

Introduction

If a Body Meet a Body

—Jane Tolmie

What is at stake in comic memoir and semi-autobiography is embodiment. Remembering a scene with the intent of rendering it in sequential art requires nonlinear thinking and engagement with physicality. Who was in the room and where? What was worn? Who spoke first? What images dominated the encounter? Did anybody smile? Unhinged from the summary paragraph, the artist must confront the fact of—to quote Bruce Willis in *The Fifth Element*—the meat popsicle. Accordingly, work on autobiography is increasingly turning to the question, in Judith Butler’s words, of the “bodily condition of one’s narrative account of oneself” (Butler 2005: 39). Graphic memoirs, or what Gillian Whitlock has categorized as “autographics,” offer valuable insights into the various layered processes of memory and self-representation through “the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text in . . . autobiography” (Whitlock 2006: 966).

Virginia Woolf was premature in speculating that the “impulse towards autobiography may be spent” (Woolf 1975: 79). Autobiography has seen enormous expansions and challenges over the past twenty to thirty years (Rak 2005: 2). One of these expansions has been in the area of comics, and it certainly is an expansion that calls into question any postmodern notion of the death of the author. Accordingly, this collection focuses on relationships between artist/writer and artistic product, or rather, on artistic self-representation in comics. Negotiations between artist/writer/body and drawn/written/text raise the question of whether and how “stories . . . capture the body to which they refer” (Butler 2005: 38). Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven argue that graphic narrative’s “fundamental

syntactical operation is the representation of time as space on the page," but it is also key to analyze the body on the page (Chute and DeKoven 2006: 769).

In the course of a discussion of the need for "more advanced visual and cultural literacies to interpret the intersections of various modes and media and the complex embodiments of avatar, autobiographer," Whitlock and Anna Poletti describe the "confronting bodies that recur under the sign of autographics"; this collection attempts to offer valuable contributions in the area of visual and cultural literacies (Whitlock and Poletti 2008: vi). *Drawing from Life: Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art* examines autobiography, semi-autobiography, fictionalized autobiography, memory, and self-narration in sequential art. Contributors come from a range of academic backgrounds including English, American Studies, Comparative Literature, Gender Studies, Art History, and Cultural Studies. The book engages with well-known figures such as Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel, Neil Gaiman, Brian Fies, Lynda Barry, Chris Ware, Phoebe Gloeckner, Julie Doucet, Gene Luen Yang and Kim Deitch; with cult-status figures such as Martin Vaughn-James; and with lesser-known works by people such as Frédéric Boilet.

Academic publishing on comics is a rapidly growing field, and this collection aims to make a contribution in the broad area of autobiography studies in sequential art. The international focus of the collection is one of its strengths, thus making it a complement to such publications as Michael Chaney's edited collection *Graphic Subjects* (Wisconsin, 2010), Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women* (Columbia UP, 2010), Bart Beaty's *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (U of Toronto P, 2007), Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics* (UP of Mississippi, 2005), as well as influential volumes such as Joseph Witek's *Comic Books as History* (UP of Mississippi, 1989). A particular strength of this volume is its thematic focus on memory and subjectivity without a strict definition of autobiographical form, so that the collection includes many allusive—and elusive—types of relationships between artists/writers/subjects. A unifying focus on memory/the construction of the subject encourages readers to work through some of the complicated effects of mixing text and embodiment while remaining sensitive to the need to avoid simple models for truthfulness.

My own recent work on sexual trauma in comics centers on issues of memory and self-representation, so the work of other authors in this collection has been invaluable. Both Debbie Drechsler's intensely creepy

Daddy's Girl and Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* are routinely described as semi-autobiographical and have attracted excellent critical attention. Barry's own by-now-famous term for the status of her truth-telling is "autobiofictionalography"—and she drives her point home by asking, right at the start of her text, "Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?" (2002: 7). Similarly, Drechsler has said, "I realized that if I wrote straight autobiography the stories would suffer, so I began to take things that had happened and expand upon them, and mold them into stories that worked better than the 'honest truth' could" (Verstappen: online). While in the original 1992 publication of "Visitors in the Night" in *Drawn and Quarterly*, the abused girl's name is Debbie, in the 1996 *Fantagraphics* publication it has become Lily, which Drechsler relates in her interview in the *Comics Journal* (82).

The truth is not what I am interested in, and of course scholars invested in critical autobiography studies routinely point to the impossibility of direct transmission of lived experience. What I am interested in via Drechsler and Barry are the ways in which their texts and images negotiate private trauma in public, popular-culture formats, using an aesthetic process of reworking childhood events and emphasizing, in each case, a shared community formed from private pain and taboo knowledge. At the heart of each book is an episode or series of episodes of child sexual abuse. Neither artist intended an attractive coming-of-age story, but each makes radically different decisions about degrees of exposure and explicitness, developing two distinct approaches to the artistic representation of sexual trauma and memory. Both approaches, however, ultimately embody productive, empathic, and inclusive solutions to problems of isolation, invisibility, and shame. An image of abuse reaches out and makes—often coerces—emotional connections, forcing a public acknowledgement of private trauma, remaking a closed world of shame into an open book. There is an aesthetics of affect, not an inevitable or natural emotional side effect but a deliberate result of artistic decisions: the image of a forced encounter or an encounter grounded in power inequities is in turn thrust onto the audience.

My own approach to comics study is an intersectional, feminist one, invested in the many and various ways in which a large body of women's comics art makes a point of expressing interconnections between gender, race, class, nation, and sexuality. Both Drechsler and Barry have spoken about the ways in which their respective texts are sourced in painful lived experience, and have expressed the desire to use art both to raise social



I.1. Note the hunched shoulders and resentful upwards glare, the body language of the daughter cringing away from the father's seemingly benevolent gaze. Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, Cover Art.

awareness and to forge connections with other survivors. Both Drechsler and Barry also make a point of connecting sexual abuse with other forms of abuse such as physical, verbal, and emotional abuse; abuse of animals; racism; poverty; and gender stereotyping. They thereby offer insights that connect dots between different kinds of lived experience rather than insisting on one isolated and isolating theme of female sexual victimization; Chute has similarly observed that the works of Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Phoebe Gloeckner resist simple models for female sexuality, insisting that it is “composed of both pleasure *and* degradation” (61).

The representation of sexual violence, especially violence directed at children or young girls, routinely raises questions of censorship in at least two ways. In the first sense, public anxiety about the display and dissemination of scenes of child rape or sex abuse often expresses itself in the terms of anxiety about pornography and voyeurism. See Chute on Kominsky-Crumb and Gloeckner, both of whom are frequently accused of producing pornography (56, 68–90). Public reaction against Gloeckner’s work, in part about lived experiences of child abuse (as well as substance abuse,

adolescent desire, and much more), has led to cancellation of speaking events to which she was initially invited. Her work has also been seized by British customs officials and banned from France.

In the second sense of censorship, there are those techniques of silencing and shaming that so key to rape culture and incest culture, the techniques of teaching the victim and people in the know to hide the knowledge and make it *unacknowledgeable*. This sense often aligns nicely with the discomfort experienced by a cultural elite that has the power to censor difficult materials and determine what is in good taste. This alignment, of course, leads disastrously to an environment in which what Gloeckner labels the “laws of pornography” refuse visual space to victims of abuse with the same logics used to deny narratives of pleasure (quoted in Chute, 68). Such dovetailing of interests are painfully familiar to feminists, highlighting ways in which even opposed groups can cooperate in patriarchal projects of erasure. Comics do a particularly good job of addressing invisibility and silence, however, along with other cultural taboos. Even in non-explicit panels, the artistic decisions made in these comics—the representations of hunched bodies, sideways glances, turned backs, and averted eyes—force the viewer to “see” an often-invisible culture of shaming and silencing. Again, deliberate visual decisions force audience engagement with the dominating and destructive forces of the unspoken and unspeakable. Traumatic memory of something as intangible as being unable to speak can be made visible in the comics medium. The resulting conflation of terms and categories of speech/visibility/affect/bodily experience conveys a strong sense of the complexities of traumatic experience.

For the academic, one problem: how much revelation is *too much* revelation? The ethics of—possibly even forcing—someone to see something profoundly disturbing must be considered, as well as the political implications of making a “wrong” decision, a decision that leads someone or some formal body to identify a voyeuristic mentality or any mentality that is about consumption or even enjoyment of sexual abuse. How is the issue of consent negotiated between academic and audience? How is the issue of consent negotiated between comic artist and audience? They are not the same question because it is not my lived experience at stake—but are related questions. This set of issues is constantly in the minds of the creators of this sort of disturbing work. Barry says in interviews with Chute that she warns parents in particular when purchasing *One! Hundred! Demons!* that the book contains disturbing material about incest, suicide, and drugs (Chute, *Graphic Women* 54, 240 notes). And in an interview



1.2. In classic Barry style, what is remembered is simultaneously forgotten. Lynda Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!* p. 65.

with *comicsbulletin.com*, Drechsler expresses retrospective worry about maybe having “gone too far” with some of the images in *Daddy’s Girl* and acknowledges that even she herself finds them difficult to reread, adding that she found comics to be the ideal way to approach “hard topics” because they are “so much the bastard children of the arts that no one cares what lines get crossed” (<http://cotlzine.blogspot.ca/2008/07/debie-drechsler-interview.html>). That is not quite true, of course, though certainly marginal and alternative publications routinely do difficult cultural work in terms of raising awareness and pushing against boundaries, e.g., as in Jennifer Camper’s two edited volumes of *Juicy Mother*.

Comics about abuse offer a visual networking strategy for bringing together survivors in particular and those interested in raising awareness in general; they also extend the borders of autobiography about trauma to make us think about the implications of the image in debates about how prose autobiography forces the reader either to identify or dis-identify. Chute observes that the “disgust and pleasure that the visual carries is related to a bodily rhythm of reading, further underscored, and prompted, by the rhythm of the visual-verbal page, a rupturing alternation between affects” (Chute, *Graphic Women*, 71). In other words, the visual image of abuse is aesthetically and emotionally confrontational, even potentially coercive. Barry steps back from this coercion by leaving the main burdens of imagination to the reader: Only God gets to see what actually happened. Drechsler’s approach is totally different.



1.3. When the father figure in *Daddy's Girl* enters the bedroom, holding his erect penis, he chirps with a happy smile and some musical notes showing in the air, "Daddy's got a big surprise for his little girl" in a grotesque abuse of the language of a caring parent bringing a present. And then you see his penis in her mouth and you realize that that phrase with its little musical notes is as obscene as anything else in the frames. Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, p. 2.

I have included this explicit set of Drechsler's images of an erect male organ and direct sexual contact with a child for multiple reasons, all to do with confronting different kinds of censorship—and there are, of course, more than two kinds—despite my concerns about the very real dangers of traumatization through such visuals, always keeping in mind that the image can force a reaction in ways that perhaps the word cannot. If we are concerned about the line between what is scene/seen and what is obscene, we must also ask: Who gets to say when reality exceeds the representable? Why is it that so often those primarily concerned with censorship of self-narration are not the ones who have lived the negative realities at stake or



1.4. Lynda Barry. *One! Hundred! Demons!* p. 72.

in question? To what extent does censorship of these images participate in a culture of shaming and blaming? To what extent does said censorship work to obscure connections between individual and community in terms of both affect and shared experience? Perhaps we must think here of Freud and his desperate desire to deny the quotidian nature of father-daughter sex incest, as Judith Herman Lewis observes, “because of what it implied about the behaviour of respectable family men” (9, *Father-Daughter Incest*).

There is usually more buffering in the realm of words than in the world of images. An extensive vocabulary exists to describe incidents of sexual abuse/incest in distant and distancing terms—and no need even to use the word “penis,” given the range of available euphemisms: consider Jean Auel, who managed to write an entire series of soft porn using words like “organ” and “member.” The phrase “sex abuse” itself is non-specific and leaves the mind free to refuse to imagine in ways that the image does not.

In *One! Hundred! Demons!* Barry takes that indirect approach in any case, using an aesthetic approach of suggestion and inference—a *less is more* approach sharply in contrast to Drechsler’s vivid and explicit renderings. Note the speech bubble positioned directly over the genital



1.5. Debbie Drechsler. *Daddy's Girl*. p. 3.

area. Barry leaves the burden of imagination to the reader; Drechsler, like Kominsky-Crumb and Gloeckner, forces the reader to see what the abuse victim sees. Once again, what is remembered is also forgotten, in a frequent Barry trope that emphasizes memory as a series of choices as much as something that takes shape on its own (72). Memory, like subjectivity, is partial, constructed, and reconstructed. At one point Drechsler's Lily comments, "I never did remember the thing I forgot," even though the reader/viewer has just seen what it was, in all its atrocity (56). Here we see only the head of the father, having an orgasm, and then the sister turning away in denial of what she has witnessed. The sister does and says nothing—here we "see" the refusal of emotional connection, the refusal of acknowledgement, the refusal to confront the situation—the refusal to participate in the reconstruction of memory and subjectivity (3).

Confrontational is an apt word here, recalling Whitlock and Poletti on confronting bodies. It is important to avoid the impression, when

talking about affective outreach, that Drechsler's and Barry's visuals offer merely a sort of visual networking system for female victims. Far more profoundly, they offer cultural confrontation and the potential for change or healing through strategies of outreach and uncomfortable transparency. They make clear the value of what might be called feminist art activism, art that deliberately self-defines as a form of creative emancipation. Creative emancipatory work, in the context of the representation of child sex abuse, offers a venue both for the artistic self and for the receiving viewer/reader to do a range of affective and political things: to heal, to make transparent, to undo, and to redo. All of those artistic endeavors are highly politicized. Speaking of Gloeckner, Chute talks of the "urgency of representing trauma" (2010: 74); these comics are precisely about matters of essential cultural urgency at the everyday level. Unique events such as the collapse of the Twin Towers demand and produce acknowledgment of the effects of the extraordinary. These texts do precisely the opposite. They emphasize repeated and quotidian traumas, trauma of gender inequity, traumas set in the home and enacted and re-enacted every day. In a sense, these texts are about what is perfectly ordinary and one thing that is perfectly ordinary is that it is impossible to separate mind and body, word and image, emotion and politics.

The stakes here, unlike those in papers in this collection about the events surrounding 9/11, are precisely about *not* being in a state of exception; the ordinary world itself is dangerous, sexually violent, emotionally difficult, racist, unequal in terms of wealth and class, as the body of Drechsler's and Barry's work makes clearly and undeniably visible. Comics such as these are trouble at its best, destructive of some social norms and creative of new ones. I will not write here about the various ways in which the comics format itself troubles norms of art and of high and low culture, for reasons of space and also because so many comics critics have done such a good job of that already, e.g., troubling norms and comfort levels of art is also something Alisia Chase emphasizes in her essay for this collection, "*You Must Look at the Personal Clutter: Diaristic Indulgence, Female Adolescence, and Feminist Autobiography*." Chase offers a feminist art historian's perspective on women comic artists' deployment of the mess and pain of everyday lived experience to make profound connections that are at once, to use a phrase we all know well but often use tokenistically, personal and political. Barry and Drechsler use sequential art as critique (exposing rape-culture's strategies of shame, blame, and silencing); sequential art as vehicle for self-emancipation, at once political



I.6. The mother's turned back and averted gaze echo those of the sister in earlier frames. The viewer is invited into the scene, eyes following the gaze of the child to rest on the mother. Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*. p. 25.

and personal, and sequential art as *invitation* to participate in cultural production. By deploying these effectively activist techniques, Barry and Drechsler emphasize ways in which comics art can forge bonds between individual and community.

Drechsler's visual rendering of trauma illustrates rape culture's and incest culture's politics of shame in ways that the word alone cannot, as recognition cannot be refused. The unspoken word does not mean the viewer/reader has not seen and understood. Forbidden things may continue to be unnamed, unspoken, but they are irrefutably there: image forces recognition, empathy, acknowledgement of shame and damage. The shunned or damaged body draws the gaze, and also makes the viewer uncomfortable and afraid of being voyeuristic and thus participating in a culture of dominance and harm.

Both authors have expressed the feeling in interviews that artistic production about the traumatic past is necessary for them, a form of essential performance and public acknowledgment of things the world so often wishes to keep private. Barry's title for the episode specifically about child



1.7. Note the emphasis on something that no one can take away. Lynda Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!* p. 177.

abuse is “Resilience.” It is acts of artistic reimagining that express this resilience for both Drechsler and Barry. There are scenes in each text in which a supportive art teacher makes a huge difference in enabling access to this form of self-expression. These scenes are tremendously important as they are themselves instructional—by reproducing them Drechsler and Barry are emphasizing the lesson itself: self-expression is something you can give to yourself continually and no one can take it away. Self-expression gives you power over your own memory—and over your own sense of self/subject.

By passing on the lessons that art is liberating should be encouraged and supported, both artists are issuing invitations to participate in artistic self-expression, passing on the emancipatory lessons offered to their child selves, emphasizing a transmission of transformative possibilities. Both Drechsler and Barry offer an aesthetic escape: the working through and rendering of trauma through visuals. However, this escape does not separate mind and body but instead invites the visualization of the body as a form of freeing mental expression. Drechsler says in her interview with *comicsbulletin*, “. . . there are people who know what’s what who are making change.” Making change, for both Drechsler and Barry, is about inviting others into self-expression; Drechsler has talked about the importance of reimagining the past as a way of moving forward. In a similar vein, Barry teaches writing and drawing classes and gives workshops on accessing the inner storyteller, often describing her work as being about writing



1.8. A lesson about empathy and support is passed on, together with an emphasis on having something valuable of one's own. Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*. p. 37.

the unthinkable. Barry has published books intended to draw readers into active artistic participation, *What It Is* and *Picture This*. In “paying forward” the lessons given to their child selves, both artists open up creative, political, and affective possibilities for re-connecting individual and community and moving away from isolation and shame. Ann Cvetkovich’s recent brilliant book, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, articulates ways in which the “encounter between feeling and politics is thus open for discussion of forms of activism that can address messy feelings rather than trying to banish them (110). Such productive and nuanced reimagining of therapy is offered through the works of Barry and Drechsler alike.

Not all the creative writers/artists discussed in this collection are concerned primarily with rendering and confronting demons, of course, but



1.9. Here, for once, Barry is the more explicit. Lynda Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!* p. 13.

all are engaged in active attempts at self-rendering and the remaking and representation of memory. Barbara Christian's word "rememorying" is suggestive, as it implies the active and deliberate reconstruction of memory to void fixed categories (Christian 1990: 48). For indeed, comic rememorying is doing much to unfix, remake, and make us rethink boundaries through the production of "self-regarding art" (Whitlock and Poletti 2008: v). At a recent talk at Queen's University, Glenn Willmott and Bart Beaty talked about the need for comics scholarship to theorize both authorial/creative subject and viewer/audience, much as film theory has done, and it is my hope that the essays in this collection do some of that work.

David Ball and Yaël Schlick begin the analytic work of the collection with attention to self-representation in the comics of Alison Bechdel and Lynda Barry. Ball's work tracks the intertextuality of Bechdel's created self, focusing on the conflation of allusion and confession in *Fun Home*. Ball works with textual genres and canonicity, while Schlick, in a similar vein, approaches the fictionalization of the self in autobiography more broadly, contrasting Bechdel's deployment of the fictional with Barry's refusal to distinguish between fictional and real. While Bechdel's text is obsessively self-reflexive, Barry's work invites reader/viewer participation, reducing the distance between bodies and text.

Michael Chaney's attention is on the body in the text, specifically the animal body. What is it about comics, he asks, that summons the human in bestial form? It is a profound question as animal studies in the humanities is an emerging powerhouse, and one that has not yet engaged fully with comics criticism. Chaney produces a sophisticated analysis of the potential and the dangers of a discourse of animal-human hybridity. In another study of subjectivity located outside the bounds of human form, Jan Baetens offers an examination of Martin Vaughn-James, pointing out that all comic art carries some degree of subjectivity, and working his way through an extended and elegant reading of object-subject relations in *The Cage*. Baetens invites readers to refuse simple conceptualizations of "serious" art and to reject oppositional models for relations between subject/object and subject/abstract.

Benjamin Widiss explores a sort of dialogic subjectivity, in which Chris Ware's relationship(s) with Joseph Cornell inform and inspire Ware's distinctive aesthetic. Cultural dialogues are also at stake in Christopher Bush's analysis of a *nouvelle manga* aesthetic, which incorporates analysis of French and Japanese literary and comics forms, film theory, and literary criticism. Via the *nouvelle manga*, Bush queries connections made between autobiography, self-referentiality, and cultural authenticity. Isaac Cates, too, raises questions about cultural authenticity through his study of the faux memoir and interpretive uncertainty in the collaborations of Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean.

With Lopamudra Basu and Davida Pines, we move into the analysis of trauma, both public and private. These essays focus on autobiographical representations of the events and emotions surrounding 9/11, on acts of recovering, and exploration of pain, grief, and mourning. Focusing on Art Spiegelman, Basu positions comic art as a space of resistance against oppression; Pines, in a similar vein, demonstrates how bearing witness challenges public narratives of unity, triumph, and heroism, referencing Spiegelman, Alissa Torres, and Sungyoon Choi. In contrast, Alisia Chase turns from public to private and calls for a re-engagement with the personal, the messy, and the intimate. Chase works with Phoebe Gloeckner, Debbie Drechsler, and Julie Doucet to expose the importance of quotidian traumas and the emotional confusions of lived experience.

Rachel Trousdale balances the personal and the public in her analysis of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, unpacking ways in which personal and public rebellions coincide and ways in which bearing witness both engages

with universal narratives and produces individuals/individualism. Sharon O'Brien, bringing the collection to an end, looks at ways in which bearing witness to the suffering and pain of others gives voice to bodies and, perhaps, souls, otherwise left out of language. Attentive to emerging work in the medical humanities with her analysis of Brian Fies' *Mom's Cancer*, O'Brien brings us back to the opening premise of this introduction: comics and engagement with embodiment. I chose to end this volume with O'Brien's powerful narrative about hope.

This book has been a labor of love extending over a long period, and it would have been impossible without the careful work and editorial attention given it by Sylvia Andrychuk and Kelly Quinn. I am lucky to have such devoted colleagues and friends. Many thanks to Walter Biggins and Anne Stascavage for their patience, and many thanks to Katie Keene and to all the others at University Press of Mississippi who worked hard on the volume. Thank you to anonymous reviewers. A special thank you to *Tangles* author Sarah Leavitt, who graciously donated her artwork for our cover. Flaws and remaining errors in the book are of course mine.

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