Chapter 6

Grotesque Adolescence in Charles Burns' *Black Hole*

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Charles Burns' graphic narrative *Black Hole* begins by emphasizing the corporeal. After an initial black page showing a slice of white in the middle, followed by a subsequent black page with the white widening into a yonic image, the comic's next page foregrounds its content with the chapter title: Biology 101.

The chapter title is located at the top of the page. Underneath, there is a tray with a frog on it. The frog is pinioned to the tray, and its belly is slit open, revealing its entrails and continuing the metonymic assemblage of the vulva from the preceding two pages. Around the tray are school-related items, like a pencil, scissors, and book.

This page is indicative of Burns' black and white style, with clear, distinct lines, and lots of contrast. The lack of color belies the vast detail found in Burns' drawings, such as the black lines and shading covering the frog, which give the frog a distinct corporeality. Its tissue and musculature are evident, and its stomach is plump and round. This image, before any characters are introduced, foregrounds the text's primary concern with bodies. Not just any bodies, but slightly disturbing bodies that are subject to examination. After the title page, the narrative depicts high school students Keith and Chris dissecting the frog. Keith faints during the process. When he regains consciousness, he finds his classmates hovering over him. Chris seems concerned, but others mock Keith, saying he "wimped out" and calling him "pussy."[1] This incident at the beginning of the narrative speaks to the characters' isolation from their peers, another central concern of the novel. Their alienation comes from their exclusion from their social groups. While this exclusion is generally predicated on bodily difference, it also surfaces in more mundane ways, such as the callous mockery of Keith.

Figure 6.1 Charles Burns, *Black Hole* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005).

Charles Burns' *Black Hole* is a magnum opus on the alienation of adolescents. Originally serialized between 1995–2004, and collected in 2005, *Black Hole* garnered the most prestigious United States comics awards: the Eisner, Harvey, and Ignatz. His narrative is about a handful of high school students in a 1970s Seattle suburb: Chris, Eliza, Keith, and Rob. All of whom either already have, or contract, an STD called the bug. The bug causes physical disfigurements unique to each individual. Chris sheds her skin, Eliza has a lizard's tail, Keith grows tadpole-like protuberances under his arm, and Rob has a second mouth at the bottom of his neck. Despite the differences in each deformity, all the afflicted characters become misfits whose self-perception often becomes one of being outcasts. They are adolescents whose bodies are both familiar and strange, and who desire the company of peers, but are stigmatized for their physical differences. Regardless of the particular mutation, all of the adolescents with the bug struggle with their misfit status. Some of them hide their disfigurements and try to pass as "normal"; but because the changes are physical and oftentimes cannot be easily covered, the bug becomes a source of shame for many. These adolescents, feeling themselves freaks, withdraw from their former peer groups and form a community of the disfigured living in the woods. They internalize the social stigma of their bodies to such a degree that they eventually become outcasts, preferring to cut themselves off from their former peers entirely rather than face judgment and cruelty. Their deformations provide visual metaphors for the passage from childhood to adulthood and accompanying feeling of alienation. These visual metaphors are articulated through the aesthetics of the grotesque.

THE GROTESQUE

The grotesque is notoriously difficult to pinpoint, with scholars often noting the term's ambiguity and emphasizing its different elements.[2] Since ambiguity is often part of the grotesque itself, it seems not only appropriate, but delightfully subversive, that the term is difficult to define. Even so, most definitions agree that the grotesque involves bodies or images that resist easy conceptualization or classification because they destabilize biological or ontological categories, often, though not always, through fusions or juxtapositions.

Noël Carroll gives perhaps the most lucid and insightful definition of the grotesque by emphasizing both its structure and function.[3] For Carroll, the structural underpinning of the grotesque is that it "subverts our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order. Fusion, disproportion, formlessness, and gigantism are the most frequently recurring ways of realizing this structural principle."[4] The most important aspect of the grotesque is the subversion of "natural and ontological order." The means by

which this subversion is achieved is of secondary importance. However, the grotesque does have other criteria. Carroll refines his definition by noting that "something is grotesque only if it is an image, whether verbal or visual, of an animate being."[5] While I have reservations regarding the notion that the grotesque must involve animate beings, I mostly concur with his emphasis on animate bodies. The grotesque involves forms and is often explicitly corporeal. Although a plot or an argument can be grotesque by "metaphoric extension," they cannot be literally grotesque.[6]

After establishing the structural underpinnings of the grotesque, Carroll examines one of its functions: "to elicit certain affective states, namely, horror, comic amusement, and awe."[7] Carroll states that horror is "perhaps the emotion now most frequently associated with the grotesque," and that it involves both fear and disgust.[8] Disgust is often related to impurity. The impure connects to the grotesque because "impure correlates with the violation of our standing categories in various ways. Things like blood, fecal waste, mucus, vomit, and pieces of flesh are treated as impurities because they are ambiguous or interstitial between categorical distinctions such as me/not me, living/dead, and inside/outside."[9] Humor's relationship to the grotesque coincides with an emphasis on "conceptual anomaly."[10] The incongruous yet compelling punch lines of certain jokes elicit laughter, which is "a gesture of expulsion that establishes our distance from the absurdity."[11] Awe involves an acceptance of the grotesque, the in-take of breath as opposed to the expulsion of laughter.[12] Carroll explains, "The grotesque functions to promote awe, instead of horror, where the monstrous engenders neither an attitude of expulsion nor the disposition either to fight or flee in response to the prospect of harm to oneself or others."[13] While awe is generally connected more with sublime experience, some scholars of the grotesque believe the grotesque and the sublime are complementary. For example, Shun-Liang Chao asserts that "grotesque physicality—the monstrosity of incompleteness—can be an appropriate object for provoking sublime sensations."[14]

Scholars often use the term "monstrous" synonymously with the term "grotesque." In addition to emphasizing similar forms, the term "monster" also has theoretical similarities. Peter Brooks, discussing the Monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, observes that it exists to be looked upon.[15] Furthermore, the Monster also challenges conceptual and ontological boundaries. Brooks writes, "The Monster appears to be—as in his original creation—both born of nature and supernatural, and as such he puts normal measurements and classifications into question"; the Monster's creation "takes place on the borderline between nature and culture."[16] Brooks notes that the Monster's body challenges divisions between various categories like natural/supernatural and nature/culture. This is analogous to Carroll's definition of the grotesque. Brook's discussion coincides with J. Jack Halberstam's history of

Gothic monsters in the nineteenth century. These monsters often mediated between conceptual categories.[17] They also embodied cultural fears, including fears regarding sexuality, and demonstrated "who must be removed from the community at large."[18]

With Carroll's taxonomy and the grotesque's association with monstrosity in mind, I argue that the bodies in *Black Hole* are embodiments of the grotesque. Theories of the grotesque emphasize corporeality and the capability of various forms to collapse categorical boundaries. By drawing upon the grotesque, the comic book not only illustrates feelings of strangeness and estrangement, it also complicates clear distinctions between childhood and adulthood, as well as between belonging and not belonging. Its adolescent characters do not just feel freakish as they change from child to adult; they become monstrous. Even as they are shunned by their former classmates, the infected try to relate to each other. Ironically, in visualizing internal feelings, the comic book provides a perverse justification for the exclusion of these adolescent bodies from society within the context of the narrative. Therefore, it subtly reinforces the alienation its characters experience, even as it speaks to their loneliness and isolation.

ADOLESCENCE AND ALIENATION

Adolescence maps roughly onto the teenage years, from the start of puberty until around the age of eighteen, when adolescents ostensibly become adults. There is some debate over when adolescents are able to transition into adulthood in contemporary, Western society. The increase in the amount of time people take to reach adulthood, and the anxiety and uncertainty that accompany this transition, is a trend so pronounced that scholars have named the extended transitional period following adolescence "emerging adulthood."[19] While the debate over when adolescence ends and adulthood begins is complicated, the beginning of adolescence is less so. It generally begins at puberty. Although the age a child begins puberty can vary greatly, the underlying premise is that once a child's sexuality overtly develops, he or she leaves behind childhood and enters into the transitional period of adolescence, a period that some associate with alienation and/or rebellion.

The term "alienation" herein is multivalent. It has a general meaning, as well as various technical ones.[20] Robert T. Tally Jr. defines alienation generally as "a condition of being estranged from someone or something."[21] Tally defines alienation in social psychology as "a person's psychological withdrawal from society. In this sense, the alienated individual is isolated from other people; taken to an extreme, such psychological isolation expresses itself in neurosis."[22] This isolation need not be self-imposed either.

Society is perfectly capable of alienating individuals, just as individuals are perfectly capable of alienating themselves. Tally Jr.'s definition of alienation within social psychology is especially evident when examining literature. He observes, "In literature, the theme of alienation most often appears as the psychological isolation of an individual from the community or society."[23]

Harold Bloom reminds us that literature abounds with alienated figures, from Homer to Shakespeare, Joyce to Kafka. Alienation's longevity as a topic worth exploring implies that it does vary over time. In Shakespeare, alienation "meant estrangement," but during Kafka's time it involved "existential dread." Camus applied alienation to post–World War II France and its suffering.[24] Bloom's preferred form of alienation involves the Freudian Uncanny, but he notes that alienation can exist in a range of modes, including the Sublime in Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare, and the comic grotesque of Kafka and Beckett.[25] J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* gave the modern age Holden Caulfield, perhaps its most recognizable alienated figure. Robert C. Evans calls Holden, "the archetype of the disaffected teenager."[26] The constant presence of alienation within Western literature (and other art forms) is no surprise, as so much artistic output explores what it means to exist, oftentimes in a troubling or troublesome world. In the modern age, as Salinger and others demonstrate, alienation is often associated with adolescence.

Feelings of alienation among adolescents are sometimes thought to be part of the process of growing up, as adolescence is considered "a time of rebellion and strong (possibly dangerous) emotions, coexistent with desires to search and to discover how one relates to the world."[27] But alienation need not be a prerequisite for growing up. Not everyone experiences alienation, and those who do are not necessarily better adults for it. Rather than being an integral aspect of adolescence, widespread alienation represents a real or perceived disconnect from communities such as families, friends, or society. In the 1960s, social critics were concerned "that growing up in America was becoming more problematic, and that the most sensitive young people were growing deeply alienated from their society."[28] This concern over adolescent alienation, and their growing away from the control of adults, continues. Teenagers sometimes struggle to find their place in the world while dealing with feelings of "isolation and estrangement."[29] These feelings are sometimes exacerbated by educational systems, where adolescents spend considerable time among their peers and often deal with significant "social [and] academic stresses."[30] Adolescents must also navigate a host of contradictions because of their liminal status as no-longer-children and not-yet-adults. For example, Mary Jean Demarr and Jane Bakerman's bibliographical accounting of adolescence in contemporary literature finds that societal institutions often train youths to behave a certain way even though reality may be more complicated.[31] Incidents of this conflict abound in contemporary culture.

For example, adolescents are taught not to engage in sexual experimentation until they grow up, yet they live in a culture in which they are bombarded with sexual imagery, and in which advertisers sexualize increasingly younger people. The disconnect between appearance (what children and adolescents are taught) and reality (how the world oftentimes works) is sometimes difficult to process, but "young men . . . [and] young women . . . must perceive these contradictions and struggle to their own resolutions in order to achieve maturity."[32] Yet the failure to resolve these contradictions, or feeling resentment toward them, is often blamed on the individual, not our sometimes schizophrenic and contradictory society.

Steven Mintz, in his meticulous account of American childhood and adolescence, makes clear that unstable periods are the rule in American history, not the exception. However, he also notes that contemporary society has placed childhood into a distinct category that is supposedly separated from adulthood and that is yet constantly bombarded with adult realities.[33] He explains, "American society sends young people many mixed and confusing messages. . . . The basic contradiction is that the young are told to grow up fast, but also that they needn't grow up at all, or at least not until they reach their late twenties or early thirties."[34] The pressures of peer groups, the educational system, and the contradictory culture are some of the contributing factors for adolescent alienation.

Despite the pressures adolescents currently face, surveys report that young people today feel less alienation than their counterparts a quarter-century a century ago.[35] However, the perception that youths are more alienated today remains. Thomas Hine, in his book on the evolution of the American teenager, sees adolescents as having lost any sense of what it means to meaningfully contribute to society. In his discussion of the trend in the 1990s to implement curfews for young people at malls, he writes, "I think the situation is significant because it vividly raises many of the issues that haunt teenagers' lives at the end of the twentieth century. It is about the alienation of teenagers from adult society, and equally about the alienation of that society from its teenagers. The mere presence of teenagers threatens us."[36] Hine sees alienation as part of the teenage experience and extends that alienation further to include adult fears over adolescents.

Burns' *Black Hole* plays on the fear of and over adolescence by depicting teenagers engaging in sex as monstrous. Their monstrosity also functions as a visual metaphor for adolescent feelings of freakishness. Leslie Fiedler argues that puberty makes early adolescence feel freakish as youths become more aware of their own, and others', genitals and their changing bodies. He also observes that society encourages females to remove "excess hair . . . to de-freakify themselves."[37] Thus, although alienation may occur through a disconnect between generations, either individually or as a group, it may

also occur due to hormonal changes and uncertainties over one's own body. Fielder's identification of society's emphasis on certain standards of appearance makes the physical incongruities of the adolescents in *Black Hole* all the more applicable as a metaphor for feelings of discomfort over one's changing body. The monstrous adolescents of *Black Hole* are disconnected from their parents and peers at school. Their changing bodies are often sources of anxiety among them, which they hide in shame. These monstrous, changing bodies, which turn their bearers into misfits because of the familiar strangeness of their bodies that are their own and yet are unlike anything to which they are accustomed, can be understood through the theoretical concept of the grotesque.

BLACK HOLE

Charles Burns' comics often contain grotesque bodies. For example, the various collections of his earlier work, which was often produced at the same time as his work on *Black Hole*, harbor a consistent emphasis on abnormal bodies. For example, the stories in *El Borbah* depict a variety of grotesqueries, including humans who replace their biological parts with robotic ones and old men who have their heads placed on children's bodies. While the titular character is not particularly grotesque himself, he is a detective dressed as a giant Mexican wrestler, an absurd juxtaposition. But the image of the Mexican wrestler is also inherently corporeal for Burns. In the epilogue to the collection, he notes that he watched wrestling as a child. He recalls, "There was something strangely compelling about the whole choreographed ritual; the sight of all those twisting, sweaty bodies going at it had a brutal intensity you didn't see on other, sanitized television shows."[38] Burns' reference to the "twisting, sweaty bodies" is an acknowledgment of the tangible, imperfect human form, as opposed to more immaculate bodies.

Burns' thematic focus on uncanny bodies is prevalent in much of his work, but nowhere is this focus as emotionally gripping as in *Black Hole*, his tale of adolescent alienation and isolation. The premise of *Black Hole* was initially explored in some of Burns' other work in the 1980s. In a different story, Burns' Big Baby character mistakes the spread of an STD among teenagers as the sign of an alien invasion.[39] In *Black Hole*, however, Burns tells a different story about characters dealing with the disease. The comic abounds with phallic and vaginal imagery, which emphasizes the prominence of sex in the teens' lives. The characters infected with the bug are grotesqueries. Chris' ability to shed her skin is first noticed as a gaping hole in her back and connects with the vaginal imagery present throughout the comic. John Lowther argues that Chris' mutation "model[s] the falsity and instability of

her identity, something that at any moment tear and fray," which he argues is a "metaphor for a number of Lacanian perspectives on subjectivity and desire."[40] Chris' symptom blurs distinctions between inside/outside. Eliza's tail destabilizes the ontological divide between animal/human, and if read as a phallic symbol, challenges gender divisions. The protuberances Keith grows underneath his arm look like tadpoles and sperm, and also challenge both animal/human and inside/outside divisions. Finally, Rob's second mouth on his neck, which Bruce Dadey reads as a vagina dentate,[41] is unable to keep from speaking, which, according to Lowther, challenges the divide between the conscious/subconscious.[42]

Bruce Dadey finds that *Black Hole* (as well as *Our Cancer Year* and *Epileptic*) destabilizes binaries of image and word, purity and disease. He also engages with a discussion of adolescence. He writes, "Though adults are almost entirely absent from the world of *Black Hole*, teenagers have internalized the moral prohibitions of the adult world so thoroughly that adolescence itself—the inevitable bodily changes and sexual awakening that accompany maturity—is perceived by them as a disease."[43] Though Dadey isn't interested in the grotesque, his emphasis on teens perceiving their bodily changes and sexual awakening as a disease resonates with the idea that adolescence can be grotesque, although it is also fair to say that the teenagers do not just perceive adolescence as a disease, but that there is a disease affecting adolescents. Dadey concludes by asserting that the text "leads away from ideologies of purity and into a state of dynamic indeterminacy that blurs distinctions between the healthy self and the diseased Other, and the word and the image."[44] The indeterminacy and blurring of distinctions resonates with the grotesque.

Dadey illustrates the recurrence of adolescence and the challenge to binary distinctions within *Black Hole*, which I argue merge in the metaphor of grotesque child as alienated misfit. It is clear that *Black Hole* is about alienated adolescents and sexuality. The alienation to which *Black Hole* speaks is more about a multitude of anxieties facing youth, of which developing sexuality is a significant, but not solitary, component. The comic is also about how poorly teenagers treat each other, as many of those who have contracted the bug leave high school and their families and form a separate community in the woods so they do not have to face the constant harassment of their peers.

Chris exemplifies the alienation facing those with the bug. Chris sleeps with Rob at a party and contracts it. Soon after, Chris develops symptoms, but she is not initially aware of them. During an outing in the woods with friends, Chris goes skinny dipping.

After she takes off her clothes, her peers start to whisper and to stare. This can be seen in all six panels, and the cramped panels convey a sense of claustrophobia and the inability of Chris to escape the judgments of her peers.[45]

Figure 6.2 Charles Burns, *Black Hole* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005).

Chris, unsure of what they are saying, understands their whispers and stares as a reaction to her lack of clothing. She says, "What's wrong, I'm . . . it's just like wearing a bikini or something . . . I mean, it's only underwear . . . ."[46] This sequence is exemplary in its mimicry of how someone might feel when they were wearing less than his or her peers, as if everyone is looking at, and talking about, him or her. But the scenario is also emblematic of how many adolescents feel about themselves regardless of their bodies. Adolescents often feel as if they are the subject of gossip or ridicule, often rightfully so, even if it has nothing to do with their sexual activities or appearance. It is also emotionally salient for the reader because he or she knows that Chris has had sex with Rob and should be developing the physical manifestations of the bug, but the reader is not sure if that is the reason for the gossip. Chris is unaware at this point that Rob was infected, and her comment that "it's only underwear" suggests that although she is aware that they may be gossiping about her lack of clothing, she does not see the big deal because she's basically wearing a swimsuit. In fact, on the subsequent page she wonders if her underwear has a stain, rather than worrying about her lack of clothing. As Chris nears the end of her swim, Burns depicts a page with three panels.

The first two focus on her head above the water, so they are smaller than the third panel, which reveals almost her entire body. In the first panel, Chris reflects on her peers' behavior: "They can be such jerks sometimes."[47] Then the subsequent panel shifts to a view directly behind Chris, as she wonders if she is overreacting. The final panel is the culmination of the page. It gives a rear view of Chris as she stands up in the water, about to emerge. The bug's effects on Chris are now revealed to the reader, although, ironically, not to Chris. The reader is shown a long line of sagging and loose skin that Chris is subsequently able to pull off and thus shed her entire skin, revealing an identical epidermis underneath. Chris' rise and exit from the water, as seen in the second and third panels, is an inversion of the traditional image of the monster rising from the depths, à la the Creature from the Black Lagoon. Chris' wet hair and underwear underscores her vulnerability, and her skin makes her look injured rather than fearsome. She is a human being depicted with freakish characteristics, rather than a monster with human characteristics. The snickering of her peers is due to a physical aberration, one that also speaks to Chris' sexual behavior. The sniping behind Chris' back is thus also a form of moral and social policing that serves no purpose but to ostracize Chris because she will always already have had sex.

The moral policing of sexual behavior and the association of the bug with sex resonate with adolescence, particularly because sex is associated with the passage into adulthood and many adolescents face pressure, from themselves and others, to have sex. Adolescence is a liminal stage between childhood and adulthood, where youths must negotiate their changing identity and

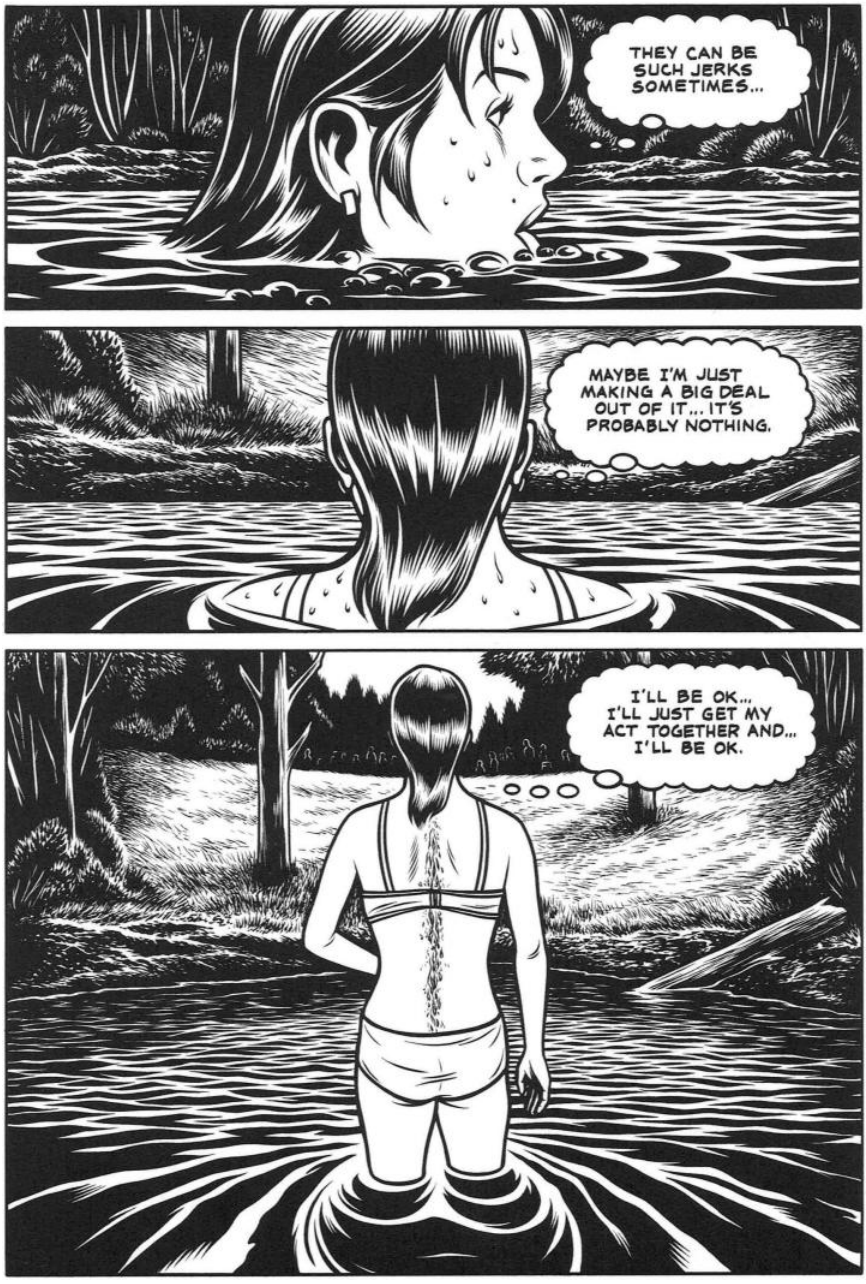

Figure 6.3 Charles Burns, *Black Hole* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005).

societal expectations. Because of the duality of adolescence, the grotesque, with all its embodied ambiguity and tension, makes for an especially suitable metaphor for the alienation of adolescents. Chris and her peers become monsters and misfits in appearance. Some hide their disfigurements and try to pass as normal, some leave society. Their grotesque appearances function as a metaphor, in part, for the transitional period of adolescence in which they are no longer child and not yet adult, but also for the concern over fitting and not fitting. For many, adolescence is a time of physical and emotional discomfort, where individuals may feel compelled to behave in ways that allow them to fit in or risk being ostracized. *Black Hole* complicates this dynamic because its characters' differences are inscribed onto their bodies. Burns describes the bug as "a physical manifestation of whatever is going on internally."[48] This physical manifestation of the characters' internal world is articulated through the use of the grotesque. These grotesque manifestations differ by character and the reactions they engender. Chris' mutation leads to snickering. Other transformations are more horrific. Some may even elicit a sense of awe and acceptance, such as when Eliza's tail becomes a part of her and Keith's first sexual experience. Regardless of the various feelings the manifestations engender, however, they all lead to alienation at one time or another.

The characters articulate this alienation in various ways. At one point, Chris is alone in the woods with Dave, whose physical disfigurement has given him a feline facial appearance. Chris comments on her desire to return to her previous life, before she went into the woods to escape the ridicule of others: "Go back to my boring, normal life . . . living with my parents, being the straight-A student, the perfect, sweet little daughter . . . I'd take it all back in a second."[49] Dave, however, has an entirely different outlook. He exclaims, "I'd never go back, not in a million years. Anything's better than all the crap I had to go through . . . Going to school and getting beat up almost every day . . . all those stuck up girls laughing at me . . . **Fuck** '**em**! Fuck 'em **all**!"[50] Dave's rejection of society shows his frustration over the way he has been treated in school and in life. He would rather stay in the woods and live apart from society than return to his previous life. He would rather pine over Chris, who has no interest in him. Unbeknownst to the others, Dave kills Rob, Chris' boyfriend. Then, as Keith allows the more isolated freaks to stay in a home he's watching over while the owners are on vacation, Dave enters a vacant home some of the freaks are staying at and murders the other teenagers.

While Dave represents an extreme reaction of an alienated youth, most of the adolescents in the comic are alienated but not dangerous. They are isolated from their peers and adults. For example, they hate spending time with their parents. Keith feels "the thought of being stuck at home all night [with his parents] was too awful to even think about."[51] Or their parents do not understand them. When Chris' mom tells her about Chris' missing school,

Chris says, "Mom . . . I . . . I can't tell you . . . It's . . . nothing happened, OK?" Her mom responds, "It's some boy, isn't it? Christ, you're too young to throw your life away like this . . . You may think you're in love, but . . . ." Chris ends the conversation by exploding, "You don't **understand**! You'll **never** understand! **Never**!"[52] These examples highlight a generational divide between the adults and their children. However, the parents are most noticeable in their absence. Keith's disdain for his parents while they watch TV and Chris' confrontation with her mother are two of the only references to adults, much less parents, in the book. Burns initially envisioned a story where adults were the bad guys, but decided against it. In an interview with Hillary Chute, Burns recalls, "I realized that what I really wanted to do was just talk about the actual characters and their lives and not include many adults. Occasionally they're there in the background; occasionally they might present an obstacle. But at that age in my life, my parents didn't really exist either."[53] The lack of adults in the lives of children and adolescents is an increasingly common reality in society as the more pronounced emphasis on education, along with other cultural factors like the specific targeting of children and adolescents as discrete categories by marketers, has created a culture wherein children and adolescents are increasingly disconnected from adults.[54]

Because so many of the adolescents with the bug cannot pass for normal, some create a community of their peers within the woods. This community may offer solace for some, but it is less about embracing differences than escaping ridicule. It is not a utopian alternative to high school. When Keith, who can pass relatively easily by covering up his underarm, comes across the community, he remarks, "Yeah. I was finally where I belonged . . . with a bunch of loser sick kids down at the pit."[55]

It is not surprising that the main characters leave town. Chris heads toward the coast and swims into the ocean. Whether she lives or not is ambiguous. Keith and Eliza leave town together after Eliza expresses her disdain for remaining. Eliza argues, "It's more than just wanting to get out of this nuthouse . . . It's this city . . . . The whole fuckin' state!"[56] The adolescents are so alienated from their environment that they refuse to remain in one place. They believe their growth as individuals requires them to leave, as they feel no strong connections to the place that they come from and lack a close relationship to the people who raised them. Furthermore, though *Black Hole* may emphasize four characters, the text itself, the collected issues of the book, notes the commonality of adolescence as a period of alienation. The inside of the front cover shows a typical high school yearbook. The inside of the back cover shows the same characters, all with physical disfigurements. The implication of depicting random adolescents, all with the bug, even though not all of the characters in the book actually contract it, is that all adolescents are potential misfits. While on a metaphoric level, the disfigurements work

to visualize internal feelings of alienation and of their physical changes, the ramifications of this metaphor are a generation of adolescents who can never put their past behind them. Eliza can leave the town behind, for example, but not her tail. Even where she to break it off, it grows back. And the absence of adults in the text means that we do not see any adults with the bug. It is an adolescent concern.

Current scholarly considerations of *Black Hole* do not account for the grotesque, but they do circulate around related concepts, like abjection, otherness, and the Uncanny. Perhaps the most popular method of reading *Black Hole* involves psychoanalytic approaches. Lowther employs a Lacanian lens to understand how the text informs psychoanalysis and vice versa. He understands the central characters as abject bodies, "weighed down by the social gravity of their abjection and otherness, they try to let no light escape . . . lest they be silently discarded from the (social) network, becoming invisible remainders (waste), consigned to darkness."[57] Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund associate abjection with the "liminal grotesque" through its relationship to the Freudian Uncanny.[58] While Lowther is not particularly interested in the grotesque, his emphasis on abjection connects to it. His connection to network theory, of which adolescents' "abjection and otherness" must be hidden or result in their exile from "the (social) network" or face social invisibility furthermore aligns with my discussion of alienation. Laura Perna utilizes Ernst Jentsch and Freud's discussion of the Uncanny to illustrate how the material "suspend[s] the reader between familiarity and unfamiliarity, primarily via visual means."[59] Peter Walton argues that the characters unconsciously seek a return to the archaic mother and to the comfort of the womb in a quest for wholeness. He also argues, "[T]he bug amplifies the ambiguity and pain of forming an individual identity. The terror is not of the infection, nor solely of the subsequent social stigma; it is of the uncertain independence of the adolescent, the hopelessness in trying to again obtain the sense of wholeness lost since birth."[60] Like Lowther, Walton understands the text as one about the horror of adolescence.

Other scholars focus on the bug as a disease, like Dadey. Hillary Chute asserts, "The plot might strike some as simply grotesque, attending to only the horror of illness and too rife with genre conventions, such as 'teen plague.'"[61] But Chute's use of "grotesque" is disconnected from its aesthetic implications and instead functions as a pejorative adjective. Chute's reading actually foregrounds elements similar to the grotesque. She writes, "The tension between 'normal' and 'abnormal,' surface and depth, is obviously faced by the books characters, but it is also faced by readers who can see both the distortion and elegance that are intertwined on the page,"[62] thus locating potentially grotesque tension within both the characters and the overall aesthetic. Vanessa Raney believes the bug is a metonym for AIDS and that

"AIDS became a metonym for deviance, for otherness, and it remains human nature to strike out in fear of the unknown."[63] To take adolescents and turn them into deviants and others is a metaphorically grotesque transformation, as known becomes unknown.

The grotesque serves as a touchstone for the related, but disparate, readings of Burns' *Black Hole*. Due to its visual nature, it provides the means for writing adolescent alienation upon the body, which becomes an ouroboros of self-justification. The characters' alienation manifests itself in their bodies, transforming their bodies into a reason for others to alienate them. Furthermore, the grotesque's power to elicit reactions that involve both estrangement and acceptance allows for the possibility of the primary characters to accept themselves. While most of the comic is about the discomfort and estrangement brought on by their deformities, it ends in self-acceptance. Since Chris, Keith, and Eliza are socially ostracized, they feel no compunction to remain in the town. They eventually leave. They begin to accept their bodies, or at least learn to live with them, after escaping the judgmental world of their peers and its accompanying feelings of alienation. Chris, Keith, and Eliza's ability to eventually navigate their alienation and to arrive at self-acceptance becomes a way to escape the infinity of the grotesque's self-justifying hold over them. By rejecting the communities that estrange them, they dismiss a culture that worships sameness but that paradoxically obsesses over the difference of others—a paradox metaphorically embodied in the bug's individualized symptoms for the same disease.

NOTES

1. Charles Burns, *Black Hole* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), n.p.
2. Shun-Liang Chao, *Rethinking the Concept of the Grotesque: Crashaw, Baudelaire, Magritte* (London: Legenda, 2010), 7; Alan Spiegel, "A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Georgia Review* 26, no. 4 (1972): 426.
3. Noël Carroll, "The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes towards a Taxonomy," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. Frances S. Connelly (New York: Cambridge UP, 2003), 295.
4. Ibid., 297.
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45. Significantly, the characters also appear to be looking at the reader.
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