

Drawn Out

Identity Politics and the Queer Comics of Leanne Franson and Ariel Schrag

The world of comics has traditionally been highly heteronormative and male-biased. That Leanne Franson and Ariel Schrag, two women, would engage this discourse with comics that tackle questions of identity formation for their queer heroines is, therefore, remarkable. It is in this generally hostile (homophobic, misogynist) atmosphere that their highly autobiographical characters each struggle to forge an identity that is not simply the one she is called to but one that also situates her uniquely in a subculture that has historically internalized homophobia itself. While this journey of self discovery is not portrayed in dramatic/traumatic terms in either text, each heroine is consciously trying to position herself in relation to conflicting ideas of what an acceptable identity, especially in the form of self-presentation, should look like.

Issues of sexual identity and the meaning of difference are explored, both visually and textually, in the comics of Ariel Schrag (US b. 1979) and Leanne Franson (Canada b.1963). Almost a generation apart in age, their works nonetheless expose similar anxieties about fixed sexual identities and the issue of how the adoption of a specific identity serves to position one in queer discourse. Schrag exhaustively chronicled her emotional life in her high school years in comics now collected into three large volumes, totaling almost 700 pages, which she began to publish in small self-published splits while still in school. Franson writes *Liliane, Bi-Dyke* which is available as a web comic and which has also been collected into mini-comics and small books dating from the early 90's. Both artists/writers are engaged in a conversation about the reductive and divisive nature of sexual identity politics. They argue against adopting any hierarchy of particular sexual identities and instead focus on proffering a challenge to normativity in general, and heteronormativity in particular.

Schrag and Franson aren't just telling queer stories in the highly heteronormative world of comics; they're telling their own stories. Schrag's comics are autobiographical; Franson describes hers as semi-autobiographical but often adds the phrase "true story" in small print at the end of a narrative sequence. Schrag uses the term "dyke" or "lesbian" for herself but portrays Ariel having sex with men as well as women, while Franson uses the term "Bi-Dyke" for her alter ego Liliane and represents her as also sexually involved with both men and women. The use of the autobiographical mode for these stories creates an authentic challenge to heteronormativity because it asserts an existing alterity. As authors, artists, and, in their original formats, distributors of these representations of their experiences and desires, Franson and Schrag are activists because they refuse silence and discretion, a discretion demanded by many heterosexuals, French philosopher Didier Eribon argues, because it "would allow the reassertion of peaceful certitudes, of the comfort of a normalcy built on the silence of others" (54). As well as creating a platform to speak their desires, the use of the autobiographical mode creates the expectation in the reader that the distance between the author, the narrator, and the central character is minimal. As Smith and Watson argue in *Reading Autobiography*, "the writer becomes, in the act of writing, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation" (1). Thus, if either Liliane or Ariel explores an issue in identity politics it is also likely an issue Franson or Schrag are investigating both for and in themselves. For example, in an untitled strip from 2004 Franson floats a series of nine characters on the page, beginning with her lead, Liliane, who announces that "labeling seems to be a big problem for sexual minorities." Each of the subsequent eight women proceeds to problematize in direct address to the reader, not interacting with each other, at least one of the following categories: lesbian, dyke, queer, butch, femme, bisexual. Clearly drawn distinctions in age, race, and styling imply, but don't clarify, that these issues of identity may be linked to other cultural viewpoints related to class, ethnicity, and so on. Franson concludes the strip with the ominous: "stay tuned for the 'more-radical-than-thou' wars!!" Her conclusion is that these identity positions are deliberately divisive, even competitive and combative—certainly not designed to build community. Because she positions Liliane as introducing the subject, but then not speaking to it in one of the testimonials, Franson appears reluctant to take a specific position on sexual identity. She creates a spectrum of characters to take stands while she remains a not-quite neutral observer, upset by the nature of the

character's statements but unwilling to adopt a fixed identity herself. She sees this self-labelling as combative, but does not explore the ways in which it may also be a defensive strategy.

Schrag's Ariel also struggles with the function of labels in relation to identity: while she is entitled to accept or reject any label attached to her, Ariel's mockery of others might be seen as a symptom of internalized homophobia. Eribon argues that because all homosexuals exist in a world saturated with insult, negative allusions, insinuations, and so on, which function

to produce certain effects—notably to establish or to renew the barrier between “normal” people and . . . “stigmatized” people and to cause the internalization of that barrier within the individual being insulted, . . . [i]nsult tells me what I am to the extent that it makes me be what I am. (17)

Thus the climate of insult in which all homosexuals live contributes to the investment in nuances of identity difference which Franson observes, as well as to a tendency to criticize those like one, as Schrag explores. In *Likewise* by Schrag, Ariel rejects the recently-embraced identity “dyke” after her girlfriend Sally breaks up with her and tells Ariel that she, Sally, is not a dyke. “What the fuck is a dyke, doesn't exist if Sally's not one” (*sic* 7), Ariel tells herself; she then recounts how she and Sally mocked a lesbian teacher, Ms. Salt, over what they see as her “pro-dyke=pro-nothingness” position. At the same time as she insults Ms. Salt, it is Ms. Salt who sits in the art workroom day after day during her lunch break letting Ariel cry over Sally. Ariel recognizes that it is the very thing she mocks, Ms. Salt's pride in her identity, which makes the teacher so caring and so willing to provide “queer teen support” (7). Ms. Salt is able to “take care of [her] own” (7), because she acknowledges that being in a sexual minority may have eroded or even exiled students such as Ariel from earlier communities they may have inhabited. Ariel is affirmed, though not directed, in her sexual identity by the mentoring of her teachers, Ms. Salt and later also Ms. Nocatz. By the end of the volume Ariel has matured enough to acknowledge the debt she owes Ms. Salt. One of the things her teachers help her to understand is that she cannot mend her broken heart simply by rejecting the associated sexual identity.

One of the things that drives Ariel and Sally to mock Ms. Salt is internalized homophobia in the form of shame. Eribon theorizes that shame is the most isolating of the emotions created by insult. He ends his discussion of the function of insult in homosexual identity with the following summary:

because it is always collective in nature, because it writes an individual into a group, one of the effects of insult is that it encourages the individuals in question—

or those who wish to avoid being brought into question—to find any means to separate themselves from the “species” to which the social and sexual order would have them assigned. Precisely because it collectivizes, insult encourages individualism. (73)

Eribon reminds us that it is not just an accidental consequence of insult, but instead one of its functions, to put barriers in the way of community and collectivity. Schrag illustrates this beautifully in Volume II, *Potential*, when Ariel and her girlfriend Sally discuss the dyke scene at school and who is out and proud. To contrast themselves with that group Ariel declares, “We’re like not proud,” to which Sally adds “We’re proud to be *ashaaaaamed!* Let’s hear it for shame!” (125, her emphasis). Further to Eribon’s argument, as each subculture develops its own normative injunctions it creates further alienation by creating a hierarchy of compliance and authenticity. To Ariel and Sally there is something wrong, even inauthentic, about the proud dykes whom they see as having developed their own normative rules of style and behaviour.

One of the ways people can express notions of identity is through bodily gesture and adornment. In autobiographical texts questions about embodiment proliferate. To what extent does the author write of and inhabit a body as well as an intellect? Do readers expect even more embodiment in queer autobiographies because what is sexual identity if not of the body? In comics the author must be embodied, even if they draw themselves as caricature. In *Alternative Comics* Charles Hatfield argues for the effectiveness of caricature as self-presentation:

Like the subversive subalterns who reappropriate hateful epithets for their own ends, a cartoonist may actually find him or herself through a broad, cartoony, in some sense stereotypic self-depiction. . . . Paradoxically, playing with one’s image can be a way of asserting the irreducibility of the self as agent. (115)

Schrag is particularly diverse in her self-representations. Not only is her style changing as she matures and practises her technique, but she also varies techniques for emphasis and for emotional effect. In the final volume, *Likewise*, she has pages in her dominant line-only style, a small number of pages in ink washes which have an almost photographic effect, and pages in a loose and chaotic rough sketch style which exaggerate the drawn effects. Occasionally she makes hatch marks over a series of drawings, almost obscuring them. She uses this technique on a series of panels illustrating Ariel having sex with a girl she has no particular feelings for (Figure 1). The effect of all these lines over the awkwardly drawn images creates a visual, but

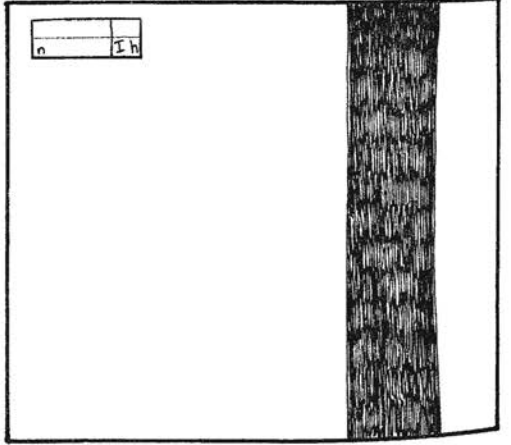
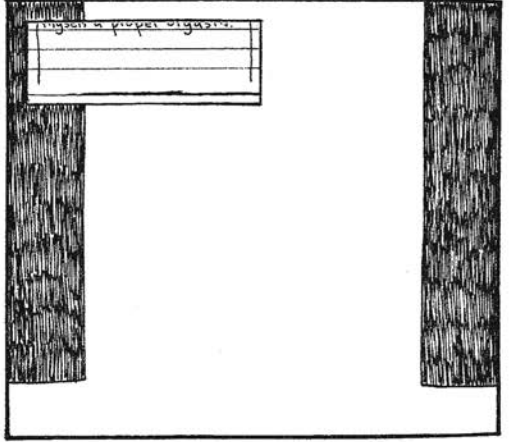
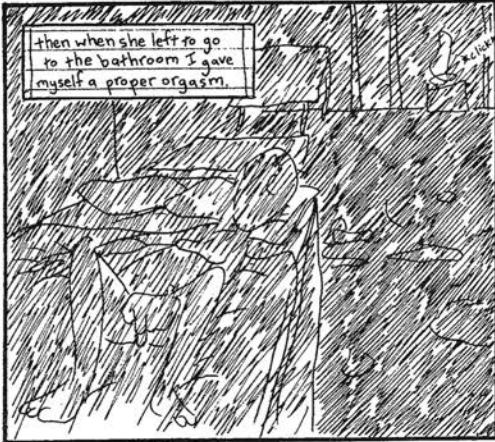
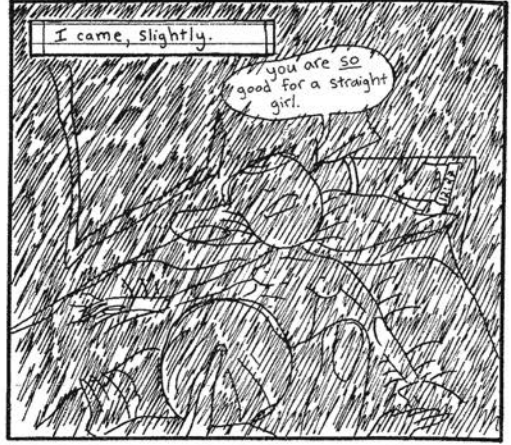
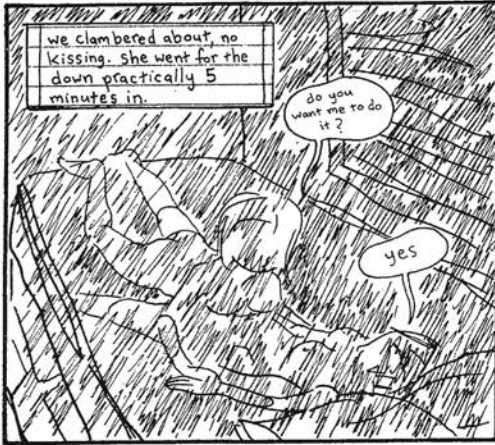


Figure 1: Ariel Schrag, *Likewise*.

unspoken, rendering of shame. The way she handles this scene also reminds us that there are things we come to know or understand through the body and she wants that knowledge even if she feels sad about the way it was learned. She may not wish to celebrate this moment, as both the shortness of the scene and the cross-hatching over it suggest, but she does not want to omit or obliterate it either. As Smith and Watson point out:

By exploring the body and embodiment as sites of knowledge and knowledge production, life narratives do several things. They negotiate cultural norms determining the proper uses of bodies. They engage, contest and revise cultural norms determining the relationship of bodies to specific sites, behaviors and destinies. And they reproduce, mix, or interrogate cultural discourses defining and distinguishing the normative and ab-normal body. (41-42)

Both Schrag and Franson, by writing and drawing their own lesbian or bisexual bodies, challenge both the dominant heteronormativity and the norms within their subcultures. When they write about sex with men they are not celebrating heteronormativity but their prerogatives as non-heterosexual women to have sex with men if both parties so desire. By including their desire for men as well as women they resist being coerced into an either/or position by the subculture. By labeling herself “Bi-Dyke” Franson chooses to reflect an identity, reiterated in the title of every episode of her comic, which resists containment by all three of the popular labels of hetero/homo/bi-sexuality. In their works both artists engage in self-display, as is the essence of autobiography. But, as Eribon argues: “self-display . . . [is an] important means of defying the heteronormative hegemony. . . . Shame cedes its energy to self-exhibition . . . and thus to self-affirmation” (106). Even when Schrag scribbles over a scene she does not completely obscure or omit it—telling the truth about what we know through the body includes telling the truth about what we are not proud of and instead being proud of the honesty that conquers shame.

We dress the body for public display and thus the labour of constructing identity takes place on the outside as well as the inside. Both authors talk a lot about “the look”—where jeans should fall on the hip, the right t-shirt, and so on. Because comics must also give us the outside, the characters interacting on the page, it’s easy for both artists/writers to show the importance of the haircut, the posture, the walk, the facial expression, in the codes of sexual identity their characters inhabit or wish to inhabit. *Likewise*, Schrag’s final volume ends with Ariel in the bedroom where she, and her readers alongside her, have spent so much time. She stands in front of her mirror, her high

school graduation over, celebrations and farewells made, and she peers closely at her face looking for “zits.” Her final line of narration is “this is what I do with my time” (359). The final panel of the trilogy is of the framed mirror within the framed panel of the comic, reflecting a reverse Ariel back at us and reminding us, one final time, that this is how she chooses to represent her identity. As we reflect on her drawing of her reflection we are left to ponder with her all the time spent in front of that mirror, and by association in front of our own mirrors, where we, in turn, think about whether our reflection represents us as we wish to be seen at any particular moment in time.

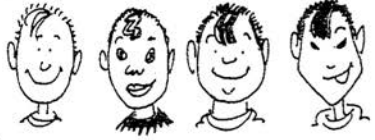
While for some, embodying desire is all about projecting a consistent message, for others, such as Franson’s Liliane, desire has a certain fluidity and may be embodied in a playful world of sometimes contradictory codes. Comics provide her with an ideal medium to reveal the possibilities of changing looks and performing identities. In “Playing with Perruques”, a story in *Teaching Through Trauma*, in which Liliane buys four very different wigs and then notes the very different reactions she gets to this much more feminine hair than her usual short hair style (Figure 2). Her wigs range from a short precise brunette Louise-Brooks-style bob to long lush blond curls. Some of her own ex-lovers don’t recognize her at the bar, she gets served differently in stores, and some friends complain she has turned herself into a feminine bimbo. She puts different outfits with the different wigs (a corset with the bob, a flowing summer dress with the long blond curls) and concludes that this ability to pull off completely different looks is evidence of her versatility and the fluidity of identities. To underline the connection, Franson has her author’s photo for the book taken in one of her wigs. The narration on the final six panels of the story claims: “Despite the blatant femme privilege . . . the political crisis . . . the anti-femme prejudice . . . and the mistaken identities . . . I’m having a blast!!! Know someone looking for ‘versatile’?!!” (19, her ellipses). Her choice of the word “someone” suggests that in spite of presenting her desire as fluid and multiple, she really is looking for one person who enjoys her multitudes. Each of the conflicting experiences is illustrated to amplify the point. For example, Franson illustrates “the anti-femme prejudice . . .” with Pierre telling Liliane she looks “gruesome . . . like a blond bimbo!!” to which Liliane replies “. . . nice misogynist sentiment, Pierre!” But at the same time the small text of narration at the bottom of the panel with an arrow pointing to Liliane tells us, she “has, of course, said same herself” (19). Now that she is dressing up femme on occasion, a type

I DID worry about loss of social identity...

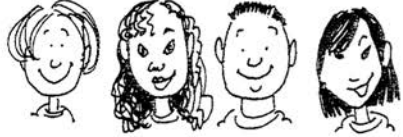


But dyke 'do's have evolved...

1991:



1999:



... and the reviews are mostly positive...

so? is it awful?



... i hate to say it, but you look like someone i would've hit on before i got attached!!
"Biker chick with rocker hair" !!!

... mostly !!

... liliane! T'es ruinée!!



... i dunno! ... i've always hated femmey, but this hair !!! ... Yum!!



And i am comforted by knowing there is a young dyke uniform...

...all the ingredients of which lurk in my closet!



Ya still got it, liliane!!



jog bra
no tattoos! cops!
men's wide-elastic underwear (thank god for gay men influencing men's lingerie!!)
off-the-hip men's jeans

will have to make do with old army boots: won't shell out for platform sneakers!

Figure 2: Leanne Franson, "Playing with Perruques," Teaching Through Trauma.

Despite the blatant femme privilege ... the political crisis...



... the anti-femme prejudice...



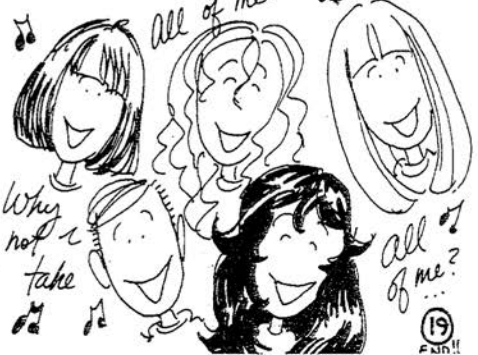
... and the mistaken identities...



... i'm having a blast!!!



Know anyone looking for "versatile"??!



she herself is not attracted to, she feels defensive of an identity which is a field for play, rather than a space in which she lives. But even just visiting that identity allows her to see how the privileges and problems of femme identification differ from those of butch identification. Because of her strong interest in how different people read the performative or coded aspects of identity, Franson is watching for, and learning from, the different responses to her alter-ego, Liliane, as not just femme, but different styles of femme.

One technique autobiographical comic writers can use to distance themselves from the primary character and create an observational distance is through narration (what French comic theorists call *récitative*) as well as speech and thought balloons, which allow for a commentary on characters and events. Franson uses narration relatively minimally; Schrag uses it extensively in some sections, up to fourteen lines of tiny writing boxed off across the top of a single panel. It is in the use of narration that we can most easily see the shaping and constructing of the autobiographical text grappling with identity. Unlike speech and thought balloons which are always in the present, the narration allows for hindsight and interpretation. Ann Miller explains the distinction in *Reading Bande Dessinée*:

the split between the presenting and represented self corresponds. . . . With a further distinction between the immediacy of texts attributed to the autobiographical self in speech balloons, and in the retrospective effect of the recitatives, where dissociation between character and narrator is maximal. (218)

In the opening sequence of *Potential*, Schrag narrates her way through the school hallways at the beginning of eleventh grade, imagining the occasional naked girl in the hallway, or even astride the frame of a panel of the comic. She takes her desk in a classroom, grabs the edge of the desk with both hands and stares out at us while the narration above her declares: “This year was just not the time for frivolous sexual orientating to take place. I had a boyfriend and a damn good one at that. It was time to settle down and learn some math” (3). She has just spent the last two pages fantasizing about girls but her narrator self can instruct her to redirect her sexual feelings precisely because it is not in the moment of the action. Even when she is having a “nothingness” moment and provides a blank panel as evidence, she will sometimes put a blank narrative box into the frame (*Likewise* 326) reminding us of the ongoing distance between character and narrator even when neither has anything to say.

Schrag chooses as her author photos, not photos contemporary with the edition, but with the year of high school in which the comic originated.

These comics (written from ninth to twelfth grade) depict an adolescent's struggle to construct identity in the face of insecurity, sexual confusion, unreciprocated desire, separating parents, and the general social, emotional, and psychological complexity of those teenage years. Schrag catalogues her high school world in 667 pages of, at times, exhaustive detail. As her friends come to know of the comics and their own appearance in them the whole enterprise becomes increasingly fraught with self-consciousness. Still, we know she shapes it carefully because she often discusses the comic process and draws herself critiquing segments with her art teacher and so on. However thorough it feels, there is much left out. In contrast, Franson's carefully crafted short pieces may show more evidence of shaping in terms of the structure of story, but she shares with Schrag a propensity to return repeatedly to the questions of sexual identity—what does it mean, in this context, to say I am queer? How does my understanding of my identity shape the interactions that make up my day? How does being queer empower or disempower me? Alienate me or help me find community?

The characters of both Schrag's Ariel and Franson's Liliane ponder the meanings of masculinity and femininity in relation to queerness and desire, including their desire, as women, for sex with men as well as the relationship of such desire to heteronormativity. In one of her post break-up conversations with Sally, the 18-year-old Ariel struggles to understand if female masculinity and female homosexuality are connected. She tells Sally that "dyke=manly and straight=feminine" (123) and that therefore Sally's femininity is evidence that the latter was trying to go straight. But in the next panel she admits that, like Sally, Ariel has enjoyed sex with men so she concludes that perhaps that is proof that homosexuality doesn't exist at all and she must be "really straight but like, living in Berkeley or whatever" (123). In other words, Ariel asks herself if she has simply acquired a metrosexuality because of where she lives, so that geography may also create desire, at least to the extent that a place tolerates, or even makes available, particular sexualities. After Sally hangs up, Ariel writes in her notebook, and that text and her process of revision of it become part of the comic. Because Sally has told Ariel that Ariel is a dyke even though Sally is not, Ariel can conclude, "her voice: confirmation, and my state's confirmed" (127). Someone who has rejected both a lesbian identity and Ariel herself still assumes the power to define Ariel's sexuality. This moment emphasizes the role of others in the shared social and cultural spheres in defining a person's identity. As Eribon argues,

A personal identity in fact takes shape through the degree of acceptance or refusal of this 'interpellation' and through the often difficult and painful evolution, over years, of this relationship of submission and rebellion. (24)

In this instance Sally's interpellation matches Ariel's understanding of her own desire so she embraces it.

Liliane, for whom masculinity and femininity are very performative and variable, puts on a harness, goes to a gay leather bar, and jokes with a friend that he would be a very cute butch dyke in the 2004 story "Boy George." He, in turn, calls her "Dyke Bitch" and tells her she didn't have to butch it up so much. Franson draws the two characters relatively similarly (though Liliane never has a nose). When the owner, Vince, christens her "George," Liliane is thrilled and Franson labels her "the happy bi [woman] in the leatherfag bar." In a subsequent strip she takes her friend's advice to dress less butch and puts on a long blond wig (an accessory that features in other strips about femininity and self-representation) and goes back to the bar. This time she cannot get in even though she tells them the name of the owner, the bartender and the friend, and about her previous visits. Her performance of femininity has crossed the line of what the bar will tolerate. The men in the strip who think it is nice to "see a girl / have some pussy in here" have a very particular image of a girl in mind. In her mini-comic "The Fucking Faggot" Liliane flirts with a gay man in a bar and makes out with him, but in the end he goes home with his unseen, but presumably male, friend. Because Liliane desires butch women (and long-haired men) it is easier for her to include a cute guy than a feminine woman in her world of desires though she will drag up as the latter occasionally—trying out other versions of her sexual self. Unlike Ariel, Liliane never comes out and says feminine=straight and feminine lesbians appear as friends in her world if not in her desires.

Although in a recent interview with Anna King for *Time Out New York* Schrag has stated "I didn't grow up with homophobia, there wasn't a sense of shame about sexuality," in the comics Ariel talks about her internalized homophobia. While in eleventh grade she and Sally embraced shame in opposition to pride, in twelfth grade she became fixated for a short time on the idea that homosexuality is an evolutionary defect and, to her, this partially explains why Sally seems to have gone back to boys. In one of her many conversations with her art teacher and ally, Ms. Salt, Ariel states that sex is "really all about wanting to *complete* yourself with something *different*, the opposite that locks in and makes sense *plus* reproduction" (her emphasis

77), Ms. Nocatz, like Ms. Salt, wears her pants “suspiciously high” (82) but Ariel believes that in spite of this defect they are “really gay” (82) and she recognizes that they both talk to her honestly and try to provide her with a caring and compassionate space in which to come out, space, in other words, to explore what coming out means to her.

Because all geopolitical states regulate sexuality, and because most of them regulate or have regulated homosexuality much more aggressively than heterosexuality, homosexuals often have an understanding of sexuality informed in part by laws specific to their nation and state/province. Although both comics are set in a specific time and place their authors are less interested in identity in terms of geographic and political states than in identity as a product of emotional and psychological states. But Franson’s Liliane is well aware of the differences in her rights as a Canadian in relation to her peers in the United States. Franson lives in Montreal, but grew up in Regina. Only in issue #38, “I am thankful . . .” (2005) does she literally fly the geopolitical flag. This issue has Liliane on the cover waving the Canadian flag and wearing a t-shirt that says “No% American” (her erasure), her response to the re-election of George W. Bush late in 2004. The text consists of a series of illustrated statements each beginning “I am thankful for . . .” praising aspects of the Canadian political landscape not specifically related to sexuality, such as universal health care, as well as aspects which are, such as inclusive marriage rights.

The most significant use of geography as related to the discovery of identity comes when Franson’s hero, Liliane, leaves Montreal to visit her mother in a prairie city. For those stories she draws an opening panel of a grain elevator or the flat extended view around the city (#28, 1995). Liliane walks around the city looking in vain for signs of a visible lesbian presence. On the plane back to the east she sits next to another lesbian and they share their escaping-the-prairies stories. But this story also makes clear—in the panel that shows Liliane walking past a newspaper turned to a page of personal ads which we see, but Liliane does not—that the lesbians are there, just not visible the way they are in Montreal. Living in a more open environment, Liliane, but not Franson, who drew the panel, has almost lost the ability to read more subtle and underground identity codes. The point of this journey is to demonstrate the degree to which Liliane has begun to take a varied and diverse subculture for granted, so much so that she seems oblivious to the more subtle cues that signal a less “out,” perhaps less extensive or diverse queer subculture.

Both Franson and Schrag tend to draw backgrounds in a generic rather than particular way. Franson's Liliane is often sitting at a table, talking against a white ground. She sketches in more details for an interior sequence in a bar, living room, or bedroom, but in exterior scenes the outdoors is merely suggested by a few blades of grass, some sidewalk pavers, and perhaps a lone tree or piece of fence. Schrag's comics also occupy a world of interior spaces. Ariel and her friends hang out in school and in domestic spaces, especially bedrooms, which are drawn with loving attention to the specific details of teenage décor (such as movie posters on the walls). The family dinner table, bathrooms, a few key classrooms at school (especially the art room), and some music venues, make up the primary locations of Schrag's three volume *High School Chronicles*. Rare outdoor scenes have minimal backgrounds, although they get a bit more detailed in volume three. When she moves about in cars or buses the windows are blacked out. What movement there is, is mostly within interiors; the map of her outer life seems small. She may live in Berkeley, but she rarely mentions the place or references anything of American political life. Popular culture references, such as to the films of Juliette Lewis, her favourite actor, give us some sense of time and place. The only real glimpse of a cityscape comes near the end of volume three when she goes into the city to purchase her first dildo at a sex shop; it's clear she has fun drawing the *mise-en-scène* for that interior. Although Ariel goes to a school with some progressive teachers, including out homosexual women, and where her comics are taken seriously as part of her "potential" (the title of her second volume), she is mostly preoccupied with interior spaces, reflective of Ariel's inner life. Her own bedroom, where she writes her diaries and illustrates her life in comics, documenting every emotional up and down, where she masturbates to fantasies of both males and females, where she tries on clothes and stares into the mirror contemplating her look, is the space of Ariel's discovery of identity. The oppositions of Ariel's world are archetypal; they are the great chasms of adolescence—joy or depression, cool or reviled, loved by your one true soul mate or eternally lost, normal or not normal.

In the more mature world of Franson's Liliane the great emotional rollercoaster of adolescence may be over but the judgmental world of identity politics continues. In "Tax Evasion Liliane", when she donates a work of art to a lesbian fundraiser, Liliane finds herself in a fight after the auction with the woman who purchased her drawing. The purchaser is incensed that Liliane is bi and wants her to admit that she is really a lesbian who sleeps with men. When Liliane won't, the woman expresses her regret

that she bought the art at all since it no longer represents what she thought she was buying. She implies that it shouldn't have been in the fundraiser! The purchaser's outrage stems from the fact that the art is literally devalued for her by Liliane's revelation. Later in the same collection, in the story "Yes, We Don't Want No Bisexuals" Liliane volunteers to go into schools as part of an anti-bullying initiative in her province. At the first session she is taken aside and told she can't participate because she is bi even though volunteers who were once married to the opposite sex or admit to still having heterosex are acceptable if they identify as homosexual. Only the word bisexual, not the act of sex with a member of the opposite sex, is contested. Both these strips expose absurdities within the world of identity politics, but both also expose the deep investment and sense of value that these terms convey for those committed to them. These nuanced identities may be accurate, but they also have the potential to create normalizing pressures within subcultures already engaged in challenging the pressures of heteronormativity.

Fragmented and particular sexual identities can be seen as challenging heteronormativity by expanding our understanding of the complexity and fluidity of human sexuality. To try to contain these identities within a generalized vocabulary is counterproductive because it suppresses the enrichment of difference. Autobiography as a genre seems designed to explore difference. As Smith and Watson argue:

We are also witnessing, in an outpouring of memoirs, the desire of autobiographical subjects to splinter monolithic categories . . . and to reassemble various pieces of memory, experience, identity, embodiment and agency into new, often hybrid, modes of subjectivity. In this pursuit, life narrative has proved remarkably flexible in adapting to new voices and assuming new shapes across media, ideologies, and the differences of subjects. (109)

Furthermore, if Eribon is right when he claims that the "intensification of 'subcultural' life" is a major challenge to the powers of normalization, why would anyone not embrace expanding that challenge? (Surely it is partially the progress of homosexual and/or queer identities in articulating themselves that has encouraged some of the hetero subcultures of recent years).

These comics I've looked at briefly are all about carrying on conversations—in interviews, in phone calls, in schools, bedrooms, and bars. They are all images of talking about identity and sexuality. People explore their sexuality through experience and feeling but also through knowledges and through the continuing privilege of conversation. By foregrounding the processes and politics of identity these two queer comic artists, Leanne Franson and Ariel

Schrag, add to the conversation by telling their own stories and exploring part of the complexity of human sexual desire. Schrag reminds us of the exhaustive adolescent roller coaster of making meaning (often too much meaning) and forging identity from experiences, and Franson reminds us of the life-long complexities of identity politics. By consistently poking fun at characters who are over-invested in small differences, Franson invites us to see the potential for celebrating difference as spectrum rather than hierarchy. Through their comic explorations both writers/artists have become, to revisit Eribon's point, questioners of the social and sexual orders and of the institutions that uphold them.

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