Reading and Restricting Gender Queer: Graphic Memoir, Queer Self-Representation, and Book Challenges in the United States

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Abstract

This preprint examines Maia Kobabe's Gender Queer: A Memoir (2019) at the intersection of graphic life writing, queer self-representation, and institutional book challenges in the United States. Rather than treating the controversy surrounding the memoir as a simple opposition between censorship and free expression, the paper analyzes how the work's visual form, autobiographical claims, representations of embodiment, and intended readership become entangled with institutional decisions about age, access, and educational suitability. Drawing on scholarship on graphic memoir and life narrative, the analysis first considers how Kobabe uses the interaction of image and text to represent gender dysphoria, asexuality, self-naming, and the instability of identity categories. It then distinguishes among book challenges, restrictions, and removals and places Gender Queer within the documented rise in challenges to LGBTQIA+ materials in U.S. schools and libraries after 2021. The paper also examines the competing institutional arguments that structure these disputes: challengers commonly emphasize sexual imagery and age appropriateness, while librarians, authors, and free-expression organizations emphasize context, collection policy, and access to diverse life narratives. A final section considers the narrow constitutional framework provided by Board of Education v. Pico (1982). The paper argues that Gender Queer's contested status is inseparable from its formal strategy: the same graphic embodiment that makes the memoir legible as a record of queer self-formation also makes individual panels unusually portable as objects of institutional controversy. Understanding the debate therefore requires attention to both the memoir as a complete aesthetic work and the procedures through which public institutions classify, restrict, or retain it.

Keywords: Maia Kobabe; Gender Queer; graphic memoir; life writing; queer self-representation; book challenges; censorship; school libraries; intellectual freedom; LGBTQIA+ literature

1. Introduction: A Memoir Becomes an Institutional Dispute

Maia Kobabe's Gender Queer: A Memoir (2019) is a work of autobiographical comics about the difficulty of finding language for gender, sexuality, embodiment, and intimacy. It is also one of the most frequently challenged books in the United States in the early 2020s. The conjunction matters. The public controversy did not attach itself to an abstract treatise on gender; it attached itself to a graphic memoir whose argument about identity is made through a body drawn on the page. Kobabe's use of sequential images allows private experiences - discomfort with gendered expectations, uncertainty about sexual attraction, encounters with medical care, and experiments with pronouns and self-description - to become visible in a form that can be read quickly and excerpted easily. The memoir's formal accessibility is therefore also part of the controversy surrounding it.

This paper studies Gender Queer as both a literary text and an institutional object. Its first task is interpretive: to ask how the memoir uses the grammar of comics to represent a self that is

not stable in advance but becomes legible through repeated acts of naming, looking, remembering, and revising. Its second task is institutional: to ask how that mode of self-representation changes when the book enters school and public-library systems, where questions of collection development, age appropriateness, parental authority, student access, and constitutional limits become relevant. These are related questions, but they should not be collapsed. A literary analysis can explain what the images and narrative form do; it cannot by itself decide every policy question about where a particular edition should be shelved or how a school should structure access.

The distinction is especially important because the vocabulary of public debate is often imprecise. A title can be challenged without being removed, restricted to a particular age group without disappearing from a collection, or removed entirely after a reconsideration process. The American Library Association (ALA) defines a challenge as an attempt to remove or restrict access to material based on an objection, while it defines a ban as removal of the material (American Library Association, "About Banned & Challenged Books"). These terms describe institutional actions, not simply disagreement with a book. For that reason, this paper uses 'challenge,' 'restriction,' and 'removal' whenever the available evidence allows the distinction to be made, reserving 'ban' for documented removal or for datasets that define the term explicitly.

My argument is that the controversy surrounding Gender Queer is inseparable from the memoir's form. Kobabe's visual narration does not merely illustrate an already complete verbal story. The drawings make the body an archive of discomfort, pleasure, uncertainty, and recognition. That formal strategy gives the memoir much of its autobiographical force, but it also produces panels that can be detached from the surrounding narrative and circulated as evidence in disputes about sexual content. The same work can therefore be read in two very different institutional modes: as a sustained life narrative in which images acquire meaning cumulatively, and as a set of isolated images evaluated for age appropriateness. The tension between those modes helps explain why Gender Queer has become such a persistent object of challenge.

The analysis proceeds in seven stages. After clarifying the terminology and data used to discuss book challenges, the paper turns to graphic memoir as a form of life narrative, then to Kobabe's treatment of self-naming, embodiment, and visual testimony. A fourth section examines why visual explicitness becomes central in institutional disputes. The paper then places Gender Queer within national challenge data, before considering competing arguments about selection, access, and age. A final legal section discusses Board of Education v. Pico (1982), a fractured Supreme Court decision that remains important but limited in its guidance on school-library removals. The conclusion returns to the problem of context: how a memoir that insists on the slow construction of identity becomes controversial through the rapid circulation of decontextualized images.

2. Terminology, Evidence, and the Scale of the Controversy

Any analysis of contemporary book disputes requires care with statistics. Different organizations count different things. The ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom collects reports from libraries, schools, media coverage, and individuals; it describes its figures as a snapshot because not every challenge is reported. PEN America tracks public-school book bans using a separate methodology focused on instances in which access to a title is removed or restricted in school settings. The resulting numbers are not directly interchangeable. They are best treated as evidence of scale and pattern within each organization's definitions rather than as a single unified census.

Within the ALA's data, Gender Queer became a recurring target. The ALA listed it as the most challenged book of 2021, citing objections to LGBTQIA+ content and images described by challengers as sexually explicit. It again ranked first on the ALA's 2022 list, and the ALA's 2023 list, published in 2024, also placed it first (American Library Association, "National Library Week" 2022; "National Library Week" 2023; "ALA Kicks Off"). The recurrence is analytically more important than any single ranking. It shows that the controversy was not confined to one district or one news cycle; the same memoir repeatedly entered local reconsideration processes across multiple years.

PEN America's school-ban data offers a different measure. Its 2022-23 report recorded Gender Queer as banned in 26 districts during that school year and noted that Kobabe was among the authors whose single title was repeatedly removed (PEN America, The Mounting Pressure to Censor). A later PEN report counted 41 instances in 2021-22 and 26 in 2022-23, for 67 bans across those two school years under PEN's methodology (PEN America, Spineless Shelves). By the 2023-24 school year, PEN documented a broader surge in school-book removals and restrictions nationwide, recording more than 10,000 ban instances across more than 4,000 unique titles; the organization continued to report disproportionate targeting of books involving race, sexuality, and gender identity (PEN America, Beyond the Shelves). These figures describe a broader institutional environment in which Gender Queer became emblematic, but they should not be used to imply that every challenge had the same initiator, rationale, procedure, or outcome.

The distinction between a challenge and a ban is also conceptually important for literary scholarship. Treating every complaint as a successful act of censorship can exaggerate institutional outcomes; treating every removal as a neutral collection decision can erase the role of political pressure. A more precise approach asks what action occurred, who had authority to take it, what written policy governed the action, what reasons were offered, and whether the

work was considered as a whole. That procedural focus will matter later when the paper turns to legal and educational questions.

3. Graphic Memoir and the Problem of Autobiographical Legibility

Gender Queer belongs to a tradition in which comics and life writing alter one another. Hillary Chute's work on graphic autobiography emphasizes that the form does not simply add pictures to memoir; it makes the page a site where memory, embodiment, sequence, and visual evidence interact (Chute). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson similarly treat contemporary life narrative as a field that extends well beyond conventional prose autobiography into hybrid and multimedia forms (Smith and Watson). These frameworks are useful for Kobabe because the memoir's central problem is not merely what happened in eir life. It is how an autobiographical subject comes to recognize and narrate experiences for which available categories initially feel inadequate.

The graphic page gives that problem a material form. A prose sentence can report that a younger self felt alienated from gendered expectations. A comic can place the narrated self and the narrating self into visual relation: the adult creator draws the earlier body, selects a posture, determines what is visible, and surrounds the image with words that may clarify, complicate, or retrospectively reinterpret the experience. The result is not transparent access to a past self. It is an act of reconstruction. The page makes visible the gap between the person who experienced an event and the person who now knows how to name it.

That gap is central to queer life writing. Categories such as nonbinary and asexual do not operate in the memoir as labels that were always waiting to be discovered. They appear as tools that become useful after periods of uncertainty. Kobabe narrates reading, conversation, fandom, family relationships, and encounters with institutional language as part of this process. Identity is therefore neither presented as a purely private essence nor reduced to external social construction. It is negotiated through a vocabulary that must be learned, tested, accepted, and sometimes revised.

The memoir's use of Spivak pronouns - e/em/eir - makes this process especially visible. Pronouns are ordinarily among the least noticeable words in a sentence, but here they become a record of linguistic self-positioning. The reader cannot move through the memoir without repeatedly encountering a grammatical system that refuses the binary assumptions built into conventional English pronoun use. This is not simply a thematic statement about gender. It is a formal demand placed on reading itself: the memoir asks readers to practice the language through which its autobiographical subject becomes legible.

Graphic memoir also complicates the conventional distinction between private and public. Kobabe's subject matter includes bodily discomfort, medical encounters, desire, fantasy, and uncertainty about intimacy. Autobiography turns these experiences into public narrative, while comics further convert them into visible scenes. The body is not simply described; it is drawn. That visuality can produce recognition and specificity, but it also raises questions about spectatorship. Readers are asked to look at images of a body whose relation to visibility is itself often conflicted. The memoir thus makes looking part of its ethics: it exposes without claiming that exposure is simple.

4. Self-Naming, Embodiment, and the Visual Archive of Queer Experience

One of the memoir's strongest formal achievements is its refusal to organize identity as a single revelation. Coming-out narratives are often retrospectively structured around a moment in which a true self is discovered and previous confusion becomes intelligible. Gender Queer uses some elements of that structure but repeatedly interrupts it. Recognition arrives through accumulation: an uncomfortable dress, a hairstyle, a conversation, a fictional character, a term encountered in reading, a medical appointment, a relationship that does not fit expected patterns. The cumulative structure matters because it prevents the memoir from reducing queer identity to one spectacular moment.

This accumulation also explains why images matter. The visual record allows small bodily negotiations to retain weight. Clothing, hair, posture, chest binding, menstrual experience, and medical examination are not peripheral details around an abstract identity claim. They are the material situations through which identity is experienced. The memoir's politics of representation therefore begins with embodiment rather than with a generalized statement about inclusion. Its subject becomes intelligible through concrete negotiations with a body and with the social meanings attached to that body.

At the same time, the memoir does not present embodiment as self-evident. A body can be seen by others and still not be experienced by the self in the same way. This mismatch is one of the recurring conditions of dysphoria. Graphic narrative is particularly suited to representing it because the page can show one body while the accompanying narration registers a different relation to that body. Image and text need not say the same thing. Their friction can represent the distance between social perception and self-perception more effectively than either mode alone.

Asexuality is treated through a similar logic of interpretive delay. The memoir documents uncertainty about attraction and intimacy without framing absence of sexual attraction as a simple lack. Kobabe's later access to asexual vocabulary allows earlier experiences to be reconsidered, but the narrative does not erase their ambiguity. This retrospective reclassification

is a recognizable feature of life narrative: new concepts reorganize the meaning of old memories. Smith and Watson's account of autobiographical acts is useful here because it emphasizes that life narratives do not retrieve an untouched past; they produce intelligibility from a present position (Smith and Watson).

The memoir is therefore best understood as an archive of changing interpretations. Its value as testimony does not depend on claiming that every memory is complete or that every identity term is final. Instead, the book documents the labor of making experience narratable. That labor includes searching for terms, rejecting some, testing others, and accepting that self-knowledge may remain provisional. The form is well matched to this argument: panels create discrete moments, but the page and the book connect them into patterns that no single panel can contain.

5. Visual Explicitness, Context, and the Portability of the Panel

The controversy over Gender Queer has focused heavily on a small number of images that challengers characterize as sexually explicit. The ALA's annual lists repeatedly record this rationale alongside objections to LGBTQIA+ content (American Library Association, "National Library Week" 2022; "National Library Week" 2023; "ALA Kicks Off"). It would be analytically weak either to deny that the memoir contains sexual and anatomical imagery or to assume that the existence of such imagery settles the question of the work's meaning or institutional placement. The more productive question is how visual explicitness functions inside a graphic memoir and how that function changes when images are extracted from sequence.

Comics are unusually vulnerable to decontextualization because a panel is both part of a sequence and an independently reproducible image. A paragraph removed from a prose memoir still looks like a fragment of text; a panel removed from a graphic memoir can appear visually self-contained. Screenshots can therefore travel through board meetings, social media, news coverage, and challenge documents without the narrative pacing that originally framed them. This portability is not incidental. It helps explain why disputes about graphic memoirs often center on selected pages rather than on extended summaries of the whole work.

Chute's account of graphic life narrative helps clarify what is lost in such extraction. In autobiographical comics, the relationship between image, sequence, and memory is constitutive of meaning (Chute). A panel representing sexual discomfort, fantasy, or bodily exposure may perform one function within a sequence about confusion, another within a chapter about self-recognition, and a very different function when reproduced alone as evidence of inappropriate content. The image itself has not changed, but its framing has.

This does not mean that context automatically overrides age-related concerns. Schools and libraries routinely classify materials by audience, reading level, developmental suitability, and

collection purpose. A complete-work approach does not require every institution to place every book in every collection. It requires a distinction between evaluating a work's overall function and reacting to a fragment as if the fragment exhausts the work. The policy question is therefore not whether the image exists, but what procedure an institution uses to assess the image in relation to the book's audience, purpose, and collection standards.

The memoir itself makes this contextual problem thematically appropriate. Gender Queer is about how bodies acquire meaning through interpretation. Institutional controversy repeats that process at another scale. The same drawn body can be interpreted as testimony, education, autobiography, sexual content, or evidence of unsuitability depending on the interpretive frame. The dispute is thus not only about what is visible on the page. It is about who has authority to define what that visibility means in a public institution.

6. From Literary Text to Challenged Object

Once Gender Queer enters a school or library dispute, the relevant unit of analysis shifts. Literary criticism asks how the work produces meaning; institutional analysis asks how organizations make decisions under rules, policies, legal constraints, and public pressure. The ALA's terminology is useful precisely because it separates objection from institutional action. A person can dislike or criticize a book without challenging access to it. A challenge begins when the objection is converted into a request to remove or restrict the work for others (American Library Association, "About Banned & Challenged Books").

The arguments made in these disputes usually involve several different questions that are often compressed into one. One concerns content: whether particular images or descriptions are sexually explicit. Another concerns audience: whether the book is suitable for the age group served by a specific collection. A third concerns institutional role: whether school libraries should prioritize curricular support, broad voluntary reading, parental control, student privacy, or some combination of these goals. A fourth concerns viewpoint: whether the objection would be made in the same way if the memoir described heterosexual or cisgender development. These questions can overlap, but they are not identical.

Challengers frequently frame their objections in terms of protecting minors and maintaining age-appropriate collections. That concern cannot be dismissed merely by labeling it censorship, because public schools do make legitimate selection decisions and because not every work belongs in every age-level collection. At the same time, access advocates argue that removing an entire work because of selected passages can suppress a viewpoint and that LGBTQIA+ materials have been disproportionately targeted in recent challenge patterns. The empirical data supports the claim that LGBTQIA+ titles have been heavily represented among challenged

books, while the normative interpretation of that pattern remains contested (American Library Association, "ALA Kicks Off"; PEN America, The Mounting Pressure to Censor).

A neutral analysis therefore has to resist two shortcuts. The first is to treat all restrictions as proof of animus toward queer people. The second is to treat all age-appropriateness claims as content-neutral. Institutional motives are often mixed, and procedures matter. A reconsideration process that reads a work in full, applies published criteria consistently, records reasons, and allows review is different from an informal removal based on circulated screenshots. Conversely, retention without any attention to audience classification is not the only possible alternative to removal. The space between unrestricted access and total removal includes location, grade-level designation, parental-permission rules, and other mechanisms, each of which has different consequences for access and stigma.

Gender Queer is particularly revealing because it forces institutions to confront the relationship between identity and explicitness. The memoir's sexual material is not separate from its account of identity development; it is part of the autobiographical evidence through which Kobabe explains eir relation to body and desire. An institution that evaluates the work must therefore decide whether it can separate representation of sexuality from representation of queer identity, and if so, on what criteria. That is a policy judgment, not a question literary criticism can answer alone. But literary criticism can clarify the cost of pretending the two are unrelated within this particular text.

7. School Libraries, Selection Authority, and the Pico Framework

The constitutional discussion around school-library removals often invokes Board of Education v. Pico (1982). The case is important, but it is frequently summarized too broadly. Pico produced a fractured Supreme Court decision rather than a simple majority rule governing every book dispute. Justice Brennan's plurality reasoned that public-school boards could not remove library books simply because they disagreed with the ideas in those books. At the same time, the opinion distinguished removal from initial acquisition and recognized that school boards possess significant authority over education and community values. Later summaries of the case emphasize both its protection of a student's interest in receiving information and its narrow, unsettled character (Board of Education v. Pico; Legal Information Institute, "Freedom of Speech").

That narrowness matters for Gender Queer. A school board considering whether to acquire a book is not in precisely the same legal position as a board removing a book already selected for a library. A decision based on educational suitability is not automatically equivalent to a decision aimed at suppressing an unpopular idea. And public libraries, school libraries, classroom

curricula, and private booksellers operate under different institutional and constitutional frameworks. Using the word 'ban' without specifying the institution can obscure these differences.

Pico nevertheless provides a useful analytical question: what is the reason for removal? If a public-school authority removes a title because it objects to the viewpoint expressed, the constitutional concern is different from a decision grounded in a generally applicable, consistently enforced collection policy. The difficulty is evidentiary. Public debates often involve multiple stated reasons - explicit imagery, age appropriateness, parental rights, queer content, curricular relevance - and the boundary between content evaluation and viewpoint discrimination can be disputed.

For literary studies, the value of the legal framework is not to transform the paper into constitutional doctrine. It is to show that the institutional reception of a text is itself structured by categories: library versus curriculum, acquisition versus removal, suitability versus viewpoint, restriction versus exclusion. Gender Queer becomes a political object through these classifications just as its narrator becomes an autobiographical subject through acts of naming and classification. In both contexts, categories organize what can be seen and how it can be acted upon.

8. Queer Representation Without Simplification

The original reception of Gender Queer often cast the memoir as valuable because it could provide recognition to readers who had not encountered nonbinary or asexual experiences in literature. That claim has intuitive force, but an academic analysis should avoid turning representation into a guaranteed psychological effect. Readers do not respond uniformly, and a book's presence in a collection does not automatically produce acceptance, just as its removal does not erase the identities it depicts. Representation is better understood as availability: the existence of a narrative form through which a particular configuration of experience can become publicly legible.

That distinction also avoids treating queer literature as valuable only because it performs social service. Gender Queer is not merely an informational guide. It is a crafted memoir whose aesthetic decisions - pacing, color, visual metaphor, repetition, juxtaposition, and shifts in narrative distance - shape its account of selfhood. Reducing it to a tool for inclusion would paradoxically reproduce one of the problems at stake in the challenge debate: judging the book primarily by what institutions think it will do to readers rather than by what kind of work it is.

The memoir's contribution lies in the specificity of its uncertainty. Kobabe does not present a universal nonbinary experience, and the book should not be used as if it speaks for all

transgender, nonbinary, asexual, or queer people. Its autobiographical authority is narrower and, for that reason, stronger: this is one person's account of learning to interpret eir own life. The graphic form makes that interpretive process visible and allows contradictions to remain on the page without forcing them into a single explanatory statement.

The same specificity should guide institutional debate. A district's decision about one title does not settle the status of LGBTQIA+ literature in general. Conversely, repeated challenges to the same cluster of identity-related books can become a pattern worthy of empirical analysis. The task is to move between case and pattern without allowing either to erase the other. Gender Queer is both a particular memoir and a recurring object in a broader national dispute about access to books concerning gender and sexuality.

9. Conclusion

Gender Queer is difficult to analyze adequately if it is treated only as a symbol. In literary discussion it can become a symbol of queer visibility; in political discussion it can become a symbol of inappropriate school material or of censorship. Both uses flatten the book. Kobabe's memoir is more specific: a graphic life narrative about the slow acquisition of language for body, gender, attraction, and self-description. Its images matter because they do autobiographical work that prose alone would do differently. They record embodiment as a problem of interpretation.

That same visual specificity helps explain the memoir's institutional afterlife. Individual panels can be detached from sequence and circulated as evidence in challenge campaigns. When this occurs, the unit of judgment changes from the memoir as a narrative whole to the isolated image as an object of suitability review. The resulting controversy is not merely a disagreement over the book's message. It is also a disagreement over context: how much surrounding narrative should matter when public institutions decide what younger readers may access.

A careful account of the controversy therefore requires precision. Challenges are not the same as bans; restrictions are not identical to removals; school-library selection is not identical to classroom assignment; and the constitutional issues surrounding viewpoint-based removal are narrower than slogans on either side suggest. ALA and PEN America data nevertheless show that Gender Queer has been repeatedly targeted and that LGBTQIA+ materials have occupied a substantial place in the broader wave of challenges since 2021. Those patterns provide necessary institutional context, but they do not eliminate the need to examine local procedures and stated reasons case by case.

The most productive way to read Gender Queer alongside its controversy is to keep literary form and institutional process in view at the same time. The memoir demonstrates how identity becomes intelligible through accumulated context; book challenges demonstrate how

institutional judgments can change when context is narrowed, reclassified, or removed. In that sense, the conflict surrounding Gender Queer reproduces one of the memoir's central questions: who has the authority to name an experience, and what happens when different systems of naming produce incompatible accounts of the same body, image, or text?

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