creating, using, analyzing, and critiquing various forms of media messages" (Moeller 482). Images can convey feelings and experiences we don't always have words to describe. For these reasons, the teaching of graphic novels, in general, can be beneficial to a wide variety of students regardless of their gender or even their status as neurotypical. The reason that specific graphic novels can add to the engagement of learners who are neurodivergent comes from the ability of illustrations to provide embodied representation and relatability. Visuals are able to show the embodiment of neurodiversity and how one interacts with and interprets the world around them through body language, expression, actions, and physical proximity to others. Rosqvist addresses how intersubjectivity can be "further conceptualized by examining the ways a particular individual's embodiment and embeddedness constitute the individual's cognition and experiences in the world." She discusses enactivism, the notion that cognition occurs from multiple interactions between a person and their environment, stating that "an individual's particular embodiment and embeddedness constitutively shape, via experiences in the socio-material world, cognition" (Rosqvist 74). Graphic novels are, therefore, the perfect way to represent neurodivergent individuals by using images of the body to depict neurodivergent experiences and interactions with the world. Images of the body work doubly to provide not only the embodied experiences of neurodivergent individuals but of women and genderqueer students as well.

By teaching works that visually depict the embodied existence of not only marginalized genders and not only neurodivergent folks but combining the two, students who share this multifaceted identity will be able to see themselves in the characters and thus better engage in the material. In Moeller's study, this was evident in a girl's comment toward a graphic novel with all male characters when she stated, "'I didn't really feel any connection to anyone. I just didn't

really care about them'" (Moeller 479). Many novels often focus their representation on stories whose primary focus and plot revolve around a specific gender or neurodivergent identity, usually falling into the overworked and stereotyped "overcoming" narrative. Examples of this are seen in stories where a character's entire experience revolves around their inability to cope in some way due to their disability, which they then must overcome. This type of story closely relates to the ideology of cure, which insinuates that a disabled person cannot be complete unless the disability is treated. Garland-Thompson addresses how this "emphasis on cure reduces the cultural tolerance for human variation and vulnerability by locating disability in bodies imagined as flawed rather than social systems in need of fixing" (Garland-Thompson 14). Since our exclusionary societal structures are the problem rather than the individuals who don't fit into them, depictions of neurodivergent individuals should not be shown in an overcoming or curing narrative but should be embraced and represented in a way that any other character would be, as a part of the story rather than the story itself. Graphic novels work particularly well to accomplish this because they can use images to depict a character's embodied experience without making it the story's sole focus.

It's also essential to note misrepresentations of neurodivergence. While his article focuses primarily on television, John Aspler brings up the point that "Scholars studying media representations of disablement have identified problematic narrative tropes and stereotypes associated with disability, including the victim, villain, hero, and fool (Barnes, 1992; Darke, 1998; Worrell, 2018)," which can be applied to any storytelling medium, including graphic novels (Aspler 324). So, while more representation is emerging, it is not necessarily accurate. Aspler goes on to explain how representations that explore "nuanced intersections of disability," like the identity of girls and neuroatypicality, are required to promote change and access.

Examples of positive representation include "highlighting the agency of disabled people, centering their strengths, and representing solutions to access barriers, all of which promote social justice by imagining inclusive fictional worlds that can inspire change in the real world" (Aspler 343).

1. Visual Embodiments of Neurodiverse AFAB Identities in *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is a perfect example of a graphic novel that can provide representation and more student engagement in the classroom. First published in 2006, *Fun Home* is a critically acclaimed and newly classic graphic memoir that has been taught in high school and college classrooms for years now. *Fun Home* recounts the coming-of-age events in Bechdel's life as a neurodiverse adolescent lesbian coming to terms with her sexuality and her father's suicide. Bechdel's graphic memoir was revolutionary to the world of comics, opening up the graphic novel community to new and diverse voices seldom received with such popularity and positive reader reception. While *Fun Home* engages readers in many ways, making it a great work to teach, my studies will focus specifically on visual depictions of Bechdel's embodied experience as a neurodivergent woman. While this paper focuses primarily on the intersectionality of neurodiversity and AFAB[4] individuals, it goes without saying that sexuality plays a crucial role in this story, adding yet another oppressed identity into the equation, which I will discuss in more detail at the end of this essay. However, given the primary focus of this paper, I will be examining specifically Alison's unique positionality in her society growing up as both a girl and neurodivergent and how the visual nature of her graphic memoir allows readers to share in her embodiment.

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[4] Assigned Female At Birth

Alison Bechdel's gendered experience in *Fun Home* plays a crucial role in her coming-of-age story. Though focusing on Italian comics specifically, Professor Barbara Grüning makes the important observation regarding embodiment and graphic novels that "the way that women's bodies are spatialized in comics reflects social constructions of gender at given historical moments" (Grüning 115). *Fun Home* is full of instances in which Alison struggles to position herself in society due to her disdain for traditional norms and expectations of girls. An early example is when Alison is given pink floral wallpaper for her room. Alison's body language shows readers how much she hates it before words can. She creates a distance between her body and the wallpaper, holding it out as if it were diseased (Bechdel 7). A few pages later, Bechdel depicts her obvious discomfort at being forced to wear a frilly dress. The physical proximity between Alison's arms and the dress on her body is quite notable, as her arms are outstretched as far from the dress as possible. The fingers on her hands are unnaturally splayed, and her legs are spread as if her entire body seeks to break away from the outfit. Wanting Alison to change the top under her dress to one that is more colorful and classy, Alison's father stares at her with a stern face while pointing accusingly. His pointed hand is large and centered in the panel, ensuring readers know there will be consequences if Alison does not choose to wear the traditionally feminine outfit (Bechdel 15; see figure 1).

Bechdel pg. 15; Figure 1

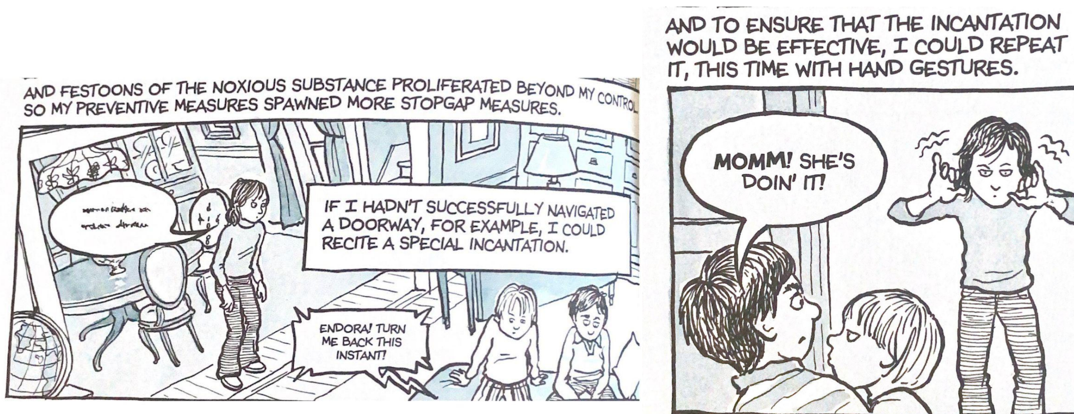
Each one of these specifically gendered instances is significant because they remind readers not only of gender constructs but depict gender constructs as a crucial part of the embodied experiences of those that they negatively impact. Scholar and graphic novel expert Hillary Chute writes, “comics call attention to what we as readers ‘see’ and don’t see of the girl at the book’s center” (Chute 302). While Bechdel could simply write about her discomfort, drawing her physical form in such a way allows readers to quickly visualize and embody her feelings in a way that a few words could not as fully express. In contrast, Alison’s positionality is depicted in a way that shows enthusiastic awe when staring up at a rifleman on television who is bearing a gun, cowboy hat, and stoic expression. Rather than positioning herself away from the TV, Alison leans in closer, slack jawed and wide-eyed (Bechdel 95). This intimacy between girl and image accurately embodies how it feels to admire and long for something, in this case, the masculine aesthetic rather than the man himself. As Alison ages and starts puberty, the illustrations in *Fun Home* successfully convey the shame put on women’s bodies by society. While experiencing one of her first periods, Alison is drawn sitting with her head hanging low, held up by her hand on her face. The position of Alison’s hand covering part of her face conveys her immense distress and a sense of shame. Significantly, this panel begins right after one of her mother’s plays, in which two actors speak about women, men, and tragedy (Bechdel 168; see figure 2). Young Bechdel’s visual humiliation

Bechdel, pg. 168; Figure 2

allows readers to take on her shame, potentially eliciting a new degree of empathy and understanding from students who have not personally dealt with such experiences.

As mentioned previously, the images in graphic novels have the power to embody not only gendered experiences in our culture but disabled experiences as well, my focus being on those that are neurodevelopmentally disabled and thus less instantly visible in society. Scholar Radmila Lale Stefkova explains that the graphic novel medium "can depict invisible challenges through extralinguistic expression and communication" (Stefkova 170). This is accomplished by putting emphasis on physical distance between characters and material objects and through a character's body language and placement. Bechdel depicts such invisible changes concerning her own OCD, as a significant portion of *Fun Home* details the struggle of both Alison's father and herself with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. According to the DSM-5, OCD is characterized by "recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges or images that are experienced as intrusive and unwanted," as well as compulsions, defined as "repetitive behaviors or mental acts that an individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession or according to rules that must be applied rigidly" (Obsessive). It should be noted that OCD manifests differently for each individual and that this definition is very loose. Hillary Chute writes, "stories about illness and disability use the show-and-tell aspect of comics so basic to its hybrid form to reveal hard-to-convey truths about sickness or ability" (Chute 240). The show-not-tell method is used in *Fun Home* to depict Alison's Obsessive Compulsive Disorder through spatiality in the novel. And while Alison does come right out and tell readers about her OCD, the visual images depicting her physical presence in the world around her do far more in terms of conveying emotion and mental anguish. In fact, a significant element of Bechdel's OCD "is in part about the location of her body in space" (Chute 253). For instance, young Alison has to physically utter

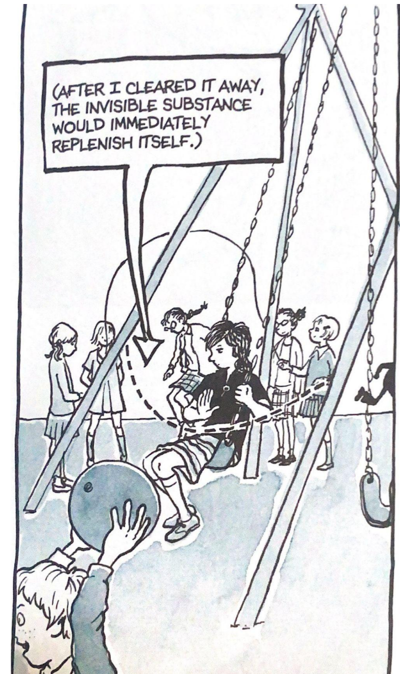
what she refers to as incantations whenever she is about to cross through a doorway (136). The inner turmoil she feels when having to repeat such compulsions is seen in illustrations, such as on page 137. When Alison has to put her clothes on for a third time in the morning, the positionality of her hand covers part of her face, once again conveying both shame and frustration. Her eyes are tightly screwed shut, allowing readers to see her longing to escape her situation. Alison's interactions with her brothers also convey her unique spatiality in the household. When performing a doorway compulsion, Alison's brothers become frustrated. With annoyed expressions, they call out to their mother to make Alison stop (Bechdel 136; see figure 3). In the panels, the two brothers are positioned close together while Alison is off by herself.



Bechdel, pg. 136; Figure 3

This separation implies not only the inability of Alison's brothers to accept her neurodivergent behavior but the isolation that results from it. Stefkova addresses this unique embodied experience depicted through Bechdel's drawing, writing that "by emphasizing the bodily, gestural, and spatial, visual narrative questions the use of traditional discursive forms that surround neurological diversity" (Stefkova 172). Indeed, the graphic novel allows readers to visualize and feel such identity isolation that often accompanies being neurodivergent in a neurotypical world to a different degree from traditional narrative forms. Distanced spatiality is again shown in Alison's correspondence with school peers. In the midst of discussing her OCD,

readers see her on the playground surrounded by her peers. While the other children play together on either side of her, Alison sits alone on the swings. She is centered in the panel to draw attention to her isolation and downcast expression, emphasizing her loneliness and perceived otherness (Bechdel 137, see figure 4). However, while this panel takes place in the middle of Alison's recollection of her childhood OCD, it is entirely possible this distance could also come from her interests in socially unconventional things for a girl. I argue that it is likely a combination of both. It is, in fact, the intersectional identity of being a girl while also being neurodivergent that acts to create the unique and, at times, isolated experience embodied in Bechdel's visual depictions of herself.



Bechdel, pg.137; Figure 4

Alison Bechdel uses the positionality of visuals in *Fun Home* as a method of embodying her experiences and multifaceted identity not only in her spatiality to other individuals but in relation to material items as well. Alison's hand is often shown in panels holding up an image or article or writing a journal entry. When discussing these instances, Robyn Warhol explains how "the materiality implied by those images works together with other features of the text to give *Fun Home* an aura of embodiment that distinguishes it from prose autobiography" (Warhol 6). With Alison's hand in the frame, readers are reminded of Bechdel's presence and that the depicted experiences are real. Author Zainab Younus writes that "for the reader, this implies a way to address the gaps in knowledge not only for them but also for Bechdel herself, making the reader a participant observer of the memories within the narrative and not one who is always standing outside it" (Younus 19). By connecting readers to

Bechdel's experiences in this way, more than just simple observation, readers become part of the conversation and see themselves more fully in Bechdel's experiences. Warhol points out that by having Alison Bechdel's hand bleeding off the page, she can "imitate the reader's own hand holding the book" (Warhol 40). By embodying her book in such a way as to replicate the reader's hand, Bechdel further increases the connection between her experience and those reading it.

Fun Home's success at embodying Bechdel's intersectional identity is even present when images aren't. Regarding the blank space between panels, Bechdel has said, "What I loved about cartooning was what I had learned from Charles Addams, that the space between the image and the words was a powerful thing if you could figure out how to work with it" (Quoted in Warhol, 2). Bechdel's use of blank space is powerful because it works to signify what is too big to be said, and as Warhol states, presenting itself as a solution for this inadequacy of words or even images "to the task of representation of the self" (Warhol 8). On page 138 of *Fun Home*, Alison is reading about OCD while panels depicting a series of other events in the house take place around her. This blank space is significant because it causes the small panel of Alison reading to be separate from the panel of the text itself and her interactions with her family, illustrating how internalized and isolated her experience is. I believe the blank spaces between these panels are also significant because they represent the isolation that comes from having an oppressed identity and the lack of conversation around it. The space is blank because there is no place in our patriarchal neurotypical society for people who don't follow its identity rules. It embodies an emptiness that is both scary and lonely, allowing readers to feel the discomfort that comes from being stuck in such a place.

In *Fun Home,* the characters are "the embodiment of not only real figures but also of Bechdel's memory of her own history, and that of her family" (Younus 24), demonstrating that

narratives of gender and neurodivergence cannot be generalized into one experience or story and like other identities are unique to each individual. By adding Bechdel's voice and visual embodiment of her experience and other neurodiverse AFAB authors and characters, students who resonate with these identities will feel seen. And while we must teach enough of these narratives to represent such intersectional identities, it is equally important that students who do not share the same identity read about them in order to embody the lives of those different from them in such a way that can reduce othering by increasing understanding.

2. Visual Embodiments in Brenna Thummler's *Delicates*

Like the classic graphic narrative *Fun Home*, the newly released *Delicates* (2021) by Brenna Thummler features a main character who fits into the intersectional identity of assigned female-at-birth and neurodivergent. *Delicates* is a sequel to the Barnes and Noble Best Book of 2018 award-winning young adult graphic novel *Sheets*. While *Delicates* brings back two main characters, Marjorie and her specter friend Wendall, and further explores many of *Sheets'* themes of grief, friendship, and coming of age, it also tells a new chapter in Marjorie's life that can be read either as a continuation or a stand-alone novel.[5] Thummler is well known in the graphic novel community for her work in young adult comics. And while her work is not autobiographical as Bechdel's is, her ability to draw on her own experiences to address mental health and adolescence in her characters make their experiences both believable and relatable. The primary purpose of using *Delicates* as an example of a teachable graphic novel offering feminist and neurodivergent representation has to do with the introduction of a new central character, Eliza. After doing some detailed analysis and finding close connections as someone

[5] While *Delicates* can be read as a standalone novel, I highly recommend also reading *Sheets*. It is an equally fantastic novel that will help with the understanding and development of central characters.

who is on the autism spectrum myself, I reached out to Brenna Thummler through social media to inquire about whether or not Eliza is neurodivergent. To my surprise, Thummler responded, telling me that yes, she did, in fact, write Eliza to be neurodivergent and that she is "unofficially on the spectrum," and that while Thummler herself is not autistic, she does have close friends and family members on the spectrum who she has been able to draw from. Thummler wrote that her decision not to outwardly label Eliza was purposeful and important to her. This decision stood out as significant because it ensures that readers do not go into the story with preconceived and stereotypical assumptions about Eliza and that her whole personality and character are not dependent on her being autistic. Yet, by depicting visually AFAB and autistic traits, Thummler is representing and normalizing this intersectional identity while also encouraging other readers to think about how they perceive and react to such differences without promoting any ideas of a "cure" or overcoming narrative that is often seen in stories about autistic characters.

The visuals in *Delicates* represent Eliza and Marjorie's distinct struggles and embodied coming-of-age experiences as girls. Marjorie, for instance, feels like she must compete with her "former nemesis" and current friend, Tessi, for the attention of a boy named Colton, who is stringing both of them along. This idea that women must compete for the attention of a man is nothing new and often contributes to much of the "mean girl" bullying behavior seen in secondary school and depicted in both *Sheets* and *Delicates*. Dr. Maria Victoria Carrera-Fernández writes that "bullying is a strongly gendered phenomenon" and that it "constitutes another way of performing or doing gender and a heteronormative control practice(s)." She discusses how it often involves "imitating and reproducing gender norms and punishing those who transgress them" (356-357). Marjorie experiences judgment from Tessi despite being friends when they are at the pool with a group of friends, and Tessi draws attention

to the fact that Marjorie isn't wearing a bikini. The image shows both girls from behind sitting down at a beach table, but one can see that Tessi is positioned with her head tilted and looking down at Marjorie's body, indicating judgment while stating, "We really have to get you a bikini," further conveying that there is something wrong with Marjorie that needs to be fixed (23). Tessi's body language as she condescendingly looks down on Marjorie is shown in almost every one of her interactions with Eliza. Eliza's special interests do not align with gendered stereotypes of what girls are expected to enjoy. She is uninterested in attending a conventional school dance and instead proposes that they center the dance around the theme of ghosts. Her choice of dress is also unconventional. In almost every panel, except for when Eliza is at home, she wears a baseball cap. While this fashion choice initially seems minor, it heavily contrasts the chosen styles of the other girls depicted at Eliza and Marjorie's school, who are seen with their hair styled down and long or in barrettes and high ponytails. Instead of dressing in traditional "cutesy" fashion on Halloween, she dons a head-to-toe Ghostbuster costume. The reaction to this decision becomes evident when Tessi questions Marjorie, "uhh, what is she doing here?" She then arches her eyebrows and crosses her arms, further creating a physical barrier between herself and Eliza (171; see figure 5). Such societal judgment around girls' bodies and how they dress impacts their treatment and perceived worth. By emphasizing the physical body and its positionality among society in visuals, Thummler accurately depicts isolating and uncomfortable experiences that come with embodying an AFAB identity in a way that words alone cannot.

Thummler, pg. 171; Figure 5

While Eliza and Marjorie both have struggles they face as girls coming of age in our society, their neurological differences play a significant role in their treatment and ability to fit in at school. While Marjorie initially struggles with fitting in, her eventual acceptance is much easier than Eliza's. Like Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, discussed above, and other types of neurodivergence, autism is not as visually apparent as a physical disability might be. Often, people are even encouraged to "mask" or hide their autistic traits from a very early age. Despite this initial invisibility, someone's autistic traits will eventually become apparent in some way to their peers, friends, teachers, or family, regardless of how that behavior will then be perceived. Ya‐Chih Chang writes that ASD impacts an individual's executive functioning, social communication, and behavior. Common traits include "difficulty with communication and interaction with other people, restricted interests and repetitive patterns of behavior" (256). While this broad definition explains some common traits of autism, it certainly doesn't cover all of the extensive autistic attributes a person can have. It's also important to note that, like with other neurodivergences, autism is not clear cut and affects people in various ways. Paula Corscadden and Ann Marie Casserly write about ASD in girls in particular. They focus on recent studies and note that girls are often left out of autism discussions because of the societal pressure they feel to "mask." Their study "highlights that autism traits in younger girls may be more subtle and hence, they are socially accepted. However, as girls mature, these traits are less subtle, and increased masking is apparent as girls struggle to keep up with the social ability of their peers" (Corscadden 26). Regardless of one's tendency to mask or not, when these autistic traits do show up in various social situations, an autistic individual will often then be perceived as different in some way. The impact of this change of perception can vary greatly, but can and often does result in bullying of some kind, especially in early to late adolescence. In fact,

"research suggests that bullying victimization occurs at higher rates among students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) than among their typically-developing peers" (Matthias). *Delicates* conveys many examples of such bullying through the persistent ridicule of Eliza from Tessi and other peers at their school. Due to differences in social development, Eliza doesn't always act in ways that are considered "socially appropriate." For instance, she does not think twice about

Thummler, pg. 63-64; Figure 6

revealing to Tessi and her friends that she wears a pin "to protect against evil spirits" or to reveal her ghostly theory regarding the visible blurs captured with her camera (Thummler 63-64, see figure 6). This specific revelation leads to the smirking face of Tessi following the departure of the students in Eliza's general vicinity, an instance that we see happen multiple times throughout the novel.

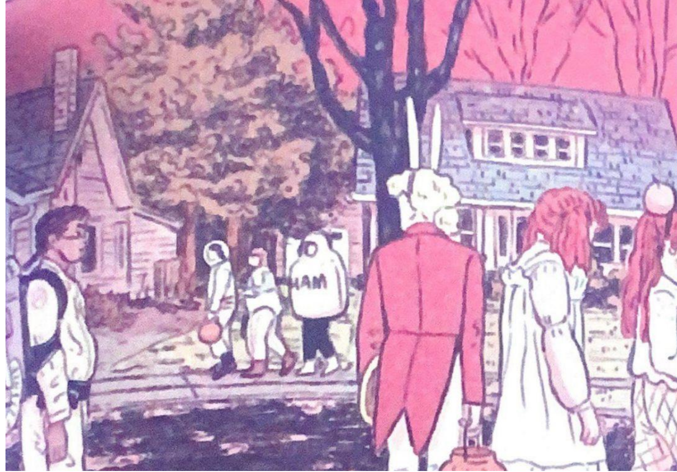
A higher rate of bullying, both subtle and more overt, that readers see in Eliza's case reflects the higher rate of bullying experienced by autistic individuals in general. Such bullying adds more challenges to the already existing struggles that an autistic person faces from living as a neurodivergent individual in a world built around neurotypicality. LaVelle Matthias informs readers that the impact of such bullying often leads to the victim being "more likely to experience both physical and mental health problems," such as depression, traumatic stress, and

suicidal ideation (Matthias). *Delicates* also represents this struggle when readers learn of Eliza's suicidal ideation. After extensive bullying from Tessi and her entourage, Marjorie and Wendell find notes left behind by Eliza conveying her suicidal ideation, contemplating, "Is it still a life when you're a ghost?" (Thummler 250; see figure 7). Due to this increased risk of mental health problems and suicide, it thus becomes even more pressing that autism is being addressed and represented accurately in the classroom in a way that helps autistic students feel understood, and that also encourages peers and potential bullies to think about how they interact with others. Unfortunately, since so many of the struggles an autistic person faces are not always visible, it becomes challenging to do so. Radmila Lale Stefkova writes about how comics can "depict the invisible challenges produced by autism and depression as experiences which cannot be easily verbalized and are more accessible through corporal gestures, spatial relationships, and tactile interaction with the physical environment" (Stefkova 164).

Thummler, pg. 250; Figure 7

As seen in the discussion of *Fun Home*, spatiality is a technique unique to graphic novels that, like Bechdel, Thummler also uses in *Delicates* when portraying Eliza's autistic experience. Stefkova writes, "multi-modality serves to position the autistic individual in time, in space, and through spatial relationships and to define their position within their family and society" (Stefkova 169). As demonstrated in the examples above, readers can view more subtle signs of bullying through visuals in the positionality between Eliza and her peers throughout the novel in instances where students are first seated together. Then readers see students move away when

Eliza shows up, creating a physical barrier between them. When Eliza is allowed to participate in group activities, like on Halloween, she is positioned further away from everyone. At the same time, all of the other kids are gathered close together in a tight-knit group (Thummler, 174; see figure 8). In a class setting where students are forced to be together, Eliza is depicted on the gym bleachers among other students. She sits uncomfortably with her arms crossed protectively around her midsection while the girls beside her shift their bodies in the opposite direction and refuse even to look her way (Thummler, 130). Barbara Grüning writes that "in the diegetic world of the graphic narrative, a woman's body interacts in an external world with other bodies by simultaneously displaying women's social status, cultural and erotic capital" (Grüning 116). By allowing readers to visually note the physical spaces created between Eliza and her peers, one can infer that her social status is not high. While part of this has to do with her experience as a girl refusing to act in conventional ways, it also has much to do with her autism, as well as her race, as she is clearly one of the few Black students at her school. The distance between Eliza and her peers further emphasizes her positionality as an "other" and allows readers to better experience and understand the isolation that she is going through.



Thummler, pg. 174; Figure 8

Similarly, readers get an idea of Eliza's embodied experience through the positionality of her own body in relation to itself and the material objects around her. Just how Alison Bechdel chooses to include her hand in specific *Fun Home* visuals, Brenna Thummler draws particular

attention to the spatiality of Eliza's hands, especially in relation to her camera and film. Eliza's grandfather explicitly states that her camera is used to capture the world in the way that she sees it. (229). On the front cover of the novel, the camera is in center view with Eliza's hands wrapped around it, obscuring her face and background and allowing readers to know not only that her way of viewing the world is different from others but that she has agency in what elements of it that she chooses to depict (Thummler; see figure 9). In this way, "the body is transformed into a visual tool" (Stefkova 167). By drawing attention to Eliza's hands, Thummler is also drawing attention to the readers' own hands, making them a part of the conversation and reminding actual readers of their own embodiment (Warhol 7). In connecting readers' own embodied experience with that of Eliza, individuals whose identity experiences are different from Eliza's can empathize with her to a higher degree and contemplate the role they could have in that of Eliza's and other neurodivergent girls' lives.

Thummler, cover of Delicates; Figure 9

Often commented upon is the graphic novel's ability to convey intense emotions that might otherwise be hard to describe. It is common for autistic individuals to struggle with identifying emotions with words. "Comics can make visible both external features of a condition, and internal, cognitive and emotional features that are otherwise hard to communicate accurately" (Chute 243). Such subtle visibility is conveyed not only through facial expressions and words, but the physical positionality of the body both in terms of body language and physical space. By using physical space to interrupt and combine words with powerful images, these complex emotions are, therefore, more likely to show through the cracks in wording and

resonate with autistic students while allowing for non-autistic individuals to better experience second-hand what Eliza is going through. For example, after explaining her photography to the other students in her class, her peers are shown whispering and making fun of her together. The page uses space between panels to offer insight into how Eliza feels at this moment. The first panel of the page depicts Eliza's face looking down in the corner, while at the other end of the panel, a speech bubble is shown of her classmate's conversation. Positioned beside this panel is another where Eliza's body faces away from her peers, but her head turns around to listen. The two largest panels given the most space on the page are one in which Eliza's classmates sit at a table laughing at her and then one where Eliza's feet are shown under the table, anxiously

Thummler, pg. 71; Figure 10

rubbing together and conveying her discomfort (Thummler, 71; see figure 10). The amount of space given to these two panels signifies their significance in the situation and further allows the reader to feel more invested in those moments and better understand and experience Eliza's emotions at this moment. In another instance, when Tessi confronts Eliza about taking an embarrassing photo of her, a panel is seen where Tessi and Eliza speak about the photo. After, the comic moves to a panel of Eliza's photograph front and center framed only by Tessi's hand holding it and tearing it straight through the middle with only the word "rrrripppp" as the photo tears. By emphasizing the tearing apart of Eliza's work in such a way, readers can fully understand the impact of this moment (213). In "Voiceless Bodies," Stefkova writes that "a comics narrative can multiply emotions across its characters and space"

and emphasizes “empathy without language” (Stefkova 170). Though the only part of a physical body present in this panel is part of Tessi’s hands holding the torn photograph, the amount of space dedicated to the photograph and centering of it being torn emphasizes how large the emotions are associated with this action, as well as Tessi’s physical accountability.

Because Eliza's embodied experience in the world around her is impacted by both her gender identity, autism, and race, her struggles are different from individuals who exist in only one of these categories, both of which are only just recently beginning to get the representation that they deserve independently. Like Bechdel with *Fun Home*, Brenna Thummler uses the unique format of the graphic novel to show this often-overlooked intersectional identity of girl and neurodivergent accurately through the positionality of characters in relation to one another and the embodied self in addition to the positionality of physical space between words, images, and the page. The technique allows Thummler to represent this intersectional identity without having to come out and state it explicitly. On the topic of intersectionality, John Aspler writes, “Autistic scholars, artists, and self-advocates have called for greater diversity in the portrayal of autistic experiences, including the perspectives of autistic people of colour, women, and non-binary folk” (Aspler 327). While this paper focuses on the experiences of neurodivergent women, it is essential to again note that Eliza is also a woman of color, something I will explore in more detail towards the end of this essay and that further emphasizes the need for the representation of multiple experiences and intersectional identities.

Pedagogy in Practice

After exploring the literary merit of *Fun Home* and *Delicates* and how their visuals work to convey the embodied intersectional neurodivegent AFAB experience, I will now discuss the

importance of enacting a pedagogy around them and how to go about doing so. Graphic novels have long been acknowledged for their ability to engage young readers who may initially be uninterested in reading. This revelation is especially beneficial to neurodiverse learners who, due to having classrooms typically catering to neurotypical minds, may experience various concentration issues. For instance, in *Keywords for Comic Studies*, Scott Bukatman writes that "the world of the comic is immediately available" (103). It is true that the minimal text combined with engaging images sparks a student's interest, and elements such as color draw the reader in and allow them to know more about what they are getting into before reading. However, there are more subtle elements to a graphic novel that warrant further study and are not "immediately" visible at first glance, mimicking and embodying what it is like to exist as a neurodivergent individual in a neurotypical world; what you see at first glance isn't all that is there. By focusing specifically on the physical embodiment an identity takes in the space around it, readers can draw such conclusions between themselves and the characters in the work they consume.

Studies also show that with neurodivergences such as autism, students have an easier time engaging with a text if the topic interests them (Chang 257). I believe this phenomenon could be true for many readers, though to varying degrees. While the particular coming-of-age stories of Alison and Eliza may not be of special interest to a neurodivergent reader, students will have more interest in a story if they feel they can relate to the characters they are reading about since "children must identify with characters in some fashion to find them meaningful" (Moeller 477). It is a tremendously important job of an educator not only to engage students but to share the stories and experiences of people they can directly identify with to some degree, as continuously trying to identify with neurotypical characters can be exhausting. As previously mentioned, this representation is not only integral to the education of neuro-minority identities

but to students who don't share these identities to generate a greater amount of understanding and connectivity, both of which lead to an overall greater sense of empathy and connection, as well as reminding neurotypical readers that their experience in the world isn't more important than anyone else's. While exposing students to graphic novels that bring attention to the embodied experiences of neurodivergent girls is a significant first step, it is not the only step. Despite having a primary focus on universities, much of the work of Lorna Hamilton and Stephanie Petty in their research regarding compassionate pedagogy is relevant to any classroom environment. They write that "neurodivergent students, like all students, deserve fit-for-purpose learning experiences" (Hamilton). This means teaching with representation in mind and in a way that actively engages and benefits all students. To properly do so, educators should keep Universal Design Learning in mind, providing a wide array of classroom instruction and assignments to draw attention to the elements specific to the graphic novel's visuals that might otherwise be missed. As seen in both the previous *Fun Home* and *Delicates* chapters, one such element is the body's positionality in the physical world around it, apparent through its physical relationship to other characters, the material items around it, or the lack of its presence altogether.

The first major element for depicting Alison and Eliza's experience in the world around them involves the use of physical space between characters, which is emphasized by the graphic novel format. As Scott McCloud writes, "There is no mistaking the central role which sequence plays in the work" (McCloud 19). The sequence in which we see characters begin close in one panel and then grow further apart or vice versa plays a significant role in understanding their relationship and an individual's role in society, see figure 11. We can then ask students to pay special attention to these moments, asking how time has changed the space between characters

and contemplating the effect. McCloud also says that "backgrounds can be another valuable tool for indicating invisible ideas… particularly the world of emotions" (McCloud 132). This emphasis on background helps to create a sense of distance and disconnect, as can be seen in images of Alison alone on the swing surrounded by children playing behind her or Eliza looking behind her as the speech bubble depicting her peer's conversation is placed in the background.[6] To add to elements of physical distance

Thummler, pg. 123; Figure 11

that should be taught to students, Will Eisner points out the importance of distancing body language, noting the significance of "selective posture" (Eisner 104). In both moments, the main characters are drawn slumped with their heads downcast, creating an additional distance between them and their surroundings. This slumped posture also serves to mirror that of the reader bent over while engaging with the text, further increasing readers' identification with the characters. For this reason, we should point out not only the physical proximity between characters to students but also the distance created by body language.

In addition to the relationships between characters, people's relationships with material objects is another essential element to draw attention to in the classroom in terms of teaching how visuals work to capture the embodiment of identities. As seen in both *Fun Home* and *Delicates,* one's "identities and awareness are invested in many inanimate objects every day. Our clothes, for example, can trigger numerous transformations in the way others see us and in the way we see ourselves" (McCloud 38). Educators can teach these identity embodiments by

[6] Bechdel 137, Thummler 71

highlighting connections between material objects and major characters in *Fun Home and Delicates*. For instance, in *Fun Home,* extensions of Alison's identity can be seen bleeding into her diary and clothes. In *Delicates,* part of Eliza's identity is embodied in her connection with her camera and photography. There are also moments in which these objects take up the entire space of a panel. When this much space is devoted to inanimate objects, the reader is left to wonder why. Eisner writes, "The intent of the frame here is not so much to provide a stage as to heighten the reader's involvement with the narrative" (Eisner 45). This reader involvement can be seen even as students are encouraged by the large image to contemplate further its purpose in connection to the main character. In the classroom, one can encourage students to think about their own identity extensions, thus encouraging their role as active participants.

When addressing space and positionality between characters as physical embodiments of a character's experiences, it is important to note moments in which nothing exists. Educators should encourage students to question what to do with the blank space between panels, referred to as "the gutter." Scott McCloud refers to the gutter as a sort of "limbo" space where "human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (McCloud 66). This "gutter" space presents a perfect opportunity for an educator to further encourage the reader's role as an active participant. They could do so by, for example, asking students what they perceive to be happening between panels in the gutter space. This practice would help to build students' close reading skills while also encouraging greater engagement with the text.

At the end of this essay, I will give examples of workable lesson plans for one week of teaching *Fun Home* to a fifty-minute upper-level high school class and one week of teaching *Delicates* to an upper-level middle school class or early high school class of the same length. While many graphic novel elements are essential to teach and draw attention to in the classroom,

the first week of introducing these novels in my lesson plans will focus mainly on the emphasis on space and embodiment conveyed through visuals, as that is the focus of this essay. I have based some of the thought behind my plans on Hamilton and Petty's work, who write that "we make recommendations for Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and strengths-based pedagogical approaches, which create a fit-for-purpose educational environment for the widest possible range of learners" (Hamilton). It is important that the way we teach graphic novels not only conveys accurate representation while offering the accessible benefit of multi-modality but also utilizes multiple methods of accessible instruction to continue engaging students. For example, I incorporate various teaching techniques ranging from inquiry-based seminars to cooperative learning and project-based learning. I also include a mix of independent, small group, and whole group participation so that every student can engage in a way they are most comfortable with. I will also have students contemplate their emotional responses to specific panels and aspects of the work since "the idea that a picture can evoke an emotional or sensual response in the viewer is vital to the art of comics" (McCloud 121). Having students contemplate their responses allows them to see the work's emotional impact while working to increase their connection with the main characters. Chang writes about studies that have shown that "students with ASD may be focused on insignificant or irrelevant details of the narrative rather than the global picture" and that "while it's possible that some people with ASD may initially miss out on obvious comprehension themes (like would be in a multiple choice exam), it is important to think about all of the unique and nuanced insight that a group of learners could benefit from" (Chang 256). For this reason, I allow students many chances to contribute to the class discussions and ask questions rather than relying only on specific comprehension questions, permitting readers to benefit from multiple perspectives and insights.

The primary purpose of focusing on both *Fun Home* and *Delicates* is to give examples of graphic novels that utilize visual space and positionality of characters as a way to embody the unique intersectional identity of AFAB neuro-minority students with instructions on how to close read and teach such works. It is not my intention that both novels be taught together, though they could be depending upon the specific class. Rather, I suggest that the older coming-of-age intersectional challenges primarily described in *Fun Home* may be more relevant to an older high school audience, while the experiences and ages of the characters in *Delicates* are more applicable to a slightly younger one. And while these two books make for ideal works to teach, they aren't the only graphic novels worth teaching by any means. I encourage educators to go to more lengths to seek out graphic novels that include AFAB and neurodiverse characters, and to seek out more minority voices and intersectional identities as well. Many of the activities and assignments I include in my lesson plans are relevant to almost any graphic novel to some extent, and one's classroom will benefit from the windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors shown to students through teaching the embodied experiences of a diverse array of identities uniquely displayed through images graphic novels have to offer.

Concluding Thoughts

It is my hope that my work, as well as the writing and research of scholars I've pulled from, encourages the use of graphic novels in the classroom to better represent and engage neurodivergent girls and genderqueer students. However, there is still much research left to do. The "current educational contexts largely illustrate a conditional view of an acceptable student, i.e., a student is acceptable only when fitting to a neurotypical standard" (Hamilton). While graphic novels are one way to open up academic access, it isn't the only way, and more research

and theorizing should be done and action taken to make classrooms more accessible. By studying how to incorporate feminist engagement and representation in the classroom, we must put focus on intersectional neurodiverse identities. As Hannah Simpson writes, "Disability recognition and representation are too often pushed to the margins of feminist activity" (Simpson 81-82). Given that neurodiversity is only recently being considered in disability discussions, it becomes even more omitted from feminist work. When these intersectional identities are being discussed, it is often in a way that universalizes one singular experience despite the fact that "there is no such thing as the singular "disabled experience," any more than there is a singular "female experience" (Simpson 82); proving that we need to draw attention to a variety of stories depicting feminist neurodiverse perspectives. Teaching works that focus on drawing connections and empathy rather than promoting "othering" narratives are important to upholding an environment of ethical reading. "Ethical reading requires sustained awareness and vigilance against objectifying others" (Cressman 24), meaning that it is of utmost importance that we don't teach neurodivergent characters in a way that makes a spectacle of their differences or emphasizes the idea of overcoming their neurodivergence. To avoid objectification, it is also important to make sure that the narratives we teach are not solely focused on such identities as the central plot point of the story but that neurodivergent AFAB characters have their story told in the same way that any other character might. This point is highlighted, for example, by Thummler's purposeful decision not to label Eliza outwardly.

Furthermore, it's crucial to note that many other identity intersections often coincide with neurodiversity and gender. Both sexuality and race, for example, are depicted in the graphic novels addressed above and warrant further study and evaluation. While this paper has analyzed the representative embodiment of gender and neurodiversity, Alison in *Fun Home* is also under

the identity category of lesbian. *Delicates* centers around Eliza, whose societal experience is dictated not only by her gender and autism but also by her race as a Black girl. These examples show just how complex identity is and convey a greater need for representation. We as educators must attempt not only to engage and teach with neurodiverse learners in mind but to understand that not all students with mental differences look the same. Like everyone else, they are multi-faceted with various significant identities that should be added to the conversation. By using graphic novels in the classroom as a space to promote, teach, and normalize intersectional identities through narratives that utilize visual embodiments of underrepresented identities, we break this false narrative of a "correct" body to celebrate differences and forge connections that students will take into the world with them. This research is just one more step towards opening up the classroom for students to connect, engage, and learn to the best of their abilities. I am optimistic that intersectional neurodiversity will continue to gain scholarly attention and graphic novels more academic merit, which, when taught correctly, will lead us to a higher number of accessible learning environments.

Lesson Plans

Upper-Level High School Class on *Fun Home*

Day 1 Agenda

Things Assigned: *Fun Home* Pages (1-54)

Goals:

- Introduce graphic novel as a writing form
- Introduce *Fun Home*
- Draw attention to formal elements of the graphic novel

Activities:

- Graphic novel and *Fun Home* introduction discussion
    - What was your initial impression of graphic novels before reading *Fun Home?*
    - How has this impression changed or remained the same after reading?
    - What elements of *Fun Home* did you find to be more impactful due to being a graphic novel? How would these moments have differed in traditional novel format?
    - Make sure to address difficult topics and material in the novel that might be triggering for students, specifically Alison's father's sexual abuse of minors.
- Think: Look back through and find a page that you think would have had a different impact if it had been written in a different format.
- Pair: Share your page with a partner and discuss what elements of that panel made you choose it. How are parts of your pages similar or different? What elements are present in

both? What impact do they have on your understanding of the text?

- Share: Give each group a chance to share with the class what elements of the panels they chose helped to further their understanding of the text. Discuss elements they bring up in further depth as they are addressed. Draw attention to the ones not addressed after every group has had an opportunity to speak.

Homework: As you continue reading, mark one panel in particular where you felt a close emotional connection to Alison or another character while reading.

Day 2 Agenda

Things Assigned: *Fun Home (*55-86*)*

Goals:

● Establish different ways of forging reader/author connections in a graphic memoir

● Practice writing about graphic novels.

● Best annotation/close reading practices for engaging with a graphic novel

Activities:

● Go over graphic novel annotation strategies

● Give students five minutes to look back at the panel they chose for homework and spend time annotating it

● Freewrite about what elements from your chosen panel and annotations helped you to feel a closer emotional connection to or understanding of the character depicted.

● Go around and share your findings with the class.

● If time, go into a deeper whole group discussion about the purpose of these connections, and apply them to real-world scenarios.

Day 3 Agenda

Things Assigned: *Fun Home (*87-150*)*

Goals:

● Continue best annotation/close reading practices

● Establish an understanding of space/positionality in graphic novels

● Continue to establish reader/text connections

Activities:

● Put an example panel on the board (example: panel on 136 depicting Alison's positionality to her brothers or whatever aligns with pages assigned)

- What does this image tell you about Alison's relationship with her brothers?
- What does it say about the brother's relationship with each other?
- Why might this difference exist between siblings?
- What do you notice about Alison's expression and bodily movement?
- How does this image make you feel? Why?
- What is its significance to the memoir?

● Give an assigned panel to partners. Chosen panels will depict Alison with at least one or more other characters or with a material object like a pencil, doorframe, etc.

● Group work! Have partners work together to annotate their panel

● Ask groups to contemplate similar questions as we did as a group earlier in regard to their own panel. What does the panel convey about Alison's relationship with/to the people/objects around

her? How does Alison's physical position to these characters or objects allude to such relationships? How do her bodily movements and expressions tell readers more about what is going on in the panel?

Day 4 Agenda

Things Assigned: *Fun Home (*151-186*)*

Goals:

● Continue to establish an understanding of space/positionality in visuals

● Continue to establish reader/text connections

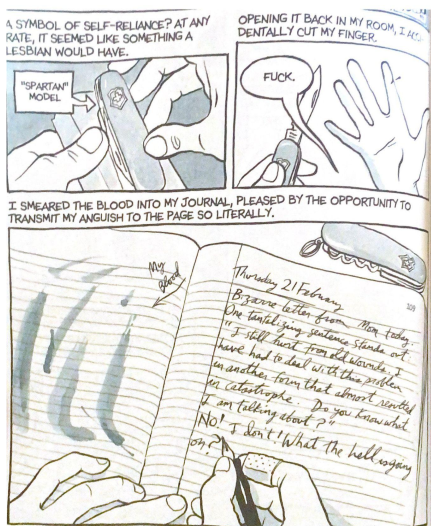
● Build off past two weeks of readings

Activities:

● Pull up a panel(s) on the board that depicts a lack of characters, see figure 12

- Why do you think Bechdel chose not to include characters here?
- How does the lack of characters make you feel?
- What does it draw attention to?

● Display an image of a page from the memoir and draw attention to the gutter



Bechdel, pg. 78; Figure 12

- Why include empty space?
- Where does the character exist if not in this space?

● Ask students to take the time to independently choose one "gutter" moment of the novel to fill in the space with what they think is taking place between the panels on either side of it.

● Have students share their filled in space with the class, detailing their mindset behind it. Ask the rest of the class if

they imagined something differently taking place in this gutter moment.

● Go over the homework assignment

Homework: Create a page of panels reminiscing on a specific emotional moment in your life (happy, sad, stressed, etc.) that might be included in a memoir about yourself. Make use of space, positionality, and framing to convey how you felt at that moment.

Day 5 Agenda

Things Assigned: *Fun Home* Pages (187-232)

Goals:

● Practice giving and receiving peer feedback

● Practice putting work in conversation with someone else's

● Gain a better understanding of how visuals can depict emotional experiences crucial to your own identity and that of others

Activities:

● Pair up with a partner and share your homework page with them

● Read and annotate your partner's work

● See if you can guess what emotion your partner was trying to convey.

●Discuss with your partner what elements of their work you found successful and what suggestions you have. Did reading their work help you to form a connection with them at that moment? How do you feel their identity or experiences were embodied in their drawings?

● Break out of groups. Independently write about how you drew from visual elements used by Bechdel in *Fun Home* to create your own graphic memoir page.

Upper Middle School/Beginning High School Class Discussion of *Delicates*

Day 1 Agenda

Things Assigned: *Delicates (*1-66*)*

Goals:

● Introduce formal elements special to the graphic novel format

● Introduce *Delicates*

● Compare/Contrast different types of writing forms

Activities:

● Brainstorm: Independently write out a list of your favorite comic books. Write how they are different/similar to *Delicates.* If you don't like comic books, list reasons why.

● Class intro discussion

- What do you think about when you think about graphic novels?
- Do you like comics? Why/why not?
- What elements are special to the graphic novel format not found in traditional books?
- What do you think of *Delicates* so far?
- What stands out to you in the story?
- What do you think of the characters?
- How do the visuals help you understand the characters better?

● Go over PowerPoint detailing formal elements of graphic novels. Leave space for questions.

● Review homework.

Homework: See if you can find any of the formal elements discussed today in your reading.

Bring one example to the next class.

Day 2 Agenda

Things Assigned: *Delicates (*67-121*)*

Goals:

● Go over what it means to be a close reader, close reading strategies

● Discuss best annotation practices

● Continue building knowledge of important visual elements in graphic novels

● Build connections

Activities:

● Share your homework example with a peer

● Compare/contrast your and your partner's examples. Discuss how your examples made use of formal elements. How did the visuals enhance the example? How did they impact your understanding of the story or connection to a character?

● Come back for a larger discussion.

● Review annotation techniques

● Pull up a page from the novel on the board. Annotate together as a whole group.

● Review homework assignment

Homework: Annotate as you read the next assigned section of *Delicates*

Day 3 Agenda

Things Assigned: *Delicates (*122-191*)*

Goals:

● Continue thinking about the format of a graphic novel

● Find and contemplate character connections

● Begin thinking deeply about positionality/space in visuals

Activities:

● *3, 2, 1*: Independently write out three things that stood out to you about the characters relationship with each other, 2 ways the visuals helped to convey these relationships, 1 feeling you had while reading about these relationships

● Discuss findings with whole group

● Whole group discussion about positionality and character relationships and connections

- How does the distance between characters impact how you perceive their relationship?
- Why might this distance exist?
- Do these moments of distance remind you of real-life here at our school? How or how not?
- How do you think Eliza or another character feels at this moment? Why do you think so?

● Freewrite independently about a time you felt far away from your peers, whether at school or elsewhere. How did it make you feel? How was your experience similar or different to that of Eliza's?

Day 4 Agenda

Things Assigned: *Delicates (*192-246*)*

Goals:

- Continue the conversation about space/positionality
- Contemplate how elements specific to the graphic novel help to create this space and embody a characters emotion/experience
- Draw more reader/writing connections

Activities:

- Independently find and think about a page where there is a lot of blank (gutter) space
- Break into assigned larger groups to each share your individual findings and the significance the size of the space takes up, in addition to its overall reception and perceived importance in the story.
- Share group findings with examples with the whole class.
- Display and discuss examples of empty space with the class.
- Now display panels in which a single character is positioned near or away from an inanimate object. Discuss. How are their experiences related to said object? How much space is given in the panel to that object rather than to a person?

Homework: Pretend you go to Marjorie and Eliza's school. Create one page of panels rewriting an event to include yourself and what you think you would do in that situation.

Day 5 Agenda

Things Assigned: *Delicates (*247-317*)*

Goals:

- Practice giving constructive feedback to a peer
- Practice responding to feedback
- Establish connections between different pieces of writing
- Gain a better understanding of visuals and the embodiment of character experiences

Activities:

- Freewrite: Think about the piece you wrote for homework. Write about why you would or would not make the decisions that comic you did on the page you wrote.
- Partner with a peer. Explain your creation and free-write findings to them
- Read and annotate each other's piece
- Give and receive constructive feedback
    - What formal elements did your partner use?
    - How did your partner use space and positionality to depict their intentions?
    - How did your partner's actions in the story impact the embodied emotions and experiences of the other characters?
    - How is it different than the original page they rewrote?
- Group discussion
    - How do our own embodied experiences impact those around us?
    - How do the visuals in a graphic novel allow us to see this impact?

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