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Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles*: Teaching Queer Caregiving Memoir on Disability, and Pedagogy as Resistance

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Sarah Leavitt's graphic novel *Tangles: A story about Alzheimer's, my mother and me* (2010, 2011 UK), in relation to queer identity, feminist wilfulness (Ahmed, 2014), and critical disability studies. *Tangles* takes up themes of lesbianism, disability, and activism, and it does so through storytelling. Studies around life writing and disability, including the dementia disease Alzheimer's, point the reader strongly toward recognition of the key importance of storytelling in the preservation of selfhood. Whose stories are told, and whose are not, and by whom? How can or does patient selfhood emerge or survive in caregiving narratives written and/or drawn by others? This article examines graphic memoir in the contexts of Comics Studies, Canadian Gender Studies and Critical Disability Studies.

Keywords: Alzheimer's, graphic medicine, disability, memoir, intergenerational trauma

INTRODUCTION

I am a Canadian Gender Studies academic living with disability, and it has seemed to me timely to revisit Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles: A Story About Alzheimer's, My Mother and Me* (2010, 2011 UK), in light of current events. I am writing this article as a call to use graphic novels in teaching to fight back against hate directed at minority groups, and for teachers to consider the potential that Comics Studies has to serve as a platform for positive LGBTQ+ texts, and for narratives that engage actively with disability. In June of the summer of 2023, a former student walked into a Gender Studies class at the University of Waterloo, in Canada, and stabbed the professor and two students, in what police described at the time as a planned hate crime; I suggest that more education is needed, so in this article I will revisit how queer creativity can provide a useful teaching aid in the classroom.[1] It is important to work towards more inclusive classrooms and ways of teaching, and visual learning is accessible for students. The Graphic Medicine Movement teaches how valuable comics can be in the classroom.[2] Graphic medicine, a phrase coined in 2007 by Ian Williams to describe the interaction between the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare, has become a large international area of research, study, and art-creation. In her chapter on 'The Uses of Graphic Medicine for Engaged Scholarship,' in *The Graphic Medicine Manifesto,* Susan Merrill Squier argues that graphic medicine promotes:

> engaged scholarship beyond the medical or health humanities. This category includes women's studies, environmental studies, disability studies, and science and technology studies, as well as critical race studies, queer studies, and animal studies. Each of these areas has a mandate for real-world commitment and engagement that comics can serve well. (2015: 43)

On Disability Studies, Squier observes that '[c]omics can play a powerful role in DS by framing disability as an experience that may include but also frequently transcends the medical context' (2015: 49).

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[1] https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/university-of-waterloo-vivek-goel-gender-course-continues-1.6897673 (Accessed 6 July 2023). https://www.cp24.com/news/u-of-waterloo-stabbing-at-gender-studies-class-amounts-to-terrorism-prosecutors-1.6554045 (Accessed June 2, 2024).
[2] https://www.graphicmedicine.org/ (Accessed September 16, 2023).

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Continuing with the engaged classroom as a goal, I turn here to bell hooks, and to her foundational call within feminist critical pedagogy for educators to challenge simple ideas around the mind-body split in the classroom. hooks says:

> While I wanted teaching to be my career, I believed that personal success was intimately linked with self-actualization. My passion for this quest led me to interrogate constantly the mind /body split that was so often taken to be a given. Most professors were often deeply antagonistic toward, even scornful of, any approach to learning emerging from a philosophical standpoint emphasizing the union of mind, body, and spirit, rather than the separation of these elements (1994: 18).

The comics classroom encourages a reading engagement with the body as well as the mind, and such a visual-verbal double impact can support work towards integration of the reader's senses, especially in relation to the often-difficult materials represented in graphic medicine.

In Rosemary Garland Thomson's groundbreaking *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (2017), the Preface points out that while the book was a 'latecomer' in feminist literary and critical race studies, it was at the forefront of Critical Disability Studies. Garland Thomson reminds the reader that establishing Critical Disability Studies was the product of activism as well as scholarship, of networking, of protests, all with "disability diversity as a political and ethical goal" (2017: ix). In a similar way and responding to this call, *Tangles* takes up themes of queerness, disability, and activism and it does so through storytelling. Martina Zimmerman's work in *The Poetics and Politics of Alzheimer's Disease Life-Writing* (2017) brings literary and medical work together to emphasise that patients' voices must be made central to dementia discourse, and considered in relation to broader discussions around caregiving, aging, dementia, and Alzheimer's patients. Zimmerman's work around life writing and disability, including Alzheimer's, can point the reader strongly toward a recognition of the key importance of storytelling in the preservation of selfhood, however imperfectly. Such narratives will consider: whose stories are told, and whose are not, and by whom? Readers also need to consider: can or does patient selfhood emerge or survive in caregiving narratives written and/or drawn by others?

The *Tangles* part of the book's title invokes the tangles of Alzheimer's itself – the neurodegenerative disease is caused by the accumulation of proteins called neurofibrillary tangles in the brain. Leavitt's graphic memoir tracks her family's care for her mother Midge after her diagnosis with early-onset Alzheimer's disease, at the age of 52, to her death. There are other tangles in the memoir: in family roles, in relationships between the sisters Sarah and Hannah, in people's hair, in queer feminist life for Sarah, in the creation of her tangled archive of notes and sketches about Midge's experience that become this graphic memoir later, over a period of four years of drawing and learning. Throughout this article, I will use 'Leavitt' to denote the author/artist, and the name 'Sarah' to denote the character of the author as represented in the story. In her introduction, Leavitt concludes that '[i]n the end, this is only my story: the tangled story of my mother, and me, and Alzheimer's' (2010, 2011: 8). The book negotiates the simultaneous presence and absence of Midge, physically and mentally, and asks difficult questions about the representation of disability and aging, questions that are now, in 2024, being taken up in the world of digital storytelling, so valuable to disability arts, and disability activism, and the evolving engaged classroom. Leavitt's *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, My Mother, and Me* is also being adapted for film.[3]

Tangles is a queer, feminist contribution to life-writing, and graphic medicine, which as the *Graphic Medicine Manifesto* defines, is the 'intersection of the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare' (2015: 1).[4] My own approach to comics study is 'an intersectional, feminist one, invested in the many and various ways in which a large body of women's comics art makes a point of expressing interconnections between gender, race, class, nation, and sexuality' (Tolmie, 2013: ix). The cross-connections between caregiving, the politics of queer resistance, and mother-daughter closeness are laid out in an early set of images of mother and daughter appearing together at the same political event. Leavitt's spare black and white renditions of a protest of queer people, with the note that she had never called herself queer before, is made funny and approachable by her mother joining in the protest and adding to the chants of 'We're here, we're queer!' with her own version: 'We're here, we're straight, we're also great!' (2010, 2011: 69). The bond between mother and daughter, between straight and queer, is a key theme in the text. The fragility and precarity of it all is laid out clearly too, as Sarah introduces her mother to a friend who was subjected to domestic violence, and readers know from the book's title that that invocation of 'great' is fragile and temporary.

Hillary Chute in *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics,* says:

[3] https://freehand-books.com/sarah-leavitts-tangles-on-the-big-screen/ (Accessed June 2, 2024). It will be a feature-length animated movie produced in collaboration by Monarch Media, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Point Grey Pictures, Lylas Pictures and Giant Ant Films.

[4] https://www.graphicmedicine.org/ (Accessed July 6, 2023).

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> I am interested in bringing the medium of comics – its conventions, its violation of the conventions, *what it does differently* — to the forefront of conversations about the political, aesthetic, and ethical work of narrative (2010: 3).

Similarly, I want to focus in here on the political, aesthetic, and ethical work done in *Tangles,* which carefully represents the mother's work of allyship. Without claiming claims for herself, or naming names for herself, the character of Midge Leavitt is represented as doing the quiet, sustained *work* of allyship with her lesbian daughter, and readers see that work, represented in the book's text and images, and by extension offers the teacher the potential for discussions of allyship as labour in the classroom.

Figure 1. Sarah Leavitt. 'Untitled' (*Tangles,* 2011: 16). Used with permission.

In **Figure 1**, Midge and Sarah attend a demonstration against police violence together. In *Willful Subjects* (2014), self-described feminist killjoy author Sara Ahmed describes wilfulness as a 'sweaty concept' that 'involves persistence in the face of having been brought down […]. Mere persistence can be an act of disobedience' (2014: 2). I want to focus in this article on the classroom as a potential space of persistence, as pedagogy as persisting in the face of having been brought down, threatened, and made dangerous. Academics in Canada teaching things like reproductive justice are routinely consulted about safety plans, and not putting our classroom numbers and student names out publicly, partly as a result of the 2023 stabbing, but also because educators remember the antifeminist mass shooting of women in 1989, at the École Polytechnique in Montreal. In this terrible incident, fourteen women were murdered; another ten women and four men were injured[5]. Teaching narratives such as Leavitt's beautiful, loving caregiving memoir is a quiet form of resistance and persistence in feminist pedagogy, in a context in which protests around so-called gender indoctrination in public education are being still being staged outside Canadian universities. On September 20th, 2023, conservative right-wing activists planned nationwide events to protest teaching queer curriculum content in Canadian schools, using the rhetoric of 'protecting the children'. According to the activists' description of the protest, it was: 'A day to unite all religions in the defence of children against LGBTQ+ indoctrination in Canadian schools.'[6] I lectured about these protests, and made it clear that in my university classroom, LGBTQ+ material is welcome, and as readers learn from the character of Midge in *Tangles*, it is something to be welcomed. In a political context in which in the Americas and other continents, the language of protection of children is being invoked to advocate book banning, the erasure of history and of lived experience alike, and the increased marginalisation of already-marginalised groups, the burden falls on us as educators to respond with counter arguments.[7]

Ahmed (2017) also identifies wilfulness as a key aspect of feminism in *Living a Feminist Life,* noting that the word '*willfulness* implies the problem with being feminist is feminist being' and is related to the 'acquisition of a voice' (2017: 71, 73). Her analysis foregrounds such concepts as resistance, refusal, and disruption, and moments in which '(t)o be called willful is an explanation of why we ruin things' (2017: 73), Ahmed's introduction of the

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[5] https://engineerscanada.ca/news-and-events/news/remembering-the-montreal-massacre-30-years-later (Accessed June 2, 2024).

[6] https://blueprintforcanada.ca/planned_protests.html (Accessed September 16, 2023).

[7] Some people consider this to be a period of crisis for LGBTQ+ rights in the USA. Human Rights Campaign declared a state of emergency in 2023. https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/06/us/hrc-lgbtq-emergency-declared/index.html (Accessed June 2, 2024).

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concept of wilfulness concludes with the assertion that the feminist's 'willfulness or obstinacy means that she makes the world about herself' because she is not 'willing to recede' (2017: 75). Her subsequent discussion of wilfulness presents wilfulness as a 'diagnosis', centrally connected to self-expression, acts of understanding and misunderstanding, and of course, to resistant and recalcitrant attitudes and behaviours (2017: 75). Her diagnosis of wilfulness is about harnessing both control and resistance, and can also be about the loss of both things. Caregiving memoirs, similarly, spring from an interrogation of our relations and connections to care; care, too, is often connected to resistance, disruption, and to things being formed, ruined, or spun out of control. It is a form of wilfulness, that it is not willing to let the cared-for recede.

Leavitt's *Tangles* documents her mother's Alzheimer's diagnosis at the early age of 52 and the subsequent degenerative processes of the disease as its affects both her mother's body-mind and spreads outward into the well-being of the entire family. Sami Schalk (2018) uses the word bodymind in her work on speculative fiction in *Bodyminds: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction,* the mind is extraordinary, and in this caregiving memoir the protagonist and her mother try (and fail) to prevent it from receding. Other disability books also represent this theme of the disappearing mind within their book; one such example is *Uncanny Bodies: Superhero Comics and Disability* (2019) edited by Scott T. Smith and José Alaniz. Leavitt kept sketches and notes throughout the period of her mother's illness and up to her death, and those sketches and notes became this book. Ian Williams, in the *Graphic Medicine Manifesto,* observes that graphic medicine 'combines the principles of narrative medicine with an exploration of the visual systems of comic art, interrogating the representation of physical and emotional signs and symptoms within the medium' (2015: 1).

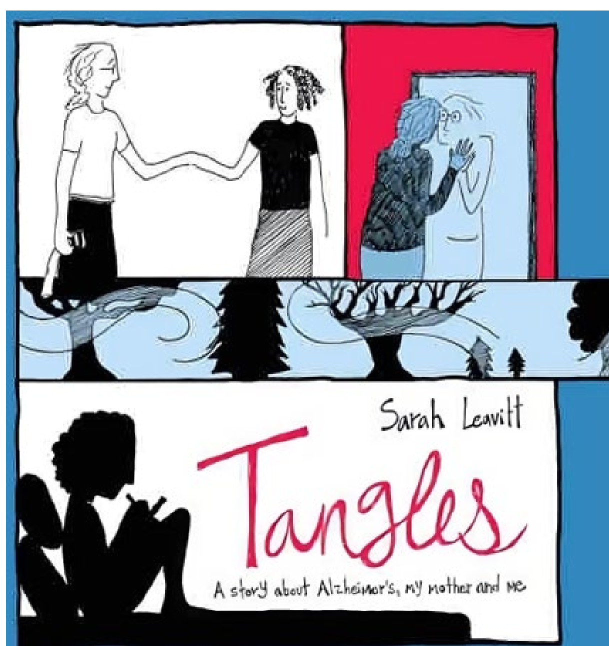

Figure 2. Sarah Leavitt. 'Untitled.' UK title page. *Tangles.* 2011. Used with permission.

The graphic novel *Tangles* was a finalist for the 2010 Writers' Trust of Canada Non-fiction Prize, the first graphic narrative to be a finalist in this category, just as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1992) was the first graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize (with no fixed category), in 1992. Genre problems, like gender trouble, are represented frequently in comic narratives. *Maus* (1986) tackles the story of Spiegelman's mother, whose destroyed journals were lost and her voice was excluded from the family archive of intergenerational trauma. Similarly, *Tangles* brings another form of painful exclusion from the archive into sharper view: mental decline means that memories become more and more difficult to represent. In talking to the author Leavitt about why a comic book might be especially effective when dealing with a difficult topic such as terminal illness, she expressed:

Often in the middle of the most painful situation there's a moment that makes you laugh. Like if you're taking care of someone with a terminal illness and they crack a joke about it, or you and your fellow caregivers collapse in semi-inappropriate laughter after a hellish day. Comics are a great tool for conveying this sort of mixed-up, crazy combination of tears and laughter — a way of forcing the reader into that uncomfortable space that you occupied. (2011: personal communication)

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Figure 3. Sarah Leavitt. 'Untitled.' *Tangles.* (2011: 124). Used with permission.

In **Figure 3**, there is a 'SCREECH!' from a departing car, and a steaming casserole on the doorstep. The scene captures something of the unspeakability of it all: this is the gift you cannot give in person, because you cannot say the right words. The image captures it, as the steam rising in streams is all the unspoken words flying uselessly into the air. The experience of chronic suffering, physical and emotional, is extremely difficult to convey in language, but can be rendered more approachable, indeed more wilful, via a combination of creative techniques and of visual storytelling.

There is something universal about the insights offered in Leavitt's book, given the truth that we all die, and we all think about the way in which we will die, and the ways in which people around us and especially people close to us, die, have died, and will die. Leavitt's work is successful storytelling because it draws the reader in through pictorial detail rather than generalization or the use of 'we.' Drawing on Ahmed's work and on ideas from the Graphic Medicine Movement, there are productive tensions between claims of universal experience, and the narratives of particular, individual experiences. I will discuss how the personal, the political and the so-called universal play out in a medical memoir such as this. The book offers a narrative of dementia that is applicable to wider narratives about disability; the specifics are a mess, but the mess of illness and decline is something readers can identify with. The simple, clear lines of Leavitt's drawings are in contrast to the lived mess, emotional and mental, depicted in the frames of the comic: what *looks* clean and simple visually, is messy to live and experience, but Leavitt persists through the mess, working through it, drawing through it, writing through it, making a coherent story. The narrative takes the reader through caring for Midge at home, to Midge moving into a nursing home, to her death in that home. The author/artist Leavitt guides the reader through her autobiographical journey from her mother's diagnosis on page 37 to her death on page 122, making the many kinds of mess visible and accessible to the reader.

M. K. Czierwiec and Michelle N. Huang in their article about hospice comics come right to the point by both naming the neurofibrillary tangles that are part of the 'valence of *Tangles'* title' and by adding they cannot be untangled, in so many ways (2017: 101). Victim and observer come together, mother and daughter shift roles, private and public mix together. Alzheimer's is a life-altering and fatal disease, which is mirrored in the narrative structure. In their article about life writing in disability narratives, Czierwiec and Huang point to experiential messiness in another way, by talking about the overlap of the categories of life writing and comics. They discuss the genre of the graphic caregiving memoir or the 'graphic somatography' that brings conflicting, and conflicted, selves and others together (2017: 74). Quesenberry observes that since 'comics and lifewriting are already outside of some of the norms of narrative and literary traditions, they can open up understandings of "a life"—as well as "a body", "an experience", "a story" – that are not only more inclusive but also less-normatively expressed, circulated, and discussed' (2016: 77).

Leavitt's *Tangles* is not just a universal retelling and illustration of the death and dying of a mother. It is culturally specific, in that it is a Canadian woman's queer comic that tells a story of a developing lesbian identity and of the accompanying feminist politics, written from the position of white academic privilege, informed by a Jewish identity. These are some of the identitarian tangles represented in the comic. It is also 'crisis witnessing', in the terms of the acute difficulties of living with Alzheimer's. Crisis witnessing can also be seen in *Maus* (1986, 1992) and in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000, 2001), these other graphic novels depict traumas about the Holocaust, and international intergenerational trauma; themes of the war and family and the Iranian revolution are part of intergenerational trauma there. Such powerful visual media can also be about dementia, and about intergenerational trauma there, and all the concomitant, multiple crises of suffering that can be told. Creativity, in all three of these texts, becomes a literary response to trauma. Hillary Chute takes readers through the possibilities of both presence and absence in the framing of such trauma in *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*:

> As I have suggested before, while all media do the work of framing, comics manifests material frames – and the absences between them. It thereby literalizes on the page the work of framing and making, and also what framing excludes. While it has become commonplace to identify and praise a work's self-reflexivity, the textual feature of self-reflexivity is not necessarily a value in and of itself. Comics offers attention both to the creation of evidence and to what is outside the frame. It invokes visual efficacy *and* limitation, creating dynamic texts inclined to express the layered horizon of history implied by 'documentary.' (2016: 17)

Leavitt draws reader attention to both such an absence and presence in her treatment of the coming-out process in this comic:

Figure 4. Sarah Leavitt. 'Untitled.' *Tangles.* (2011: 17). Used with permission.

Sarah describes the act of coming out as 'pretty anticlimactic' (Leavitt, 2010, 2011: 17). The act itself is handled as an everyday sort of thing, and her mother Midge's acceptance of it is also handled calmly as an everyday and welcome thing - such is the work of allyship. In the classroom, using texts like *Tangles*, teachers can open up positive discursive spaces, making cultural space for queerness and queer attachments. Leavitt's own personal story of growing into her lesbian identity and finding her partner, Donimo, who appears as a character in the novel and is a witness and supporter throughout her mother Midge's decline, is key to how this story of loss is told. Following in a long line of feminist cartoonists such as Roberta Gregory, Phoebe Gloeckner, Alison Bechdel, and so many others, Leavitt's text is an exploration of how to negotiate a personal and political self within a family context.[8] Whereas the protagonist's coming out is represented as fairly quotidian, her sister, Hannah, is offered up as a contrasting figure, a woman without easily-identifiable feminist politics, whose primary cultural affiliation instead is Orthodox Judaism. This depiction is a demanding one, that prompts the reader to think about the high prices that might be paid by secondary characters in memoirs of any sort. Hannah celebrates her upcoming marriage, commenting 'I always said my life would really start once I got married, and now it's really going to happen!' In the book, the character of Sarah describes herself as 'pissed off' by this attitude and asks, 'Why is every single heterosexual wedding cause for celebration?' (2010, 2011: 74). Ahmed observes that:

> To make a case for a feminist life can be about keeping open the question of how to live. This opening up can be experienced as a judgment: I have heard this. For instance, if you decide not to marry and have children, your decision can be narrated as somehow rejecting that life, or passing judgment on those who life that life, as if by not doing *x* you are saying *x* is wrong. Maybe sometimes you do speak of wrongs – you might say it is wrong to assume those choices are right or are the only right choices. But you can be heard as being judgmental or dismissive just by virtue of not following a well-trodden path. (2017: 197)

The main character's sister Hannah takes on her role of wife and mother, within a conservative Jewish context, and is treated – because she makes that particular choice – as one who responds without wilfulness, and consequently without a sense of strong emerging adult-self. Her non-feminist convention (as it is depicted), becomes a negative and stilted choice, against which the protagonist's own queer partnership and artistic set of priorities are highlighted as aspects of independence and political and emotional growth. The more conventional choice is represented rather critically as a thoughtless reproduction of cultural norms, so the protagonist's sister Hannah pays the price of the woman who is not wilful, as *Tangles* celebrates instead the wilful author/protagonist. The angry Sarah comments, 'She's changing her fucking name!' (2010, 2011: 74).

[8] Taking Roberta Gregory as the example here, it would be a disservice to pick simply one publication and date from this prolific writer in different genres, and the same is true for Phoebe Gloeckner and Alison Bechdel. https://cbldf.org/2017/03/she-changed-comics-roberta-gregory-interview/ (Accessed June 2, 2024).

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Ahmed's own experience of being engaged with as a feminist is described as both a source of pain and of inspiration, which leads ultimately into the materials she subsequently developed in *A Killjoy Manifesto* (2017), in particular in the Conclusion 2 (pages 251-268). The adoption of wilfulness for oneself, and its deployment as an analytic category, becomes a source of pride, anger, and activism; Ahmed makes connections here to other feminist texts touching on illness and mental health, most notably Charlotte Perkins Gillman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), in which the author's own experience of postpartum depression inspires a short story, which itself becomes a textual form of political resistance and disruption raising awareness around lack of understanding and awareness about mental health disorders during the nineteenth century. The story itself, in which the husband forbids writing and journal-writing, affirms the importance of storytelling through and about difficulty (2017: 76).

Anger, pride, and activity are all part of fighting back through creative and academic writing alike. Giving a voice to trouble, owning it, articulating it, and living resistance - these things become for both feminist critic Ahmed and for *Tangles* author Leavitt a reaffirmation of a proud creative feminism that celebrates and makes space for diverse forms of queer storytelling. Ahmed observes that:

> Perhaps a lesbian feminist struggle for recognition comes out of rage against the injustice of how some dwell by the dispossession of others. Perhaps the signs of this struggle are neutralized by being represented as a gift. (2017: 221-2)

Figure 5. Sarah Leavitt. 'Untitled.' *Tangles*. (2011: 17). Used with permission.

Hannah's eyes are closed and her head is down as she waits for life to 'start' after marriage (Leavitt, 2010, 2011: 17). The image speaks to a serious rift between the sisters, and to a dynamic tension of representation that endures throughout the text – a lesbian feminist sister on the one hand, and on the other hand a sister who marries a conservative Jew and has a traditional family. Both sisters, however, must cope with the decline and death of their mother Midge. This raises a point that must always be made about memoir, in that it is partial. I doubt very much that Hannah appreciated Leavitt's representation of her beliefs and attitudes in the book, in which she appears as someone who believes that marriage and childbearing give automatic, intrinsic meaning and validation to life. Leavitt, perhaps indicating this bifurcation of vision, makes the disclaimer in her 'Introduction,' saying that 'Other people may remember things differently' (2010, 2011: 7). That is an important truth: autobiography is always about the author as self, a constructed self, and it often hurts other people. As the late Queen Elizabeth II is said to have said about Prince Harry's book *Spare* (which he did not write himself), 'recollections may vary.'[9]

Autobiography is perhaps unconvincing if it causes no pain, especially when pain itself is the subject. Leavitt tells the story of her sister alongside her own story, and that appropriation is part of how memoir works: it works uncomfortably. Leavitt, the character, is depicted as wary of her sister's decision to marry a conservative Jew and contemptuous of her sister's idea that marriage will solve everything. But in fact, the narrative logic suggests that through the representation of Leavitt's protagonist's own misgivings and pain and her serious choices, the reader is invited to consider that with one family crumbling away, the desire to form a new (queer) family in the way that one chooses makes clear emotional sense. All of these choices made by her daughters, made as forms of building new lives at a difficult time, are made against the backdrop of Midge herself losing the ability, and the time, to make her own choices.

Sarah's own choices are laid out in the graphic memoir, albeit selectively. Throughout this text, the strengthening and supportive relationship that Sarah shares with her partner, Donimo, is key. Yet readers learn almost nothing overt about Donimo's politics or self-identification, she is represented as the foil to the

[9] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/mar/10/recollections-may-vary-how-the-papers-covered-queens-response-to-meghan-interview (Accessed June 2, 2024).

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protagonist's selfhood. Again, in contrast to the representation of Hannah, this is one of those sets of representative choices that reminds readers that selective memory is a key to good story-telling, (and that some people are punished while others are rewarded). So while the protagonist's queer identity is key to the text, only certain aspects of it are explored. This next image shows readers the central importance of the novel's queer relationship and how it is essential to appreciating her relationship with her mother.

Figure 6. Sarah Leavitt. 'Untitled.' *Tangles.* (2011: 31). Used with permission.

A scene of lesbian tenderness and intimacy is interrupted by Midge's knocking, and her banging on the door is set up visually to interrupt in many senses: to interrupt the readers with a spatial transition, and to interrupt the lovers in the story. It is one of many moments in which Midge's sense of social context has fallen away, leaving her banging at the outside of things, literally and figuratively. Calling them 'Girls!' she strikes at the door, and one sees the frustration on both sides – Midge's frustration at not being answered right away, and Sarah's frustration at not having her adult relationship understood or recognised. Many of Leavitt's particular authorial and artistic techniques are on display in this set of scenes. Note the spare black and white lines, the strategy of juxtaposition rather than explanation, the rendering of the mother in profile which is her frequent position throughout the text. It is entirely possible, and desirable actually, to read this as Midge being wilful, being interruptive, making and claiming her own space, and I suggest that the imagery is left open for that reason.

Tangles is a lesbian feminist Jewish text sometimes about hair, pubic and otherwise. Both Sarah's own hair and her mother's hair deserve some discussion here in this context.

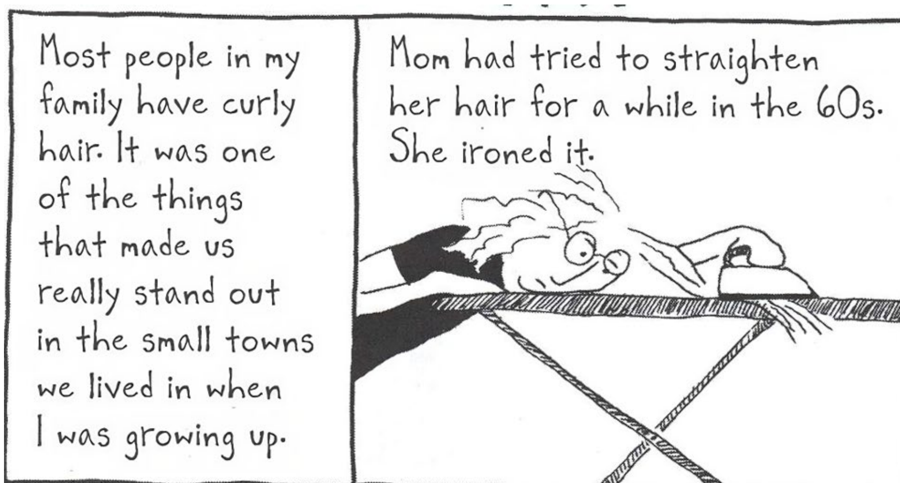

Figure 7. Sarah Leavitt. 'Untitled.' *Tangles.* (2011: 63). Used with permission.

Consider the scene in **Figure 7**, in which Midge irons her own hair, on an ironing board. At a conference in Leeds, I saw the author Leavitt talk about her own work, and she showed some family photos. One was of her with her

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mother. Both had curly brown hair, the mother's medium brown and Leavitt's very dark brown. Yet in the book, her mother's hair looks light. At the time I asked her about this, and she replied to me:

> Her hair was a medium brown until she died with only a bit of grey. I didn't realize it seemed light in the book till someone told me recently at a talk I gave. It seemed to me that she lost colour/density as the illness progressed, so I think her hair got fewer lines. Also, I needed her to look distinctly different from me. (2011, personal communication)

There is a great deal of wilfulness at stake here: memoir selects what is important to the person writing, not necessarily what is most accurate, and memoir is not realism. And yet, accurately rendered or not, at several points in the story, hair is key. Sarah combs her mother's hair with her fingers, and starts to keep the hair that comes out. She starts to collect her own hair, too, and puts the hairs together into boxes. They comfort her somehow. It is emphasised in these sections of the text that the hair is the same – dark, curly, dense. So it is important to note that in her own drawing, she erases that similarity as the narrative progresses, even while insisting on it in the text. In the case of Leavitt's book, Quesenberry points us to the mixing of is 'queer life and disability' in *Tangles* (2016: 65). As queer caregiver and as narrator/artist, Leavitt brings together complicated, (dis)abled selves and conflicting meanings, through and into what Squier calls 'productive dissonance' (2016: 73). Productive dissonance is a useful and flexible concept, like wilfulness.

Lesbianism, feminism, Jewish identity: Leavitt uses them to particularise the universals, and to bring in wilfulness. Alisia Chase in *Drawing from Life* has written about the ways in which women's alternative comics use everyday messiness to express profound emotional truths (2013: 207). Chase's focus here is on the alternative comics of artists such as Phoebe Gloeckner, Julie Doucet, and Debbie Drechsler, women who use the same technique of using the personal, diaristic quotidian mess that is at work, similar to Leavitt's *Tangles*. *Tangles*, in the tradition of feminist art since at least the 1970s, also depicts the everyday lived experience of women as a legitimate subject for art. The story of the decline of Leavitt's mother is worked out against a backdrop of Leavitt's own emergence as a lesbian feminist artist, working through a series of intergenerational issues with candour and vigour. Picking up Midge's soiled clothes, cleaning her mother's bum, trimming her mother's pubic hair, her horror at a group of kids yelling 'Dykes' at her when holding her mother's hand – all of these everyday instances are included, cumulatively giving a sense of the grinding, exhausting, humiliating progress of a physical and mental decline. Leavitt emphasises the mess, the dirt, the everyday of women's work of care.

In 'Autography's Biography,' Jared Gardner (2008) observes that the gestation of the autobiographical form in comics was partly inspired by 'the feminist movement and revolutionary politics that were very much in the air' in southern California in the early 1970s. In the same volume, Chase argues further that 'feminist artists' consciousness-raising sessions from the mid-1960s onward were another important influence on the rise of the confessional form' (2008: 14). At such sessions, women not only encouraged one another to share their 'neuroses, body-issues, and [worries about] sexuality' (as Gardner points out, Aline Kominsky-Crumb would later do this in her comics) but helped each other recognise that these psychological hang-ups were largely due to one's biological gender and the institutional sexism that prevented women from making equitable social progress in the art world as elsewhere. In sum, to affirm that the personal was indeed political. What Gardner describes as being the greatest surprise of the first comics autobiographers is that: 'the most personal stories became the ones that forged the most meaningful connections with others, opening up a dialogue with audiences and a sense of communal experience and release,' (2008: 13). This might just as easily describe how feminist artists felt when they discovered that art about the female experience liberated the psyches of makers and audiences alike (2008: 13). Chase says:

> I propose that is … female comic artists' similar use of feminine iconography, or as feminist performance artist Carolee Schneemann later termed it in 1975 – 'personal clutter' — that educes identification and empathy in the reader. (2013: 207)

My focus here is on Schneeman's use of the phrase 'personal clutter,' as personal clutter and mess are key to understanding the success of *Tangles*, which is about messy situations and unsolvable problems, though in this case drawn with spare and clean lines. One thing Leavitt mentioned to me is that she feels her text has been particularly successful with women readers.

Gillian Whitlock (2006), in an article about the unique power of comics autobiography, which she has termed 'autographics,' posits that the comic art form in particular has the potential to speak across cultural divides. Gender and its many, many, various embodied experiences is one more area in which this speaking-across works well. Scott McCloud argues that comics possess a universality, but Whitlock warns that scholars should 'be wary of claiming universality in mediations of comics and cartoon drawings' (2006: 970). This caution is well taken. In McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, now a canonical text like *Extraordinary Bodies,* he draws a literal portrait gallery of creators who 'shake things up.' There readers can see such reputable comic artists as McCay, Spiegelman, Herriman, Sterrett and

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Moebius. In an odd bracket underneath the gallery appears the comment '(In *other* art forms: Stravinsky, Picasso, Virginia Woolf, Orson Welles, etc.)' (1994: 179). Woolf's presence is jarring in its suddenness and uniqueness. The impression McCloud's gallery of 'pioneers and revolutionaries' leaves the reader is an unbalanced one, and not a universal one; this has to be brought forward when using a text such as *Tangles* for teaching purposes. Pedagogy, too, needs to shake things up through presenting an inclusive Comics Studies field that is fully engaged with all comics artists: with female and male artists, with non-binary and transgender artists.

In their anthology, *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance* (2002), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson draw attention to the frequency with which women's visual art during the twentieth century has engaged the autobiographical, not only in order to illustrate the politics of self-representation, but to politicise the personal, and by doing so, to offer it up as mode of communication with the viewer. They also propose that feminist autobiography frequently occurs at the interface of image and word, illustrating how this intentional, and frequently jarring, juncture of two separate discursive modes provides a way for female artists to rupture conventional and expected meanings, ultimately providing a site of artistic resistance to heteropatriarchal culture. The comics form is capable of both liberating the reader from a traditional, linear method of reading/interpretation, and providing a site of resistance and agency for writers/creators, who can capitalize on the multitude of ways in which image and text confirm, contradict, and/or complement one another. Additionally, by sharing the individual articulation of their subjective experience with a wider readership—which is perhaps functioning as a consciousness-raising session in a reproducible and circulating narrative form—comic artists seek to make the personal public, and to challenge the Cartesian mind-body split.

Turning back to the question of particular versus universal, it is notable that frustration with the universal is both specific and unspecific, at the same time. Here both mother and daughter are frustrated.

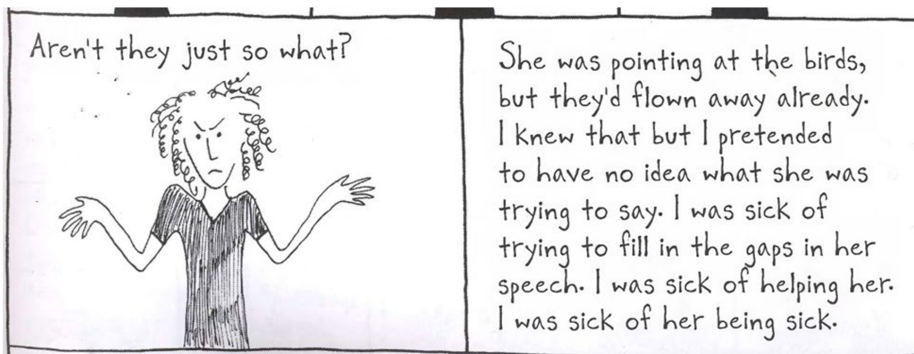

Figure 8. Sarah Leavitt. 'Untitled.' *Tangles.* (2011: 73). Used with permission.

Midge's scowl is met by Sarah's feigned incomprehension: 'I pretended to have no idea what she was trying to say' (2010, 2011: 73). Sarah is represented in the novel as losing her temper with Midge's inability to express herself clearly. Author Leavitt does not shy away from representing her characters' anger, tiredness, and frustration within the disheartening arc of the Alzheimer's story, with Sarah acknowledging that she was 'sick of [Midge] being sick' (2010, 2011: 73). There is no hiding the anger and frustration that attend unending illness. Author Leavitt represents losses of patience and even moments of cruelty. In another scene, Sarah talks about how the whole family talk about Midge as if she were not there, even when she is right there in the room.

In this image of a car drive with her mother as passenger and Sarah as driver, the car's positioning against black space can be interpreted as a visual representation of the endlessness of care. Mother and daughter are together, looking much the same, driving through a part of life that smells like, and is, shit.

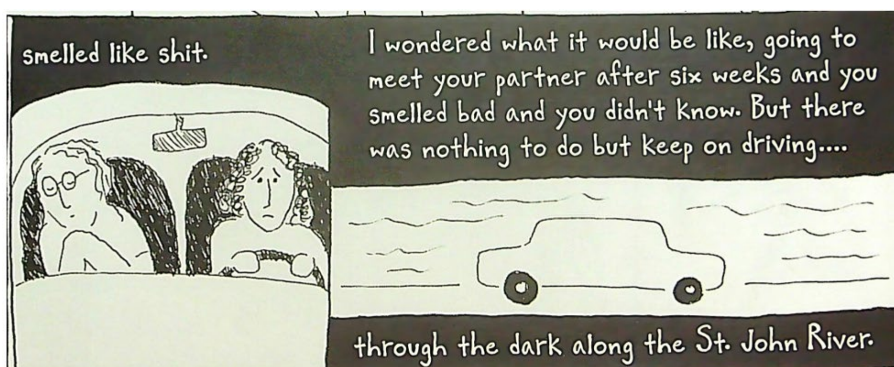

Figure 9. Sarah Leavitt. 'Untitled.' *Tangles.* (2011: 62). Used with permission.

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Many of the more intimate scenes in *Tangles* are illustrations of Leavitt's personal care of her mother – personal in very mundane, dirty ways, such cleaning her poop, cleaning her clothes, picking up her stuff, leading her away from social situations in which she has behaved oddly. In the graphic memoir, there is no clean-up of the relentless of personal clutter. The everyday nature of caretaking is represented to a wide audience. Anne Rüggemeier (2019), addressing the ways in which practices of caregiving are charged with shame, observes that shame, much like graphic narrative itself, collapses categories. When Midge soils herself, Sarah in a triple sense loses her mother: first, because their roles as dependent child and competent adult are ultimately reversed, second, because Midge (unconsciously) breaks another taboo and thereby further alienates herself from the social world to which the daughter still belongs, and finally, because the daughter might very well perceive her mother's excrements as disgusting and thus finds her own mother repulsive (2019: 269).

Sarah, in the novel, describes the complicated emotional and intimate process of trimming her mother's pubic hair with her sister Hannah, and how she feels a sense of shame. Rüggemeier connects this shame in the narrative to Leavitt's own queer identity, saying it is 'entangled with her fear of discrimination as a lesbian' (2019: 273). It is also part of Sarah's 'solidarity and sympathy' with her mother, a shared shame, a shared knowledge of physical weakness and disability (2019: 277). The text indicates that Sarah's lesbianism is also a shared knowledge, and shared accepted knowledge.

Figure 10. Sarah Leavitt. 'Untitled.' *Tangles*. (2011: 75). Used with permission.

Figure 10 literalises the body as being a prison. In this image, Midge's head is turned to the side in anger, as both the house and her body are prisons for a declining selfhood. Leavitt represents Midge's anger and frustration at being locked in her own house by locking her in her own body visually. Midge's hands disappear so that her arms seem locked together. Midge is trapped in her own body, trapped and helpless to stop the progress of the disease or to take control of her own life. Readers can see how other people such as neighbours fail to help, or cannot cope, with the dirt, the ugly emotions, the social failures of dementia care. Discomfort, mess, and tangles: things that are tangled: hair, bodies, stories, lives are tangled together. Leavitt tries to represent the universality of this suffering – the non-culturally-specific details that are transferable to many people living with long-term illness in their own tangles of anger, frustration, filth, exhaustion, and loss of autonomy.

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Figure 11. Sarah Leavitt. 'Untitled.' *Tangles*. (2011: 77). Used with permission.

Frustration takes many forms in the book. This image from the novel, of anger, brings into mind Diane DiMassa's classic comic hero *Hothead Paisan*: *Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* (1999); the narrative shows Sarah in a rage after some kids yell 'Dykes' at her when she is holding her mother's hand in the street. Readers here will also recall Alison Bechdel's many years of work (1983-2008) in *Dykes to Watch Out For*, and the novel has many parallels to Bechdel's oeuvre of representing family discord and trauma. Sarah's anger in *Tangles* repositions the text within a particular set of political and personal discourses, bringing readers back to the designation of wilfulness. Wilfulness can be angry, and moments of disidentification are just as important as moments of identification in feminist rage. Storytelling can be one way forward through such things, as community arts projects can show, such as the Re•Vision Centre for Art and Social Justice, which brings together disability arts, feminist arts, and community arts at the University of Guelph.[10]

Ahmed's figuration of wilfulness is what started me re-thinking *Tangles* as a form of feminist resistance, but the novel depicts the ambiguity of wilfulness. The sister, Hannah, is not given credit for her own wilfulness. She too comes into herself in the environment of her mother's falling-apart. She too, like Sarah, comes into her relationship and produces a family – not the alternative feminist one, but the traditional, heterosexual, religious one. The wedding scenes detail her mother's mental absence and the emotional pain of it. Tellingly that set of scenes is prefaced by Sarah apologising to the sister for 'being an ass' (2010, 2011: 74). The wedding scenes end with Midge not remembering the wedding – though she attended – and saying 'I wasn't there' (2010, 2011: 75). And of course, there it is. That is the central pain of the Alzheimer's story, that people can be there and not be there at the same time.

Similarly, Ahmed's reflections on wilfulness bring her to the realisation that 'it is not always self-evident which bonds we are damaging' (2017: 196). Her ruminations about living a feminist life teach that 'difference and deviation are often registered as damaging those who are different, those who deviate' (2017:197). Particular forms of feminism become expressed as forms of harm, including self-harm (2017:197). *Tangles* makes me wonder whether self-harm is being assigned in the narrative diegesis to the conventional sister, perhaps feminist wilfulness is being withheld from her in a problematic way. What, in the end, does it mean to be 'rash,' to use Ahmed's word? What is it about getting married in a conservative context that is not as rash as finding a queer partner and getting a dog? In both cases, one world is falling apart and another is being built. I admire Ahmed's work and consider the killjoy manifesto to be both valuable and entertaining, but its central premise is that 'a manifesto not only causes a disturbance, it aims to cause this disturbance. This intimacy between manifestation and disturbance has implications for how we write a killjoy manifesto' (2017: 251). Perhaps Ahmed is talking about productive dissonance. Perhaps, the novel suggests that conformity itself can cause or embody resistance. *Tangles* made me rethink a series of easy assumptions about wilfulness and how it is expressed, assigned, and owned. I recognise the anger and pain underlying *Living a Feminist Life*, very much so. But I also take the warning visible from *Tangles,* which is that both assigning and withholding wilfulness is power, and returning to Ahmed, perhaps most importantly, 'If feminism is a bubble, we need the bubble to burst' (2017: 259).

In terms of the difficulty of representation of selfhood for Midge, Leavitt takes up the challenge through the inclusion of Midge's own words, in her own handwriting, carefully reproduced as both Leavitt's art and Midge's self-expression, character-Midge and real-Midge at once, in a tangled way. This is done via instances such as the recreation of a handwritten loving note to Donimo, complete with mess and hearts. Through inclusion of this

[10] https://revisioncentre.ca/ (Accessed July 6, 2023).

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image, Midge's personhood appears; there is persistence of self, even in the face of having been brought down by illness and disability. Her mother's handwriting makes it in. Her mother's selfhood gets included. Midge, unlike Spiegelman's mother Anja, here briefly enters into the archive of intergenerational trauma in her own words, as an ally, and a loving one. Anja's exclusion from the archive of intergenerational trauma in *Maus* (1986, 1992), where her diaries and written materials are destroyed by Vladek, is more like a black hole of pain and anger for Art Spiegelman, who calls his father 'murderer' (1986: 159). But Leavitt brings her mother into the archive, and Midge's allyship lives on.

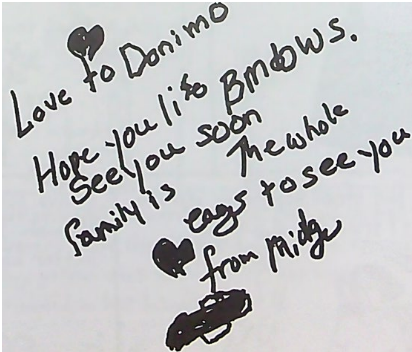

Figure 12. Sarah Leavitt. 'Untitled.' *Tangles*. (2011: 61). Used with permission.

Midge's note to Donimo is the *work* of allyship (Leavitt, 2010, 2011: 61). Zimmerman's book *The Poetics and Politics of Alzheimer's Disease Life-Writing* (2017) on dementia life-writing was inspired by an encounter with a patient that made her critical of simple ideas about selfhood, and conscious of the potentially problematic ways in which caregiver narratives can dominate the cultural reception and understanding of Alzheimer's patients' experiences. She emphasises the difficulties presented to self-narration by cognitive impairment, and in her own discussion she highlights the ways in which *Tangles* self-consciously addresses the limitations of caregiver discourse. As such, *Tangles* is, as its subtitle suggests, Leavitt's story as much as it is her mother's, especially since Leavitt comments in her introduction that '[a]s my mother changed, I changed too, forced to reconsider my own identity as a daughter and as an adult and to recreate my relationship with my mother' (2010, 2011: 7). Leavitt's memoir becomes a space in which she can also come to terms with herself, and her coming out. And her narrative gains further meaning, because it deals with the added complication of providing dementia care in what is represented as a heterosexist environment (2010, 2011: 3).

I use the word ally carefully, and I close this essay with an image about the labour of allyship, in order to advocate for that labour in the classroom, with making it an everyday labour, as is coming out in *Tangles*. Ally, as Canadian trans artist and activist Sophie Labelle points out in her ongoing project *Assigned Male* (2023), is not something you can or should name yourself, it is work that you do.[11] The swimming platypus, **Figure 13**, produced by Sophie Labelle in Pride Month 2023, signals that there is important visibility and inclusion work to be done. 'Ally' is a title to be earned, as readers saw in the scene in the novel in which Midge joins her daughter at a queer protest, and also in her note to Donimo, drawn for us by Leavitt, in which a picture is worth a thousand words.

Figure 13. Sophie Labelle. 'Untitled.' *Assigned Male*. 2023. Used with permission.

[11] Image access from: https://www.facebook.com/assignedmale (Accessed June 3, 2023).

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Leavitt's partner Donimo was an activist for queer and disability rights, and she died on April 21, 2020, choosing to end her suffering with medically assisted dying (MAiD). Leavitt's next queer, creative work on grief and memory is scheduled to come out in 2024, and I look forward to what that can teach the reader, and to bringing it into the classroom. Ahmed has left academia to become an independent scholar, and Leavitt has entered academia through the School of Creative Writing at UBC in Vancouver, Canada, working to make visual learning through comics studies more available, and perhaps also education to be more open to different forms of learning. I learned about Ahmed's resignation from academia from the acknowledgements in her 2019 book, *What's the Use?,* where she expresses appreciation to all those who made her 'feel part of a killjoy collective as [she] made the difficult but necessary transition to working as an independent scholar' (2019: xiv), In the feminist killjoy blog, Ahmed uses the image of 'chipping' just as Labelle uses the image of swimming, as an image for shared and shareable work:

> By saying resignation is a feminist issue I am not saying to resign is an inherently feminist act even when you resign in protest because of the failure to deal with the problem [of] sexual harassment. I am saying: to be a feminist at work means holding in suspense the question of where to do our work. The work you do must be what you question. Sometimes, leaving can be staying, with feminism. Sometimes. And not for all feminists: other feminists in the same situation might stay because they cannot afford to leave, or because they have not lost the will to keep chipping away at those walls. (2016: 1)

In light of the hate-motivated stabbing of a professor and two students in a Gender Studies class at the University of Waterloo in pride month, 2023, I turn to queer creativity in pride month 2024 for inspiration, for tools to build a better classroom, a better pedagogy. Comics pedagogy offers many tools for resistance and persistence, for 'chipping away'.[12] This is the feminist work I choose to do. I will turn and return to the teaching of queer imagination, to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ materials in the classroom, and to the teaching of more material around disability - to the labour of allyship.

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[12] https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/gta-sexual-education-protests-1.6972566 (Accessed June 2, 2024).

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