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Queer and Crip Reproduction as/in Comics: Networks of Belonging in Aminder Dhaliwal's *Woman World* (2018)

Abstract

This article explores queer/crip reproduction and intimacy in Aminder Dhaliwal's *Woman World* (2018). Drawing on Sara Ahmed's theories of queer phenomenology (2006) and pleasure (2004), Sami Schalk's take on crip pleasure (2024), Alice Wong's reflections on disability intimacy (2024), and recent scholarship in comics studies (Fawaz 2022, Baldanzi 2024), it situates *Woman World* as a queer/crip object that fosters embodied networks of belonging. Set in a world devoid of men, *Woman World* envisions a future where reproduction occurs through scientific means, allowing relationships to center on solidarity, kinship, and embodied intimacy. The depiction of queer/crip love between Layla, a disabled character, and her partner Lara, exemplifies Ahmed's and Schalk's notion of queer/crip pleasure as the convergence of bodies in both sexual and affective intimacy. *Woman World* also functions as an intimate companion for readers/viewers, especially those from queer/crip communities (who often experience structural exclusion). As a historically marginalized form, comics possess a unique capacity for fostering affective connections (Gibson 2023). The tactile and visual qualities of the hand-drawn medium enhance intimacy (Szép 2020), allowing readers/viewers to engage physically and emotionally with the text. As a queer/crip object, *Woman World* enables unexpected connections and fosters networks of belonging that resist hetero- and able-bodied-normativity.

Keywords: (North-)American comics, graphic embodiment, queer/crip object, queer/crip pregnancy, queer/crip reproduction.

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INTRODUCTION

Inspired by Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology and pleasure, Sami Schalk's notion of crip pleasure, Alice Wong's take on disability intimacy, and contemporary inquiries into embodiment in comics studies (Fawaz, Baldanzi), this article examines queer/crip reproduction as/in comics in Aminder Dhaliwal's[1] *Woman World* (2018). Considered a contemporary queer and feminist comics classic, *Woman World* (henceforth *WW*) introduces the reader/viewer[2] to a half-serious and half-humorous world in which men have become extinct.[3] Women must rebuild themselves as a community, navigating their way through the pitfalls of the binary utopian/dystopian thinking. The comics demonstrates, it is argued, how new networks of belonging based on intimacy may be forged both between *WW*, construed as a queer/crip object, and its reader/viewers, and between the fictional characters.

The article envisions the reader/viewer's relationship with comics as intimate companionship. Historically considered neither literature nor art, leastways not "high" literature and art (Hatfield, Lopes), comics have for years functioned on the margins of culture as "queer" objects. Building on this marginality, comics might also be further conceptualized as "crip:" as fragmented into panels, "prostheticized," with visual elements compensating for what (in this binary, the "ableist") prose supposedly does better. Such a critical perspective opens up a more nuanced contextualization of the relationship between the medium and non-normativity, one that expands the discussion about the representation of disability in comics (see Alaniz, Smith and Alaniz).

In their marginalization, comics have also developed more intimate ways of connecting with their audiences that extend beyond a mere commercial relationship (Gibson 287–307). *WW* provides a form of intimate queer/crip companionship for the reader/viewer who lacks a connection to a queer/crip community in real life. Ahmed explains in *Queer Phenomenology* (henceforth *QP*) that queer objects "mak[e] contact

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[1] Born in Canada but working in the United States, Dhaliwal has built a career in the US animation industry, working as a director, storyboard artist, and writer for major studios. She often comments on American politics in her work (Dhaliwal, "About"). She names Jillian Tamaki and Marjane Satrapi (especially *Persepolis*) as major influences shaping her style and sense of humor (Dhaliwal, "Rabble").

[2] Throughout this essay, I use the term "reader/viewer" to emphasize the dual mode of engagement that comics require: we both read the text and view the visual-spatial arrangements and images. This terminology reflects the multimodal literacy central to comics.

[3] While it might be argued that same-sex relationships are the new diegetic "norm" in the world of *WW*, the use of "queer" in this context is meant to signal that the comics destabilizes heteronormative frameworks and (re)orients intimacy.

possible" and "creat[e] other kinds of connections where unexpected things can happen" (169), which helps illuminate how comics function as queer/crip objects: they orient the reader/viewer toward alternative relational possibilities. The comics page in particular and *WW* as a comics book in general (literally a queer/crip object) enable contact and create non-discriminatory networks of belonging.

Respectively, one of the most prominent aspects of building those new networks, as visualized in *WW*, is the intimate relation between bodies and selves. Without men, the women reproduce without sex (with the help of artificial insemination or a newly developed scientific process that uses stem cells extracted from their own bone marrow) and thus focus in their relationships on building a queer/crip feminist "utopia" where intimacy, primarily based on solidarity and kinship, is nevertheless embodied. What complements this general network of belonging in *WW* are also more private visualizations of queer/crip love, such as the relationship between Layla, a character with a physical disability, and her lover Lara. As such, *WW* reproduces both what Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* calls "queer pleasure," that is "the coming together of bodies" both in "sexual intimacy" and in "the pleasure of opening up to other bodies" (165), and what disability scholars describe as crip pleasure. Crip pleasure foregrounds the embodied, political, and affective possibilities that emerge when disabled bodies claim desire on their own terms (brown and Schalk, Schalk). Reading *WW* through this lens aligns with Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price's ("Deleuzian Connections" and "Breaking the Boundaries") reflections on disability and (being) touch(ed), which help destabilize the fixed boundaries of disability. In this sense, Layla and Lara's relationship stages a queer/crip (re)orientation of intimacy.

Considering the above, the article starts with a survey of queer/crip intimate methodologies that inform the analysis of *WW* in the contexts of intimate relations between the comics and its readers/viewers as well as the respective characters, demonstrating how new networks of belonging are forged between them.

DEVIANT MATTERS: QUEER/CRIP INTIMATE METHODOLOGIES

"Intimacy is more than sex and romantic love. Intimacy is an ever-expanding universe composed of a myriad of heavenly bodies. Intimacy is about relationships within a person's self, with others, with communities, with nature and beyond," Alice Wong writes in the introduction to *Disability Intimacy*, hoping that her readers will "reexamine what intimacy can be"

(xviii). This reexamination, in my case a reading of *WW*, is based on a queer/crip intimate methodology that, to draw on Wong, I also conceive of in terms of "an ever-expanding universe," where queer/crip phenomenology, pleasure, and graphic narrative all intertwine, trying to capture, represent, and theorize something that thrives on the material—on physicality, belonging, and "the enduring place of human-to-human touch . . . in networks of connection that stretch from near to far" (Shildrick and Price, "Deleuzian Connections"). The methodological template constructed in this section, based on the writings of Sara Ahmed and Sami Schalk, will help analyze *WW* as a queer/crip object, site, and embodiment of networks of belonging.

In her investigation of sexual orientation in relation to phenomenological orientation presented in *QP*, Ahmed argues that desire, identity, and body are shaped by the directions one takes toward objects and others. "Phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies," the feminist scholar writes, "insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, . . . the significance of nearness," both of which are further shaped by emotions as forms of "(re)orientation" as essentially intimate because "the orientations we have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting the relations of proximity and distance between bodies" (2–3). When one orients oneself toward certain people or objects, one makes them proximate, reachable, and (potentially) intimate. When one turns away, they become distant, invisible, and undesirable. A powerful example Ahmed uses in *QP* considers home, a safe and familiar space (10–11), that is intimacy embodied and inhabited, which, when queered, says as much about belonging as about non-belonging. Ahmed writes:

> "[T]he family home" seems so full of traces of heterosexual intimacy that it is hard to take up my place without feeling those traces as points of pressure. In such moments, [bodies] might feel "out of place" where they have been given "a place." Such feelings in turn point to other places, even ones that have yet to be inhabited. (11–12)

(Non)belonging in certain places and spaces allows for exploring queer/crip intimacy, (re)orienting it as a process of inhabitation that is dynamic, relational, and contextual, that both resides in and affects or directs the body.

As Ahmed further explains in *QP*, drawing on the metaphor and the materiality of the line, which guides one's life, "mak[ing] certain things, and not others, available" (14), we follow certain lines simply because they have been directed towards us, at times failing to realize the constrictions such an illusionary "choice" offers. "We follow the line that is followed by

others," Ahmed writes, "the repetition of the act of following makes the line disappear from view as the point from which 'we' emerge" (15, 17). Queer, and by extension crip (see Kolářová and Koobak 218), phenomenology is thus in equal measure about the uneasiness triggered by a lack of intimacy, or non-belonging, and intimacy which conceals the existence of other possible directions. To adopt a heterosexual/ableist orientation entails not only orienting oneself toward the objects prescribed and legitimized by heterosexual/ableist norms, but also actively disengaging from, or rejecting, those objects and/of desires that deviate from or disrupt this prescribed trajectory, insofar as "[t]he queer object within straight culture . . . deviates and is made socially present as a deviant" (Ahmed, *QP* 21). Some bodies and objects belong (in)to spaces, cultures, and norms, while others do not.

Ahmed reflects on the familiar table as an intimate object that may shape one's identity as a writer, as both a profession and an aspiration, since it makes one "orient" oneself "around writing" (56). The table is thus exemplary in navigating and configuring bodies in space, raising further questions about "what kind of objects bodies 'tend toward' in their tendencies, as well as how such tendencies shape what bodies tend toward" (57). As mentioned above, oftentimes the nature of this relationship is repetitive and socially conditioned: limited by the fact that certain spaces are already "occupied" by other, most often heterosexual/ableist, bodies and norms.

Queer/crip objects and bodies, intimately connected to one another and to space, thus disrupt and reconfigure their surroundings and themselves. Ahmed writes: "When bodies take up spaces that they were not intended to inhabit, something other than the reproduction of the facts of the matter happens. The hope that reproduction fails is the hope for new impressions, for new lines to emerge, new objects, or even new bodies" (62). Belonging and non-belonging, as well as forging intimate connections, "involv[e] hard work" and are "a form of action" (63, 102). This labor of intimacy is directed against "reproduction," defined by Ahmed in terms of the reproduction of oppressive norms (62). Queer/crip objects, bodies, and spaces, as and in *WW*, are deviant, thus reconfiguring intimacy. Ultimately, Ahmed concludes, we investigate "how they gather, how they perform, to create the edges of spaces and worlds" (167). In other words, queer/crip (re)orientations produce alternative spatial and/as social arrangements, creating new worlds and destabilizing the edges of existing ones.

In being "deviant," a term which, following Ahmed, I also connect with the (re)orientations of crip/queer as "fluid and ever-changing, claimed by those whom it did not originally define" (Sandahl 27), they are not only disorienting but also, in the intimacy they embody and forge, function as a source of queer/crip pleasure. Queer pleasure, a phenomenon

essential to the understanding of intimacy yet sometimes overshadowed by queer alienation (see Dyer, *Now You See It* 133–40; Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* 1–8, 15–23; Careless and Cotton 10–28), is also fundamentally deviant. Likewise, crip pleasure deconstructs the normative boundaries of the experience. "We're whole and happy," Schalk writes, "when we fight against the ways that the world believes that some people are less worthy of good lives and happiness" (168).

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed explains how "emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (10). Emotions are in her understanding political, insofar as they are—as a response, movement (being moved by something), effect—a kind of "world making" (12). Ahmed analyzes, among others, fear, disgust, and shame "as different kinds of orientations towards objects and others, which shape individual as well as collective bodies" (15). Moving beyond the negativity of alienation, she focuses on love, pleasure, and intimacy in queer and feminist contexts in the two closing chapters of the book. Queer pleasure, Ahmed writes, is envisioned as a form of affective disruption to heteronormativity by adopting what it marks as shameful (164). Queer pleasure does not simply transform shame into pride but instead "challenge[s] the designation of queer as abject" (163). Crip pleasure operates in a similar way, countering and transforming shame into a site of resistance (Schalk 170).

Both further engage with space (boundaries), power, and activism. Ahmed explains that there is "an important spatial relation between pleasure and power. Pleasure involves not only the capacity to enter into, or inhabit with ease, social space, but also functions as a form of entitlement and belonging" (*Politics* 165). Transcending sexuality, important as it may be, queer/crip pleasure reconfigures how queer/crip bodies inhabit the world and relate to one another: "When bodies touch and give pleasure to bodies that have been barred from contact, then those bodies are reshaped. . . . Queer pleasures are not just about the coming together of bodies in sexual intimacy" (ibid.). As a Black disabled queer woman, Schalk analogously explains how "[p]leasure activism has helped [her] find less hurtful ways to take care of [her]self" (170), literally allowing her to open up to other bodies and spaces. "Creating pleasure with people the world hurts," in that sense, "creates change" (173). Queer/crip pleasure, by inviting contact, unsettles "the boundaries between sameness and difference," between "the 'purity' of the 'healthy" body" and its "contaminated others—disease, disability, lack of control" (Shildrick and Price, "Breaking the Boundaries" 439).

Intimacy, sexual or not, allows queer/crip bodies (and objects) to expose the constraints of hetero- and able-bodied normativity both

in private and public. This dynamic operates similarly to what Keren Moscovitch calls "radical intimacy," which is an artistic and social practice that positions intimacy beyond its socially sanctioned boundaries, so that it becomes a powerful "disruption of ideological constructs" (2).

COMICS AS QUEER/CRIP OBJECTS

Ahmed's and Schalk's views of queer/crip phenomenology and pleasure, located at the intersection of bodies, objects, and spaces, provide a thought-provoking platform for conceptualizing and working with comics. I propose to think of *WW* as a queer/crip object that, for one, makes an intervention in what Pierre Bourdieu calls the literary field (24, 47–57, 215–42) and, secondly, offers a form of intimate companionship to the reader/viewer.

While they may have been elevated to the status of "serious literature" in recent years, as demonstrated, for instance, by the critical acclaim garnered by Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, comics historically grew out of a turf that is as removed from the literary model (Miodrag 390–98) as from art history (Gray and Horton 1–9). They are in that respect fundamentally queer and crip. Still, the history of mainstream comics, works from the Golden and Silver Ages (from the 1930s to the 1970s), and most titles published by such powerhouses as Marvel and DC, is largely heteronormative, "full of traces of heterosexual intimacy" (Ahmed, *QP* 11), and ableist. Comics whose tradition *WW* continues make an intervention in that space, being queer/crip among the already othered. Bodies which "tend toward" such objects (57) find their home there.

WW in fact draws on the legacy of the comix underground scene—a rebellious, artist-driven comics movement that flourished in the 1970s, fueled by the counterculture's rejection of the mainstream. In the 1970s, Mary Wings and Roberta Gregory broke ground with early lesbian comics like *Come Out Comix* and *Dynamite Damsels*, and the 1980s saw the rise of LGBTQ+ magazines such as *Gay Comix* (Aldama 2–3). By the 1990s, zines allowed many queer artists to express themselves (Galvan 178–205). Both the status of comics and their form lent themselves to intimate queer (and crip) expression, where, as Ramzi Fawaz explains in *Queer Forms*, the language of comics, characterized by fragmentation, juxtaposition, and sequencing, reflects queer/crip epistemologies that resist "norms"—linearity and coherence (6–7)—much in the way described by Ahmed and Schalk. Deviant comics language, the very interplay between panels and gutters as well as word and image, unsettle stable interpretations. This further aligns with political efforts to destabilize fixed categories,

and the medium's visual and sequential flexibility lends itself to depicting characters and bodies that evolve and defy categorizations (9–12).

WW is thus not an isolated experiment but a deliberate continuation of that deviant comics lineage. Dhaliwal initially began *WW* as a serialized webcomic, in early 2017, after participating in the Women's March in Los Angeles ("Rabble"). Taken up by Drawn & Quarterly, it expanded into a more than 250-page long graphic narrative which strategically—through queer/crip modalities—adhered to the formal poetics of fragments, pieces, and disorientations. Framed by an introduction (1–29) and an epilogue (250–57) executed in color and relying on full-page drawings, the body of *WW* (30–247) is minimalistic and black-and-white. There are between four and six square and rectangular panels per page arranged in two to three rows,[4] whose constellations never settle into a predictable and regular visual rhythm but instead vary, morph, and do not follow the straight, normative lines or patterns critiqued by Ahmed, Schalk, and Fawaz.

This formal deviance is further enhanced and elevated by the comics' status as a queer/crip object, as a physical, printed text with which the reader/viewer may form an intimate connection, insofar as queer/crip bodies gather around queer/crip objects and through them connect with other queer/crip bodies (Ahmed, *Politics* 165–67). Conceptualized as a queer/crip object, *WW* both stems from and forges "other kinds of connections where unexpected things can happen" (Ahmed, *QP* 169), where word, image, line, space, physicality, representation, reproduction (as multiplication), grassroots newspapers, underground series, fandoms, and communities meet. This connection between form, semantics, and physicality is also subtly emphasized in *WW* by queer/crip meta-objects, namely colorful and detailed drawings of two statues featured on two corresponding pages (84–85, 140–41, 190–91). They appear three times in the comics, further interrupting what is already a fragmented graphic narrative. Both statues present semi-naked women, embodiments of classic art and beauty, in their original setting: that is, before the end of men. They metaphorically represented abundance and justice, (ab)using and sexualizing women's bodies in the process of patriarchal meaning-

[4] This structure, in turn, is based on Dhaliwal's creative process: she used post-it notes, each functioning as a single panel. Dhaliwal developed *WW* initially on Instagram ("Rabble"), a platform that itself "queers" the conventional, print-first path by centering immediacy and community-driven circulation (other titles followed a similar trajectory; for example, Tillie Walden's 2018 *On a Sunbeam*). Dhaliwal's creative process, marked, as she puts it, by "re-doing," that is "re-writing" and "re-drawing" ("Comics Q&A"), is documented on the penultimate page of *WW*. A reproduced photograph shows countless yellow pieces of paper covered with drawings (Dhaliwal, *WW* 258). It is in and of itself an intimate sight, foregrounding Dhaliwal's fragmentary method.

making. Repeatedly depicted in *WW*, in different stages of decay, they function as both bodies and statues, as remnants of the patriarchal past, which the comics does not so much violently destroy as ignores or, in Ahmed's words, fails to "reproduce" (*QP* 62). *WW* as an object and the bodies that engage with it are liberated from heterosexual and ableist norms in Dhaliwal's comics as a result of a long yet peaceful (re)orientation. The final double-page shows both statues fractured and covered in moss (*WW* 190–91). Their eventual decomposition demonstrates that when the social forces that maintain oppressive normative frameworks as "natural" cease to operate, the construct fails as well.

This slow, almost organic undoing of patriarchal symbols in *WW* demonstrates how the material and the conceptual come together in an embodied, relational experience of reading. Comics forge intimacy through the interplay of image, text, and space, drawing the reader/viewer into deep emotional and cognitive engagement (Simpson). This closeness lies not just in what they depict but in the act of reading itself: the reader/viewer holds the object, turns its pages, and connects the gaps and gutters in the process of "closure" (McCloud 63). As Benjamin Fraser writes, "the page is a relationship that cuts both ways": "This interaction is an affective form of thought, thinking that is already relational and conditioned by bodies" (89).

Contemporary inquiries into embodiment in comics studies (Szép, Cressman and DeTora, Baldanzi) further inform the understanding of comics as queer/crip objects through the double materiality of drawing and the body (of both the artist and the characters). Following Jessica Baldanzi, embodiment in *WW* may be conceptualized as a site of resistance and reimagination (2–3). In and through her drawings of queer, disabled, and intersectional characters, Dhaliwal critiques dominant visual tropes of femininity and gender representation. While her characters embrace sexuality, they are not sexualized or fetishized, a problem which remains one of the cardinal sins of mainstream comics (3). In Dhaliwal's "woman world," as one of the elders proclaims, a woman is not construed by "anything specific," be it "period," "breasts," or ability to bear children (*WW* 168). The running joke throughout the comics is the new flag of the town the women inhabit, namely the powerful and inspiring "Beyoncé's Thighs" (37). While the essentialized idea of a vagina as a symbol is discussed, it is ultimately dismissed because it does not "represent the scope of womankind" (36). Belonging in Dhaliwal's "woman world" is, if anything, based on declaring that one is willing to be a part of the community and this invitation, interlaced with jokes but nevertheless earnest, is extended to the reader/viewer as well.

The cast of fictional characters living in Beyoncé's Thighs is presented on the final page of the introduction (29). Their identities reorient the

lines of gender, race, age, and ability, exploring the themes of feminist community and resilience. Ulaana, the matriarch of the group, is a trans woman. The Doctor, a tall woman of South Asian descent, has had a mastectomy, and two scars are visible on her bare chest (Fig. 1). Gaia, the "mayor" of the town, is a full-figured woman with light skin and long hair who manifests her bodily autonomy through nudity. Lara, the town's carpenter, is a young woman with dark skin and curly hair. Layla, one of the disabled characters, uses a prosthetic leg (Fig. 2). Layla's disability expands the comics' broad interest in embodied difference and demonstrates that disabled embodiment—prostheticized or otherwise—participates in, and potentially redefines, the intimate.[5] This recalls the critical work of artists such as Nomy Lamm, who foreground the erotic potential of prostheticized bodies through explicitly autobiographical practice. Dhaliwal's engagement with queer/crip embodiment unfolds in the realm of fiction but it also renders Layla as both sexual/desiring and desired. Both Lamm's and Dhaliwal's critical practices thus point to "the dangers of invisibility that arise when disabled individuals are viewed as desexualized, passive, infantile, and dependent" (Kafai 183). Beyond Layla and Lara's relationship, which forms the central romantic story in *WW*, Dhaliwal also introduces Ina, a character who is desperately in love with Layla, craving for touch and physical contact (48–49, 56, 70, 114–15, 119, 159, 165, 214–15). The futuristic setting allows Dhaliwal to draw a world where disability, intimacy, and sexuality are reconfigured, with desire circulating around and through queer/crip embodiment. This act of "imagining different futures and temporalities," in turn, allows us to "see, and do, the present differently" (Kafer 28).

QUEER/CRIP REPRODUCTION AND NETWORKS OF BELONGING

One of the central elements in the construction of new networks of belonging, as depicted in *WW*, is the interplay between corporeality and identity. The absence of men and a queer, crip (and) feminist utopia created in the aftermath of their natural extinction, with fewer boys being born every year (Dhaliwal, *WW* 3–10), foregrounds the characters' embodiment as reproductive agents, engaging critically with traditional roles assigned to female bodies. Just as home is discussed by Ahmed in *QP* as a space

[5] Importantly, Layla's portrayal defies what Wälivaara calls "the medical model" of showing disability in science-fiction and futuristic texts "in which disability is considered in relation to cures" (229). Layla's prosthetic leg is part of her embodied self, not a "problem" she or the narrative seeks to fix.

of oppression, "so full of traces of heterosexual intimacy that it is hard to take up . . . place without feeling those traces as points of pressure" (12), reproduction is inhabited anew in *WW* by queer/crip bodies. Ahmed further explains that, historically, reproduction inscribed in heterosexual contexts served to discipline queer pleasure:

> Whilst sexual pleasure within the West may now be separated from the task or duty of reproduction, it remains tied in some way to the fantasy of being reproductive: one can enjoy sex with a body that it is imagined one could be reproductive with. Queer pleasures might be legitimate here, as long as "the queer" is only a passing moment in the story of heterosexual coupling ("queer as an enjoyable distraction"). (*Politics* 163)

Feminist dystopias and utopias, a tradition to which *WW* also refers, have long used speculative frameworks to interrogate and reconfigure the politics of reproduction, severing sexual desire from the reproductive imaginary (see Kafer, Wagner-Lawlor). Women-only reproduction functions in such texts not merely as a biological alternative but a reimagining of kinship, intimacy, and social organization.

Alison Kafer's critical investigation of crip/queer futurity and pleasure helps us imagine how queer/crip bodies might (re)orient reproductive imaginaries (26–46). *WW* points to these questions at the general level, hoping to, to draw on Kafer, "articulate a queercrip time that does not oppose queerness to longevity yet maintains a critical stance toward hegemonic expectations of (re)productivity" (44). The comics explicitly, yet in a fragmentary manner (as suit for the medium), shows Lara and Layla discussing the possibility of having a baby together (*WW* 206–07), and this moment both opens and closes space for queercrip reproductive futures (Lara is ultimately unable to commit). Although the comics does not frame Layla's disability as shaping her relationship to reproduction, her presence unsettles normative assumptions about who is positioned as a bearer of the future, insofar as the queer/crip allows us to reflect on the very notion of futurity and/versus chronicity (Kolářová and Koobak 218). Lara's anxiety (but not refusal), in turn, highlights the ambivalence that often surrounds queer/crip reproductive visions—even in feminist texts[6]—revealing both the possibilities and the limits of the future the comics constructs. In this context, "[t]his time of anticipation is itself a kind of queer liminality, living always in anticipation of the moment that has not yet arrived" (Kafer 66), where Layla and Lara's child occupies a space of possibility that is neither erased nor, however, fully imagined.

[6] See Kafer's critique of Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) as feminist utopia which erases disabled people (69–85).

WW, in and through queer/crip reproduction, further traces and interrogates two phenomena. One concerns new ways of home-making and/as world-making and belonging. The old patriarchal family home is radically re-possessed and re-inhabited. Queer/crip bodies begin to "mak[e] the strange familiar through the extension of [their] bodies into" the previously hetero- and able-bodied-normative space (Ahmed, *QP* 11). The other revolves around queer pleasure and intimacy conceptualized "beyond" reproduction, insofar as queerness may also disrupt the very imperative to reproduce (Edelman 25–31). "[T]he movement away from oppressive families of origin toward alternative structures of belonging," Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman further explain, "may offer intimacy, care, eroticism, and dependency in other forms: throuples, friendships, cousins, mentors, companionate marriages, nesting partners, roommates, queer platonic partnerships" (13). This reimagining of kinship in *WW* resonates with a longer history of queer/crip reproduction.



Fig. 1. Alternative methods of woman-only reproduction. *Woman World*, Drawn & Quarterly, 2018, p. 192. Copyright Aminder Dhaliwal. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly.

For one, reproduction is re-possessed and re-inhabited in *WW* through technological advancements. One involves artificial insemination, that is relying on the few remaining sperm banks whose deposits are, due to scarcity, rationed (Dhaliwal, *WW* 136, 186). This method, in a wider historical context, is both a nod towards and a reflection of the queer grassroots reproductive groups which first emerged in the US in the 1970s and developed in the 1980s, allowing lesbian women to conceive through artificial insemination, often with the help of gay male donors, as the first sperm bank available to lesbian and single women opened in California only in 1982 (Matthiesen 224). An alternative innovative scientific procedure involves stem cells derived from women's bone marrow (Fig. 1).

Reproduction is thus no longer tied to sex. This (re)orientation of/in reproduction enables the formation of relationships centered on solidarity and kinship, while remaining grounded in physicality, touch, bodily interaction, and mutual care. Women are no longer forced to perform their roles as reproductive bodies, but those who choose to become pregnant are supported by the entire community (Dhaliwal, *WW* 186–87), which may constitute a playful utopian take on the phrase "it takes a village to raise a child."

Complementing this broader communal framework in *WW* are intimate portrayals of queer/crip love, exemplified by the relationship between Layla and Lara (Fig. 2).

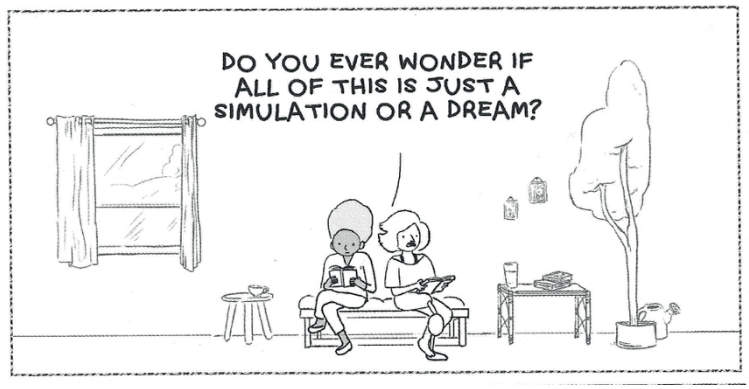


Fig. 2. An intimate portrayal of Lara and Layla. *Woman World*, Drawn & Quarterly, 2018, p. 146 (single panel). Copyright Aminder Dhaliwal. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly.

Their relationship, weaved into the greater tapestry of other non-romantic forms of belonging (grandmother–granddaughter, the elder–the young, doctor–patient, friends, co-workers, etc.), lies at the heart of *WW*. The respective panels and sequences often show Lara and Layla being intimate

(talking, arguing, joking, dancing, kissing, hugging, touching, protecting and helping one another) and thus acting as both subjects and objects of care and desire (56, 70, 83, 86, 90, 134, 142, 146–47, 151, 160–61, 164, 194, 206–07, 222–23, 232–33, 244). Their intimacy—emotional, relational, and occasionally erotic—is grounded in connection and closeness rather than in (normative) sexual sequences. These depictions resonate with Ahmed's (*Politics* 165) and Schalk's (170) concepts of queer/crip pleasure seen as the convergence of bodies in both sexual intimacy and affective openness.

Queer/crip pleasure and intimacy in *WW*, to once again refer to Ahmed's examples involving the family home and the table, are both products and triggers of (re)orientations. Likewise, the focus on both desire *and* care in Lara and Layla's relationship is meant to expand the concept of intimacy beyond what some disability critics call the superficiality of touch and nakedness. Ashley Volion explains, for example, in her conversation with fellow disability scholar Akemi Nishida, how due to her condition she is required to undress and be touched by healthcare professionals every day, though rarely in intimate contexts; therefore, she defines intimacy as "something *deeper*. . . . Intimacy for disabled people can be more of an emotional connection but on a *deeper level*. It is this moment of intimacy when you're seen fully. That can be rare" (96, emphasis in the original). In showing Lara and Layla engaged in intimacy, *WW* desires to see them fully and thus redefine physical/sexual intimacy, important as it is, into a form of engagement that is molded and shaped into something that feels right for them (101). Instead of foregrounding explicit sexual acts, the comics emphasizes gestures of care, shared routines, and comfort. As mentioned earlier, comics as a medium struggled with the sexualization and fetishization of bodies; *WW* avoids such visual economies. In this sense, the intimate is felt in the ways bodies relate to one another.

Looking at Lara and Layla's relationship through the combined lens of queer/crip theories further demonstrates how the binaries of "normal/abnormal," "disabled/non-disabled," and "heterosexual/homosexual" rely on an unmarked norm—an "invisible center"—that upholds them as compulsory (Kafer 8–17; Santinele Martino and Fudge Schormans 57). In its conceptual makeup, *WW* eradicates this "invisible center," and as such queer/crip intimacy is both positioned in the sphere of the utopian/fictional or "inclusive futures" (Wälivaara 235), and critically juxtaposed with the dystopian/real or the discriminatory present. In *WW*, both disabled and non-disabled characters desire, are desired, and enter fulfilling relationships.

What is most "utopian" about *WW* is how it challenges existing structures and envisions transformative (re)orientations. Unlike some futuristic texts, it does not adopt "absence of disability" as a sign of a "better future" (Kafer 2). Instead, it asks: can you imagine a world where Lara and Layla's relationship exists on such terms? In answering this question, the reader/viewer is once

again asked to either accept or decline the invitation to join the fictional (that is utopian) yet tangible (physical, hand-drawn) community. Not to position themselves on the outside looking in but as active actors in the networks of belonging forged by the comics. In a way, the question of reproduction is reiterated, but it concerns the willingness to reproduce the utopian in the real. For one last time, the comics conceptually and physically envisions this new "woman world" in the epilogue (Dhaliwal, *WW* 250–57) as both "the coming together of bodies" (Ahmed, *Politics* 165) and of words and images. The future involves, as the captions announce, "appreciating loved ones," "strengthening the community," and "spreading love," and the corresponding drawings show, respectively, Lara and Layla lying together in a field of grass, with Layla's head resting on Lara's stomach (Dhaliwal, *WW* 250); the mayor Gaia listening to the voices of everyone who lives in the town (251); and one of the younger girls in the community, Naomi, feeding a stray cat (255). Banal as they may seem, these are radical acts of intimacy.

CONCLUSION

One of the first things Wong mentions in her introduction to *Disability Visibility* has to do with the political, activist, and communal power of storytelling which, importantly, need not be confined only to "a blog post, essay, or book" (xviii) and should, I argue, also include comics. By drawing on the theoretical frameworks of queer/crip phenomenology and pleasure, this article explores the dynamics of queer/crip reproduction and intimacy in *WW*, arguing that it may function as a site for reimagining networks of belonging. Graphic narratives can disrupt normative paths and offer radical (re)orientations of intimacy, belonging, and identity, thus contributing to the broader discourse on queer/crip intimacy. Ultimately, the comics invites readers/viewers to reconsider the possibilities of intimacy and community in a world which challenges oppressive norms: we are meant to enact the change, to participate in its reproduction in the real. The pleasure of reading, to draw on Ahmed for one last time, "functions as a form of entitlement and belonging" (*Politics* 165).

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