Bodies With(out) Boundaries: Affective Ambiguity in Boundless

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Bodies With(out) Boundaries: Affective Ambiguity in *Boundless*

By Gracyn Bird

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Dickinson College Department of English
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Acknowledgements

In June 2017, my dad texted me a link to an article by Rowan Buchanan for The Atlantic: “The Cartoonist Who Makes You Look Twice,” a review of Jillian Tamaki’s graphic novel *Boundless*. Neither of us could have predicted that my senior thesis would stem from the story he sent to me that day. True to the article’s title, I kept looking at Tamaki—not just twice, but continuously over the next three years as I continued my research in comics with the encouragement of my parents, professors, and peers. I have much love and thanks for my parents, not only for enthusiastically supporting my interest in an emergent field of literature, but for thinking of me when encountering comics and inadvertently finding my primary text.

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Preface: “Let me show you something”

Three hands reach for each other in a moment of suspense and tension on the final page of Jillian Tamaki’s comic “The ClairFree System.” Against a black background with no concrete setting, one set of hands reaches out and lightly grasps another hand with a promise to show them “something.” As the edges of the wrists fray like white threads into the void around them, the moment appears ephemeral, both physically and metaphorically fading away. While there are no clues about the identities of these people, it seems as if they share a personal connection. The speaker trusts the other person enough to reveal “something” special to them, and the other person trusts the speaker enough to physically comply. However, this is not a unique moment: similar images of hands grasping one another are littered throughout “The ClairFree System.” ClairFree is actually a skincare pyramid scheme, and the interaction above is just one of the
many carefully scripted moves for its members, all of whom are women. The speaker, a member of ClairFree, begins with a simple offer: “here.” Immediately after, she asks the other woman to “give” her their hand, followed by a promise to “show” her something in return. These three movements—giving, taking, and then giving again—reveal that the intimate action of holding another’s hand is merely transactional for the speaker. While the speaker asks for the other woman’s trust by making vague offers and initiating physical contact, the rest of the story reveals that her true motivation is to sell ClairFree products to her clients.

The underlying tension present in this exchange pervades nearly every page of Jillian Tamaki’s graphic novel *Boundless*. The nine short comics that comprise *Boundless* are narratively independent of one another, yet gain a new depth when arranged as a collection. Some—such as “The ClairFree System” and “bedbug”—border on the mundane, with the former portraying an all-too-common pyramid scheme and the latter detailing a woman’s extramarital affair. Other stories are almost fantastical, such as “Half-Life,” which tells of a woman who spontaneously begins shrinking until she dissolves into nothingness. Even though her stories explore a range of topics, Tamaki is always questioning the fabric of contemporary systems—specifically how women navigate those systems.

In order to understand why Tamaki compiled these nine specific comics out of her extensive oeuvre into one book, one needs to look no further than the title of the collection: *Boundless*. Each of Tamaki’s comics identifies, pushes, or breaks the physical, emotional, and social limits, both explicit and ineffable, that govern contemporary society. Many of the boundaries that Tamaki investigates dictate female experiences, whether that be their intimate and platonic relationships, their identities, or their physical bodies. While she is not proposing that there exists a universal female experience, Tamaki does draw attention to the restrictions
unique to women even in a seemingly egalitarian society. The two comics of this analysis, “Darla!” and “The ClairFree System,” spark a surprising conversation about how Tamaki explores the boundaries surrounding women.

The publisher of *Boundless* describes the collection as “at once fantastical and realist, playfully hinting at possible transcendence: from one’s culture, one’s relationship, oneself” (Drawn & Quarterly). When Tamaki draws attention to the boundaries surrounding culture, intimacy, and identity, she also suggests that they can be transcended—that one can “pass or extend beyond or above” those boundaries (“transcend,” v.1). The boundaries do exist, but in Tamaki’s world, they can be passed or extended. In “Half-Life,” for example, the physical laws of nature exist for everyone except the narrator, who shrinks until she does not exist. Alternatively, “Darla!” breaches the socially taboo by describing the rise and fall of the titular “sitcom-porno.” If such transcendence were to become widespread, then the end result would be a society that is boundless: “without bounds or limits; illimitable, unbounded, unlimited” (“boundless,” adj. 1). Tamaki’s world is not boundless—yet—but by identifying many of the implicit and explicit rules that govern women in contemporary society, Tamaki prompts us to visualize which boundaries are oppressive and which are necessary.

The visual format of graphic novels generates a particular strength in dealing with issues of space—how spaces are constructed, perceived, inhabited, and filled. I believe that Tamaki pays special attention to female spaces, female-exclusive spaces, and the most intimate female space of all: the body. The anchors of this analysis, “Darla!” and “The ClairFree System,” present strange spaces that appear to be female oriented, but function under complex gender structures. Hillary Chute approaches women in comics in “The Space of Graphic Narrative: Mapping Bodies, Feminism, and Form,” which focuses on nonfiction graphic life stories. Chute
argues that comics, especially graphic narratives, are well suited for feminist stories because their use of positionality, voice, and narrative can depict multiple versions of the author in time: there can exist the author, their childhood self, their adult self, and the speaker all on the same page (Chute 200). While Chute is specifically referring to graphic narratives, I believe that her argument is relevant to fictional texts as well. This connection is particularly clear when she articulates that “the attention to bodies in space, bodies producing space, and bodies taking up space that comics proposes is about situating the self” (Chute 204). While the “self,” or rather selves, depicted in *Boundless* are not explicitly stated to be Tamaki, many of the stories deal with issues of multiplicity and identity in relation to the female body. Each of Tamaki’s comics investigates very different subjects, narrative styles, and visual techniques, but they are all directly engaged with issues of how the female subjects’ physical bodies shape their identities and communities. Comics, as I will argue, is able to engage with feminist body politics in a more complex way than words alone are able to.¹

¹ I follow Scott McCloud’s definition that the term “comics” is “plural in form, used with a singular verb” (McCloud 9).
**Introduction: Identifying *Boundless***

While *Boundless* is a book that relies equally on visual and verbal text, critics and scholars have not settled on one definitive label for the collection. *Boundless* was published in 2017 by Drawn & Quarterly, a Canadian publishing company specializing in comics. The page for *Boundless* on the Drawn & Quarterly website is notably absent of any mention of the graphic form, referring to the book as a “collection of short stories” (Drawn & Quarterly). This absence may be due to the fact that every book on Drawn & Quarterly’s website is a comic, so it goes without saying; however, characterizing the collection only as “stories” also dodges any preconceptions or expectations that readers might bring after hearing the word “comics.” A look inside *Boundless* reveals that it is far more than prose: the pages are filled with blobs of text, floating illustrations, and neatly arranged panels, all in a wide array of visual styles. Drawn & Quarterly’s loose description is the first clue that this book mindfully evades clear cut labels and visual categories.

Whether critics refer to *Boundless* as “short stories,” “comic-book stories,” or “graphic work,” they all gesture towards the difficulty of labeling a visual and verbal form (Drawn & Quarterly, Bausells, Cavna). The terms “comics” and “graphic novels” carry distinct connotations within the history of American comics. American comic books originally emerged in 1934, but Superman’s debut in 1938 marked the first explosion of comics. (Lopes 28). Even though comics is a relatively new form, the style of “comic art” has roots in eighteenth century political cartoons, nineteenth century illustrated dime novels, and 1930s pulp magazines (Lopes 29). After some growth, the comics industry began to suffer in the 1940s as adults became afraid of the new entertainment that was supposedly captivating their children with violence and sex (Weiner 7). However, the “Big Three” comics—*Maus, The Dark Knight Returns,* and
Bird 9

*Watchmen*—marked another spike in comics popularity in the 1980s (Weiner 7). This very brief overview of just a few of the major points in comics development offers a glimpse into the turbulent highs and lows in the form’s fight towards mainstream acceptance. As comics evolved to address more complex themes and adult audiences, its goal became to offer a physically and intellectually accessible form of entertainment.

The cultural distinction between “comics” and “graphic novels” lies in subtle differences in both form and content. While comic issues are typically 15 to 20 pages long with low-quality printing on cheap paper, graphic novels boast a higher quality book form (Danzinger-Russell 180). The implication of the term “graphic novel” is that it is an upgrade from comics; Richard Kyle established this when he coined the term in his 1964 column titled “The Future of Comics.” He used the term “graphic novel” to refer to “the artistically serious comic strip” (Kyle 2). While Kyle was ahead of his time in giving a name to the shifts occurring in comics and their possible trajectory for “the future,” his definition generates politics of “high” and “low” art. By this line of thought, if graphic novels are “artistically serious,” then comics must be visually frivolous and narratively vapid. Dichotomous definitions only serve to widen the gap between two forms that share much in common, and also close off the possibility of forms that exist somewhere between comics and graphic novels.

As a feminist author, Tamaki steps boldly into a genre that was not always designed for a female audience. Jacqueline Danziger-Russell tracks the role of gender in the development of comics in *Girls and Their Comics: Finding a Female Voice in Comic Book Narrative*. She points out that “for many years the majority of publications have been produced *primarily* for male consumption” and goes on to argue that Japanese manga played a key role in welcoming women into the audience of American comics (Danziger-Russell 1). Unlike American comics, Japanese
manga has specific genres that target different audiences. *Shonen* and *shojo* manga are respectively designed for young boys and girls, while *seinen* and *josei* are aimed toward older men and women. In the 1990s and 2000s, manga, especially *shojo*, became increasingly popular with American girls and began drawing them into comic book stores, cracking the gendered barrier around comics (Danziger-Russell 130). While Tamaki has not explicitly stated that she is visually or conceptually influenced by manga, bold stories about women and for women would not have a voice today if not for the permeation of manga into American culture.

What category, then, does *Boundless* fit into? On one hand, the short lengths and narrative independence of the stories in *Boundless* align with traditional comics. Yet the book’s narrative depth and “artistically serious” qualities certainly match up with Richard Kyle’s criteria. As critics’ mixed descriptions of its form suggest, *Boundless* lies somewhere in the middle of comics and graphic novels. Tamaki’s work resists placement into any one category and instead takes inspiration from a range of visual and verbal forms, from Classical imagery to advertisements and stock images. With the success of female author-artists such as Allison Bechdel and Marjane Satrapi, comics has become a space for women to tell their stories.

Without getting tangled in the technical distinctions between “comics” and “graphic novels,” identifying the core functions of visual and verbal media is key to understanding feminist comics. A succinct yet complex description of the nature of comics comes from W.T. Mitchell’s afterward to *Comics as Media* in which he asserts that “in the framework of media theory…comics is a trans-medium, moving across all boundaries of performance, representation, reproduction, and inscription to find new audiences, new subjects, and new forms of expression” (Mitchell 259). As a scholar of literature, visual art, and media studies, Mitchell approaches comics with an understanding of their place in visual and verbal media since the eighteenth
century. His use of the word “boundaries” could not be more fitting—*Boundless*, like the comics that Mitchell describes, contains moments of transcendence from visual, cultural, and gendered boundaries. The boundaries that Mitchell identifies—“performance, representation, reproduction, and inscription”—manifest themselves both conceptually and visually in comics. Performance and representation, for example, are present within the characters’ identities and actions in *Boundless*: Tamaki’s diverse set of characters\(^2\) are often performing in some capacity in these stories. Tamaki also confronts performance and representation in her artistic and authorial choices. Technical decisions such as line, color, panels, composition, and proportions all shape how Tamaki visually represents her characters. When Mitchell refers to boundaries of “performance” and “reproduction,” I also think of the physical form of comics and how they “perform” for or present themselves to the reader. Whether appearing in a cheap 20-page single issue, a high-quality printed volume, or digitally on a website, the composition of pages both individually and collectively is essential to comics. By arranging the stories of *Boundless* in a specific sequence, Tamaki urges her readers to find connections and points of departure between her stories.

Tamaki is highly conscious that each story about women in *Boundless* requires a unique approach rather than the application of a single formula. While Tamaki does have a distinct visual style, no two stories in *Boundless* look quite the same—each has its own color palette, level of naturalism, line quality, and compositional style. Compare the two pages from “1.Jenny” and “SexCoven” in figures 2 and 3:

\(^2\) The characters of *Boundless* are racially, sexually, and physically diverse people, but even diverse in terms of species; “World-Class City” and “Boundless” include sentient animal characters.
Tamaki renders “1.Jenny” with flat brown contour lines. Each page has a hand-drawn quality with jagged edges and uneven shading. In figure 2, three versions of the same woman, Jenny, walk side by side. In “1.Jenny,” the main character Jenny struggles as social media manipulates her identity and sense of individuality. When visually illustrating Jenny’s internal identity crisis, Tamaki avoids using panels and presents iterations of Jenny in the same space and time. As Scott McCloud points out in his definitive guide *Understanding Comics*, “in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same” (McCloud 100). Since the three versions of Jenny physically appear in the same space, Tamaki suggests that they exist simultaneously as well. In this way, Jenny’s fractured sense of self becomes physically manifested on the page. In contrast, page 207 from “SexCoven” makes extensive use of panels. “SexCoven” runs in the same thematic vein as “1.Jenny” as it describes the internet cult following of a song called
SexCoven that comes to define the identity of Raven, the woman on page 207. With a plot deeply ingrained in internet culture and aesthetics, “SexCoven” uses panels to visually replicate the geometric sensory overload of internet pages filled with pop-up ads, windows, and text. Other pages of “SexCoven” create a digital landscape with an overload of visual and verbal information that is nearly impossible to navigate. Figure 3 illustrates how Tamaki brings those same aesthetics into the real world outside of the internet during a candid conversation.

By briefly comparing pages from two stories in Boundless, I hope to reveal Tamaki’s diverse approaches and attention to visual details when depicting female bodies and stories. The visual relationship between space and time identified by both McCloud and Chute gives comics a rich potential for exploring identity. In relation to Mitchell’s definition of comics as transmediatic, Tamaki capitalizes on what Mitchell calls “[comics’] openness to multiple alternative frameworks in terms of style, form, structure, material support and technical platform” (Mitchell 259). As illustrated in the stylistic differences between “1.Jenny” and “SexCoven,” Tamaki constantly uses the “alternative frameworks” of style, form, and structure that Mitchell identifies. She has also explored material and technical alternatives: many of the stories in Boundless first appeared in web format, and the title story “Boundless” first appeared on the Hazlitt website in an “infinite scroll” (Randle).

Tamaki’s training as an illustrator has helped her master a range of artistic styles. After receiving a degree in illustration from the Alberta College of Art and Design, Tamaki worked on many creative projects aside from comics including children’s books, editorial and book illustration, and storyboarding (Tamaki, “About”). Her continuing work in these areas has given her a broad understanding of the contemporary artistic sphere. Her artistic influences include—but also go beyond—traditional comic books, and she has worked in a variety of media from
traditional drawing and painting to digital and textile work (Tamaki, “About”). Her diverse studio practice is visible in *Boundless* where she does not adhere to one consistent formula or artistic approach throughout her stories.

This analysis of *Boundless* will rely on attention to both the visual and verbal. When reading comics for both their images and text, Katalin Orban dubs the “dynamic multitasking” that takes place as “hyperreading” (Orban 107). She argues that reading comics is unique from reading other forms of literature or visual art because “the components’ narrative, temporal, spatial, verbal, and visual connections almost never coincide in a single mandatory path and rather compete as alternatives” (Orban 107). With the potential for so much information on a single page, the components that Orban identifies have the potential to create tension as they “compete” for the readers’ attention. Thus, “hyperreading” requires readers to spend time exploring each competing pathway. Readers can first read a page visually, taking in aesthetics and expressions; then read the page for its verbal components including dialogue, internal monologue, and diegetic text; and again as a whole, analyzing the composition, panels, and gutters. Reading Tamaki’s comics with the watchful and attentive eye of hyperreading is crucial to uncover the pathways that might not be obvious upon a first read.

Feminist comics scholar Hillary Chute gestures towards Orban’s idea of “hyperreading” when she emphasizes the level of work required by readers engaging with comics. She posits that there exists “a back-and-forth of reading and looking for meaning” (“Comics as Literature?” 452). Reading comics is not a linear process; as Chute suggests, a “back-and-forth” of reading and rereading, looking and looking back again is crucial in finding meaning. Even W.T. Mitchell uses the language of “looking” at comics in a conversation with Art Spiegelman, author of *Maus*, which is arguably one of the most important graphic novels of all time. During their written
conversation, Mitchell states that “even though we use the word ‘read comics’ more than ‘look at
comics’… [you have to] reenter deeply and decode all of the little background stuff. It’s a lot of
images to decode” (Spiegelman 22). Orban, Chute, Mitchell, and Spiegelman all bring attention
to the act of looking that is of equal importance to the act of reading. Comics exist as a sort of
space that the reader must “reenter,” spend time in, and choose which path of information they
will follow each time they look. Tamaki makes this process particularly challenging.

The two stories of focus in this analysis, “Darla!” and “The ClairFree System,” speak to
the sort of “code” that Mitchell references. Neither story offers a clear tonal or visual path.
Instead, subtle shifts and contradictions break down the reliability of each narrator and the
subject position of the reader. Tamaki leaves the reader to negotiate between the different pieces
of information available in order to “decode” the most reliable narrative—if there is one. Tamaki
creates tension between the verbal and visual in three areas: narrators, systems, and affect. In
“Darla!” and “The ClairFree System,” Tamaki confronts the problematic handling of female
bodies in postmodern society that relies on performance, stereotypes, and manipulation. By
forcing her readers into a space of ambiguity and uncertainty, Tamaki mirrors the experience of
encountering misogynistic systems in real life.
Chapter One: Narrators

The very first page of “The ClairFree System” signals that Tamaki’s narrators are enigmatic, to say the least. Rather than telling a linear narrative, “The ClairFree System” is eerily reminiscent of a commercial. The narrator is an anonymous female member of ClairFree who attempts to enlist more women into the ClairFree pyramid scheme. Her opening line addresses the reader: “Listen, if you had told me twenty years ago that one day I would love my skin, I would have said you were crazy” (50). This text box lies inside of a larger panel that spans the
entire black and white page, which is filled with fine lines that create indiscriminate shadows and highlights. Such is the structure of this entire story: each page contains just one large panel rather than a series of small panels or floating illustrations. The pages are uniform and controlled, just as their text is carefully rehearsed. On this first page, neither the narrator nor the setting is clear. Rather than rooting the reader in a specific time, place, and conversation, the reader is left to imagine who is speaking and where they are. After commanding the reader to “listen,” the narrator speaks directly to “you,” implying an existing relationship between the narrator and reader. She speaks candidly about her insecurities as one would with a friend; however, once the narrator reveals that she is trying to sell a product, her words seem increasingly unnatural and rehearsed. The entire script rides the fine line between authentic vulnerability and a rehearsed targeting of the client and reader’s emotions.

When the narrator shares her testimony, it is equally unnerving as it is emotional. She raves about the effectiveness of the ClairFree System: “within a week of being on the System, my face was completely clear. I literally cried, I’m not joking” (54). Her testimony hovers between convincing and ridiculous, namely through the extreme adjectives: she literally cried because her face became completely clear in just one week. And as if she is aware of how dramatic her claims are, the narrator attempts to convince the reader of her honesty by adding that she is “not joking.” Again, she tries to forge a connection with the reader, her friend—no, her client—by softening her outlandish testimony with the emotional confession that she was brought to tears.

The most jarring tonal shift from an intimate conversation to a sales pitch occurs in figure 5 where the narrator begins using overtly commercial language. She explains, “For the first 10 Wingsellers you enroll, you will receive 40% commission on their sales…last year I grossed
$16,000 in commissions. Did that get your attention? $16,000” (60-61). Just a few pages ago, the narrator was confessing her emotional journey with her skin. Now suddenly throwing out statistics and figures, she shifts into business mode. She echoes her opening line where she told “you” to “listen”; this time she asks “did that get your attention?” (50, 61). By doing a double take, the narrator pauses to ensure that she still has the attention of both her clients and the reader. With the sudden use of both emotional and financial language, the narration checks off all of the warning signs of a pyramid scheme. Promoters of pyramid schemes will “make extravagant promises about your earning potential,” “emphasize recruiting new distributors,” and “play on your emotions” (Federal Trade Commission). Even with a trendy term like “Wingsellers,” ClairFree is clearly a pyramid scheme whose income relies on enlisting other women to participate (60). Tamaki frames a manipulative and problematic system with an enthusiastic narrator who highlights the glamorous promises of the scheme.

Figure 5: Tamaki, Jillian. *Boundless* (60-61)
The images on these pages undergo just as eerie of a tonal shift as the text does. Where previous pages were filled with close-up and full-body shots of women, figure 5 depicts two nearly identical girls sitting in a vast rural landscape. The girls’ faces are far away and hard to connect with—they are both physically and emotionally distant. Their smiles and stiffly sitting body language seem extremely posed and inorganic. Their skin is hardly visible, which is strikingly odd when discussing skincare. The pages of figure 5 are composed with the same fine lines and hatching as the opening page of “The ClairFree System” in figure 4. However, the lines that filled figure 4 simulated a close-up view of something, perhaps even the texture of skin. These same lines render the field in figure 5, but now feel static and more deliberately constructed. The lines are all drawn on the same diagonal axis, with no curves or bends as in figure 4. Tamaki returns to a familiar visual style, but reframes it through commercial rather than emotional language.

Just as the narrator’s voice moves away from the intimate conversation earlier—when she mentions how she “literally cried”—so do the visuals shift toward something more akin to a stock image. Purchasable and reusable, stock images are meant to represent generic moments that anyone can relate to rather than unique individuals. Figure 5 illustrates the banality of stock images both formally and conceptually. ClairFree displays female faces and bodies without a strong sense of individuality because their individual identities are not important. For example, the two girls in figure 5 share similar body types, long hair, and indiscriminate faces. Thus, their static and repetitive physical appearance indicates that they are representative of a collective group, not individuals.

Underlying the text and images of these stories is a tension between the genuine and the inauthentic. In “The ClairFree System,” the narrator initiates both visual and verbal intimacy
through her personal testimonies and the close-up images of women’s skin and faces (figure 4). At odds with this intimacy is her sales pitch. Throwing out quantitative figures and statistics negates the trust based on common experiences that she attempts to build with her clients and the reader. Tamaki places the reader in the position of one of the victims of a ClairFree sales pitch. Thus, the reader experiences the strange bonds that exist between the women of the ClairFree system as well as the confliction that the potential clients might feel. On one hand, participating in ClairFree allegedly grants you alluring physical, financial, and emotional benefits—but at what cost? Accepting the benefits of ClairFree also means entering a system that relies on the objectification and subjugation of women. Rather than teaching women to break away from expectations surrounding their bodies—namely, to have clear skin—ClairFree relies on and perpetuates self-inflicted female bodily dissatisfaction.

Figure 6: Tamaki, Jillian. *Boundless* (138)

Tamaki’s narrators are unreliable and unsettling, yet they simultaneously attempt to make the reader comfortable enough to trust them. Their accounts of events and the images that accompany those accounts are constantly at odds with one another. A prime example is in figure
6 from “Darla!” in which the narrator Frank Cicco is describing his failed “sitcom-porno” from the 90’s called *Darla*.

The scene depicts the aftermath of shooting a pornographic scene for the show; Darla’s co-star Louis gets up from the bed, attended by a crew member who helps clothe him with a robe. Darla sits up in the bed faced away from the viewer while another crew member picks up props off the ground. In a jarringly inaccurate narration, Frank states, “God, those shoots were fun. We could not stop laughing” (Tamaki 138). In the scene he is describing, no one is smiling—their facial expressions and body language are calm, hardly radiating the “fun” environment of laughter that Frank describes. In fact, Darla’s body language is concerning and uncomfortable given the pornographic context, which inherently paints her as a sexual object even though she covers herself with the sheets and turns away from the gaze of others. All throughout “Darla!” Frank’s narration is at odds with what is shown, and the reader is left in between the visual and verbal accounts. Either Frank is blissfully ignorant of reality, purposefully telling an inaccurate account, or his version of the story is truthful and the images are wrong. Rather than resolving the conflict between narrator and images, Tamaki builds tension through her narrators in order to reveal the challenges women face surrounding voice, positionality, and identity.

Just as Tamaki creates tension between Frank’s earnest descriptions and the opposing illustrations, the television show *Darla!* also relies on a tension between the emotional (romance and humor) and the physical (pornography). As a witness to both Frank’s account and stills from *Darla!* the reader is once again placed in the middle of conflicting narratives. Tamaki draws the moments from Frank’s memory without the boundaries of panels, such as figure 5. These scenes float in the middle of the pages, dissolving around the edges just as details might fade away in

3 I use Darla! in italics to refer to the television show and use quotations to refer to the short story.
Frank’s memory. Conversely, stills from *Darla!* are always contained in neat square panels, complete with subtitles for “[theme music]” and sound effects from the audience (139). These stills from the show hold more narrative credibility than Frank’s narration: the stills are preserved in the film of the show, indisputable and undoctored. Between the multiple sources of information—the show footage, Tamaki’s images, and Frank’s narration—the reader is left to discern which source should take priority. By deliberately telling the story of *Darla!* through multiple visual and verbal perspectives, Tamaki urges the reader to question the narratives they encounter surrounding female bodies—particularly narratives from men.

Tamaki does not criticize the premise of *Darla!* itself, but rather points to the misogyny embedded in its execution. *Darla!,* according to Frank, sounds innocent enough in theory: he insists that it was intended to “[blend] what everyone loves about situation comedy—a beloved cast, comforting plots, and, of course, laughter—with sex” (137). He acts as if sex was an afterthought to the show—that people watched for the rich writing and character development rather than the sex. Yet for all of the emphasis that Frank places on the non-sex related strengths of *Darla!,* the scenes included from the show tell a different story. All of the scenes of *Darla!* shown emphasize Darla’s body or her relationships with men. On pages 139-141, a succession of panels depicts the opening sequence of *Darla!* (139). After three panels showing shots of New York City, the following six panels pan up Darla’s legs, her short dress flowing in the wind, until the title text appears beneath her face looking wistfully into the distance (140-141). The title sequence offers a tame example of the true focus of the show: Darla’s body. Why not show all of the main characters in the opening sequence, or funny moments from the show that highlight the “beloved cast” and “laughter” that Frank lauded? Instead, *Darla!* puts the female body on display while distracting from this fact by sprinkling in a joke and laugh track here and there.
Just as Tamaki aligns the reader with the clients in “The ClairFree System,” she puts readers of “Darla!” in the position of audience members of the show. When stills from Darla! accompany Frank’s narration, they include sounds and reactions from the audience that instruct the reader how to react to events. Tamaki begins “Darla!” with a sequence from the show (figure 7). Darla makes a joke to herself after a failed baking attempt in the first panel. She then opens the door to find her boyfriend sopping wet in a clown costume while cues of audience laughter, “ha ha ha,” float in the air around them. Darla and Louis passionately embrace, backed by the “aww!” of the audience, then by “ooooooohhh…” as Louis begins to untie her clothing. In the span of four panels, the tone of the scene shifts from humorous to romantic and sexual. With an abrupt change of pace from humor to erotica, the scene offers no explanation as to why Louis is in a wet clown outfit. Rather, the two humorous panels seem like a flimsy lead-up to the sex scene: the humor is the afterthought, while sex is the main attraction.

Figure 7: Tamaki, Jillian. Boundless (135)
By constructing subject position based on roles within these stories of clients and audience members, Tamaki complicates how the reader understands these events. With a greater distance between the reader and narrator, perhaps the problematic undertones of *Darla!* and ClairFree might be more overt. Instead, when Frank Cicco and the unnamed narrator of ClairFree address the reader candidly and vulnerably, they seek to gain the reader’s trust and tell their stories from a flattering point of view. Without the audience reactions in figure 7, the reader would be free to interpret this sequence on their own. Perhaps you might even view Louis as sexually aggressive and the whole scene uncomfortable. The scenes from real life without sound effects, such as figure 6, are far more unsettling, especially next to Frank’s narration. Tamaki alternates between narrative tones with what critic Marta Bausells dubs a “simultaneously deadpan and sensitive voice” (Bausells). The narrators of “Darla!” and “The ClairFree System” propose almost absurd narratives in a serious, “deadpan” voice. However, Tamaki’s visual framing of these narratives is also highly sensitive to the misogynistic implications of commercial language.

I do not believe that Tamaki necessarily critiques the premise of a sitcom-porno or the use of skincare products. Rather, her objection lies in their execution and treatment of female bodies on a systematic scale. Furthermore, the problematic executions are not delivered by just one gender: both men *and* women can participate in harmful systems that target and weaponize female bodies. Tamaki masks this critique beneath attractive and earnest narration. For example, the final page of “Darla!” shows Frank at a convention discussing his show with two male fans. He muses, “I don’t like what some of them say about ‘Darla.’ Maybe it’s their attitude. A little too snide, too winky-winky” (147). *Darla!* was not a successful show; cancelled after “twelve solid episodes,” most of their fans watched it on the internet years later (143, 145). While Frank
is excited to talk about the cast and crew, he picks up that fans seem more interested in the show because of its sexual content, giving them a “winky-winky” attitude. If *Darla!* was truly the piece of creative genius that Frank seems to consider it, then surely it would have been more popular as they appealed to a “general audience” (141). Instead, the show’s small cult following is probably only interested in the pornography.

Tamaki tells the stories of *Darla!* and ClairFree through the least reliable narrators possible. Even with a television show and short story titled after her own name, Darla Nakamura never has the chance to tell her story. Frank calls her a “sweet girl” but is “not sure where she ended up” after the show (144). This is Frank’s story, not Darla’s. Even the title of the story “Darla!” refers not to Darla Nakamura, nor the character of Darla, but to Frank’s television show *Darla!* because of the exclamation point. Frank is not the most accurate source of information in this story and while is his account is seriously flawed and ignorant of the issues in his project, I do not believe he is intentionally misleading others. However, even if his intentions were somewhat innocent, his ignorance is not an excuse for his mistakes and his identity as a man invariably shapes how he views sex in *Darla!*.

By allowing Frank to tell Darla’s story, Tamaki imitates the prioritization of male voices over female ones that is both historic and contemporary. However, while Frank has dominion over the text of “Darla!” he cannot control the images that Tamaki interjects from the show or real-life events. Thus, although Frank dominates the verbal narrative, Tamaki leaves just enough cracks for alternative visual narratives to show through.

The narrator of “The ClairFree System” is just as unreliable as Frank, and while she delivers her own testimony, it is entirely possible that she did not write it herself. Because she is delivering a rehearsed speech rather than an impromptu skincare recommendation, she repeats key words and phrases that were likely written by an advertising agency. Phrases such as
“cleanser, toner, moisturizer,” “double loading,” “rubbing nail polish remover on your face,” and “what do you want?” are repeated throughout the text (56-7, 64-7). Even her actions are scripted: for example, return to figure 1, the very last page of “The ClairFree System.”

Figure 8: Tamaki, Jillian. *Boundless* (59)  Figure 1: Tamaki, Jillian. *Boundless* (68)

The narrator reaches for her client’s hand to “show her something” (68). While this may seem like an intimate action, it is completely scripted. Earlier in the story, another image of a pair of hands touching a third hand is accompanied by the text “(at this point in the presentation, I like to take the ladies’ hands, apply a pump of the moisturizer, and gently massage it in.)” (59).

Unlike the rest of the narration, this text is in parentheses. These words are not intended for the clients of ClairFree to hear; rather, they are almost like stage cues for future Wingsellers making a sales pitch. The image in figure 8 is drawn with simple contour lines, while the white hands in figure 1 are more concrete with a physicality conveyed through their faded edges. The hands in figure 1 might be purely conceptual: the bare bones of the instructions the narrator gives in
parenthesis. Figure 1 manifests those instructions and brings them to life with the more physical hands and spoken words. The narrator also implies that this action is not a unique occurrence, but is performed with multiple “ladies’ hands. By instructing the Wingsellers to “gently massage” the moisturizer in, the narrator acknowledges the tender connection between seller and client that can be fostered through this movement. By scripting even the physical actions involved in a ClairFree pitch, the Wingsellers negate any moves that are spontaneous or genuine.

Chapter Two: Systems

![Figure 9: Tamaki, Jillian. Boundless (56)](image)

On the micro level, the ClairFree System functions as a group of skincare products. From these skincare products grows a system of women who bond over sharing their testimonies and
seek to recruit other women. On the macro level exists systems of sex, gender, and power in society as a whole. These large-scale systems enforce the pressures and beauty standards that the ClairFree System supposedly amends. All three levels of these systems are at work in figure 9. Five women in dresses and skirts walk in a circle with their heads bowed. In another iteration of figures 1 and 8, the women join hands to create a physical connection. Their feet and skirts are in movement, suggesting that they are in the middle of some kind of dance or ritual. The text reads: “a cleanser, a toner, a moisturizer. These three things—cleanser, toner, moisturizer—are the backbone of the ClairFree System. That’s the key word here: system” (56). A system is both “an organized or connected group of things” and “a set of persons working together as parts of an interconnecting network” (“system” 1a, 3b). The group of skincare products that make up ClairFree rely on one another, complement each other, and work together as part of a whole—just like the women do.
As the narrator of ClairFree moves back and forth between languages of vulnerability and commercialization, she appeals to female experiences by explaining the role of motherhood in her choice to enter ClairFree. She raves, “the income from this program has been a godsend for me and my daughter” (63). Below this text box is an infant in a crib sleeping on its side, resting on crinkled sheets and a pillow. This is not the only image related to motherhood; one page depicts a woman lying on her side on sheets, her arms extended over her head as she curls around her breastfeeding child (54-55). In another image, an older woman holds a young boy in her lap; she looks down at his face while he rests his head on her shoulder (65). When viewing these tender moments between mothers and children, it is almost easy to forget what the narrator is really talking about: skincare. Bringing her daughter into the picture suggests that participating in the ClairFree System is a selfless and motherly duty that allows her to provide for her child financially and emotionally. ClairFree advertising thrives on the illusion of a female community that promotes autonomy. However, while no men are explicitly illustrated, their presence is still looming beneath ClairFree. When these women identify themselves by their roles as mothers and wives, they implicitly define themselves by their relationship to men. Even in an industry as seemingly simple and female-oriented as skincare, the effects of deep-rooted misogyny linger.

The language of “The ClairFree System” is so casually seductive, its visuals so calm and alluring, that its outlandish claims are almost normalized. The narrator even goes so far as to argue that what ClairFree ultimately brings women is “time and money” (63). The hyperbolic claims of ClairFree implore us to notice how the attractiveness of women is commodified, inflated, and connected literally to time and money. What really twists the knife, however, is that even if this spiel was written in a conference room by old male marketing agents, it is performed
by a woman, to other women. The commodification of female beauty is so deeply ingrained in our economy, our interactions, and our perceptions of happiness that it is no longer weaponized solely by men. Physical beauty is equated with time, money, and ultimately happiness. Through ClairFree, women actively perpetuate these beliefs and create a system to recruit others to join them—not out of malevolence, but ironically with the appearance of compassion and empathy.

Figure 11: Tamaki, Jillian. *Boundless* (52-53)

Time and money are just two of the alluring outcomes that ClairFree offers. When explaining what led her to ClairFree the narrator confides, “What was I really looking for? Hope. Faith. Magic. Something that would make me feel normal. Make me feel worthy of love” (52-53). Both verbally and visually, ClairFree begins to take on mystical or almost religious properties. The narrator’s hyper-fixation on her skin leads her to believe that without clear skin, she is neither “normal” nor “worthy of love.” Once again, she defines her identity through her relationship to
other people, not herself. If she is not “normal” and fitting in with other people who deem her “worthy of love,” then she is not satisfied with herself. The ClairFree System becomes her very reason for living and the source of her identity. The accompanying imagery on these pages visually places ClairFree onto a divine pedestal. In a dark space, two figures face each other and between them lies a blank white silhouette of a torso on a block. The space they are in is unrecognizable and spatially confusing, with small columns in the distance and an incline on which the second figure stands. The second figure is dressed in a white robe with pure white skin and one arm raised, evoking traditional imagery of angels or Jesus Christ. Reading this page for its religious imagery, the benefits of ClairFree take on the role of the white figure. The first figure, representing the women, gazes upon the other and steps towards it. Between them sits a pure mirror image of the first figure, an image of what they could be if they continue on the path towards the figure of hope: pure, unblemished, and perfect.

ClairFree’s power dynamics and empty promises mirror the function of commercial and religious cults. Such cults seek wealth and status using “deceptive sales techniques, guilt and shame, peer pressure, financial control, magical thinking, or guided imagery” (“Cults in America”). The bond that ClairFree seeks to foster between women actually allows for “peer pressure” to take place. Furthermore, while ClairFree promises women “financial control” by allowing them to make their own income, ClairFree ends up with the control over these women’s lives and income as the women become completely reliant on the System for money and self-esteem. The “magical” promises of the ClairFree System—and similar real-life beauty campaigns—become warped and questionable when they function by selling products and targeting female insecurities. Rather than building each other up and breaking away from the
expectations surrounding female bodies, these women succumb to those expectations by reinforcing how important their appearances are to their happiness.

ClairFree is both an example and a product of “consumer feminism,” which “[ties] notions of women’s empowerment to the use of products for self-improvement” (Arend 64). Far from existing only as theory, consumer feminism is a very real phenomenon in advertising identified by Patricia Arend in the textbook *Gender and Pop Culture: A Text-Reader*. While the selling point of ClairFree is that it guides its members towards loving their skin, promoting “self-improvement” implies that women must change themselves in order to be happy. Offering to “improve” women’s skin and physical appearance completely goes against the self-contained and self-motivated strength that sources true “empowerment.” By connecting ClairFree to both physical “improvement” and emotional “empowerment,” Tamaki reveals that the ClairFree System is much more than a skincare product. When women participate in a system that relies on controlling female bodies, they inflate beauty with happiness and perpetuate harmful mindsets and practices.

While “The ClairFree System” equates beauty and skincare with female empowerment, “Darla!” hauntingly suggests that the female body itself can be a product used for “empowerment.” Frank’s description of *Darla!* emphasizes the show’s emotional strengths and its story about an independent “young Midwestern single” woman in New York City (Tamaki 143). However, he is unable to tell what could have been a conceptually empowering story without focusing on Darla’s body. Rather than mentioning Darla’s career, friendships, or hobbies, Frank recalls only her romantic and sexual encounters. Therefore, since consumer feminism argues that consuming a product (in this case sexualized female bodies) leads to “self-improvement,” then the display of Darla’s body is the only way for her to “improve” herself. If
Darla reveals her body and sexuality on screen for audience consumption, then she will “improve” herself and her career. One page reveals Darla Nakamura rehearsing her lines for Frank, saying “I’m not going home, Louis. When I came here I had $100 in my pocket and a head full of stupid dreams. And now? Now I don’t even have those. But I have something better. I have you. I love you” (142). Not only does Darla deem her own personal goals “stupid,” but she throws them away for Louis. By Darla’s own standards, she undergoes self-improvement by finding a sexual relationship that is “better” than her personal dreams. At its worst, Darla! suggests that women are empowered when they offer their bodies as a product in exchange for a “better” and more improved life—one that includes a heterosexual relationship.

As contemporary systems become increasingly complex and opaque in their intentions, postmodern theory questions how to interpret and understand those experiences. Literary scholar Sianne Ngai identifies three “aesthetic categories” that appear throughout postmodern art, literature, and media: the zany, the cute, and the interesting. According to Ngai, these are the categories “best suited for grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism” (Ngai 1). The universe that Tamaki crafts in Boundless shares the same values of “late capitalism,” shedding light on systems such as ClairFree and Darla! that commodify female bodies and demand their performance for others. Ngai’s aesthetics identify subtle emotions that are particularly prevalent to contemporary and postmodern experiences. As societies change and develop, so do the forms of expression that people use to understand human experiences. Pop art, for example, arose at the hands of artists like Andy Warhol in the wake of mass production in the 1950’s when no preexisting art form could adequately address the rapidly changing culture. Ngai’s aesthetic categories and Tamaki’s stories attempt to provide new lenses through which
postmodern culture can be understood. In Tamaki’s stories, zany performances and aesthetics of powerlessness work with dynamics of consumer feminism to propose a version of contemporary society that is strange and uncomfortable, but also eerily within reach. However, the larger picture here is that the comics form of *Boundless* serves many of the same functions as aesthetic categories do: to provide a lens through which an increasingly multisensory society can be understood.

When considering how Tamaki builds the tension that her readers must navigate, Ngai’s category of cuteness illuminates how her visual techniques contribute to an ambiguous affect. “Darla!” uses the aesthetic of cuteness to present questionable pornography as attractive yet unthreatening. Ngai posits that “cuteness is an aestheticization of powerlessness” (64). While Ngai cites examples such as stuffed animals and Hello Kitty to explain cuteness, “Darla!” demonstrates how cuteness can function in comics. The pastel pink color palette evokes a soft, feminine atmosphere, especially in contrast with the harsh monochromatic naturalism of “The ClairFree System.” While the figures’ proportions are fairly naturalistic, the rounded bends of their fingers and elbows (see figure 12) add a soft, plush feeling to the figures. What connects
these cute visual traits to powerlessness, however, is the fact that Darla is repeatedly shown in sexually submissive positions. On the very first page, Darla’s boyfriend grabs her and reaches to untie her clothing; later he is shown on top of her in bed (figure 13) and then with his legs on top of her in a confusing position (137). In figure 12, an unknown woman touches Darla’s thigh and shoulder as Darla bends over, her eyes cut off from the top of the panel. Her head is turned back towards the woman with a smile, suggesting that she enjoys this contact and, by extension, her submission in general. In fact, with one exception, Darla’s face is not visible in any of the sexual scenes, removing her identity from these interactions and focusing the viewer on her body. She is the recipient of touch, not the one giving it. Cuteness—at least in “Darla!” but surely in other media as well—is coded as feminine. Even when drawn in rosy pink hues, the few male figures in this story are not in positions of submission as Darla is. Cuteness makes politics of powerlessness more digestible, perhaps even seemingly empowering, when Darla! is actually anything but.

Dynamics of power and gaze are also at work in the aesthetic of the zany, which is primarily concerned with performance. Citing zany characters from television comedies such as I Love Lucy, Ngai argues that zaniness is “an aesthetic about performing as not just artful play but affective labor” (Ngai 7, 1). The characters in “Darla!” and “The ClairFree System” are motivated by the same uneasy balance between performance, play, and labor—specifically “affective labor” that seeks to have an emotional impact on others. As an actress for both television and pornography, Darla Nakamura has the difficult task of performing and laboring on multiple levels. Affectively, she plays a version of herself on television and must fulfill emotional and playful scenes. But she must also be ready to perform with her body in sex scenes, which is a form of physical labor. Similarly, the women involved in the ClairFree pyramid
scheme are carrying out a job to make money, but their labor becomes strangely emotional as they share their personal lives to connect with their clients. Tamaki’s framing of these stories tempts you to overlook the work that these women are performing. The performance of female bodies has become so commonplace in contemporary life that it is easy to overlook unless the underlying tension between performance and authenticity snaps. When Tamaki’s narrators attempt to create a happy façade to disguise their mistreatment and exploitation of female bodies, they inadvertently fuel this tension by offering information that conflicts with other accounts. Frank suggests that Darla loved her work and “could not stop laughing” on set, and the women of ClairFree seem to gain powerful and enjoyable friendships with other women (138). However, beneath the laughter and camaraderie that the narrators present, their systems push women to work and perform in strange and damaging ways against other women.

Through Darla’s performance, Tamaki also sheds light on the problematic stereotypes and expectations in the pornography industry. Darla’s role requires her to be a sweet, emotional girl engaged in romance as well as a submissive sexual object. In a strangely contradictory comment, Frank says “it was really sexy stuff. Though, all in all, pretty tame. Darla, both the character and the real girl, was wholesome” (141). Darla! relies on a woman who is simultaneously “sexy” and “wholesome,” whose performance appears to be play. She is innocent yet sexual, working and performing but enjoying it. The women of ClairFree are also subject to the expectation for purity, though in the more physical manifestation of clear unblemished skin. And yet another stereotype that Darla must fulfill is not addressed by Frank but is referenced in her last name: Nakamura, one of the most common Japanese surnames (Meiji Yasuda). While Frank never addresses Darla’s race, the fact that Tamaki mentions the detail of her last name subtly prompts you to consider the fetishization of Asian women and how that might shape or affect Darla’s
career. Frank is blissfully ignorant of the many problematic stereotypes that he perpetuated in his show.

The narrative differences between “Darla!” and “The ClairFree System” allow them to address different aspects of female performance in media. The female narrator of “The ClairFree System” performs the actions of friendship, revealing how a woman speaking to other women fosters a sense of trust and solidarity that can be abused in the context of advertising. Conversely, the male narrator of “Darla!” carries less reliability when speaking on female experiences, but shapes how Darla Nakamura performs in his show and uses her voice to deliver his sexual agenda. I am not suggesting that a man should never attempt to create a show about a woman, but Frank’s project is concerning because of the conflict between his account and the accompanying images. By using conflicting visual languages within and between stories, Tamaki echoes the tension between the individual and the group, the unique and the stereotypical, the performative and authentic. Reduced to and reinforcing stereotypical female qualities, ClairFree women struggle with motherhood, are obsessed with their appearance, and are driven by emotion. Darla, too, must fall into stereotypes of being simultaneously “sexy” and “wholesome,” all while Frank tells her story. Tragically, both the ClairFree women and Darla are defined by their relationships to men—as mothers, wives, girlfriends, sexual partners.

Zany performance is not a positive experience when its workers are part of corrupt systems. Tamaki and Ngai both suggest that performance is nearly unescapable in a society that blurs the boundaries between labor and play. In the case of Darla Nakamura and the women involved in ClairFree, their job is to lure others in and grow investment in their systems. However, the

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4 The fact that Tamaki herself is a Japanese-Canadian woman makes this detail even more poignant.
systems of ClairFree and *Darla!* rely on an effortless and playful display—they strive to appear as natural and authentic experiences, rather than scripted performances. Thus, when the performances’ true monetary and sexual motivations inevitably show through the cracks, they become strange as the viewer questions their authenticity.

While the women of ClairFree want to draw in more women to their system, the underlying tensions urge the viewer to be wary of getting close to these women. As Ngai points out, “there is something strained, desperate, and precarious about the zany that immediately activates the spectator’s desire for distance” (Ngai 8). If Tamaki had illustrated candid moments in warm colors rather than showing rehearsed monochromatic interactions, perhaps the relationships in “The ClairFree System” would not have seemed so “strained, desperate, and precarious.” Ngai continues, “zaniness ultimately remains unsettling, since it dramatizes…the easiness with which these positions of safety and precariousness can be reversed” (Ngai 11). Tamaki’s stories, too, ride this line of “safety and precariousness.” Is *Darla!* empowering or degrading female bodies? Is ClairFree a safe space for women to build independence and confidence, or is it a ruthless manipulation of female insecurities? I believe neither story commits fully to one side of these spectrums, but rather hovers in the middle, luring readers in one moment and pushing them away the next.

**Chapter Three: Affective Ambiguity**

The verbal and visual elements of Tamaki’s comics are simultaneously a source of synergy and tension. This tension is what sets comics apart from other media with text and images. For example, one expects the illustrations in a children’s book to complement and enhance the text. However, comics not only allows for but encourages a more complex relationship between
images and text. I turn to figure 14 as an example of narrators, systems, and affect working simultaneously:

Figure 14: Tamaki, Jillian. *Boundless* (54-55)

Based on this text from these pages, one might expect to see close ups of a woman’s skin, her face, looking in a mirror, even talking to a friend. This image doesn’t illustrate or illuminate the text—it complicates it. It’s like we’re viewing an advertisement. The narrator is reading her script and the client or reader might see this image and start to associate her raw emotional confession with a female experience like motherhood. By pairing these two pieces of information together, Tamaki implicitly urges you to trust the speaker more because she’s showing and telling you something personal. With no clear logical connections between image and text available, witnessing this pairing might lead you to wonder how ClairFree affects this woman’s
relationship with her family. Since she says that after ClairFree “it was like seeing the real me for the first time,” perhaps using ClairFree gave the narrator a better sense of self, which allowed her to be a better mother. So maybe ClairFree can give you a stronger sense of identity and love for yourself and you can be a better mother—or a better woman. The narrator never makes these claims explicitly, but you might start to look for those connections because Tamaki does not tell you what you are supposed to think or feel. So which source should take priority? Should the reader trust the text or the image? Is it the narrator who is unreliable, or the author herself?

Tamaki poses all of these questions and demands affective uncertainty and discomfort to grow in the spaces between clear-cut explanations.

The affective ambiguity in Tamaki’s texts leaves the reader wondering how to feel about the larger systems her stories portray. When you encounter pyramid schemes such as ClairFree or problematic portrayals of female sexuality like Darla! in real life, no one can instruct you how to feel about those institutions. In fact, pyramid schemes and pornography thrive and rely on charming distractions and a glamorous aesthetic to hide their sinister intentions. Whether preying on female insecurities, sexual urges, or capitalist tendencies, countless systems exist in society that harbor a beguiling disparity between their outward appearance and true motivations.

When considering how systems of entertainment and advertisement function in postmodern society, Tamaki’s use of form becomes particularly relevant when considering that comics itself is a system. The “organized or connected group of things” “working together” as an “interconnecting network” in comics include all of its formal and conceptual elements (“system” 1a, 3b). For example panels, text, visual aesthetic, level of naturalism, proportions, composition, and line quality work in conjunction with narrator, subject position, pacing, and aesthetic references. However, the politics and history of comics also shapes its function as a system,
especially when authors like Tamaki confront the male-dominated form with feminist issues. By using a form that requires you to enter a different visual and verbal space, Tamaki mirrors the systems she is depicting as she forces readers to both participate in and judge her comics.

The reason that Ngai’s categories are so well suited for understanding postmodern systems is the same explanation for the uncanny impact of *Boundless*: both offer ambiguous affect. Neither Ngai’s categories nor Tamaki’s stories offer clear-cut judgements on their subjects. At the core of the zany, cute, and interesting lies a “contradictory mixture of feelings” that are “held in an indefinite tension” and resist an “emphatic affective resolution” (Ngai 19). So, too, is the reader of *Boundless* “held in an indefinite tension” as they try to resolve the dissonance between text and image, between tone and message. “The ClairFree System,” for example, sparks a “contradictory mixture of feelings” ranging from empathy as the women share their testimonies, solidarity with the female experiences of motherhood and community, and an underlying discomfort from the unnervingly ominous images and cult-like undertones. The resulting experience is one of confusion and confliction. Should we feel sorry for the women trapped in this system or happy for their success? Should we feel angry that they are buying into a system that preys on fellow women’s insecurities for profit? If not, who is truly to blame? Tamaki mirrors the experience of witnessing such a system in real life: there are no clear answers, and she encourages the reader to think critically about what they witness and what forces are at work underneath the surface.

**Conclusion**

Tamaki’s stories live up to the title of *Boundless*, constantly pushing and pulling against the boundaries of comics and narratives. Rather than creating purely hyperbolic stories or humorous parodies of problematic systems, Tamaki lures in her readers to a world familiar enough to
appear comfortable, but surprises the reader with moments of absurdity, irony, and strangeness. Thus, the interpretations she offers to her readers are also boundless. There is no singular correct response to these stories, but as one rereads them, new details and interpretations might come through. For example, Tamaki herself offers a positive reading of “Darla!” when she says that it is in part “about intention versus interpretation. You find, as a creator, you make [something] with one intention but it ends up being something else! And that’s wonderful” (Bausells). Her more lighthearted reading of “Darla!” is valid, but so are readings critical of the show’s problems. Tamaki proves why constant re-evaluation of a seemingly flourishing and progressive society is crucial. Ngai echoes the similar goal of considering new aesthetic categories when she argues that “they are compelling reminders of the general fact of social difference and conflict underlying the entire system of aesthetic judgement” (Ngai 11). Ngai reserves the impact of her categories to “the system of aesthetic judgement,” but I believe Tamaki’s investigation of zany performance and powerless cuteness speaks to systems at large. Countless organizations, communities, and practices in contemporary society rely on unsettling performance and deceptive cuteness.

Finally, I want to address how longstanding discussions around feminist theory intersect with the fairly recent emergence of graphic novels into the literary canon. In Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture, Rita Felski devotes a chapter to discuss “Why Feminism Doesn’t Need an Aesthetic.” She argues that “it is impossible to define in general terms what a feminist aesthetic might be, that feminist approaches to art must be plural, not singular” (Felski 190). Felski emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the tensions between the fields of art and politics as well as the non-homogenous audiences of accessible art and mass-media. Graphic novels gained momentum in the wake of the serialization and affordability of comics in the
1990s, and their accessibility grew even more when women became less excluded from comic book stores (Danziger-Russel 131). All this is to say that comics and graphic novels are an inherently accessible form, less intimidating than Shakespeare or Van Gogh, but still able to communicate sophisticated social and political messages. *Boundless* does not seek to cater to a “feminist aesthetic,” but rather employs and subverts traditional feminine aesthetics and expectations in her exploration of boundaries.

By telling these stories through comics, Tamaki holds a mirror up to the ugly systems in society, but in a form that is warped and easier to digest than a polemic depiction. Some forms of literature—essays, memoirs, even poetry—can appear opaque and inaccessible to those not in tune with the literary world or who do not hold the “proper” training or experience. Comics, however, is a form that has been accessible to everyone since its birth. Designed to be short and captivating, comics appeal to a range of audiences young and old, comfortable with both “high” and “low” art. Regardless of where you come from, Tamaki places her readers in specific positions—client, audience member, interlocutor—to illustrate one situation through many perspectives. She carries the tradition of comics into *Boundless* and, in a way, updates it for a new age. Tamaki testified to the pervasiveness of feminist issues in both the artistic canon and contemporary media when she said that “women’s bodies are literally one of the most political things on the face of the earth. How you choose to depict them is very loaded” (CBC). Faced with the challenge of addressing female bodies, sexuality, and identity in the contexts of both the literary and art historical canons, Tamaki finds a worthy outlet in comics.
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