

THE COMICS OF ALISON BECHDEL

From the Outside In



EDITED BY JANINE UTELL

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ALISON
BECHDEL
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SERVANTS TO WHAT CAUSE

Illustrating Queer Movement Culture through Grassroots Periodicals

MARGARET GALVAN

In the late 1980s, after nearly a half decade of self-syndicating her own comic in grassroots newspapers across the nation, Alison Bechdel took the next step and decided to launch her own periodical. Her creation, the *10% Tribune*, was germinated in phone conversations and written correspondence with Mark Thompson, senior editor of the *Advocate*, a gay magazine with national distribution. The reason that Bechdel's periodical escapes notice is because it was, in reality, a fictional setting for a new comic, *Servants to the Cause*. The contexts surrounding the development of the comic are key because Bechdel integrates them into its plot to theorize the role of periodical production and culture in queer social movements. As she writes to Thompson in a letter dated September 23, 1988:

How about a comic strip set in the offices of a gay and lesbian newspaper? I collectively run [a] paper in a medium sized city. It would be a perfect context for exploring gay/lesbian relationship dynamics, as well as a natural scenario for covering current events and topical issues.

I've worked in and around the g/l press since I graduated from college, and I'm champing at the bit to do an expose. . . . My brain is teeming with possible characters and personalities and conflicts. (para. 1–2)

In these paragraphs, Bechdel alludes to her experience as production coordinator of *Equal Time*, a Minneapolis–Saint Paul gay and lesbian newspaper where she worked from 1986 to 1990. She also gestures back toward her years of involvement “in and around the g/l press,” which included participating from 1983 to 1985 in the collective of the largely woman-only *WomaNews*, a New York City feminist newspaper, in addition to the perspective she gained

through self-syndicating *Dykes to Watch Out For* “in more than two dozen newspapers and magazines in the U.S., Canada and Great Britain” (*New, Improved!* front matter). Arguing that the newspaper provides “a perfect context for exploring gay/lesbian relationship dynamics,” she further underlines how her current and prior experience leaves her “champing at the bit to do an expose.” Although Bechdel is most known for her lesbian-centered comics, her pitch for a gay and lesbian take on grassroots newspapers reflects an awareness of the *Advocate*’s predominantly gay content and audience.¹ In this context, she wields the knowledge gathered from participating in all these venues to examine the subtleties of gay and lesbian interactions, creating a diverse cast that allows her to investigate these identities in intersectional ways.²

Introducing these characters a month and a half later in another letter to Thompson, dated November 11, 1988, Bechdel describes them both as queer social subjects and also in terms of the associated personalities and behaviors that shape the work they do at the *10% Tribune*, for example, Rachel, “an anal-retentive perfectionist who has memorized the *Chicago Manual of Style*” (para. 4) (fig. 14.1). By presenting her six characters textually as well as in sketches alongside the left margin, Bechdel foregrounds their difference. She devotes the most page space to her two protagonists, Eric and Tina (later renamed Liza), who hail from a younger generation than the other characters and represent newer ways of negotiating sexuality in society. While Eric is “a Radical Faerie, a WASP gone amok,” Tina (Liza) is a black woman who is a “very hip, free-thinking, sexual libertarian kind of dyke” (para. 3). These characters are balanced by MJ, a white “old-school lesbian-gone-separatist”; Julio, a middle-aged Latino “ad rep, [who is] slightly superficial but charming”; Arthur, an older black man who “tends to be tyrannical”; and Rachel, a Jewish lesbian who “do[es] most of the editorial work” alongside Arthur (para. 4).

I emphasize the generational and racial differences evident through the combination of these textual and visual portrayals because they inflect the interactions of these characters as much as do their personalities, individual expressions of sexuality, and roles on the newspaper staff. After these descriptions, Bechdel concludes, “That’s about all I know about them at this point—after I work with them a little more, I will learn more about them” (para. 5). This remark not only points to Bechdel’s organic process of character creation but also reflects back on the space of the grassroots periodical office, where one might encounter a range of individuals and “learn more about them” through the process of “work[ing] with them a little more.”

These conversations with Thompson set the foundation for *Servants to the Cause*, which ran for nineteen episodes over the course of a year and a half in the pages of the *Advocate* (1989–90).³ During this time—from the first strip in the March 14, 1989, issue to the nineteenth strip in the August 28, 1990,

Alison Bechdel

p.o. box 8161, mpis., mn 55408

Friday, November 11, 1988

Mark Thompson
The Advocate
6922 Hollywood Blvd., 10th fl.
Los Angeles, Ca 90028
871.1225

Dear Mark:

Sorry I took longer than I projected with this. I'm much more punctual when I have a definite deadline.

I hope you like it. I think 'Servants to the Cause' is a good title because I'd like the strip to apply not just to the newspaper biz but to the whole 'cause'--to all of us working in the community, with other gay folks, for alternative organizations.

It took a while to come up with these characters...they are starting to grow on me. My favorites are Tina, the production manager, and Eric, the guy with the pony tail. Tina's this ver hip, free-thinking, sexual libertarian kind of dyke. Eric's a Radical Faerie, a WASP gone amok. He wears a crystal and does yoga and considers himself a radical feminist.



ERIC

The other folks are less clear. M.J.'s sort of an old-school lesbian-gone-separatist. Julio is the ad rep, slightly superficial but charming. Arthur and Rachel are the heavies--he tends to be tyrannical and she is an anal-retentive perfectionist who has memorized the Chicago Manual of Style. Together they do most of the editorial work.



TINA

That's about all I know about them at this point--after ~~xi~~ I work with them a little more, I will learn more about them.



MJ

So, I hope this can work out on a semi-regular basis. Here's a couple ideas for possible future scenarios:

o one day in the office the phone keeps ringing--either it's readers complaining, people in the community wanting various kinds of information as if the paper were some kind of hotline, ~~xxx~~ or else it's crank/obscene callers. Someone ^{speculates} on how it's all worth it if they can be of help to one troubled soul struggling to come out somewhere..then some kind of ironic twist of a punchline..I haven't figured it out yet.



JULIO

o a collective post-mortem where ~~xxxxx~~ they thoroughly depress themselves dwelling on all their mistakes and how hard they work, and for what? Not sure what could be funny about this yet.



ARTHUR

o They're all sitting around joking about the personal ads, maybe selecting an 'ad of the week' to highlight...then it turns out one of them has placed it.

o Eric & Tina scandalizing MJ with true'safer sex' stories.



RACHEL

That's all for now... look forward to hearing from you. — Alison

Fig. 14.1. Letter from Alison Bechdel to Mark Thompson, November 11, 1988.

Description: drawings of characters for strip down the side. Creator: Alison Bechdel. Alison Bechdel Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.

issue—*Servants* was published alongside Howard Cruse's *Wendel* and Donelan's *It's a Gay Life* and alternated issues with Tim Barela's *Leonard & Larry*. These comics interlocutors, which mainly focused on the gay experience and had largely less diverse casts, further emphasize the radical nature of Bechdel's project. By situating every strip within the newspaper's offices, Bechdel shows how this cast of characters collaborates on production while simultaneously engaging in debates about gay and lesbian life and how that world is shifting around them in the late 1980s. Her episodic, nonserial approach to storytelling means that we encounter these characters at nineteen distinct moments and watch how they mediate long-running and emerging debates, some of which are localized to grassroots periodical production and some of which touch on larger debates in gay and lesbian culture.⁴ For example, they argue about the co-optation of Pride celebrations while putting together the annual Pride issue (*Servants* #5), and they all weigh in on the politics of drag when two male staffers dress up for Halloween (*Servants* #9). The office of the *10% Tribune*, the setting for every strip, acts as a place to synthesize these debates, suggesting that all these perspectives inhabit the pages of the periodical as well, making it a venue speaking not just for its own time but also across time.

I position the comic and the newspaper it contains as intersectional spaces to theorize across difference, bringing varying contingents of queer folks together in common cause. Moreover, Bechdel's integration of her own experiences into the strip allows us to reread periodicals in their moment, understanding them not as individual ventures but as an evolving network of activism. These intertwined perspectives—informing the creation of the comics and fueling the characters' interactions—produce queerness. Through this process, Bechdel emerges as a theorist engaging in contemporaneous queer thought. To understand her engagement with, and contributions to, contemporary discourse, I will first put her into conversation with grassroots and academic takes on queerness and then examine how she represents these ideas in the comic itself. Her engagements extend—and presciently challenge—contemporaneous writing about possibilities for coalition within LG-BTQ communities.

In the queer periodical press where Bechdel worked, the reality of lesbians and gay men working alongside one another on AIDS activism informed these conversations in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the editorial for the October 9, 1990, issue of the *Advocate*, editor in chief Richard Rouillard evokes this coalition when he writes: "To be gay in this decade, we feel, one must also be lesbian, since lesbians in the preceding decade, in their participation in AIDS activism, were awfully gay" (6). These remarks are part of an editorial where Rouillard details "a brand-new look" for the magazine, which includes changing its tagline to incorporate lesbians: "the national gay *and lesbian*

newsmagazine” (6; italics in original). Over the course of its run, *Servants* directly referenced AIDS activism through the organization ACT UP in three of the nineteen strips (#6, 11, 19). The first two inclusions only reference ACT UP and its actions, while the final strip speaks the words “HIV” and “AIDS” when Liza worries about Eric’s status, since he is under the weather and refuses to be tested (*Servants* #19). In the final panel of the comic, a text box instructs us to “Stay Tuned!,” suggesting that the following strip would continue this story line, thereby disrupting the nonserial storytelling.

However, Bechdel produced no further strips, as Rouillard’s revamping of the *Advocate* included the cancellation of Bechdel’s comic and other comics in the publication, except for gay artist Donelan’s single-panel cartoons. Thus this moment of recognizing the importance of lesbians to AIDS activism is paradoxically also one of elision that erases lesbian representation and Bechdel’s contributions to the conversation.⁵ I discuss the reasons behind the cancellation more fully later in this essay, but the move reveals the superficial nature of Rouillard’s embrace of lesbian identity, an ethos that Bechdel challenges throughout *Servants*.

Bechdel creates a space for exchange that is not necessarily overdetermined by gay men or by one subset of gay men, as her diverse cast of characters and their interests vis-à-vis the newspaper illuminate. In *Servants*, it is the shared activity of producing a grassroots newspaper that brings the characters together in dialogue. This action produces movement on the local level. Each strip brings us to a different moment in the making of the periodical that unfolds into a larger discussion of gay and lesbian politics from a variety of perspectives. This range is active from the first strip of *Servants*, where all six members of the collective civilly debate the inclusion of a back-cover advertisement featuring a naked gay man (*Servants* #1). When the ad manager, Julio, brings in the salacious ad, Eric quickly recognizes that it “doesn’t conform to our guidelines” and calls for a “collective meeting.” In this conversation, MJ adds that “naked men upset the balance of gay to lesbian content,” while Liza is against “censorship” and Arthur contends that “this is a respectable publication.” Because the money from the advertisement is important to sustain the newspaper and the messenger is about to arrive to pick up the finished copy, they quickly have Liza, the staff artist, alter the drawing so that the man is not fully naked, all of them standing behind her in solidarity as she completes the task. This moment of quick processing underlines the range of perspectives that get heard and wrapped into the decision making. In this way, Bechdel imagines the newspaper as the sustaining space that can build deep dialogue around a number of issues.

Through the framework of this grassroots newspaper that centralizes a larger set of perspectives and issues than Rouillard is able to acknowledge,

Bechdel anticipates theoretical work in the early 1990s that would establish the field of queer theory as distinct from gay and lesbian studies. Like Bechdel, these proto-queer theorists acknowledged the important coalition work of AIDS activism but also questioned what perspectives were left out by reductive fusion such as that enacted by Rouillard. In the most quotable axiom with which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick launches *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), she observes, “Axiom 1: People are different from each other,” following this with a third axiom that more directly pushes back on assertions like Rouillard’s editorial position by suggesting that it is not clear whether “it will make sense to conceptualize lesbian and gay male identities together” (22, 36). In an essay widely recognized as naming this emerging field, Teresa de Lauretis meditates on the depth of experiences that continue to separate lesbians from gay men:

The fact of the matter is, most of us, lesbians and gay men, do not know much about one another’s sexual history, experience, fantasies, desire, or modes of theorizing. And we do not know enough about ourselves, as well, when it comes to differences between and within lesbians, and between and within gay men, in relation to race and its attendant differences of class or ethnic culture, generational, geographical, and socio-political location. We do not know enough to theorize those differences. (viii)

At the same time that de Lauretis describes the multifaceted gulf between these identities, she identifies the challenges that enforce this distance. Both Sedgwick and de Lauretis suggest that we need to devote more thought on how to parse these perspectives.

With *Servants*, Bechdel not only demonstrates how one can learn about and acknowledge the differences in the LGBTQ community that de Lauretis outlines but, from this position, also “theorize[s] those differences.” *Servants* acts as a model for working across difference and shows how intersectional space can be created and sustained. The image-text form of the comic supports the kind of nuanced representation that can simultaneously examine difference on the visual and verbal axes. Rebecca Beirne and Judith Kegan Gardiner have both written about the evolving viewpoints of Bechdel’s long-running strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, with Beirne specifically tracking how these shifting frameworks parallel theoretical developments—from lesbian feminism to queer theory (Beirne, 178; see also Gardiner and Parker-Hay in this volume). Because of the wider generational range of the characters in *Servants*, older and newer perspectives of what it means to be queer mesh on the page, creating intergenerational dialogue between earlier activisms in gay liberation and second-wave feminism with contemporary movements like ACT UP. Moreover, other forms of diversity—notably gender and

race—expand the space between the characters that they must broach in their decision-making processes.⁶ Bechdel directs readers to examine these differences through background details and conversational exchange, interrogating how they inform periodical production. Coalition building operates in these everyday moments. In producing the periodical, Bechdel's characters also produce queerness in their exchanges across difference.

A proliferation of recent scholarship has shed light on the role periodicals have played in building the feminist movement at the local level (Beins; Beins and Enszer; Enszer, "Fighting," "Night"; McKinney). In *Liberation in Print*, Agatha Beins constructs a network across individual, local feminist periodicals by examining their interconnections throughout her book rather than treating the history of each individually. Likewise, the field of comics studies has begun to pay attention to comics within queer grassroots periodicals and how the political network of these precarious spaces shapes the comics. In his introduction to *No Straight Lines*, a volume containing a number of queer comics recuperated from such publications, editor Justin Hall remarks how the grassroots context facilitated the "direct political and social commentary" of the comics while also obscuring them from "the traditional comics industry."⁷ Hillary Chute contends with how the serialization of *Dykes to Watch Out For* and its treatment of "the present tense" and its "invest[ment] in reflecting the world . . . opened up the door for participation and interactivity, bringing in a population of involved readers . . . eager . . . to see certain kinds of under-represented lives reflected back at them" (366). Together, this scholarship describes Bechdel's approach to content creation, with the focus on grassroots periodicals reflecting how Bechdel's comic itself echoes the ethos of periodicals by fusing multiple local perspectives into each comic strip. *Servants* is a layered synthesis of Bechdel's networks. In operating as metacommentary on this movement, the strip argues for the periodical as a queer clearinghouse that can recognize difference in a way that other activism—represented in the pages of the periodical—cannot. It is while producing the periodical that the characters must synthesize how to respect different approaches to queer identity, such as when they discuss how to caption a photo featuring people on a gay softball team who don't want to be publicly outed (*Servants* #7). Among the six characters themselves, movements and positions proliferate, expanding the network that informs their periodicals.

Bechdel explicitly depicts the larger network of grassroots periodicals in addition to implicitly weaving it into the plot. We can read this network as an activist movement and theorize its potential for recognizing difference just as much as those reported in the pages of the periodical itself. These influences are sometimes quite literally named in the comic, as when we see characters reading other gay and lesbian press, whose names are slightly obscured

from actual fact: Liza cracks open a copy of the lesbian erotica magazine *Bad Backs* (*Servants* #8) to intentionally shock her colleagues; MJ catches up on the reporting in *Out of It* (#14) and *Gay Community Schmooze* (#16) as the newsroom bustles around her; and Rachel holds a copy of *Weekly Voice* while discussing how a not explicitly out J. T. Chapridge, an analogue for k.d. lang, had done interviews in both that paper and the *Distress* (#17).⁸ By including multiple exemplars of, and allusions to, independent publications in the newsroom, Bechdel constructs her characters as connected to other regional outlets about queer folks like them. These periodicals from elsewhere affect discussions about the content and direction of the *10% Tribune*, similar to how all the places where Bechdel published her comics shaped the content of her own representations, including these conversations in *Servants* as well as the narratives in *Dykes to Watch Out For*.

Yet what ends up on the pages of the *10% Tribune* does not always equally represent these perspectives, underlining the inequities present in coalition. When incorporating contemporaneous issues facing both *Equal Time* and the *Advocate*, Bechdel employs her diverse cast of characters to weigh in on how production decisions unevenly affect various constituents. As mentioned earlier, the first strip concerns the newsroom coming to consensus about, and altering an advertisement of, a naked gay man (*Servants* #1). Although the strip ends with everyone huddled together in solidarity, endorsing the change because the original ad violates their collective guidelines, the debate about including sexually explicit ads persists in the fictional newsroom of the *10% Tribune* and in the real production offices of *Equal Time* and the *Advocate*. In *Servants* #15, the comic opens on a collective meeting where Rachel holds up a page spread of a recent issue of *10% Tribune* full of largely gay phone sex ads, acknowledging that “a lot of our readers have been complaining. We have to make a decision” (*Servants* #15). By opening the discussion up to the entire collective, Rachel allows all these different perspectives to have a say in the decision.

While we do not encounter the content of the complaints in *Servants*, we can find them in the surrounding pages of the *Advocate*, encouraging us to compare the handling of this conversation at both periodicals. In a letter printed in the April 11, 1989, issue of the *Advocate*, a reader writes to cancel his subscription, explaining, “I wanted to show an article in a recent issue to a straight friend of mine whom I had come out to, but I realized I couldn’t when I saw all the ads for X-rated films, all the pages of personal sex ads, and even an ad for a latex simulation of a certain part of a porno star’s anatomy” (Hanscom, 6). The reader further qualifies that this material, which was then concentrated near the back of the *Advocate*, did nothing to dispel stereotypes about “the gay life-style [being] centered around sex.” These assertions echo

the remarks of Arthur and MJ, the older collective members, especially Arthur, who reveals that he is “embarrassed to show the paper to [his] family and straight friends” (*Servants* #15). The strip’s youngest characters and protagonists, Eric and Liza, object to these views, claiming that these ads support “safe sex” and to censor them would be to give in to “what the right-wingers want!” Bechdel interleaves these opposing views, giving each its own panel, so we have pro and con following each other in sequence before Rachel regains the floor, invoking “the voice of reason.” In this wider panel showing all six collective members at once, Rachel and Julio hold the financial report as Julio discloses that these ads account for “25% of our total ad revenue.” Rachel and Julio are centered in the panel, visually separating the old guard, MJ and Arthur, from the younger generation, Eric and Liza. Visually, Bechdel allows each perspective to be heard in the newsroom even if not all the perspectives make it onto the periodical page, rendering transparent how coalition operates in regard to an issue that has the potential to alienate some members.

Rather than finding a way to resolve the debate and come together in solidarity as everyone did in *Servants* #1, the final three panels show individuals holding fast to their sides. Although this indecision disenfranchises certain collective members and readers, the financial bottom line—and, by default, the younger generation—wins out. In the final episode of *Servants*, MJ is pictured perusing a periodical identified only by the phone sex hotline ad on the back cover (#19). This detail is not part of the main plot for the strip, but it gestures toward the reality that these ads, in part because their revenue stream supports the paper, are here to stay. In including the evolution of this debate in a number of strips, Bechdel encourages her readers to reflect on how the pages of real grassroots periodicals do or do not equally speak to all community members.

Both the *10% Tribune* and the *Advocate* recognize the financial necessity of retaining these ads, and the *Advocate* does so by including them in a removable center section of the magazine. However, the market forces that drive the *Servants* collective to retain the ads are the same as those that compel the *Advocate* staff to reconceive the seriousness of their publication, keeping the ads but ditching the comics.⁹ Although we cannot get a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the *Advocate*’s newsroom as its members made their decision, similar to what we witness in *Servants*, Rouillard’s aforementioned editorial reflects the role that respectability politics played for this overwhelmingly gay staff. The decision did not escape notice. A reader letter printed in the *Advocate* a few issues after the reveal of the “brand-new look” lamented, “I am dismayed that you have chosen to drop two of the most intelligent, human, and humorous gay comic strips I have ever encountered (namely, ‘Servants to the Cause’ and ‘Leonard and Larry’)” (Rouillard, 6; Tate, 11). Bechdel’s fellow

lesbian comics artist Jennifer Camper more emphatically responded to the cancellation in her write-up of the 1991 Outwrite lesbian and gay writers conference, published in the Lesbian Cartoonists' Network newsletter of spring 1991. Informed by what a staff member from the *Advocate* shared following a panel of cartoonists, Camper opined, "It seems that the image that *The Advocate* is trying to develop is a 'serious' one and that doesn't include comics. . . . It's a damn shame. Maybe it's time for a posse of leatherdykes to pay a visit to their office?" (3). Together, these lamentations question why the *Advocate's* new "serious" image did not include "two of the most intelligent, human, and humorous gay comic strips." Although the *Advocate* found a way to balance readers' demands for discretion with the magazine's own need for ad revenue, the decision to cancel the comics reveals that they were deemed out-of-step with the transformation of the *Advocate* into something more mainstream. With this change occurs a compartmentalizing of certain kinds of queer content, along with a complete dismissal of others. In this we see the particular precarity that comics face in grassroots contexts, as they are considered disposable in the ways that other content—especially content that fills, rather than drains, the coffers—is not.

The move toward the mainstream that leaves the comics and, metaphorically, the grassroots newspaper behind is one that Bechdel explores in *Servants*, where she examines not only what but who gets left behind by such a transition. In the comic's penultimate strip, Julio consults an issue of the mainstream magazine *Newstime* (a mash-up of *Newsweek* and *Time*), whose cover story is "The Future of Straight-Looking Professional White-Gay Men in America," as the newsroom erupts into a conversation about assimilation, prompted by the anxiety dream of Eric, who imagines how acceptance for homosexuality ("openly lesbian tennis stars . . . on Wheaties boxes") will destroy their community spaces ("gay bars or clubs," "gay churches and synagogues and professional organizations," and "lesbian and gay newspapers or publishers") (*Servants* #18) (fig. 14.2). In retrospective comments on this strip written eight years after its publication, Bechdel expresses "a particular fondness" "because it's so prescient," qualifying that though "everything Eric saw in his dream has already happened," the strip "nicely encapsulates a lot of my own complex feelings about assimilation and identity" (*Indelible*, 191). Although much of what Eric fears comes to pass, by positioning him talking through these fears with only his colleagues of color, Bechdel unpacks how race factors into assimilation.

Although Eric is a ponytailed radical faerie, as the only white man in the newsroom, he is the closest to the identity type that might be seen as the prerequisite for the mainstream acceptance that *Newstime* promises for a small subset of the LGBTQ community, and yet he fears this acceptance and



Fig. 14.2. Servants to the Cause #18.

its possibilities more so than do his colleagues of color—Arthur, Julio, and Liza—for whom “the right to be like everyone else” remains a farther-fetched dream. The subtle staging of this exchange reminds readers of the disconnect between the values that gather together a broad-based coalition at the *10% Tribune* and those of a larger public, and how acceptance is not just about sexuality and sexual desire but (as highlighted by the cover story’s title) also intersects with gender, gender expression, class, generation, and—further underlined by Bechdel’s casting choices—race.

Ultimately, at the end of the comic, Liza joins Eric in his fears about what the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian politics might mean for all their social institutions. This alliance reinforces an intergenerational divide between the two characters and the other members of the collective. By including multiple generations in one newspaper collective, Bechdel suggests that dialogue can bridge this division, representing the possibility through even the smallest of details, including the production of the newspaper itself. Different generations of periodical production coincide as both physical pasteup of the layout and the use of computers are pictured throughout. Notably, characters of different generational positions are shown in relationship to both methods, so we are facing not a moment of obsolescence but one of coexistence that mirrors the material reality of the publication and the relationship of the characters as well.¹⁰

In *Servants*, Bechdel recognizes how histories of activism challenge intergenerational coexistence, but she posits that it is about making a newsroom—or movement—big enough to respect different histories of, and approaches to, activism. As members of the younger generation, Eric and Liza engage in activism differently from their elders, who were themselves on the front lines, fighting for rights through the movements of gay liberation and second-wave feminism. This divergent perspective is particularly evident in *Servants* #16, when Eric and Liza’s loud chants of a new, explicit ACT UP slogan echo throughout the office and frustrate two older members of the collective, MJ and Arthur. An exasperated MJ intones, “They think they’re being radical,” and Arthur quips, “Radical? It’s tasteless, shock-value tactics like that that are gonna set the gay rights movement back 20 years!” (*Servants* #16). Although Arthur’s reaction may seem insensitive, we learn in an earlier comic that his partner Bill died—possibly due to AIDS (*Servants* #11). Until this point, the two pairs have been occupying different rooms in the office, but Liza and Eric then enter the other room and attempt to bring MJ and Arthur to their way of understanding. MJ and Arthur are pictured in the foreground and centered as holders of an older perspective being challenged by those coming behind them. Neither side is convinced of the other’s position, and they return to different rooms in the office at the comic’s end, but we do encounter

both sides dialoguing and sharing space, making legible the variety of opinions that queer people hold, informed by their age and histories of activism. Bechdel's ability to facilitate these disagreements positions her comic as one that theorizes differences by creating spaces—like the grassroots newspaper—for proximity.

NOTES

1. As Bechdel relates in her introduction to a compilation of fellow gay cartoonist and mentor Howard Cruse's *Wendel*, which originally appeared in the *Advocate* over the course of the 1980s: "Like lots of women in those days I saw that publication's pink pages as evidence that it was a men-only affair" (Bechdel, "Introduction").

2. I discuss in greater detail how this network of grassroots periodicals shaped and supported the development of Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* in the "Queer about Comics" issue of *American Literature* (Galvan).

3. In addition to first appearing in the *Advocate*, all of the *Servants* strips were also reprinted three years later in *Gay Comics* #19, an issue devoted to Bechdel's non-*Dykes to Watch Out For* work, featuring three short comics—"Coming Out Story," "The Power of Prayer," "True Confession"—and *Servants*. The three short comics are collected in *Indelible*, 35–54.

4. Bechdel established this storytelling strategy in her first letter to Thompson, dated September 23, 1988, arguing in the aforementioned excerpted paragraphs that the periodical would allow her to "[cover] current events and topical issues" (para. 1). In a later paragraph of the same letter, she further elaborates on this stylistic decision: "And it wouldn't be a serial strip. . . . Each installment would be self-sufficient, given that only one would appear each month" (para. 4).

5. This erasure resonates with Adrienne Rich's meditations on the constant societal erasure of lesbian experience in her landmark essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (57). Even more directly, the cancellation, which effaces Eric and Liza's active participation in ACT UP, echoes the problematic recounting of ACT UP's history, where lesbians' participation has been often overlooked, as Ann Cvetkovich details in scholarship that seeks to recuperate their import: "It has seemed all the more urgent to provide a history of ACT UP's lesbians when, with the passage of time, ACT UP is in danger of being remembered as a group of privileged gay white men. . . . Once again lesbians, many of whom came to ACT UP with considerable political experience, seem to be some of the first to disappear from ACT UP's history" (158).

6. The "generational diversity" in *Servants* predates Bechdel's introduction of that facet in *DTWOF*, first through Clarice and Toni's baby, Raffi, and later through a whole host of other characters (*Indelible*, 69). Gender diversity is especially notable, since *DTWOF* was a world populated solely by dykes at this point and contained no major male characters until a few years later. Moreover, among the six major characters, there is an equal 50/50 male/female split, whereas *DTWOF* never reaches that level of saturation. Three years after the end of *Servants*, Bechdel introduced a main male character when Raffi, Clarice and Toni's son, was born in *DTWOF* #171, "Infant Replay," in 1993 (*Essential*, 114). Three more years after that, Carlos, Raffi's caretaker, debuted as the first major adult male character in this near lesbian utopia, in *DTWOF* #232 "A Smidge Too Far" (*Essential*, 155). All told, it took Bechdel roughly a decade from when she introduced recurring characters in *DTWOF* until she allowed a major male character on the same generational wavelength as her main characters to enter the scene.

7. I evoke the same observation by Hall in an *American Literature* article on Bechdel's beginnings, where I contend with how this grassroots publication context kept Bechdel from mainstream renown for decades despite the reach of her subcultural publication networks (Galvan).

8. *Bad Backs* refers to *On Our Backs* (1984–2006), a lesbian erotica magazine that Bechdel occasionally contributed cartoons to and for which she was interviewed by editor Susie Bright in the November–December 1991 issue (Bright). *Gay Community Schmooze* likely denotes the Boston-area *Gay Community News* (1973–92), and *Out of It* refers to the New York City magazine *OutWeek* (1989–91), whose creation during the rise of AIDS activism explains the triangle in the title logo, which Bechdel represents in her rendering. It would take two more years after this comic for k.d. lang to officially come out, doing so in an issue of the *Advocate*, of which she was also the cover star (Lemon). A twenty-year retrospective article in the *Advocate* suggests that “lang became one of the first celebrities to crack open the closet door, laying a blueprint for Melissa, Ellen, and Neil” (Advocate Contributors).

9. During the year and a half that *Servants* appeared in the pages of the *Advocate*, the magazine was in the midst of transforming itself into a more serious publication, shifting from cover images of nearly nude hunks to more clothed, serious portrayals of male cover models that signaled the important feature stories contained within. Later in the year, after the April letter, the *Advocate* moved the ads from the back of the magazine into a separately paginated regional supplement section at the center of the volume that could easily be removed by a reader. These shifts affected the placement of *Servants* and other comics in the magazine, as they were moved around the magazine, sometimes immediately preceding the classifieds and ads and eventually occupying space at the back of the magazine that used to be the domain of the advertisements. That is, the comics experienced a precarity of placement before they were ultimately canceled, in a move that coincided with the finished transformation of the magazine to a broadly respectable magazine at the start of the 1990s, as editor in chief Rouillard detailed in the aforementioned editorial.

10. The computer was reshaping the production of *Equal Time* during this same time frame. In the August 17, 1988, issue of *Equal Time*, Barney Dews begins as the first and only “word processing volunteer” (“Staff Box”). When Bechdel leaves the paper roughly two years later, twelve people are listed in the staff box as “computer volunteers” (“Staff Box”).

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