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Unspeakable Empathy: Graphic Queerness and Silence in David Small's *Home After Dark*

David Small's 2018 graphic novel, *Home After Dark*, tells the story of thirteen-year-old Russell Pruitt as he relocates from Ohio to California in the 1950s and faces the challenges of coming-of-age in a new place with a drunk, and eventually absent, father. Russell grapples with finding his voice throughout the novel, yet, even at the conclusion, remains silent and grapples with his ability to speak up and out for others and himself. On the dust jacket for the book, Jack Gantos comments on this pervasive voicelessness by noting, "The silence of David Small's masterful drawings has put words in my mouth—words that recapture the inchoate chaos of youth." This blurb anticipates the unspeakability that permeates Small's novel, while pointing to the way the novel itself fosters empathy and speech acts through visually representing wordless spreads of adolescent boyhood.

In this paper, I explore Small's use of silence and empathy around a queer sub-plot. I argue that Small employs several silent sequences to create an empathetic intimacy that mirrors the silence surrounding queerness in the United States during the 1950s. By furthering Barbara Postema's assertion that wordless comics can "evoke the preverbal and subverbal state of experience that is the dream," I connect these silent spreads to the "preverbal and subverbal state of experience" that marks trauma and queer intimacy in the novel, even as the images become too violent or queer to exist on the page and become silenced in the gutters and page turns (87).

Postema, Barbara. *Narrative Structures in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments*. RIT Press, 2013.