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“Kill the Monster!”:

My Favorite Thing Is Monsters and the Big, Ambitious (Graphic) Novel

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In his discussion of the “big ambitious novel,” James Wood dismisses both male and female authors but singles out Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* for most of his critique of what he terms “hysterical realism.” For Wood, recent long novels display too much imagination but not enough substance and depth of character; the new novel has become “a picture of life.” With its deliberate foregrounding of inhumanness and spectacularity, Emil Ferris’s *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* commits many of Wood’s list of transgressions against the traditional novel. This article examines how Ferris’s book is unaffected by negative reactions to this transgressiveness, championing transgression and ignored voices as the mode of expression best suited to the big ambitious novel of our times. The book’s heroine and purported author of the book touches readers and moves them through the monstrous form she imagines for herself. Her reproductions of comics covers and art works negotiate diverse visual vocabularies and their resulting aesthetic and historical scope. In filtering its story through a young protagonist who is marginalized on all counts (age, class, race, sex, sexual orientation), Ferris’s “big, ambitious (graphic) novel” is also a layered response against the criticisms of childishness levied against comics. Transgression in *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* becomes a way of rethinking tradition—of comics, of novels, and of graphic novels—in the broader terms of cultural history.

Keywords graphic novels, comics, interconnectedness, hysteria, monsters, queer, ambitious women

> Certainly, the characters who inhabit the big, ambitious contemporary novels have a showy liveliness, a theatricality, that almost succeeds in hiding the fact that they are without life: liveliness hangs off them like jewelry.
>
> —James Wood, "Human, All Too Inhuman"

In a July 2000 essay published in the *New Republic,* the critic James Wood reviewed Zadie Smith's *White Teeth,* a novel that he found altogether too much. He identified the contemporary "big ambitious novel" as the unworthy offspring of Dickens, grouping Smith together with Salman Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace. These novels were "ashamed of silence," and "evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself" (Wood 2000: 41). To Wood, Smith's novel, and novels like it, represented a genre distinct from the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez, and were instead a form of "hysterical realism" (41) that he later dismissively wrote off as "magical realism's next stop" (Wood 2001). The essay sought to simultaneously define and dismiss a genre that suffered from a lack of "the human" (Wood 2000: 42). A year later, Wood (2001) returned to his critique of this "false zaniness of hysterical realism," in a freshly post-9/11 article in the *Guardian,* invoking Smith once more as an inheritor of DeLillo's "tentacular ambition . . . to pin down an entire writing culture," and concluding that "the result—in America at least—is novels of immense self-consciousness with no selves in them at all, curiously arrested and very 'brilliant' books that know a thousand things but do not know a single human being." Wood's piece was followed a week later in the same paper by Smith's (2001) response: "Be more human? I sit in front of my white screen and I'm not sure

what to do with that one. Are jokes inhuman? Are footnotes? Long words? Technical terms? Intellectual allusions? If I put some kids in, will that help?"

Smith (2001) points out that Wood asks writers to show him how they feel; yet, when they do so in the only way that they know how—"writers do not write what they want, they write what they can"—they are criticized for lack of feeling or even of being inhuman. This begs the question: what makes a writer's literary response to the world fall short of being classed as human? In short: who or what dispenses the authority to decide what is human feeling and how it is best expressed or examined? Smith's essay does not critique Wood's diagnosis, granting that the symptoms he observed are his to observe. At the heart of her response is a bewilderment about why these symptoms should be pressed further into becoming causal indications of lack. Why does one kind of response to the world—in Smith's case, as a response to the inundation of words and images of a white screen that brings together different worlds, temporalities, preposterous acronyms, and subjectivities together in the same perpetual motion flicker of light—have to be less human than another? And, although this question goes unaddressed in their exchange, why did he use the overtly gendered term "hysterical"?

Wood (2000: 41) suggests in his essay that "a genre is hardening" that is "hysterical," "as if ashamed of silence," filled with "props of the imagination." He does eventually allow that, of the offenders in his inventory, Smith "may be more likely to 'get the balance right' than any of her contemporaries" (43). Nonetheless, he ends his essay with examples from Smith's novel, examples that he imagines leave David Copperfield and Mr. Micawber "weeping together in an upstairs room" (45). This longing to return to some golden age of writing, one that was decidedly more "masculine," sounds not unlike Basil Ransom's rant in Henry James's (1886: 333) *The Bostonians*:

> The whole generation is womanized; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solicitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been. The masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not fear reality, to look the world in the face and take it for what it is . . . that is what I want to preserve.

The formation of the literary genre that Wood sought to describe was largely composed of male writers, but it was a female writer who occasioned Wood's literary takedown. Was it because her gender conveniently corroborated for him exactly why those Dickensian characteristics were left weeping upstairs, replaced by a generation of male writers who had become rather too, as James's character complained, "womanized"?

Hysteria itself comes with a loaded, gendered history, evoking a broad-ranging neurosis originally ascribed to women alone. The Greek roots of the word *hysteria—hystera*, or womb—anchor the condition in the woman's body. Although the malady had already existed for centuries, it acquired epidemic proportions in the nineteenth century, with the changes propelled by widespread industrialization and "overcivilization," as Laura Briggs (2000: 250-254) suggests in tracing the whiteness of the disease. In his note on Wood's "Hysterical Realism," Daniel Zalewski (2002) lists the following aspects: "anxiety-riddled, emotionally confused and intellectually scattershot," all of which remain marked by a patriarchal mistrust of the emotional and the supposedly "irrational" that is relegated to the domain of the female. It is, like caricature, with its filiations with the grotesque and the monstrous, a form of exaggeration that has been too easily dismissed as superficial.

Roiling the surface of Wood and Smith's exchange, and integral to the concerns of this article, are two captivating provocations that relate to the ostensible diminution of the "masculine" and "realistic" character: one centers around ideas of "the comic" and the other around the critique of "profusion" and "relatedness" where "characters are forever seeing connections and links and plots, and paranoid parallels" (Wood 2000: 42). Wood's (2001) disdain for "false zaniness" and Smith's (2001) asking "are jokes inhuman?" invoke a well-worn debate about whether the comic style or genre is adequate as a serious medium. Its absurdity exposes the unavoidable yet previously invisible interconnections of structures that turn out to be not so absurd.

Contemporaneously, these same interconnections were being articulated by writers and critics in nuanced expositions on postcolonialism, racial and gendered constructions of identity, and diasporic histories. Bruce Robbins (2010: 79), acknowledging the reach of Wood's argument, writes that Wood's critique "has gotten so much attention, and even in the academy has not been dismissed as banal anti-modernism . . . because in spite of its crudeness—a crudeness that is both formal and ethical—it puts its finger on a genuine question: how or whether the imperative to know and feel our connectedness within an ever-expanding globality . . . can express itself within the limited formal resources of the novel." Not knowing how to feel about this surplus of information, Robbins has suggested, may be precisely what this surplus of information is trying to articulate. Robbins draws attention to how Wood's coupling of an excess of information with feeling is fueled by "a certain view of gender [that] makes it possible to naturalize the excess of this information, folding it into a narrative site of feeling" (79). He further argues that the surplus of information of this kind, which he traces from García Márquez to Rushdie, Michael Chabon, and Jeffrey Eugenides, is "a way of getting into the narrative places

that are alien to the experience of the characters but that have a determining effect on their lives" (80).

This article focuses on a contribution to the big ambitious catalog which grapples with an excess of information and emphasizes the alien—and monstrous—experiences of queer girlhood in civil rights–era Chicago and Weimar-era Berlin. This is a work that is not primarily engaged in acts of response or resistance to existing forms. Rather, it is simply an example of an author who is "writing what [she] can" (Smith 2001) and, additionally, drawing what she can. *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, by Emil Ferris, is a meticulously drawn and intertextually rich and referential comic—or graphic novel—which is, only at its midpoint, already several hundred pages long. As Ferris recounted in a comic for the magazine *Chicago* that accompanied the 2017 release of the first volume in a planned two-volume book, the pathway toward the still-incomplete book has been littered with, and sometimes inspired by, obstacles. Ferris traces its beginnings to a mosquito bite in 2002 that infected her with the West Nile virus. The debilitating illness resulted, however, in her return to school and the realization there of the potential of the comics medium as a powerful storytelling form (Ferris 2017a).

The graphic novel appears as a journal sketchbook kept by the protagonist, Karen Reyes, who is a ten-year-old queer girl of mixed ethnicity. Karen draws herself in these pages in her self-fashioned were-girl persona, and the design of the book has been described as one that "strengthens the book's immersive recreation of its narrator's point of view . . . by the design choices and . . . the absence of consistently employed traditional comic-book panels" (Hassler-Forest 2020: 493). The journal soon coheres around evidence Karen gathers following the death of her upstairs neighbor, Anka Silverberg, a Holocaust survivor whose childhood is haunted by all-too-human monsters, interposed among Karen's friends and family, who are sometimes

illustrated as monster hybrids. *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* combines fantastic, popular, and artistic images and tropes to construct its narrative, ingenuously—and un-self-consciously—engaging seriously with monstrous hysteria and paranoid parallelism. It is "excessively centripetal. The different stories all intertwine, and double and triple on themselves. Characters are forever seeing connections and links and plots, and paranoid parallels" (Wood 2000: 42). The capacity for doubling and tripling of connection and meaning is Ferris's guiding creative principle, articulated in the form of the "vesica piscis," a proportioning system of circles and equilateral triangles from which "the whole world is born" (Ferris 2017b). Indeed, that drawing of the vesica piscis foreshadows the surprise, though perhaps inevitable, announcement at the end of the first volume of a twin brother living in a parallel world. *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* blissfully commits nearly all of the big ambitious contemporary novel's alleged transgressions while giving expression to voices that are too often marginalized on account of gender, age, race, queerness, or cultural prestige. Ferris offers a contemporary big, ambitious, graphic novel that embraces the pejoratively assigned terms of monstrousness, hysterical zaniness, and cartoonishness. These qualities become the very means to engage with one's world and inherited tradition. This article unpacks each of these transgressions to show how, rather than distancing us from the text, they are integral elements to showing us how to feel.

The interconnectedness that is celebrated within the pages of *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* also suggests the interconnectedness of genre and medium, which is particularly muddled by the term "comic." Already overdetermined, "the comic" also invokes another variant of the noun: a form of popular picture stories, originally relegated to children's culture but, in the past few decades, seen as showing signs of "growing-up," becoming graphic *novels* and engaging with adult concerns. This oversimplification of what comics are and can be is

examined in detail in Christopher Pizzino's (2016: 42) *Arresting Development* where he traces the dynamics of an "'internal' legitimation . . . applying external standards that have been used to devalue it." The contemporary comic is perhaps keener than ever before to confront the value systems separating the higher arts from popular ones. "The comic" as style or genre is therefore also an artistic and material form. At times the latter definition conforms perfectly to that of the former, and sometimes it overtly goes against it; for the sake of clarity in making the distinction, the medium will be referred to as comics. Comics accord with the other provocation considered in this essay: the question of the inhuman.

This medium has long been the refuge of versions of the inhuman, ranging from anthropomorphized animals, superpower-wielding entities, racialized caricatures, aliens, monsters, and oftentimes characters that are hybrids of these figures. Not surprisingly, in the discourse on abjection, one too often finds that inconvenient perspectives, subjectivities, and reactions to the phenomena of our shared world are relegated to the "not us, them" category, in the name of hysteria, the inhuman, or the monstrous. Comics, an ephemeral and transgressive form, harbors sometimes subtle and sometimes overt commentaries on the many inhuman elements that populate its pages. The relegation of such themes into bodily representation is doubly materialized in language and image. The words, ideas, and images that Karen reproduces in her journal come from the humans and nonhumans around her, transformed and translated by her subjective eye and hand into unequal carriers of meaning, made comparable by the universalizing visual grammar of a single drawing hand. A painting by Delacroix and a horror comic cover, a mother's face and a tattoo of a mother's face, a Frankenstein's monster's face and a vampire heart, these are presented in the pages all in the hand of a fictional female author who is "writing what she can."

In the context of comics, big ambitious graphic novels, as represented by, for example, Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan,* are often read as a direct response to the tradition of the hypermasculine superhero, performing a close examination of the burdens of heteronormativity and their dispossession. Yet, this teleological reading of the evolution of the graphic novel has left little room for female creators and female readers, who do not generally identify with or write against this model. While the rise of female and queer authorship in the graphic novel form is impossible to ignore (Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, Alison Bechdel, Marjane Satrapi), graphic novels by women have frequently been compartmentalized under subgenres such as life writing or women's writing (see, for instance, Chute 2010). *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* disregards categorization and resistance alike, with its insistence on the interconnected; its belief that spiraling and throbbing whirls can and will resolve into clarity; and its deliberate dwelling on twins, impossibilities, nonhumans, unrealities, and previously-unimaginables. The challenges of rethinking tradition are native to a comics tradition that so often engages with multimodal (life) narration and visual history, and they are the very materials and aspirations of the big ambitious graphic novel.

"But He Feels, and He Makes Us Feel": Feeling and Tangibility

My Favorite Thing Is Monsters shatters assumptions and constraints of form with its sketchbook diary-horror-crime comic and its central plaidoyer for good monsters that counter banality on one hand and human cruelty on the other. The unruliness of form, of storytelling, and of image is mirrored by the monster that becomes Karen's sense of self. Monsters, the embodiments of excess, can help us draw the limits of, and even unpack certain biases behind, criticism of texts for having too much information—and perhaps too much imagination—at the cost of emotion and deep connection. While *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* has all the elements of the

spectacular, it suggests that the spectacle is a part of life that goes unnoticed or is willfully ignored, like some monsters: both are part of a dialectic with reality that sometimes requires a different set of eyes, like Karen's, to be perceived and drawn as such. It is difficult not to hear echoes of the distinction between genre fiction and literature in critiques like Wood's. The disdain for the comic and the fantastic are, to a certain extent, linked. Is the fantastic in some way less human or emotive? *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* seems to suggest the opposite. Karen's fear, sorrow, and love are all tangible, and this is reinforced with the literal connotation of the word tangibility: touch.

Perhaps one of the most obvious signs of emotional connection is the representation of hands. Ferris's novel is laden with representations of hands: holding hands, supportive hands, arms and hands locked in an embrace. In addition to the representation of drawing hands, which are mostly those of Karen, we often see hands touching or strengthening an embrace. Writing on the role of shaking hands and touching in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, Rebecca Scherr (2013: 21) transposes Laura U. Marks' term of "haptic visuality" to show how drawn moments of touching can act as a site of contact and understanding. Haptic visuality unfolds on two levels: the haptic charge of the drawn line and the visual representation of hands touching. While Scherr introduces the notion of haptic visuality in the warlike context of the Gaza strip, the power of the haptic resonates through *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, through its distinctive drawing style, through the intimate form of the diary, and through the presence of hands.

Already on the second page of the graphic novel we see Karen's scrawny hand that is almost a claw with its pointed fingernails turning up the volume of her record playing "Wild Thing" by the Troggs. We are already in a liminal realm between human and monster, and the song assures us that this is not a monster to fear. After her nightmare of being persecuted by the

entire city—a recurrent nightmare her mother Marvela calls "the villager dream"—we see the two sleeping, with Marvela's body curled around Karen's, and her hands protectively holding Karen's tense arms. On introducing Anka, Karen zooms on the moment when their hands touch as Anka furtively hands her a piece of rye bread. A little later, we see Karen's own hands holding a rose petal found in the basement, the first of many she finds that interweave the uncomfortable undertones of impossible love and violence running through the graphic novel. Here, the zooming in on her othered, monstrous hand, places the reader in Karen's position: the hand here is both liminal and affective and draws us into the story. It suggests the possibility that the hand holding the petal, the only colored object in a black and white hatched drawing *could be* ours even though it is not. The possibility is sufficient for emotional connection.

Hands also express the strong bonds of love between characters. Karen's older brother Deeze takes her by the hand as they walk up to the Art Institute of Chicago for the first time "to see some friends" or artworks. Karen remembers how, after watching old horror films and before falling asleep, she held hands with her crush and childhood friend, Missy. We encounter Missy shunning Karen for a more popular group of girls, but later rekindling their friendship, and revealing that her mother had forbidden it. It is the memory of their friendship, of holding hands, that helps Karen ignore the taunts of Missy and her new group of friends (fig. 1). When a new friend and admirer, Franklin, rescues Karen from an assault by a group of boys, we see Franklin's hands multiply and float around Karen's prone body with the wings of angels or "neat-freak birds." Here, as with the image of Karen's hand holding the rose petal, the reader's body shares the same space as Karen's body, off-page and off-panel.

<Insert Figure 1>

Toward the end of the graphic novel, as Marvela passes away, we see both Karen and Deeze lying next to their mother, holding tightly to her hands, as they hold on to their final moments with her. During Karen's moments of extreme grief, she takes refuge in Deeze's pile of clean and dirty clothes as a large hand encompasses her curled body, while Deeze turns to drink and sex and distances himself from her. The hand captures the humanity and comfort that Karen has to create for herself. Visually, the very human, but disproportionally large hand protects at its center the monstrous hybrid form of Karen. They form one whole, demonstrating how fantasy imbues reality and vice versa.

"Liveliness Hangs Off Them Like Jewelry": Seeing Humanity in Others

The elision of monstrousness and lived experience in *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* raises a counterpoint to assumptions of the lack of believable or "true" humanity in the sprawling contemporary novel. The association of human beings—or rather, the lack of them—with feeling is striking, for *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* is as full of feeling as it is full of characters that are either not fully human or not fully alive. Karen appears throughout the book as a werewolf. Specters and monsters populate a book that decidedly aligns with them against the "MOB" (mean, ordinary, and boring) that seeks to destroy them. Karen explains that the MOB "believe only in what they can see, smell, taste, touch, hear or buy. They say 'Because monsters couldn't possibly be real, then they're not real . . . we've never seen monsters, so they can't be there.' The truth is that there are a lot of things we don't see every day that are right under our noses—like germs and electricity and just maybe—monsters are right under our noses, too" (Ferris 2017b). Karen's journal thus offers a way to see what is not usually seen: a place, like the safe space she imagines inside her mother's eye, a retreat where even secret things are welcome. Seeing,

especially seeing things that "couldn't possibly be real," is not figured as a superhuman ability and is in fact an ability to see, and record, things that are in plain sight.

Things being in "plain sight" is never taken for granted in *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*. Seeing is an act that grants some power and control, just like the monstrous identity Karen forges for herself: "I want to be a monster and only *look* with my not-blind-eyes at the machine. I definitely don't want the sleeves of my detective coat (or anything else) to get caught in the greasy clockwork of the night machine" (Ferris 2017b). Karen's observation reminds the reader of the crucial importance of perspective: characters who are looking at the same thing do not necessarily see the same thing: they see what they want to. Karen looks in a mirror and sees a monster; her brother insists that she see a girl. At the Art Institute of Chicago, Franklin sees himself in the female portraits, and reads meaning about their personalities and the lives that they lead from their clothing. Sandy, the insatiable spectral companion, sees nothing but delicious food. And Karen, of course, sees monsters. On the contrary, the sex acts that she witnesses, whether through Anka's audiotape descriptions or through her own eyes on the street, stairwell, or her brother's bedroom, are frequently converted into the abstract, into the "night machine" that is something she only wants to "look" at. When she is nearly sexually assaulted by a group of classmates, she willfully prevents Deeze from learning about it and, likewise, she lets the nuns at her school believe that she is the one who has assaulted one of her attackers. Ferris is able to implicate the reader, who also sees events and objects through Karen's filtering eye and hand, and thus make decisions about plausibility and reality that extend far beyond the covers of this book.

Karen's world is inhabited by friends who look very much like horror movie and comic archetypes. Franklin is the only person who appreciates her sense of humor, and the one who

steps in to rescue her when she is attacked. He towers over their classmates, judged by his physical differences from the others as the only Black child at their school, but excluded for his homosexuality by other Black people on the streets. Franklin is capable of shows of strength even while preferring to focus on beautiful objects, and he resembles, in both name and appearance, the Frankenstein monster. Likewise, Karen's new friend, Sandy, appears to her immediately following the pages in her journal in which she mourns her lost friendship with Missy. On the page directly before Karen meets Sandy, she imagines Missy as a vampire from the "Alucard" movies that they watched together. Sandy, the proxy friend who no one else can see, has a spectral quality even to Karen, who sees and draws her as a real person, even though no one else is able to see or interact with her. Sandy lives in an abandoned apartment, is possessed with an overwhelming hunger, and mysteriously floats, instead of walking, away. In a brief episode, Sandy and Karen discover a camera and accidentally take a photograph, playing on the ghost story trope: the ghost fails to appear in the developed photograph, thus revealing its true nature.

<Insert Figure 2>

Readers can only wait to see if this will occur in the second volume or if, it will be yet another MacGuffin in the plot, a surface detail that leads nowhere. Ferris cheekily suggests as much, hinting at this with a graveyard mausoleum engraved with the name MacGuffin (Ferris 2017b). Finally, there is Paul Silverberg, Anka's husband, who is pictured with bandages around his neck and hands, and whose wrinkled face makes him looks like "he's lived in the desert all his life" (fig. 2). He shares an apartment decorated with Egyptian icons and memorabilia, not to mention a cat named King Tut and a wife named Anka, whose name plays on the Egyptian hieroglyph for life. Sam easily inhabits the role of the Mummy in the cast of the book's monsters.

It is Anka, a character who is dead at the beginning of the book but whose narrative, and face, from childhood to middle-age, appears most frequently throughout the book, whose personhood makes the greatest case for the "liveness" of fictional characters of all kinds. Her name is mirrored in the ankh marking the face of her cat, King Tut. Liveness literally hangs off her "like jewelry," as she is drawn most frequently with her favorite earrings dangling from her ear, scarabs that symbolize renewal and the movement of the sun. Anka's face, like Paul Silverberg's, is a disconcerting blue in most of Karen's journal, and Karen explains that "she wasn't actually blue . . . but she always looked as if she might start crying at any minute" (Ferris 2017b). As much as Karen's journal is an investigation, it is an act of recovery and resurrection, giving life to a woman whose mysterious behavior is simply one manifestation of the many lives that she has led and that are generally unseen by those around her. Anka's story is separate from 1960s Chicago, beginning in 1920 in Berlin, and her childhood is "peopled" by humans whose behavior is monstrous and whose power is unchallenged. Anka's passage through childhood is represented by a narrative of constant fleeing: from a mad mother, innumerable pedophiles, and Nazis alike. The fact that this narrative exists, then, is a testament to the remarkable fact of simply being able to stay alive.

"Characters Are Forever Seeing Connections and Links and Plots"

Karen finds mirrors of her own experience in her uncovered narrative of Anka, whose death by suicide—or murder—absorbs the keeper of the journal and the reader alike in a mystery full of potential killers and MacGuffins. *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* reminds that feeling and humanity are far from missing in this intergeneric meditation on what constitutes liveliness, liveness, and the human. Connectedness is unapologetically the very aim of the reading process in this graphic novel, which directly gestures to its debt to earlier graphic novels (Kwa 2020a;

see also Hassler-Forest 2020). Ferris also borrows from many narrative traditions including, but not limited to, detective fiction and its derivative subgenres in the horror comics and films that Karen avidly consumes. The plot begins with a mysterious death followed by a reconstruction of the evidence, akin to traditional detective novel conventions. By adopting detective novel conventions, Ferris demonstrates how reading the detective novel genre is simply a starker presentation of the acts of reading, remembrance, and authoring, drawn to the forefront by stories that "thematize narrativity itself as a problem, a procedure, and an achievement" (Hühn 1987: 451). Indeed, what her graphic novel borrows most heavily from detective fiction is the fact that "such a narrowly defined plot-structure, which does not appear in need of interpretation, because no mysteries or ambiguities remain unresolved, should nevertheless have elicited a large variety of divergent interpretations and thus have proved highly polyvalent" (453). Seeing connections, links, and plots is what Karen does to investigate the mystery of Anka's murder, but that process of evidence seeking very quickly occasions even more new mysteries sited at the surface of the text.

Karen's procedural investigation is explicitly tied to the act of critical interpretation, learned from Deeze, when he begins bringing her to the Art Institute of Chicago, at a time when she is "still so little that he had to lift [her] up so that [she] could see things" (Ferris 2017b). In front of a painting alluded to in the very first pages of her journal, Karen recalls her brother's instruction: "Deeze brought me to the paintings he loved like they were rich uncles of ours that I'd never met. He showed me how not to just see with my eyes, but to hear, smell, taste, and touch with them, too." Deeze tells her: "Every person who sees this painting gets to end the story any way that he or she wants to." In front of Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, Deeze encourages Karen to "go into the painting and see what happens."

Karen cries out “Deeze! It’s all made out of . . . dots!” Dots are the fundamental units of meaning-making in the painting, but, though they are presented here as the basic building blocks of learning how to draw, they are also laboriously implicated in the book’s social and epistemological structures. The pages that precede this exchange at the Art Institute are focused precisely on circles, and the points, or dots, that center them.

Deeze uses his compass to give Karen a drawing lesson, in which he explains “the vesica piscis” as the shape from which “the whole world is born” (fig. 3). This drawing lesson is, within the framework of the book, also a reading lesson. Being able to see is fundamental to understanding the world, but the eye must be trained to see, and to see better. Thus the readers of *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* are enjoined to learn alongside Karen, and, like her, to be alert to another mystery that only attains its meaning upon rereading. The book draws our attention, at this moment, only to a surface twinge: “Deeze looked kind of sad when he told me how Mr. and Mrs. Dot had twins” (Ferris 2017b).

<Insert Figure 3>

This twinge will cohere into significance only three hundred pages later, at the appearance of the actual missing twin who is the cause of Deeze’s grief and, even more mysteriously, guilt. The graphic novel reinforces the importance of making connections between the dots, indeed insists upon that action as a means of proper reading, if not interpretation. It also underscores how the dots that need connecting are not in fact hidden beneath the surface of a text. In fact, they are there at the surface, having escaped notice because of the absence of time or because of the absence of attention. In either case, they lack the future knowledge that the viewer has to recognize their part in the construction of a narrative. To the extent that one’s freedom is bound by one’s inability to hurry time, then, the novel suggests that one’s best efforts

must be diligently applied to carefully observing what is there to be found. Seeking out connections is not viewed as absurd or zany, but as the real and serious, and constant, work of reading the signs that make up one's world.

This position with respect to the world is especially heightened by the graphic novel, which not only draws from literary devices of analogy but visual analogies as well. Most striking is Karen's own self-depiction, which begins in the opening pages of the book, as a strategy of hiding. The narrative opens with a sentence begun in a text box that appears as if superimposed over the hand turning up the volume on the record player: "I turned up the volume to hide what I was doing because it would've completely sucked if Mama had come in and found me doing it . . . but I started moaning real loud like Deeze when he used to have his 'boy's dreams.'" The reader is explicitly encouraged to assume that Karen is hiding a "transgressive" act of masturbation from her mother, but the next page shows instead an actual visible and physical manifestation of transgression. The body transforms: "just like Larry Talbot in 'The Wolfman.' My skin and ligaments got thick and stretched, my teeth grew out to be finger-long and jagged" (Ferris 2017b). Ferris artfully connects the subtext of monster movies and comics—staples of 1960s children's culture (Jenkins 2020: 196–97)—with the transforming adolescent body, further complicated for the protagonist by her growing awareness of her queerness.

From the beginning of the book, Karen is only depicted in her bestial monster form. Close to the end of the first volume, immediately before Karen comes out to Deeze, he holds her in front of a mirror and forces her to acknowledge, for the first and only time, how she appears to him and to others: "Look at her! She might be a girl who needs her mouth washed out with a big bar of soap but she is a girl! . . . A girl! Not Larry Talbot three quarters the way to being the fucking Wolfman!" (Ferris 2017b). This is a moment that occurs with the immediacy of the

reflection in a mirror, but that is modified by the reader's awareness of the narrator-artist, Karen, whose use of past tense and whose painstaking crosshatching suggest that the drawn page is the result of glancing backwards at a past action. If we can acknowledge that this graphic novel must be read as a subjectively shaped picture, where the other characters are drawn as Karen sees them, and where the piecing together of knowledge is equally shaped by Karen's interpretation of the evidence, and after the fact, where does "reality" fit in? It is in the very spaces between the narratives that Karen overhears and the events and works of art that she contemplates that reality surfaces. That reality relies on making the connections between those points.

Children in comics, like child characters in other media, wield a nostalgic, affective hold (Ahmed 2020a). These affects are closely tied to the way romanticism and modernity have positioned the child. While for Rousseau, the child is the closest link between humanity and nature, reflecting in its development the impact of the civilizing process, for Freud the child and childhood inform the unconscious to the extent that the core of human subjectivity is affected by childhood experiences (see Steedman 1995: 88–89). If "the iconic child of the comics forges new . . . spaces of possibility—of history, identity, and knowledge—not just to read or to view but to inhabit," as Michael A. Chaney (2016: 76) suggests, the compulsively sketching were-girl Karen animates all three possibilities in her notebook. She explores her identity, creating a monstrous shell to afford her some liberty against the hostility of an environment that allows only limited space to outcasts and children like her (Jenkins 2020: 215). She revisits history through recreating Anka's account. Finally, she unpeels the layers of adult knowledge, some better concealed than others in the story. Mysteries and the solutions to those mysteries are rehearsed, reinterrogated, and resurrected in the pages of her journal. One of these mysteries is the recurring visual trope of twins.

Twins figure heavily in Ferris's book, doing the work of echoing or literalizing the phenomenon of making connections that spread throughout the book. An actual twin does not manifest until the last page of the first volume, and he makes his appearance in a reality that has been attenuated by a preceding scene where Karen murders all her monsters and retreats into the safe space of the "Green Island" that she has always imagined in her mother's eye. At this moment, the early art history lessons that Karen learns from Deeze, about the vesica piscis that produces twins upon twins who represent the very structures of their world, resolve. The mysterious Victor enters, and he appears to be Deeze's twin. This surprise revelation foregrounds the interconnectedness of the book's characters. Not only is a surprise twin announced at the end of the volume, but the surprise twin emerges from the underbrush of an imaginary green island that itself has retreated more exclusively into the imagination. Victor is dead, as is their mother. Even Marvela's eye, which had been the portal to Karen's imaginary world, can exist only in memory and in the pages of Karen's book. Thus the journal's pages become the repository of twins: page upon page of the same figures, who are identified as the same singular person, separated by moments in time but, in the comics form, nonetheless repetitively doubled, tripled, and so on, throughout the novel. By this point, questions of literal versus symbolic have been all but demolished: the work of the book has been to emphasize the subjectivity of an individual and, indeed, to champion that individual's observation and interpretation. Rather than representing the uncanny or the preposterous, twins, or at least doubles, function as entities as natural as sight. The recurrence of eyes throughout the book, whether the glass eyes of a neighbor, the shapes of the "sideways eyes" of the vesica piscis, the eyes that stare out of paintings and tattoos and that are made indistinguishable from "real" people

by the fact that they are all drawn by Karen's hand, make the point that seeing double may actually be the more realistic rendering of our world.

"All Shiny Externality, All Caricature": Monsters, Spectacle, and "Women's" Comics

The fifth of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's (1996: 12) seven theses about the monster states that "the monster polices the borders of the possible." Herein lies the humanity tangible in *My Favorite Thing*: the monsters jump in when things escalate. When reality becomes too much, they point toward the symptoms of the excess. In alluding to the "too much" of reality, they seem to give into hysterical realism and spectacle, but they also protect inexpressibility—of events and emotions—from being banalized. Zaniness, a characteristic of hysterical realism, has been defined by others as a specific and pervasive condition of the early twenty-first century. The zany is present, in the visual network established by the images, through the exaggeration in the images themselves and the comics and monstrous idioms that they reconfigure. Sianne Ngai (2010: 948) proposes three categories that respond to the "performance-driven, information-saturated and networked, hypercommodified world of late capitalism." The zany, existing next to cute and interesting, "is the only aesthetic category . . . with a special relation to affective or physical effort" (950). Elsewhere, Ngai (2011) suggests that "zaniness is essentially the experience of an agent confronted by—even endangered by—too many things coming at her quickly and at once." In *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* Karen's monstrosity gives form to and is a means of dealing with her vulnerability to the prolific adversities around her. It is then a layer, or a shell protecting the girl. It is also a means of presenting and performing the story for the reader. Ngai's analysis of the zany suggests that the sense of superficiality explored in this essay exists to mask an all too human coping mechanism.

The monsters that we face and that lead us through *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* are drawn monsters. They consequently offer us the opportunity to consider the role of caricature as a mode of meaning-making in this book. Historically, comics have been closely connected to caricature, both literally in the actual drawing styles, and figuratively through the humor they can incorporate and their associations with superficiality (see Ahmed 2020b: 23–25, 49–52). Bearing the connotations of "load" from the Italian *caricare*, derived from the Latin *carricare*, part of the weight carried by the term caricature is its lowly status. It is an exaggeration, often a comical one, removed from reality and traditionally of limited significance. The early nineteenth-century engraver James Peller Malcolm (1813) dismissed caricature as primitive, a sign of limited skill. Caricatural or grotesque distortion were for Malcolm a natural inclination that had to be disciplined into realistic imitation. As comics readers, as readers of images in general, we are accustomed to accepting deviations from reality. The form reminds us that even the most "realistic" of images—photographs, for instance—reflect a distinct point of view. In deviation we find meaning and even emotion.

Caricature is often used synonymously with the grotesque which in turn is closely related to the realm of the monster, combining the human and the vegetal, a decorative element mistakenly presumed to hail from antiquity (for the grotesque predates antiquity) and only discovered during the early sixteenth-century excavations in Italy. Monstrous in its impossible combination of living organisms, the grotesque has been linked to the constrained liberty of the carnival but also the disturbing and the uncanny, as Mary Russo has elaborated in her book on the female grotesque. Russo (1994: 5) draws parallels between the "positioning of the grotesque—as superficial and to the margins" and the "construction of the feminine." She also points out how the two kinds of nonbinary grotesques are embodied through female forms:

Bakhtin's pregnant old hags laughing at their contradictory state (nearing the end of life while generating new life) and the female hysteric described by Freud, "ungrounded and out of bounds, enacting her pantomime of anguish and rebellion" (9). While both kinds of grotesque evoke emotions that could be dismissed as minor or superficial, remnants of popular entertainment and cheap, fleeting thrills, *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* sets the complexity of the grotesque into motion, combining its visual history across diverse forms of image-making, recalling its uses but also all its organic nature, its *aliveness*. The grotesque forms move the marginal—women, children, foreigners, outcasts, monsters—to the center of the comic and by extension the comics form to new possibilities of both spectacularity and interconnections.

Much has been written about the significance of the hand-drawn line: Philippe Marion sees in it the trace of the *graphiateur*, the figure of the comics author inscribed and formed through the line (see Baetens 2001). Hillary Chute suggests that the drawn line can be intimate and visceral (2010), incorporating layers of temporalities since "drawing represents its own thicket of time" and memories (2016: 21). Simon Grennan emphasizes the embodied aspect of the line and the intersubjective space it opens. The line continues to fascinate and to a certain degree even elude comics scholars in its confluence of visual history, artistic training, and personal style. While the comics line is in itself monstrous in its resistance to translation and interpretation, it is the transgressive, even unruly quality of women's comics that has attracted considerable attention. To better understand where this unruliness lies, it is useful to start with Jared Gardner's description of the comics story:

> To read a story in a comic is to be reminded constantly that this is a story told *by* someone—and a storyteller who is necessarily and fundamentally bound to often brutal physical realities: the physically demanding and time-consuming work of composing,

> penciling, erasing, inking, coloring, lettering on one hand; *and* the physical constraints of a narrative form that demands greater use of ellipses and compressions than novel or film to tell even the most basic stories. Too much time, too little time: with every graphic narrative we have an inevitable encounter with the laboring body of the graphiateur and the constrained body of the form itself. (Gardner 2011: 66)

Comics, then, is a laborious form and also a potentially intimate form, creating possibilities to connect the *graphiateur* with the reader. The painstakingly drawn lines in *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, where the ballpoint line does not leave room for mistakes, acquires a further laborious and intimate quality when we take into account the fact that Ferris made the graphic novel on the road to recovering from paralysis (Ferris 2017a).

In addition to its connections with historically disparaged forms of drawing, perhaps what is most relevant for our discussion of *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* is the frankness that personalized drawing styles convey, a frankness that is molded, inevitably, by years of drawing practice, of influences and copies. Articulating this interaction between individual traces embodied through drawing and the constraints of the comics medium (and their eventual relativization), Frederik Byrn Køhlert (2019: 3–4) suggests that "because comics rely on both highly personal hand-drawn aesthetics and a serially networked approach to narrative, the form can challenge conventional representation schemes in a complex dance of appropriation and resignification that is always open to the construction of new meanings." The seriality mentioned by Køhlert should be understood as a nonlinear one, and the dynamics of the network he evokes are crucial: comics interweave connections within and beyond their panels and pages, connections that deepen the narrative and flesh out characters.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, where we first find Karen inscribing her monstrous face on the cover of the 1967 year in review edition of a horror comic called *Renowned Creatures of Movieville*. Karen is a conscious copier of the horror and crime comics given to her by Deeze—comics seen as exercising an evil influence over young children—and it is the imaginative models of these comics that Karen reproduces in her everyday experiences to come to terms with the difficulties life throws her way: she absorbs her status as school freak, itself an outcome of her mixed-race heritage, an absent father, and the limited financial means of her family, and twists it in her own favor. She embraces the monstrosity her schoolmates impose on her, using her imagination to carve out her own space. In her own bodily unruliness and defiance of categories and boundaries, which mirrors her notebook's unruliness, Karen asserts these qualities as what constitutes her personhood.

My Favorite Thing offers us a world of fine art that coexists with popular gore. Often no less gory than the comics she copies, the paintings that hang in the Art Institute of Chicago reappear throughout Karen's diary. She painstakingly copies in ballpoint pen paintings from Jacob Jordaens's *The Temptation of Mary Magdalene* and Henri Fuseli's *The Nightmare* to Gustave Doré's *Alpine Scent* and Harald Solhberg's *Fisherman's Cottage*. Unlike the comics covers that punctuate different sequences of events and allusively foreshadow them, these works of art reappear like characters throughout the diary. Karen carries them with her and brings them to life. She experiences them synesthetically—"this seeing/smelling thing happens a lot to me"—and uses their obscure regions to explore the mystery of Anka's death and the secrets adults keep from her. It is not surprising that she sees the paintings as friends. The boundaries between life and reality, imagination and art, waver. We have in *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* a potential overload of information and varying degrees of self-consciousness (of comics storytelling, of

identity construction, for instance). Like Barry, Ferris is an "image wrangler" (Barry, quoted in Kirtley 2012: 193). Her narrator and protagonist can't stop drawing, interweaving all she sees and experiences. The result is potentially hysterical at times, as when Karen's mother dies and she is left without any emotional support but such excess, like her were-girl detective persona, is a means of dealing with grim realities. It could not be more real, relatable, or human.

My Favorite Thing Is Monsters can be easily placed alongside the now-significant body of women's comics, especially those interweaving autobiographical strains and marked by a certain interrogation of identity. Some, such as Gloeckner's *Diary of A Teenage Girl* (2002) and Barry's *Cruddy* (1999), which recount troubled and even traumatic girlhoods, move away from the comics form toward that of the illustrated novel, as if the panels and grids are only just enough. Unfolding as fictionalized diaries, these works are also closely related to—and too easily assimilated under—life writing. In highlighting the tensions raised by works like *Diary of a Teenage Girl* and *Cruddy*, noncomics made by artist-writers now known for their comics, Rachel R. Miller (2018: 105) offers insight into the "affordances of the diary or the diaristic format" by considering the "unruly and intimate" connections interwoven between the diaries and writing and drawing girls' bodies. The self in these works is always unraveling, coming apart, enacting Jack Halberstam's description of shadow feminism, which relies on undoing rather than doing (Miller 2018: 105). According to Jan Baetens (2014: 166), a comparable politics is discernible in Dominique Goblet's *Portraits crachés* that allows for a queer reading based on highlighting the constructed nature of differences and the fluidity of identity. True to the pun in Goblet's title (literally, spitting images and spat-out portraits), *Portraits crachés* is a collection of portraits in diverse styles, often veering toward the childlike and the abstract. Accompanied by text, in varying degrees of readability and sometimes in collaboration with

other writers, *Portraits crachés* deliberately confounds genres and forms but also the possibility of a narrative.

While the latter makes it seem far removed from *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, *Diary of a Teenage Girl*, and *Cruddy*, all four meet at the crossroads of unruliness and untidiness, with the identities portrayed, with form and style, and with genre. Embodiment through comics, identity construction and deconstruction, coexists with formal unruliness as suggested by Køhlert when he writes about artists such as Julie Doucet and Ariel Schrag. Exaggeration and excess—in itself not unfamiliar to the comics form—has been instrumentalized by these women artists to interweave powerful narratives that reclaim a space often denied to them: too often diminished and pushed to the sidelines because of their gender, these women activate the very elements that are looked down upon to question and complexify the possible assumptions underlying the stories they tell. Ferris's *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* is no exception.

Our "Morganatic Heirs"; or, Someone's in the Attic

As Mary Russo shows, the grotesque, especially in its gendered forms, has always hovered at the edges of our realities, thriving in the carnival and in mental asylums. As the novel, once the bastion of realism, albeit not always of high culture, lets in more of the grotesque and hysteria, there is perhaps little need to panic. These exaggerations are our friends. They show us what we do not want to see or have difficulty seeing. They also show us possibilities, different facets of a situation or a problem. In embodying excess, they do not smother emotion but enable us to grasp it better. On learning that her beloved Sonja, the cook at the brothel where she was raised, has been murdered, we see Anka wearing the head of a bird, recalling the bird that she and Sonja had rescued and that her mother had fed to the alley cats. This is also the disguise Anka had put on for the day she and Sonja were supposed to escape the brothel. She wears this as she goes up to

her mother's bedroom with a bloody knife. It is suggested that Anka killed her own mother, but Anka herself is not sure. It remains a terrifying possibility mediated through Anka's costume, which was supposed to facilitate her escape but ends up embodying her deep grief and pain. We are only shown as much as we can handle, and we remain aware that we are all too likely to turn away from anything more intense. Here the exaggeration is not hysteric, it is reasonable and maybe the only way to convey the shattering of Anka's world.

My Favorite Thing Is Monsters shows how unruly, fantastic, and impossible storylines can work without detracting from the human, from depth of character and emotions. Instead it offers us possibilities to connect with the story. As Shiamin Kwa (2020b: xxv) writes in *Regarding Frames*, the surface of graphic narratives is "the space where sense occurs" where meaning and the possibility of emotional connection can be found. Works like *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* create a space where the comfort of closure is traded for "the challenge of interstitial thinking" constraining "us to stay in the spaces between" (110). We read *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* with a profound awareness of the surface, an awareness that only grows as we negotiate between the grotesque and hysteria and what lies underneath.

Wood (2000: 45) imagined "Mr. Micawber and David Copperfield, so uncovered by theme and idea, so uninsured, weeping together in an upstairs room." Ferris, too, has peppered her book with weepers. Anka Silverberg, drawn in blue because she looks like she is always on the verge of tears. A little boy, crying deep in the unseen folds of a painting that hangs in a museum of art. A bride of Alucard, trapped and staked in a coffin. A best friend, weeping with the shame of having discarded an old friend to please her unyielding mother. Even the Valentine's Day decorations in windows weep tears of condensation. They are all tacked together by an invisible web, inextricably connected. There are tears in Ferris's attic. These tears

appear in suppressed memories, and in the horror comics and movies into which children and adults alike project their loneliness and anxiety. They are shed by humans, but they are shed by monsters, too. There are mobs that chase werewolves with silver bullets, and mobs that riot in Chicago following the martyrdom of a civil rights hero. Tears are shed over the easily relatable pain of being rejected by one's beloved, and tears are shed over the hopefully less familiar pain of finding a loved one murdered. Circles connect, creating triangles between them, and continue outwards until they reach the borders of our sight. The book teems over with feeling, and these feelings are all too real.

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