

YOUTH IN BLOOM: GIRLHOOD SEXUAL AGENCY & NONDICHOTOMOUS SEXUAL CONSENT IN THE DIARY OF A TEENAGE GIRL

© Screenshot from *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2015) dir. Marielle Heller.

by: Katie Tobin, March 30, 2023

Released to a mass of cultural backlash in 2015, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* follows fifteen-year-old Minnie Goetze as she begins a sexual affair with her mother's boyfriend in libertine San Francisco circa 1976. Oscillating between a mediation on sex, power, agency, gender, and consent on one hand, and Minnie's sexual discovery on the other, the graphic novel faced censorship threats in US libraries (Commons 2015). Gloeckner's debut novel, *A Child's Life* (2000), also received similar criticism and was labelled 'a how-to guide for paedophiles' by Mayor Gary Podesto (CBLDF 2017). The subject of extensive controversy, the novel depicts 'an ambivalent combination of pleasure and degradation' (Køhlert 2015: 124) as Minnie explores her sexual desires. Køhlert's suggestion upholds Podesto's claim, and exposes the novel's dangerous potential in that, without sufficient critical engagement, Gloeckner's work could appear to condone and justify her protagonists' abuse. The critical reception of Heller's film only affirmed such dangers by eliciting responses like that of Elaine Teng, who adamantly claims that 'Minnie is no Lolita' (2015). Also remarking that 'Minnie enthusiastically pursues Monroe, fantasizes about him while in the bath, and tries to use the illicitness of their affair as sexual capital,' Teng concludes that Minnie is not 'only a victim' or a 'sex object but an unapologetic participant' in her sexual relationship with Monroe (Teng 2015).

While Teng diminishes Minnie's abuse to 'deep [misguidance]' (2015), this paper seeks to demonstrate *Diary's* capabilities as a text that discredits the 'perfect victim' myth by exploring the capacity for both exploitation and pleasure within sexual relationships. Evidencing this through Gloeckner's stream-of-consciousness narrative and comic illustrations, I argue that *Diary's* explorations of power, gender, desire, and agency highlight the necessity of reframing our understanding of consent. More broadly, I compel a reading of *Diary* through a philosophical framework that invites Gloeckner's readership to envision sex 'beyond the narrow parameters of "consent"' and ultimately dreams of 'freer sex' in doing so (Srinivasan 2021: 127). Drawing upon a range of socio-legal and philosophical scholarship on consent, power, and age, I hope to

encourage a consideration of sexual ethics that dispels outdated myths about female sexuality, and instead places the onus of consensual responsibility on parties with perceivably more agency.

Nondichotomous Consent: A New Frontier for Sexual Morality

In England and Wales, sexual consent is legally defined as ‘if he agrees by choice, and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice’ (Rape and Sexual Offences – Chapter 2021). Foregrounding the legal construction of consent for philosopher Amia Srinivasan and myself, this definition—while seemingly objective—is elsewhere tenuous under an enquiry of cross-cultural differences and personal subjectivities. Likewise, as the age of consent varies between nations and states, so do understandings of freedom and agency. In their attempts to define sexual agency, Breanne Fahs and Sara I. McClelland explicate the notion in terms of an individual’s ‘self-efficacy and the perceived ability to decline invitations to sex,’ focusing ‘on how individual actions shape sexual practices’ (2016: 396). Those with perceivably more sexual agency are often also considered more powerful, possessing privileges such as status, class, race, gender, sexuality, and age (amongst others) that may redefine another’s capacity for full autonomy and agency within sexual relationships. Also considering the extent to which privilege and power shape the authenticity of consent, Srinivasan asks readers ‘when the relatively powerless consent to sex with the powerful, is it consent worth the name?’ (2021: 127). For such a question, there is no definitive answer, and yet it echoes the recent deepening feminist concern about the ethics of sexual relationships shaped by large differentials of power, a theme which Gloeckner’s playful literary and artistic affectations explore at length. Contrary to conventional understandings of sexual consent, this paper asks readers to think about consent beyond its traditional dichotomisation into two reductive categories: ‘the consensual (unproblematic) and non-consensual (problematic)’ (Srinivasan 2021: 95). This didactic approach to consent follows the broad scope of contemporary thought on sexual morality, which argues that we should look beyond the binary of consent as the sole constraint on what constitutes ethically sound sex. Using *Diary* as a case study, I propose a discursive socio-legal reading of the text which exposes the failures of a cultural and legal model that fails to adequately distinguish between the age of ‘consensual competency and incapacity, and between the time for innocence and the time for sex’ (Fischel 2010: 270).

Fischel points out that the modern model of consent neglects to consider factors that may render some individuals more vulnerable to ‘coercion and exploitation,’ including ‘power, dependency, sexual and social experience, gender and gendered expectations’ (281). Since the inception of the #MeToo movement in Hollywood in late 2017, cultural and theoretical discourses have shifted focus towards identifying the plethora of moral ‘grey areas’ during sex. Identifying that the ‘subjective comprehension of these situations is framed by discourses not of our own making,’ conversations surrounding these grey areas have been increasingly inclusive of sexual-moral transgressions, such as substantial power differentials in purportedly ‘consensual’ sexual relationships (Gunnarson 2018: 5). By establishing a legal approach that considers factors such as ‘age difference and relations of dependence,’ Fischel concludes that we can then ‘reflect and displace more normatively apt questions around gender, gendered power and submission’ (2010: 270). *Diary* serves as an important case study for this approach as, through her diary entries alone, Minnie’s obsession with both sex and Monroe are transmuted into a far more palatable narrative for readers to digest. Often dismissing the cogency of her exploitation, Minnie offers a rationale for Monroe’s behaviours, largely codified as a response to her sexuality and sexual expression. The graphic novel’s striking visual style, however, confronts readers with the reality of Minnie’s abuse far more objectively than her diary does. Here, Gloeckner demonstrates not only the kind of cognitive dissonance undertaken by victims and child abusers, whose justifications obscure a grim reality, but also the necessity of addressing the discourses surrounding grey areas that habitually give credence to defences of sexual abuse.

Consequently, this paper reflects the plethora of sexual moral grey areas explored through fiction: ‘empty consent,’ consent-by-deception, and sexual pleasure during non-consensual sex, all of which fall under my umbrella term of ‘nondichotomous sexual consent.’ Building upon the aforementioned research, I propose that the notion of nondichotomous sexual consent can be used to characterise sex where one party is unable to issue truly autonomous, fully informed consent due to extraneous social circumstances beyond their control. Operating outside of the legal binary, nondichotomous sexual consent concerns sex that is in some way violating or morally transgressive, without the need to classify it as sexual assault or rape. In turn, I argue that by emphasising the need for discourse surrounding ‘the murky interface of consent and coercion’ (Gunnarson 2018: 5), writers like Gloeckner can instigate

substantiative debate about ‘the complexities of sex, sexual violence, and the grey area in between’ (Gunnarson 2018: 5). While conventional recognitions of consent are problematised by their dichotomisation as ‘either consensual *or* traumatic,’ *Diary* asks its readers to consider that sex under patriarchy can often be both (Appleton 2021). Here, we may better understand how Minnie’s narratorial fluctuation from a young woman with a sense of sexual agency to a girl who is the victim of sexual abuse.

Throughout *Diary*, Minnie frequently has sex where her consent and sense of desire are all seemingly empty, but her motivation behind agreeing is compelled by the logic of patriarchal sexual norms. Melissa Febos’ idea of empty consent is used to articulate the ambiguousness of sexual encounters such as these, including those where a woman may consent to acts that she does not want in order simply to avoid a far worse trauma (2021: 222). In *Diary*, Minnie writes that she says yes to sex, not because she wants to, but because she doesn’t ‘know what else to say’ (Gloeckner 2015: 220). This idea has since been developed in Kristen Roupenian’s ‘Cat Person,’ heralded as the world’s first viral short story after becoming the subject of widespread internet debates about sex and agency as part of a post-#MeToo cultural retrospective. Like Minnie, the protagonist of ‘Cat Person,’ Margot, is ambivalent about the prospect of sex with her date Robert. She ultimately decides to follow through with intimacy as to do otherwise ‘would require an amount of tact and gentleness that she felt was impossible to summon’ (Roupenian 2017). Her lack of desire is only described privately as she tries ‘to bludgeon her resistance into submission’ and afterwards becomes ‘overwhelmed with a skin-crawling loathing’ and ‘self-disgust and humiliation’ (Roupenian 2017). As Appleton notes, this type of ‘encounter resists the simplistic categorisation of consent as something uncomplicated and blurs the lines between consent and non-consent’ (2021: 5). Margot’s sexual encounters with Robert and, as will be elaborated upon further throughout this paper, Minnie’s experiences with various partners, occupy the problematisable territory between the consensual and non-consensual. As revealed in Minnie’s conclusive character arc, sex, even if seemingly consensual, can also result in profound trauma and damage. Febos’ idea of empty consent is significant, as it accounts for the contextualisation of Margot and Minnie’s sexual experiences without necessarily placing blame on their respective partners but condemns the heteronormative cultures that compel them to ‘say yes’ instead.

Similarly, heteronormative cultural scripts have invoked a longstanding critical debate about whether using dishonesty to gain someone's consent constitutes sexual assault (McNeil 2016; Tobin 2021). In his paper, 'Sex, Lies, and Consent,' Tom Dougherty asks, 'how wrong is it to deceive someone into sex by lying, say, about one's profession?' (2013: 717). He concludes that the answer is 'seriously wrong' when the liar's deception 'would be a deal breaker for the victim,' arguing that this would ultimately vitiate the victim's ability to give sexual consent (Dougherty 2013: 717). While the law in England and Wales highlights that consent should not be obtained by 'coercion' or 'manipulation,' what would be considered unacceptable levels of deception would be both a highly subjective task and an incredibly complex process to negotiate in the eyes of the law (Rape and Sexual Offences – Chapter 7 2021). To simplify this, the legal discourse of sex is presently segregated into two distinct categories of consensual sex and non-consensual sex. Beyond the substantial age and power differentiation between Minnie and Monroe, his behaviour is coercive, manipulative, and deceptive, even though she pursues a sexual relationship with him throughout *Diary*. Minnie's desire does, however, dispel the misconception 'that it is impossible to consent to traumatic sex' (Appleton 2021: 5). While an oft-used legal defence for rapists suggests that 'she' (the victim) 'wanted it' (sex) Minnie's abuse is not repudiated by her desire, and nor is the trauma that she endures as a result.

To discuss consent through such a dichotomised framework eradicates opportunities for nuanced discussion surrounding sex, which Carol Vance, in 'Towards a Politics of Sexuality,' refers to as 'simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency' (1982: 38). Certainly, this complication of sex is a more apt description of Minnie's sexual feelings than to simply view them through a binary of 'good' and 'bad,' or 'right' and 'wrong.' Similarly, young women who experience sexual abuse or exploitation often hesitate to report their experiences out of fear that their desire would undermine the validity of their case. Such ideas serve to highlight an urgency in reframing not only the ethics of sex, but also our understanding of consent, through a moral imperative as opposed to a legal one. As Srinivasan asks us to consider 'what forces lie behind a woman's yes' (2021: xiii), I propose that instead of understanding consent as a legal hurdle, we should instead consider 'the ethics of our sexual interactions,' and ask ourselves, 'is it

right to act this way?’ (Srinivasan: xiii). It is this line of questioning, I argue, that should henceforth shape our understanding of sexuality and, in turn, this critical discussion of Gloeckner’s graphic novel.

The Graphic Novel: Form, Illustration, Trauma & Desire

While the popularity of comics as a literary form has been increasing steadily since the 1960s, it was not until the 1990s and 2000s that the genre became emancipated from its notoriety as an extension of children’s comics and the superhero genre. By then, a new wave of female graphic novelists, including Julie Doucet, Debbie Drechsler, Marjane Satrapi, and of course, Gloeckner, had begun to dominate the graphic novel industry, offering raw and largely autobiographical accounts of the authors’ coming-of-age, often including their experiences of sex and drug abuse. The popularity of the female-authored graphic novel grew in tandem with the exponential growth of digital pornography. This mode of storytelling is what Elisabeth El Refaie suggests helps to challenge ‘traditional cultural inscriptions of the gendered body and [claim] the right to represent [female artists’] own physicality’ in a time when potentially exploitative and degrading imagery of women became more accessible than ever before (2012: 80). Jane Tolmie also suggests that these graphic memoirs of sexual abuse had become ‘feminist art activism,’ thus leading to a ‘creative emancipation’ that sought to undo the silencing of victims of abuse (2013: xvi). Gloeckner’s insistence on terming *Diary* as ‘semi-autobiography’ is as telling about her own identification with Minnie as it is the thematic universality of her text (2015: xv). While Gloeckner’s author photo on the right hand of the revised edition’s sleeve also bears an uncanny resemblance to her stylised drawing of Minnie on the left—which could potentially conflate their identities still further—the author dedicates *Diary* to ‘all the girls when they have grown,’ offering the text as a form of transformative emotional catharsis to the reader. By referring to her work in this way, Gloeckner’s elucidations of her own experiences, as well as the partially autobiographical form, allow readers to relate to Minnie as a fictional entity—one with whom *Diary*’s readership may share commonalities—without the author’s own subjectivities eclipsing the text or its content.

Absent from *Diary*’s original publication in 2002, the revised edition of Gloeckner’s self-described ‘semi-autobiography’ also features an added preface which attempts to identify where Gloeckner’s experiences end and Minnie’s begin (2015: xv). This

distinction has long been indecipherable by critics, exacerbated by *Diary*'s notability as 'autographic,' a work that embodies the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text in the genre of [comics] autobiography' (Whitlock 2006: 996). While Køhlert posits Minnie as the graphic novelist's 'alter ego' (2015: 124), Gloeckner's intentions for *Diary* are clarified through her refusal to define the book as a 'document,' arguing that the value of Minnie's story is more 'aesthetic and literary' as opposed to 'political and historical' (Gloeckner 2015: xv). By enacting this mode of creative emancipation, the unsettling depiction of childhood sexual exploitation that festers in Doucet, Drechsler, and Gloeckner's works is distinguished from their own authorial identities (Tolmie 2013: xvi). For Gloeckner, establishing this separation from Minnie is a necessity, as documentation from the author's own childhood is encased within *Diary*, as much of what Minnie says is lifted directly from Gloeckner's own diary entries. Minnie's declaration that 'it really hurts to admit, but I think I have figured out the way Monroe thinks of me' is taken from Gloeckner's own prosaic diary entries after the book declares itself finished (157; 303). By including these textual documents from her own life at the end of the text, Gloeckner's intentions to play upon readers' own primacy and subjectivity over her material are revealed. By shaping *Diary* as a collective readerly experience, Gloeckner offers a template 'for the mediation of trauma' and crucially, 'the move beyond it' (Michael 2018: 230). While readership identification with fictional characters is not a unique phenomenon, texts such as *Diary* and 'Cat Person' have received particular attention for illustrating the subjectivities of sexual grey areas. In *Slate* magazine, Alexis Nowicki writes that the short story, published 'at the height of the #MeToo movement,' portrays the 'type of bad sex that is easy for readers to relate to: not explicitly harmful or abusive but toeing the line of consent and leaving Margot feeling repulsed afterward[s]' (2021). In Febos' terms, Margot's consent is empty; a sexual participant who is neither willing nor unwilling. Although losing her virginity to Monroe marks Minnie's first sexual experience—even her first kiss—she quickly engages in a plethora of sexual experiences that are equally as empty of fully autonomous consent as Margot's.

The cultural climate of the contemporary is one that, undoubtedly, promotes the suggestion that sex should be easily accessible to all; that sex is a 'right' to all. So goes the ideology behind the incel—or 'involuntarily celibate'—movement, formed of radical online communities that convince young men they are 'owed sex' by women (Srinivasan 2021: 73). As the sexual revolution liberalised casual sex outside of

marriage and monogamy, a pervasive ethos of sexual entitlement has progressively distorted heteronormative attitudes to and about sex. Incels believe that if modern sex is to be truly liberated and unconstrained, then access to it should be as well. But as Rebecca Solnit reminds us in her essay 'Men Explain *Lolita* to Me' sex is not a right irrespective of increased sexual liberation for women, dispelling one comic's suggestion that 'access to sex is strictly controlled by the woman' (2015). The patriarchal logic that enrages men for being deprived of sex simultaneously teaches women that sex is something to be tolerated, to be endured, thus pacifying male rage. Passively agreeing to sex that they do not want, Minnie and Margot also acknowledge the consequences of saying 'no,' as I elaborate later in this paper. However, as James Kincaid points out in *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*, childhood and innocence have become sexualised and fetishized in their own rights (1998: 54.). He suggests that the liberation of adolescent sexuality has consequently shifted our conception of innocence backwards, 'onto younger and yet younger people' (Kincaid 1998:54). As children and young women like Minnie and Margot objectively lack the same sexual agency as their older male counterparts, they are less likely to resist sexual transgressions, their bodies more predisposed to potential exploitation as they follow the lessons of heteronormative sexual relationships instilled in them by society.

Contrary to the ambiguous cultural narratives surrounding victimhood and sexuality, as well as Minnie's own sexual desires, Gloeckner insists that her protagonist is unequivocally a victim of abuse (Martin 2003). The very nature of Monroe and Minnie's relationship, built upon an abuse of power at the hands of her father figure, is as legally sound as it is morally so. Readers are shown how Minnie's understanding of her abuse waivers, evidenced from the very beginning by their affair in which Monroe touches her breast. Here, Minnie writes that she has 'this strangely calming feeling that even if he had touched my tits on purpose that it was probably all right because he's one of our best friends and he's a good guy and he knows how it goes and I don't' (Gloeckner 2015: 4). This passage not only clarifies who initiates the affair—Monroe—but also addresses Minnie's lack of conviction regarding her own perception and understanding of her abuse. Unable to trust her own judgement, Minnie asks Monroe 'did you really take advantage of me?' (35). Already aware of the answer, Minnie adds that this is not 'very nice' (35). At once, Minnie tells her diary

that her best friend Kimmie thinks Monroe is a ‘pervert’ and ‘she can’t possibly understand’ the nature of their sexual relationship, but she then swiftly notes that she is ‘almost still a child’ (26).

Despite *Diary*’s subject matter and sexually graphic nature, texts with illustrations—be it a picture book or a graphic novel—are still typically viewed as literature for children. Yet, the novel’s subject is as transgressive as its form, violating ‘the traditional values of Western intellectual culture’ in its ‘taboo’ depiction of female sexuality through its dialogic hybridity (Kraemer 2005: 1-2). Gloeckner, by utilising a textual form associated with children, also arbitrates her childhood memories through an ‘understated third-person perspective that *Lolita* lacks’ (5). While Humbert, and to a degree, Minnie, uses the subtlety of text to obscure and transmute abuse into a palatable ‘love’ story, Gloeckner’s art confronts readers with Minnie’s abuse, rendering its true nature inescapable. *Diary*’s graphic revision of Minnie’s corporeality is one such way that Gloeckner’s illustrations offer visual interventions between text and trauma, fluctuating in their stylistic depiction of Minnie and Monroe together by altering her physical size next to him. Initially longing to see herself as an equal to him, Minnie’s drawings become more reflective of the true difference in their size and stature, and at a metaphorical level, their power differentiation. The most evident example of this is the text’s final image, in which Minnie shakes Monroe’s hands, thinking to herself ‘I’m better than you, you son-of-a-bitch’ (2015: 291). While visibly smaller than him, Minnie smiles widely, writing that she ‘[feels] unusually powerful and in control of the situation, despite the fact that ... Monroe is a foot taller and more than twice my age’ (2015: 219). Although most images were drawn in retrospect by Gloeckner as she embarked on the creation of *Diary* as a hybridized form, others (in a lesser quantity) were done by the comic when she was Minnie’s age. Furthering Køhlert’s implication that *Diary* functions as a displaced and externalised narrativization of Gloeckner’s trauma, one illustration features her superimposed face onto a mirror in Minnie’s room, further entangling their identities (165).

It would, of course, be neglectful to write about *Diary* without addressing the novel’s striking similarities to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Both narratives centre on a young girl’s sexual exploitation at the hands of their mother’s boyfriends. Alongside Doucet and Drechsler’s works, Gloeckner’s publication of *Diary* in 2005 succeeded the wave of late 1990s revisionist critiques of *Lolita* that sought to dispel any misconceptions

about Delores' abuse. Arguing the case for her resuscitation, critics suggested that Humbert's account of their relationship was a distorted myth that had only been exacerbated by misreadings of the text (Patnoe 1995: 81-99). These critical revisions of *Lolita* and the novel's eponymous protagonist were both a literary and cultural necessity, rejecting previous interpretations that had favoured Humbert Humbert's prosaic justification for the abuse. Markedly, these misinterpretations of the novel followed Humbert's own recollection that Delores cries out 'you revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl and look what you've done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me' (Nabokov 2006: 159). In the same way as Minnie's perceived promiscuousness sees her subjugated to further sexual degradation, the myths surrounding *Lolita* invokes the suggestion that 'a girl who seeks out sexual experiences may be assumed to be "debauched," as Humbert says about Lolita because she has violated the cultural norms for sexual interaction' (Kraemer 2005: 11). Young girls, such as Minnie, are thus 'assumed to be open to any and all sexual experiences,' irrespective of their age or (lack of) agency (Kraemer 2005: 11). By invoking the sensibility of Freud's Madonna-whore complex, 'the right to sex,' as Srinivasan may suggest, is defensible by our partner's perceivable sexuality instead of our own moral obligation to act 'right' (Srinivasan 2015: i – xiii).

Beyond its perviousness in heteronormative cultures, the logic of the Madonna-whore dichotomy has historically shaped legal approaches to consent and sexual assault. Until the late 1990s, defendants could claim a 'promiscuity defence' against their accusers, using their prior sexual history against them (Oberman 1994: 32-36). Following this sensibility, Monroe explicitly frames Minnie in terms of her own sexuality through expletives such as 'Jesus, you really like to fuck, don't you?' (Gloeckner 2015: 144). Srinivasan equally suggests that men accused of sexual misconduct as part of the #MeToo movement 'are widely seen, by themselves and other men, as being widely punished don't deny doing what their alleged victims claim they did,' but instead cite their victim's sexuality as the causation of their offence (2021: 18). But it is by engaging with cultural narratives that frame women who express sexual desire as 'tainted' that the progression of Monroe's treatment of Minnie subsequently erodes her of sexual 'agency in her own eyes as well as in those of others' (Kraemer 2005: 11). 'Monroe sees that I get screwed by other people and that I'm not hard-up and crawling all over him,' Minnie writes (Gloeckner 2015: 108). 'He sees that, and I think it makes him want me more... he likes it. He asks

details sometimes . . . A lot of times, I make things up, because I know he likes to hear it. He thinks I've slept with a million guys' (108-109). Minnie's promiscuity thus allows Monroe to avoid moral culpability for his abuse, something he also attempts to achieve by rhetorically reversing their positions of power. This idea reverberates throughout the text, as shortly after declaring that Minnie 'exude[s] sexuality' (70), Monroe tells her that he doesn't like 'stupid little chicks like [her] trying to manipulate him' (78). Like many sex offenders, Monroe's portrayal of Minnie through the language he uses is calculated, and by framing her this way, he carefully implants in her the idea that she is the one sexualising herself. In this, Gloeckner's readership is shown the mechanics of the grooming process, as the author may also have experienced it herself.

Diary's inextricable relationship with Nabokov's *Lolita* is further exemplified by the presence of apathetic mothers in each text—both of whom are named Charlotte. Abandoned by her father at a young age, Minnie's mother, while physically present, is mostly depicted as drunk, high, and neglectful of her children; Minnie's illustrations nearly always visualise Charlotte as smoking and drinking, even if it is not referenced in the corresponding diary entries. As with *Lolita's* Charlotte Haze, both women also fail to notice their partner's sexual interest in their daughters. *Diary* only sees Charlotte appear concerned about Minnie's friendship with Monroe when the subject is raised by Pascal, her ex-husband. 'The younger the better, no??' Charlotte asks, continuing to interrogate Monroe about Minnie's 'tits' and 'ass' (153-155). The implicit Freudian portrayal of Minnie's sexuality persists through her semi-incestuous affair with father figure Monroe, and Charlotte's hostility. Carl Jung terms the scenario in which a 'daughter develops a specific liking for the father, with a correspondingly jealous attitude toward the mother' the Electra complex (1961: 154), thus inciting further comparison to Humbert who overtly refers to Delores as 'Electra' (Nabokov 2006: 263). Equally, Charlotte appears more concerned with her daughter's potential as the more desirable sexual partner to Monroe: her reaction to the affair is not one of disgust or horror, but seemingly of jealousy. While Charlotte remains suspicious yet unaware of Monroe and Minnie's sexual relationship, Minnie muses 'what is it like for a mother and a daughter to be secretly jealous of each other over the same man?' (Gloeckner 2015: 228). When she eventually discovers the diary and its documentation of the affair, Charlotte asks Minnie to meet her and Monroe and

asks him 'was it good?' (253). In Charlotte's eyes, the betrayal is her partner's infidelity, not the abuse of her daughter, subsequently positioning Minnie as a fully liable adult with whom she must compete for Monroe's affections and sexual interest. While not an active party to Minnie's abuse, Charlotte's negligence positions her as inadvertently complicit. Minnie's final diary entry reveals that her mother still sees Monroe, and that 'she doesn't understand why I don't want him around' (286), Charlotte still failing to acknowledge the severity of her daughter's abuse. This is reiterated as she declares 'he porked you, Minnie!' reducing her daughter's rape to an animalistic, almost comical, act, before then telling Monroe to '[m]arry her! Then you can fuck her all you want!' (255). Following the psychoanalytic rationale behind the Electra complex, Gloeckner's readers are shown how Minnie conflates her sexual desirability with her sense of self-worth. Her narrative positions Charlotte as responsible for instilling this belief in her, writing that her 'mother keeps on bothering me every now and then about how I have no boyfriends' (26). Furthermore, readers are shown how Minnie's longing for touch arises from her mother's disregard, and causes her to seek physical affection elsewhere. An illustration of Minnie and Monroe captioned 'I love Monroe to touch me affectionately' precedes a body of text that begins 'my mother doesn't touch me if she can avoid it' (84). As Kraemer notes, Minnie's family life 'leaves much to be desired.' Minnie turns to the hedonistic climate of San Francisco's mid-20th century sexual counterculture instead, as a means by which to find the love and affection that she desires from her family (2005: 8). Coming of age amidst San Francisco's 'sexual revolution was an extended engagement with, and celebration of, the human libido,' so it is quite understandable that Minnie's preoccupation with sex is symptomatic of a culture that equated sex, desirability, and love (Sides 2009: 1). Minnie agrees to her first sexual experience with Monroe hesitantly, confessing that she won't 'pass up the chance as [she] might never get another' (Gloeckner 2015: 6). Following the loss of her virginity, Minnie's peers' perception of her is drastically reshaped from the virtuous Madonna, as they now view her as 'whore' and a 'slut' (55; 78). As Hilary Chute notes in *Diary's* foreword, Minnie's own sexuality is one 'which she both celebrates and derides; her views are decidedly not one note.' Minnie begins to willingly self-identify with these Freudian terms, gradually seeking sex as an affirmation of her own desirability rather than enacting her own desires (xiii).

While Minnie's sexuality further obscures her victimhood or her susceptibility to exploitation, *Diary's* bildungsroman form never confines sex, or its importance to the novel's narrative, to a singular meaning. In both writing and illustration, Minnie is open about her desires; 'I really want to get laid right now—in fact, any time—the desire is insatiable,' Minnie declares, 'I don't know if I've made that clear—I really like getting fucked' (26). As Minnie tells her therapist that she thinks she 'want[s] Monroe out of [her] life,' he gifts her a vibrator to displace her sexual urges (228). Over the course of *Diary*, the meaning of sex transforms from an act in which Minnie perceives herself to be an equal participant to one that she feels compelled to do in order to receive love. She explains that she 'let[s]' a boy 'fuck' her 'in the bushes behind the hockey field,' establishing her passivity in the act (215). As in 'Cat Person,' Minnie agrees to sexual situations she does not want, in one instance saying yes to because she 'didn't know what else to say' (210). Following her mother's discovery of the affair, Minnie also writes that she and Monroe 'fucked but it doesn't count with me' (Gloeckner 2015: 255). Here, sex functions as an obligatory act and a 'response to being perceived as desirable,' informed by Minnie's understanding of sex through hetero-patriarchal terms (Korbel 2020: 92). Margot also fantasises about her sexual encounter from Robert's perspective, 'carried away by a fantasy of such pure ego that she could hardly admit even to herself that she was having it' (Roupenian 2017). External threats shape the characters' choice to say 'yes' which, in turn, render the act of giving consent empty in Febos' terms. While Margot fears her date 'could take her someplace and rape and murder her' (Roupenian 2017), Minnie's conflation of sex and love causes her to believe that if she were to refuse him, the boy 'would hate' her and 'he would think [she] was leading him on' (Gloeckner 2015: 215). While Minnie identifies her diminished sense of sexual agency and autonomy with other partners, she eventually recognises how this dynamic shapes her relationship with Monroe.

To further confuse Minnie's perception, recollection, and understanding of their relationship, Monroe continuously attempts to shift the onus of power onto his teenage mistress. When she begins to realise this truth, he attempts to destabilise her sense of reality: 'I feel like Monroe is such a bastard, but then, I can never tell for sure ... He tells me I'm overreacting and I get confused and I don't know whether I'm overreacting or not' (211). Although Minnie oscillates between seeing herself as a victim on one hand and a 'whore' on the other, her narratorial instability is reflective of the logic used to discredit rape victim legitimacy and propel heteronormative

cultural myths about female sexuality. ‘One part of me knows he’s an asshole and a jerk and I’d be better off if he were dead,’ Minnie writes, ‘but the other part of me doesn’t believe that and is sure that one day we will all live happily ever after, one way or another’ (226). Minnie’s fluctuating—but not wholly unreliable—narrative is ultimately shaped by her desire to receive the love she has not received at home, intertwined with her own sense of worth and desirability.

With a significant portion of Minnie’s diary entries suggested to be Gloeckner’s own from childhood, illustrations serve as a visual disjuncture between the text itself and the process of remembering. As Olga Michael notes, ‘the fragmentation, re-configuration and re-capturing of past experiences in autofictional writings centralizes authorial presence’—the exaggerated visuality of *Diary* captures the emotional intensity of Minnie’s sexual experiences (2018: 2). While Minnie’s diary entries often feature grandiose hyperboles—such as her instability in wishing Monroe ‘dead’ while also longing for a future with him—Gloeckner’s corresponding portrait attempts to capture this feeling of dissonance and grief; by organising her trauma into a coherent, multimodal narrative through image, Gloeckner’s illustrations position both readers and herself as third-party witnesses to her abuse (2015: 212). Through this, Gloeckner can mediate her experiences, and those of the readers to which she dedicates her work, through externalisation, distinguishing the past self from the present through narrativization.

In Køhlert’s trauma studies-informed analysis of *Diary*, he returns to the text’s psychoanalytic properties, arguing that ‘the idea of the displacement and narrativization of trauma through externalizing testimony is as old as Freud’s “talking cure”’ (2015: 128). By doing so, *Diary* organises and documents memories and experiences that were formerly ‘fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation’ (Henke 2000: xviii). As Ian Williams similarly notes, through the medium of the autographic, this organisation process ‘could be seen as analogous as turning testimony into narrative’ (2011: 359). Alternatively, by offering an artist the scope and form to portray her sexual abuse, this embodies Leigh Gilmore’s notion of ‘alternative jurisdiction’ (2001: 715). Gilmore’s term clarifies the testimonial significance of Gloeckner’s graphic novel, allowing the author ownership over her experiences beyond the scope of the US legal system. With little credence given to children who claim to be victims of sexual abuse, their narratives are often disbelieved and

discredited. As current legal approaches fail to recognise the subjectivity of sexual ethics, relying on a model of consent that instead relies on affirmation without questioning the forces behind it, Minnie's sexual enthusiasm with Monroe decimates her legal credibility as a victim.

Gloeckner similarly portrays a selection of ambiguously consensual encounters; from those where she issues nondichotomous sexual consent, to a violent gang rape towards the novel's end. By narrativizing these experiences, Gloeckner rejects the physical passivity of her childhood self and takes an active role in constructing her story on her own terms. Gilmore writes that 'thinking of autobiographical self-representation as a jurisdiction helps to clarify the kind of agency such a text can claim and the quasi-legal authority it possesses' (2001: 696). Establishing authorial agency, Gloeckner's graphic novel may then 'offer a forum of judgment in which the subject may achieve a control over her story that she would not hold in court' (Gilmore 2001: 696). By claiming authority over her experiences, Gloeckner's depiction of her abuse thus offers an alternate mode of justice that recognises her exploitation without denying the importance of her own sexual desires.

Envisioning the text as a project of displacement by which to process and organise her trauma, we better understand Gloeckner's commitment to revising her childhood through multimodal forms. Alongside *Diary's* re-publications, Gloeckner has retold and reformatted Minnie's story in her first collection *A Child's Life and Other Stories*. Chute describes *A Child's Life* as filled with images that are 'consistently informed by trauma, [and] their combination of meticulous, painstaking realism and their non-realism (the puffed-up heads, eyes and genitals she tends to give her characters) carries an intense foreboding' (2006: 61). While *A Child's Life* features dramatically darker images, more explicit and direct in their depiction of abuse than *Diary*, Olga Michael clarifies that the texts' markedly different revisitations, remembrances, and reimagining signify 'repetition as resignification' in traumatic processing (2018: 13). Demonstrating Gloeckner's numerous narrative alterations are central to 'trauma survival,' as they allow both the author and reader to deconstruct the gendered dynamics of 'dominance in sexual abuse' (Michael 2018:13). These alterations also rely on her readers' own agency and subjectivity, requiring a greater degree of participation and responsibility to pass moral judgement. In moments of tonal discrepancy between image and text, at once depicting Minnie as a willing participant

in the affair while still visibly a young adolescent, the task of creating meaning falls to the readers themselves. Affirming this, Tolmie states that ‘creative emancipatory work in the context of the representation of child sex abuse, offers a venue both for the artistic self and for the receiving viewer/reader to do a range of affective and political things: to heal, to make transparent, to undo, and to redo’ (2013: xvi). This process is as vital for Gloeckner as it is for *Diary*’s readership, many of whom have likely had sex of an ambivalently consensual nature, which may fall outside of the legal scope of sexual violence and assault.

Conclusion

Contrary to contemporary legal and social discourses on consent, texts such as *Diary* and ‘Cat Person’ complicate the very idea, articulating the scope for ambiguities and debate. Gloeckner furthers this idea, depicting her own sexual trauma, as stated in *Diary*’s preface, in a manner that ‘decidedly not one note’ (2015: xiii). While the multimodal discrepancies, inconsistencies, and contradictions may invite her readers to question Minnie’s victimhood, this is precisely Gloeckner’s aim. In particular, the revised edition’s publication two years before the global popularity of the #MeToo movement invites a nuanced and critical understanding of power, sex, and agency. Although myths of victimhood, such as the perfect victim and the promiscuity defence, invite critical analyses of the victims themselves, Gloeckner, Febos, and Srinivasan’s works place responsibility on the perpetrators. Elucidating the ambiguities and potential contradictions of desire and consent, turning to fiction—and in Gloeckner’s case, illustration—as a discursive mode of debate, *Diary* creates a distinction between the respective culpabilities of victim and perpetrator. While Minnie’s sexual desires are fully realised, her power asymmetry in relation to Monroe is only understood as the protagonist herself comes of age.

Discussed throughout this paper have been numerous instances of sexual grey areas in which characters such as Minnie and Margot both appear to consent to sexual experiences that neither fully desire nor, in Minnie’s case, are legally capable of fully desiring. While these sexual grey areas have become more subject to critical discussion in recent years, the language of consent is often absent, or crucially overlooked as part of a heterosexual culture that dichotomises consent and trauma rather than exploring how the two may intersect. The narrative of *Diary*, however, exposes the potential overlaps and intersections of trauma, pleasure, desire, and abuse, and how a singular

relationship may contain them all. While terms such as ‘nondichotomous consent’ and Febos and Srinivasan’s pedagogy have no legal bearing, I believe that they hold the necessary potential to affect more nuanced understandings of consent than the scope of our current culture allows.

REFERENCES

‘Case Study: *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*,’

<http://cbldef.org/banned-challenged-comics/case-study-the-diary-of-a-teenage-girl/>

date unknown, *Comic Book Legal Defence Fund*, (last accessed 3 August 2022).

Appleton, Marni (2021), ‘Feeling Straight: Heterosexual Fatigue in *Cat Person*,’ *Alluvium*, Vol. 9, No. 6, pp. 1-11.

Chute, Hillary L. and Marianne DeKoven (2006), ‘Introduction: Graphic Narrative.’ *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (2006), pp. 767-782.

Commons, Jess, “Girls Aren’t Given The Chance To Be Sexual! The Author Of The Diary Of A Teenage Girl Speaks To Us,” 11 January 2016, *Grazia*,

<https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/tv-and-film/diary-teenage-girl/>

(last accessed 3 August 2022).

Dougherty, Tom (2013), ‘Sex, Lies, and Consent,’ *Ethics*, Vol. 123, No. 4, pp. 717-744.

El Refaie, Elisabeth, (2012) *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*, Jackson: Mississippi University Press.

Fahs, Breanne, and Sara I. McClelland (2016), ‘When Sex and Power collide: An Argument for Critical Sexuality Studies,’ *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 53, No. 4-5, pp. 392-416.

Febos, Melissa (2021), *Girlhood*, London: Bloomsbury.

Fischel, Joseph J. (2010), ‘Per se or power-age and sexual consent,’ *Yale JL & Feminism* 22, pp. 279-341.

Gilmore, Leigh (2001), *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Gloeckner, Phoebe (2015), *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Picture, Revised Edition*, Berkley, California: North Atlantic Books.

Groth, Gary (2011), ‘The Phoebe Gloeckner Interview,’ *The Comics Journal*, 6 February 2011,

<https://www.tcj.com/phoebe-gloeckner-2/>

(last accessed 18 January 2022).

Gunnarsson, Lena (2018), “Excuse me, but are you raping me now?” Discourse and Experience in (the Grey Areas of) Sexual Violence,’ *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 4-18.

Henke, Suzette A. (2000), *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life Writing*, New York: St. Martin’s Press.

Jung, Carl (1961), 'The Theory of Psychoanalysis: The Oedipus Complex,' in H. Read, M. Fordham, and G. Alder (eds), *Collected Works Vol 4.*, 2nd edition, New York: Pantheon, pp. 151-156.

Kauffman, Linda (1992), *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Kincaid, James (1998), *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*, New York, USA: Duke University Press.

Køhlert, Frederik Byrn (2015), 'Working it Through: Trauma and Autobiography in Phoebe Gloeckner's *A Child's Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*,' *South Central Review*, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 124-142.

Korbel, Marissa (2020), 'At the Intersection of Teenage Desire and Statutory Rape,' in Laura A. Gray-Rosendale (ed), *Me Too, Feminist Theory, and Surviving Sexual Violence in the Academy*, London: Lexington Books, pp. 89-104.

Martin, Michael (2003), 'Interview with Phoebe Gloeckner,' *Nerve*, 6 March 2003,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20150909223139/http://www.ravenblond.com/archive/pages/nerveinterview-1.html>

(last accessed 21 March 2022).

McArthur, Neil (2016), 'Is Lying to Get Laid a Form of Sexual Assault?,' *VICE*, 5 September 2016,

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/4w5w7g/is-lying-to-get-laid-a-form-of-sexual-assault>

(last accessed 24 January 2022).

McMahon, Sarah, and G. Lawrence Farmer (2011), 'An updated measure for assessing subtle rape myths,' *Social Work Research*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 71-81.

Michael, Olga (2018), 'Graphic Autofiction and the Visualization of Trauma in Lynda Barry and Phoebe Gloeckner's Graphic Memoirs,' in H. Dix (ed), *Autofiction in English*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 105-124.

Nabokov, Vladimir (2006), *Lolita*, London: Penguin.

Nowicki, Alexis (2021), "'Cat Person" and me,' 8 July 2021,

<https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/07/cat-person-kristen-roupenian-viral-story-about-me.html>

(last accessed 3 August 2022).

Patnoe, Elizabeth (1995), 'Lolita Misrepresented, Lolita Reclaimed: Disclosing the Doubles,' *College Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 81-104.

Rape and Sexual Offences – Chapter 6: Consent, *Crown Prosecution Service*, 21 May 2021,

<https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/rape-and-sexual-offences-chapter-6-consent>

(last accessed 18 January 2022).

Rape and Sexual Offences – Chapter 7: Key Legislation and Offences, *Crown Prosecution Service*, 21 May 2021,

<https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/rape-and-sexual-offences-chapter-7-key-legislation-and-offences> (last accessed 18 January 2022).

Roupenian, Kristen, (2017), 'Cat Person,' *The New Yorker*, 4 December 2017,

www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person/

(last accessed 24 January 2022).

Solnit, Rebecca, 'Men Explain Lolita to Me,' LitHub, 17 December 2015,

<https://lithub.com/men-explain-lolita-to-me/>

(last accessed 19 October 2022).

Srinivasan, Amia (2021), *The Right to Sex*, Croydon, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Teng, Elaine, 'The Diary of a Teenage Girl' Is A Story of Sexual Abuse – And Female Empowerment,' *The New Republic*, 6 August 2015,

<https://newrepublic.com/article/122471/diary-teenage-girl-story-sexual-abuse-female-empowerment>

(last accessed 3 August 2022).

Title 9: Of Crimes Against the Person Involving Sexual Assault, and Crimes Against Public Decency and Good Morals, 4 April 2011, *California Legislative Information*,

https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=PEN§ionNum=261.5

(last accessed 19 January 2022).

Tobin, Katie (2021), 'What is 'Consent Theft' and Why Aren't We Talking About It?,' *Restless Network*, 31 March 2021,

<https://restlessnetwork.com/what-is-consent-theft-and-why-arent-we-talking-about-it/>

(last accessed 24 January 2022).

Tolmie, Jane (2013), *Drawing from life: Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art*, United States: Univ. Press of Mississippi.

Vance, Carol (1982), 'Diary of a Conference on Sexuality,' *Dark Matter Archives*, <http://www.darkmatterarchives.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Diary-of-a-Conference-on-Sexuality.pdf> (last accessed 24 January 2022).

Ward, Jane (2020), *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality*, New York: New York University Press.

Whitlock, Gillian (2006), 'Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of the Comics,' *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 4, 2006, pp. 965-79.