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RESEARCH

The New Normal: Enfreakment in *Saga*

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This article draws on the award-winning fantasy comic *Saga* (Vaughan and Staples 2012–present), in order to explore how it portrays bodily difference as the norm, presenting to us a fantasy reality that nevertheless uncannily parallels ours in many ways. If 'enfreakment' is the creation of the freak, the article argues that the comic achieves something that might be termed 'dis-enfreakment'. This article is mainly grounded in literary disability studies, drawing upon the work by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and others. The article explores how *Saga* portrays racism, miscegenation, and homosexuality. The basic argument is that, through the presentation of a variety of races and species of life, *Saga* deliberately questions the very idea of 'normal' by presenting many co-existing forms of normalcy.

Keywords: disability; enfreakment; freak; miscegenation; queer

Introduction

"'Freak' labels disability as spectacle' (Leonard Kassuto 2015: 246).

Normalcy is fluid. It is not absolute. In fact, as Lennard Davis (1995: 23) observes in *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*, it is a human construction. That is a point that anchors the argument in this article, with illustrations from Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples' award-winning comic book series, *Saga*. With examples from various moments in the title, the article advances the contention that the othering, or 'enfreakment' of individuals based on sexual and species difference is an untenable process, based as it is on unstable and fluid premises and assumptions of species superiority and heteronormativity. Consequently, the discussion illustrates how various characters in the comic resist the othering, and strive to change the world that they inhabit into a more inclusive one. Although there has been growing

scholarship on the 'freak discourse' (see Bogdan 1996; Kerchy and Zittlau 2012), this study adopts what may be the most currently referenced, which is Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's (1996) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. In the book, she points out that 'enfreakment emerges from cultural rituals that stylize, silence, differentiate, and distance the persons whose bodies [are deemed different through repeated public spectacle]' (Garland-Thomson 1996: 10). Another critic, David Hevey (cited in Richardson 2010: 5), reads enfreakment as a 'process of stylizing and, most importantly, marketing the non-normative body.' These positions permit the defining of enfreakment as a social process in which the physically different body is relegated to the margins of existence, denied humanity, and essentially othered. For the actual term, freak, the article appropriates Robert Bogdan's school of thought, which traces the construction of the freak in social attitudes towards anatomical difference.

Texts such as *Freakery* document the history of mankind's fascination with enfreakment, or freakery, a continued captivation with what may be deemed anatomical peculiarities. In fact, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson highlights the economic opportunism that others have, in much of human history, found in exploiting such bodily differences. Similarly, Anna Kérchy and Andrea Zittlau (2012: 4) observe that throughout human history, from the Stone Age, through the Renaissance to the present day, there has been a fascination with the 'different' body.

Narratives such as Vaughan and Staples' *Saga* do not dwell on the past, but instead create the imaginary in such a way that it reflects our present reality. And indeed, this reality is one where the term 'freak' still has currency, as a derogatory term applied to perceived differences in appearance, sexual orientation, or general behavioral norms. It is helpful to bear in mind the point that 'comics provide rich opportunity for interrogating the politics of representation and alterity' (Whalen, Foss and Gray 2016: 4), and *Saga* affords us an opportunity to explore this function in the present world. In presenting a mirror to the readers, the comic falls into the category of texts that make us question attitudes and practices regarding racial difference and heteronormativity in our world.

There is a rich composition of beings that make up the world of *Saga*, at least in the world portrayed from issues 1 to 35, under consideration in this article. The setting of the comic resembles that of many famous science fiction worlds, such as that of *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, for instance. This is so in the sense that the story (or stories, as there are multiple plotlines) plays out on various planets, involves space travel, and features characters of many different extraterrestrial species and languages. These racial differences are primarily evident through the physical appearance of the characters. For example, the natives of Landfall have wings sprouting from their backs, the inhabitants of the Wreath moon bear horns on their heads (and wield magic), the Robot species (also of Landfall) have television screens for heads, the natives of Cleave have relatively large ears on their heads, and flat noses. There are a lot of other species whose planets are not identified, a good number of whom, due to the bearing of anthropomorphic features, would be likened by the reader simply to talking animals of various species. These differences are what usually lead to enfreakment, since, in most cases, each species regards itself as the norm, and all others as freaks. This is supported by a point that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997: 62–63) makes, that ‘freaks are above all products of perception: they are the consequence of a comparative relationship in which those who control the social discourse and the means of representation recruit the seeming truth of the body to claim the center for themselves and banish others to the margins.’ Central to this statement is the observation that enfreakment entails a social creation by those who suppose that they wield naming power through their possession of the normative body.

In opposition to the process of enfreakment, this article proposes a counter-process that also occurs in the text. This is a process we may term dis-enfreakment, which signifies the challenging of processes, languages, and indeed actions that render one a freak. Through dis-enfreakment, barriers between individuals or species are ignored or broken down, through the recognition of the worth of the other. There are various elements that serve to simultaneously enfreak and dis-enfreak various characters. In *Saga*, these include portrayals of romantic love between species, illustrations of childish innocence and how it bears the potential to subvert established assumptions about species difference and assumed superiority, complexities

of sexual identity and orientation, inter-species sexual union, intertextual literary interventions and narrative agency, species coexistence, and deliberate sexual commodification of the body through brothels.

Lovers and Childish Innocence

As already pointed out, there are multiple plotlines in *Saga*. In virtually all of them, the issue of enfreakment emerges in different ways. Therefore, the present discussion does not limit itself to any single one of these stories, but rather attempts to illustrate how they all contribute to the singular point of enfreakment and the challenges raised against it. The central plot of the comic, indeed the feature upon which it is built, is the union of the two lovers, Alana and Marko. These two characters belong to two different species, and for the entirety of the comic (so far), they have been on the run, since their union is forbidden within their respective species. Indeed, the animosity between the two species is so strong that it is characterized by hate-filled labels, pretty much like the world today. Much as this hate exists in their world, by bringing these two characters together right from the beginning of the text, the writers aim to show a disruption in the status quo (in the world of the comic). Even though to some this might be an 'unholy union' (Vaughan 2012e: 14), it nevertheless highlights the possibility of a shift in the way the inhabitants of this world view racial issues. Indeed, their plight is one not unlike that of the two famous Shakespearian lovers, Romeo and Juliet, in the sense that their union is strongly contested by the larger communities to which they belong, and their coming together is not seen in these communities as an act of rebellion, but rather a form of betrayal to their respective species.

Unlike the Shakespearian characters, in *Saga*, Vaughan and Staples use the character of Hazel to challenge the mutual othering of the species. Hazel, presented in **Figure 1**, is also the narrator, and serves as the promise of a world where species othering might be a thing of the past. She is the daughter of the two lovers, Marko and Alana. Being the offspring of forbidden sexual union between two species, Hazel is seen as a freak. The evidence of her enfreakment emanates from the various labels that she is given by many other characters in the text ('creepy mutt' [Vaughan



Figure 1: Hazel: the narrator of the story. Vaughan, B K. (w), Staples, F (i). *Saga* #31 Nov. 2015. Image Comics. 20 © Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples.

2012b: 18]; 'gross kid' [Vaughan 2012c: 16]; 'failed abortion' [Vaughan 2013a: 6]; 'inconvenient little footnote' [Vaughan 2015a: 1]; 'ugly little mutant' [Vaughan 2015b: 5]; 'abomination' [Vaughan 2015c: 9]). This labelling stems from a sense of discomfort upon being confronted with a body that is seen as anomalous.

At the same time, however, Hazel is a clear unifier of the various species in *Saga*. Bess Pallares (2015: 4) agrees with this point, arguing that 'the impetus of the central family unit is Alana and Marko's collective belief that a loving relationship between the worlds is the only hope for peace – represented through their love, marriage, and the birth of Hazel, who is the only cross-breed between their cultures portrayed in the book.' In the course of the comic, so far, she does not display an aversion to any species. (The cover of *Saga #2* perhaps makes the best statement of how Hazel is ignorant of the barriers created by species-difference in her world, as it features Hazel's baby hands eagerly grasping the finger of what appears to be an arachnid creature). This in part thanks to her upbringing, as at one point in the text, her father confesses, 'I've been trying to make her more comfortable with diversity...' (Vaughan 2014b: 15). This lesson endures, to the extent that Hazel admits that to her, the word 'alien' means 'future friend material' (Vaughan 2016b: 2). This statement suggests that she is drawn to befriend those that are deemed different, even by those of their own species. And indeed, as she grows, Hazel finds herself at ease with any species that she encounters. This is a profound example of dis-enfreakment, happening as it were through the eyes of the narrator. In this case, dis-enfreakment occurs when the character does not read the other as the freak. And language is a key aspect of that process. Identifying a character as 'future friend material,' for example, is an indication of recognition, an acknowledgement of the other as a worthy individual.

Hazel exercises another form of agency in the text, even before she can walk. From the start, she is given narrative authority. She is the one who tells the story (in the form of a flashback). In the sense that she has absolute narrative authority, this character is the one who is ultimately responsible for the dis-enfreakment that occurs in the text. The initial presentation of different species may insist on enfreakment, but Hazel's perspective towards other characters erases that label. It is in this sense that Gamson (1998: 18) talks of freaks as individuals engaged in 'muddying the

waters of normality.' We are forced to realise that the label of 'normal' is elusive, once we recognize ourselves in the 'freak.' As young as she is, Hazel is quick to acknowledge the variety of anatomical configurations and species varieties in her world.

Enfreakment and Sexual Orientation

Race relations are not the only human subject that *Saga* comments on. One of the reasons for *Saga's* popularity is the way it tackles matters of sexuality, a subject that, in most science fiction works, 'often catches us by surprise' (Pearson, Hollinger and Gordon 2008: 2). That is because in futuristic or fantasy worlds often imagined in this genre, sexuality is rarely the primary concern, as opposed to the imagined or futuristic landscapes and the adventures within. *Saga* is a science fiction narrative that manages to present a mirror to the readers with regard to the ongoing debates about sexual orientation in our world, from the violent persecutions in countries like Uganda and Zimbabwe, to the legalization of same-sex marriages in some parts of the United States. As a title intended for an adult audience, the comic occasionally presents sexually explicit scenes. In this case there is no discrimination with regard to sexual orientation – queer as well as straight couples are placed on display. In this regard, Precup and Manea (2017: 267) make the somewhat inaccurate observation that '*Saga* seems to show sex scenes between strangers more openly and in more detail than those between couples who love each other.' For the sake of the current discussion on enfreakment – and its possible erasure – the portrayals of homosexuality and intersexuality are particularly relevant.

Queer sexualities are introduced in the comic through the characters of Upsher and Doff, two reporters interested in following the story of Marko and Alana. The two, who work for a tabloid called the *Hebdomadal*, are of a queer sexual orientation– something the comic does not shy away from making explicit. Through these two, *Saga* again employs sexual unions as a way of challenging enfreakment. The type of unions that are highlighted in the text serve this function particularly due to the human emotion with which sexual activity is associated. This is yet another portrayal of a romance (and occasional associated sexual union) that aids the text in its mission of dis-enfreakment. These two reporters belong to a species of aquatic or amphibious

nature, due to their possession of webbed feet, and gills on their necks. With this example, *Saga* is engaging in dis-enfreakment on two simultaneous levels. The first is obviously that of creating the two reporters with seemingly alien features (at least to the reader). The second is the comment on homosexuality, through which the comic also makes an observation regarding the real world. To be queer is to have a *human* sexual orientation, and the writers decide to deliberately ascribe this to the two alien characters. Most importantly, deep inside, Upsher and Doff recognize the union of Alana and Marko as one which resembles their own – a union that society frowns upon. The reporters appreciate the two fugitive lovers as being ‘just two people who like to screw even though everybody else thinks it’s gross or immoral’ (Vaughan 2016a: 7). The presentation of these two characters is just one among many ways in which the comic ‘develops coherent visual and narrative strategies of defamiliarizing audiences and calling into question received knowledge’ (Precup and Manea 2017: 254). Much as the characters may try to deny the analogy, *Saga* nevertheless forces readers to question if one sexual union should be deemed more ‘freakish’ than the other. The effectiveness of this attempt remains questionable, however, reflecting the argument that in most cases where homosexuality is depicted in science fiction, there is no ‘unsettling of a heteronormative regime’ (Pearson 2003: 150). There is still, largely, a sense of enforced heteronormativity in the world of *Saga*.

That Vaughan and Staples are invested in exploring the complexities of sexual identity is something that cannot be ignored. Take, for instance, the introduction of Petrichor, which opens up yet another dimension of sexual identity that challenges enfreakment. A native of Wreath, Petrichor is an intersex individual, imprisoned in a detention center for women. She is othered by the rest of the female prisoners, as Petrichor herself observes that ‘Everyone here sees me as some freak of man’ due to the possession of a different body, specifically the featuring of a penis, which Hazel, in her innocence, refers to as an *outtie*. (Vaughan: 2015c: 17).

In **Figure 2**, Hazel encounters Petrichor in the shower area, and her reaction is significantly not one of disgust or fear, but of curiosity, seen in her inquiry to the intersex character: ‘...are you a girl?... But you have a dad piece’ (Vaughan: 2015c: 17). Whereas other characters in the detention centre are averse to any closeness with the

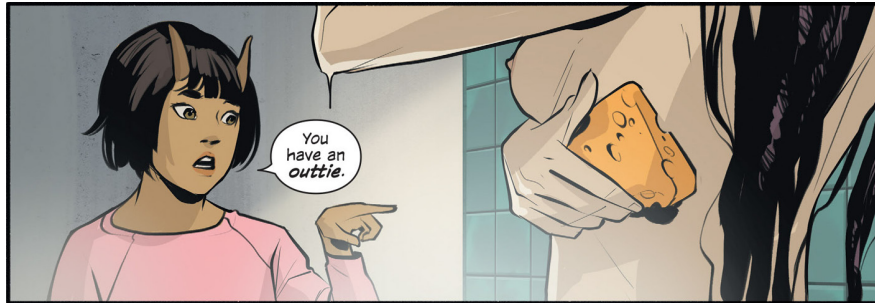


Figure 2: Hazel meets Petrichor. Vaughan, B K (w) and Staples, F (i). *Saga* #31 Nov. 2015. Image Comics © Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples.

intersex individual, Hazel is not. Through this young character, Vaughan and Staples reveal the innocence which children have, and consequently illustrate that hate that is founded on physical differences really is baseless.

The difference that Petrichor's body represents, therefore, does not render her as a freak, in Hazel's eyes, since she already identifies with anyone who is different, having realized at an early age that '[w]e are all aliens to someone' (Vaughan 2016b: 1). And in turn, Petrichor is there to reinforce the point that as an offspring of two species, Hazel is not sick (Vaughan 2016b: 4). This is a very important character-building point, in which *Saga* employs a character that society has attempted to enfreak as the very agent of dis-enfreakment for the young Hazel.

The Unifying Text: *A Night Time Smoke*

Part of the argument this article advances centers on the power of the text to challenge various stereotypes or wrong perceptions. Although *Saga* is a work of fiction, there are many elements of the story that resonate with what occurs in the world today. The reader of the text therefore stands to recognize the construction of enfreakment that also occurs around them, seen in cases of discrimination, stigma, violence and racism, just to mention a few.

Although *Saga* is a text that engages in this dis-enfreakment, there is a heteroglot inclusion, through the existence of *A Night Time Smoke* (shown in **Figure 3**), a novel by D. Oswald Heist. This is a case where reference to a work of literature (albeit fictional) is made within another literary work. We are never given that much access to the contents of this novel. However, at one point, we are simply told it is a book



Figure 3: *A Night Time Smoke*: The book that starts it all. Vaughan, B K (w) and Staples, F (i) *Saga* #3 May. 2012 Image Comics © Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples.

about 'a rock monster and the daughter of [a] rich quarry owner' (Vaughan 2012g: 2). With this novel, Vaughan and Staples '[introduce] the idea that works of art can have a radically transformative effect upon their audience' (Precup and Manea 2017: 256). It is beyond doubt that the literary work is what brings Alana and Marko together. Through the seemingly sentimental romantic story on the surface, Heist lays out the seeds of a philosophy of harmonious racial coexistence. As Precup and Manea (2017: 256) argue, the novel reflects

The narrative logic of *Saga*: subversion follows subversion, until the binary opposites that it calls into question are collapsed and meaning becomes slippery. Yet this slipperiness is not an end in itself, but a precondition to something new: by first revealing the arbitrariness of received ways of being and knowing, it lays the foundation for an alternative reality...

It is the literary work that enables the two lovers to see past the socially constructed differences that are associated with their species.

M. M. Bakhtin (1975) has famously argued that the literary text is a multivoiced composition, comprising of various voices, some of which reflect the status quo,

whereas others sometimes challenge it. These voices can include intertextual inclusions, something which *A Night Time Smoke* represents. *Saga* is a mirror image of our world, if only more colourful, forcing us to reflect on the various experiences that we have.

Miscegeny: 'the opposite of war is fucking'

Miscegeny is the interbreeding of members of different races. It is an issue that has been mainly frowned upon, if human history is to provide an example. The term has been used quite widely to refer to 'the sexual union of different races, specifically whites with negroes' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000: 127). There is a relation between miscegenation and eugenics, which was a scientific practice that was meant to preserve the assumed purity of a single race, and therefore was counter to the sexual union of people of different races.

Saga is a commentary on the restrictions between sexual union among races that have characterized many moments in human history. The assumptions of superiority displayed by various races in the comic recall Nazi ideologies behind the holocaust, as well as the justifications for the slavery of Africans. Much as these events are now history, this does not mean that negative attitudes do not still exist. Through the union of Alana and Marko, *Saga* adds its voice in support of mixed-race unions, emphasizing the point that at our core, we are all human, despite the various racial differences that may exist among us. Perhaps this is best captured in a line from the author of *A Night Time Smoke*, who sagaciously avers that 'the opposite of war is fucking' (Vaughan 2013c: 16). In the eyes of most of the characters in the comic, as Precup and Manea (2017: 263) observe, 'the biggest taboo seems to be inter-species union, with pedophilia a close second, followed by homosexuality.' In the world of *Saga*, the idea of sexual union between species is unthinkable. For example, one character, Gwendolyn, who is from Wreath, is very clear about the disgust she bears towards the natives of Landfall. She stresses that the horned species is 'disgusted with the idea of copulating with [their] winged oppressors' (Vaughan 2013b: 20). In yet another issue, when she finally meets Alana, she exclaims to Marko 'You really did fuck one of these animals' (Vaughan 2014a: 018). The usage of the term *animal* as an

expression of hate is common throughout the text, just as it is in our lives. It is a term that denotes not merely othering, but also the rejection of humanity in the subject at hand. To have sex with another species, in the eyes of most characters in the text, is an act akin to bestiality. Gwendolyn's slur therefore enfreaks both Alana and Marko. Alana is enfreaked through Gwendolyn's designation of her as an animal, and Marko is a freak through his willing sexual union with her.

According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997), literary texts can help to create enfreakment. They can render characters with anatomical differences as 'freaks, stripped of normalizing contexts and engulfed by a single stigmatic trait' (Garland-Thomson 1997: 11). When the text defines that character based on their disablement, for instance, enfreakment can occur. However, with respect to *Saga*, the opposite happens. The text actively resists narrowing down the definition of its characters merely to their physical appearance, which is one of the main bases upon which enfreakment occurs. Whereas the Wreathers and the Landfallians hate each other mainly due to visible features, this hate does not exist when those features are occluded. For example, as a toddler, Hazel has moments when her parents deliberately dress her in a fashion meant to conceal her wings. As a result, she does not encounter the hostility that is normally directed towards the winged species. It is moments such as these that serve to show the trivial bases upon which so much animosity thrives. With reference to disability, we are reminded of Lennard Davis' (1995: 12) observation that the visualization of the different body is crucial to the formation of specific, often hateful, attitudes.

One of the clearest indications of the construction of freaks in *Saga* is the law that forbids any kind of sexual union between the two species (reminding the reader of anti-miscegenation laws in apartheid South Africa, for example). This is because, in the eyes of one species, the other fits the definition of a freak. For instance, the inhabitants of Landfall have the one distinctive feature of bearing wings. This is a trait that attracts derision from other species, to the extent of calling them 'overgrown housefly' (Vaughan 2012g: 13), 'feathered fucks' (Vaughan 2012d: 9) and 'those evil fucks with the wings' (Vaughan 2012f: 5). Similarly, in the eyes of the Landfallians,

the Wreathers are freaks, mainly due to the attribute of having horns on their heads. This in turn attracts labels such as 'goat boy' (Vaughan 2012g: 19). It should be clear that these labels commonly attempt to reduce the addressed individual to a beast. When enfreakment occurs through the ascription of labels, it is an attempt to deny the identity that the speaker has. It is a form of misrecognition, in which one deliberately ignores the humanity of the other.

The term, *monster*, often used by various characters in the comic, is also an indicator of the process of enfreakment. This process is best explained by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1996: 10), who observes that 'indeed the word *monster* – perhaps the earliest and most enduring name for the singular body – derives from the Latin *monstra*, meaning to warn, show or sign.' In *Saga*, this is a term that is used to indicate disgust, to signify deviation from what is deemed normalcy by the speaker. For example, Prince Robot IV is unable to mask his shock that Alana 'willingly laid down with one of those monsters' (Vaughan 2012a: 24), in reference to the horned species. The Robots, as a species, are allied with the inhabitants of Landfall. The use of the term in this context deliberately highlights how, in their eyes, the natives of Wreath are monstrosities. The *monster* denotes '[a] fluid and shifting spectre [that] points to what is and what is not allowed to be human, whether in appearance or behavior' (Diamond and Poharec 2017: 404). The connection between the term and enfreakment is further captured in the argument that 'the very term "freak" seems to resonate with the most heinous connotations for labelling physical difference: aberration, monstrosity, otherness' (Davies 2015: 10). The term therefore assists in enfreakment, in the process of othering that which is physiologically different from oneself.

In general, we must acknowledge that sexual activity is here posited as an avenue of dis-enfreakment. With the examples of Alana and Marko, Upsher and Doff, as well as Sextillion (a planet-sized brothel characterized by sexual freedom), sexual activity is one of the deliberately transgressive acts that have the potential to destabilize the upholding of a single version of normative sexuality. As we see from the story, this also has the potential to affect relations among the different species.

A World of Racial Variety

A broader perspective – an attempt to regard all the races of *Saga* within a single frame – helps to further clarify the points being raised here, and the way the comic mirrors the world of the reader, as well as the variety of races that live in it. Jeffrey A. Weinstock (1996: 330) acknowledges that ‘SF aliens frequently function as thinly veiled metaphors for real-world racial, ethnic, religious, somatic, and political groups.’ From the perspective of the reader, the entire world of *Saga* is populated by characters with strange appearances. It is a work of science fiction, with an imagined world, imagined species, engaging in matters that are only all too human. The two main species either have wings or horns. The characters from the Robot Kingdom have television screens (whose projection often displays the sentiment of the individual) in the place of heads (with a subtle suggestion that picture resolution is proportional to social status).

Other examples abound. D. Oswald Heist, who authors *A Night Time Smoke*, is a cyclops—featuring one eye on the center of his head. However, his experiences are those that many readers would be familiar with – deaths of loved ones, multiple marriages and divorce. The world of the dead does not escape this enfreakment. In the course of the story, Hazel gains a babysitter, a ghost named Izabel, who is known as a *horror*. It emerges that this is a term that has been assigned to her kind based on misconceptions that people have. It is therefore a discriminatory, or ‘enfreaking’ term, in the context of the story. This is also encouraged by Izabel’s appearance: she has her torso intact, but her entrails are occasionally displayed hanging out from the bottom – a reflection of her death by landmine. The dis-enfreakment of this particular character occurs in the interactions between her and the two lovers, when they come to realise that the label of *horror* is wrongly applied. It is also evident in the bond that is established between Izabel and Hazel as she grows up.

Conclusion

Throughout the article, the emphasis has been on the fact that much as *Saga* is a work of fiction, it nevertheless provides commentary on human events and experiences. These are many, but the article has focused on how the comic book serves the

very important function of dis-enfreakment, the rejection of the social construction of freaks. It presents to its readers a world – very much a mirror of ours – in which enfreakment happens on the basis of bodily difference. The comic employs several characters and other methods to challenge these processes of enfreakment, in the process highlighting how trivial the bases of enfreakment are.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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