

Casey Hamell

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Thesis

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Thesis Proposal Spring 2020

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Casey Hamell, Thesis Proposal Spring 2020
Instructor: Roy Tomlinson

Finding a reflection of myself is difficult. I want to create a memoir, my memories and experiences, in the form of a graphic novel. I hope this will be a resource for others to be able to see themselves reflected in solidified words and images. I identify as nonbinary, aro/ace, and neurodivergent and I use the word “Queer” to summarize myself.

Queer representation has come a long way in just the past five years; the time I have been aware more than just the two ways I was exposed to to be human. Still, there are many gaps in areas such as nonbinary, asexual, and aromantic representation. Neurodivergence is also not a commonly addressed topic, and it is not often that I find work made directly by the people whose experience is being articulated. While the things that make me queer are not the only things that I am, I think that it is important to claim these labels for myself because even if they are not fully addressed in my work, they will come through in one way or another and speak to those who will hear them. By using words (phrases) such as “I am autistic” and “I am aromantic,” I am giving other people a foothold for contextualizing their experiences with mine and not leaving them to wonder if maybe I am like them. Since I am comfortable sharing that information and I have found that having some general words to use to describe myself quickly is helpful to me, I would like to put them out there as I describe myself as a creator.

My life has not been bad. I have been educated, cared for, loved, and supported throughout it. But there is hard stuff too. Living is not easy. It can be even harder when you can’t see yourself reflected in the world around you. There is often no space for people like me or a space I can fit into. I would like to use this project to create some of that space to be seen and experienced.

I want to use a combination of black, white, and color pens, along with elements of multi-media collage. Often, in discussions of comic inking techniques, the pen is considered the colder method with which to create lines. The brush is usually considered more organic. (DC Comics Guide to Inking) I like both, though I tend to favor the pen as I have greater control over it and feel that it conveys my work better than a straight-up brush. I do enjoy using brush pens. I love the unique lines that come from them and they always feel like an adventure. They are part of the exploratory process of my proposed body of work. I will be utilizing text and imagery through a comic format, and I expect the exact experiences that I choose to include to change as I work my way through my past, as well as the imagery to change and grow as I work.

Currently, I envision the final work to be formatted as a book available both in a physical form and on the web. In its current projected final form, I would like to have this book printed. While this work will have an impact wherever it is published, there is a special impact that holding a physical object can have. With this work, that is going to be very personal to me, I want people to be able to have that close, intimate experience with the book in printed form.

For content I intend to focus on my experiences growing up queer. This will range from matters of personhood survival, to dealing with internalized amatonormativity. Other artists I am currently looking are other documentary creators such as Allie Brosh, writer and illustrator of *Hyperbole and a Half*, Maia Kobabe, writer and illustrator of *Gender Queer, A Memoir*, and Alison Bechdel, creator of the comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*. These folks provide me with a springboard for expressing my own experience.

I am creating a project that is about me, a human person, with all of my experience and influence so far driving me. I am constantly moving, growing, changing. Even if it is just a little bit,

even if it is just by a thought that may not appear to have any impact on the outside but might be something to hold onto later; I contain multitudes.

Artist Statement

I am a queer creator. I use this word to summarize all the other words that I use to describe my identity. I make animation, illustration, and often use a mix of digital tools to bring a project together. I also like to use pens, pencils, and paper to make sketches; this allows my ideas to have a form I get to touch directly.

My work functions as a way for me to connect to the world and create connections between others and myself. In my animated documentary, I use myself as the subject, giving voice to my experiences and feelings in order to let other people connect to me. I know that though I often feel alone in my struggles and even sometimes in my victories, that I do not have to experience life, no matter what is happening at the moment, separated from myself and others. However, that is a hard outlook to keep. I create to explore the parts of life that have caused me deep sadness and pain, but also to dive into the absolute joy that can come from being alive. When I use sound, I keep it quiet because there are not enough quiet places in this world for people to just be and reflect on what is around them.

Abstract

My thesis examines identity and voice through an exploration of self and community. There are two main components, the presentation itself, and the visual work, which is a short film. I reflect on my past as it informs my present, and occupy an inbetween type of space. The film can be viewed on its own, or with the talk I gave. They are both different experiences. When viewed after the talk, there is a small journey that the audience takes with me before the viewing where I tell parts of my story as the happenings of my life greatly influence my creative process, and inform my voice.

Writing For Oral Presentation

Welcome! My name is Casey, I use they/them pronouns. I am queer, which I use as a summarizing term for all the other words I am defining myself with. I am also a master of allusion. I can and will tell you a bunch of things and yet never say the one thing that all those things are. Part of me says that you all can just deal with that. And then another part, that regularly pulls up evidence of people who I want to understand what I am saying who then do not because of what I only allude to, says “you know, you should really just say it.” This part sounds like several of my teachers and various other people from my life. And they make a good point!! I do need to lay out those touch points of “this is where I am at”. The tricky part is that for most of my life, the point of laying out who I was was so that I could be shown how best to make people comfortable around me despite my identity. I have to trust now, that in this space, the roles are changed. I am nonbinary. I am on the aromantic and asexual spectrums. I am neurodivergent. I have tremors in my hands. I have chronic pain. I have frequent headaches and migraines that sometimes go on for days. Late in the summer of 2019 I got another concussion and that one significantly impacted and still impacts my life. I have four younger sisters. I have been in environments where people have been phobic of me and that messed with my trust and ability to connect with a lot of people in my life. I am, of course, more than the words that I state for the “I am”. Those words are not all that I am, and they do not tell you everything about the experience behind them, just that my experience and journey of how I arrived is there. Nor do all the “I have” statements cover all the things that I have going on in my life. But they are some of the ones that ripple the most across my experience of life and how I experience the world and how the world experiences

me. My queer identity intersects with all the other parts of my life, and as such, is deeply intertwined to my voice as an artist. I am introducing myself this way because its important to the work.

Looking at identity through a lens of ME lol.

And welcome to my ted talk! I'm kidding, you did not primarily come here for jokes, but in a way similar to a ted talk, this presentation is an important component of my thesis work. You are now experiencing my work in its most complete form. I have a film I will show, but the film is not the complete work by itself. I thought about putting the film on the web as its intended home, where it would be easily accessible, but it doesn't have the same impact by itself. It needs this second part, the presentation itself where I'm going to lay the groundwork for an understanding of how the visual work came to be. This feels like how the work is most complete.

I started the journey that led up to this presentation the moment I walked into PNCA. And at the start of the fall, how I found community through PNCA was going to be directly what my thesis was about. I originally came here to search for my artistic voice, and I knew I needed I am here because I needed to find a community. I need people around me who can connect with me through shared experience, or an understanding that we are moving through the world differently but that does not give any of us any more right to thrive than anyone else. I need space where it is explicitly okay to develop my artistic voice as it is becoming, I need space to be myself as a person unapologetically and PNCA has continuously been that space for me. It is those ideas of finding artistic voice through community that I'm bringing into this work.

I thought I was going to explore identity and voice through a graphic novel. But by the time I proposed that, my ideas were already shifting more towards animation and film. Even though I moved away from a graphic novel presentation for my work, I still took a lot of inspiration from comics, particularly ones that were autobiographical in some way. Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer* is a graphic memoir that was

particularly inspiring because eir shared very personal somewhat singular experiences that I still found both relatable and to be impactful. I could connect with this work even though I didn't know em. I brought that knowledge that people would be able to connect with my work without totally knowing everything about me to this. This is another work where the author is portraying themselves that could have just been words but the images and the text worked together in a way that allowed deeper access into the work. In comics, the space between panels is important. In animation too, the use of silence, and inbetween spaces. This work occupies an inbetween space. In the film it ends in an inbetween space. I started experimenting with the use of black space, but instead ended up using empty space. I kept the visuals and let the space be quiet. Last semester I was also in the animated documentary class. In that class we viewed a lot of works that had interviews as an element with animation that helped give depth to the work. I particularly remembered the film that Rose showed us by John Sumerson. It was a story told in interviews with two of his friends and animation. What I liked about that film and films we saw with similar elements was how they connected you with what was being documented. They did that through visual elements and voice performance. And on the back end, a conversation between the person being interviewed and the interviewer. At the end of that class I made a short documentary animated film. It was an interview of myself. I thought about something from my life that I hadn't seen talked about in the way I'd experienced it, but had actually had recent conversations with people whose underlying feelings were along the same lines as mine though the events that caused the feelings were different. And then I responded to that. For a summary, I was speaking to my experience as a nonbinary person with bras. First I wrote out what became the script for the voice performance, and then I read it, animated to it, and that was the film. There was rawness in that film that I hadn't ever felt like I'd been able to convey before. It felt like I had really gotten at what I was feeling as I was experiencing what I was talking about. A big part of that was my choice to use my own voice. My main roadblock with that project was that I had written and spoke on something that I felt very emotionally close to and couldn't detach myself from it in enough time to give any extra attention to how I

animated. I could not listen to that recording for several days after making it and finally had my best friend transcribe and timestamp it for me because I had gotten myself to a place where I was really feeling it. I knew what I wanted the imagery to be, so there was a space in the process of making that film that I could do a little animation just knowing how long a particular part needed to be. I quickly got to the point where I needed to directly listen to the audio to parse out where images and sound needed to be in very specific places in relation to each other. And that meant that I had to confront my voice, but also detach myself from it. It was an experience similar to that of walking into a figure drawing classroom for the first time. I was making a lot of quick judgements on what I sounded like (I sounded like me.) and worrying that that was not enough or that I was going to sound too weird. I wasn't allowing myself to experience that particular creation process fully at first because my own boldness was thrilling but also scary. I was putting out something that felt very personal to me, out in the open and I was going to let people see a vulnerable spot! What was I thinking! Was this really the time to test drive how I might use myself to allow people to see into experiences of identity that they may not have had a very personal connection to before? Was I going to get people to connect with me in a way that made them feel like they should care? Ultimately I had to let the presentation of the work itself answer those questions. My time with my identity and figuring out my voice, both artistically and as a person is an ongoing process. That film gave me the confidence I needed to continue to do that. .

After I gave my proposal, I left the production part of thesis alone. The pandemic is definitely happening at that point. Over the summer I again experienced life without my community. With its own challenges to myself, a lot of them were to how I was presenting and being acknowledged as a person and I felt the lack of space that I could go to that had people who really saw me. I am still doing what I was doing over the summer. I'm still having headaches, still meeting and recovering from concussion symptoms, still going to therapy, and still considering how my experience causes me to reflect on the world and how other people are doing the same. These same things that I have been doing took on a

kind of starkness in relation to my work. Once the semester restarted I was adding back in another same thing that I had done in the past but it was different because I was doing it, doing all these things now, feeling like I had lost my community support. It was a struggle to figure out how to bring these feelings into my work

There was no hub of shared experience that I, as a queer person could turn to. The main group of people around me, my immediate family, support me and love me how they can, but they are all cisgender heterosexual (as far as any of them know) people. Is it hard to get them on the same page as me about what I feel about things and what I've gone through being nonbinary. I was also really missing being around people who knew what I was going through with art school! Just the level of intense learning I had been experiencing! How I was moving through school towards graduation and what I needed from this experience. A lot of the turmoil I experienced when attempting to plan this project was pushing away the feeling like I had to do something. That I had to make something marketable so that when I graduated I could get a job. This was not that.

Going through my process of getting to a point where I could reflect on what was going on in my life. A lot of this work is the process itself. There are things that happen. I reflect on them and let that guide where the work goes. I had settled on a main theme. And I had gotten a mentor! (Thanks Zak!) I knew I wanted to talk about community and how much that meant to my identity. I was physically cut off from everyone who I relied on for support and really just seeing live their everyday lives. It is rather difficult to find openly queer older adults and at PNCA I got to know more than I ever had previously. I talked to them. I passed them in the halls. Not only was I surrounded by a peer group who could really connect with me, I had adults who could too, and it was a relief!!! There has been some points of connection through emails and classes. And I had this thing of experiencing life knowing that I do have a community waiting for me but being very cut off from them that I wanted to get out but wasn't sure how to do it. What was I going to show this through? Myself, but which parts?

Was it important that I really had a hard definition of the part of myself I was showing through or could it all just be me? I spent time sketching, and I spent time journaling.

I have taken a lot of walks over the course of this journey. Walks through my neighborhood and the surrounding suburbs are my breaks from the unbalancing power dynamic that comes from being a trans person in a cis people space. Walks aren't a complete break from that, but they are time that I can reflect on what has been going on and spend time with myself in a space that doesn't have a particular way it asks for me to be.

The walks are where I was able to bring back in my self interview to an extent. I took myself on a walk and I filmed it because I want to be able to bring people along on it with me. Walks are where I talk to myself about what is going on, and they are where I have been able to speak in person with another person who doesn't live in my house. Through the walk, the words become a reflection on myself, and the walk itself is a journey that ends with an inbetween space. The space that takes you to what is going to come next, but hasn't happened yet. Throughout this process of working with the film and audio, I tried adding more animation to the film, but every time I did so it just did not feel right. With this work I am figuring out how to make a space that I can visualize feelings and experiences that I have a hard time sharing otherwise. This work is just as much for me as it is for other queer people and anyone who takes the time to share it with me. And now I invite you to click the link in the chat box to view the film.

[Show Film]

Annotated Bibliography

Barry, Linda. *Making Comics*. Drawn and Quarterly, 2019

Looking at and understanding personal creation and observation in a way that is conducive of growth that expands to encompass what is already there to what is out in the world and in others.

Bongiovanni, Archie. *Grease Bats*. BOOM! Box, August 2019.

Grease Bats is a 5+ year running comic strip on autostraddle.com and follows the lives of a group of queer friends living in a fictional minneapolis. These comics are accessible commentary and fictional documentary of some of the things, feelings, etc. that queer folks experience and allow the reader, queer or not, into a space to get familiar with the fact that these are all people too! (If fictional ones) Aspects of the queer human experience are captured and put into comic form. Relating to my work, *Grease Bats* is a black and grayscale comic. Simple style, not overly detailed that focuses on the power of clear expression and specific action combined with words to stick with the reader. I find it inspiring and stylistically a good starting point of reference for some of my own work.

Brosh, Allie. *Hyperbole and a Half*. Simon and Schuster, 2013.

I first read *Hyperbole and a Half* back when it first came out. This book contains stories of Brosh's life and times in a format that I hadn't seen before. Brosh mostly uses paragraphs of words interspersed with drawings. The style is one of shameless "I have stopped giving a fuck" which I admire. The art gives me the dose of "stop giving a fuck" I need to keep creating with my shakey hands that REFUSE to conform to standard practices. My youth director gave me the book to read on the assumption that I would find the dog stories relatable. I did. I didn't have quite enough life experience yet to know that I was on the same path of destruction as Brosh but this book has reentered my thoughts many many times as I have come into my adult life. Content wise I relate to the dog stories even more now, and I also wish to share some of my life with others in the hope that they will find it informative and helpful.

G, Mady and J.R. Zuckerberg. *A Quick and Easy Guide To Queer and Trans Identities*. Limerence Press, Inc, 2019.

Gender and sexuality made accessible with cute snails and other characters!! Uses anthropomorphism and fantasy characters to allow us to suspend our biases and actually take in some information. Geared at younger readers and those with not as much knowledge or experience with the topics covered. Gentle, not overly theoretical, uses the mode of documentary where you have an interpersonal relationship to the on page narrator.

Jacobs, Mira. *Good Talk*.

A conversation based graphic memoir! Neat style, not what I will be using, but something different and a very good read just to expand my own horizons of how I think about the world and what I consider in my day to day experiences.

Kabi, Nagata. *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness*. East Press, 2017.

A manga about the author's experience with loneliness, juggling sexuality that isn't heterosexual, insecurity and inexperience and feeling further alienation because of that. Another one that I looked at not only because it really speaks to the part of me who was that person but because it is autobiographical and conveys experiences.

Kabi, Nagata. *My Solo Exchange Diary*. Shogakukan, 2018.

Slightly different format, not totally linear, split into sections of diary entries. I like that not-about-just-one-experience but also narrowed down enough that it is manageable for one volume at a time format. I want to do something that has a lot of separate parts but they all go together instead of just one story. Plus I'm not sure I could go on about one part of my life for long enough. My gender and sexuality sure but there's more to me than that and I want to talk about the other stuff too.

Kobabe, Maia. *Gender Queer, A Memoir*. The Lion Forge LLC, 2019

This was such a cathartic read for me. Kobabe talks about eir experiences with gender and sexuality and how eir came to identify as nonbinary and ace. I've never seen anyone who is also nonbinary and ace be so open about their experiences. This book is similar to what I see myself doing. A compilation of experiences. Kobabe has created something coherent by narrowing focus (experiences from life that center on gender and sexuality.) and being very economical with details. Not in a sparse way but eir evidently put a lot of effort into condensing eir experiences in a way that still allows them to have a full impact.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. Kitchen Sink Press, 1993.

Theory and history of comics. Understanding how they are read, how we process the static word and image and how they become incredibly powerful together. Helping me understand what I am doing and how I can make it more impactful.