DRAWING COMMUNITY:
EMBODYING THE COLLECTIVE IN FRANCOPHONE GRAPHIC MEMOIRS

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ABSTRACT

Martha Moreno Linares: Drawing Community:
Embodying the Collective in Francophone Graphic Memoirs
(Under the direction of Jessica Tanner)

My dissertation explores the ways in which Francophone women graphic novelists from diverse backgrounds use their pictorial embodiment in autobiographical texts to make space for a community based on openness and inclusiveness, rather than shared identity. As artists seeking inclusion within the traditionally male-dominated landscape of graphic literature, the authors in my corpus—like their graphic avatars—operate in spaces sanctioned by men and governed by rigid codes designating how women should act and appear. *Drawing Community* proposes that they resist these codes by depicting themselves as bodies that are nonreproductive, nonhuman, ailing, abused, or overtly sexualized—and thus do not conform to biopolitical norms. Their portrayal of the body as permeable and ever-changing—an openness that is reinforced by comics' hybridity, its disjoining of lived narrative into text and image—challenges traditional notions of the self and the community as closed entities that need to protect themselves from otherness and external intrusions through self-defensive, immunitary mechanisms. By dissociating their identity from any fixed, normative body and opening up themselves and their stories to the creative force of readers, I argue, these authors sketch out an alternative, radically inclusive form of community that transcends national or geographical borders and the boundaries of the book.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

In this project, I worked closely with various graphic novels and they constitute the center of my arguments. I used numerous visual examples taken from primary and secondary sources to support my arguments throughout this dissertation. For copyright reasons, I have not included the images that I had scanned from the books, and only a handful of my original drawings remain here. Since their detailed analysis is key to my arguments, I left the captions in place so that the reader can have enough bibliographical information to find the original panels on their own. However, a couple of graphic novels with which I worked don't have any page numbers, so if the reader would like to have more information about those figures, I can be reached at marthamorenolin@gmail.com.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2015 and 2016, French comics writer Diglee devoted two entries of her blog to a thorny question in the world of both literature and sequential art: why are female authors constantly overlooked? Diglee explores this question from her perspective as a reader who has noticed blatant injustices in the literary world. In the first post, she mentions that at the time, no woman had ever been featured in the program for the *bac de terminale littéraire*.[1] In the second, she addresses the polemic that arose in 2016 when the list of thirty comics authors considered for the *Grand Prix* at the *Festival International de la Bande Dessinée d'Angoulême* did not include any women.[2] These two facts highlight the reality of inequality and underrepresentation of women in the field. Even prior to these events, in 2015, a group of women comics authors created the *Collectif des Créatrices de Bande Dessinée contre le Sexisme* as a reaction to the misogynistic environment of comics publishing.[3] This collective is a formal, concrete manifestation of the community of women writers and illustrators who have taken matters into their own hands in recent years, attempting to make their voices heard and combat the sexism that still prevails in the comics world.[4]

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[1] http://diglee.com/femmes-de-lettres-je-vous-aime/. This only changed for the 2018 *baccalauréat*, when the *Ministère de l'Éducation* in France decided to include a female writer—Mme de Lafayette—for the first time in history, after a teacher started a petition in 2016 that was signed by over 19,000 people.

[2] http://diglee.com/angouleme-2016-et-sa-bourde-sexiste-2/.

[3] http://bdegalite.org.

[4] For more on this problem, cf. Milquet and Reyns-Chikuma (2016).

Originally started by French-speaking authors of graphic novels, mostly from France and Belgium, the *Collectif* eventually grew to include creators from several languages and nationalities.[5] While the Collective was formed in an effort to redress the exclusion of women artists in the comics world, the artists I analyze seek to engender a different type of community through their life narratives. My project focuses on a group of female comics authors—some of whom belong to the Collective—who write and publish in French, whether it is their native language or the language of their adoptive country.[6] Though they all publish in French, the authors I study come from different geographical contexts: Nadja, Élodie Durand, Marion Fayolle and Aurélia Aurita are French; Anne Herbauts and Dominique Goblet are Belgian; while Julie Doucet, Geneviève Castrée and Sylvie Rancourt are Quebecois. Although their origins are not central to my study, they do inform this notion of community for which I'm arguing—one that is not based on traditional criteria of inclusion and exclusion. Even if, for academic reasons, I chose a corpus centered on the French language, my project aims to identify the ways in which these women work to create communities that are not predicated upon national, geographic, or identitary belonging. Instead, they use their work to bring their lives to the public by sharing their personal narratives with their readers, thus bridging the gap between the individual and the collective. I argue that this community extends to the readers of these texts—who should not be assumed to be women or girls, as the Collective states in its charter—and thus beyond the bounds of gender.[7] It is precisely this kind of exclusion that the

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[5] Although the FrancoBelgian tradition of *bande dessinné* has its own history and particularities, for this project, I use the terms comics, graphic novels and *bande dessinée* interchangeably, as the distinction between them is not productive for this particular discussion. Further, when using the term 'comics' I follow Scott McCloud's use of the plural noun with a singular verb (*Understanding Comics* 1993, 20).

[6] This is the case for Nadja (born in Egypt to a Russian mother and a Lebanese father) whose family lived in Lebanon before settling in France when she was five years old.

[7] In the world of sequential art there is, in fact, a particular type of relationship between the artists and their readers. On the one hand, new technologies—blogs, social media, etc.—have allowed a more intimate interaction between comics creators and readers. On the other hand, smaller and larger comics festivals have proliferated in recent decades, providing a physical space of synchronous exchanges where the connections among artists extend to the community of their readers. Although these spaces of collective gathering are dominated by the superhero genre and its predominantly

Collective fights, as well as the assumption that female themes and experiences can all be grouped under the label of "bande dessinée féminine."[8]

In spite of the mistreatments and oversights that women creators have endured in the world of comics, there have been steps taken to acknowledge and correct this, though they may be small. For instance, in his acclaimed series of graphic memoirs *L'Arabe du futur* (2014-)*,* Riad Sattouf denounces toxic masculinity within his Syrian family—and the Muslim world at large—based on experiences from his childhood. Another example of the relationship between the comics world and women creators is the fact that the first recipient of the prize "Couilles au Cul" was a woman: Tunisian Nadia Khiari. Created in 2016 after the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks, the award is designed to celebrate freedom of speech and the courage of creators who continue their work in the face of threats. But the name of the award belies its ostensible mission: it uses the very gendered image of testicles to celebrate the courage of "ballsy" artists. Since its creation, this new prize has already been awarded to two women—out of five recipients so far—which signals a change in an industry that has typically failed to acknowledge and celebrate the work of women creators. By contrast, the "Grand Prix de la ville d'Angoulême"—considered the most prestigious award in the world of comics—has only been given to three women since it was created in 1974: Claire Brétécher (France, special 10th anniversary prize), in 1982; Florence Cestac (France), in 2000; and Rumiko Takahashi (Japan), in 2019. Although the low number of women who have been recognized can be explained by the simple fact that there have historically been fewer women publishing comics and

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male readership, other genres of comics have also benefitted from these platforms, though they are still "heavily guarded" by gatekeepers from a male-dominated publishing industry (cf. *Fraise et chocolat* by Aurélia Aurita). However, platforms such as Instagram opened a direct channel between artists and readers, most notably during the recent pandemic, where "quaranzines" proliferated, allowing for people to share the unique common experience of quarantine and isolation, bringing people around the world together in new and inventive ways.

[8] When I talk about women, I am not only referring to people assigned female at birth, but to all individuals—including non-binary people—who live in the world as women, since it is not only women that are subjugated in and by societal paradigms in terms of gender. Evidently, there are other factors that result in the marginalization of people, such as class, race, etc. but in this project, I focus on gender.

graphic novels, recent events—such as the failure to even nominate women for these awards—demonstrate that inequality persists in the world of comics in the Franco-Belgian tradition.

A Biopolitical Framework

Rather than advocate for the inclusion of women in the field, the artists in my corpus aim to reconfigure the landscape of the graphic novel's publication and reception altogether—a decision that aligns their goals with Jacques Rancière's (2007) definition of politics. In Rancière's view, literature can make space for those who have no place in the existing power structures, by reconfiguring what he calls the *partage du sensible* (the distribution of the sensible): the organizing logic that determines who is seen, recognized, heard, and included in a community. In this sense, I contend that by making themselves visible in a world that often marginalizes and erases them, these authors dismantle the existing hierarchy. Their graphic memoirs make space for them—and their readers—to inhabit another distribution of the sensible, potentially redrawing the lines that determine who is included and excluded. By advocating for the recognition of the "féminin" as part of the plurality of identities that constitute the "universel," these authors situate their aesthetic practice as a form of politics that embraces an alternative mode of community formation.[9]

In *Drawing Community*, I study the choice made by the authors in my corpus to bring their lives to the public through a feminist approach that considers the publication of their life stories as an act of revolt. This aligns with a similar argument made by Mercédès Baillargeon in *Le personnel est politique* (2019). Baillargeon studies the autofictional practices of Christine Angot, Chloé Délaume and Nelly Arcan as a way to

> refuse[r] de taire leur expérience individuelle et de considérer celle-ci comme étant purement personnelle. Elles soulignent ainsi la dimension politique et collective de leur vie privée en dénonçant les structures sociales qui ont rendues possibles les traumatismes qu'elles ont vécus. (3)

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[9] The authors in my corpus don't figure their lives *as* universal, nor do they claim or aspire to universality, but rather make space for others to determine the shape and story of their lives.

Through this lens, the lines between the private and the public, the individual and the collective, are necessarily blurred, and the simple act of speaking out and reaching out to others who might have similar experiences is a way to establish a community.

In my project, I understand community in the sense that Roberto Esposito has defined it in his contributions to biopolitical theory. Going beyond the notion of a common space or common property shared by a group of people, Esposito focuses on the complex notion of *munus*, traditionally understood to be a "gift" given by the community to its members. As Esposito shows, however, the *munus* is not only a gift, but also a debt and an obligation. It is an obligatory gift that individuals owe to the community, but it involves no return: "In short, this is the gift that one gives because one *must* give and because one *cannot not* give" (Esposito, *Communitas* 4). As Thomas Tierney clarifies:

> what individuals owe most fundamentally to the community, in both senses of owe, is their identities. Individuals owe their identities to the community in the sense that it is their source [...], and in the sense of a debt that must be repaid to the community, but again without any expectation of return (60).

For Esposito, the concept of community as a group sharing a *munus* is coterminous with another concept that exists as its negative form and its logical consequence: that of immunity. In its negative, immunitary mode, community is based on the logic of the proper, of a common property; since individual identity is subjected to the communal one, external entities are perceived as threats and systematically excluded. This negative response, Esposito argues, is modeled on biological and political immunity, whereby the body becomes a fortress designed to shelter what it recognizes as its "own" and to defend itself from intruders—a "negation [that] doesn't take the form of the violent subordination that power imposes on life from the outside, but rather is the intrinsically antinomic mode by which life preserves itself through power" (Esposito, *Bíos* 46). This is precisely the mechanism through which communities perceive external elements as threats to their integrity, attacking them in an effort to maintain their internal balance. While a certain degree of immunitary

response is necessary in order to sustain difference, Esposito suggests, the excessive immunization

of communities founded on the exclusion of difference—on the defensive reassertion of the proper

through opposition to the "other" that defines it—inevitably begets an autoimmune crisis. Just as

an overactive immune response can lead the body to attack the self it recognizes as other, the body

politic can experience similar autoimmunitary crises with devastating consequences. This type of

crisis is by no means theoretical and there are multiple examples in History, as Jacques Derrida

(2003) has studied[10] In an effort to identify ways to prevent this immunitary crisis, Esposito

proposes an alternative form of community that is open to difference: a collective that embraces—

through interdependency—the singularities of individuals that cannot be assimilated under a

common property. The model for this "affirmative" community is the "common immunity" of the

maternal body, whose immune system tolerates the fetus despite its otherness. It surpasses the

immunization paradigm by changing the focus from the threat of expropriation of a common

identity to a "being in common" of singularities. The key, then, is figuring the community as a

permeable entity, which Donna Haraway had pointed out years before Esposito in her *Cyborg

Manifesto* (1991).

    In recounting their personal experience, the artists in my corpus do not stake an

authoritative claim to the story of their lives, nor do they use immunitary strategies to consolidate

their individuality and defend it in a way that alienates them from community. Instead, they portray

themselves as both unique and relatable, often forsaking the very personal features that, visually,

would signal their individuality. At times, the authors in my corpus choose to draw themselves in

ways that strip them of their singularities, focusing on what I understand to be their *essence*. I identify

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[10] cf. Jacques Derrida, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides," *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (U of Chicago P, 2003).

these depictions as individuals who match the definition given by Gilles Deleuze in his essay *Pure Immanence* (2001):

> The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from subjectivity and objectivity of what happens [...]. The life of such an individuality fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence, a life. (28-29)

In this posthumous essay, Deleuze sets out to explore a concept that was, later, adopted by Esposito as the key to an affirmative community: that of *a* life—and here the use of the indefinite article is of paramount importance. In order to explain it, Deleuze cites an example taken from a story by Charles Dickens, where a disreputable man is shown great mercy and even love by the townspeople as he lays in his deathbed. For Deleuze, this is the moment in the narrative where—between life and death—he becomes *a* life, an indefinite life stripped from the particularities of external elements, but also from the past and the present. Deleuze adds: "[b]ut we shouldn't enclose life in the single moment when individual life confronts universal death. *A* life is everywhere, in all the moments that a living subject goes through and that are measured by given lived objects" (29). When reduced to its pure immanence, in Deleuze's sense, each life is a singular impersonality or an impersonal singularity that shares exactly that same unique yet common value with all other lives.

In the introduction to Deleuze's essay, John Rajchman (2001) asserts that "we need a new conception of society in which what we have in common is our singularities and not our individualities—where what is common is 'impersonal' and what is 'impersonal' is common" (14). This aligns with Esposito's idea of an affirmative biopolitics, a politics of life and community that embraces difference rather than pathologizing it and rejecting it as otherness. As Timothy Campbell explains, this idea is the "the basis for elaborating a radical tolerance toward a world understood as a multiplicity of different living forms" (16). I contend that the autobiographical texts in my corpus

strive for what we might understand as an affirmative biopolitics, where artists portray themselves as "impersonal singularities" and accommodate others in the story of their lives.

It is this affirmative mode of community that I identify in the works in my corpus. This argument is perhaps counterintuitive, given that the charter of the Collectif affirms that only female authors can officially join its ranks—a principle of "non-mixité" based on their shared experience of "des situations basées sur des préjugés genrés."[11] And yet, though they define their Collective via what they have in common—their shared experience of and opposition to sexism—their broader goal is to reshape the comics community as a space that is open to all. It is this larger community, I argue, that the artists I study attempt to realize in, and through, their graphic memoirs. The indiscriminate circulation of their identities, figured as singularities in the pages of their works, makes space for a more expansive collective—one that is open not only to graphic novelists of all genders, nationalities, and linguistic expressions, but also to their readers. In the process, I contend, they lay the groundwork for constituting a radically inclusive, non-immunitary community that approaches Esposito's vision of an affirmative biopolitics by resisting patriarchal violence. My dissertation thus studies not only what their works have in common, but also what they *make* (in) common, through an analysis of their representation of the body—traditionally, the site and model of the individuation on which immunitary communities are based. By figuring the body (and the self) instead as sites of openness to alterity, I propose, the graphic memoirs I analyze allow readers to envision the affirmative biopolitics that Esposito sees as the best way to avoid the immunitary crisis that inevitably leads to *thanatopolitics*—the death of community, and the politics of death that accompanies an excess of immunitary defense—associated with historical events such as Nazism and the aftermath of September 11.[12]

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[11] http://bdegalite.org, consulted in April 2018.

[12] cf. Esposito's chapter on Nazism in *Terms of the Political : Community, Immunity, Biopolitics* (2012).

As theorized by Michel Foucault, biopower first emerged around the 18th century as a technology of power concerned with managing the population as a whole. It seeks to administer, develop, and secure the life of the population by regulating factors related to issues like public health, birthrate, and life expectancy. With the goal of fostering a population that is physically healthy and economically productive, biopower—working in conjunction with disciplinary power—prioritizes docile bodies and reproductive sex. This focus on the body, both individual and collective, reflects a desire to protect the population from the internal or external dangers that would otherwise jeopardize its proper development and functioning, as Foucault (1997) emphasizes:

> les ennemis qu'il s'agit de supprimer, ce ne sont pas les adversaires au sens politique du terme; ce sont les dangers, externes ou internes, par rapport à la population et pour la population. (228)

This understanding of the body (or body politic) as a closed entity is one of the reasons why communities fall into the immunitary paradigm, because they see any type of difference as a threat that must be eliminated to secure the community. Biopower also concerns itself with the regulation of each individual's body in an effort to maintain a healthy, (re)productive population. In order to achieve this, those in power survey and discipline individuals, who are expected to maintain clean, regulated bodies. The graphic novels I analyze all resist biopower by deviating, in one way or another, from the disciplined bodies it requires. By exploring, explaining, exposing, and reinventing their bodies in their graphic memoirs, the authors in my corpus render themselves (as) vulnerable. When they open up their bodies to otherness in their narratives, they open themselves up to communion with other selves—an opening that often creates a conflict with the power structures around them.

In examining the ways in which these authors figure themselves in non-normative, non-(re)productive bodies, I explore the graphic memoir as a site of resistance to thanatopolitics.[13] I contend that the artists I study use their graphic narratives to represent their singularities—as previously discussed regarding Deleuze—and their vulnerability, as defined by Judith Butler:

> vulnerability can be a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time. Such collective forms of resistance are structured very differently than the idea of a political subject that establishes its agency by vanquishing its vulnerability—this is the masculinist ideal we surely ought to continue to oppose. (24)

Butler's conception of vulnerability as both "exposed and agentic" is particularly relevant when talking about autobiographical comics, since the mere fact of bringing one's life into the public entails a voluntary exposure that often empowers the authors and can establish a sort of dialogue with the readers. While the autobiographical graphic novels in my corpus focus on personal stories and individual identities, their power resides in their unique yet common character—an inscription of self that remains open to the incorporation of difference and to the communion with others as readers.

What Comics Do Differently

As a medium, comics is characterized by its duality since it is a form of representation that relies on both words and images. As Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven (2006) state, "[t]he medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal and visual narratives that do

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[13] I understand *normative* as the fiction of autonomy that makes people obedient to power, which is precisely what the works of authors of *bandes dessinées* such as Claire Brétécher fight against with their representation of women's bodies. In her work, Brétécher defies traditional and normative representations of the female body, both visually and textually. According to Pezzullo (2020), Brétécher "proposes a new model for women, openly in contrast with the visual culture of her time, perpetuated especially via beauty and fashion magazines" (68). She does this by drawing all types of female bodies with all their imperfections, including older women. A noteworthy example of Brétécher's unique and innovative depiction of the female body is the series *Cellulite*, which follows the story of the eponymous character, an unconventional princess from the Middle Ages. By naming her protagonist after one of the most demonized—yet common—features of the female body, Brétécher reclaims the word but she also depicts imperfect bodies, thus revolting against female stereotypes and gender roles of her time. Her contributions to comics-as-sociological commentary are innumerable and her role as a trailblazer for women cartoonists can be felt even today.

not simply blend together, creating a unified whole, but rather remain distinct." (769).[14] This cross-discursivity can itself be considered non-immunitary, as it neither prioritizes one mode of expression nor resolves them into a cohesive whole. The sense of comics only emerges through the simultaneous interpretation of both text and images—in other words, it is constructed by readers, who help compose the stories these bodies speak and tell. In the study of the role of text and image in comics, Thierry Groensteen (2011) proposes two useful concepts: *reciter* and *monstrator*. In attempting to theorize a "narratologie de la bande dessinée," Groensteen postulates, the main difficulty is the mixed nature of a medium that relies on both text and image to tell stories.[15] While explaining that in comics narration can be done by visual and verbal narrators, Groensteen defines them the visual narrator as follows:

> Je retiendrai le terme de *monstrateur* pour designer l'instance responsable de la *mise en dessin* de l'histoire […]. Hypostasier, dans le cadre d'une théorie narratologique, l'instance du monstrateur, c'est isoler, à l'intérieur du processus de création d'une bande dessinée, ce qui ressortit spécifiquement au dessin en tant qu'il est animé par une intention narrative et en tant qu'il est traversé par une subjectivité. (93)

This definition of the monstrator highlights the role that drawings play in the unfolding of the storytelling process, along with the narrative intention that drives the particular choices made by this narrative voice. The other layer of comics narration is the reciter, the verbal counterpart to the monstrator. Though typically found in captions or text boxes that contain precisions about time and/or place, the presence of this "narrative voice" can also be found outside of them, floating in different places on the page. The main takeaway from the existence of two distinct narrators in sequential art is understanding how both image and text collaborate to set the tone of the story that

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[14] Gillian Whitlock also approaches this feature of graphic memoirs—which she calls 'autographics'—in her important article on the subject: "[b]y coining the term "autographics" for graphic memoir I mean to draw attention to the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text in this genre of autobiography, and also to the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through comics" (966).

[15] On the narratology of comics, see Kai Mikkonen's *The Narratology of Comic Art* (2017).

is being told. The mixed nature of comics allows artists to interweave narratives that are complex and nuanced, depending on their choices and their use of the tools available to them.

The mixed used of text and image in comics to convey meaning is not the only instance where the sense is built through the interpretation of two seemingly separate components. The reader is also invited to make associations between each individual panel and the panels around it, in a logical operation that Groensteen (1999) calls *braiding* ('tressage' in French). It is the process through which individual panels can relate to or resonate with other panels and the work as a whole—both for the creator and for the decoder. Groensteen adds: "le tressage est une relation supplémentaire, qui n'est jamais indispensable à la conduite et à l'intelligibilité du récit, dont le decoupage fait seul son affaire" (174). This "iconic solidarity" is at the center of Groensteen's view of the *bande dessinée* as a system: a network of individual panels that constitute the graphic novel as a cohesive unit. Thus, *braiding* is a somewhat symmetric operation that starts at the moment of creation of comics and ends at the moment of consumption by the reader. This puts both the author and the reader in an analogous position, with both required to participate actively in the process of making meaning.

Reading sequential art entails a different kind of engagement on the part of the reader, who simultaneously absorbs the panels of the double page spread before their eyes and focuses on each single panel, weaving them all together with previous and successive pages. For example, when talking about Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and its mix of accelerated and decelerated narrative rhythm, Chute (2008) asserts that the uniqueness of comics rests in the specificities associated with its reading process: "[a] comics page, unlike film or traditional prose narrative, is able to hold this contradictory flow in tension, as narrative development is delayed, retracked, or rendered recursive by the depth and volume of graphic texture" (460). For Chute, these formal possibilities of comics allow them to explore non-fiction narratives in ways that are very different from other artforms.

The Graphic Memoir

Over the past forty years, the world of sequential art has seen the emergence—and the dominance, as several critics have noticed—of autobiographical comics authored by artists who have decided to bring their private lives into the public eye.[16] *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972) by Justin Green is widely accepted to be the first graphic memoir. In this confessional comic, the author explores his complex relationship with sexual desire and religion in a way that had never previously been approached and that would inspire other authors such as Art Spiegelman, Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky. The autobiographical wave that followed opened a whole new venue for creators who wanted to explore more serious and intimate themes in comics, challenging the traditional perception of the medium by both the public and critics.

In French-language comics, the credit for the first graphic autobiography goes to Quebecois Sylvie Rancourt's *Mélody* (1985). As an inaugural work, *Mélody* is a unique case: Rancourt was not a visual artist, but an exotic dancer who wrote, drew, published, and distributed her own series of *bandes dessinées*. Another Quebecois, Julie Doucet, likewise began publishing autobiographical texts in French in the underground comix scene in Montreal in the 1980s.[17] On the other side of the Atlantic, French creator Edmond Baudoin had published *Passe le temps* (1982), where he figures himself as four different characters of varying ages—including an imagined older self—who interact with one another. Although Groensteen (2014) presents this *sui generis* graphic memoir as the first attempt at autobiography in the French language, I consider Sylvie Rancourt's *Mélody* to be the first comic to directly attempt to narrate the artist's life because I consider Baudoin's work to be more

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[16] In this respect, Andrew Kunka (2018) comments on the current dominance of the autobiographical genre in comics: "[t]hese academic and commercial moves in recent years demonstrate a clear, mainstream acceptance of autobiographical comics, even if that acceptance is not reflected in most comic book stores" (np).

[17] *Comix*, Chute (2010) notes, "is an alternate spelling of *comics* that originated in the 1960s and emphasizes its ex-centricity and intended adult audience" (221).

experimental than experiential. Aside from Baudoin's text, the autobiographical genre experienced a later boom in Europe than in North America, slowly expanding over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, though it was only in the 2000s that the autobiographical genre experienced a real boom that was followed by a proliferation in critical work about it.

In focusing on autobiographical graphic novels, my project contributes to a growing body of research on self-representation in graphic narrative. While much of this scholarship has sought to theorize what distinguishes graphic life narratives from literary autobiographies, it still relies heavily on Philippe Lejeune's foundational text *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (1975)—particularly his definition of an autobiographical text as one where the author, narrator, and protagonist are identical and known to the reader. A notable example of the scholarship surrounding graphic memoirs is Chute's *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010), where she analyzes the work of five renowned comics authors: Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloekner, Linda Barry, Marjane Satrapi, and Alison Bechdel. Here, Chute theorizes the use of graphic memoirs by feminist women cartoonists who explore their formative years. While they explore the reality of their everyday lives, Chute asserts that their narratives go beyond the personal to extend to the collective, presenting a complicated picture where trauma is not unspeakable, but rather communicated through various and inventive formal devices

In *Graphic Women,* Chutes asks "what does it mean for an author to literally reappear—in the form of a legible, drawn body on the page—at the site of her inscriptional effacement?" (3). As an avid reader of autobiographical comics, this question has occupied my study of the form, since sometimes artists make intriguing choices when drawing themselves. My project aims to analyze how francophone women comics artists depict their bodies—and their selves—in their graphic narratives and the stakes of the formal choices they make. I study the ways in which these authors

use the representations of the body to explore the relationships that they establish with others and

how they reconfigure their community as one that is open to other authors and to their readers.

The Case Against a "Bande Dessinée Féminine"

In her influential feminist text, *Le rire de la Méduse* (1975), Hélène Cixous invites women to

write as a means of liberating themselves in a world controlled and sanctioned by men:

> Écris, que nul ne te retienne, que rien ne t'arrête : ni homme, ni imbécile machine capitaliste où les maisons d'édition sont les rusés et obséquieux relais des impératifs d'une économie qui fonctionne contre nous et sur notre dos; ni toi-même. (40)

In this injunction to women, Cixous frames writing as a liberating act of revolt whereby women

expose themselves against the desires of an establishment that prefers that they remain silent. When

authors put themselves on the page to recount their lives, they are making a conscious decision to

bring their stories from the private sphere into the public. In the specific case of female authors, this

allows them to gain visibility in an environment where they have traditionally been considered minor

and labeled as such. The charter of the aforementioned Collective denounces this tendency in the

world of comics publishing:

> 'La bande dessinée féminine' n'est pas un genre narratif. L'aventure, la science-fiction, le polar, le romantisme, l'autobiographie, l'humour, l'historique, la tragédie sont des genres narratifs que les femmes auteures maîtrisent sans avoir à être renvoyées à leur sexe […]. Définir les goûts et aptitudes des gens selon leur sexe biologique ou leur genre est un préjugé qui ne repose sur aucune réalité.[18]

The phenomenon of categorizing women's creations solely on the basis of their gender or biological

sex is by no means limited to the world of sequential art. Implicit in this grouping is the notion that

all female experiences are the same, an assumption that Cixous likewise condemns:

> [i]l faut dire, avant tout, qu'il n'y a pas, aujourd'hui même […] une femme générale, une femme type. Ce qu'elles ont *en commun*, je le dirai. Mais ce qui me frappe, c'est l'infinie richesse de leurs constitutions singulières : on ne peut parler d'*une* sexualité féminine, uniforme, homogène, à parcours codable, pas plus que d'un inconscient semblable. (38)

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[18] http://bdegalite.org.

For the purposes of my project, there are two important takeaways from Cixous' claims. The first is that it is impossible to claim that there is *a universal woman*, as the various efforts to characterize the work of women solely on the basis of their gender in the comics world would have it. Secondly, Cixous highlights the inexhaustible richness of women's singularities, pointing to a multitude of experiences that are particular to each woman. In my project, I argue for the importance of embracing impersonal singularities as the basis for an affirmative community.

If writing oneself can be an act of revolt for women, focusing on one's body goes even further, since writing—and in this case drawing—one's corporeity means exposing the body by putting it on the page. According to Cixous, whenever a woman speaks up—and what is writing/drawing but a way to speak to a larger, farther audience—she "throws" her whole person into the public, revealing her inner most thoughts:

> Écoute parler une femme dans une assemblée […]: elle ne 'parle' pas, elle lance dans l'air son corps tremblant, elle se lâche, elle vole, c'est tout entière qu'elle passe dans sa voix, c'est avec son corps qu'elle soutient vitalement la 'logique' de son discours; sa chair dit vrai. Elle s'expose. En vérité, elle matérialise charnellement ce qu'elle pense, elle le signifie avec son corps. (47)

Our individual experience of the world is perceived and filtered through the body. As such, I argue that narrating one's life by way of one's embodiment allows to communicate the intricacies and complexities of a life.

Publishing graphic memoirs can be considered an act of revolt against power because it transgresses the limits of what is supposed to be kept private—particularly by making the female body visible on the page. In their study of corporeal representation by French contemporary women writers, Christine Detrez and Anne Simon (2006), affirm that the artistic representation of the body in works authored by women constitutes a political act through which women defend and reappropriate their bodies and—by extension—themselves. But this reclaiming of the proper body goes beyond questioning what society demands of the female body. Instead, "[i]l s'agit, par un retour

sur cette identité qui semblait précisément s'échapper à elle-même, de reconfigurer symboliquement un corps trop souvent objet, pour en faire un sujet récusant l'étymologie de l'assujettissement (16). Detrez and Simon find that some women artists are making space for new bodily depictions, thus gaining agency by re(con)figuring and reimagining the body in their work.

Drawing Community in Three 'Movements'

In the chapters that follow, I analyze the various ways female graphic artists in the francophone world represent the body—in both text and image—in order to convey the imbrication of their singular lives with others in an interdependent network. The graphic memoirs I analyze reject the traditional conception of the body and the self as autonomous entities that can coexist with others while maintaining their integrity and sovereignty. Rather than containing themselves within a closed, discrete body, the authors in my corpus figure the body as open and vulnerable to those around it. I argue that the interactions with those around them—both within and outside of the works I study—are precisely what allows them to reach for an affirmative community by radically embracing otherness. Throughout my dissertation I explore how these texts sketch out an affirmative mode of community-making by examining how authors portray individual bodies and the contexts that shape them in four different but convergent forms. In order to illustrate the path that connects all chapters, I have included four illustrations that—rudimentary as they are—attempt to clarify the transition between the individual arguments in my chapters.

In Chapter 1, "Alternative Bodies," I explore the problems of self-representation in Julie Doucet's *Ciboire de criss!* (1996), Nadja's *Le coeur sanglant de la réalité* (2012), and Anne Herbauts' *Autoportrait* (2002). As a point of departure, I study the varied choices these artists make when deciding how to represent themselves in graphic form. From their internal, abstract conception of their identity, these authors find unique ways to shape their selves on paper, and the result often takes them in directions that I didn't expect. I focus on how these authors eschew the orderly,

(re)productive bodies cultivated by biopower in favor of alternative embodiments that explicitly resist biopolitical norms—for instance, by figuring themselves as animals or transgender men. This flexible depiction of the body's relationship to the self as ever-changing and permeable is a step towards building an affirmative community.
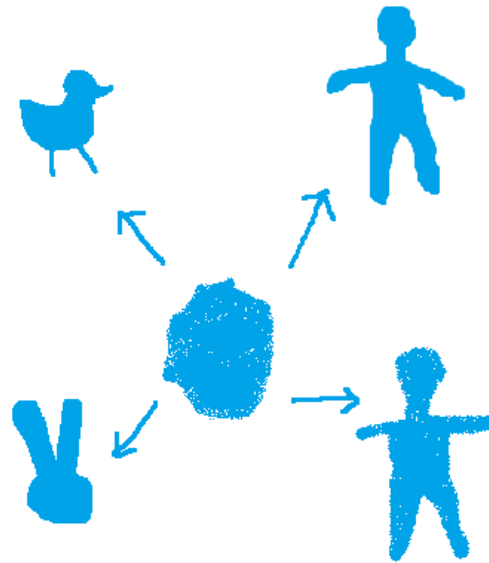
Figure 0.1. Martha Moreno Linares. From one's essence (*a* life) to a body/self.

In Chapter 2, "Ailing Bodies," I move beyond the borders of the "individual" body to explore how it can affect the lives of those around it, effectively exceeding the imagined corporeal boundaries between members of a community. Specifically, I analyze the how the intruding presence of a disease in the body of an individual erodes its "borders" and ultimately threatens the entire family as an immunitary community. Through a reading of Élodie Durand's *La parenthèse* (2010) and Marion Fayolle's *La tendresse des pierres* (2013), I examine how graphic novels make space for a more inclusive and hospitable community that is not based on genetics or kinship. In these works, illness is portrayed as a collective experience—one that potentially affects not only the immediate family and health care professionals, but also the readers who take part in it via graphic narrative and help to make sense of it.
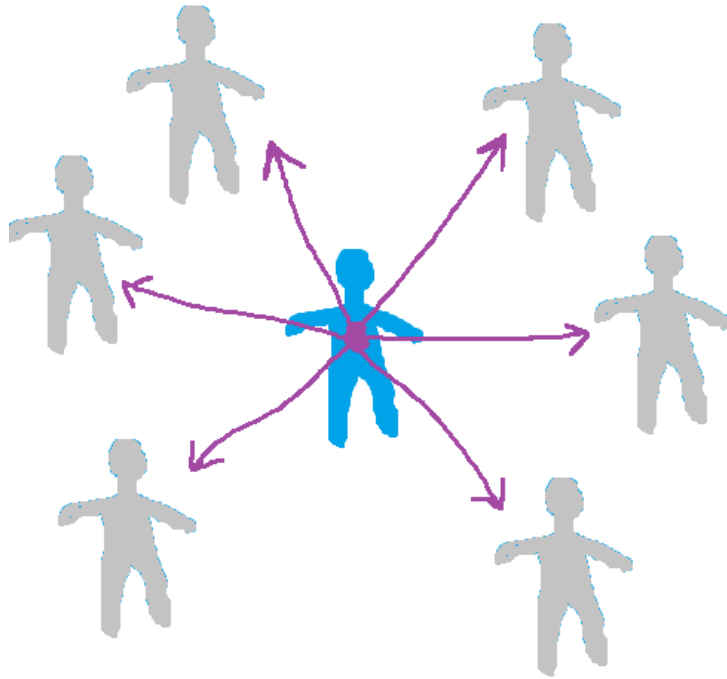
Figure 0.2. Martha Moreno Linares. How an 'individual' ailing body/self can affect others.

Whereas Chapter 2 is concerned with how illness can ripple out to affect the community, Chapter 3, "Abused Bodies," focuses on the opposite progression: the impact that the community can have on the embodied experience of a single individual. Through a reading of Dominique Goblet's *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (2007) and Geneviève Castrée's *Susceptible* (2012), I explore how the authors represent the physical and emotional abuse they suffered as children at the hands of their parents and other close relations. Both artists use the comics medium in unique ways to represent deeply traumatic events and complicated relationships characterized by a power imbalance between the child protagonist/narrator/author and the adults in their life. These destructive interactions with relatives reveal the family to be a metonymic representation of the biopolitical society in microcosm. By bringing their stories to the public, both authors reclaim their agency and regain the control that was once denied to them as children—not by reappropriating their narrative, but by making it public and sharing it with readers.

Figure 0.3. Martha Moreno Linares. How authority figures affect the child/protagonist's corporeal experience.

In my conclusion, "Erotic Bodies," I analyze how graphic narratives portray the interaction and exchanges between individuals who willingly choose to expose their bodies to one another. I focus on how Aurélia Aurita's *Fraise et chocolat* (2006-2007)—and, to a lesser extent, Rancourt's *Melody* (1985)—show sexual interactions between bodies that do not comply with the reproductive purposes that sex is meant to serve in societies regulated by biopolitical power. Instead, they open up their bodies to their partners and to the public, refusing to conform to the social expectations for women. The polemic following the publication of both volumes of *Fraise et chocolat*—an explicit erotic graphic memoir—showed that some actors in French society still condemn the type of candor with which Aurelia explored her relationship with fellow comics author Frédéric Boilet. In addition to portraying her relationship, Aurita uses both volumes of *Fraise et chocolat* and *Buzz-moi* (2009) to denounce the inequality that exists in the world of sequential art. The kind of behavior that she had to endure during the beginning of her career exemplifies, in my opinion, the mistreatments which the *Collectif des Créatrices de Bande Dessinée contre le Sexisme* is trying to eradicate.
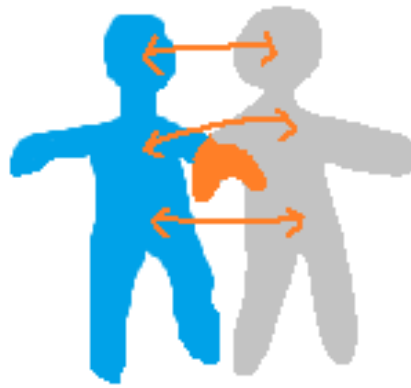
20

Figure 0.4. Martha Moreno Linares. The communion of bodies/selves.

As a final example of the status of women in the world of sequential art and the need for permanent change, I want to point to a sort of testimonial from author Aurélia Aurita. In an undated blog entry on her website, entitled "Are there too many Smurfettes in comics?," Aurita instructs readers to visit the website of the *Collectif des Créatrices de Bande Dessinée contre le Sexisme* to find the answer to the question she raises in the post's title.[19] In the playful comic that accompanies the post (fig.0.5 below), Aurita condemns the misogyny that still plagues the comics world, offering a commentary on the struggles—past, present, and future—of women in comics. By using the Smurfs to convey her ideas, Aurita pays homage to one of the most celebrated children's comics in the Franco-Belgian tradition. But this choice of subject is also germane to her critique. In most issues of the original comic series, all but one of the smurfs are male; the lone exception, Smurfette, also has a complicated origin story, since she was originally created as an evil character by the villain, Gargamel. In this short satirical comic strip, Aurita summarizes her personal feelings about the experiences of female creators in the comics world, and points to the difficulties women comics creators still face as they strive to make a place for themselves in the world of sequential art.

Figure 0.5. Aurélia Aurita, Les schtroumpfettes et la BD.

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[19] https://www.aurita.fr/bonus/.

Chapter 1 : ALTERNATIVE BODIES

In her graphic memoir *Le quart de millimètre* (2009)*,* Quebecois author Zviane devotes eleven

pages to a reflection on how she has been portraying herself in her autobiographical work, declaring

"Je me dessine souvent comme ça. C'est pas tout à fait la réalité" (fig. 1.1):

Figure 1.1. Zviane, *Le quart de millimètre* (Magnani, 2013), p. 25.

Zviane's panel makes explicit one of the central issues of autobiographical texts: the relationship

between self-representation and the representation of the body. In her particular case, she decides to

address the fact that her drawings of herself are not entirely truthful to her figure, since she has what

she humorously calls "un handicap poitrinaire." The pages that follow serve as a manifesto against

the consequences of having a different frame as a woman in a society that values big breasts. The

author addresses readers by breaking the fourth wall and engaging them in what feels like an

intimate conversation to discuss her choices regarding her appearance. Moreover, Zviane uses this

monological sequence to further explain that her choices as an artist support a certain character that

is her visual self:

Figure 1.2. Zviane, *Le quart de millimètre* (Magnani, 2013), p. 30.

These panels serve as an invitation to readers to participate in a discussion that opens up her body

and its portrayal to the public, thus stressing the fact that the way we choose to represent ourselves

is not innocent.

The choices made by graphic artists have different implications than those facing writers

working only in text, as Charles Hatfield explains: "In comics, such questions inevitably have to do

with appearances, in particular the graphic likeness of the autobiographical protagonist and its relation to the artist's own sense of self" (114). The process of drawing oneself is very intimate and subjective because it means a double movement of internal reflection and external representation, or as Hatfield puts it: "We *see* how the cartoonist envisions him or herself; the inward vision takes an outward form" (114). This self-fashioning, which has more in common with self-portraiture and other visual arts than with traditional literature, subjecting the author's drawn form to the reader's gaze. The drawn body in autobiographical graphic novels serves as a window into the artist's subjectivity; it creates a space for authors to shape their visual identity, whether it matches the perception of others or not.

It is this discrepancy that I will explore in this chapter, along with the stakes of graphic artists' choice to represent themselves in such ways. In my corpus, I argue, the portrayal of the self in alternative forms—from those of a different sex to those of a different species—strives to represent *a life* as defined by Gilles Deleuze in *Pure Immanence*:[20]

> The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from subjectivity and objectivity of what happens [...]. The life of such an individuality fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence, a life. (28-29)

From this perspective, what these authors represent goes beyond their external appearance as human women. They try to depict themselves as *a* singular *life*, and thus sometimes play with their visual representation to show an immanent self that is open to refashioning in collaboration with the reader. This portrayal deviates from the self-contained self, where identity coincides with a body that is closed off to difference. The self-sufficient self is the basis for traditional conceptions of community that are defined by their individuals' common, fixed identity. These communities, like

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[20] As Deleuze does in his essay, I will insist on the use of the indefinite article which stresses his view of a life devoid of the accidents of internal and external, past and present, and is rather a singular, immanent life.

the bodies that constitute them, exclude difference as a threat that has to be rejected through an immunitary defense. The alternative bodies drawn by the different authors I want to explore in this chapter bend the rules of traditional and logical visual storytelling in favor of depictions that prioritize their own self-perception rather than the external perception of others. By doing so, they refuse the disciplinary gaze of others, in embodied reality, and opt instead for the unknowable perception of readers, in the space of the graphic novel. These bodies open up the self to the co-creation of readers, generating a space for a radically inclusive community.

For example, in *La parenthèse* (2010), Élodie Durand's portrayal of herself is very stable throughout her text. The only clear difference is her hair length, which she uses to mark the period before (long) and after (short) her complete recovery from a brain tumor.[21]

Figure 1.3. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 4-5.

However, there are two more equivocal panels on page 161 (fig. 1.4), where for the first—and only—time in her graphic novel she draws an overweight version of the same avatar she has used up to this point to portray herself. For the reader, who is used to the slim avatar, this representation comes without any previous contextual explanation and causes the same kind of confusion that the protagonist has been experiencing since her diagnosis. This feeling is augmented by the fact that neither text nor thought bubbles address the sudden change; instead, they continue the internal monologue from previous panels:

Figure 1.4. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), p. 161.

It is only several panels later that Durand addresses the difference in her weight. This time, however, she does so only in the text—not in her drawings, which once again show a slim Élodie:[22] "J'avais

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[21] I will study this text in depth in Chapter 2, "Ailing Bodies."

[22] In this text—except with the artists who publish under a pseudonym—I will use the artist's last name to refer to the author and the first name to talk about the character in the autobiographical work.

grossi depuis le début de ma maladie. Presque dix kilos sans le voir. Avec le régime sans sel, au bout de quelques mois j'ai retrouvé mon poids d'avant la maladie." In these pages, the author uses the dislocation between text and image to support the confusion between the disoriented protagonist's internal impression and her external reality. What is depicted visually here without textual explanation is followed by a six-panel page where the drawings emphasize the edema in her brain rather than her weight, in an attempt to refocus on the condition that—if not obvious to the naked eye of the people around her—is still very present and causing changes in her external appearance. Once again, the author uses the graphic nature of the comics genre to portray *a Deleuzian life* that doesn't follow the rules of orderly, self-contained bodies represented in her healthy-looking exterior but rather concentrates on a silhouette dominated both visually and metaphorically by the edema. Only a couple of pages later does Durand address her weight loss, and she does so only in her internal monologue:

Figure 1.5. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 162-163.

Throughout the graphic novel, readers perceive Élodie as she perceives herself during her illness, except for the brief interlude or "parenthesis" where the overweight portrayal opens up a window to the reality that she could not see at the time. The duality of this self-representation (slim/overweight) shows the author's ambivalence with respect to subjectivity and objectivity. The line between them is blurred by the effects of her brain tumor, as her own memories are unclear.[23] Furthermore, by making her weight gain intelligible only in retrospect, Durand aligns readers with her own perspective rather than that of an external observer, disjoining her embodied presence from their potentially disciplining gaze.

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[23] I explore the related duality of individual and collective autobiography in Chapter 2, "Ailing Bodies."

The choices made by both of these artists illustrate the main argument that I will develop in this chapter: in the graphic memoirs written by francophone women that compose my corpus, the visual representation of the artist is an attempt to represent outwardly the inward vision of how the artist sees or chooses to portray herself. Considering the fact that, according to Michel Foucault's *Il faut défendre la société* (1997), biopower aims to control bodies so they are orderly, disciplined, (re)productive and—above all—normalized, these portrayals of bodies that do not align with that regularizing view manifest a resistance to those power structures. While Zviane modifies her representation as a way to deal with her own self-image issues, Durand uses comics' *cross-discursivity* to express how her own disjointed self-perception is aggravated by her illness. Both cases are examples of the larger argument of this chapter, which is that in my corpus the self takes shapes that may come into conflict with the female body—or even recognizably human body—expected by biopower as Foucault defines it. Instead of the orderly (re)productive female body, the authors draw figures that are not traditionally recognizable as such. These figures are open to the interpretation of unknown and unknowable readers, and thus to the difference they represent.

Among the perceived dangers to biopolitical regimes, according to Foucault, are abnormal bodies that do not conform to the normalizing ideal of biopower:

> La mort de l'autre, ce n'est pas simplement ma vie, dans la mesure où ce serait ma sécurité personnelle ; la mort de l'autre, la mort de la mauvaise race, de la race inférieure (ou du dégénéré, ou de l'anormal), c'est ce qui va rendre la vie en général plus saine ; plus saine et plus pure. (*Il faut* 228)

Then, for biopower all bodies that deviate from normalization constitute a threat against public health and the greater good. While those in power might insist on the dangers of these alternative bodies on normalized bodies, the main concern is actually the discipline and control of the population so that they can remain healthy and (re)productive. In what follows, I explore the work of three artists whose self-portrayal exemplifies this resistance to biopolitical control, examining the non-normative, non-(re)productive bodies figured in the autobiographical works of Julie Doucet

(Canada), Anne Herbauts (Belgium) and Nadja (France). By refusing to draw themselves as female or even human, and opting instead for different avoidance strategies, these authors break the biopolitical mold and lay the ground for a new mode of aesthetic communing. More specifically, Doucet uses resexualization—the depiction of the character under a different gender identity—and doubling in her work, while Herbauts and Nadja opt for theriomorphism—the shaping of characters in animal form. They disjoin self-representation from the discrete human body, incorporating otherness within the self—both through the figures they draw in their works, and through the indeterminate incorporation of readers. By resisting the notion of the body—and the self—as self-sufficient (id)entities and opening them up to interpretation and re-creation, they refuse the immunitary form of community, based on common identities and the exclusion of difference. Instead, they make space for a radically inclusive collective, one that embraces readers and their multiplicity of identities.

Julie Doucet and the Exploration of the Double

There is currently a sort of critical renaissance happening around the work of Quebecois Julie Doucet, caused by the new compilation of her work released by Drawn & Quarterly in the second half of 2018. One of the pioneers of Francophone autobiography in the sequential arts, Julie Doucet was among the quintessential figures of the (underground) comix scene in the 80's, second only to Sylvie Rancourt's *Melody.*[24] Her self-published work, notably her *Dirty Plotte* series (in French), was published in English translation by Drawn & Quarterly (1990-1998). Since the beginning of her career, Doucet's work has been unapologetically frank when it comes to "feminine issues" that, in the 1980s, were not typically portrayed in mainstream comics. Her work shares some stylistic and thematic similarities with Aline Kominsky-Crumb, another female pioneer from the American scene. As Hillary Chute (2010) asserts:

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[24] I will discuss this graphic novel in the Conclusion: Erotic bodies.

Largely, readers find Kominsky-Crumb's work off-putting: for cartoonists, this is because of her excessively "primitive" style; for some feminists, this is because the sexually explicit content of her work not only depicts the character Aline's body—excrement, blood, and vaginal discharge—intimately but also depicts her enjoying "perverse" or "eccentric" sex." (30)

Doucet's style and the content of her work were likewise, at the time of publication, uncharted territory in French sequential arts. Her panels are often crowded with objects that seem to serve no purpose other than to clutter the page. The lack of "'artful' composition and 'correct' spatial perspective" Chute attributes to Kominsky-Crumb surfaces in the aesthetics of the ugly and the grotesque that have become a staple in Doucet's work (31). I contend that Doucet uses the grotesque as a way to break with the biopolitical idea of a clean, orderly, closed body.

Her representation of the body as an ever-changing entity that is almost impossible to seize visually falls in line with the goal of this group of women authors: to dispute the idea of a closed community trying to protect its members from difference by breaking with the logic of the immunitary paradigm. By representing bodies—especially her own—as malleable, Doucet pushes herself and her audience to question the given dichotomies of feminine/masculine, human/animal, and whole/fragmented that govern bodily and identitary perception. By undermining the boundaries of her own graphic identity, Doucet makes space for an affirmative community as she opens up the self, while visually taking importance from the body and putting it on the same level as the numerous everyday objects that surround it:

Figure 1.6. Julie Doucet, *Ciboire de Criss!* (L'Association, 2004), np.

The clutter of objects in figure 6 is part of Doucet's very recognizable visual style. Additionally, the personification of mundane objects attributes language to the things that surround her. This leveling with animals and objects is consonant with Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque (1970): "ce corps ouvert, non prêt […] n'est pas franchement délimité du monde: il est mêlé au monde, mêlé

aux animaux, mêlé aux choses" (Bakhtin 36). The panel figured above fits this definition of the grotesque, since it portrays a grotesque "animate kitchen" in which Julie is embedded.

Additionally, Mary Russo (1995) has also theorized on this subject. According to Russo, "the grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing" (8). All these characteristics of the grotesque body can be found in Doucet's *Ciboire de Criss!* (2004). In this graphic journal devoted to her dreams and fantasies, the author portrays open, multiple, changing, and secreting bodies. From fantasies and dreams where body parts are amputated and shared as removable objects, to others where two versions of Julie coexist, the alternative bodies that the author draws are ever-changing and present her as a complex character who refuses to conform to the societal ideal of the docile female body. Furthermore, by bringing something private like dreams and fantasies into the public, the artist transgresses the space of what is considered appropriate, especially since Julie is drawn as a disheveled, unruly body. This exploration of subjects such as bodily fluids and masturbation is far from flattering and had traditionally been rejected as worthy of development in comics. However, the grotesque—as opposed to the sublime—, is part of what Victor Hugo defended in the preface of *Cromwell* (1827), which served as a manifesto for Romantics: "Le sublime sur le sublime produit malaisément un contraste, et l'on a besoin de se reposer de tout, même du beau" (29). For him, art should have a place for the grotesque, since the sublime, like anything else, can be monotonous, thus devoid of the richness of variety that the grotesque provides. Doucet's penchant for the grotesque, especially for a woman writing about her own life, is particularly subversive in a society where the clean, proper, (re)productive body is the expectation, especially for women.

Furthermore, Doucet's emphasis on bodily functions in *Ciboire de criss!* corresponds to what Bakhtin calls *grotesque realism*, which, for him, encompasses a larger vision of the body: "Dans le réalisme grotesque […] le cosmique, le social et le corporel sont indissolublement liés, comme un

tout vivant et indivisible" (28). Bakhtin's conception of the body beyond its individuality echoes Deleuze's definition of *a life*, since it considers that the material bodily principle is not contained in the individual. Bakhtin locates it, rather, in the people, "un peuple qui dans son évolution croît et se renouvelle perpétuellement" (28). Doucet embraces this corporeal renewal in the ever-changing multiplicity of bodies she draws to depict herself. In these bodies, she portrays both herself and the larger groups that she belongs to: her community of female graphic artists and any woman (represented by her readers). And by portraying herself in a variety of grotesque bodies, she refuses the illusion of a body and a self with only one possible representation, especially when exploring the lower parts of her body and its secretions. What's more, she overthrows the traditional hierarchy that associates the higher bodily parts with anything that is elevated, spiritual, and abstract and insists instead on her corporeal materiality. Just as Bakhtin attributes a subversive intention to the grotesque, Doucet underlines her resistance to the oppression of biopower through her emphasis on the *bas corporel.*

Never one to shy away from controversial topics, Doucet is well-known for her exploration of bodily fluids such as periods, sweat, mucus, urine, feces, blood, etc. Numerous panels are devoted to different episodes relating to her periods, like the one in figure 1.7:

Figure 1.7. Julie Doucet, *Ciboire de Criss!* (L'Association, 2004), np.

In this series of panels entitled "En manque," Julie realizes that she has run out of tampons while on her period and suddenly starts to become a monster in a way that is reminiscent of the Hulk's transformation.[25] These hyperbolic panels are a grotesque reimagining of the poster of the 1958 film *The Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (fig. 1.8), which portrays a highly sexualized woman whose only monstrous traits are her size and strength. In Doucet's version, the panel shows Julie walking

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[25] Fictional comics character created in 1962 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.

through the city attacking men and flooding everything in her wake with her menstrual blood. The episode ends when she breaks into a pharmacy and finds some tampons to staunch the heavy flow, which returns her to normal size and temperament. This humorous intertextuality opposes an iconic female sex-symbol with an aspect of women's everyday life that is rarely depicted in comics or other forms of visual culture: menstruation. A woman on her period represents a body that is capable of reproduction but is not fulfilling that function at the time, thereby failing to meet one of the main expectations for women in a biopolitical regime. With this representation, Doucet appropriates a bodily function that has traditionally been considered taboo and, as such, has been hidden from public view. As Russo notes, following Julia Kristeva, secretions are associated with women and the abject: "Blood, tears, vomit, excrement – all the detritus of the body that is separated out and placed with terror and revulsion (predominantly though not exclusively) on the side of the feminine – are down there in that cave of abjection." (2)

Figure 1.8. Reynold Brown, *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*, *1958*.

In *Ciboire de criss!*, Doucet explores the grotesque body along with all its secretions, which reminds the reader that corporeal borders are easily erasable—and indeed, that they are always permeable, since these flows show that the "contained" body is a fiction. By exposing the abject, she blurs the line that is believed to separate the inside of the body from the outside world. Instead, she presents the body itself as an open entity composed of those elements that society has deemed unworthy of mention, for they paint a different picture from the orderly, biopolitical body.

As Kristeva (1980) affirms : "Ce n'est donc pas l'absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend abject, mais ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L'entre-deux, l'ambigu, le mixte" (12). It is this other characteristic of the abject in Doucet's work that I will analyze next: the double representation of the self. Throughout *Ciboire de*

criss!, Doucet uses different variations of the double.[26] In the series of panels entitled "Je n'ai pas la conscience tranquille," for example, she depicts her guilty conscience as a grotesque double of herself, walking side by side with her:

Figure 1.9. Julie Doucet, *Ciboire de Criss!* (L'Association, 2004), np.

As the play of words in the title implies, the character of her conscience portrays the side of her personality that Julie is constantly repressing in order to adapt to social norms.

This visual representation of her duality presents her conscience as an outrageous version of the self—an avatar who constantly embarrasses her because she lacks any inhibitions in the way she dresses and acts, but who also more closely aligns with the way she perceives herself. The first panel shows her conscience as a dark outline lurking behind her, seemingly ready to hit her with a bottle. As the story progresses and they are out in public, Julie is mortified by her conscience's shameless spitting, flirting, and farting, since they all represent socially unacceptable behaviors, especially for a woman. When Julie is fed up with her conscience and demands that she leave, her conscience tells her "Vraiment tu mérites pas que je sois ta conscience. T'es straight à mort !", to which Julie answers "Toi ! T'es mortelle !" Whether she refers to the reputational death Julie faces as a result of her conscience's behavior or a bodily death represented in/by her insides, this reference to being deadly is reminiscent of the link that Kristeva makes between the abject and death:

> Tel un théâtre vrai, sans fard et sans masque, le déchet comme le cadavre *m'indiquent* ce que j'écarte en permanence pour vivre. Ces humeurs, cette souillure, cette merde sont ce que la vie supporte à peine et avec peine de la mort. J'y suis aux limites de ma condition de vivant. De ces limites se dégage mon corps comme vivant. (11)

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[26] The title *Ciboire de criss!* is a profanity in Quebec, where it is common use to take words associated with catholicism such as *ciboire* (wafer box) and *criss* (Christ) but also other terms as *estie* (host), *câlice* (chalice), *tabarnak* (tabernacle), etc.

Eventually, however, the apparently irreconcilable differences between Julie and her conscience disappear. They make up at the end, as she embraces the other side of her self in the last panel both literally and metaphorically:

Figure 1.10. Julie Doucet, *Ciboire de Criss!* (L'Association, 2004), np.

This series of panels is one of many explorations of the in-between that is characteristic of the abject. In itself, the comics medium has been considered a composite medium, and its *cross-discursivity* has historically led to its classification as low culture—though its component parts, literature and visual art, have long been considered high culture. The dichotomy associated with graphic novels is not only restricted to authors and their creative process, but also to readers, who are themselves not fixed since they *braid*[27] together the sense communicated by both text and image in each panel, and in the work as a whole.

Furthermore, the comics medium allows for the activation of the dichotomy between the literal and the metaphorical, through the juxtaposition of text and image. For example, the play on words in the title of the sequence ("Je n'ai pas la conscience tranquille") I have just analyzed is only one of the possibilities that the medium allows. In this case, the metaphorical sense of a "conscience tranquille" (a clear conscience) is mixed with the literal sense of "tranquille" (quiet/immobile) as the avatar representing her conscience speaks loudly and walks on cars. Moreover, the title of the graphic novel *Dirty plotte* and its explanation on the first page also address the duality in the literal and metaphorical sense of the word "plotte", which can mean vagina, slut or sexy (this last use corresponds to Quebec):[28]

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[27] *Braiding* (*tressage* in French) is a term coined by Thierry Groensteen in comics studies to describe the process—both in creation and in decoding—through which every individual panel is in a relationship with each other but also with the whole composed by the graphic novel as a unit.

[28] See Urban Dictionary at https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=plotte.

In figure 1.11, the first panel positions the word "plotte"—and, at the same time, the artist—geographically in the province of Quebec, surrounded by anglophone territories. Having established the geographical context, Doucet illustrates the different meanings of the word, all related to the female experience. The third and fourth panels depict scenes of street harassment towards women, which places the author socially as a gendered subject sanctioned by the male gaze. Doucet seems to be well-aware of the flexibility of comics and uses the very first page to situate herself and tell her experience as a gender and national minority.[29] Moreover, she concludes with a panel that conflates the literal and metaphorical meaning of the other word in the title: "dirty" by showing a very disheveled and dirty woman saying "T'sais, plotte est un mot très, très sale".

Catherine Mao (2013) has theorized what she calls "l'autoportrait détourné" as a *topos* specific to the autobiographical genre in sequential arts. She affirms that while the doubling of the artist and the protagonist as two separate but concurrent entities is used in literary genres such as fantasy and horror, comics often use it in autobiographies. She then lists the different strategies that graphic artists use to avoid portraying themselves:

> Le relatif désintérêt pour l'autoreprésentation se traduit de plusieurs manières, les dessinateurs adoptant parfois des stratégies d'esquive tout à fait remarquables : l'indistinction, la dépersonnalisation, la désexualisation ou encore l'évitement constituent autant de manières d'éviter l'autoportrait. (n.p.)

I would argue that what Mao calls "lack of interest" is actually an aesthetic choice, one that allows artists to avoid aligning themselves with the classic representation of beautiful, disciplined bodies. By drawing themselves as what I am calling alternative bodies, the artists in this chapter resist conformity with biopolitical norms by choosing ambiguity, thus destroying the fiction of the discrete individual. The avoidance strategies used by Doucet and other authors in my corpus, from doubles

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[29] See Marcie Frank's chapter in *Queer Diasporas* (2000).

to resexualization, represent a refusal to conform to the logic traditionally associated with the autobiographical genre—where author, narrator and protagonist are the same. Furthermore, these representations of alternative bodies are political because they take bodies that were not traditionally spoken of and bring them to the public. Following Jacques Rancière's view, they reconfigure what he calls the *partage du sensible* by making them visible and counted, thus fulfilling their emancipatory goal. Rancière finds that the idea of emancipation implies "la volonté d'être participant à un même monde, d'être reconnu comme parlant un langage commun, mais aussi de pouvoir participer à toutes les formes du langage" (Palmiéri 35). The way in which the authors in my corpus represent the body has clear political implications, as those depictions transcend the traditional stakes of self-representation in sequential art.

In many sequences of *Ciboire de criss!*, Doucet depicts her self as a man, transgressing the boundaries that, at the time of publication, saw gender as the traditional binary of masculine and feminine. These scenes portraying Julie as a man evoke a range of dreams and fantasies: from the aftermath of a gender reassignment surgery, where Julie is shown sporting the associated scars on her body, to a complete reimagination resulting in the male version of herself. For this discussion on Doucet's reimaginations of the self, I understand *transgender* as explained by Jack Halberstam (2016): "The term "transgender" […] refuses the stability that the term "transsexual" may offer to some folks and embraces more hybrid possibilities for embodiment and identification" (146). The flexibility associated with the term echoes that of Doucet's fantasized, embodied transgenderism. In *Ciboire de criss!*, these gender-bending scenes show different options for body modification, as the author portrays masculinity as a fluid category along the gender spectrum. In each of these sequences, Julie explores different aspects of her newfound masculinity, focusing especially on the penis. For example, in a sequence entitled "Regret" (fig. 1.12), Julie wakes up quite confused after a gender reassignment surgery:

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Figure 1.12. Julie Doucet, *Ciboire de Criss!* (L'Association, 2004), np.

After a brief shock, she sets out to explore the possibilities of her new anatomy and is soon satisfied

with her functioning penis. The duality between masculine and feminine is still present, since she

draws herself as a rather androgynous figure but maintains the feminine adjective "curieuse."

Towards the end of the sequence, when she entertains the idea of having sex as a man, she is initially

excited at the prospect, but suddenly becomes burdened by the thought that she might not like using

her new penis—and indeed, might actually miss her vagina.

This obsession with sexual/reproductive organs is present throughout *Ciboire de criss!*,

especially in gender-bending sequences. Although the reproductive function of sex is explored in

this graphic novel—as I will address further below—, Doucet portrays many other facets of both

men and women's sex lives associated with those organs, such as masturbation. For example, in a

sequence entitled "Oh la la j'ai fait un drôle de rêve!", Doucet recounts a dream where she is an

astronaut about to go on a mission, when her mother comes to bring her cookies at the last minute.

The first transgression comes when the mother explains the reason: "…C'est pour mieux te

masturber mon enfant!" (np). This sentence is reminiscent of a key moment in *Little Red Riding Hood*,

the European folk tale, when the big bad wolf utters a similar sentence—grammatically, but not in

content—while posing as the grandmother. The reference to the children's story is juxtaposed with

an action traditionally associated with adults and considered taboo—masturbation—and with the

unexpected addition of cookies:

Figure 1.13. Julie Doucet, *Ciboire de Criss!* (L'Association, 2004), , np.

The conclusion of the sequence (fig. 1.13) depicts Julie undressing and trying the cookies by eating

them but also by masturbating with them. Firstly, this sequence transgresses the social norms

imposed by biopower which, according to Foucault (1997), dictates that masturbation is an activity

exclusively reserved to adult for reproductive purposes:

"les fameux contrôles, par exemple, de la masturbation qui ont été exercés sur les enfants depuis la fin du XVIIIe siècle jusqu'au XXe siècle, et ceci dans le milieu familial, dans le milieu scolaire, etc., représentent exactement ce côté de contrôle disciplinaire de la sexualité" (224)

Secondly, this sequence also breaks any logic by portraying cookies (traditionally, a snack for children) as a tool for self-pleasure. Lastly, masturbation in general is an activity that is condemned by biopolitical power, which seeks to discipline and regulate sexuality for two main reasons:

"d'un côté, la sexualité, en tant que conduite exactement corporelle, relève d'un contrôle disciplinaire, individualisant, en forme de surveillance permanente […] et puis, d'un autre côté, la sexualité s'inscrit et prend effet, par ses effets procréateurs, dans des processus biologiques larges qui concernent non plus le corps de l'individu mais cet élément, cette unité multiple que constitue la population" (*Il faut* 224)

The very last panel figures Julie in bed, waking up from the dream and showing, through her facial expression and body language, the logical reaction of incomprehension to such an illogical dream.

In another sequence that mixes non-reproductive sex and gender-bending, Doucet explores toxic masculinity as she figures herself as an extremely sexually aggressive man. In this very short sequence, entitled "Si j'étais un homme", Julie draws herself as a very masculine, muscular young man who sexually assaults a woman passing by:

Figure 1.14. Julie Doucet, *Ciboire de Criss!* (L'Association, 2004), np.

In this sequence, the author conflates virility with aggressiveness to caricaturize the traits that can be associated with an excessive masculinity. At the same time, the female character who is passing by seems to be at the mercy of the protagonist's impulsive desire, which culminates in sexual assault. The whole episode presents an exaggerated and simplified view of masculinity, where sexual assault is justified by the simple fact that the protagonist has a large penis.

Beyond these gender-bending moments, Doucet devotes several sequences to the exploration of dreams and fantasies centered on her imagined or actual sexual organs: for example, recounting a dream about a double mastectomy. This emphasis on body parts is a *leitmotif* of *Ciboire*

de criss!, as Doucet insists on portraying the self as a collection of parts that seem to be (and are, in some cases) interchangeable. This conception of the body as a collection of parts that, together, form a larger unit is similar to Thierry Groensteen's idea that a graphic novel as a whole is, at the same time, composed of smaller signifying pieces, such as the "vignette". This idea, which he calls "solidarité iconique", is defined by Groensteen (1999) as follows:

> "On définira comme solidaires les images qui, participant d'une suite, présentent la double caractéristique d'être séparées […] et d'être plastiquement et sémantiquement surdéterminées par le fait même de leur coexistence *in praesentia*." (21)

The medium of comics, with its iconic solidarity, allows Doucet to figure a fragmented body to highlight its composite form.[30] For example, back in figure 12, Doucet uses the layout and position of the panels on the upper side of the page to show her face and her chest and groin. Even though the organization of the panels indicates a sequence in time, the layout also encourages the reader to recompose part of the body. Additionally, by putting the two central figures side by side, the reader is once again reminded of the ubiquitous idea of the double in *Ciboire de criss!* which I previously explained in the sequence entitled "J'ai pas la conscience tranquille".

The culmination of Doucet's avoidance strategies is found in a sequence entitled "Le Double," in which the author recounts a dream where she consciously decides to make her reflection in a mirror—her double—a male version. Then, the couple composed of the male and female Julies kiss and engage in intercourse.

Figure 1.15. Julie Doucet, *Ciboire de Criss!* (L'Association, 2004), np.

This exploration of the transgendered (fantasized) double highlights Doucet's goal of pushing the boundaries of the body and the self, especially when we consider that by drawing a male version of herself, she is refusing a label—that of a cisgender woman consistent with traditional expectations.

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[30] A similar portrayal of the body as an organized collection of smaller (sometimes interchangeable) parts is also explored in Marion Fayolle's *La tendresse des pierres* (2013), which I will analyze in Chapter 2, "Ailing Bodies."

For the artist, the construction of her self has little to do with reality and more to do with her own exploration of identity. As Martine Delvaux (2018) states:

> At some point in our conversation, she tells me that she is 100 percent heterosexual, but that heterosexuality makes it more difficult to move towards a different sexual identity. The kind of sexual identity that she questions and undoes in her work. (73)

Instead of seeing her gender identity or sexual orientation as problematic in this discussion of her self-depiction, I find that the author is pushing against a system that uses categories to regulate and repress individuals. As such, this refusal to adapt to certain labels, I argue, is a kind of "reverse discourse" as Michel Foucault defined it in *Histoire de la Sexualité* (1976):

> l'apparition au 19e siècle […] de toute une série de discours sur les espèces et sous-espèces d'homosexualité, d'inversion, de pédérastie, d'"hermaphrodisme psychique," a permis à coup sûr une très forte avancée des contrôles sociaux dans cette région de "perversité"; mais elle a permis aussi la constitution d'un discours "en retour": l'homosexualité s'est mise à parler d'elle-même, à revendiquer sa légitimité ou sa "naturalité" et souvent dans le vocabulaire, avec les catégories par lesquelles elle était médicalement disqualifiée. (134)

When faced with a regulatory discourse associated with gender identity—such as that of biopolitical power—, depicting herself as a transgender man constitutes an act of revolt, especially considering that she is constructing an identity that does not conform to the traditional label or (re)productive bodies associated with women. As Halberstam affirms: "a 'reverse discourse' is in no way the 'same' as the discourse it reverses; indeed, its desire for reversal is a desire for transformation" (146). Her male depiction, then, is consonant with her desire to portray her body as ever-changing. This permeability and fluidity are also reminiscent of Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg, especially as she describes it as "a creature in a postgender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity" (150). For Haraway, the cyborg transcends the traditional duality of male/female, but also that of organic/mechanic and human/animal. The latter will be the final aspect that I will analyze in Doucet's *Ciboire de criss!*

As I have argued, Doucet's fluid self-representation matches a desire to depict herself while avoiding a realistic portrayal, in an attempt to figure her self as what Deleuze calls *a life*, stripped from the identitary markers that would identify her as a traditional, clean and disciplined woman who conforms to biopolitical standards. In several sequences of *Ciboire de criss!* she portrays herself as a woman capable of reproduction—for example in the multiple sequences devoted to her period— but not fulfilling what biopower sees as her paramount function. The final sequences, however, explore her recurrent dreams about maternity, which she calls "recidivist," an adjective that is far from innocent because it denotes a certain frustration on her part. At first sight, these sequences where Julie envisions herself as pregnant and eventually giving birth appear to be more realistic, but these traditional representations soon yield to unorthodox endings filled with non-human representations of the newborns. These figures are invariably monstrous: a human baby with a broken neck, another with a tail, one shrunk to the size of a pea, and finally several cats:

Figure 1.16. Julie Doucet, *Ciboire de Criss!* (L'Association, 2004), np.

By figuring her offspring as non-human, Doucet refuses the "normal" reproductive role reserved to women in biopolitical power. For example, figure 1.16 is part of a sequence where the author tells a dream where she is pregnant. In the first part, the baby briefly exits her womb while she is taking a bath, only to reveal it has a broken neck but seems normal otherwise. Later, within the dream she falls asleep and has another dream where she gives birth to a baby with a tail. After waking up from the dream within the dream, she realizes she has in fact given birth, but this time to a cat (fig. 1.16). Throughout the series, Julie seems to be aware of the fact that none of her offspring are healthy, human babies but this doesn't seem to shock her. In fact, in *Ciboire de criss!* motherhood is never associated with the normalized view of reproduction under biopower. Considering that biopolitical power had assigned itself the task of administering life, portraying reproduction in a non-normative way underscores the subversion of Doucet's text.

These alternative representations of the body are especially subversive when they portray non-human beings that couldn't conform to the (economically) productive goal that biopower has set for its subjects. In particular, theriomorphism has its own motivations and stakes. Animal depictions are, then, the next avoidance strategy that I will study in this chapter. In addition to Doucet's representations of anthropomorphized subjects, two other graphic artists use animal representation as a way to avoid self-portraiture and thus resist biopolitical power. While in Doucet's dream accounts of maternity Julie is aware of the "abnormality" of her animal offspring, theriomorphism is completely ignored by all characters in the two works that I will study next.

Nadja and the Contradiction of Re(ferenti)ality

The use of theriomorphism is not uncommon in graphic memoirs, as evidenced by the work of important artists such as Art Spiegelman and Lewis Trondheim. According to Michael Chaney's "Animal Subjects of the Graphic Novel" (2011), animal depictions "often function as the semiotic talisman in comics for broaching such questions of representation and its limits" (131). I argue that theriomorphism is another avoidance strategy used by graphic artists to highlight the difficulties associated with representing oneself, as I explained previously. These alternative animal bodies redirect the focus away from the referentiality traditionally associated with autobiography and thus destabilize the notion of self-depiction. As Chaney asserts, "rather than reading the human body as it is, we are often called upon in the comics to view and imagine it as dramatically other than it is" (132). This embrace of otherness supports the idea of a community that is open to the radical singularity of every life that constitutes it, including that of the reader who is confronting what they see in the text against what they know from experience. In this way, the visual distortion of animal depictions helps to construct the unique kind of community for which, I assert, these women graphic artists strive: "by operating invisibly behind the distortions we do see, the distorted illustration works to constantly reinforce the singularity of a negated ideal that we do not see" (132).

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Furthermore, by using animal figures, graphic artists make it easier for the reader to identify with them, since animal shapes share fewer features with the depiction of any human. Because animal avatars transcend race, age or gender, the reader can look past those specificities and identify with the author on the basis of their shared humanity.

In my corpus, this strategy is used by French illustrator Nadja—born in Egypt to a Lebanese father and a Russian mother—in three of her works, all autobiographical. In *Comment écrire des livres pour les enfants* (2002), *Comment ça se fait* (2006) and *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* (2012), all the characters are drawn as bears—also a symbol of Russia, her mother's native land:

Figure 1.17. Nadja, *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

The artist's choice of animal—the bear—carries in itself a connotation, since bears can evoke opposing feelings: from the endearment of a teddy bear to the fear of a wild creature. In general, Nadja's characters borrow the appearance of bears, but not the behavior, since they mostly act like civilized human beings. Thus, her drawings of the zoomorphic characters depict a sort of mix of a bear's head and a human's body, similar to Spiegelman's use of theriomorphism in *Maus* (1986). However, the characters in Nadja's works alternate between wearing clothes or accessories and not, which makes them seem more or less civilized. In this section, I will focus on *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* (2012), the third graphic novel in Nadja's autobiographical trilogy. This text centers around metatextual questions about the creative process, such as the responsibility of the artist to portray the truth. Nevertheless, this presents a conflict by virtue of the fact that she refuses all plausibility by drawing all humans as bears. In my corpus, theriomorphism operates on a different level from resexualization.

Whereas transgender representations in Doucet's work are present both visually and textually (fig. 1.14), transspecies portrayals in Nadja's *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* are only apparent on the visual level, with no textual references whatsoever. Thus, the comics' *cross-discursivity* allows for

the exploration of alternative representations through graphics alone, without any words that would

tame their meaning and allow readers to make easy sense of what they see. In the case of animal

depictions, the visual aspect of the graphic novel is employed to populate a world where the

dichotomy human/animal has no relevance. The portrayal of the author/narrator/protagonist as an

animal breaks the pact of referentiality traditional of autobiographical texts. The discrepancy of

representation found in *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* echoes what Louis van den Hengel (2012) calls the

"apparent contradiction of 'posthuman auto/biography'" (2). In his work on "bioart," Hengel

introduces the concept of *zoegraphy*, which is germane to my analysis of theriomorphism in the

graphic memoirs in my corpus.[31] Reprising two key concepts of Giorgio Agamben's theory

developed in *Homo Sacer* (1998)—*zoe* and *bios*—, Hengel defines *zoegraphy* as:

> a mode of writing life that is not indexed on the traditional notion of *bios*—the discursive,
> social, and political life appropriate to human beings—but which centers on the generative
> vitality of *zoe*, an inhuman, impersonal, and inorganic force which […] is not specific to
> human life worlds, but cuts across humans, animals, technologies, and things. (2)

I assert that animal portrayals serve a purpose that shifts the focus of autobiography from the

anthropocentric, patriarchal perspective to concentrate on a life that is closer to what Agamben calls

zoe: "the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)" (1). The removal

of the specificities attached to women—and more largely to human beings—is reminiscent of the

deleuzian concept of *a life*, which concentrates on the essence of the human being by taking away all

external accidents.

By stripping the depictions of human bodies down to their basic vitality—*zoe*—Nadja

focuses on the impersonal aspect of her "person," which constitutes the first in a string of

contradictions explored in *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité*. Similarly, for Esposito the key to escaping the

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[31] According to Hengel, bioart "uses biotechnology as a means of creative expression, [and it] is currently emerging as a vital site for the exploration of the cultural impact of the life sciences, even though its value as art does not primarily lie in its contribution to discussions beyond the aesthetic field" (4).

immunitary paradigm lies precisely in abandoning the traditional idea of "personhood" and embracing an "impersonal" conception of the individual: "What is sacred in humans is not their *persona*; it is that which is not covered by their masks". (2012 16) This point of view aligns with the Deleuzian idea of *a life* that is immanent, thus freed from the accidents of internal and external life. Following Esposito's formulation above, Nadja's depiction of characters in the form of bears proves a refusal to portray the human "mask", thus insisting on that which is behind. Moreover, she also visually refuses the perspective of the "first person" narrator, which in the medium of comics would mean drawing panels from the point of view of what the narrator/protagonist is seeing herself.[32]

Although this practice of—visually—adopting an impersonal point of view is rather widespread in the autobiographical genre, some authors have chosen to experiment with the first-person perspective. For example, in *Livret de phamille* (1995) Jean-Christophe Menu insists on limiting the panels to what he sees:

Figure 1.18. J. C. Menu, *Livret de Phamille* (L'Association, 2010).

In figure 1.18, the panels show the sights of the different places the narrator visits. Only the central panel depicts the author as he draws his reflection on the window of a store. This *mise en abyme* is only possible once his own image comes into his field of vision. In *La bande dessinée et son double* (2011), Menu calls this kind of perspective *autobiographie directe* and defines it as "d'après nature ou en 'caméra subjective', s'apparentant au carnet de voyage. En principe je ne m'y représente pas, sauf si je tombe sur mon reflet. Je ne suis présent que par ma voix en texte off". (68) Nadja, on the other

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[32] All of the authors in my corpus make a similar decision to draw themselves in the panels, adopting an external perspective visually but embracing the first-person pronoun textually. These divergent perspectives show, yet again, one of the possibilities of comic's *cross-discursivity*.

hand, chooses the impersonal perspective thus problematizing the relationship between personal and impersonal that we just discussed.[33]

In addition to the dichotomy personal/impersonal, Nadja plays with the opposition of human/animal. According to Chaney (2011), the exploration of animal depictions in comics has often been assimilated with children's stories, since the blurring of the line between humans and animals is much less accepted by adult readers. The illusion of a solid border separating humans from animals is then shattered in theriomorphic depictions, which portray human bodies as permeable to other species. This flexibility also raises the question of the contrast between civilized/savage. However, in *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* this dichotomy doesn't have colonial implications since the opposition is not associated with a specific group of characters, but rather with specific moments in the narrative. Here, Nadja doesn't use savagery as a device to other a person or a group of people, instead she reserves what I call "savage moments" to highlight the moment when a particular character is making an important argument.

In *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité*, the characters drawn as bears behave like regular human beings, moving around the city, having dinner at restaurants and talking on the telephone. However, there are several examples of panels where, graphically, the otherwise civilized animal representations give in to their "primitive" nature. The context in which these panels appear—dinner at a restaurant, gatherings with friends—does not seem to be disrupted by the bestial actions and attitude of the character behaving savagely. Instead, they appear to be included to serve as glimpses into the latent nature of these characters, who are otherwise in control of their emotions and impulses. The panel in figure 1.19 is part of a section where the protagonist is having dinner at a restaurant, with some friends, talking about literature:

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[33] Menu (2011) opposes the *autobiographie directe* mentioned above to the *autobiographie indirecte*, which he defines as "mise en scène, mise en narration. Elle transpose l'autobiographie dans la convention de la bande dessinée humoristique. Ici, il faut se représenter, mais tel un personnage de BD, ce qui est très différent d'un autoportrait". (68)

Figure 1.19. Nadja, *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

The first of these "savage" moments is in figure 1.19, where a friend of the protagonist is talking about what he considers to be the goal of writing: "Pour moi, l'écriture, c'est… aller au cœur de la réalité" (np). By using this expression, the character takes a stance on the importance—for him—of truth telling in literature. Thus, the "heart of reality" references the (hidden) core of things, the nitty gritty. This is followed on the next panel by the depiction of that same character holding the heart of a dead animal lying on a table, with its chest open. In the panel on the right, "reality" is drawn as a concrete being of an indiscernible species, and its heart—alluded to figuratively in the text—is represented literally in the image. Once more, *cross-discursivity* allows Nadja—like it did Doucet—to highlight an element by playing, in this case, with the literal and metaphorical representation of the heart. Furthermore, the disposition of the drawing on that panel is quite complex: it features the same character in two consecutive moments that are not separated by gutters, but rather overlap. The top part of the panel figures the protagonist's friend asking her if she understands what he means. In the bottom of the panel, the speech bubble corresponds to her answer, and the image of her friend reaching inside the dead animal to grab its heart represents her visual, literal interpretation of what he just said about the heart of reality.[34]

The panel that concludes this discussion about the importance of reality in literature focuses on a hand—a metonymic representation of the artist—holding a bleeding, dripping heart:

Figure 1.20. Nadja, *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

Both the splash of bright red and the simplicity of the drawing break with the artist's hitherto visual style in *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité*. Besides the rare use of color, the size of the panel emphasizes its importance, since it's one of the very few panels that take up a whole page. The texture and size of

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[34] This is not the first or the last time where the narration slips from the diegetic "reality" into fantasy. On several occasions, the focus of the narration swifts to imagine inanimate objects such as paintbrushes coming to life.

the lettering also convey the feeling of "animality," as they are made up of fuzzy lines, giving the impression that they are made up of fur. Moreover, the panel in figure 1.20 clearly explains the cover and title of the graphic novel, which portrays a clawed hand holding a bleeding heart:

Figure 1.21. Nadja, *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

However, there are two important differences between these illustrations worth mentioning: first, the letters on the cover are a typeface, rather than hand drawn. This gives the cover a more polished, professional—civilized—look.[35] Moreover, the heart portrayed on the cover of the graphic novel is drawn in clear, neat lines as a traditional heart symbol, forsaking all referentiality.[36] Nonetheless, in the middle of the comic (fig. 1.20), the heart resembles more closely an anatomical heart, especially considering that it is still profusely bleeding, even staining the hand that holds it. This ambivalent referentiality emphasizes the reality/fiction dichotomy that constitutes the center of *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité,* which revolves around the question of whether art needs to portray reality. Ultimately, Nadja turns this very issue on its head by refusing to visually represent humans in a "realistic" way. Additionally, these depictions of primitive behavior are highlighted by the rare use of red in a graphic novel that is mostly drawn in shades of grey. The two series of panels depicting "savage" moments contain two features that are exclusive to them: in addition to their use of red, they both contain aggressive facial expressions from the characters, including bared teeth. Both overtly bestial moments also happen as the narrator is addressing issues associated with the creative process.

The second "savage" moment comes later (fig. 1.21), in a sequence where the protagonist is depicted—on the left panel—breaking the fourth wall and looking straight at the reader as she attacks the canvas with a paintbrush. On the right panel the perspective changes, now portraying her

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[35] The cover of *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité*, itself, is inspired by the cover of the album entitled *American Idiot* (2004), by Green Day.

[36] When I describe the drawing on the cover as using clear lines I am not referring to the *ligne claire* style of drawing popularized by Hergé, but rather lines that are more stylized than the ones in the story.

hand painting on the canvas, each stroke coloring the panel in red. Again, the consecutive moments depicted are not separated by any gutters but rather juxtaposed in order to communicate the rapid brushstrokes. The quick movements of the hand are matched by the speech balloons that echo the furor of her painting. Moreover, it is no coincidence that the artist uses red—the color of blood—once again, thus connecting the creative process with a corporeal element. For the artist, the body is not contained within the boundaries of its skin, but rather overflows and splashes onto the canvas, mixing inside and outside as the author quite literally pours herself into her work:

Figure 1.22. Nadja, *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), , np.

As I have explained, the metatextual reflection throughout this text openly questions the relationship between reality and fiction. Some panels are devoted to real-life events traditionally considered too meaningless to be included in a narrative, such as trivial phone conversations and dinners. Other panels directly address deeper questions about the creative process in illustrations that present a clear *mise en abyme*, where the artist portrays herself drawing:

Figure 1.23. Nadja, *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

Nadja paints multiple panels where she is drawing or deciding what she will include in her graphic novel. She also discusses her process with her friends and her significant other:

> - Mais tu vois, c'est bizarre… après ce bouquin, je me suis dit génial, j'ai trouvé mon truc, je raconte tout ce qui se passe et basta.
> - Et alors ?
> - Ben, ça marche pas. Et je sais pas pourquoi. C'est comme si j'arrivais pas à… je sais pas… trouver la bonne distance… un truc comme ça. (np)

These interactions where the author discusses art, reality and fiction with friends show the creative process as a collaborative endeavor nurtured by the input that others might have. Even though drawing/writing autobiography is, in principle, an individual and intimate activity, there are several graphic memoirs in my corpus that depict the degree to which it is a rather collective labor—not only in the creative stage, but also in its reception, since the audience's role in its consumption is

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particularly active in the case of sequential arts. The interaction between creators and the people

around them is not limited to the immediate community of family and friends but it extends to other

artists and the audience throughout the whole process. Then, the larger community around these

works is one that strives to remain open and thus escapes the immunitary response that comes with

the rejection of foreign members. By convening with others before, during and after the creation of

her text, Nadja is maintaining that openness characteristic of an affirmative community.

Lastly, the metacreative aspect of *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* and its exploration of the

ambivalence of self-depiction is pushed to the limit in the work's very last panel, in a sort of punch

line that reconfigures the whole debate about referentiality. As the protagonist decides to switch

from reality to fiction and starts drawing, she finds herself unconsciously leaning toward

autobiography again:

Figure 1.24. Nadja, *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

Through the use of theriomorphism, Nadja builds a story that questions basic autobiographical

matters such as the importance of referentiality. By drawing herself (as well as others) as a bear, she

chooses to focus on *a life* as *zoe* to depict her immanent self. A similar strategy is used by Anne

Herbauts in *Autoportrait* (2002), but in this short text, the discussion becomes less anecdotal and

focuses even more on the self.

Anne Herbauts and the Impossibility of Self-Representation

Belgian illustrator Anne Herbauts centers her *Autoportrait* (2002) around the question of the

impossibility of representing herself. Despite its brevity, *Autoportrait* pushes the problem of self-

depiction to the limit, figuring it through a sort of non-story that takes place in an indeterminate

space and time. By stripping her text of any specifics, Herbauts forces herself and the reader to

confront the difficulty of telling/drawing herself from the very first page:

Figure 1.25. Anne Herbauts, *Autoportrait* (Esperluete, 2002), np.

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In figure 1.25, Herbauts plays with comics' *cross-discursivity* by using the verb *s'écrire* instead of *se dessiner*, thereby highlighting the mixed nature of her creative process: to write herself is to draw herself, a self that resists the visual tropes of human individuation. She also mentions the difficulty of staying within the borders, formally referencing the traditional layout of comics with panels delimited by drawn borders.[37] A body without borders is notably a body open to the exterior, and thus vulnerable. Since the body is at the center of biopolitics, this particular conception of the body constitutes in and of itself a statement against disciplinary control. As Foucault states, contemporary regimes of power use "[u]ne technique qui donc est disciplinaire: elle est centrée sur le corps, elle produit des effets individualisants, elle manipule le corps comme foyer de forces qu'il faut à la fois rendre utiles et dociles" (*Il faut* 222). The alternative bodies represented in the examples studied in this chapter do not correspond to the docile bodies that disciplinary structures require or to the reproductive vision of female bodies that is central to biopolitics.

Herbauts's approach is to draw herself as a bird, thereby avoiding any attempt at a realistic, human portrayal. In choosing a bird as her visual form, I argue, Herbauts offers an alternative representation of her body that refuses the logic of discipline and legibility imposed by biopolitical power structures. In a deeper sense, moreover, the borders of her self-representation are permeable in a way that recalls Haraway's notion of the semi-permeable self (1991):

> The perfection of the fully defended, 'victorious' self is a chilling fantasy […] whether located in the abstract spaces of national discourse, or in the equally abstract spaces of our interior bodies […] Immunity can also be conceived in terms of shared specificities; of the semi-permeable self able to engage with others (human and non-human, inner and outer), but always with finite consequences; of situated possibilities and impossibilities of individuation and identification; and of partial fusions and dangers (224-225)

Haraway's biological theorization of immunitary logic precedes and anticipates Esposito's, taking the human immune system as the basis for envisioning an alternative model of community. For

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[37] See Van Den Broeck, 2007.

Haraway, the (mis)conception of the biological body as a closed entity has caused a misunderstanding of immunity, and this explains its erroneous application to medicine, war and other domains. Understanding the body as a semi-permeable form is, for Haraway, the key to avoiding autoimmunitary crisis, as it dismantles the fiction of the self as a discrete being closed to difference.

In *Autoportrait*, Herbauts constantly plays with the literal and metaphorical sense of both words and images, combining the *cross-discursivity* of comics with the rhetorical recourses of literature, such as alliteration:

Figure 1.26. Anne Herbauts, *Autoportrait* (Esperluete, 2002), np.

Figure 1.26 contains several instances of word-play and image-play, for example, when the narrator writes: "Le grand marécage des sentiments. Je m'enlise. // Vous me lisez" (np.) ["The big swamp of feelings. I get stuck. // You read me"] The text on this page is a continuation from the previous one (fig. 1.25) and further elaborates on the difficulty of putting oneself—including one's feelings—onto paper. The narrator uses the metaphor of the swamp to describe emotions. Then, she connects the impossibility of moving ("Je m'enlise") with the exposure that comes with being read ("Vous me lisez"). In French, these verbs share similar sounds, forming an alliteration that is not unique in *Autoportrait*. This play on words is accompanied by the placement of the bird/protagonist within and then outside the border of the next panel, representing the crossing of the obstacle depicted by the border. This movement from the private space (inside the border) to the public space (outside the border) where the audience can read her shows the attempt to overcome these traditional limits.

However, the author insists on the fact that this is not an easy task: "J'ai des limites: mes pieds, mes mains, ma tête. Et d'autres limites. // L'impossibilité de me représenter d'abord. // Je ne tiendrais pas dans un cadre" (np.) In this series of panels, the drawings echo the text by portraying the bird in three very different shapes that shift to show that the lines composing the border of the

body can morph into the lines of the panel itself on the bottom left of the page. This "impossibility" is then literally pushed to the limit of the page, in the bottom right panel, where the drawing of herself cannot be contained by the frame of the actual paper. Sophie Van der Broeck (2007) explains this formal transgression of the comics medium:

> Toutes les possibilités de transgression se retrouvent dans *Autoportrait*, allant du cadre partiel à trois bordures, deux, une, jusqu'à la disparition complète et même la légère apparition par un jeu de transparence ; chaque approche est significative. Lorsqu'une ou plusieurs lignes ne sont pas tracées, il y a abandon momentané de la clôture qui peut avoir diverses conséquences au plan de la lecture comme, par exemple, un effet d'ouverture. (6)

By overflowing the limits of the page, Herbauts calls the reader's attention to the traditional rules of the medium. Like Nadja's *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité,* Herbauts' *Autoportrait* manifests an awareness of the medium specificity of the graphic novel. Herbauts also addresses the creative process, but from a very personal point of view instead. While focusing on herself—or her self—this intimist take on the fashioning of the self leaves no room for any other characters. As she explains how she approaches drawing herself in a new text, she goes from the materiality of drawing to the impossibility of representing herself:

Figure 1.27. Anne Herbauts, *Autoportrait* (Esperluete, 2002), np.

Figure 1.28. Anne Herbauts, *Autoportrait* (Esperluete, 2002), np.

Furthermore, as with Nadja's choice of bears, Herbaut's self-depiction as a bird carries specific connotations associated with the chosen animal species. Traditionally, birds are perceived as fragile animals, especially when they are still in the egg. Both of these states are explored in *Autoportrait*:

Figure 1.29. Anne Herbauts, *Autoportrait* (Esperluete, 2002), np.

The panels figured above correspond to the last pages of *Autoportrait*, which take an even more intimist turn as the narrator addresses a letter to herself. In this section, the pronouns "je," "tu," "nous" and "on" all refer to the narrator, indicating a splitting of the self that resembles Doucet's in *Ciboire de criss!.* Visually, Herbauts draws the bird that represents the narrator in very different ways:

opaque, transparent, in an egg, and contained within itself, in a *mise en abyme* that is rather common

in graphic memoirs. This multiplicity of representations constitutes a malleable body that refuses any

fixedness. The top left panel is of particular interest for several reasons: the panel takes the shape of

a page torn from a notebook, with a stamp drawn on the top left corner. Part of the panel has a blue

square background over which the body of the bird is depicted. Its feet and its beak, however, are

drawn outside of this background, penetrating it and extending beyond it. More importantly, the

beak seems to be detached from the head and placed just outside of the blue square. This is a

graphic representation of the effort that the author makes to transmit her voice outside of an

intimate space into the public.

Additionally, the switch in the lettering from a typographical font to handwritten text gives

this section a more personal and intimate touch, both consistent with the tone of personal

correspondence. Also, the handwritten text is closer to the esthetics of the drawings, thus blurring

the traditional opposition between text and image inherent to comics. For example, in figure 1.29

Herbauts uses similar pencil strokes for the drawings and the text, which homogenizes the style of

the panels. What's more, on the center left panel she positions the text itself as a border, thus

playing with the function of the different elements of the page. This playful use of text evokes—

although in a much less ambitious way—the work of American cartoonist Chris Ware, who

systematically uses design as a crucial narrative element in his graphic novels. In this respect, Gene

Kannenberg, Jr. (2001) argues that "in Ware's work, layout and design govern visual and thematic

complexities, wherein the words and the images are conjoined in such a way that it is not possible to

discuss one without considering the other". (177) In the particular case of the last pages of

Autoportrait Herbauts uses the lettering to signal the move from the level of the narration to a more

intimate level where she turns to herself in an attempt to resolve the problem of self-representation,

to no avail. As both the narrator's letter and the graphic novel approach their end, the author circles

back—both figuratively and literally—to the idea that she cannot portray herself, which she expresses by returning to the use of a typographical font:

Figure 1.30. Anne Herbauts, *Autoportrait* (Esperluete, 2002), np.

Over the course of the last four panels, shown in figure 1.30, the bird progressively loses its features; at the same time, the strength of the pencil stroke becomes weaker, which makes the shape almost disappear on the paper. The author's signed name on the bottom left panel reinforces the referential pact expected of autobiographies according to Lejeune's (1975) definition of autobiography where the author, narrator and protagonist are identical. However, the bottom right panel barely shows a circle that remains open on several points, above the words "Je désespère", which reinforces the artist's view of the body as open and vulnerable. The return to using the typographical font closes the intimist dialogue that the narrator had opened with her self. This way, that last panel concludes the discussion on which the whole text focuses: it is impossible to represent oneself.

Throughout this first chapter I have argued that Doucet's *Ciboire de criss!*, Nadja's *Le cœur sanglant de la réalité* and Herbauts' *Autoportrait* adopt alternative bodily forms in order to subvert biopower and disciplinary control by radically opening the (human) self to difference. In closing, I want to turn to Judith Butler's conception of vulnerable bodies (2016) in order to explore further how these bodies constitute a form of resistance for the authors in my corpus. For Butler, bodies that assemble in public to protest in an act of collective resistance are more vulnerable to dangers—such as police brutality—as this act exposes them and makes them more visible. However, acts of resistance are usually a consequence of an initial state of vulnerability and thus are tightly connected in a cycle:

> Yet vulnerability emerges earlier, prior to any gathering, and this becomes especially true when people demonstrate to oppose the precarious conditions in which they live. That condition of precarity indexes a vulnerability that precedes the one that people encounter quite graphically on the street (12)

For the authors in my corpus, this initial state of vulnerability comes with the fact that they are women who create comics in a publishing world that has historically marginalized them, and that remains dominated by men. By committing their lives—and bodies—into words and images and bringing them into the public sphere, they are putting themselves in a position that is both more visible and more vulnerable—especially as they choose to come together in an open collective that affirms their identity as a group composed of singularities.[38] This double articulation of bodies that are simultaneously individual and collective, and that resist by showing their vulnerability, is of special interest to Butler:

> Although we universalize in such a statement ("every" body has this right), we also particularize, understanding the body as discrete, as an individual matter, and that individual body is significantly shaped by a norm of what the body is, and how it ought to be conceptualized. (15)

Here, Butler highlights the fact that the body—as individual matter—has been conceptualized and normalized to be thought of as a closed entity by those in power, thus perpetuating the myth of the impenetrable, isolated body. Furthermore, Butler is equally aware of the body as individual yet collective, which is key in biopolitics.

As I have argued, the authors in my corpus have built a body of work that allows them to affirm their individuality by exposing their vulnerability—while inscribing themselves within a community—of women—that celebrates what they share: vulnerability and openness. For Butler, a key element associated with vulnerability is the idea of dependency, that she relates to what she calls "an alternative view of the body" (16): "if we accept that part of what a body is […] is its dependency on other bodies and networks of support, then we are suggesting that it is not altogether right to conceive of individual bodies as completely distinct from one another" (16). It is precisely the openness of the alternative bodies that Doucet, Nadja and Herbauts use to represent

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[38] Cf. bedegalite.org

themselves, their lack of borders, that I take as a point of departure in my analysis of their work. In my reading, as for Butler, the key to resistance is, indeed, in the relationship between bodies and selves that are radically open to one another:

> What I am suggesting is that it is not just that this or that body is bound up in a network of relations, but that the body, despite its clear boundaries, or perhaps precisely by virtue of those very boundaries, is defined by the relations that make its own life and action possible (16).

This network of relations is precisely the affirmative community that this group of francophone women authors have formed by bringing their lives into the public sphere, and setting them into circulation in these graphic memoirs. By doing so, they affirm their singularity and collective identity while inviting readers to join them in this act of resistance. Whether against the regularizing and (re)productive force of biopower, or against the disciplinary order of the gatekeepers who seek to exclude them from the mainstream comics community, the authors in my corpus resist by the mere act of self-exposure: by putting their lives on display for the world to see, and for their readers to commune with and co-create.

Another key concept in Butler's theorization of vulnerability is infrastructure. For Butler, failing infrastructure is the main reason why most marginalized communities are vulnerable in the first place. Just as bodies are dependent on infrastructure, the drawn body depends on paper—a material object—for its existence. Furthermore, beyond the immediate infrastructure of the book there is the larger infrastructure of editors in publishing houses, critics, festival organizers, and others that populate the world of sequential art. This larger infrastructure—mainly controlled by men—has historically failed to support and recognize the women comics creators I have set out to study. It is for this reason that both Julie Doucet and Sylvie Rancourt initially had to self-publish their work in the mid-1980s, and Rancourt also had to distribute it.[39] These artists make an

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[39] I will study Sylvie Rancourt's *Melody* series in the Conclusion: "Erotic Bodies".

alternative space for themselves in a world that has long denied women creators a place, echoing Michel de Certeau's conception of tactics as a mode of resistance (1980): "La tactique n'a pour lieu que celui de l'autre […] elle est mouvement 'à l'intérieur du champ de vision de l'ennemi' […] et dans l'espace contrôlé par lui" (86). Although the women in corpus still have to move in a world sanctioned by men, they keep opening up new spaces where they exercise and celebrate their agency, such as the website for the Collectif des créatrices de la bande dessinée contre le sexisme. Yet, this is only one example of the tactics that female artists find in order to refuse being marginalized in the world of comics.

In this chapter, I have focused on the relationship between how these authors perceive and represent the self. The chapters yet to come will explore the interactions between the author's drawn body and the bodies that surround and affect them. In Chapter 2: "Ailing Bodies," I turn to look at a very specific embodied experience that cannot be confined to the individual body: illness. Élodie Durand's *La parenthèse* (2010) and Marion Fayolle's *La tendresse des pierres* (2013) demonstrate the impossibility of sustaining the fiction of the closed body in the face of illness, portraying what has often been seen as a very individual—even isolating—event as a profoundly collective experience of ailing.

Chapter 2 : AILING BODIES

In one of the most popular and celebrated graphic novels in French, *L'ascension du haut mal* (2011), David B. tells the story of how his brother's epilepsy affected both his and his family's lives for decades. Published in six volumes, this monumental work explores the repercussions of the narrator's brother's affliction on the whole family. Told from the perspective of a member of the family—rather than that of the patient—, it is immediately clear that this experience will surpass the limits of his brother's body and reach the people around him:

Figure 2.1. David B, *L'ascension du haut mal* (L'Association, 2011), p. 27, vol. 2.

The example above (fig. 2.1) depicts the family sharing the dinner table with a monstrous figure that represents the brother's epilepsy. In this panel, David B. portrays the disease as an embodied monster that threatens the intimacy and integrity of the family. In what follows, we will see that this view of illness as collective and embodied is far from unique in graphic narratives of illness.

In Chapter 1, I studied how Julie Doucet, Nadja and Anne Herbauts refuse realistic portrayals of themselves by drawing bodies that do not conform to what is expected of them. Instead, they opt for alternative representations that focus less on their actual appearance and, at the same time, refuse some of the roles traditionally required of women by biopolitical power, such as reproduction. While the previous chapter dealt with the relationship between the author, her self-perception, and her self-depiction, the current chapter will move on beyond the supposed borders of the singular body and study how the "individual" experience of illness transcends the body and

affects others around it.[40] In particular, I will look into how, in the context of illness, the family

views the disease as a threat to its integrity as a unit. Whether the "invasion" is caused by the

affliction itself or by the presence of the medical professionals, the members of the family unit tend

to react as an immunitary community and attack the disease as an external threat. I understand

immunization as Roberto Esposito defines it in "The Immunization Paradigm":

> We can say that immunization is a negative [form] of the protection of life. It saves, insures,
> and preserves the organism, either individual or collective, but it doesn't do so directly or
> immediately; on the contrary it subjects the organism to a condition that simultaneously
> negates or reduces its power to expand. Just as in the medical practice of vaccinating the
> individual body, so the immunization of the political body functions similarly; introducing
> within it a fragment of the same pathogen that it wants to protect itself from, by blocking
> and contradicting natural development. (24)

In order to demonstrate how the ailing body is portrayed by francophone women artists, I will

analyze two graphic memoirs written by French artists: *La parenthèse* (2010) by Élodie Durand and

La tendresse des pierres (2013) by Marion Fayolle. The first is an autopathography that centers on the

narrator's epilepsy and brain tumor and the recovery process after its removal. According to Thomas

Couser (2016), autopathographies are

> autobiographical narratives of illness or disability. The texts I have in mind range from
> journals to essays to full-life narratives, but most lie in a middle range of "single-experience"
> autobiographies. Disease may remain in the background, as when serious illness stimulates
> reassessment of a whole life; but usually it is squarely in the foreground, as when the
> narrative is coextensive with the illness" (95).

The second graphic novel that I will study recounts the cancer diagnosis, treatment and eventual

death of the narrator's father. Although the protagonist herself is not ill, her perspective as a

caretaker is the main focus of this graphic novel and gives great insight into how the rest of the

family is affected by the illness of one of its members. Both of these works figure the affliction as an

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[40] In the context of disability studies, Thomas Couser (2015) defines disease as "a pathological entity in the abstract—
disembodied, as it were, rather than as experienced by any particular person;" its counterpart, illness, is then defined as
"a particular person's experience of a disease: its various effects on the person's existence and identity" (105).

invader that comes from within one of its members but soon transcends the individual's body and affects the family unit:

In figure 2.2, the artist depicts the family house under siege by four people in white, referred to as "les hommes en blanc", who represent health care professionals. She draws the contour of the house with solid brick borders, which highlights its supposed impenetrability. Along with the text, this seemingly simple image represents the immunitary response to the intrusion of doctors and nurses in her family's life. In both *La parenthèse* and *La tendresse des pierres*, the initial response from the family when faced with the illness of one of its members is to fall into the immunitary paradigm in a misguided effort to protect its integrity. I argue that in both texts, the authors eventually destroy the fiction of closed borders—both for the body and for the family—when they decide to compose their texts as part of the healing process, thus bringing their stories to the public. As they depict the body and the family as permeable, they rely on the [inter]dependency Butler identifies as an act of resistance, and they even extend that network of dependency to include readers. I believe that this is, in fact, a concrete example of the theoretical answer to one of Esposito's concerns, which wonders how to strengthen a life's opening to other lives while avoiding an immunitary paradigm. For Esposito, the answer lies in the conception of *a life* as defined by Gilles Deleuze: "An impersonal singularity (or a singular impersonality), which rather than being imprisoned in the confines of the individual, opens those confines to an eccentric movement" (Esposito *Bios* 194). In my corpus, the way the authors portray themselves is reminiscent of Deleuze's definition of *a life*: "the life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal life and external life […] It is haecceity no longer of individuation but of singularization" (Deleuze 28). For example, in *La parenthèse* Durand uses a particular depiction of herself in order to portray her epilepsy, seen on the bottom panel of figure 2.3:

The reflection in the mirror, depicted in figure 2.3, shows the change in her self-perception, as she draws herself as a dark, shadowy figure with no recognizable features other than very long hollow eyes. However, this portrayal is later extended to others who have the same affliction, thus placing her visually in the community of epileptics:

In figure 2.4, the crowd of epileptics shares the same visual depiction described previously. Additionally, the bottom two panels echo the change of perception—and depiction—of the characters, like on figure 2.3. The slight change in the characters' eyes signals their condition. Here, epilepsy is figured visually even though, in reality, it is a disease with no evident signs, except during attacks. As we will see later, this apparent normalcy is questioned graphically throughout *La parenthèse.* This portrayal of the protagonist strips her from some of her individual features to highlight this new part of her identity as an epileptic, thus figuring her as *a life*, similar to the others around her.

Nonetheless, disabled and ill individuals have a complicated place in biopolitical societies, since they do not conform to the norm and thus have to strive to make a place for themselves. According to Michel Foucault (1997), while sovereign power focused on the individual and their disciplining through the use of surveillance techniques, biopower is concerned with the individual's role as part of the population. As such, the new body that concerns biopower is composed of uncountable individual bodies: "c'est un nouveau corps: corps multiple, corps à nombre de têtes, sinon infini, du moins pas nécessairement dénombrable" (Foucault 218). The goal of biopower is to regulate phenomena related to the population as a whole—such as birth rate—and to normalize biological processes in search of a internal balance that will guarantee the productivity of the population: "c'est une technologie qui vise donc, non pas par le dressage individuel, mais par

l'équilibre global, à quelque chose comme une homéostasie: la sécurité de l'ensemble par rapport à ses dangers internes" (222).

In addition to universal phenomena that can have an effect on the population, Foucault mentions other accidental phenomena which "entrainent aussi des conséquences analogues d'incapacité, de mise hors circuit des individus, de neutralisation, etc." (217) These phenomena—such as old age, disability and biological anomalies—are also of interest for biopower, since they entail the exemption of those individuals as a productive part of the population. This part of the population has often been marginalized and they still struggle to make a place for themselves in society.[41] Disabled or ill bodies thus escape the normalizing reach of biopolitical power:

> In tandem with queer, "crip" identifies the ways in which such bodies represent alternative forms of being-in-the-world when navigating environments that privilege able-bodied participants as fully capacitated agential participants within democratic institutions. Such alternative modes of interaction made available by crip/queer lives create capabilities that exceed, and/or go unrecognized within, the normative script of biopolitics. (Mitchell and Snyder 3)

By portraying their own illness or disability, the artists I study in this chapter refuse being subjected to the normalizing gaze of political or medical institutions and bring their experiences to the public in order to extend their community. Before delving more deeply into the study of how the texts in my corpus evade the reach of biopower, I will explore some generalities and specificities of this genre of comics.

Graphic Medicine: a Blooming Genre in Sequential Art

Published in 2015, *The Graphic Medicine Manifesto* is a collective volume that looks to define what graphic medicine is, while also exploring its reach and importance. Defined as "the intersection of the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare" (1), graphic medicine is now an

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[41] Even linguistically, people with disabilities have reappropriated terms such as "crip" in order to regain some agency over the discourse surrounding them. Victoria Lewis (2015) defines "crip" as "the shortened, informal form of the word 'cripple' […] With the emergence of the disability civil rights movement in the 1970s, 'crip' gained wide usage as an informal, affectionately ironic, and provocative identification among people with disabilities" (46)

established discipline "that combines the principles of narrative medicine with an exploration of the visual systems of comic art, interrogating the representation of physical and emotional signs and symptoms within the medium" (1). In recent years, the field of graphic medicine has grown exponentially. From conferences and collective volumes to informative pamphlets and graphic memoirs, comics have cemented their place in the world of medicine. As the *Manifesto* argues, the medium of comics is particularly apt to communicate the experience of illness, especially by those living it:

Figure 2.5. MK Czerwiec et al., *Graphic Medicine Manifesto* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), , pp. 18-19.

Figure 2.5 shows the multiple reasons why the medium of comics adapts well to narratives of illness, especially since the complexity of the embodied experience with disease can be very hard to communicate effectively. The use of text and image by people who might not have any training truly makes graphic medicine accessible to the authors and their readers. This shift in traditional medical discourse opens it up to include anyone who experiences issues related to health, creating a community that rejects these power structures by giving voice to anyone who wants to share their experience—whether as a patient, a caregiver or a health care professional. Inclusivity is one of the central tenets of the graphic medicine manifesto, conceived by key actors in the field, who define the discipline as "the intersection of the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare" (1). Therefore, graphic medicine aims to give voice to those who live illness and caregiving, and not only to doctors or medical artists "who wiel[d] power by controlling and standardizing the way that diseases [a]re visualized" (20). This entails a switch from the traditional perspective that intended to cover the generalities of diseases to a more inclusive and flexible way to depict illness as it is lived, from an individual point of view.

The connection between drawing and medicine is not new by any means. Drawing has long been used in anatomy texts to figure both healthy and ill bodies, since illustrations were the most

accessible mode of visualizing the body before the popularization of photography.[42] Additionally, illustrations offered the possibility of figuring potential or imagined scenarios, whereas photography was limited to portraying reality. While medical drawings suppose an objective view of the human body, their objectivity is questionable. This is especially true with respect to medical illustrations of women's bodies, given that the field of medicine has long been dominated by men. Theresa Tensuan (2011) highlights this propensity for subjective distortion, commenting on a peculiarity in a drawing included in a popular medical manual: "Carter's illustration of the feminine reproductive system in the highly influential and seemingly straightforward *Gray's Anatomy* shows the cross-section of the vagina with labia and vaginal canal wide open, as if occupied by an invisible phallus" (182).

If the influence of the male gaze on female graphic subjects is somewhat nuanced in medical drawings, it is blatant in the world of comics—especially, but not exclusively, in the superhero genre, where female subjects are generally hypersexualized. Even though graphic memoirs tend to present less voluptuous female bodies in general because they are meant to represent "real" bodies, there is still a difference depending on whether the *monstrator* is a man or a woman.[43] Although this difference is not relevant to this chapter since both works studied here were written and drawn by women, I will discuss this aspect of the relationship between bodily representation and gender more extensively in the Conclusion.

In representing their own stories of illness, women graphic artists reclaim their bodies from these sexualizing or medicalizing gazes and portray them in their own terms. As Tensuan observes with respect to an illustration from Phoebe Gloeckner's *A child's life* (2002), they "challeng[e] viewers to literally see how social conventions and medical discourses construct normativity" (182-183). All

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[42] For more information on the history of medical illustrations, cf. Tensuan 2011.

[43] As previously discussed in the Introduction, according to Thierry Groensteen (vol. 2, pp. 86-88) the *monstrator* is "the instance responsible for the *rendering into drawn form* of the story". Similarly, the *reciter* is the instance responsible for the narrative text.

of the authors in my corpus participate in these "acts of radical revision" (182) by virtue of drawing

their own bodies and putting them on public display. In this chapter I will address the specific case

of illness narratives and how they subvert notions of normativity in a world dominated by able-

bodied and/or healthy subjects. This emphasis on individual experiences instead of generalities is

another one of the tenets delineated in the *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*: "graphic medicine resists the

notions of the universal patient and vividly represents multiple subjects with valid and, at times,

conflicting points of view and experiences" (Czerwiec et al 2). This echoes Couser's (2015)

definitions of disease (the pathological entity in the abstract) and illness (a person's particular

experience with the disease) which stress the impact of illness on the individual's identity. This

impact often extends to their family, as we will see when discussing *La tendresse des pierres*, often

changing the life of the patient and their family temporarily or permanently.

Another important aspect to consider when studying autopathographies is the particular

kind of affliction the subject has. The nature of the affliction conditions not only the individual's

experience, but also the way they are viewed by society, especially in the case of diseases that are

highly politicized such as breast cancer or AIDS. For example, Couser (1997) explains the

particularities associated with breast cancer:

> more than the narratives of many other diseases […] narratives of breast cancer generally
> have a public mission, an agenda that is in some sense political. […] Breast cancer narratives
> are written primarily for an audience at risk. […]
>
> Thus two focuses emerge: the personal (addressing the illness as an individual concern) and
> the political (addressing the disease as a women's health issue). (37)

The visibility of a particular disease can be associated with details about its pathology, such as its

causes or its contagiousness. The public often romanticizes or demonizes different afflictions, which

then results in their mythification. For instance, Susan Sontag (2001) describes the "popular

mythology" (17) surrounding tuberculosis, cancer and AIDS. When talking about her own

experience as a cancer patient, she mentions "how much the very reputation of this illness added to

the suffering of those who have it" (100). The social burden of illness mentioned by Sontag adds another layer to an experience that is already taxing physically and emotionally for patients and their caretakers. Each one of the diseases explored by Sontag has its own imagery, as they were—and still are, in some cases—viewed as different metaphors. The public perception of these diseases has changed over time, as more information about the causes and treatment has become available.

Some of the metaphors associated with epilepsy and cancer have influenced the way the two authors in this chapter figure them, with both graphic novels using visual representations of those metaphors. In the case of cancer, for example, the most generalized images associated with the disease are military metaphors that view it as an attack on the body. In *La tendresse des pierres,* Fayolle depicts her family house as a castle under siege, the castle metonymically representing her father, who is portrayed as theruler:

Figure 2.6. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 87.

In figure 2.5, the house is depicted as a fortress surrounded by solid brick walls in order to protect it from attack—here, the attack of medical professionals. The text also comments on the changes to the family dynamics, underscoring the fact that, during his illness, the father has taken on a central role, which Fayolle depicts by drawing part of the fortified tower as a crown over the father's head. Here, she graphically integrates two metaphors: the body as a fortress and the father as a king. Throughout her graphic novel, Fayolle constantly uses visual metaphors, which gives her text a whimsically naïve feeling, as I argue more in depth later.

Before delving into the detailed analysis of Elodie Durand's *La parenthèse* and Marion Fayolle's *La tendresse des pierres*, I will briefly mention other texts by francophone women artists where they address health issues, but only briefly and tangentially. The first is *Le journal de Jo Manix* (2009), where Joëlle Guillevic addresses her breast cancer diagnosis, treatment and relapse. While the graphic novel centers on her professional life as a comics artist, the second volume contains

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interspersed sections regarding her cancer diagnosis and treatment. In figure 2.6, for instance, she

explicitly mentions her cancer for the first time:

Figure 2.7. Joëlle Guillevic, *Le Journal de Jo Manix*. Vol. 2 (Éditions Flblb, 2009), p. 77.

In addition to portraying her visits to the hospital and her chemotherapy sessions, she illustrates her

everyday activities as a cancer patient, such as shopping for a wig. Guillevic also explores the feelings

brought on by the cancer, especially as she tries to maintain a certain degree of normalcy. In all of

the entries focused on her illness, she is always surrounded by people—her boyfriend, or her mother

and sister—demonstrating how the very personal experience of cancer extends to her loved ones.

Her journal is cut short by the reappearance of cancer on her liver, with the last entry—on May

2001—centering around the doctor's appointment where she learns the news and expresses her

frustration at her relapse. Although her treatment of the illness may seem to be narratively

marginalized, it takes on a central role at the end of her journal, which is cut short by the

reappearance of cancer.

In a similar way, Julie Doucet briefly addresses her epilepsy in *Changements d'adresses* (1998), a

text that mostly focuses on her professional career and her relationship with her boyfriend after she

moves to New York. The epileptic episode she narrates in figure 2.7 shows a very disoriented Julie

as her boyfriend tries to figure out what is happening and what to do:

Figure 2.8. Julie Doucet, *Changements d'adresses* (L'Association, 1998), p. 23.

In this journal entry, Doucet chooses to portray a moment she most likely does not remember

herself due to the nature of the epileptic spell, relying instead on her boyfriend's memory of the

incident in order to recount it. In the case of epilepsy, as I have asserted, some spells are only visible

to others in the erratic behavior of the patient, which Doucet figures in her unfocused eyes, the

wavy lines that compose her speech bubbles, and a loopy line drawn above her head to signify

confusion.[44] Meanwhile, her boyfriend's desperation is portrayed by the anguish in his face and the

sweat drops drawn near his head. This short episode showcases how her affliction transcends her

own body and affects the person physically and emotionally closest to her. Like Guillevic's handling

of her illness, Doucet's mention of epileptic episodes is narratively marginalized and remains a

tangential subject in *Changements d'adresses*. Even though brief, the general sentiment of confusion

expressed by both Julie and her boyfriend is similar to the experience told in *La parenthèse* by Élodie

Durand, which I will study next.

Elodie Durand and the Collective Reconstruction of Memory

In *La parenthèse* (2010), French artist Élodie Durand tells the story of her personal experience

with epilepsy over a period of more than five years and the physical and emotional struggles

associated with her condition. Even though the protagonist's name in the graphic memoir is

Judith—and not Élodie—this text is entirely autobiographical, as Durand explains in an interview:

> Judith est mon deuxième prénom, mais c'est bien entendu de moi dont il est question. Je
> préfère néanmoins maintenir cette distinction, car cette histoire est le temps d'une
> parenthèse à mes yeux. C'est maintenant une partie de ma vie qui est derrière moi, ce qui me
> permet de me lancer dans d'autres projets. (Detournay, np.)

Durand's choice to use her middle name puts some distance between herself and the character that

represents her, allowing her to separate the past, ailing self and the present, healthy one. This also

allows her to compartmentalize this part of her life as a past self that's still in her.

At the beginning of *La parenthèse*, Durand tries to convey the confusion she lived for years as the

result of an aggressive brain tumor by telling the story non-linearly and slowly disclosing the details

of her condition. The first panels of the graphic novel alternate between the text of a letter

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[44] In *The Lexicon of Comicana* (1980) Mort Walker defines *emanata* as the symbols that emanate outwards from cartoon characters to show their internal state (28). In particular, the *emanata* that is shaped as a corkscrew is called a *spurl* and it is used to indicate a state of confusion, discomfort or drunkenness.

addressed to her mother and drawings that portray her as she looks in the mirror and cuts off her long hair:

Figure 2.9. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 4-5.

The narrative is retrospective, as the narrator looks back on her illness several years after her recovery. It is driven by her decision to collect and organize her memories and those of her family and put them on paper, as a cathartic exercise.[45] The graphic novel moves back and forth in time, following the rhythm of Judith's efforts to pick up the pieces of their memories and recompose them into a coherent story. This pendular movement covers several years in Durand's life, from the past—when the illness started manifesting—to moment of publication. Between the two, she addresses years of diagnosis, treatment and recovery, but also countless conversations with her family to (re)compose a chronologically complex narrative.

The confusion that the reader might feel with this kind of enunciation underscores the protagonist's feelings during the worst moments of her illness, and her disorientation ripples onto the reading experience. For instance, the first two pages of *La parenthèse* (fig. 2.8) show the moment where Judith decides to cut her hair. The text states the importance of the events to be told, but it remains vague, giving very little context. The next several pages jump to a seemingly superficial conversation where Judith and an acquaintance are catching up after several years, yet Judith gets visibly upset when asked what she has been doing during the past several years. For a few pages, the captions express Judith's panic for not remembering the previous years and the drawings show her wandering around town. Then, the narration jumps further back in time, to the first occasion when her sister noticed that Judith was acting strange—the reader will later learn that this was an epileptic episode—with no temporal indications in the captions. This oscillation between different

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[45] For this project, I understand *catharsis* as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary online: "purification or purgation of the emotions (such as pity and fear) primarily through art."

chronological moments mirror the author's experience with the illness and create curiosity in the reader, who must gather the pieces and make sense of them. Nevertheless, Judith's haircut serves as a visual index, marking a before and after that helps the reader to situate events in a loose chronology: the short-haired avatar represents the protagonist after she has overcome her illness and decided to write about the whole process.

Unlike other autopathographies, which typically rely exclusively on the author's own experience of their illness, *La parenthèse* combines the individual—but in this case faulty—memories of its narrator with the collective recollections of her family in order to compose a text that is doubly hybrid, combining text with image and the individual with the collective. This latter dichotomy is of particular importance when studying this text through the lens of biopolitics because, as Foucault asserted in *Il faut défendre la société* (1997), biopower is concerned with both the individual and collective body. Further, illness narratives expose that the notion of the body as a contained, closed unit is a myth, since the seemingly individual experience of illness has repercussions on the whole community to which the ailing body belongs, as the body is opened up to others for tests and treatment.

In using the metaphor of the parenthesis both verbally, in the book's title, and visually, in the image that spans its front and back covers, Durand overdetermines the book itself as a parenthesis, an interstitial space:

Figure 2.10. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), front and back covers.

On both covers, the drawing of the protagonist is bisected by the typographical symbol of the parenthesis; the content of the graphic novel constitutes the interval between the two. The interlude marked by her illness cuts her—literally on the cover and metaphorically in the narrative—into two parts. Whether these parts refer to a chronological division (before and after her affliction) or some other hiatus is left up for interpretation by the reader, especially considering that both halves of the

self are sporting long hair. This exposure of the self to the reader reinforces the author's opening of

the body's interiority, which coincides with Haraway's conception of the semi-permeable body. The

act of creating and publishing this graphic novel subverts the fiction of self-sufficiency, as the period

of time narrated in *La parenthèse* shows the protagonist and her family as vulnerable subjects who rely

on one another to preserve themselves. Furthermore, this text serves as an opportunity for the

author and her family to figuratively (re)open a wound that changed their lives and explore it as a

finite experience. By putting their experience on paper in the form of a book that is then available to

readers, Durand shares her and her family's story with the world. Only by exteriorizing her

experience through this cathartic process are the artist and her family able to move on.

Over the course of *La parenthèse*, the protagonist finds herself in situations where she has no

idea what is happening around her. This causes a state of panic that is comparable to physical pain.[46]

While she rarely feels physical pain, Judith experiences emotional suffering throughout the graphic

novel. For example, figure 2.11 depicts a moment when, after verbally and physically attacking her

friend for no apparent reason, the protagonist is unable to explain her behavior. All she can feel at

that moment is the fear caused by not understanding what is happening:

Figure 2.11. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 34-35.

Figure 2.11 shows the moment immediately after Judith verbally and physically attacks her friend,

Christophe. This violent outburst is followed by a moment of confusion and despair, as she realizes

that she has no idea why she was acting this way. The text expresses her disorientation, while the

drawings alternately show Judith, her friend and the onlookers. In particular, the top right panel

reproduces her field of vision, with Christophe and the onlookers staring at her. This kind of panel

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[46] In this chapter, I follow the common practice of distinguishing between (physical) pain and (emotional) suffering.

breaks the fourth wall and allows the reader to identify with the protagonist by metaphorically putting themselves in her situation.

Throughout her graphic novel, Durand repeatedly underscores the feeling of panic and isolation that comes with her illness, in both her text and her images. This is especially caused by the fact that her memory constantly fails her, often leaving her completely disoriented—both in the past, at the critical time of her disease, and in the diegetic present, as she's trying to reconstruct the story. This feeling of isolation is visually represented in the numerous pages where she draws herself in the middle of the blank space of a panel or amidst an intricate entanglement of lines, for example in figure 2.12:

Figure 2.12. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 20-21.

In these panels, Judith appears alone, trying to balance while walking on a rope that is part of an entanglement symbolizing her memory, her small size and body language supporting the precarity of her situation. While the image highlights her isolation, the text contradicts this feeling as she states that several people have helped her reconstruct her story: "Vous m'avez tous aidée, papa, Sandrine, Jean François et toi". The drawing portrays her internal feelings, while the text expresses her thoughts *a posteriori*. The example above is only one of many instances where Durand uses the mixed nature of comics to juxtapose two or more meanings at once: in this case, past feelings through image and present facts through text. In general, the drawings in *La parenthèse* serve a more introspective purpose: they are used to express feelings that transcend words.

The artist also uses comics' *cross-discursivity* to oppose the individual against the collective. In one scene, Judith appears to be by herself at her doctor's appointment—even though she has confirmed with her parents that they were also there. In figuring herself standing alone under the doctors' imposing gaze, Durand prioritizes *how she felt* during this experience (in the large images at the top of both pages) over *what happened* (in the panels on the bottom of figure 2.13):

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The temporality of these pages is of particular interest: Durand figures flashback through juxtaposition, and she mixes story-time and discourse-time. Because of this visual representation, it flattens the temporal distinction between past and present and between those two temporal modes—as the reader oscillates between the times. What could be perceived as inconsistencies in storytelling are meant to reflect the protagonist's confusion and reinforce the fact that she's rebuilding her story as she draws it. The presence of several panels in which her parents correct some of the details she remembers—both big and small—as she is talking to them on the phone reminds the reader of the fragility of her recollections and the important role that her family plays in her narration.

In addition to blurring the timeline of events, the artist uses other strategies to disorient the reader in order to replicate her own feelings at the time of the illness and increase the reader's empathy. For example, she only mentions her diagnosis and identifies her affliction by name for the first time somewhat late in the narrative, after over 40 pages during which the reader doesn't know exactly what the issue is (on page 44 out of 222):

On the left page of the figure above, Judith and the neurologist talk about her symptoms, diagnosis and a possible cause to her epilepsy. On the right page, she is depicted lying in bed, next to her notebook and pen, processing the information she just received while the text explains her concern over hitting her friend. This shows that her main motivation to seek help is the impact that her illness has on her relationships with people around her.

Though at this point in the narrative Judith has already consulted with a doctor in earlier pages (pp. 28-29), she refuses to accept the suggestion to see a neurologist at the time, so she does not mention the disease's name. In the first third of the narrative, she refers to her episodes only as

"malaises," which is what her family calls them. She acts unpredictably when these "malaises" surface, but she does not remember her actions afterward. Instead, she is faced with the reaction of family members who are concerned about her well-being. It is then, through her loved one's eyes, that she is confronted with the reality of her unexplainable actions, which surpass the "limits" of her body and affect others. In figure 2.15 the reader sees the result of one of her "malaises" for the first time. In the figure below, Judith and her sister are visiting the site of a renovation effort by artists in the basement of a hospital. What starts as a regular interaction between the two sisters becomes a confusing moment of disorientation for both:

Figure 2.15. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 24-25.

As she is describing her initial "malaises," she hesitates when it comes to the date: "Je devais avoir 21 ans quand j'ai eu mes premiers symptômes. C'est Sandrine qui s'est souvenue d'un jour plus significatif. C'était en 1994 ou déjà en 1995? J'avais ma licence en poche" (24). The text mentions that this particular memory comes from her sister, since Judith has no recollections from these episodes. On the right page, the top panel depicts an aerial view of the system of hallways where the two sisters are walking. In the middle panel, the continuity of her story is interrupted verbally by the characters' silence, but also visually by the style of the drawings. Here, Judith and her sister walk through a parking lot, surrounded by a dark haze that symbolizes her mental haziness; the images of the cars around them rendered with almost no detail. This marks a visual transition between the onset of the blackout caused by the "malaise" and her regaining of consciousness. Finally, the bottom of the panel depicts the conversation that ensues following the episode and shows Judith's confusion. The text on the bottom reads "Je crois que toute la famille a mis du temps à réaliser que je n'avais, moi, jamais le moindre souvenir de ces malaises. Vous en parliez comme ça. Je pensais que vous blaguiez…". This highlights the division between her perception (and recollection) of

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events and those of her family. If, for a long time, Judith is not sure of the gravity of her epileptic

crises, her family has no doubt that there is something wrong with her.

Until her diagnosis, there is a clear division between Judith's inner and outer world, since she

is not aware of the disconnect caused by her affliction. After her diagnosis of epilepsy and the

identification of the seemingly inoperable brain tumor that is causing it, her family becomes more

involved and is soon absorbed by Judith's illness. As her condition worsens (particularly after she is

treated with gamma rays), the shadow of the illness gradually covers the whole family, throughout

her very slow recovery process. Ultimately, the reconstruction of her story is a process that involves

her family and friends, and only through their interdependency can they heal their emotional

wounds as they build the story by putting the pieces of their own memories together.

The loss of memory and its reconstruction is thus central to *La parenthèse*. Since memories

are mainly composed of flashes of images and other sensory impressions, the comics medium is

especially apt to shape them because it is made off of fragments—visual and verbal—that compose

each page. As Hillary Chute (2010) asserts:

> the spatial form of comics is adept at engaging the *subject* of memory and reproducing the
> *effects* of memory—gaps, fragments, positions, layers, circularities; it recognizes and plays on
> the notion of memory as located in mind and body and as, perhaps, shiftingly inaccessible
> and accessible. (134)

In this sense, the choice of the graphic novel medium to recount a traumatic event involving a faulty

memory has different stakes in the case of *La parenthèse*, since the narrator must rely on other

people's perspectives to fill in the voids in her own recollections. The importance of memory in *La*

parenthèse is made clear in the early pages of the narrative, in a panel that pairs a Luis Buñuel quote

with a very expressive illustration of a naked female body with a disproportionately large, deformed

head:

Figure 2.16. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 22-23.

In this double page spread, the left page contains a quote by Luis Buñuel: "La mémoire est notre coherence, notre raison, notre sentiment, et même notre action, sans elle nous ne sommes rien." This paratext highlights the importance of memory for the author and sets the tone of what is to come. On the right, the drawing of a naked female figure emphasizes Durand's feeling of being exposed. While the body's proportions approach those of a caricature, the oversized head is devoid of human facial features and instead seems to be translucent since the inside shows a sort of ramification of nerves. This monstrous head appears to be a burden—literally but also figuratively—on the small body, as the subject struggles to hold it in place.

For Chute, the comics form lends itself to the autobiographical genre because it offers "a way to put the body on the page" (10). The fragmentary nature of the medium also makes it particularly apt for representing memories, as Chute observes:

> images in comics appear in fragments, just as they do in actual recollection; this fragmentation, in particular, is a prominent feature of traumatic memory. The act of crafting words and pictures together into a narrative punctuated by pause or absence, as in comics, also mimics the procedure of memory (4).

In Durand's case, the act of retrieving her own memories and combining them with those of her family is the first step in the creative process where she is composing a patchwork with the fragments in order to put them onto paper both as images and words. However, there are times when the drawings are not the result of remembering, but rather the opposite, since many of her memories are triggered by sketches she made during her convalescence, such as the one on the right page of figure 2.17:

Figure 2.17. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 14-15.

In figure 2.17, Durand uses one of these drawings to access her scarce memories and feelings in order to recompose her story. At first, all she has are flashes; only when these images are connected to her family's memories do they begin to make sense and, in turn, help her retrieve other memories.

In this regard, Durand's autopathography is a collective work, fusing the experiences of both the patient and her caretakers, thus combining public and private perspectives on her illness.

Evelyne Ender (2005) argues that memories are at the core of human subjectivity and give humans their individuality. For Ender, the lack of memories turns the amnesiac into an aimless being devoid of defining features:

> when, because of amnesia or dementia, memory disappears, a person's life dissolves into an immediate, purposeless present. Unable to grasp the organizing shapes of her existence, this person will lead an increasingly centerless life, with fits of erratic activity giving way to inertia. For indeed our thoughts, emotions, pleasures, and intentions only acquire an existential relevance when our remembrance casts them in a narrative pattern and creates a self. Adrift in a sea of perceptions and sensations, the amnesiac is reduced to following, mindlessly, the vagaries of her biological fate (3)

Durand depicts this mindless existence as one full of repetition but empty of meaning. It reduces her to her basic biological functions, subjecting her to an endless loop of confusion. Durand conveys the monotony of this stage of her life in several panels devoted to this part of her story:

Figure 2.18. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 72-73.

In the example above, the narrator draws her head in profile, but she doesn't include any facial features, thus preventing her depiction from expressing any feelings. This is reinforced by the fact that all the frames are uniform in content, size and disposition. The repetitive nature of the drawings and texts echoes Ender's characterization of the amnesiac as stuck in an endless present. The lack of temporal markers or responses to the questions she poses as she seeks to orient herself in time and space highlights the fact that even communication with others has lost its purpose.

This purposeless existence, guided only by her physiological needs, soon becomes Judith's routine. Eventually, she becomes completely dependent on her family for everything. Forced to quit her job to take care of Judith, her mother is dragged into a similar routine: "Pour toi, maman, nos journées se ressemblaient. Pour moi, elles ne se ressemblaient pas parce que je n'avais plus notion du temps" (97). At the height of her illness, Judith loses any sense of time, trapped in a continous loop

marked by the routine that her mother tries to preserve in their lives. After her recovery, as she starts to compose her narrative, she still struggles to situate the events in a clear timeline. This complicated relationship with time is a constant source of frustration for Durand as she tries to tell her story, especially considering that her family does remember most events. Her faulty memory has contradictory effects on Judith's relationship with her family. First, it isolates her from them, since she is missing a key to her own past (her blackouts ranging from several minutes to several days) while they have the shared experience of going through her illness. However, the collective reconstruction of her story brings them closer together, as they weave their individual memories into a coherent narrative that is ultimately curated by the narrator. What can be seen as a threat that could divide the family according to their ability to remember and recompose this experience ends up becoming a strength, since they can gather their individual recollections and focus on supporting each other.

This interdependency on family members is necessary for Judith's creative process, but even before that, during the height of her illness, she comes to rely on her mother for most everyday activities. The treatment for her epilepsy diminishes her intellectual abilities, hindering the basic skills necessary to exist in the world as an adult for several months, effectively disabling her. During the critical period where Judith falls deeper into her illness, her personality starts to fade away, as her intellectual capacities continue to diminish. Though she loses her sense of self, her sense of time, and her memory, her most basic emotions remain. At the time, the only constant are the sketches that she makes throughout her convalescence.[47] These emotionally expressive drawings are the only trace of the author's own experience of her descent into the illness, as Durand explains in an interview with Charles-Louis Detournay:

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[47] On the page following the title page of the book, there is a note that specifies when these "special" drawings were made. It reads: "Les dessins des pages 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 86, 87, 88, 89, 182, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 191, 192, 193, 196, 197, 198 et 199 ont été réalisés entre les années 1995 et 1998" (np).

Je voulais renforcer l'impact du témoignage et l'identification du lecteur. J'aurais été incapable de l'inventer ou de les redessiner. Parmi la multitude de dessins que j'ai réalisés, j'ai choisi les plus représentatifs sur une période qui s'étend sur près de dix ans. Ils démontrent autant les problèmes psychiques que je traversais que les soucis physiques comme les troubles de la vision. Puis, je représente également la maladie en la caractérisant telle un être qui me dévore. C'est alors plus une projection de mes sensations. (Detournay, np.)

In this quote, Durand explains the importance of including the drawings she made during the most difficult years of her illness, as most of them represent the complex emotions caused by her condition. Considering the fact that these drawings are interspersed within the narrative, they provide a complex mix of retrospective narration and testimony that is concurrent with her convalescence. Thus, adding these sketches served multiple purposes for the author and helped her communicate some of the effects of her illness on both her body and her mind.

In addition to these drawings, Durand alternates her narration with other panels that feature no text and interrupt her story in order to shift the focus to her emotional state. This kind of glimpse into her feelings is one very important feature of graphic illness narratives, which tend to give similar importance to the mental and physical troubles of the patient, as opposed to medical manuals that often omit personal experience with a certain illness. While the panels that explore her memory troubles are filled with hesitation, those devoted to her feelings are unequivocal. Their expressivity represents what cannot be conveyed with words because the emotions are so primitive.[48] In a similar argument, Elaine Scarry (1987) suggests that extremely intense pain destroys language even to the point of obliterating the contents of consciousness, which makes its description an impossible task for words. For this reason, I contend that the graphic novel medium is particularly adept at conveying experiences related to pain and suffering, as it allows the author to use images where words fail:

Figure 2.19. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 38-39.

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[48] In this text, I use primitive in the traditional sense of the word: "belonging to or characteristic of an early stage of development" (Merriam Webster).

Figure 2.19 contains a double page spread with each page depicting a human-like figure composed by rough lines and disproportional features. On the left panel, the mouth has an expression of distress, as if yelling, while both arms are wrapped around the torso in a sort of self-embrace. A hand is covering one eye, and the other is made of multiple chaotic lines. On the right panel, the hunched figure features minimal detail, with only recognizable limb—a hand—and a disturbing depiction of the face very similar to the faces of the epileptic patients featured in figures 2.3 and 2.4. Both of these drawings communicate very raw feelings from the time she was deep into her illness. The sketches made between 1995 and 1998 also illustrate her deteriorated drawing skills, since the difference between them and the rest of the graphic memoir is quite evident.

As I stated earlier in this chapter, one of the tenets of graphic medicine is the empowerment that comes with giving a voice to those who experience illness. This results in a new way to represent it, as the *Graphic Medicine Manifesto* asserts: "in graphic pathographies, artists create their own **iconography of illness**. In doing so they are creating new knowledge, combining subjective feelings and perceptions with the objective visual representation" (19, author's emphasis). This is particularly true for representations of physical and emotional pain, which tend to be very subjective, as pain is an extremely individual experience. As Scarry affirms, pain dissolves the boundary between inside and outside, in "an almost obscene conflation of private and public. It brings with it all the solitude of absolute privacy with none of its safety, all the self-exposure of the utterly public with none of its possibility for camaraderie or shared experience" (53). In Durand's text, this is evident in several panels where the narrator draws herself as being so exposed that she is completely naked, pushing this exposure from metaphor to a literal graphic representation:

Figure 2.20. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 102-103.

In figure 2.20 the artist draws her ailing self naked, as a body with a disproportionally large head, surrounded by a multitude of eyes staring at her. This short human figure with an oversized head is a

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visual leitmotif in *La parenthèse*, used to represent the narrator or the personification of her illness. In this two-page panel, her body language indicates sadness and shame. A result of her epilepsy, Judith's failing memory is a source of shame, but also fear since she doesn't understand what is happening to her.

One of the major characteristics of physical pain, as Scarry observes, is the fact that it achieves its *aversiveness* "in part by bringing about, even within the radius of several feet, this absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons" (4).[49] In this reading, physical pain expands the division between the individual and the collective, which translates into the sufferer's isolation: "to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt" (7). This insurmountable gap between the individual in physical pain and other people brings about questions about the difference between one's lived reality and the perception of someone else's reality, effectively separating the suffering individual from people around them. In addition to this divide, epilepsy is unique because—at times—the patient is not aware of all its manifestations, as its symptoms are not constant and can be accompanied by temporary memory loss. In this sense, the physical pain that is traditionally associated with many types of illness is replaced or accompanied by the emotional pain that comes with the uncertainty that the patient feels when they realize that they don't know the whole story. In Judith's case, this asymmetry is sometimes reversed: though her family can sense that there is something wrong during her "malaises," Judith doesn't realize it, which fills her with doubt and isolates her even more.

The disorientation that Durand feels—caused by the holes in her memory—resembles a state of panic brought on by the resurfacing of traumatic memories. In her seminal work on trauma, Cathy Caruth (1996) affirms:

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[49] When explaining the effect of pain on people, Scarry describes it as being *aversive*, meaning that it causes a sort of rejection of the unpleasant sensation resulting in a disconnect between the sufferer and those around them.

In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena (91).

In this definition, there are several key elements that, I argue, link Judith's memory problems to trauma. While Judith's epileptic episodes—usually accompanied by blanks in her memory—might not be physically violent, they devastate her once they resurface in the shape of flashes of images that she can't fully understand. Although she is not aware of her "malaises" when they happen (so she can't process them), her family's ensuing accounts trigger an overwhelming feeling that I understand to be similar to trauma as described by Caruth. What's more, the wordless panels devoted to her feelings that are interspersed throughout *La parenthèse* echo the repetitive phenomena associated with trauma, taking the form of flashes of images that do not necessarily fit the narrative thread of the story, but rather interrupt it.

The numerous panels in *La parenthèse* that convey pain—both physical and emotional—rely almost exclusively on drawings, which echoes Scarry's conception of pain as pre-verbal: "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). In *La parenthèse*, I argue, this extends to emotional pain, especially when its intensity increases. In the case of graphic autopathographies, the first-hand traumatic experience of pain is translated onto the page by that same hand; the hybrid medium gives the author more freedom to recompose intimate memories and sensations that would otherwise resist communication. Comics' capacity to render the intimate experience of pain is manifest in the sequence in figure 2.21, which shows Judith waking up from anesthesia following a brain biopsy:

Figure 2.21. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), p. 64.

The top panels show the outline of her body, her mouth open as if screaming, her arms in the air and her fingers curled in agony, divided into three vertical panels. What would seem to be a short

instant is divided into three consecutive panels in order to communicate how pain distorts time, extending the duration of this moment. Even though the text that hovers over her body indicates the presence of a medical professional trying to rouse her, the image concentrates on her inner reality of pain and confusion. On the bottom panel, no text is visible. The drawing occupies the remainder of the page, figuring pain metaphorically as a giant hand that is ripping through her chest.

This and other visual metaphors constitute a very important aspect of *La Parenthèse*, which Durand uses to convey complex thoughts and feelings. For example, as Judith falls deeper into her illness, Durand figures herself as literally falling; pages later, she appears dragging her parents along with her in her free fall. These drawings communicate the frustration and impotence that she feels, especially considering that this deeply affects her family:

Figure 2.22. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), pp. 145, 157.

Figure 2.22 contains two panels from different moments in the graphic novel, separated by a dozen pages but thematically connected. The left panel (p.145), corresponds to the moment when, three months after the gamma ray treatment, her condition worsened considerably and she lost all autonomy, which she depicts as a literal fall into the depths of her epileptic condition. The panel on the right (157) illustrates her feelings around the time when doctors found out she had developed a cerebral edema as an extremely rare side effect of the treatment. Building on the same metaphor of the free fall, she draws herself falling further, her parents connected to her by ropes that pull them down.

In her own iconography of illness, Durand also depicts her affliction as a being with a life of its own, sometimes represented as a naked body with an oversized head, sometimes as just a giant head. As the location of her tumor, the brain—and by metonymy, the head—are central to her iconography, and this is visible in these panels taken from different points in the narration:

Figure 2.23. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), pp.117-118, 142-143.

This representation is another visual *leitmotif* in *La parenthèse*, which Durand uses to illustrate her evolving relationship with her affliction as the narrative progresses. In the top left page of figure 2.23, her feelings of frustration and shame about her diminishing intellectual abilities coalesce into a monstrous shape, a giant head that swallows her whole and keeps her out of reach from others, further highlighting her sense of isolation. As time progresses and she tries to escape, the monstrous head prevents her from leaving, keeping her locked up in her head, both literally and figuratively. By portraying her illness as a discrete entity, Durand demonstrates the impact of her affliction, expressing a wide variety of feelings that resist being distilled into words.

In other scenes, the artist represents her illness as a sort of bird or winged demon (figure 2.24):

Figure 2.24. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), pp. 41-42.

In figure 2.24, Durand depicts a human figure being attacked by a flying animal shape (left) and then being devoured by it (right). Even though the sketch is rather rudimentary, it conveys the terror of the imminent attack and her subsequent obliteration, marked by the intense pencil strokes. In this example, Durand uses an animal figure to depict her illness and the complex emotions that come with it. As David Herman (2018) has argued, graphic artists sometimes "use animal imagery to project onto animal others aspects of human selves that prove difficult to understand or accept" (11). In *La parenthèse,* Durand uses both animal and monstrous figures to represent the illness as an entity that exists separately from her person. Similarly, David B's uses a snake to represent his brother's epilepsy (figure 2.1) as an uninvited guest in his family.

In Durand's iconography, there are several representations of human heads that are detached from any body. These disjoined heads dismantle the fiction of the body's wholeness, self-sameness, and self-sufficiency, much like Jean-Luc Nancy's *L'intrus* (2000). In this text, Nancy narrates his experience involving a heart transplant that made him question the way he perceived his body.

Similarly, for both graphic artists in this chapter, body parts are conceived as interchangeable, and the body is often portrayed as open, as can be seen in the figure below:

Figure 2.25. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 159-159.

Figure 2.25 corresponds to the moment in the story when Judith develops a brain edema three months after her gamma ray surgery. In order to highlight the size of the edema, the artist draws her head in profile, with an enormous hole shaped as a fist. The contrast between the black head and the white [hole? Edema? Fist?] insists on the openness of her head, thus figuring the body as vulnerable to the outside world. Further, the messiness of the contours between the black and the white created by the small lines sprinkled over the opposite color reinforce the idea of the permeable body since its borders are not neat, clear lines but rather porous ones.

This image of the open body coincides with the way Nancy feels about his failing heart in *L'intrus*: "la sensation physique d'un vide déjà ouvert dans la poitrine, avec une sorte d'apnée où rien, strictement rien, aujourd'hui encore, ne pourrait démêler pour moi l'organique, le symbolique, l'imaginaire, ni démêler le continu de l'interrompu" (15). For Nancy, the failing organ's relationship to the body that contains it is rather complex, since his original heart starts to feel like a strange organ that no longer fits in with, or fits within, his body. This "étrangeté" produced by the feeling that one's organs are not one's own anymore echoes Sigmund Freud's idea of the *uncanny*, which he defines as an unpleasant sensation brought on by "a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it" (94). In his essay on the uncanny, Freud mentions several circumstances that have proven to cause this unpleasantness, including "the uncanny effect of epilepsy or madness" or "dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist" (92). Both of these examples are analogous to Durand and Nancy's own particulars of their afflictions, and although they are not presented to create an uncanny effect on the reader, they present it as part of

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the confusion that their illnesses brought about. In *La parenthèse* and *L'intrus*, both narrators are overcome by the feeling that causes them to question their body's unity and even their identity.

Throughout Durand's tale, her sense of what is her "own" progressively fades, echoing Nancy's reflection on the problem of the 'proper' body: "Je le sens bien, c'est beaucoup plus fort qu'une sensation: jamais l'étrangeté de ma propre identité, qui me fut pourtant toujours si vive, ne m'a touché avec cette acuité" (36). Here, Nancy's own identity ceases to feel familiar and, instead, becomes strange to him. Thus, the familiar becomes strange and doubt replaces certainty. This ambivalent sense of self is common in illness narratives, since patients often go back and forth between their healthy and ill identities. Karen Yoshida (1993) theorizes this self-unbelonging:

> The reconstruction of self and identity […] is conceptualised as a pendulum. The pendulum of self represents a dynamic model of identity reconstruction. The pendulum suggests that identity reconstruction is a process that swings back and forth like a pendulum between the nondisabled and disabled aspects of self.

Two important ideas stem from this quote: first, the fact that the presence of an illness irrevocably triggers a reckoning of the patient's self-image, but more importantly is the fact that the process of reconstruction is not linear. Instead, this model accounts for a dynamic process where the afflicted person does not immediately settle into either the new (disabled) or the previous (non-disabled) identity. In the case of *La parenthèse*, this oscillation in Judith's identity is also communicated by the non-linear chronology of events and the interposition of drawings made during her convalescence, which are scattered throughout the text.

Ultimately, telling her story allows Judith—within the text—and Durand—in reality—to start rebuilding her self as a permeable body with open wounds that have left her both physically and emotionally vulnerable. In a similar fashion, Nancy also experiences a transformation in his identity, saying that he cannot be the person he used to be anymore:

> On sort égaré de l'aventure. On ne se reconnaît plus: mais on n'est, très vite, qu'un flottement, une suspension d'étrangeté entre des états mal identifiés, entre des douleurs, entre des impuissances, entre des défaillances. Se rapporter à soi est devenu un problème,

une difficulté ou une opacité: c'est à travers le mal, ou bien la peur, ce n'est plus rien d'immédiat – et les médiations fatiguent. (39)

The adventure, as he calls the experience of his heart transplant, produces changes in his self-image, which is somewhat diluted among a cacophony of feelings and sensations such as pain and frustration. He can't quite see his new self behind a curtain of pain and fear, but his old self doesn't exist as such anymore. If for Nancy the ambivalence between the old and the new identity remains opaque, Durand represents the changing self as multiple, represented visually in the panel below:

Figure 2.26. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), pp. 194.

The panel above corresponds to the last third of the story, where she is slowly regaining her independence after several years of recovery from surgery and her epileptic crises. The text gives details on the areas that needed improvement such as her memory and reading skills. In order to illustrate the progression, she draws a succession of avatars literally falling and getting up to signify the proverbial tenacity required to keep improving. While the image depicts a literal fall, the text adds the metaphorical meaning to her process. At the bottom of figure 2.26, Durand portrays herself wearing boxing gloves and punching an invisible opponent, meant to represent her affliction. This is consonant with Sontag's idea that illnesses are often framed as an enemy the patient has to fight, in this case both literally and metaphorically. Drawing her avatar ready to punch a duplicate is a concrete way to represent the double composed by her old and new selves, where only one can emerge triumphant. Besides, the choice of words above this last image contains a clever play on words: "Je me défendais… finalement ce n'était pas si difficile". Here, the verb 'se défendre' conveys two meanings at once: in relation to the image, it expresses the traditional sense of protecting oneself against an attack (hence, the boxing gloves). But, when read as the continuation of the previous text, it can be translated as "I could take care of myself" to indicate how her progress in basic abilities has allowed her more autonomy.

In addition to the oscillation in the Durand's self-image, her relationship with their family is also deeply impacted. In her study of disease narratives, Valerie Raoul (2007) notes that for many authors of autopathographies, their experience "affects both self-definition and relationships with others" (5). In Durand's graphic novel, while Judith is still struggling to accept her identity in the wake of her diagnosis and the limitations that accompany it, her family has long since changed their perception of her, as they see the effects of her brain tumor in her everyday behavior:

Figure 2.27. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 218-219.

In figure 2.27, the narrator explains her difficulty admitting to the profound changes that the illness caused in her, acknowledging that she struggled to even accept that she was, in fact, sick. On the top panel on the left page, she illustrates this by drawing herself climbing a long staircase while carrying a detached head that symbolizes her affliction. The bottom panel on the left figures her as a child, and the text highlights the fact that, when she was little, she tended to minimize any injuries in a similar way to her attitude towards her long and complicated battle against epilepsy and her brain tumor. The last panel of the left page depicts two Judiths in front of one another, while the text reads: "Aujourd'hui encore, je me suis cachée sous mon deuxième prénom pour t'écrire mon histoire" (218). In this text addressed to her mother, the narrator recognizes that using her middle name for her avatar was also a way to keep this identity as an ill person [Judith] separated from her own [Élodie]. Finally, the text on the right page explains that her denial around the whole experience was part of her convalescence, so acknowledging it allows her to move on with her life. The drawing on the center depicts an image from her everyday life where Judith is walking in a crowd of people by herself, which signals her reinsertion to a somewhat normal life. In the text on the bottom, the narrator states that she fully recovered from her ailment, but recognizes that her family disagrees, still seeing some effects in her, even years after. This particular example is not the only occasion where Judith is inconsistent about the gravity or the consequences of the illness, in an effort to

diminish or outright deny it. It is only through her parent's comments and corrections that she is faced with admitting how traumatic the experience was for her and for her family.

Furthermore, her family's struggle continues as Judith slowly recovers, but her parents, still fearful, have a hard time with her newfound sense of independence. This creates a dissimilar perception of her recovery between Judith and her family, making it harder for both parties to move forward and leave the whole experience behind. Later, composing her story serves as group therapy for her family as well as for her since they all had to discuss her convalescence in detail to recompose the complete story. Although such a creative process is usually individual, in this case it extends to the family, allowing them to work through their feelings caused by the traumatic parts of her ailment. For Julia Kristeva (1987), literary creation "possède une efficacité réelle et imaginaire relevant plus de la catharsis que de l'élaboration; elle est le moyen thérapeutique utilisé dans toutes les sociétés au long des âges" (35). As Kristeva states above, literary creation is rather effective as a therapeutic tool because of its cathartic power, real and imaginary. Thus, it is not uncommon to find that authors of illness narratives find that composing and publishing their stories helps them to surmount challenging moments in their lives. In addition to Kristeva, other scholars also agree that autopathographies are used to heal the emotional wounds left by a disease on the narrator and/or their loved ones. In portraying the effects of her experience on both an individual and a collective level, Durand includes her family in the cathartic process she undertakes in creating her graphic novel: "Un jour, tu m'as dit: Peut-être que ça nous aiderait à tourner la page nous aussi, si tu écrivais ton histoire. Merci, maman" (220). Thus, her mother's words are presented as the motivation to recount her/their experience in order to heal their wounds.

Towards the end of *La Parenthèse*, Durand represents the culmination of her recovery by reprising the metaphor of the parenthesis. No longer officially considered epileptic, she can finally close that episode of her life:

Figure 2.28. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 210-211.

In the figure above, the text on the left explains the circumstances in which she is officially declared as non-epileptic, which means she no longer has to take the medications that hindered her abilities for a normal life. On the right page, she draws her avatar jumping (or dancing) to the right of the panel representing her future, her hands near her mouth in an expression of happiness and disbelief. To her left, two parentheses (opening and closing)—used to depict her journey as an epileptic—are left behind, which she uses to signify that she can move past the traumatic experience.

For Durand, the healing process included not only her relationship with her own identity and her family, but also with the medical world. This is not uncommon, as Raoul explains: "Whether they are dealing with disease, disability, or trauma, many narrators share common experiences of social barriers and stigma, shifts in their relationship to time and space, and problems in their interactions with medical institutions and health-care providers" (5). Illness and disability touch virtually every aspect of the patient's life in regards to their social circle and family, but also their relationship to the medical world. Invariably, being confronted with an illness entails a deepening of the person's relationship with healthcare providers, whether they had a previous similar experience or not. In *La parenthèse*, Durand illustrates her experience with a variety of doctors and procedures throughout the text, always from the perspective of the patient. During certain interactions Judith often feels that he disappears under the medical gaze:

Figure 2.29. Élodie Durand, *La parenthèse* (Delcourt, 2010), , pp. 62-63.

In the panels pictured above, Judith's bare brain is hyperbolically drawn as a large surface—almost planetary—over which her doctors walk as they examine her test results and discuss possible treatments. In the same panel, two doctors refer to her as "un sujet jeune" and ask "quel âge a-t-il?," respectively—a clear dehumanization that a colleague immediately corrects by asserting that "LA patiente a tout juste 22 ans" (62). In these panels, both text and image convey the idea that the

doctors can see only her brain tumor, relegating her, as an individual, to a second plane. This type of

detached treatment of patients has become more generalized in the medical world, as Couser (1997)

asserts:

> the same phenomena that have made contemporary diagnosis and treatment so sophisticated
> have, ironically, diverted doctors' attention toward disease and away from illness, toward the
> laboratory and away from the bedside, toward curing and away from healing (10)

By using her brain as a metonymic representation of herself, Durand emphasizes the penetrating

force of the medical gaze from which she feels that she cannot escape.

In this sense, the healthcare professionals literalize a biopower that is not only concerned

with keeping bodies healthy and productive, but also with controlling other non-normalized bodies.

This means that bodies that don't fit the healthy, ideal model are a source of concern for biopower

since they are not economically productive and require different infrastructure. When talking about

non-normatives bodies—such as those of people with disabilities, mental illness or the elderly,

Foucault (1997) finds that they have no place in biopolitical society:

> Maladies plus ou moins difficiles à extirper, et qui ne sont pas envisagées comme les
> épidémies, à titre de causes de mort plus fréquente, mais comme des facteurs permanents—
> et c'est comme cela qu'on les traite—de soustraction des forces, diminution du temps de
> travail, baisse d'énergies, coûts économiques, tant à cause du manque à produire que des
> soins qu'elles peuvent coûter. (217)

These non-normative bodies constitute a threat to biopower, and their dependency on others—such

as family members—creates networks that embrace difference, changing the dynamic of immunitary

communities, forcing them to open up as a way to reimagine/reconfigure their spaces of action.

Durand's exploration of the impact of her disabled body on her immediate community—her

family—in itself constitutes an act of revolt against biopolitical power since it depicts the kind of

affirmative community that embraces the diversity of its members instead of excluding them

because of such differences. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder state:

> What is often lost in relations of neoliberal normalcy are ways in which disabled people's
> openly interdependent lives and crip/queer forms of embodiment provide alternative maps

for living together in the deterritorialized, yet highly regulated spaces of biopolitics. The preservation of disabled bodies in the spaces depends on managing to invent forms of culture that operate as alternatives to the principles of neoliberalism. (3)

The key to revolting against biopower is, then, to reimagine spaces and ways of living in communities that rely on interdependency and include/adapt to all its members. In Durand's case, the key to her survival and recovery lies in her family's opening up to the individual singularities of its members, and the reconfiguration of her own individuality as a new identity recomposed collectively. In both illness narratives analyzed in this chapter, both the body and the family are immunitary units that are threatened by internal factors, such as a tumor or disease, and by external ones, such as the medical professionals who intervene in the body and disrupt the unity and intimacy of the family. This sort of invasion is at the center of Marion Fayolle's *La tendresse des pierres*, where she addresses her father's cancer and the impact of this seemingly individual condition on her whole family.

Marion Fayolle and the Attack of the Healthcare Professionals

The second text I analyze in this chapter also uses writing as a cathartic tool to deal with an illness that calls into question the boundaries of self and community, but shifts the perspective from the ailing individual to those who care for them. In *La tendresse des pierres* (2013), French graphic artist Marion Fayolle writes from the perspective of a caretaker as she deals with her father's cancer, the progressive deterioration of his body, and the impact of his illness on the members of his family, whose lives are completely absorbed by it.

As I have argued, the presence of disease in an individual surpasses the imagined borders of the body and it can deeply affect the family unit, conceived as a community. Fayolle's graphic novel focuses on how the structure and hierarchy of her family has to be rethought and reinvented as her father's illness progresses. In particular, her father goes from being a very busy adult who rarely has time to spend with this family to a child-like person who depends on his wife and children for

everyday activities. This descent into illness ends with the death of Fayolle's father, who succumbs to cancer after an ardous fight. This negative outcome differs from the success stories Jackie Stacey (1997) identifies as typical of illness narratives in contemporary Western cultures: "Loss and failure have their place but only as part of a broader picture of ascendance. The steady upward curve is the favored contour" (9). However, since this graphic novel is narrated from the point of view of the caretaker, the story extends to address the cathartic project of drawing/writing about this intense experience undertaken by the author.

In *La tendresse des pierres*, Fayolle develops her own iconography of illness, which features visual metaphors and a style that often dips into surrealism. Her illustration technique gives her illustrations a unique look, since she draws her characters and backgrounds by hand, then she scans and colors them digitally, prints them on a plastic sheet and applies these to the paper to recreate the grainy appearance of stamps. In addition to this particular look, the world she builds seems made out of paper, with characters often interacting with the backgrounds or other elements such as speech bubbles, which I will address in depth later on in this chapter. Her visual metaphors use seemingly simple drawings that tend to carry a deeper meaning hidden behind them, and it is up to the reader to make the connection. This gap between the connotation and the denotation of her drawings often creates an effect of naivete and/or humor. At the very beginning of her graphic novel, for example, Fayolle talks about the burial of one of her father's lungs, which the reader must come to understand as a metaphorical representation of a pneumonectomy:

Figure 2.30. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 9.

The figure above is the first panel in *La tendresse des pierres*. The text—oddly placed in the center of the page instead of the top—reads "On a enterré un poumon de papa […] Papa assistait avec nous à l'enterrement d'une partie de son corps" (9). The drawing around the textbox depict a strange landscape featuring a dark sky, two cherry trees and several intriguing shapes that could be large

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rocks, laying on the ground. Although the text also mentions people dressed in black and white ("[o]n s'habilla tous en noir" and "[d]es hommes en blanc" respectively) there are no human figures depicted here. Only will the following pages feature such depictions and clarify what the stone-like shapes represent:

Figure 2.31. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 10.

Here, four panels depict the "hommes en blanc"—which is the epithet used by Fayolle to refer to healthcare professionals, disregarding their gender—carrying a similar stone-like object that represents the father's lung. Instead of portraying the pneumonectomy in the traditional setting of a hospital, Fayolle draws it as a burial ceremony. By doing this, she amplifies the grief felt by the family over the loss of the organ and she uses the metonymic relationship between the organ and the man to foreshadow the father's burial. This removal of the lung is only the first in a series of changes in her father's anatomy, all of which Fayolle represents as simple yet cumbersome modifications or removals of body parts.

Throughout *La tendresse des pierres*, Fayolle uses visual metaphors to convey her father's deteriorating state. As he loses basic functions, his visual avatar starts losing organs: one lung, his nose, his mouth. These organs are portrayed as (re)movable parts, as when the "men in white" remove his mouth and tie it to a ribbon so that he can wear it around his neck, as a necklace. Again, the reader must interpret this visual metaphor as a figuration of the tracheotomy performed so that her father can breathe:

Figure 2.32. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 26.

The panel in figure 2.30 is one of many where the father is represented as a giant body, but this time only his neck section is visible in the panels. This metonymic representation echoes the panels where Durand portrays the doctors walking over her enormous brain, reducing her to the diseased organ that interests them. The deconstruction of the different anatomical components of these father

figures depicts the body as a sum of parts rather than as a cohesive whole, subverting the biopolitical equation of the self with an immunitary, self-contained body.

In the context of the father's illness, the body parts of all members of Fayolle's family become interchangeable common goods, always at the disposal of the man whose capabilities have diminished. The author uses this exchange of body parts to illustrate how she, like her mother and her brother, becomes an extension of her father and thereby loses her sense of self:

Figure 2.33. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 65.

In the example above, the multiple drawings depicting the narrator and her father illustrate an occasion when visitors come to see the father. Here, his needs supersede those of the narrator, who is forced to stop a phone conversation and lend her lips to her ailing father, thus losing her voice literally but also metaphorically. Her identity yields to a collective "body" modeled on her father's, who becomes sovereign through the piecemeal incorporation of parts of his family. This new view of her father's body as a collection of appropriated parts threatens the integrity and functionality of the family unit that, like the individuals who compose it, devolves into an array of fungible body parts and roles:

Figure 2.34. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p.67.

Figure 2.34, pictured above, visually depicts a confusion of body parts resembling a scramble of puzzle pieces, with the text supporting this new reality: "Tout ce qui lui manquait, on le lui prêtait. Si bien qu'au bout d'un moment, on ne savait plus s'il s'agissait de nos bras ou des siens, si ma bouche était encore la mienne ou si elle était aussi la sienne" (67). Fayolle's representation of this situation underscores how the father's illness opens up the family and exposes it to difference, mitigating the autoimmune response of this small community to those outside it.

The comics medium lends itself to this openness because its *cross-discursivity* allows for the composition of panels where the juxtaposition of text and image generates irony through an internal

contradiction. Often, words and pictures work together to convey humor, naivete, or irony, in an *interdependent* combination which, according to Scott McCloud (1993) is one "where words and pictures go *hand in hand* to convey an idea that neither could convey *alone*" (155). In the case of *La tendresse des pierres*, both text and image support the metaphors that, once confronted with the reality of cancer, create irony as can be seen in the following panels:

Figure 2.35. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 67.

In a scene where the narrator talks about her father's physical decline caused by cancer (figure 2.35), both text and image describe it as a regression in time, with the father keeping the appearance of an adult but behaving like a child. The drawings highlight this conflicting depiction of the father/child, depicting a difficult reality of illness through a playful—even naïve—lens.

Additionally, Fayolle often uses the comics' visuality to bend or even break the internal logic of the world she is building. In figure 2.36, each of the panels that compose the scramble of body parts on previous pages becomes a separate scrap of paper, and Marion's avatar even interacts with them as she searches for her misplaced leg:

Figure 2.36. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 68.

Throughout *La tendresse des pierres* Fayolle uses visual metaphors to reference events incurred during her father's illness indirectly. For example, his dependence on an oxygen tank to breathe is represented by the father dragging of a pair of lungs on a small wagon. This abstract style requires a more active participation from the reader, who has to decode the unvoiced meaning of these metaphors in order to construct the sense of the story.

Metaphors are not limited to the visual part of the graphic novel, however. The work contains no direct verbal references to cancer or tumors, opting instead for more abstract ways of figuring the father's illness. In the scene towards the end of the text devoted to her father's diagnosis

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of a relapse, for example, the author reports that the doctors have found two "bombs" in his body

(figure 2.37):

By using the metaphor of the bomb, Fayolle figures her father's cancer as a war, a depiction that

aligns with Sontag's (2001) reflections on the popular mythology surrounding cancer: "the

controlling metaphors in descriptions of cancer are, in fact, drawn not from economics but from the

language of warfare […] Thus, cancer cells do not simply multiply; they are 'invasive'" (64). This

view of cancer as war is an example of the generalized biomedical perspective of the human body's

immunity that arose in the late nineteenth century, according to Ed Cohen (2009). Before the

scientific world adopted the term *immunity*, he asserts, it had been used as a legal concept referring to

the exemption of an individual from the common law for nearly two thousand years. This new

biomedical sense of the term immunity—the body's capacity to defend itself from external

pathogens—shifted the view of the human body's capability to heal to the more aggressive idea of

defense. Cohen adds that the adoption of 'immunity-as-defense' transposed a particular view of

human relations (the need to defend from others) to the biological conception of the human body:

> Modern presumptions about personhood and collectivity saturate both immunity and
> defense. Each offers a different strategy for accommodating the frictions and tensions (if not
> outright contradictions) between the singular and the multiple, the one and the many, that
> characterize modern political formations (3)

Here, Cohen reinforces the opposition between the individual and the collective that informs the

immunitary paradigm based on the rejection of otherness. Then, this perception of immunity as

defense from external threats covers both the political and the biological, and this is depicted in the

panel above (fig. 2.37) where Fayolle pictures the illness—tumors—as warfare—bombs. With this

image, she highlights the imminent threat of cancer's recurrence, also depicting the family's reaction

to the upsetting news. The text underscores the frustration caused by the fact that the medical

professionals don't seem to offer clear answers regarding his future: "Aller les voir, c'était un peu comme consulter une voyante finalement" (119). If the text demystifies the medical profession by comparing healthcare workers to a fortune teller, the image erases them altogether in a panel that only figures the impending bombs and the frightened family, thus focusing on the invasive character of her father's affliction.

Although there is likewise no visual representation of cancer as an embodied character, the disease is graphically evoked as an invasion carried out by men in white who arrive on horseback: the medical professionals who lay siege to the house and enter through its open windows and doors. Even if they are there to help, their invasion of his body signals his lack of self-sufficiency and his dependence on outside forces to survive. In the below figure (fig. 2.38) the house is a doubly metonymic representation of both the father's body and the community, which is consonant with the vulnerable view of the body theorized by Nancy and Donna Haraway:

Figure 2.38. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 78.

As the illness progresses, the medical professionals become more involved in the father's care and thus in the everyday life of his immediate family. This "invasion" of the space of the house echoes another aspect of cancer's mythologies, as Sontag explains:

> [M]etaphorically, cancer is not so much a disease of time as a disease or pathology of space. Its principal metaphors refer to topography (cancer "spreads" or "proliferates" or is "diffused"; tumors are surgically "excised"), and its most dreaded consequence, short of death, is the mutilation or amputation of part of the body. (15)

In *La tendresse des pierres*, the men in white settle in the family house, occupying every room. Soon, there is no more intimacy left for the father or the rest of the family as they feel subjected to the judging gaze of the medical professionals. This new reality imposed by the father's illness starts to weigh on them and they start to resent it.

The invasion of the medical professionals constitutes another example of the kind of surveillance explored by Foucault in *Surveiller et punir* (1975)—a sort of 'benevolent discipline'—but in this case the disciplinary gaze is exercised from within the house. All members of the family feel the pressure to behave perfectly—and artificially—under the eyes of the men in white, who exercise their disciplinary gaze on them as they examine the father. They change their everyday behavior in order to correspond to the carefully crafted image they would maintain in front of occasional visitors, getting up early, eating healthy foods, and acting as an ideal, loving family:

Figure 2.39. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 80.

In the top of this page (fig. 2.39), Fayolle depicts a figurative battle as a literal confrontation—a sword fight between the men in white and Marion and her family, as they struggle to maintain control over their space and their privacy. The text explains the discomfort that the family felt over the constant surveillance, wondering how the men in white could possibly find their lives interesting, comparing the situation to watching a bad TV show: "[n]ous regarder vivre n'avait pas plus d'intérêt que regarder un mauvais feuilleton télévisé. Je ne comprenais pas comment ils réussissaient à ne pas s'assoupir" (80). On the bottom right side of the page, Fayolle draws her parents kissing while the onlookers—herself, her brother and the men in white—applaud as if watching a performance. Later, tired of being watched and in order to avoid losing their identity and autonomy as a self-sufficient community, the members of the family decide to take on the role of caretakers. Their identities as individuals yield to their common plight, as the hierarchy of the family is transformed by the father's affliction. In addition to lending their organs and other body parts to the father, they completely devote their time and attention to his care, even changing their clothes so that they effectively become men in white themselves.

Although *La tendresse des pierres* is narrated from Fayolle's perspective as a caretaker during her father's illness, it centers on him and attempts to paint a complete portrait, depicting all his

complexity. The changes brought on by his cancer have an effect on the family dynamics and the way Fayolle perceives her father, with four distinct versions: the father as a king, a child, an enigma and a stone. I will elucidate each of these facets and how they inform the father's character before and during the illness. First, in this new familial hierarchy, the father becomes a king whose every need must be met by those around him, since he can no longer do things for himself:

Figure 2.40. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 87.

In the panels above (fig. 2.40), the text explains that—before the illness—the father used to focus more on his work than on the family, but after being diagnosed with cancer he took on a central role in his family's lives. The images support this claim by depicting the house as a castle complete with fortified towers, which visually echoes the military iconography associated with cancer. Here, the father detaches one of the towers from the castle and wears it as a crown, while his family bows to him in reverence. He goes from being a member of the community with a similar status as his wife and children to benefiting from an immunitary status as a member with different rights and responsibilities in the group. This special status concerning the rights and responsibilities of a member of a given community corresponds precisely to Cohen's definition of political immunity discussed earlier. What's more, here the legal dimension of the term overlaps with the biomedical definition, since this change happens as a consequence of the father's failing immune system. As the family patriarch/king, the father is uncompromising and exercises his rule unrelentingly, demanding perfection in the fulfillment of his whims.

When exploring the second transformation during the father's affliction, Fayolle compares him to a child since he becomes very dependent on his wife and children (fig. 2.41):

Figure 2.41. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 44.

Here, the text communicates the narrator's concerns with her father's diminished capabilities and his dependence on others: "[l]e corps de papa n'avait pas rétréci. Ou alors très peu. Tout faisait pourtant

de lui un jeune enfant. C'est ce qui était sans doute le plus troublant" (44). Further, his regression endangers her own self-image and identity, since she is forced to care for him in a reversal of roles: "[ç]a m'embêtait d'ailleurs un peu d'avoir soudain un papa plus jeune que moi. Si mon père était un enfant, mon existence était soudain difficile à croire" (44). The images show different scenes with hyperbolic representations of the father's new behavior, the last panel depicting him under a spotlight, which literally portrays the fact that he has become the center of attention. Later on, the narrator wonders if she is supposed to be the older sister to her "little dad" or if she is now his mother since this shuffling in the familial structure reinforces the changes in their individual identities.

The third representation in the complex portrait of her father is the enigma, which Fayolle represents by drawing her father as a black silhouette:

Figure 2.42. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 63.

In figure 2.42, the artist figures herself in front of the oversized avatar of her father. The black silhouette reflects the opacity of her father's character: he remains a mystery, with the exception of some details that Marion has been able to discern and put to paper. In this panel, the clear parts of her father that she knows are limited to the periphery of his bodily geography, but his core remains dark.

Lastly, her father's inaccessibility is also portrayed in the fourth facet discerned by Fayolle: the father as stone.

Figure 2.43. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 99.

In the panel above, towards the end of the graphic novel, Fayolle finally elucidates the title of her graphic novel by explaining that—for her—the best element to represent her father is a rock: "[s]i j'avais dû trouver un élément pour symboliser mon père, j'aurais choisi les pierres […] Mon père était un rocher sur lequel on aurait aimé s'agripper sans se blesser. Sous lequel on aurait aimé

s'abriter sans se sentir menacé" (99). Visually, the artist draws a giant rock in the shape of her father's face, and the following pages show the erosive effect of the sea—representing cancer—on his decimated rock-face. The narrator explains that, instead of rendering him soft, the illness has eaten parts of his geography, making him sharp to the touch. This visual metaphor conveys the father's rough, hard character. However, in later pages the narrator adds that there was a slight change in his personality: "[i]l avait en lui un peu plus de tendresse qu'avant mais on continuait à se couper les doigts et à se blesser si on l'enlaçait de trop près" (103). This image cements her perception of her father as a distant, often hurtful figure who is nonetheless capable of tenderness and vulnerability, especially after his cancer diagnosis. The form of the graphic novel allows her to explore her father's complexity through these different visual portrayals, which reflect his shifting position in the family and his changing relationship with his family members. Her father's depiction alternately showcases him as collection of removable parts, a king, a child, a mystery and stone. All these portrayals allow Fayolle to work through complex feelings towards her father.

For Fayolle writing *La tendresse des pierres* has a cathartic purpose. However, in the narrative her writing coincides with the recurrence of her father's cancer and the announcement that he is entering his final days. In the last pages of the graphic novel, while the author draws and writes in order to remember what happened and reconstruct the story, the cancer reappears, as tangible as the lines on the page (fig. 2.44):

Figure 2.44. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 126.

Here, both text and drawings show that, by putting the illness to paper, Fayolle is re-creating her father's cancer: "[m]a feuille était blanche et papa était en rémission. Je commençais mon dessin et le mal se ranimait" (126). Once finished, the drawing of the sick lung falls on the father, who had just crawled out of a hole representing cancer. In addition to the feelings of impotence and anguish caused by her father's affliction, the fact that his cancer returns just as she starts drawing about it

brings about feelings of guilt. Once again, Fayolle uses humor to approach this situation, stating—on

the following page—that it was nice of her father to remind her of the events of his illness:

> J'avais la sensation d'avoir tout réactivé. Le scénario se rejouait. Je n'avais pas besoin de ça pour me souvenir du passé et parvenir à écrire mon livre. J'avais une bonne mémoire. C'était aimable de la part de papa de nous rejouer la scène pour que je puisse prendre des notes mais vraiment ce n'était pas nécessaire. (127)

In the last pages of the graphic novel, she centers on the creative process and reflects on how the

men in white seem to be imposing an ending to the story, and thus to her father's life—an ending

she refuses. In this last act of rebellion against the medical professionals treating her father, she

visually attacks their avatars with her pencil (fig. 2.45), later escaping from them in an attempt to

regain the privacy her family desperately needs in order to say goodbye to one of their own:

Figure 2.45. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 128.

On the panels above, Fayolle continues to depict her creative process, this time focusing on the men

in white, who appear to take on a life of their own and escape the borders of the pages. The text on

the top of the page explains that she doesn't want the men in white to decide how her book will end,

as they seem to be doing with her father's death. This self-reflexive section of her graphic novel

allows her to be more explicit about the motivations and challenges of composing this work.

Drawing and writing her father's story gives her some measure of control over the way she can bring

the story out to the world. By figuring her father's illness and putting it on paper for the world to

see, she opens this intimate story up to the reader who can identify with either patient or caregiver.

As an autopathography, *La tendresse des pierres* offers the valuable perspective of a caretaker whose life

is impacted by the illness of a family member showing that—when it comes to illness—the plight of

an individual affects the whole community.

The metafictional aspect of *La tendresse des pierres*—where the narrator/author portrays

herself drawing/writing the graphic novel—is not only limited to the examples explained above, but

can be found throughout the graphic novel. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the narrator, characters, and readers appear to be aware of the fact that they are in the middle of a story where characters and backgrounds seem to be made of paper. At times, even at the intradiegetic level—as defined by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method* (1980)—, the different visual elements are susceptible to being cut, pasted, or carried like so many scraps of paper by the characters who are, themselves, part of that paper world. In an attempt to lend their voices to her father, for example, other family members cut out speech bubbles that they then carry around and adapt to his needs:

Figure 2.46. Marion Fayolle, *La tendresse des pierres* (Magnani, 2013), p. 71.

The page above (fig. 2.46) belongs to the middle of the narrative where the father and the family are still adapting to the removal of several of his organs. The text box says that, in addition to lending their body parts to the father, his family members are also responsible for translating his words: "[o]n devenait ses interprètes, ses traducteurs [...] Sans nous, personne ne le comprenait. On était les seuls à savoir le légender, à être capables de sous-titrer ses paroles et à le relier aux autres" (71). This new responsibility is conveyed visually in both panels where the narrator and her brother draw a speech bubble out of paper, cut it and place it over the father while he entertains visitors. Here, two characters in this world of paper turn to paper, pen and scissors to change it and adapt it to their family's needs. Later, in this new role of translator for her father, she finds herself modifying and even censuring his words, as they can be hurtful at times. In later pages her avatar is seen coloring her father's speech balloons or even changing the borders from serrated to smooth, curved lines, which represents a change in the tone of his remarks. These formal conventions for elements such as speech balloons are not innovative in and of themselves, but the fact that the characters in the story are aware of them and actually modify them is definitely groundbreaking. Fayolle's playfulness concerning the fungible quality of the objects that compose this world reiterates the

artist's awareness of the materiality of the medium. Just like the body is open and ever changing, the book and its creation are open to the influence of other actors such as characters, who quite literally build the story. Further, the readers are also responsible for weaving the meaning of visual metaphors and analogies in this intricate text. By exposing the graphic novel's textuality and its two-dimensionality—by breaching the text's fourth wall, so to speak—Fayolle brings the reader into her familial community, thereby rupturing its immunitary exclusion.

By publishing their graphic novels, Durand and Fayolle open up their communities and acknowledge, accept and even celebrate the diversity of others. The moving power of both texts lies in the call to the reader to share the ostensibly singular, embodied experience of illness, thus transgressing the barriers that are meant to separate individuals from each other and, more generally, entire communities from their *others*. Furthermore, the use of comics—a hybrid medium using text and image—works well to represent a hybrid view of communities as entities where the individual and the collective cannot be separated, which keeps them flexible, permeable and open.

The individual body in these texts is only the starting point of what Judith Butler identifies as a network of interdependency. Durand and Fayolle reclaim their vulnerability, figuring it not as a flaw, but as an asset that allows them to connect with and depend on others. This way, they forge a stronger community which protects all its members against the power structures that might marginalize them for not fitting the biolopolitical ideal. Their portrayal of illness, traditionally understood as an individual corporeal experience, transcends the body, as its effects ripple out from the person afflicted to affect the family and larger community to which they belong, including the reader. Instead of highlighting the isolation that ailing people usually feel, these autopathograpies offer a bridge for the reader to connect with the stories and the characters on a deeper level. When readers are confronted with illness narratives, they gain more than just the information about the individual's personal experience with a certain disease, they are often engaged ethically and

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emotionally with the universal experience of illness. Such an engagement emerges from the reader's realization that they are equally susceptible to illness. This phenomenon of identification is a key feature of illness narratives, since they "[heighten] one's awareness of one's mortality, threatening one's sense of identity, and disrupting the apparent plot of one's life" (Couser, *Recovering Bodies* 5). In this respect, one's vulnerability to disease, suffering and death (be it one's own or that of a close relation) is a universal concern with which most people can identify.

In this chapter, I have argued that the seemingly individual experience of illness is a myth, similar to the erroneous conception of the body as a closed and isolated entity. Instead, the works studied here portray illness as a collective experience that resonates through the individual body and outside the community to which the ailing body belongs. In Chapter 3, Abused Bodies, I move beyond the repercussions that illness has on the bodies around it in order to focus on the opposite movement where members of a community affect the embodied experience of one of its members. By analyzing Dominique Goblet's *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (2007) and Geneviève Castrée's *Susceptible* (2012), I argue that the family unit can function as a smaller biopolitical community that tries to sanction its members through disciplinary techniques exercised by those in positions of power, such as the parents.

Chapter 3 : ABUSED BODIES

For a long time, the only comics and graphic novels that registered in pop culture and mainstream discourse were those that featured superheroes, and few graphic novels have gone beyond their niche to resonate with the general public. One such example is Allison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1985), the source of what is now called the "Bechdel test":[50]

Figure 3.1. Alison Bechdel, *Dykes to Watch out For* (Firebrand Books, 1986), pp. 22-23.

The seemingly superficial anecdote about watching a movie in figure 3.1 calls attention to a deeper problem, often overlooked in real life: the dominance of men in cinematic representation. In the comic strip, the conversation is punctuated by the posters in the background, all featuring violent action movies bursting with testosterone, which support and visually reinforce the argument made by the characters.

Though less influential in popular culture, the term "women in refrigerators" (also called "fridging") has likewise surpassed the superhero comics genre and is now used in mainstream criticism to refer to the trope of abused women characters in fiction.[51] In 1999 comic book writer Gail Simone expressed concern over this fact and created a list of female characters in superhero comics who met an untimely and cruel death or were otherwise tortured or objectified. Kyra Nelson (2015) explains that "frequently, comic book writers employ female characters as little more than

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[50] The Bechdel test is measure of women's representation in movies. The expression was recently included in the Oxford and the Merriam-Webster dictionaries. In Bechdel's graphic novel, it refers to the minimum requirements for a character to agree to watch a movie: "One, it has to have at least two women in it… […] who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man" (see fig. 3.1). The collaborative website bechdeltest.com features a list of recent films, detailing whether they pass the test or not.

[51] The expression "women in refrigerators" refers to a *Green Lantern* issue where a villain kills the title character's love interest and puts her in a refrigerator.

plot devices designed to provide emotional drama and backstory for their male counterparts" (73). The subjection of these characters to violence and suffering with the sole purpose of motivating the men in their lives is even more troubling considering the breadth of the negative outcomes that befall these women. As catalogued on Simone's website (https://lby3.com/wir/), women characters in works mostly authored by men are kidnapped, raped, murdered, tortured, disabled, and made infertile; they are also pathologized, suffering from various mental illnesses.[52]

This chapter explores what happens when, instead of being sidelined in the story in order to give prominence to a male protector, the abused character takes control over her own narrative and uses it for empowering and cathartic purposes. Initially, a trope as violent as *fridging* in the fictional world of superheroes seems exaggerated when compared to the more modest scale of autobiographical comics. But graphic memoirs authored by women often feature some sort of abuse exerted on their narrators, whether that abuse is emotional, verbal, physical or sexual. Surveying the autobiographical work of women artists—published both in English and in French—reveals abuse to be a rather common experience for the narrators. For example, Phoebe Gloeckner, Debbie Drechsler, and Lynda Barry (to name only a few) deal with sexual abuse at a young age, particularly incest perpetrated by a father-figure.[53] Other authors use their work to recount experiences of physical and/or emotional abuse, such as Korean-born Keum Suk Gendry-Kim in *Le chant de mon père* (2012):

Figure 3.2. Keum Suk Gendry-Kim. *Le chant de mon père* (Sarbacane, 2012), pp. 82-83.

In the scene in figure 3.2, the narrator recounts the visit of one of her uncles during her teenage years in Korea. Busy with schoolwork, she refuses to go say hello to her uncle, who feels insulted by

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[52] This whole discussion can be found here: http://lby3.com/wir/women.html.

[53] These autobiographical works containing accounts of sexual abuse are Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2002), Drechsler's *Daddy's Girl* (1995) and Barry's *One Hundred Demons* (2002).

what he perceives as disrespect. Furious, he storms into her room and slaps her in the face. As

continues to beat her, Gendry-Kim's brush strokes become more intense, echoing the violence of

the uncle's actions; ink blots appear on the page, meant to represent her blood. In the panel at the

bottom of the second page, Gendry-Kim zooms out in order to focus on the sounds of the beating

and the cries of her mother, who begs him to stop to no avail. Episodes like this one explore specific

moments when the author is subjected to physical violence at the hands of a family member. In this

case, the author's uncle thinks that, as a man, he is entitled to discipline his sister's daughter as he

sees fit, especially given the absence of the author's father at the time of the beating. Such scenes are

common in narratives of familial trauma, where the abusing family member often feels as though

they are exercising their right to discipline the younger relative. This example highlights two aspects

of the complicated family and gender politics at stake in the type of trauma I analyze in this chapter.

As we will see below, the abuser is always an older family member and often a man.

In my analysis of "Ailing Bodies" in Chapter 2, I identified the family as a community

susceptible to falling into the immunitary paradigm when its integrity is threatened, whether by

internal factors (such as the disease of one of its members) or external ones (like the intrusion of

medical professionals). Here, I turn to the question of what happens when the women protagonists

of graphic memoirs refuse the discipline imposed by the people in power in their own families. If we

understand the family as a biopolitical institution that can regulate and control the bodies that

constitute it, the logical consequence is that power figures in that family can "regularize" and punish

its members, keeping them in line by forcing them to conform. In this chapter, I examine how

graphic memoirs portray difficult family relationships that subject their authors to disciplining and

abuse during their childhood, and how these traumatic events affect and shape the author as an adult

and her relationship to said power figures. I argue that with the publication of their stories, these

authors reclaim their agency by moving away from an asymmetrical relationship in which their

parents control and discipline them and staking out an alternative form of community that is not based on the family's immunitary logic.

In order to understand how discipline—understood here both in the traditional *and* the Foucauldian sense—fits into the structure of families, it is necessary to explore Michel Foucault's ideas on familial power. Although Foucault's views concerning the family were rather scarce in his earlier works about sovereign and disciplinary power, the 2003 publication of *Le pouvoir psychiatrique: cours au Collège de France, 1973-1974* shed new light on the subject.[54] As explained by Chloë Taylor (2012): "for Foucault, in the sovereign–discipline dichotomy, the family can be situated as a sovereign institution" (203). Foucault argues that the family shares several traits with sovereign regimes of power: for example, both are grounded either in blood-right or blood-conquest. For Foucault, sovereign power is established either by royal birth or through battle. Similarly, familial bonds have traditionally been defined by blood—whether through the blood shared between parents and children, or through the blood-shedding act of rupturing the hymen, the metaphorical conquest through which a marriage was traditionally established (though the practice is now outdated in many Western countries). Under sovereign power, moreover, individuality is located at the top of social hierarchy, in the body of the sovereign, while those submitted to the sovereign's power are not individuated. For Foucault, the family is an institution "in which the father, as bearer of the name, and insofar as he exercises power in his name, is the most intense pole of individualization, much more intense than the wife or children" (80). In the hierarchy of the family, the father occupies the top position in traditional families and wields power over all of the other members of the family.

This sovereign configuration of power is at work in the families portrayed in the graphic novels in my corpus, which are organized by a traditional hierarchical structure that corresponds to

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[54] Cf. Taylor 2012.

the heteronormative model Foucault studies. In this chapter, I will focus primarily on two graphic novels: Belgian visual artist Dominique Goblet's *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (2007) and Quebecer Geneviève Castrée's *Susceptible* (2012). The families depicted in both works are anchored by heterosexual parents, with the male figure at the head exercising his authority over his wife and children. Since most of the events represented in both works are drawn from the artists' childhoods, both narrators find themselves at the bottom of the family hierarchy, with the fathers exercising most of the authority and the mothers relegated to a secondary role. The bond that ties these families together is based on shared blood, since the narrators mostly recount their childhood experiences with their biological parents—though both families also include other authoritative figures, in the form of stepparents. I examine these relationships in more detail throughout this chapter. Furthermore, both authors portray bodies that are subjected to both physical and emotional abuse—and often both, as the two forms of violence are often conflated—due to conflictive relationships with those around them. In what follows, I analyze how the protagonist's combative family dynamics shape her corporeal experience, her self-representation, and her relationships, both during her childhood and as an adult. Specifically, I argue that Dominique's Goblet skillfully uses a diverse range of visual styles to mirror the experience of familial trauma and its long-lasting impact.

Dominique Goblet and the Inexpressibility of Trauma

Belgian author Dominique Goblet's *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (2007) has attracted significant attention from major critics in the comics world, such as Thierry Groensteen (2015) and Jan Baetens (2011) as well as from literary-oriented press. In her graphic memoir, Goblet uses a non-linear narrative to recount several key moments in the difficult relationships that shaped her life, structuring the text in five parts: an introduction and four chapters that jump back and forth chronologically to inform the reader about the author's fluctuating relationships with her family. The introduction recounts a seemingly banal event from the narrator's childhood, offering a glimpse into

the narrator's loving relationship with her mother. Chapters 1 and 3 focus on a visit that Dominique and her young daughter Nikita pay to her estranged father and stepmother. In chapter 1, Goblet explores her dysfunctional relationship with her father, portraying him as a man full of resentment over the treatment he received from his ex-wife and Dominique. Cécile, the father's new wife, is depicted as a conflictive and erratic woman. Dominique's only non-conflictive relation in chapter 1 is with her daughter Nikita, around four years old at the time. While it continues the events of chapter 1, chapter 3 is devoted primarily to a traumatic memory from Dominique's childhood, which she discusses with her father. In this analepsis, Goblet goes back to the time when her parents were still together and explores a traumatic interaction with her mother, complicating the benevolent portrait of her in the introduction. Here, Goblet portrays her mother as a woman frustrated with her domestic life and her husband's negligence. The events recounted in this flashback sequence introduce the reader to the dynamics of the narrator's family and the effects they had on its members.

Chapters 2 and 4 take place somewhere from three to five years after the events of chapters 1 and 3. The general timeline of this graphic novel is difficult to follow since there is only one text box that indicates when the events occur. Instead, it is up to the reader to interpret the few temporal clues scattered throughout the narrative. For example, chapter 2 features an older Nikita, which indicates that some years have passed since the visit to the father in the previous chapter. Chapters 2 and 4, which Goblet co-wrote with her partner, Guy Marc Hinant, center mainly on their romantic relationship and its problems. While the avatars for both Hinant and Goblet appear in chapter 2, chapter 4 is told entirely from Hinant's perspective. It is drawn by Goblet, however—a unique instance of a collaborative collective autobiography that I discuss in more detail below, when I describe the relationship between Goblet and Hinant.

With her avant-garde style, Goblet "questions several basic mechanisms of what it means to make a graphic novel" (Baetens 78). Whereas most graphic artists develop a uniform, recognizable visual style in order to establish themselves and make their work distinctive, Goblet gives each section its own aesthetic, with very different visual styles that set distinct tones and showcase her range as an artist. It is precisely this idiosyncratic style, I would argue, that allows her to convey the complexity of relationships and the effects of trauma. Freudian approaches to trauma studies maintain that suffering is unrepresentable, since traumatic events challenge the limits of language and even rupture meaning altogether (cf. Balaev 360). However, according to Ann Cvetkovich (2003) there are creative ways to record one's experience of trauma, since

> "trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics" (7).

Following this perspective, different accounts of trauma can be organized in ways that do not correspond with traditional storytelling, instead presenting themselves in a fractured manner. In particular, time seems to lose its linearity after traumatic events, and so do the narratives stemming from them. As Susan J. Brison (2011) asserts when talking about the process of overcoming a violent sexual assault: "the chronology of this period, however, is fractured in the telling. Time may be linear (who knows?) but the aftermath was not" (xi). This particular feature of traumatic memory may explain Goblet's complex style and her disregard for the formal conventions of graphic storytelling. By frequently presenting the reader with information that is chronologically or thematically out of context, Goblet aligns the reader with the person facing abuse, who cannot completely process what is in front of them. I believe that the feeling of confusion often felt while reading this graphic memoir seeks to generate sometimes conflicting feelings on the reader.

The complexity of Goblet's graphic novel extends beyond its fragmentary structure, heterogenous visual style, and unique lettering; the nature of the events it recounts is rather difficult

to process for most readers. For the sake of clarity, I will not follow the structure of the graphic

novel. Instead, I will explore the narrator's relationship with each of the other characters in turn,

referencing examples taken from diverse moments in the narrative to illustrate different aspects—

both formal and thematic—of this work. Since there are no page numbers in *Faire semblant c'est*

mentir, I will indicate the chapter from which each example is drawn to try to contextualize it. The

very intricacy and heterogeneity of the work, along with its fragmented timeline—which make it

difficult to construct a linear argument—are precisely the features that allow Goblet to represent her

trauma.

In his preface, "Douze ans de repentirs," Jean-Christophe Menu notes that *Faire semblant c'est*

mentir is the result of a very long writing process that spanned over twelve years with several

interruptions. This fragmented production shapes the materiality of Goblet's panels, many of which

contain visible stains, corrections, or additions of image or text. The fact that these imperfections—

such as smudges and scotch tape—were not corrected during the editing process reveals the

importance of documenting the passage of time for Goblet's project. In his preface (fig. 3.3),

Menu—acting both as an editor and personal friend of the author—admits his concern over the

heterogeneous style of the drawings since the initial pages have been transformed by time.

Figure 3.3. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

Time is central both to the extra-textual creative process and within the narration. As Menu

underscores in his introduction, time is the raw material that constitutes the book, as Goblet finds a

tangible way to capture its passage by leaving vestiges of the various stages of her creative process in

the finished work. The yellowing of the pages, the oil stains and the use of scotch tape in some

panels all bear witness to the time that elapsed between the beginning of the writing process and the

time of publication. They also give the text a haunting, other-worldly quality that adds to the

complexity of the drawings. In figure 3.4, for example, each panel bears a particular imprint of the

passing time, which gives them a rare—and quite literal—depth in what is traditionally a two-dimensional medium:

Figure 3.4. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

The scene depicted above is part of a heated discussion between Dominique and her father in chapter 1, where he recriminates her for supposedly siding with her mother against him. In their palimpsest-like quality, these panels seem to show several stages of the drawing process at once, in synchronic frames where text is superposed over old drawings. In a single page, the reader sees the inked lines of earlier drawings bleeding through the surface of several panels, while others are marked by stains that give color to the otherwise black-and-white page. The scene in figure 3.4 also exemplifies how Goblet makes use of comics' *cross-discursivity*: the drawings focus on the father's drinking, calling the sincerity of his self-righteous speech about the sacrifices he claims to have made for his family, into question. The repetition of the image depicting his hands pouring wine into a glass both crystallizes a moment in time and conveys the frequency of his drinking. The ambiguity of these panels—and much of Goblet's graphic novel—allows the reader a degree of interpretative freedom that goes beyond the traditional interactive nature of comics where the reader decides the pace of their reading and the degree of attention given to each panel. Instead, the reader can oppose the father's words against his actions, punctuated by repetitive drawings here. In a similar way to the other authors studied in this project, Goblet uses her graphic novel as a way to reclaim agency and assert a voice of her own by choosing which events to highlight and how to organize them. For example, one of the most important relationships the author explores in this work is the bond with her mother, which I will analyze first.

Even though her mother's visual presence throughout the graphic novel is limited to the four-page introduction and the flashback sequence in chapter 3, the choice to forefront a very positive portrayal of the mother in the introduction allows Goblet to show two conflicting sides of

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their relationship. *Faire semblant c'est mentir* opens with an anecdote where a very young Dominique—referred to here as Nikske—falls and tears her tights while on a stroll with her mother. In an attempt to calm the inconsolable child, the mother removes her tights, rolls them up into a ball, turns them around a couple of times, and puts them back on backwards. This trickery goes unnoticed by the young Dominique, who is enchanted by the thought of her mother performing magic:

Figure 3.5. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

In figure 3.5 we see the resolution of the accident, and the depiction of how a simple act determines the girl's perception of her mother as someone whom she loves and trusts. The loving gazes exchanged between mother and daughter tacitly express the tenderness of the scene, and of their relationship. Like the panels in figure 3.4, these panels also show traces of the time elapsed between their creation and the publication of the graphic novel, evident in the yellowed paper and the smudged lines. However, there is a key difference between both examples: in the panels containing her father's recriminatory monologue (fig. 3.4), there is a visual overlay of the original drawings—made multiple years before—and the later addition of new text. These edits add intensity to an already emotionally charged scene. In contrast, the anecdote concerning the mother (fig. 3.5) has been left untouched, no words added to a sequence that relies heavily on the facial expressions and body language of the child and her mother. Here, the simplicity of the drawings and dialogue preserve a memory that requires no revisions from the adult author.

After the sweet portrayal of the mother in the introduction, she visually disappears from the narration until chapter 3. However, she is the subject of several confrontations between Dominique and her father in the second half of chapter 1. In these arguments, Dominique's father claims that she always sides with her mother, joining forces with her against him and abandoning him. He also vents other grievances about his ex-wife, suggesting infidelity on her part and complaining about having to pay her alimony. During the argument, the tone and the volume of his complaints

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progressively rise, a sonic intensification the author conveys through the lettering and his body language. From panel to panel, the text occupies increasingly more space, effectively overflowing the speech bubbles until they no longer exist. At the same time, the father becomes more aggressive, pointing his finger at Dominique, frowning his brow and gesturing with such emotion that his wine spills. His face almost becomes detached from his body, in impossible angles. Finally, the last page of chapter 1 depicts the father aggressively yelling at Dominique, to which she simply replies "Mais non papa… c'est toi qui nous as laissés tomber":

Figure 3.6. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

The bottom right panel features a nuanced contrast against the rest of the page, dominated visually by the father. The pencil strokes—for the drawing and the lettering—are subtle and Dominique's facial expression and body language convey a sort of calm that counteracts her father's aggressivity. This last panel ends the chapter abruptly, leaving it somewhat suspended, with their conflict unresolved: Dominique's accusation of abandonment is neither answered nor explained. At this point, the reader can't realize that this proleptic panel will connect chapters 1 and 3 to continue this thorny argument. This connection between panels that are separated by several pages—or a whole chapter, in this case—corresponds to an associative logic that Groensteen calls *tele-arthtology*: "[p]ar le biais d'une *télé-arthrologie*, des images que le découpage tient éloignées, physiquement et contextuellement indépendantes, se révèlent soudain étroitement communicantes" (186). Here, Goblet uses virtually identical panels to invite the reader back into the argument between Dominique and her father.

Chapter 3 picks up the conversation at exactly the same point where chapter 1 leaves off, reproducing the final panel in the sequence. Instead of continuing the discussion between Dominique and her father, however, Goblet jumps back in time to tell her father about an event

from her childhood— one that might change his perception of certain events or, at the very least, help him see things from her perspective:

Figure 3.7. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

Though the visual connection between the scenes is obvious (cf. figures 3.6 and 3.7), the chronology of the events in this single page is not clear: only the top left panel takes place during Dominique's visit to her father, while the rest brings the reader back to Dominique's childhood. The reader may not immediately recognize the chronological jump backwards, especially given the absence of clear temporal markers. In fact, the first page of chapter 3 includes depictions of Dominique both as an adult, in the first panel, and as a child, in the last, potentially confusing an inattentive reader who might expect temporal homogeneity or synchrony. Furthermore, the adult in the bottom panel—the mother—is only depicted from the waist down, which makes it difficult to identify her at first sight. That the patterns of the mother's clothing in the bottom panel echo those of Dominique's outfit on the same page adds to the confusion. Finally, the artist chooses not to include any captions or text boxes, eschewing the techniques traditionally used to clarify spatio-temporal setting in comics.[55] Instead, Goblet leaves it to the reader to reconstruct the fractured timeline of her narrative from the images she juxtaposes on the page, arranging the pieces of her life like a puzzle. This lack of a clear narrative voice is one of the most remarkable formal characteristics of *Faire semblant c'est mentir* for Groensteen (2015), who adds that "sauf quelques lignes pour introduire le premier chapitre, la narratrice reste en retrait" (159). By effacing her narrative voice, Goblet positions herself alongside the reader, which allows her to attain the ability to recompose her own life without imposing a narrative.

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[55] Groensteen (2011) identifies several functions of text in graphic narratives among which is the "function de régie" [controlling function]. For him, this type of text manages narrative time: "Pour indiquer au lecteur les grandes scansions temporelles du recit, le moyen le plus commode dont dispose le narrateur est en effet de recourir aux énoncés verbaux" (156).

With these stylistic choices, Goblet displays a mastery of the comics medium as she slowly

builds up tension in anticipation of the traumatic episode that constitutes the graphic novel's

emotional climax. That sequence depicts a memory of an incident from Dominique's childhood, one

that took place some years after the tights incident narrated in the introduction, during a normal day

in the life of her family. One rainy day, her father is watching a Formula One race on TV as

Dominique plays in the kitchen next to her mother, who is ironing clothes. Visually, Goblet centers

the reader's attention on two focal points that develop simultaneously: in the living room, the father

is watching the car race that while drinking and smoking; in the kitchen, Dominique is playing but

soon feels bored while her mother attends to her chores. As Goblet alternates between these two

spaces, the reader is confronted with two realities: that of the father, who is portrayed as a passive

witness, absorbed by the events on TV, and that of the mother and daughter, who are stuck inside,

resigned to doing boring activities, with little choice in their situation.

Figure 3.8. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

Throughout this sequence, these parallel developments are tied together by the onomatopoeia that

illustrates the sound coming from the TV. As in other parts of the graphic novel, the letters occupy

spaces traditionally reserved for images, seemingly escaping the boundaries of speech balloons.

Furthermore, the "vroum" of the race cars seems to run through the characters, as can be seen in

the bottom panels of both pages in figure 3.8. This visual representation of onomatopoeia gives the

sound of the racecars an almost tangible quality within the diegetic space, by placing the letters in the

same three-dimensional space occupied by the characters.

Sound is of capital importance in *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, a feature that adds to the work's

uniqueness as the comics medium has traditionally been understood to rely primarily on images—

though the use of onomatopoeia has been studied extensively, as it is the most common device

comics use to communicate sound. In Goblet's graphic novel, the centrality of sound is reinforced

by its tendency to convey other dimensions as it travels, such as emotions or time. About this, Catherine Mao (2009) asserts that "dans certains chapitres, le son bédéphilique prend une véritable consistence narrative, provoquant certaines actions majeures, voire venant se substituer au personnage-source de l'émission sonore" (2). In the scene depicted in figure 3.8, the loud noise of the televised car race invades the space of the kitchen, thus extending the presence of the father—and, I would argue, his control over his subordinates in the family hierarchy. Goblet's insistence on the sound of the cars reinforces the pervasiveness of the father's dominance, as the noise visually outweighs the facial expressions of the mother, who is always drawn from the back or the side in these pages. When the young Dominique's frustration grows because she is bored, stuck inside on account of the rain, it becomes clear that the mother is also feeling trapped in the house and, consequently, in the life it houses. When Dominique complains about not being able to do what she wants, the mother's frustration manifests clearly in her response: "Et moi, tu crois que je fais ce que j'ai envie?" [sic]. Meanwhile, the father seems to be the only one doing as he pleases, watching TV and drinking beer after beer.

This sequence prominently features another important aspect of Goblet's style: lettering. In the panels in figures 3.9 and 3.10, the artist renders the mother's utterances exclusively in capital letters, while she uses lowercase letters for young Dominique's words—a very simple visual way to convey the family's hierarchical structure and the dominance of the mother over the daughter. According to François Poudevigne (2016), the use of capital and lowercase letters figures one of the types of violence to which Dominique is subjected: verbal violence. The content of the mother's assertions ("Que je ne t'entende plus!" "Je t'ai dit de te taire!") reinforces these formal effects, clearly pointing to the young girl's loss of what little power she had previously held in that situation, when she could at least express her discontent verbally. In this respect, Poudevigne asserts that "en la privant de parole, sa mère la prive d'existence, dans la mesure où sa voix constituait jusqu'alors la

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dernière marque concrète, tangible de sa présence dans l'œuvre" (28-29). Ultimately, in *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, both parents constantly try—and succeed—to silence the protagonist, using their own words as a weapon against her.

As the story progresses, the tension of this domestic scene continues to escalate, and the "clic clac" of the rain is added to the "vroum" of the TV, saturating the aural space. As young Dominique keeps complaining about material things such as their house and vacations, this clearly hits a particular nerve on her mother, who gets more irritated and grabs her by the arm quite aggressively to sit her at the table. With this, the mother's reactions go from verbal to physical. Then, Dominique starts kicking the table with her foot, adding a "tac tac" to the already crowded and overwhelming aural dimension of the scene. As a result of being forced to sit at the table to keep drawing, she starts shaking her paintbrush, splashing the recently ironed clothes next to her:

Figure 3.9. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

In this memory sequence, the narration has been focusing mostly on what was happening in the kitchen with Dominique and her mother, with some visual interruptions of panels portraying the father or images from the race. Although these are clearly two separate spaces in the house, the father is somehow occupying the aural space of both the kitchen and the living room. Goblet uses the representation of the onomatopoeia to invade the space of both mother and daughter, who are already feeling trapped, though in different ways: physically for Dominique and metaphorically for the mother. As the representative of sovereign power, the father's control extends beyond his physical presence and overpowers—even through sound—the women in his family.

The scene in figure 3.9 also contains explicit onomatopoeia coming from the rain, the TV and the table. But other sounds that are not transcribed in text may also manifest in the time of reading, as the reader sees the thunder rumbling through the windows and the paint splashing all over the folded clothes on the table. In a way, the "silent" panels that do not contain any dialogue or

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onomatopoeia preserve a rich aural quality. When discussing the importance of sound in Goblet's

graphic novel, Mao (2009) states that "d'une part, la fonction sonore de la bande dessinée n'est pas

du tout réductible à sa fonction verbale ou parolière (…) Le dessin seul se charge fort bien

d'indiquer le bruit" (5). In *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, there are numerous "silent" panels where sound

is tacitly communicated through other elements or gestures. In one panel, sound is implied in the

characters' body language, as a character covers his ears while an airplane passes by. But in this

particular sequence (figs. 3.7 through 3.12), sound takes on a central role in the narration as the

tension between Dominique and her mother rises:

Figure 3.10. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

After young Dominique splashes her paint all over the clean and ironed clothes, the subsequent

panels shift the visual focus almost exclusively to the father (fig. 3.10). The only way the reader can

follow what is happening is through the text representing the screams coming from the kitchen,

which can easily be confused with the sounds coming from the TV.

In this very important sequence, Goblet uses the medium's *cross-discursivity* to blur the lines

between the perspectives and noises coming from both rooms in the house. Whereas the sounds

coming from the TV occupied the kitchen in the previous sequence, the screams from the kitchen

now begin to invade the aural space of the living room, where the father can no longer concentrate

on the car race because of the fight that has erupted. With one exception, however, Goblet chooses

to focus on the yelling and avoids drawing her interactions with her mother. The only panel

depicting the mother and daughter gives a glimpse into the violence—both emotional and

physical—to which the child is subjected, as the mother pulls Dominique out of the kitchen by her

hair (the panel on the bottom left of fig. 3.10). When talking about testimonies of trauma, Brison

(2011) explains that the victims "can control certain aspects of the narrative and that control,

repeatedly exercised, leads to greater control over the memories themselves, making them less

intrusive and giving them the kind of meaning that enables them to be integrated into the rest of life" (54). In choosing not to visually represent the abuse to which she was subjected, Goblet gains some control over her narrative and the effects that those events have over her.

While the panels that follow show either the father or the race, the text blends the commentator's narration from the TV with the screams of Dominique and her mother, as her father leaves the couch to go see what is happening. Suddenly, an accident on the racetrack recaptures his full attention. He decides to stay and watch, though he can still hear the screams coming from the other room. Visually, the reader is only shown the father's perspective: the drawings depict the tragedy of the racetrack accident, rather than the violence to which the protagonist is subjected. Goblet hints at the physical abuse in only one panel (bottom left, fig. 3.10), which catches the reader's attention as the only visual representation of the mother's abuse. By denying readers access to the image of the abuse, Goblet pushes them to imagine what is happening based solely on the dialogue. Only the text bears witness to the violence of the mother's accusations, as she calls her daughter "sale gamine" and "méchante petite fille." It is only after twenty tension-building panels that the focus switches again to show young Dominique tied up in the attic:

Figure 3.11. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

The full-page panel in figure 3.11 constitutes the height of the tension and intensity of both this sequence, which appears four-fifths of the way through the narrative, and of the work as a whole. The drawing shows the climax of Dominique's fight with her mother, but the text describes the outcome of the tragic car accident that claimed Roger Williamson's life. Once again, Goblet builds tension throughout the sequence by alternating text and images from both tragic events (fig. 3.11). Visually, the panel stands out from the rest of the narrative: it is drawn in a realistic style, unlike most of Goblet's images, and is one of the very few full-page panels in the book. In an image reminiscent of the Christ hanging on the cross, the punished child is tied up to a wooden beam and

left alone in the attic. While she is silent, her facial features and tears convey the intensity of her inner feelings. Her surroundings show the usual forgotten objects found in attics, but several details suggest the fear that she could be feeling: a spider appears on the right side of the panel, while several knots in the wood on the beam and the floor resemble eyes watching her. This detail conveys the feeling of always being watched by those in power, even when one is alone, which is reminiscent of the constant surveillance to which individuals are subjected under biopolitical power structures.

The tragedy of the events culminating with attic scene lies in the fact that both of Dominique's parents fail to fulfill their role as protectors: her mother by abusing her, and her father by neglecting her. In figure 3.11, Goblet juxtaposes the text from the televised car accident with the image of her own tragedy, underscoring the powerlessness of both victims—the young Dominique and Roger Williamson—and their inability to escape their respective predicaments. About this, Poudevigne states: "il s'établit alors tout au long de cette séquence un régime d'énonciation croisée, où textes et images se confrontent et se confondent en un déchaînement de violence qui confère à la scène toute son intensité" (33). But whereas a fellow racer named David Purley tries to save the driver involved in the car accident (albeit to no avail), no one comes to young Dominique's rescue.

After this scene, the tension decreases, as does the noise. We see the mother sitting in the kitchen, visibly upset about what has just happened. Outside, the storm echoes the mother's mood as it slowly starts to clear out. The novel offers no indications of how long young Dominique was left in the attic; no additional panels directly represent the time she spent tied up. Again, Goblet avoids drawing the difficult scene of her suffering and focuses instead on her mother's feelings of remorse. After some time, the mother brings young Dominique back into the kitchen and tries to console her in a warm embrace as she sits on her lap. While Dominique continues to cry profusely, her father finally reappears in the narration, oblivious to what has been—and still is—happening in such close proximity to him. It seems that his only concern is the race car accident he has just

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witnessed on TV. Once again, he invades the aural space of the kitchen with his voice, this time talking about the magnitude of the accident:

Figure 3.12. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

In figure 3.12, as in other parts of the graphic novel, the father's speech balloons—and his sizable anatomy—occupy a large proportion of the panels. In the bottom central panel, for example, a large speech balloon separates the father from his wife and daughter, who appear to be far away from him. With this play of perspective, Goblet figures the emotional distance that separates the family. The father's presence in the kitchen, moreover, has nothing to do with the yelling that he had clearly heard (fig. 3.10), nor with the violence that the mother subsequently inflicted upon Dominique. His only purpose is to get a questionable number of beers before retreating to the living room. Even during the brief moment that he spends with his wife and daughter, he is obsessed with the accident on TV. As a retired firefighter, he repeatedly claims, he would have saved the driver, had he been there—a claim that is especially significant in light of his failure to save his own daughter. That the father does nothing to prevent or remedy the physical and emotional abuse Dominique suffers— though he is, in fact, present during her punishment—highlights his neglect as head of the family.

In addition to the father's claims, there are other details that add to the irony of the sequence in figure 3.12—for example, the fact that the mother, who is responsible for inflicting physical and emotional violence on Dominique, is also responsible for comforting her. What's more, once Dominique has calmed down, her mother suggests that they play a board game—called *Ne t'en fais pas!*—in order to move on from the upsetting episode. Although the name of the game can barely be seen on the bottom right panel of figure 3.12, on the next page Goblet reproduces the cover of the box in greater detail in a panel that covers half the page and serves as a transition between the flashback sequence and the conversation with her father that had started in chapter 1. Rather than the mechanics of the game, Goblet highlights the significance of its name, which translates as

"Don't worry!". She also features the tagline "C'est un jeu fort répandu"—a potential commentary on the frequency of events like those that transpired in the attic, in Dominique's family in particular or in families in general.

This sequence, which is central to Goblet's graphic novel, depicts the complexity of family relationships. Conceived as a sovereign community, the family is organized in a hierarchical power structure where the father occupies the highest position, exerting control over other family members. In Goblet's rendering of her childhood, the young Dominique occupies the lowest place in her nuclear family, subjected to the sanctioning gaze of both of her parents. The sequence of events that end with the attic episode depicts the child's lack of power since, at first, her mother orders her to be silent, thus reducing her presence in the aural space of the kitchen. As young Dominique refuses to do this and is brought to the attic, even her freedom to move is restricted, negating her voice and even her physical existence in the field of view of the mother—and the reader—until the full-page panel in figure 3.11. Even after being left alone in the attic, away from her mother's punishing gaze, Dominique loses all agency because she is physically restrained.

The sequence evoking Dominique's abuse confronts the reader with two divergent images of her relationship with her mother. On the one hand, the mother overreacts to her daughter's disobedience and imposes a physical punishment that will emotionally scar her for years to come. On the other hand, the mother is the one who consoles her afterwards, clearly regretting her actions. By foregrounding these contradictory interactions between mother and daughter, Goblet offers a complicated portrait of the nature of her relationships with her family, since she is portraying an episode from her own childhood. As a community, the family depends on a network of interconnected relationships, each of which influences the rest. In the attic episode, this interconnectedness manifests as a sort of "domino effect": the actions of the patriarch affect the mother who, in turn, loses her patience very quickly with her young child. Under this model, the

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health of each link in the hierarchy—whether between spouses or towards the children—has a direct effect on those in the lower level: in this case, young Dominique.

Even after her parents' divorce, this network of dysfunctional relationships continues to affect Dominique as an adult. During the same argument in chapter 1 that prompted the father's recriminations of abandonment, he makes several comments about her mother, to whom he is no longer married. The panels below show part of a discussion where, even though the mother is not physically there—nor is she legally linked to the father—she continues to "haunt" the family dynamics. Even years after their separation, the father continues to resent his ex-wife, complaining about how much money he had to pay her in alimony, and about an alleged affair that he claims she had. In response, Dominique remarks "Ça ne me regarde pas", trying to avoid the conversation:

Figure 3.13. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

Throughout chapter 1, the father keeps bringing up the topic of Dominique's mother, continuously pulling Dominique into the negative circle of the relationship the three shared during her childhood. When he mentions his ex-wife's behavior and forces Dominique to take sides, the father puts Dominique in a position where, once again, she suffers the consequences of their dysfunctional relationship. In most of his reproaches, the father asserts that Dominique has always sided with her mother—a claim that Dominique rejects, noting that the issues between them have little to do with her mother and more with his own role as a parent.

In *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, chapters 1 and 3 show episodes that offer a glimpse into Dominique's relationship with her father and mother, respectively. Having analyzed the sequences that mostly concern the mother, I will go back to chapter 1 to elucidate the complicated relationship with her father. Once again, I have organized my arguments thematically rather than following the events as they are presented in the graphic novel. As I argued previously, Goblet uses words and images to depict the contradiction between her father's perception of himself and her own. His

words often indicate that he thinks highly of himself, both as a firefighter and as a father. While his

professional qualities as a firefighter are not directly questioned in the graphic novel, his paternal

performance is constantly challenged by Dominique Goblet as both character and enunciator.

Often, Dominique verbalizes recriminations against her father concerning his drinking problems, as

in the example below (a continuation of the panels in figure 3.13):

Figure 3.14. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

In this confrontation, Dominique accuses her father of drinking excessively, to the point of

developing complications from cirrhosis. At first, he denies it but he almost immediately changes his

response and blames his drinking on the emotional strain caused by the problems with his ex-wife.

This sudden change in his argument underscores the idea that Dominique is right to accuse him,

since his "reasons" to drink are not as solid as he would like to believe.

In *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, Goblet uses a large variety of the tools available to the graphic

novel in order to communicate the father's verbal violence. As Poudevigne (2016) explains:

> Cette tension se réalise alors dans l'œuvre par le biais de dispositifs énonciatifs complexes et
> variés, qui parce qu'ils sollicitent tous les plans de l'énonciation (…), jouent de toutes les
> ressources (notamment graphiques, iconiques et spatio-topiques) offertes par la bande
> dessinée, refusant de s'en tenir à sa seule dimension verbale, et à l'opposition canonique
> entre récitatifs et bulles de parole. (19-20)

These rich enunciative resources are visible in figure 3.14, where—on the left page—Goblet uses the

size and the thickness of the pencil strokes in the lettering to express the intensity of the father's

words, which are superimposed over the drawings, relegating Dominique's avatar to a second plane.

On the right page, however, the artist shifts the focal point of the scene to the objects on the coffee

table: a half-empty bottle of wine and two wine glasses to reinforce her argument against her father's

claims. In particular, Goblet uses the last two panels to build irony based on her father's words:

"C'est quand même grâce à moi que vous aviez tous les jours quelque chose dans votre

assiette!"(np). While he meant that, thanks to him, the family had food on their plates, Goblet

chooses to center the next panel on the tray—similar to a plate—that holds the bottle of wine, thus suggesting that his "contributions" to the family were very different in her eyes. Throughout the narrative, alcohol is as a visual leitmotif, representing Dominique's father by metonymy (as evidenced in figures 3.4, 3.6, 3.8 and 3.12). Here, Goblet uses this shift in perspective to contradict the father's claims, offering readers visual evidence of their falsity and drawing them toward a conclusion that is closer to what she is arguing. Often, Goblet uses visual cues to have Dominique retroactively "win the argument" with her readers when their exchange is not a real conversation, but rather an opportunity for the father to talk *at* her. Concerning this, Poudevigne asserts that the father's speech is rigorously hermetic towards other people, which constitutes another form of violence (24). When Dominique's father speaks, he frequently repeats himself, reiterating the same argument two or three times in a row. Goblet's visual rendering of his words conveys their aggressiveness: the text contains multiple exclamation points and often extends beyond the borders of speech balloons and even individual panels (this is visible in multiple panels, for example in the first figure used to analyze Goblet's work in this project, fig. 3.4); at times, the lettering is drawn over the other characters. This "hystérie énonciative" (Poudevigne 21) reflects the father's temperament not only with Dominique, but towards all interlocutors: when his second wife, Cécile, decides to chime in and comment on what he is saying, he immediately retorts "Ouais mais dis c'est moi ou c'est toi qui racontes?" Although Dominique's father is not the story's protagonist, he is—by far—the character who speaks the most, aggressively dominating the discourse throughout the narrative with his words. Yet, I argue that Goblet uses images to counteract her father's dominance in the narrative, thus regaining control of her life's story.

Unlike with most graphic memoirs, in this graphic novel captions and voice overs are quite rare, and most of Dominique's inner thoughts are not explicitly told, but rather shown through her avatar's facial expressions. Very rarely does Goblet include any kind of textual commentary beyond

the words uttered by the characters. However, in depicting her tumultuous relationship with her father, Goblet highlights details in their interactions that provide evidence of their complicated bond. For instance, in the following panels taken from the beginning of chapter 1 where Dominique reconnects with her estranged father, she elaborates on the diminutives that he uses to refer to her:

Figure 3.15. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

The middle-left panel in figure 3.15 contains an asterisk that refers the reader to a sort of footnote within the same panel, which explains that the diminutive "Nikske" means "little nothing" in the Brussels dialect. This sort of paratext is rare in *Faire semblant c'est mentir* and it is another sign of Goblet's retrospective intervention in the narrative in this case through a clarification that breaks the fourth wall, so to speak. The comment—visually reinforced by the curly line over Dominique's head in the same panel—allows Goblet to highlight the discomfort she felt when her father used this demeaning nickname.[56] This is particularly notable given that no such commentary appears when her mother uses the very same nickname in the introduction to the narrative. Though the father's subsequent use of a different diminutive is likewise accompanied by a footnote informing readers that "Dom" means "stupid" in Flemish, the narrator seems unbothered when a friend calls her "Dom" in a different moment in the narrative. With these footnotes, Goblet insists on the violence of such nicknames when used by the father. This is not an inconsistency in Goblet's account of events, I would argue, but rather a means of conveying to readers the nuances of verbal abuse that might otherwise go unnoticed.

In addition to being disparaging towards Dominique, the father's discourse is hyperbolic and self-aggrandizing. On one of the multiple occasions where he claims to have been an exemplary

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[56] As I explain in Chapter 1, artists use these symbols emanating from the characters to show their internal state. In Goblet's use here, I believe that it means that Dominique is confused and bothered by her father's nickname.

firefighter, for example, he feels the need to increase the intensity of his argument from one panel to the next:

Figure 3.16. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

In the panels on the left-hand page of figure 3.16, the father hogs the limelight, indulging in a rant about how beloved and admired he was in his work as a firefighter. After bragging to Dominique about how he retired as a high-ranking officer—a *caporal*—he immediately yells out a higher rank—*adjudant*—as if the former rank had not sufficiently impressed his daughter or inspired her respect.[57] Although the text on this page is almost exclusively uttered by the father, Goblet manages to portray her reaction to his exaggerated account with a hyperbolic illustration: a drawing of a truck full of firefighters, profusely crying, surrounded by floating hearts. In this panel, and throughout the work, Goblet uses text and image to convey opposing meanings, engaging the graphic novel's *cross-discursivity* to build a complex narrative with conflicting views.

Another important feature of *Faire semblant c'est mentir* is Goblet's unique use of lettering to convey the nuances of character's inner feelings. On the right-hand page of figure 3.16 above, a new confrontation arises when the father decides to go after Dominique over her pronunciation of "là d'sus." Earlier in the chapter, Dominique's daughter Nikita had made a comment to her grandfather about his way of speaking: "Han, papymoustach. Dis, tu parles mââl!" (np). Instead of taking the child's comments lightly—as a mature adult would—he feels genuinely attacked and later seizes the opportunity to settle the score with Dominique. Here, Goblet uses lettering—a very ornate cursive—to communicate the father's mocking tone. In turn, Dominique's mild reaction to her father's criticism seems to infuriate him, as he lashes out and tries to pick a new fight by comparing her to her mother.

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[57] In fact, neither of these ranks is particularly high for firefighters, which makes the father's comments even more derisive.

Another expressive use of lettering is key to one of *Faire semblant c'est mentir*'s most complex panels, as I will elucidate next. In the scene where Dominique argues with her father about her mother in chapter 1, he repeatedly asserts his status as a victim cast aside by his ex-wife, claiming "Je vous ai tout donné! J'ai tout fait pour vous!". While the previous pages shared the same visual style as the figures in the examples above, the following full-page panel presents a very complex image:

Figure 3.17. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

Goblet's juxtaposition of the father's words with the young Dominique's contradictory reaction culminates in the striking panel in figure 3.17, which merits special attention. In this drawing, Goblet depicts her father sitting on a sort of throne, with a halo around his head and a baby in his arms—a pose traditionally used to portray the virgin Mary. Each element of the panel's composition—the lines, the materials, the lettering—distinguish it from the rest of the narrative. The multilayered quality of the image echoes the work of the graphic novel as a whole: Goblet revisits old events and renders them through a new lens of her own creation. At the same time, she juxtaposes her father's words with a drawing that portrays him as a saint, thereby communicating his manipulation while questioning his authority. As Mao (2009) observes:

> Mais loin de citer la Bible, le texte est très caustique : 'Est-ce que tu n'avais pas tous les jours tes petites tartines pour aller à l'école ?'. Ici, c'est justement en tournant en dérision le *rôle* que le père s'est donné par la parole que l'auteur le tourne en dérision. (6)

Once again, although Dominique is seemingly condemned to silence by her father, Goblet uses her drawings to express her perspective. The religious iconography, reminiscent of a medieval illumination, also carries the connotation of religion as a timeless biopolitical agent of power. By rewriting these events from her adult perspective—a reinscription of her past self that is reinforced by the palimpsestic quality of the panel—Goblet resists her father's disciplinary control, refusing its claim on her memories of a childhood marked by his demands of obedience.

For the English translation of *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, translator Sophie Yanow collaborated with Goblet, who did the lettering herself—a testament to the importance of lettering in the work, beyond its traditionally utilitarian role. Like her drawings, Goblet's lettering has an aesthetic and expressive value, as Mao (2009) asserts: "par l'écriture manuelle, qui donne aux lettres plasticité et volume, la BD transforme et réifie le texte: celui-ci déborde alors de sa dimension conceptuelle pour jaillir dans toute sa matérialité, dans tout son faire" (8). As her lettering exemplifies, Goblet often transgresses the formal rules of traditional comics, pushing the medium in new directions that allow her to communicate the complexity of her lived experience. For instance, in addition to the gothic style of calligraphy, Goblet decorates the inhabited initial with three fish that form the letter Q (fig. 3.17), but in the English translation, the inhabited initial instead features a bat, since the English text starts with the letter W:

Figure 3.18. Dominique Goblet, *Pretending Is Lying*, translated by Sophie Yanow (New York Review Comics, 2017), np.

Critics have often commented on *Faire semblant c'est mentir*'s eclectic style, or mix of styles. Scholar Gert Meesters (2010) goes so far as to describe Goblet's graphic novel as a UFO: "ce livre est un ovni dans le monde de la bande dessinée, dans le sens où il ne se réfère pas à son réseau stylistique. Pourtant, l'héritage de la bande dessinée est également apparent dans ce livre" (7). In this article, Meester focuses mainly on the different visual styles Goblet employs throughout her graphic novel, noting how her versatility distinguishes the work from other graphic novels and pushes it closer to other visual arts. While I agree that *Faire semblant c'est mentir* is unlike most other work in the genre, I think that arguments like Meesters' reflect a narrow view of what graphic novels have done and can do. The fact that Goblet bends—or even breaks—some rules in her attempt to represent complex issues is proof that she is, in fact, exploring the possibilities of the medium. I would argue that *Faire semblant c'est mentir* is so effective in depicting the trauma stemming from complex family relationships precisely because of its unconventional form. Goblet uses the heterogenous style and

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broken timeline afforded by the comics form to present her story to the reader in a way that feels confusing and at times chaotic—and that resonates with the feelings and impressions generated by traumatic events. With this aesthetic strategy, Goblet leaves it to readers to process the events she portrays and to try to make sense of them.

Throughout *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, there are several confusing panels that resist an unequivocal interpretation, but that resistance to a clear interpretation is, itself, part of the point that Goblet is trying to make. In figure 3.19, for example, Goblet superposes animal silhouettes over her father's face as he complains about Dominique's mother:

Figure 3.19. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

The bottom panel in figure 3.19 figures the father as a sort of devil, attacking Dominique with a pitchfork—and his words. The panels that precede it are more cryptic. They may portray her father in the process of becoming a beast, ready to charge at her, or this may be a subtle way to call her father a cuckold, since all of the animals are horned.[58] With this ambiguity, Goblet leaves the final interpretation up to the reader, which makes space for her to rewrite and control her own narrative through multiple layers of construction of meaning. By including potential commentary under the surface, this ambiguity also allows her to maintain plausible deniability for herself.

Although Goblet's portrait of her father in *Faire semblant c'est mentir* shows him to be conflictive and self-centered, the final sequence that features him offers readers a glimpse into a different side of their relationship. While chapters 1 and 3 are centered on the dysfunctional family dynamics surrounding Dominique's attempt to reconnect with her father, the events narrated in chapter 2 take place several years later and they explore her experience with a failed romantic relationship, from its beginning to the days following the breakup. In the context of chapter 2—

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[58] In French, "cocu" can mean horned when referring to an animal but also cuckold when referring to a person.

which spans for 61 pages—, the two-page spread that contains the father's short intervention is not, by any means, central to the events. Yet, these panels show a different dynamic between the father and Dominique, who goes to visit him at the hospital after learning about her father's most recent ailment:

Figure 3.20. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

These pages show a completely different kind of interaction between Dominique and her father, which suggests that that their relationship was a lot more complex than chapters 1 and 3 let on. In this conversation, the father is supportive and understanding when Dominique confides in him about her heartbreak, even though he is still convalescing from a coma. Visually, these pages are also very different from other panels depicting interactions between Dominique and her father. Here, the stroke of Goblet's pencil is uniform in the lines that compose both characters, whereas panels where the father's physique is imposing and even menacing are drawn with thicker lines. He now looks visibly fatigued, with bags under his eyes and a sort of lump protruding from his side—maybe a colostomy bag—emphasizing that he is ailing and weak. All of the dialogue is contained within speech balloons, and the lettering is homogeneous. Finally, the color that fills the panels is uniform and calming. Chronologically, this is the last interaction in the timeline of the narrative shown with the father, who died in 1998 while Goblet was still composing *Faire semblant c'est mentir*. By choosing to show this gentler perception of her father, the artist adds a new layer to the portrait of a very complicated relationship with a very complicated man who, later in the narrative, will appear again as a neglectful and inattentive father. Here, and throughout the graphic novel, Goblet represents her characters as multifaceted individuals capable of contradictory feelings and actions. When talking about her creative process in an interview, Goblet states:

> Ce qui est très beau dans la vie, c'est que personne parmi nous n'est monolithique. On est tous capable de faire les pires crasses, on est tous capable d'abandonner une personne qui va

en crever pendant un an, on est capable de tromper, on est peut-être même capable de racisme, capable de dénoncer (Guilbert 4)

With this in mind, Goblet strives to depict the people in her life—characters in her graphic novel—in all their complexity, as we have seen she does with both her parents.

Another essential element of the conflict in chapters 1 and 3 is Cécile, the father's new partner. Goblet's depiction of the character surpasses the limits of humanity: she appears as a skeleton-like figure, whose face resembles the central figure in Edward Munch's painting *The Scream*. In the chapters where the narrator reconnects with her father after four years of estrangement, Cécile adds tension to the sequence, notably in her interactions with Dominique's young daughter, Nikita. In the first panel in figure 3.21, Nikita shows Cécile a drawing she has made, adding that the person in her drawing is her friend. The next panel shows Nikita's drawing along with Cécile's reaction: "Ah, does your friend have long hair?" Somehow, the child's response—"Well no, why?"—enrages Cécile, who then goes off on a tirade that ends with the words that give the graphic novel its title, "faire semblant c'est mentir":

Figure 3.21. Dominique Goblet, Faire semblant c'est mentir (L'Association, 2007), np.

The visual elements of the sequence underscore the excessive nature of the reaction itself. The lettering becomes extremely aggressive, with thick pencil strokes, an inconsistent use of uppercase and lowercase characters, and multiple question marks. Most of the drawings also have a childlike style, echoing Nikita's own drawing from the top center panel. Suddenly, both Nikita and Cécile appear as stick figures, as Goblet's drawing forsakes any attempt at realism. Thus, Cécile's representation—which was already far from human-like—devolves completely into a monstrous shape with spider-like legs and arms. The proportions of her body are also exaggerated, as we see Cécile towering over Nikita. With this change in style, Goblet modifies the point of view of the narrative to give the child the opportunity to briefly become a narrator. In addition to highlighting

the immaturity of Cécile's reaction to Nikita's silly jokes, this formal shift may also suggest that Dominique herself feels like a child again when confronted with an abusive situation that brings back traumatic memories like the attic sequence.

This overreaction to Nikita's silliness is not the only time Cécile explodes in rage. Throughout the narrative she acts erratically, sometimes treating Dominique and Nikita cordially only to change her demeanor the next minute. In an already fraught family dynamic, she is another adult who brings discord instead of stability and safety. During the same visit when Dominique and her father reconnect, Cécile becomes visibly unhappy as they all get ready to eat. When asked what is bothering her, she begins attacking Dominique for no apparent reason, telling her to leave:

Figure 3.22. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

When Cécile adds that Nikita must stay there, Dominique categorically refuses her demands. The situation escalates when Cécile grabs Dominique by the arm, to which Nikita responds by kicking Cécile—whom she calls Saigne—in defense of her mother. The reactions of both Dominique and Nikita show that they are clearly a team that will not hesitate to protect each other. Meanwhile, the father does not intervene to defend his daughter and granddaughter, though he witnesses the abuse—a failure to engage that recalls the attic scene, where he does nothing to protect his daughter despite being aware of her mother's verbal, physical, and emotional attack. Unlike her father, Dominique is determined to take action to protect her own young daughter, breaking the abusive cycle that marked her familial relationships with her parents and stepmother.

Over the course of *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, Goblet explores Dominique's various familial relationships in varying depth, sometimes remaining vague about specifics concerning her family's structure. Though Goblet never mentions or draws any siblings, for instance, some textual clues indicate that Dominique might not be an only child. When the father remarks "Elle vous a bien remonté contre moi/Et vous m'avez tous bien laissé tomber!," he uses the masculine plural

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pronouns *vous* and *tous* to name those his ex-wife has turned against him, a choice that implies that their family includes more than one child. A similar dynamic is at work in a different sequence, where a family friend breaks the news to Dominique that her father is not doing well and that, in fact, he may have died:

Figure 3.23. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

Several elements stand out in these pages. First, while the friend mentions Dominique's mother and grandmother, he also mentions a *Marie*, without providing further explanation about who she is. While this character must be close enough to the family that she knows the status of the father's health, she is never mentioned or depicted anywhere else in the graphic novel. Second, the fact that Dominique has not previously heard the news and seems unwilling to call any members of her family to find out more details indicates that her familial relationships—including her communication with her father—are strained at the time.

The only relationship in *Faire semblant c'est mentir* that is not conflictive in any way is the one between Dominique and her daughter. Although Nikita's presence in the graphic novel is usually relegated to the background in favor of more conflictive interactions, everything suggests that they share a different kind of bond. For Poudevigne, Dominique

> se représente ainsi, tout au long de l'œuvre, comme prise en étau au sein d'un réseau serré d'agressions, de conflits, qui déterminent son être au monde autant que son entreprise autobiographique, et où ne subsistent que de rares îlots d'apaisement (paradoxalement et comme une victoire, dans ses relations en tant que mère à sa propre fille) (19).

Despite her incredibly complex relationship with her own mother, which is full of conflicting feelings, Dominique manages to escape the paradigms of her childhood in her relationship with her daughter. Instead, in her portrayal of events she seems to only be a source of comfort and security for Nikita. This is evident in a brief exchange from chapter 2, which explores the romantic relationship between Dominique and Guy Marc, her on-and-off boyfriend:

Figure 3.24. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

This scene centers on a brief conversation between Dominique and an older Nikita, who tells her mother that she doesn't like staying in the bedroom that belongs to Guy Marc's son because of the graffiti-like drawings on the wall. In the panels above, the reader can see Dominique preparing Nikita for bedtime, attentively brushing her hair, carrying her and tucking her to bed. More importantly, Dominique reassures her daughter telling her that the grimacing face on the wall is nothing to be scared about: "Tu sais, il ne faut pas en avoir peur […] Les choses qui font peur, il faut en rire, tu verras, ça marche à tous les coups!" This explanation seems to convince Nikita, who falls asleep soon thereafter. This exchange, in which the mother reassures her frightened daughter, serves as a prolepsis of a similar conversation between Dominique and her own mother after the attic sequence in chapter 3 (fig. 3.25).

This intergenerational connection—where two sets of mothers comfort their daughters from frightening situations—is a good example of the structural complexity of *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, as the scene between the author and her daughter appears before the one with the author and her mother in the narrative. The reader first encounters the event that happens during the author's adulthood, only learning of the episode from her childhood in the following chapter. This fragmented chronology is one of the essential characteristics of Goblet's graphic novel. It underscores the connectedness of these and other incidents that have shaped Dominique's identity, both as a daughter and as a mother:

Figure 3.25. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

In figure 3.25, Dominique mother's comforts her using very similar words: "Il ne faut pas avoir peur des araignées voyons". But this similarity belies a fundamental difference between the two scenes. While the source of Nikita's fear is a drawing on the wall that—though scary because of its exaggerated facial features—carries no personal or emotional meaning for the child, Dominique's fear is provoked by her mother, who is responsible for the terrible events that caused her suffering.

Throughout the narrative, Goblet portrays the family as a sovereign power structure, a

hierarchy with the father at the highest position. This hierarchy is shown to be rather oppressive for

Dominique's mother, who is subjected to her husband's authority—and, in this case, to his neglect.

The young Dominique's family is not a community that celebrates the singularity of its members or

sees their difference as a strength. Instead, the effects of father's flaws—such as his drinking and

emotional unavailability—trickle down to his wife and then to young Dominique who, as a child, has

virtually no power in this hierarchical model, as was exemplified in the attic sequence. While the

father seems to have the freedom to enjoy himself, the mother is overwhelmed by the noise coming

from the TV and she takes her frustration out on young Dominique. Nonetheless, other

relationships in *Faire semblant c'est mentir* show different power structures, such as Dominique's

romantic relationship with her boyfriend, Guy Marc.

On the very first page of *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, before Jean-Christophe Menu's

introduction to the work, Goblet indicates that she co-wrote the text of chapters 2 and 4 with Guy

Marc Hinant.[59] This small paratextual detail establishes a different sort of autobiographical pact, as

the authorship of parts of Goblet's graphic memoir is a collective endeavor. Goblet opens up her

creative process to allow another person into what is traditionally an individual effort, in a similar

way to what Élodie Durand sets out to do in *La parenthèse*, as we saw in the previous chapter.

Chapter 2 is the first chapter in *Faire semblant c'est mentir* that was co-written with Hinant.

Although Goblet is in charge of all the drawings in the graphic novel, chapter 2 has a completely

different style than the chapters dealing with Dominique's parents. Here, the graphite drawings are

far more realistic and aesthetically uniform, alternating between renditions of real-life places and

depictions of Dominique and Guy Marc's relationship. The reader learns about different moments

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[59] Guy Marc Hinant is a Belgian cinematographer, writer, music producer and poet. He also collaborated with Goblet in 2010's *Les hommes loups*.

in their relationship as the chapter progresses, but one key element is introduced in the initial sequence: the presence of a spectral figure. On the first two pages of chapter 2, Goblet and Hinant recount a conversation that took place during one of their first encounters:

Figure 3.26. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

In these panels, Dominique is telling Guy Marc a story about an inexplicable event from her father's youth: an episode where doors and windows seem to keep opening themselves. The text of this fantastic tale seems to suggest that these events are mystical in nature, although Dominique does not completely discount the possibility of a rational explanation. Meanwhile, all of the panels show a ghostly figure standing next to them, which could provoke the reader to connect it to the story that Dominique is telling. What's more, this apparent shift in genre—from the autobiographical to the fantastic—creates an unexpected dissonance, potentially leading readers to question the connection between the chapters, as the events in chapter 2 seems to take place in a fantastical world.

The ghostly figure disappears by the end of this initial sequence. As Guy Marc goes to visit his parents and tells them about meeting Dominique, verisimilitude seems once again to dominate the narrative. But the specter reemerges in the panels devoted to Dominique and Guy Marc's next encounter:

Figure 3.27. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

Guy Marc seems concerned in these panels about how long it will take Dominique to prepare their meal. This prompts her to ask him if he is, in fact, single, to which he answers that he recently got out of a two-year relationship with another woman. It soon becomes clear that the ghostly figure in the panels is a visual, literalized representation of that previous relationship, which still figuratively haunts Guy Marc. In the following pages, the narrative of Dominique and Guy Marc's relationship is interspersed with full-page representations of the ghost, whose visual presence starts to permeate

their reality. For instance, Dominique mentions that the phone at Guy Marc's house rang several times, and that each time she answered, the person on the other end of the line would hang up.

One evening, as they are getting ready to eat dinner, the ghostly presence materializes in the form of a phone call. While Dominique seems to be in very good spirits, her boyfriend arrives home in a terrible mood, apparently overwhelmed by problems at work:

Figure 3.28. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

When they are interrupted by the phone, Guy Marc quickly leaves the table and locks himself up in a room to talk to the woman on the line. The presence of the spectral being thus extends from the visual dimension of the graphic novel to the aural space of the apartment and the narrative. When Guy Marc returns to the table after the conversation, he is visibly upset; Dominique understands that her boyfriend's previous relationship is not over and still deeply affects him. The phone conversation that takes place in the pages following figure 3.28 leads to the revelation that Guy Marc was engaged in a sort of love triangle, one that he decided to leave when his former lover— Michèle—failed to choose him over another man. He remains torn between Michèle and Dominique, and his indecision starts to weigh on the latter. In the figure above, the left page shows one of several full-page depictions of Michèle's "ghost", while the right page features Guy Marc and Dominique's interaction, punctuated on most panels by the spectral figure that comes between them—quite literally on the middle right panel.

As the chapter advances, the relationship between Guy Marc and Dominique continues to deteriorate, as the spectral woman continues to take up space in his thoughts and in the book's panels. Later on, Guy Marc secretly meets with his former lover several times while Dominique believes him to be at work. During her boyfriend's absence, the emotional suffering his distance inflicts on Dominique manifests as physical pain, as she is repeatedly affected by retinal migraines that cause a temporary loss of vision:

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Figure 3.29 shows the effects of one of Dominique's migraines, with three panels on the left page depicting her deteriorated vision. Visibly in pain—both physical and emotional—she knows that her suffering is caused by the problems in her relationship; her body feels a direct effect of the complications in her affective life. If Guy Marc's actions are not deliberate, they still affect Dominique's embodied experience of the external world, as I argue happens often in both works studied in this Chapter. Goblet uses Dominique's facial expressions and body language to convey her pain. As Jacques Dürrenmatt (2013) notes, the fetal position is a visual trope commonly used to depict suffering in graphic novels, appearing in works by Fabrice Neaud, Julie Maroh, Marjane Satrapi and others.

The page that follows figure 3.30 explores the end of their conversation where Guy Marc explains to Dominique that he simply cannot give her the time and attention she deserves:

Although in the first panel he complains about not having time for the relationship, the drawings show the ghost of Michèle sitting next to Dominique as they have this conversation. This sends a contradictory message to the reader, who can infer that Guy Marc's inability to choose one of his lovers is the real reason why he decides to end their relationship. Dominique is likewise aware of his conflicted feelings, and thus decides to end the relationship for him in the fourth panel: "–Mais alors quoi ? Tu veux que ce soit fini ? // –Je ne sais pas… // –…Très bien, si tu ne le sais pas, moi je le sais. Ne faisons plus semblant"! (np). Using a sentence reminiscent of the title of the graphic novel, Dominique suggests that Guy Marc is lying to her—and to himself—when he says that he does not have time for their relationship. Goblet's drawings support that contention, highlighting Guy Marc's attachment to his previous lover—and his resulting ambivalence toward Dominique—as the unspoken reason for their problems.

Several pages later we see Guy Marc after the break-up, now haunted by the ghosts of both women:

Figure 3.31. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

In the image above, as Guy Marc is getting ready to shave, he catches a glimpse on the mirror of two spectral figures representing Dominique and Michèle, which signals his lingering feelings for both women. Towards the end of the chapter, Guy Marc meets with Michèle and decides to definitively end that relationship, after she herself has gone back and forth with the third person in their love triangle. Following Dominique's decision to leave this complicated situation in an effort to protect herself, Guy Marc chooses to sever his own lingering ties and break free from the cycle of emotional suffering. The end of chapter 2 sees Dominique slowly move on with her life after the break-up, starting to heal the wounds and moving about her routine.

While chapter 2 features both of its authors—Goblet and Hinant—visually, with panels that explore each of their inner worlds and the pain they collectively endure as a result of their troubled relationship, chapter 4 is told exclusively from Guy Marc's perspective. In fact, the only drawing of Dominique in the chapter is a portrait that appears on the cover page. This portrait—like those that precede each of the book's chapters—serves as a temporal marker, denoting the passage of time primarily through the changing length of Dominique's hair:

Figure 3.32. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), title pages for the four chapters.

Goblet emphasizes the autobiographical nature of *Faire semblant c'est mentir* by marking the different chapters with her own avatar. And yet, the autobiography she creates is open to other voices (Guy Marc's) and other perspectives (Nikita's)—an intricate form of memoir that acknowledges the influence of others in the way she views and portrays the world. This openness to others is not limited to the process of creating her autobiography. Goblet also extends this collective authorship

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of her "individual life" to the reader, by exposing intimate moments and experiences and inviting them to share her story.

In chapter 4, Goblet closes her atypical autobiography by relinquishing her place as a protagonist altogether, focusing instead on Guy Marc's life following their break-up. Visually, Dominique's former lover is no longer haunted by the ghost of his past relationships. However, the text of the sequence in figure 3.33 hints at the fact that he is still hanging on to something from the past:

Figure 3.33. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

In this seemingly banal scene at a shoe repair shop, Guy Marc appears in a bad mood, upset at the prospect of having to get rid of an old pair of boots. His overreaction suggests that something else is on his mind. When he returns to his apartment, still bothered by the exchange and by his work, he becomes more pensive and starts listening to music. The only text that occupies the panels consists of the lyrics to the song that is playing—"Until I Die" by The Beach Boys, used here to communicate Guy Marc's melancholy and invite the reader to join him in his reverie.

In the following pages, the perspective of the panels shifts away from Guy Marc and focuses on his cat, as it goes out onto the terrace. The song lyrics are still present in these panels, serving as an echo of Guy Marc's melancholy. His reverie is interrupted by the sound of distressed chirping. leading him to discover that his cat has trapped a bird in its mouth. Guy Marc then takes the bird away from the cat, holding it in his hands until it flies away. Clearly moved by what has just happened, he decides to call Dominique on the phone:

Figure 3.34. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

After some initial pleasantries, Guy Marc uses the wounded bird as an excuse to invite Dominique over to see the bird, despite the fact that it has already flown away. As their conversation continues, the visual style of the panels begins to change: the drawings lose their realism, becoming increasingly

abstract. The materiality of the images also changes, as can be seen in the two panels on the left-hand page of figure 3.35 (below) that are covered in oil painting. The progressive appearance of color brought by the oil paint visually signals a different esthetic that hints at a new beginning in their relationship. As Guy Marc and Dominique leave old emotional patterns behind, the graphic novel embraces new artistic patterns as well.

In the final pages of *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, Goblet eschews traditional figurative drawings of people and places, choosing instead to feature abstract oil paintings reminiscent of Mark Rothko's style and Giorgio Morandi's color palette. With this stylistic shift, Goblet once again breaks the rules of how graphic memoirs typically portray a life, abandoning referentiality and using abstract images to convey the internal feelings of the book's co-authors:

Figure 3.35. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

On the left, the figure above shows the first abstract panels of this work. Underneath the oil paint, the reader can still make out what appear to be two panels, or at least their borders. Goblet's use of different layers allows her, once again, to use the materiality of the page to communicate complex ideas using different layers. In this case, the oil paint conceals something: their conversation? Their shared tumultuous past? Instead of lingering on the ambiguity, the two panels on the opposite page depict flying swallows—birds that symbolize the advent of spring, a season for renewal and new beginnings, suggesting a rekindling of Dominique and Guy Marc's relationship.

The following pages completely lose the appearance of a graphic novel; abstract paintings cover the entirety of each page. Some text remains, however: against the backdrop of these non-referential images, Goblet inscribes excerpts of the conversation between Guy Marc and Dominique. Toward the end of the narrative, Guy Marc acknowledges that the wounded bird has already flown away and that he only called Dominique because he wanted to see her. The book's final pages only record his side of the conversation: "… Pour ne pas te mentir… Il vient de

s'envoler… Il semblait si blessé, terrorisé, presque mort, mais finalement, il s'est envolé… //… J'ai terriblement envie de te voir!" While the text in these panels expresses Guy Marc's feelings, the images are rather cryptic. Goblet shows the end of the conversation but suspends the story, denying the reader any certainty about what happened:

Figure 3.36. Dominique Goblet, *Faire semblant c'est mentir* (L'Association, 2007), np.

The deictic "maintenant" in the book's last panel indefinitely arrests this moment in time, since the meaning of "now" is re-actualized each time a reader encounters the word. The temporal progression of Goblet's narrative is also stopped, leaving it up to the reader to imagine what comes next. By ending her narrative with an eternal but constantly renewed present, Goblet invites the reader to interpret what they have read and to imagine what is to come.

The multiple visual styles Goblet uses in *Faire semblant c'est mentir* reflect the inexpressibility of the traumatic events in Dominique's life—her father's verbal abuse, her mother's physical abuse, and her boyfriend's emotional abuse. As Groensteen (2015) observes, "ce déploiement plastique ne vise pas seulement un résultat esthétique et […] répond à une volonté de traduire au plus juste certaines émotions" (161). In an interview, Goblet reports that her ultimate goal was to portray the complexity of her relationships with people she deeply loves, despite the pain they have inflicted on her:

> Et je me suis rendu compte que finalement, c'était ça le défi : de raconter quelque chose de super violent, mais de vous faire comprendre que malgré cette violence, j'aimais ma mère au-delà de tout. Et mieux encore, arriver à vous faire aimer ma mère — à faire que vous ayez de l'empathie pour ma mère. (Guilbert, np)

The heterogenous form of her graphic novel allows Goblet to work through these difficult and often contradictory emotions visually. In making her life the material of her graphic memoir, Goblet establishes the distance she needs to process these traumatic events and purge them from her memory, turning the page on her past by turning this painful experience into something "sublime"

(Guilbert, 2011). The result is a visually arresting text that conveys the complex and multilayered nature of emotions caused by the various relationships told in *Faire semblant c'est mentir*.

In her graphic memoir, Goblet seeks to find a balance between the silence imposed on her as a child and the artistic voice she uses as to tell her story, drawing upon an array of formal strategies to express a trauma she cannot convey in words alone: from the *cross-discursivity* that allows her to counter her father's narrative with images that tell another story, to the temporal and formal complexities that compel readers to intervene in the composition of her life. In *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, Goblet reclaims the narrative of her life—not by reappropriating it and claiming it as hers alone, but by opening it up and making it (in) common. Rather than contest her father's dominance on his terms, she rejects the model of authority that empowers him, along with the fiction of self-sufficient individuality on which it is based. By putting her story out into the open for all to read, Goblet exposes her experience with abuse—in all its complexities—to those with whom she shares no familial or affective bond.

Geneviève Castrée and the sublime representation of suffering

Late Quebecois artist Geneviève Castrée's *Susceptible* (2012) shares a similar cathartic quality with Goblet's *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, though it greatly differs in the formal strategies the author uses to recount her childhood and teenage years living with negligent parents. The complicated family dynamics in this graphic novel are similar to Goblet's. Castrée portrays the family as a failed institution where the child, in the lowest hierarchical position, is attacked or ignored by the adults who are supposed to protect her: an absentee father and a resentful mother. The formal characteristics of Castrée's graphic memoir—its homogenous visual style and narrative structure, which follows the same chronology as the events it recounts—distinguishes it from Goblet's *Faire semblant c'est mentir*. Yet Castrée finds her own ways to express the isolation and suffering caused by fraught family relationships. Many of her drawings share a similar dream-like style with Maurice

Sendak's children's illustrations, though she does opt for an uglier aesthetic in some panels to highlight the nature of certain events. Still, most of the drawings have a calming feel, with details that encourage the reader to linger over each panel. The images are mainly composed of curved lines and round shapes—including the borders of the panels—with very few right angles. Additionally, the minuscule hand lettering—which often makes the text difficult to read—gives the graphic novel a confessional tone, since readers can find themselves leaning in as if to listen to a secret being whispered.

Susceptible starts with a sort of preface containing the author's reflections about what is innate and what is learned. These opening pages explore her thoughts on the influence of family trauma in a person's life. The first panels depict a young child, naked, standing next to a very small blossom, with no background or frames around her:

Figure 3.37. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

Although there are no distinct panels separated by borders, the reader can infer that the three drawings represent the same child at different moments in her development. The use of the first person in the accompanying sentences establishes the work's autobiographical pact. In the text of this sequence, the narrator muses about the source of her intrinsic sadness, pondering whether there is a genetic component to her depression:

> Je me demande si c'est possible de se transmettre la même tristesse d'une génération à l'autre…//…si mes déprimes pourraient naître d'émotions accumulées par moi, mais aussi par mes parents, mes ancêtres même.//ou si ces moments difficiles sont simplement provoqués par ce qui me tombe dessus.//Peut-être que c'est mon noyau à moi qui est pourri…//…que ma faune et ma flore internes sont trop fragiles, déséquilibrées.//Ca se pourrait. (np)

While the text records Castrée's thoughts as an adult, the drawings show the child as she grows up, along with a plant that initially appears beside her. With each drawing, she becomes increasingly tangled in the branches of the vine-like plant, which appears to represent her family. The plant

progressively limits the naked avatar's movement and begins to stifle her, ultimately infiltrating her skin like a type of scar or indelible inscription. This imagery symbolizes the lasting effect of family trauma on the individual in a similar way to what Marianne Hirsch (2012) calls "postmemory", and it sets the tone for the story that follows. According to Hirsch,

> "Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. (5)

In the opening pages of *Susceptible*, Castrée depicts a similar effect of trauma lived by previous generations by using the image of the vine-like plant that slowly becomes part of her skin and, by extension, of her person.

At the end of the prefatory sequence, we see the narrator break free—literally and metaphorically—from her entanglement with the plants that represent her conflictive familial relationships:

Figure 3.38. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

The drawing at the top of the page in figure 3.38 above marks the end of the preface, while the remainder of the page serves as a transition to the autobiographical tale. The middle image depicts the protagonist, clothed, now free from the plants but still sporting the scar-like lines on her feet and torso. Her body language and facial expressions communicate the same discomfort as in the previous pages, when she was still imprisoned by the plants—a sign of the lasting effects of her trauma, even after she breaks away from her family. The text next to the image verbalizes her position with respect to her family: "Je me suis tellement eloignée de ma famille que c'est comme si je ne lui appartenais plus" (np). This encapsulates what will prove to be the protagonist's main goal in *Susceptible*: to get as far away as possible from the toxic relationships in her family. This prefatory sequence allows Castrée to distill the essence of her childhood and teenage years into a visual

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metaphor, focusing on conveying her internal feelings as she draws her avatar in a sort of void rather than depicting specific moments, places, and events. By initially locating the protagonist outside of traditional space and time, Castrée depicts her avatar as *a life*, in Gilles Deleuze's sense, free from the accidents of the external world. These sort of depictions, I argue, allows Castrée to eschew specificities attached to her person—such as nationality and class—so that readers might focus on her immanent self.

The bottom image in figure 3.38 above marks a transition to the more traditional part of Castrée's life story that continues on the next page of *Susceptible* (fig. 3.39). Depicting the author with her mother and grandmother, this short transitional panel introduces important details about her family history:

Figure 3.39. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

The conversation with the grandmother in these panels reveals that, at least on her mother's side, Castrée has a very large family, which was not at all rare for catholic families in Quebec at the time. The captions also reveal that the village priest pressured her grandmother to continue to procreate when she decided to rest after having thirteen children—so she went on to have a total of sixteen children, Castrée's mother being the youngest. This anecdote reminds readers of the biopolitical expectations that govern the lives of women, whose main purpose in society is to produce children.

Susceptible tells the story of the author's childhood and adolescence chronologically, with short episodes that mimic the fragmented nature of personal memories. Though she confirmed the autobiographical nature of the graphic novel in several interviews, Castrée uses invented names for its various characters. In an interview with Chris Randle (2013) the author explains why she decided to change the character's names:

> I changed the names for two reasons: First because if I had used real names these people would still have been "characters" in my version of the story. Second because I was scared shitless. I don't think my childhood was over-the-top terrible, but I was raised in this "What

happens in our home is nobody's business but our own." type of way… So for me to expose
so much of these sordid little details to any kind of readership was a big step. (Randle, np)

Using fictional names in graphic memoirs is not rare, since many creators choose to protect the

identities of their loved ones—especially in narratives that deal with difficult subjects like emotional,

physical, or sexual abuse, as Castrée's does. Her own avatar is named 'Goglu,' a pet name her

mother—called 'Amère' in the book—used for her in real life. The name 'Amère' has contradictory

implications: while it contains the word 'mère' [mother], it is also the female form of the adjective

"bitter" in French. By giving her mother this name, Castrée underscores her general resentfulness

while protecting her identity. Her stepfather is called 'Amer,' the masculine form of "bitter"—a

reflection of the fact that his role in the author's life is derived from his ties to her mother. Other

names include 'Durcie' [hardened], for one of her aunts, and 'Sourire' [smile], for her mother's best

friend. While many of the names in the book convey aspects of a character's personality, Castrée

uses a made-up name for her father's avatar: 'Tête d'Œuf.' Castrée explains the origin of that name

in a caption: "Tête d'Œuf, mon père, ne parle pas français. Une fois, avant ma naissance, deux de

mes oncles lui on fait répéter des conneries : 'Je suis une tête d'œuf, je suis une tête d'œuf' pour faire

rire tout le monde." (np). This seemingly innocent anecdote establishes the linguistic barrier between

Goglu and her father as one of the main obstacles in their relationship. It also reveals the disrespect

with which her maternal uncles treated her father, an anglophone Canadian living in Quebec at the

time. In order to mark the difference in languages, Castrée uses quotation marks whenever a

character speaks English—first for Tête d'Œuf, but also for other characters later in the narrative.

If the linguistic gap between Goglu and her father strained their relationship, his continuous

abandonment almost eliminated it altogether. In the following example, the narrator recounts the

story of her father's "definitive" departure and explains the circumstances that led to it:

Figure 3.40. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

The top panels on the left-hand page depict three characters—Goglu's father, her mother, and an unidentified woman—in the midst of a discussion about the father's decision to leave for good. Both the parents are smoking and drinking alcohol as they share their personal take on the event, their facial expressions reinforcing the meaning of their words. The third person's facial expression seems contradictory, however: she is smiling as she emphasizes the extent of Goglu's mother's financial struggles around that time. In the next panel, a two-year-old Goglu looks out the window at her father, who is waiting outside for a friend to arrive before leaving. The drawings in the rest of the sequence linger on that moment in the dark, as the father waits. Using multiple panels to represent the traumatic event, Castrée suspends the moment of her father's departure in time, as she mentions in the text: "Dans ma tête, tout se passe très lentement." By slowing the pace of the narrative to a near standstill, the author aligns the reader with her perspective during the event, facilitating their empathy about this difficult moment from her childhood. At the same time, the text in the scene provides readers with supplementary information about her father's personality: for instance, the fact that he prefers old objects that have a certain charm, even if they are broken. These details show him to be a man whose priorities do not fit a traditional domestic life, since he accords little importance to financial security or his daughter's safety. Her comments about her father's friend, who makes her listen to meteorological recordings and has a dog who bites her, are just one example of the kind of difficult situations to which her parents exposed her.

Throughout *Susceptible*, there are numerous sequences where Goglu finds herself in situations that range from inappropriate to dangerous. From the parties she attends at a very young age with her mother, to an accidental fire in her mother's bedroom in the middle of the night, the young child struggles to make sense of the adult world where she is forced to live. When she behaves according to her age, she is subjected to emotional abuse. In a sequence entitled "Une sieste," for example, she recounts a visit to her father, who at the time had moved to British Columbia. The brief sequence

shows her father's reaction one time when she had "an accident"—or maybe just a dirty diaper—while taking a nap, as seen in the following image:

Figure 3.41. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

Tête d'Œuf's reaction to what is a natural bodily function—especially for a toddler—is blown out of proportion, as he shames and insults her. Even while she sleeps, Goglu remains under his disciplinary gaze, the scene makes it clear that her father is not used to interacting with a toddler and struggles to communicate with her. His chastising words in these panels are almost exactly the same as those he uses on the previous page—"fais pas ça"—a repetition that suggests that his primary mode of relating to his daughter is by scolding her. In his sporadic interactions with Goglu during her childhood, the father's speech is limited to short sanctioning commands, a reflection of the superficial yet negative nature of their relationship at the time. This sequence is unique because of the lack of narrative captions, which Castrée uses throughout the graphic novel in her retrospective narration. Here, she chooses instead to forgo textual explanations, foregrounding the almost pre-verbal perspective of a young child.

Another important aspect of Castrée's childhood explored in *Susceptible* is the precarious financial situation in which she grew up as the daughter of a young single woman. Multiple anecdotes in the book focus on the mother's struggles and her efforts to get her daughter—and herself—out of poverty. In some cases, their situation required an enormous amount of maturity from Goglu, who had to take on responsibilities beyond her years. In the following sequence entitled "Goglu pleure", for instance, Goglu explains that she was left to fend for herself when her mother found a new job with an early morning schedule. Alone in their apartment, Goglu was responsible for hearing the alarm clock that her mother had set and leaving in time to catch the bus:

Figure 3.42. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

One day, when the alarm doesn't go off and she misses her bus to school, Goglu panics and goes to see the landlord, assuming that he will know what to do. She decides to write a note letting her mother know what happened, but she lacks the words to explain the situation because she is still learning how to read and write. With the few words she does know, Goglu composes a note consisting of two simple yet expressive sentences and some equally expressive drawings—a sort of primitive comic that effectively explains the situation. If the text in this example underscores the precarity of their financial situation, other details speak to the difficulties Amère faces in trying to raise Goglu on her own. In particular, she mentions that there is "rien à voler chez nous" but also the fact that—after this incident—she continued to miss the bus a few times until a neighbor was in charge of surveying her to make sure it wouldn't happen again. In this case, the authoritative yet protective gaze that parents in traditional families typically adopt with their children is extended and distributed to other adults in Goglu's life, since her mother cannot watch over her daughter while she works.

Later in the narrative, Goglu and her mother move in with Amère's boyfriend of a few years, Amer, who shares custody of his own daughter with his ex. Much like Dominique's relationship with her stepmother in *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, Goglu's relationship with her stepfather in *Susceptible* is extremely conflictive:

Figure 3.43. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

Figure 3.43 shows a one-page sequence entitled "Montréal," where Castrée talks about her 'new family.' On the top third of the page, she draws herself sitting on her mother's lap while her mother's boyfriend, Amer, holds his daughter Lu. The text floating between them announces in a happy tone that the family is now complete—with the implication that, until then, she thought something was missing. For Goglu, the presence of another child—albeit sporadic—is a source of joy, as she says in the text: "Lu n'est ici qu'une fin de semaine sur deux. Pas grave, c'est ma petite sœur" (np). Despite the positive tone of the retrospective narration, the dialogue immediately below this panel reveals that

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Goglu's stepfather has a much more negative attitude. He tells Goglu not to call him "half-father" [sic] because he is not half a person. When Goglu suggests calling him 'Dad' instead, however, he answers by saying "I am not your father," a response that leaves the matter of how she should address him unsettled. This establishes the tension between Goglu and Amer, who is drawn as an unhappy person, always frowning. It also sets the tone for her new family situation, where the presence of a new member brings additional tension instead of security.

The rest of the page (figure 3.43) features an anecdote that shows how the young narrator was yet again put in a traumatic situation: while visiting her mother's friends to watch fireworks one summer, Goglu enters the kitchen to find her mother's friend, Sourire, snorting cocaine. Goglu immediately realizes what is happening and remembers what she has heard on TV about the implications of cocaine use. When she starts screaming that her mother's friend is going to die from drug abuse, Amer and Amère try to calm her down, to no avail. As she continues to kick and scream, her mother and stepfather grab her and cover her mouth, taking her out of the house and punishing her by locking her in the car. This scene reveals how the young Goglu was constantly confronted with situations that were too complex for her to comprehend, and yet was expected to understand social nuances that had never been explained to her. In the bottom left panel, her mother tells her "Arrête de faire ton gros bébé, on te sortira plus…" (np), thus implying that the child's behavior is inappropriate. Here, as in Goblet's *Faire semblant c'est mentir*, the child is silenced, removed from the space of the adults, and then left alone. In this case, what should have been an enjoyable event— watching the fireworks with her beloved Sourire—becomes a traumatic episode that marks a loss of innocence. In the last panel on the page, Goglu is locked in her parents' car, visibly upset. The thought balloons attest to her frustration as she thinks that she no longer likes fireworks because they are "pour les drogués, ou le monde saoul" (np). Events like this one lead Goglu to begin to associate adulthood with alcohol and drug abuse, since that is the particular reality to which she is exposed. In numerous

sequences in *Susceptible*, the narrator's mother is shown heavily drinking; oftentimes, Goglu suffers the consequences of her mother's actions, as when she has to go out in the freezing cold to buy supplies for her hungover parents. Throughout the graphic novel, Amère's drinking is a constant source of conflict between her and her daughter. As Goglu grows up, she becomes increasingly uncomfortable with this and starts to voice her discomfort, which causes new confrontations with her parents and pushes them further away.

While the fights between Goglu and her mother are somewhat attributable to her mother's drinking, her problems with her stepfather—Amer—don't seem to be rooted in any concrete cause. He seems exasperated by Goglu's very existence, but he also intervenes in her relationship with her mother, constantly complaining about Goglu's behavior and sowing discord between her and her mother. Eventually, there is so much tension between Goglu and her stepfather that Amère decides to talk to her daughter, in an effort to defuse the situation. In the exchange below, Goglu's mother tries to dissuade her from engaging with her stepfather:

Figure 3.44. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

In figure 3.44, Amère suggests that it would be preferable if Goglu did not talk to her stepfather, as it would become taxing if she greeted him each day when he returned home from work. The arguments Amère uses to try to justify Amer's attitude—and her own unreasonable request—make it clear that she is siding with her partner, instead of her daughter. In the exchange portrayed on the top half of the page, Goglu's mother dominates the conversation with her daughter, who only utters three of the eleven speech bubbles. This discursive disparity reflects the power imbalance in the family: at the bottom of the hierarchy, Goglu has little or no say in most aspects of her life. Even when she decides to take matters into her own hands, her power remains very limited. In the two panels at the bottom of figure 3.44, she decides to write a letter to her stepfather in an effort to address the situation calmly and maturely, only for him to burn the letter in the fireplace immediately, without even reading it. This

act of defiance cements his hateful attitude toward Goglu, which will only grow deeper and more entrenched as the narrative progresses.

The negative influence of Amer's presence in Goglu's life is not limited to their interactions. It also extends to his own tumultuous relationship with Goglu's mother, a partnership that is riddled with lies and infidelities on Amère's part. Amère constantly tells Goglu that things are no longer working and that they will soon break up, though this never materializes. While their financial situation eventually improves enough that they decide to buy a house together, they soon seem to be struggling to pay their mortgage. It is clear that Goglu and Amère's financial well-being depends on her relationship with Amer, which would explain why—at different moments throughout Goglu's childhood and adolescence—her mother chooses to continue the relationship at great emotional cost for herself and her daughter. By showing the financial implications of her mother's relationship with Amer, Castrée composes a complex portrait of the family as an institution based on ties that go beyond blood, with Amère often prioritizing convenience over affection.

As time passes, Goglu's relationship with her mother continues to deteriorate, especially due to Amère's alcohol use. In several sequences, Goglu tries to avoid her mother when she is drinking or using drugs, which often results in verbal confrontations between them. In the figure below, for instance, an altercation quickly develops when an intoxicated Amère forces Goglu to dance with her:

Figure 3.45. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

The text on the top right explains that situations such as the one depicted above happen quite often, and that her mother's behavior becomes unpredictable when she drinks: "Je me méfie d'elle quand elle boit. Elle peut être imprévisible". This comment insinuates that Amère has acted in unpleasant ways in the past, but it doesn't specify if this includes verbal, emotional and/or physical abuse. In this case, when Goglu refuses to dance with an inhibriated—and very insistent Amère—, the discomfort escalates when Goglu calls her mother "a drunkard". In figure 3.45, the drawings in the top half depict

Amère dancing, contorting to the music in ways that defy what is physically possible for humans: her legs impossibly bending on the left and her head completely turned backwards on the right. On the bottom left of the page, as Amère tries to grab Goglu to dance with her, their respective facial expressions communicate diametrically opposed feelings, with the mother smiling and the daughter visibly bothered. When Goglu calls her mother a drunkard, the speech bubble containing those words extends to the next drawing of the sequence, touching Amère and visually imposing the oversized word *ivrogne* over her as a label. The next drawing shows Amère's reaction, as she curses and threatens Goglu, who is grapically reduced to about half her size. In this whole sequence, Castrée draws this interaction as seen through Goglu's eyes, visually deforming her mother and shrinking herself when attacked.

In spite of Goglu's aversion for her mother's drinking, during puberty the protagonist decides to change several aspects of her personality in the hope of making friends. She soon becomes friends with several boys and starts using drugs such as marijuana, acid, and PCP. Additionally, even though Goglu does not yet have any romantic interest in boys, her mother starts to suspect that she may be having sex with her male friends. For instance, one day she agrees to let Goglu go to a concert and spend the night at her friend Jules' house, as long as they sleep in different bedrooms. The next day, however, Amère accuses her daughter of spending the night with a different friend named Tom and having sex with him. This triggers a violent argument between the two, which is only made worse by Amer's intervention:

Figure 3.46. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

The top section of the page in figure 3.46 explains the circumstances leading to the argument between Goglu and her mother. Here, the reader can see Goglu sleeping by herself on her friend's Jules' bed. On the panel to the right, her thought bubbles highlight her innocent reaction to the situation, as she marvels at the circumstances: "je dors dans la chambre d'un garçon! // c'est incroyable!" (np). The

text captions in the middle of the page inform the reader of the fact that Goglu's recent arguments with her mother have included mild forms of physical abuse, such as her mother pulling her by the ear or pinching her. However, her mother crossed the line in this particular argument, which ended with her slapping her daughter on the face. The bottom half of the page depicts the moment of confrontation: Goglu's mother launches accusations against her, while her stepfather aggressively encourages Amère to hit her. The circular layout of these panels and the clockwise direction in which they are to be read deviate from Castrée's distinctive visual style to communicate the chaos of the situation, with multiple speech balloons reflecting the charged aural dimension of the fight. The cyclical shape—in addition to the textual comment on the frequency of such episodes—also gives the scene an iterative quality, indicating that this argument is not an exceptional event. The center of the circle shows the outcome of the fight: both Goglu and her mother are crying, while the stepfather is still screaming quite aggressively, his eyes impossibly looking in two different directions at once. This panel visually summarizes the feelings of all three characters at the end of the scene, but also the dynamics of their relationship: the stepfather comes between mother and daughter—quite literally, in this instance—to instigate discord and violence.

During her teenage years, Goglu continues to feel disconnected from her friends and family, and her depression begins to manifest itself in several self-destructive behaviors, such as anorexia and bulimia. For this reason, she starts consulting a doctor and a nurse who think that her eating disorders are rooted in the conflict with her family. After talking to Amère and Amer does not seem to change anything, they suggest that she go visit her father and reconnect with him. After ten years without seeing Tête d'Œuf, Goglu goes to Vancouver to spend three weeks with him and his girlfriend of several years, whom she calls 'Sablée.' The reunion is an opportunity for father and daughter to reacquaint with one another, since Goglu was only five when they last saw each other. Although the

reunion generally goes well and Goglu gets along well with her father and his girlfriend, she is—once again—put in a questionable situation when she accompanies her father to a party:

Figure 3.47. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

Situations such as this, I argue, are a nuanced form of abuse, exercised through neglect as a result of irresponsible parenting. Figure 3.47 shows the last page devoted to Goglu's visit to her father in British Columbia. Castrée visually conveys Goglu's altered perspective by tilting the angles of the walls and windows behind the characters. Even though the gathering is supposed to be a children's party, the adults—"real punks", according to her father—offer Goglu cider, beer and marijuana. Trying to impress the people at the party, including her father, she takes everything she is offered and soon becomes very intoxicated. The text in the middle of the page informs us that Tête d'Œuf's girlfriend Sablée does not like the people at the party, preferring to avoid them because of their irresponsible attitude during a previous incident. The bottom two tiers of figure 3.47 focus on the ride back home after the party, during which Goglu tells her father that she liked his friends and reports that she is quite intoxicated. It is only then that he seems to worry about whether the party was an appropriate place to bring his minor daughter. Any doubts the reader has about this are dissipated by the text in the last two panels, where Tête d'Œuf admits that one of the men is weird and that he should not have allowed Goglu to be near him. The very last panel confirms his implications about the man's predatory tendencies, as Tête d'Œuf adds that "il préfère les petits garçons de toute façon" (np)—much to Goglu's sobering surprise. This sequence shows that despite his good intentions, Goglu's father's lifestyle is not suitable for a minor—and, similarly to Goglu's mother, he is not willing to make sacrifices and prioritize his daughter's well-being.

Although the trip seems to have gone well, Goglu falls deeper into depression upon returning to Quebec and tries to commit suicide twice: first, by taking two bottles' worth of acetaminophen, and

then by cutting her wrists. The figure below shows the one-page sequence that narrates her suicide attempts and their aftermath:

Castrée chooses not to draw the scene of the attempts or their immediate consequences, opting instead to write about them. Figure 3.48 shows a large drawing of a crying Goglu, who is carrying two small bottles in her right hand while holding a phone in her left hand. Her facial expression denotes a variety of feelings, such as anger, sadness and frustration, while her ragged clothes echo her mental state. In the text, she narrates both suicide attempts without going into much detail, except for her stepfather's reaction: "Amer prend son temps avec un sourire au coin des lèvres. Il n'est pas impressioné du tout" (np). In the two circular panels on the right, Castrée relates a short conversation with her stepfather's brother following her suicide attempt. This interaction highlights the fact that Goglu is feeling exposed because her stepfather told other people what happened. In contrast, Castrée's choice not to represent the worst moments of her suicide attempts visually communicates her decision to control which moments to highlight and share with the public, and which to keep to herself. At the bottom of the page, the doctor and nurse who had been treating her eating disorders acknowledge that Goglu's situation is beyond their capacity to help, recognizing the limitations of their authority.

In *Susceptible*, Goglu's traumatic experiences growing up are often directly connected with her body. From her eating disorders to her first period and her discomfort with her growing breasts, trauma for Castrée is always embodied. The final traumatic event she describes in her graphic memoir is an accidental pregnancy around the age of sixteen. Although she fears that this pregnancy will put more strain on her already fraught relationship with her mother, she decides to follow the school nurse's advice and tell her mother about her situation. To Goglu's surprise, instead of getting angry, her mother reacts with empathy, admitting that a similar thing happened to her when she was around Goglu's age. After Goglu expresses that she wants to terminate the pregnancy, her mother

makes an appointment for her daughter to have an abortion. The panels in the double-page spread below represent the whole episode, entitled 'un accident':

Figure 3.49. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

The panels on the left-hand page in this figure provide some context about the relationship that resulted in Goglu's pregnancy. Here again, Castrée chooses to offer very few details, never drawing the boyfriend or showing any of his interactions with Goglu. Only the telephone conversation during which Goglu's boyfriend breaks up with her, citing her depression, provides readers with information about their relationship. On the right-hand page, Castrée depicts the events surrounding her abortion. In the text caption, she emphasizes the fact that she is the only patient in the clinic who is accompanied by her mother, whose presence and support make the whole experience more manageable. The only panel devoted to the abortion itself shows Goglu unconscious on the gurney. After the abortion, Goglu's mother tenderly takes care of her "comme elle ne l'a pas fait depuis longtemps," driving her back from the clinic and offering support rather than judgment. This exceptional truce is motivated by the solidarity that the mother feels with her daughter, since she also had a similar experience during her teenage years. In a way, the protagonist's accidental pregnancy helps her form a bond with her mother that goes beyond their particular conflict and embraces their shared history. The commonality of this exclusively female experience triggers a response from the mother that is surprising considering her general negligence toward Goglu. This type of concern over Goglu's physical well-being is rare for Goglu's mother who—through her alcohol abuse—doesn't seem to prioritize her own body's well-being.

After her abortion—which is not mentioned anywhere else in the graphic novel—Goglu finishes high school and decides to move out of her mother's house. The weeks preceding her move are filled with arguments with her parents, since the two parties no longer see the need to sustain the tense peace that characterized their household. Even though Amère seems to support Goglu's

decision, she refuses at the last minute to co-sign her lease, effectively destroying her daughter's

chance to move in with her friend. After this, Goglu asks her father if she can move in with him and

his girlfriend. The following double page spread shows the contrast between Goglu's last days in

Montreal with her mother and the welcome she receives from her father in British Columbia:

Figure 3.50. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

The two pages pictured in figure 3.50 portray the contrast between Goglu's relationships with her

parents. The left-hand page is filled with text, along with drawings that reveal the strong negative

emotions felt by Goglu, her mother, and her stepfather. Castrée's use of capital letters denotes the

angry tone of the characters' arguments, while their facial expressions complete the picture of chaos

and discontent. In particular, the interaction between Goglu and her mother perfectly encapsulates

the influence that Amer had in their relationship until then, as Amère desperately tries to justify her

decision not to leave Amer to her daughter. By contrast, the page on the right represents the

welcoming embrace of Goglu's father Tête d'Œuf and his girlfriend Sablée. Here, Castrée uses the

negative space of the page to convey the peacefulness of the scene, visually demonstrating that

Goglu is starting a new phase of her life with a clean slate and leaving the dysfunctionality of her

mother's house behind.

Towards the end of *Susceptible*, an eighteen-year-old Goglu is living by herself in a small cabin

that her father built for her in British Columbia. She embraces this newfound solitude and finds

inner peace, devoting herself to drawing, as figure 3.51 shows:

Figure 3.51. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

In this full-page panel, Goglu is sitting at a desk, pencil in hand, surrounded by drawing supplies.

This *mise en abyme*—where the author depicts herself drawing— is characteristic of graphic memoirs

and it often reinforces the referential pact expected of autobiographical works. Here, it foreshadows

Castrée's work as a comics artist, but when associated with the text that accompanies it, it gestures

to the fact that drawing is, for her, a cathartic activity that is helping transition to a simpler, peaceful life. The text floating over the image contains reflections about the conflictive life Goglu has left behind and the positive changes to her personality brought on by her isolation: "[o]n dirait qu'en venant vivre ici, j'ai laissé derrière moi une histoire parallèle qui se forme et se déforme d'elle-même. Je ne suis plus là pour y participer, ni pour me défendre." (np) As she moves on to her new life, Goglu still thinks about a parallel reality that she no longer occupies: "avant, j'étais plus souvent aggressive, plus souvent méchante, plus amère." (np) Until this point in *Susceptible*, the adjective *amère* had only been used to refer to Goglu's mother, but by reassigning its traditional meaning to the word, Castrée glimpses into a new reality where *amère* is simply an adjective.

The last four pages serve as a short postface to close the coming-of-age story that is *Susceptible*. Several months after moving to British Columbia, Goglu finally goes back to Montreal to spend a couple of months with some friends. When her mother picks her up at the airport, they have a conversation that confirms that the conflict between them will always exist, regardless of the fact that they no longer live together:

Figure 3.52. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

Figure 3.52 shows the first page of the book's last sequence, entitled 'abandon.' From the beginning of the conversation, there is significant tension between Goglu and her mother as they try to make small talk. Here, the conversation seems to happen on two levels: the superficial level of what she is actually saying and the deeper level of what she thinks but doesn't dare to say right away. For instance, when Amère reports that she is looking for a new house with Amer, Goglu is surprised because she thought that they were separating, as they had announced several times before. The mother's claim that she is staying with Amer because of Goglu's abandonment upsets her so much that she can no longer talk to her mom or look her in the eyes.

After this conversation, Castrée abandons the restaurant scene with Amère to focus on Goglu's internal thoughts and feelings. The remaining pages close the graphic novel with a reflection that resembles the preface in both its content and its form, figuring only the protagonist:

Figure 3.53. Geneviève Castrée, *Susceptible* (L'Apocalypse, 2012), np.

Each page features a single borderless panel where Castrée draws her avatar in the middle of the page, her eyes closed, with no background except for what appears to be a circular rug. She is barefoot, her shoes lying on the ground as she continues to escape the conversation—if only metaphorically—, until she completely disappears and only the rug can be seen, as the frame is zoomed out in a technique that is similar to cinema. As Candida Rifkind (2018) perspicaciously observes, these pages feature circular frames— an important shape in *Susceptible*: "They also use the circular frame that *Susceptible* hitherto deploys to contain Goglu's traumatic experiences and make them stand out from
the regular grid, thereby illustrating through framing and panel shape that she has
overcome the domestic effects of her abusive childhood" (16).[60] The text in these pages reads: "j'ai dix-huit ans.//j'ai toutes mes dents.//je peux faire ce que je veux," which verbalizes her desire to cut all ties with the part of the family that has had a toxic influence on her. By "abandoning" her mother, Castrée chose to escape the community that was causing her suffering and affecting her bodily experience of the world.

For Castrée, bringing the story of her childhood to the public had very high stakes since it depicts her parents in a very unflattering light. In an interview with Naomi Fry (2013), the author explained how arduous it was for her to decide to write about her childhood: "I was agonizing a lot, especially about my mom. I kept thinking, what am I doing to her? My intention was most definitely

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[60] cf. the other circular panels analyzed in this project featuring very traumatic events are figures 3.42, 3.43, 3.46, 3.48 and 3.50.

not to hurt" (np). Even though Castrée was no longer in touch with her mother at the time of the publication of *Susceptible*, she decided to compose and publish her story, admitting that it is "the most selfish thing that I've ever had to do but I needed to do it" (np). For Castrée, it was important to convey the nuances of her story "about how a family can love one another but still do some pretty traumatizing things" (np). Writing about these traumatizing events was both cathartic and empowering for the author because it allowed her to purge complex feelings and regain some of the agency that she lacked as a child by presenting events from her perspective. As she explained in the same interview, Castrée was aware of the fact that, by publishing this graphic memoir, she had the upper hand over her family: "I'm in a conflict with my family but I'm creating this readership so I have something on them. They don't have that. They don't have anyone to defend them" (np). Here, Castrée explicitly chose the community of readers instead of her family as the group with which she can be vulnerable; and this vulnerability is, in itself, a form of revolt. Rifkind (2018) studies the use of beds and blankets in Castrée's works through the lens of the "Sad Girl theory".[61] Rifkind argues that, although *Susceptible* is mostly about Goglu's relationship with her mother, Castrée's self-images in her graphic memoir—and other autobiographical works—

> invite a re-reading of the figure of the sad girl as purely passive and tragic. Indeed, Castrée's self-portraiture intersects with the rise of Sad Girl Theory related to fourth wave feminist practices of self-portraiture on social media, especially Instagram selfies, and recent artistic and theoretical investigations of this figure in popular culture. (18)

Castrée's exploration of her depression in her graphic novel aligns with the larger trend established by the authors in my corpus, who bring their life to the public and—by doing so—create a network of interdependency with their readers, who become their "chosen family".

The events narrated in *Susceptible* cover Goglu's childhood and adolescence until she comes of age, an event long awaited by the protagonist. The delimitation of this period of her life is not

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[61] The name "Sad Girl theory" was first coined by L.A.-based artist Audrey Wollen, who proposes "that the sadness of girls should be witnessed and re-historicized as an act of resistance, of political protest" (Tunnicliffe, np.)

innocent, since it encompasses the interval of time when she was under the legal guardianship of her mother. From its preface to its last panel, *Susceptible* tells the story of Castrée's efforts to find a place within the most immediate community to which most humans belong: the family. Traditionally, as an institution, the family provides support and protection, but both *Susceptible* and *Faire semblant c'est mentir* portray the family as a failed institution riddled with conflict, incapable of providing the minimum infrastructure—financial, physical or emotional—that children need. While Goblet uses a mix of visual styles to try to communicate the inexpressibility of trauma, Castrée opts for nuance and conceals the abuse to which she was subjected during her childhood under a uniform, delicate style. Although these differences are considerable, both works convey, in their own way, the complexities of family relationships.

I have argued that—in the works I have hitherto analyzed—individual embodiment is not absolute since the imagined borders between the individual and her community are actually permeable. In a similar sense, the members of a community can have an impact—positive or negative—on the embodied experience of the individual, as I have elucidated in this chapter. By way of conclusion, I turn now to explore cases in which graphic artists choose to expose intimate aspects of their bodies and their stories to the public. In particular, I will explore how the works of Aurélia Aurita and Sylvie Rancourt fit in the community of female comics authors who write and publish in French.

CONCLUSION: EROTIC BODIES

As I have argued in this project, the francophone women artists in my corpus use the embodiment in their graphic memoirs to build a community of creators and readers that approaches the type of affirmative community conceived by Roberto Esposito. In the works I study here, these women find various ways to figure the body—and the self—as permeable, disrupting the myth of the body as an unbreachable barrier between the individual and the world. The depiction of an open and ever-changing body that doesn't conform to a traditional (human or female) form is a step towards building a community that embraces the individual singularities of its members. I see this process as an outward movement that goes from the "essence" of the self towards those around it, as ripples that touch those around them: the family and then the world. These works show that, once they have established the individual body/self in its fluidity, the next step is to understand that individual embodied experiences such as disease have an impact on the whole community, once again proving that the individuals are interdependent. Ultimately, I argue, that this outward impact of the individual body on the collective also works in the opposite direction, such as when members of the community try to exercise their control and discipline on the more vulnerable individuals, which can (negatively) affect their experience of the world.

By way of conclusion, I want to explore what happens when—in graphic narratives—two individuals willingly open up their bodies to each other in a reciprocal movement and commune with one another. With this in mind, I will briefly analyze a fourth category of bodies that appear in the works in my corpus: erotic bodies. Though several francophone comics broach the subject of sex, I focus on two artists who make eroticism central to their autobiographical narratives. The first

is Aurélia Aurita, a French author of Chinese and Cambodian origins. In *Fraise et Chocolat* (2006), originally published in two volumes, Aurita narrates her romantic and sexual relationship with fellow graphic novelist Frédéric Boilet.[1] The first volume of *Fraise et chocolat* is devoted to the beginning of their long-distance relationship; it takes place in Japan, where Frédéric lived at the time. Volume two recounts their time together in France and Belgium during one of Frédéric's book tours. The second work I want to analyze is *Mélody* (1985), where Quebecer author Sylvie Rancourt recounts her experience as an exotic dancer in Montreal during the 1980s. Initially self-published and distributed, *Mélody* covers the author's beginnings as an exotic dancer as well as other details of her everyday life. In focusing on the authors' sexuality, both of these works defy expectations of what graphic memoirs traditionally narrate, as they make public the most intimate aspects of private life. That these stories are brought to the public by women artists—in both text and image—constitutes another layer in this transgression, particularly since both texts portray sexuality as a pleasurable experience.[2]

In the first volume of *Histoire de la Sexualité* (1976), Michel Foucault identifies the seventeenth century as the beginning of what he calls "l'âge de la répression", when attitudes toward sex—and sex-related discourse—changed by those in power. This modern puritanism imposed "son triple décret d'interdiction, d'inexistence et de mutisme" (11). Foucault adds that this coincides with the advent of capitalism, since sex is incompatible with a highly productive workforce, so it is reduced to its reproductive function. In this context of repression, choosing to talk about sex is political: "Si le sexe est réprimé, c'est-à-dire voué à la prohibition, à l'inexistence et au mutisme, le

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[1] Although C(h)ris Reyns-Chikuma and Marine Gheno (2013) have perspicaciously pointed out the author's use of lowercase for her pseudonym and its stakes, I have chosen to capitalize Aurita's name, following the typographical convention of Aurita's website (https://www.aurita.fr/).

[2] For an excellent study of the complexities of the representation of sex in graphic narratives, see chapters 1 and 2 in Chute's *Graphic Women* (2010)

seul fait d'en parler, et de parler de sa répression, a comme une allure de transgression délibérée" (13). The texts that I study in this conclusion breach the limits of what can be said and showed in public according to those in power, especially considering two important facts: that these texts are authored by women and that they are autobiographical. Firstly, even though this has changed progressively through history, women were expected to remain in the private spaces of the house, so bringing their lives to the public is, in itself, transgressive. Secondly, because they are autobiographical, these texts cannot hide under the veil of fiction, which could attenuate the impact of what is told. Foucault also notes that the first structured forms of sex-related discourse in the West were associated with religious confessions; unlike many Eastern civilizations, Foucault posits, the West did not have an *ars erotica* tradition. I contend that the confessional nature of autobiographies allows them to take this intimate theme and bring it into the public sphere. As such, erotic graphic memoirs by women challenge this tradition, with their verbal and—especially—visual representation of the body.

In addition to transgressing the boundary between private and public, these graphic narratives contravene disciplinary norms by portraying sexual but non-procreative bodies in a positive light. The very subject of erotic graphic novels—sexuality—is one of the key domains where disciplinary power and biopower converge, according to Foucault (1997):

> Je crois que si la sexualité a été importante, c'est pour tout un tas de raisons, mais en particulier il y a eu celles-ci: d'un côté, la sexualité, en tant que conduite exactement corporelle, relève d'un contrôle disciplinaire, individualisant, en forme de surveillance permanente […]; et puis, d'un autre côté, la sexualité s'inscrit et prend effet, par ses effets procréateurs, dans des processus biologiques larges qui concernent non plus le corps de l'individu mais cet élément, cette unité multiple que constitue la population. (224)

Both the corporeal and reproductive aspects of sexuality are central concerns for biopower— especially with respect to women, who bear the primary burden of human reproduction. In these erotic graphic memoirs, however, sexuality is not portrayed as a means of reproduction or population control, but rather as an end in itself—a source of pleasure and intimacy shared by

consenting adults. By rejecting its assigned function as a capital feature of a disciplined and

productive body politic, these graphic narratives—created by women—free sexuality and themselves

from its biopolitical constraints.

Aurélia Aurita and the Reappropriation of the Gaze

In *Fraise et chocolat*, sex never serves a reproductive purpose, but rather is depicted as the

consummation of the relationship between the author and her lover. In her graphic narrative, Aurita

briefly addresses the subject of motherhood in the middle of a conversation between Chenda (the

author's first name and her avatar's name in the graphic novel) and her boyfriend Frédéric, who (at

forty-four) is twenty years her senior. When Chenda asks Frédéric what is missing from his love life,

he answers "Je veux un enfant" (23). Her facial expressions in the panels below reveal her immediate

reaction of bewilderment at Frédéric's answer:

Figure 4.1. Aurélia Aurita, Fraise et Chocolat : L'intégrale! (Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2014), pp. 24-26.

The three consecutive pages show the conversation that ensues between them. Chenda's initial

reaction of surprise in the first panels on the left-hand page is followed by a panel where she states

"Ha ha… euh… en tous cas, ça sera pas avec moi!!!" (24). In the middle page she adds "Je suis moi-

même trop enfant pour en avoir" (25), alluding to the fact that she is only twenty-four years old.

While the age that is considered appropriate to have children varies according to cultures and

generations, this statement shows Chenda's opinion about her own maturity and her priorities. By

choosing (artistic) production instead of reproduction, Aurita is—at the same time—eschewing the

biopolitical imperative of procreation and resisting its control through the publication of works

portraying her sexual experiences as pleasurable. Later, when Frédéric asks Chenda what will remain

of their relationship after the initial passion is extinguished, she answers "Si notre histoire est

intéressante, un très beau livre!" (26), adding that she likes to think of her books as her children.

This view of artistic creations as children is shared by Frédéric, who tells her that he has been

writing comics for twenty years for the same reason. Their similar prioritization of career over family puts them on equal ground, despite their differences in age and gender.

Though Aurita addresses other subjects in *Fraise et chocolat*, Chenda and Frédéric's sexual relationship overwhelmingly dominates the first volume. In Chapter 2, I argued that Durand and Fayolle created their own iconography of illness in their texts; similarly, Aurita develops her own iconography of sex in both volumes of *Fraise et chocolat*. Her rather explicit drawings of both male and female naked bodies are minimalist and almost childlike. A closer look, however, reveals a clear yet atypical choice made by the author: the penis is drawn in more detail than the vagina and breasts. The panels in the figure below depict moments during a sexual encounter between Chenda and Frédéric:

Figure 4.2. Aurélia Aurita, Fraise et Chocolat : L'intégrale! (Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2014), p. 58.

In the figure above, Chenda and Frédéric's avatars are naked, with their sexual organs visible. Here, and throughout *Fraise et chocolat*, Aurita draws her breasts with no nipples. She depicts her vagina with a simple line, forgoing any details pertaining to the major or minor labia or the clitoris; her anus is always drawn in the form of an "x." Frédéric's penis and testicles are depicted in greater detail, with his pubic hair and glans clearly defined. In giving as much visual importance to the male sexual organ as the female ones, Aurita goes against the tradition of erotic comics that seems to be more comfortable objectifying women over men, as Elisabeth El Refaie (2012) argues: "Some graphic memoirs by male comics artists seem to invite traditional heterosexually gendered patterns of looking through the way they depict themselves and the women in their lives" (75). This difference between the male and female gaze of naked bodies is of paramount importance when reading erotic graphic novels drawn by women since they seem to make different choices from male authors when depicting nudity.

This difference becomes even more apparent when comparing Aurita's memoir to *L'Épinard de Yukiko* (2001), a celebrated erotic tale written by her lover and colleague, Frédéric Boilet, years before their relationship. It depicts the brief love affair between a *mangaka* (manga artist/writer) whose avatar resembles Boilet and a young Japanese woman, Yukiko.[3] In this graphic novel, Boilet includes multiple nude depictions of his lover, with several panels portraying Yukiko's breasts and occasionally her pubic area. In contrast to Aurita's visual style, Boilet favors a more nuanced nudity, mostly hinting at the female body instead of showing it—though his erotic gaze over the female body is evident. In contrast, he doesn't draw the naked body of the (male) *mangaka* at all. This refusal to portray his/the mangaka's own naked body echoes Laura Mulvey's (2009) thoughts concerning visual pleasure in film: "According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the physical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like." (63) Instead, the man assumes the active role as he moves the story forward but also, and more importantly, as he guides the gaze of the viewer and invites the viewer to identify with him. Boilet's choice not to draw himself reflects the first-person perspective that he often uses: the panels are drawn from his point of view, such that his own image could only be caught in the reflection of a mirror. But even in other panels drawn from a different perspective, Boilet chooses to avoid representing the male naked body. In the following figure, the panels depict the *mangaka*'s perspective quite literally, as he touches his lover's body:

Figure 4.3. Frédéric Boilet, L'épinard de Yukiko (Ego comme X, 2001), p. 49.

The four panels in this figure show the gaze of the narrator—and by extension the reader—travelling to different parts of Yukiko's body, as the text names each part his hand touches and claims. This feature of Boilet's style is explained by Christopher Bush (2013): "The specific list of

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[3] In multiple interviews, Boilet insists on the fact that *L'épinard de Yukiko* is not autobiographical. For more on this, see Bush (2013).

body parts […] establishes a leitmotivic structure in which images and words are repeated, often out of sync with one another, drifting freely from their original contexts" (114). The asynchrony of text and image allows Boilet to capture the reader's attention in the last panel, which depicts the lover's pubis but instead mentions her belly. By seeing, touching, and drawing the lover's body, Boilet appropriates and exposes it—while refusing to expose the male anatomy in its turn.

In *Fraise et Chocolat*, Aurita represents both male and female bodies openly—not only in their erotic aspects, but rather in all their complexity. As C(h)ris Reyns and Marine Gheno point out, "dans *Fraise* le corps est représenté dans toutes ses dimensions et fonctions (ontologique, scatologique, sexuelle, et surtout de désir/plaisir)" (111). Aurita explores each of these functions individually but also mixes them, blurring the boundaries between them to compose a portrait of the body in all its multidimensionality. This all-encompassing view of the different dimensions of the body is not new to comics: the work of other women authors, such as Julie Doucet and (in English) Aline Kominsky-Crumb, goes beyond the limits of what is usually considered vulgar or inappropriate. By incorporating bodily fluids and scatological functions into their narratives, these artists help demystify the female body by countering the objectifying, unifying vision of the male gaze. Moreover, this depiction transgresses the traditional vision of docile biopolitical bodies that are characterized by their cleanliness and order. It is this scatological dimension that gives *Fraise et Chocolat* its title, which evokes two different mishaps that interrupt Chenda and Frédéric during intercourse: "Fraise" refers to the unexpected arrival of Chenda's period, and "chocolat" refers to accidental contact with fecal matter during anal sex. The following figure shows part of the "chocolate" sequence, which unfolds the first time the couple engages in anal sex:

Figure 4.4. Aurélia Aurita, Fraise et Chocolat : L'intégrale! (Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2014), pp. 35-36.

The left-hand page in figure 4.4 depicts Chenda's initial reactions of pain and pleasure, indicated visually by facial expressions that she has explored in previous pages: the frown in the second panel

gives way to a big smile in the fourth. The next two panels on the second row convey her intense

pleasure using the tools of Aurita's distinctive sexual iconography: the blushing of her cheeks, her

closed eyes, and the *emanata* radiating from her head all communicate her feelings and sensations.

The following panels portray the incident, Chenda's mortified reaction when she realizes what

happened and Frédéric's carefree attitude. Aurita ultimately portrays the whole episode as a happy

accident, and characterizes sex as a fun adventure between two individuals. The sexual activities

evoked in the title—namely period sex and anal sex—clearly do not serve reproductive purposes, a

direct contradiction of the biopolitical program. Rather, they are viewed as one of many possibilities

in the communion of two bodies reaching beyond their limits. This transgression goes beyond the

limits of sexual propriety—and what Bakhtin calls the *bas corporel*—pushing others as well.

The adventurous, playful portrayal of sex in *Fraise et chocolat* should not be taken as a sign of a

superficial relationship or one that is solely based on sex. Instead, Aurita depicts sex as the physical

manifestation of a deeply loving connection between Frédéric and Chenda. Here, sex and love are

mixed, and the intensity of both is represented in the graphic novel through Chenda's thoughts and

emotions. The three consecutive pages in the figure below illustrate a particular moment when

Chenda feels overwhelmed by the intensity of her feelings towards Frédéric. In the page that

precedes those pictured in the figure, the mere look of her lover's face brings Chenda to tears,

inspiring a monologue about her intense and—at times—confusing emotions:

Figure 4.5. Aurélia Aurita, Fraise et Chocolat : L'intégrale! (Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2014), pp. 81-83.

In this sequence, Chenda's face is resting on Frédéric's chest as they lie on the floor, while an inner

monologue follows her thoughts as she reflects on the intensity of her feelings. The text on the left-

hand page (81) reveals her concerns with the possibility of an eventual break up, as she admits that

she has never felt such intense emotions towards someone. In the bottom panel on the same page,

she uses a metaphor to explain the lack of control over her emotions, comparing herself to a "love

mop." Luckily for her, she adds, Frédéric is kind and doesn't take advantage of her impressionable nature. The admission of these strong feelings is accompanied by a very simplified drawing of her avatar, composed of only a few lines with no shades of grey. By stripping her avatar of the nuances of the previous drawings, Aurita reduces her graphic self to the bare minimum, thus representing the intensity of her feelings. In the middle page of the sequence (82), Aurita uses a new visual metaphor to illustrate her inability to control her emotions, drawing herself as a marionette controlled by an invisible hand. The bottom panel depicts Chenda's body, still attached to strings as a marionette, violently jerking, as her facial expressions communicate her discomfort and pain. On the following page (83), the reader sees Chenda back in the same position as at the beginning of this sequence, her face buried in her lover's chest. The thought bubbles alternate between two thoughts: "Je suis heureuse" and "J'ai peur." As the page progresses, she repeats that she is happy, though her facial expression betrays her concern. Here again, the drawing at the bottom of the page is simplified and reduced to a few lines. With the final depiction of herself in this sequence, which shows Chenda crying, Aurita communicates the rawness of her emotions with a less stylized drawing that more closely resembles a sketch than her finished illustrations. The unfinished style of the image also reflects Chenda's vulnerability, evoking the dangers of exposing one's body and emotions to another individual to commune with them.

While the first volume of *Fraise et chocolat* is mostly concerned with Chenda and Frédéric's intimate relationship, the second volume grapples with its repercussions in the larger context of the comics world. The first volume is devoted to the beginning of their relationship, focusing on Chenda's two trips to visit Frédéric in Japan between October 2004 and January 2005. The second volume takes place in France and Belgium, covering Aurita's book tour and participation in the *Festival de la Bande Dessinée d'Angoulême* in January 2006 with fellow comics artist Kan Takahama. At the beginning of their relationship, Boilet was already an established comics author, while Aurita was

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a relatively unknown artist just beginning her career—a disparity that led some to perceive their

relationship's influence on her budding career as nepotism. The backlash that Aurita suffered

because of her relationship with Boilet attests to the different standards to which female comics

authors are subjected by the community, as denounced by the Collectif des Créatrices de Bande

Dessinée—mentioned in the Introduction to this project—to which Aurita belongs. In the first

volume, Chenda mentions that the reason for her trip to Japan is to work on a collaborative Franco-

Japanese comics project entitled *Japon. Le Japon vu par 17 auteurs* (2005), as she explains in the two

pages in the figure below:

Figure 4.6. Aurélia Aurita, Fraise et Chocolat : L'intégrale! (Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2014), pp. 29-30.

The text boxes in these panels offer a narration similar to a voice over, while the drawings show

Chenda and Frédéric at the airport, as she is embarking on a two-week trip for the collective volume

to which she was invited by Frédéric. At the top of the right-hand page, the text explains the stakes

of Chenda's participation in this collective project:

> Autour de moi, il n'y a que des stars de la B.D. "d'auteur." Je suis la seule débutante. La plus
> jeune, et la seule fille, côté français.
>
> Si je suis ici, c'est grâce à Frédéric… Et pour faire taire les mauvaises langues qui diront qu'il
> ne m'a invitée que pour me sauter, je dois faire une très bonne histoire ! (30)

Her comments underscore the importance of the invitation to participate in the project that mostly

includes already established comics artist. For Chenda, the stakes are very high considering that she

is a young creator—not only in terms of her age, but also in terms of her career. Additionally, the

text in figure 4.6 mentions "les mauvaises langues" (30), referring to the malicious gossip in the

comics world that Boilet had invited Aurita to Japan—to participate in the volume—as an excuse to

sleep with her.[4] Two facts fueled these rumors: Aurita's status as a young female artist at the beginning of her career, and Boilet's reputation for engaging in love affairs with the young women who worked as models for his own graphic novels. Their relationship, then, added another obstacle for Aurita to overcome in order to make it in the world of comics, since her successes were likely to be perceived as the result of her new connections and not her artistic merit.

While the first volume of *Fraise et chocolat* took place in Japan, the second volume followed Chenda and Frédéric on a work trip to France and Belgium. Thematically, it moves beyond the walls of their intimate relationship to explore the aspects of their union that were becoming increasingly public. The sequence in figure 4.7 depicts a conversation between Chenda, Frédéric, and Kan Takahama, a fellow comics author who also participated in the collective volume mentioned above. While discussing details of Frédéric and Kan's book tours, Kan asks Chenda if she will also have a book signing:

Figure 4.7. Aurélia Aurita, Fraise et Chocolat : L'intégrale! (Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2014), double page spread, pp. 162-163.

In the last panel on the left-hand page, an embarrassed Chenda answers "No, not at the moment" (162). Her discomfort is evident in her hesitation, her face, and her body language. When Kan then asks Chenda if she has found an editor for *Fraise et chocolat*, Frédéric explains the delicacy of Chenda's situation now that they are in a relationship, noting that their connection could hurt her chances: "Chenda débute, dans la B.D. et comme tu le vois, elle est jeune et jolie! […] Tandis que moi, je suis "installé" dans le métier… / …et on sait que j'aime les jolies filles!" (163). Then, their friend Kan interrupts him, yelling: "J'ai compris!!! / …Tu couches avec elle pour réussir!" (163). By inverting the roles in her comment, Kan jokes about the assumption that people will surely make

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[4] Previously, the text informed the reader that Chenda and Frédéric's romantic relationship started months before the start of *Fraise et chocolat* by correspondence, after they had collaborated on a different project. Chenda's visit to Japan is the first physical encounter between the two.

regarding Frédéric's influence in Chenda's career. This conversation reveals the power imbalance between Chenda and Frédéric based on their status in the profession but also on their gender.

Situations such as this one are not rare in the comics world, with numerous women creators of comics experiencing similar inequality on the basis of gender. As evidenced in the testimonials section of the website for the Collectif des Créatrices de Bande Dessinée, women authors are often objectified and discriminated by fellow authors, editors and other members of the community. This shows a direct connection between the individual female body and the politics that still marginalize women in the publishing world. A signing member of the Collectif, Aurita uses the two volumes of *Fraise et chocolat* to offer a critique of the politics of the publishing world in two very different ways. Through overt eroticism—in volume 1—, Aurita uses her narrative to address the intimate politics that make women's bodies taboo. In volume 2, she documents the misogyny to which she was subjected during the publication process. Like many other graphic memoirs, the two volumes of *Fraise et chocolat* offer a glimpse into the realities of the trade for comics authors, often using *mise en abyme* to illustrate different parts of the profession: from the creative process to its political and financial aspects. But these graphic novels go beyond the individual parts of the creative process to show—though briefly—the politics of the publishing world, thus disrupting the narrative of individual becoming and reframing her becoming-artist as a collective endeavor.

If *Fraise et chocolat* points to the mistreatment of young women creators in the comics world, Aurita's next graphic novel *Buzz-moi* (2009) delves much deeper into the issue by exploring the aftermath of *Fraise*'s publication, following the mixed reactions to the work and the sensational treatment of it in the media due to its sexually explicit nature. Aurita contrasts her mostly negative experience with the press with the generally favorable response of the public, portraying the positive encounters with readers at various book signings and other appearances across Europe. These meetings made the whole experience tolerable, as she remarks following a conversation with a reader

in *Buzz-moi*: "Et là, pendant le demi-seconde qui me séparait du lecteur suivant… j'étais dans un autre monde. Un monde où les kamikazes de l'autobiographie ne s'écraseraient que sur des tapis de roses rouges" (84). The image of the kamikaze points to the dimension of self-sacrifice demanded of many autobiographers, especially those who publish about taboo subjects. In fact, the title *Buzz-moi* is a direct reference to another autobiographical work of a sexual nature—Virginie Despentes's 1994 *Baise-moi*—that created a lot of buzz when it first appeared. This intertextual reference in the title is one of many in *Buzz-moi*, which also includes a quote from Annie Ernaux and references to Catherine Breillat, Catherine Millet, and Christine Angot. By invoking these "romancières du tout dire"— authors associated with the current of autofiction—Aurita identifies herself as part of a group of women authors who have long subverted the expectations of the press and the literary world by broaching polemic subjects in the first person.[5] Several additional references to comics authors and other intellectuals in *Buzz-moi*—Marjane Satrapi, Joann Sfar, Pierre Bourdieu—allow Aurita to weave her narrative into a more expansive discursive network, placing herself in a tradition that she knows well and to which she hopes to belong.[6]

This need to belong to a community comes, I argue, from Aurita's yearning to fit into a world that has often rejected her as an outsider. In particular, her Asian—Chinese and Cambodian—ancestry has interfered in establishing an identity as a French woman because her name and her appearance don't fit the mold of the typical white French person. In *Fraise et chocolat*

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[5] For more on this, see Reyns-Chikuma and Gheno (2013).

[6] Aurita's reflections in *Buzz-moi* come from the scrutiny and violence to which she was subjected under the public eye following the publication of *Fraise et chocolat*. They reflect not only the misogyny of the publishing world, but also the general violence that women endure every day, from the disproportionate emphasis on women's appearance, to the judgement of women who are open about enjoying their sexuality. Virginie Despentes explores these and other issues in depth in *King Kong Theory* (2010), where she asserts that society relegates women to conformity to an aesthetic and behavioral ideal of femininity designed to subject them to men's wills and desires. Even as victims of rape and other violence, women are expected to remain silent: "The golden nugget: conceal your wounds, ladies, lest they upset the torturer. Be a dignified victim. That means one who knows how to keep quiet. Our speech so constantly confiscated. OK, we've got it, it's dangerous. Whose rest does it disturb?" (np).

she narrates a couple of racist attacks on her person, one as a young child in France and the other as

an adult in Japan, where people verbally instigated her insisting that she wasn't French. In *Buzz-moi*,

she also addresses the question of race, albeit briefly, as she marvels that the scandal around *Fraise et*

chocolat has at least pushed aside most comments about her Asian heritage:

Figure 4.8. Aurélia Aurita, Buzz-Moi (Les Impressions nouvelles, 2009), p. 92.

The panel in figure 4.8 closes a sequence addressed to journalists about the questions that they

always ask her and the answers she always gives, as if this sequence could settle the matter for good.

These types of questions—like "Est-ce que tout ce que vous racontez, vous l'avez vécu pour de

vrai?" (86)—are more prevalent in interviews with writers whose autobiographies recount taboo

events, while the question about verisimilitude seems designed to satisfy a sense of curiosity

motivated by sensationalism. At the end of the sequence, Aurita admits that at least she is not

seen—or portrayed—by the press as fulfilling the diversity quota in the comics world. She outfits

her avatar in a hyperbolized mix of different Asian cultural elements such as her clothes, shoes and

hat, adding an exaggerated accent for humorous effect: "Mes oLigines asiatiques sont pLesque

passées inapeLçues!" (92). Although it is not central to the story, the theme of race and belonging

raises important questions about community and the rejection to which immigrants and their

children are subjected when displaced from their country of origin.

Sylvie Rancourt and the Complexity of the Naïve

The second graphic novel that I will briefly discuss was written by a complete outsider in the

comics world: Sylvie Rancourt. A self-taught author from Quebec, Rancourt has the credit of writing

the first Canadian autobiographical comic, according to the *Dictionnaire Mondial de la Bande Dessinée*.[7]

While working in Montreal as an exotic dancer, she felt the need to tell her story, and she chose the

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[7] The entry for "Mélody" in the *Dictionnaire Mondial de la Bande Dessinée* credits it for being the « toute première bande dessinée canadienne autobiographique et autoéditée » (585).

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comics medium to do so. Her work, *Melody* (1985), was first edited, reproduced, and distributed by Rancourt herself to the clients of the club where she worked. This initiative of self-editing, though not rare in the underground comics world, shows the agency of an artist who did not rely on the established system to tell her story. Instead, she reached out to the "captive audience" in the bar where she danced at the time to sell her "barzines"— a play on the words bar and fanzine, used to refer to *Mélody*—and thus created a very small community composed by herself and her readers.

Several notable comics critics have praised Rancourt's work, including Chris Ware (2015), who explains that the fact that she is self-taught does not take away from her art. Indeed, the childlike, naïve style of Rancourt's drawings in *Mélody* belies the complexity of the story she presents. It is precisely the contrast between the simple, optimistic drawings and the seriousness of the themes she broaches that has caught the attention of critics and readers alike. In *Mélody*, the title character takes a very pragmatic approach to her job as an exotic dancer, without vilifying or glamorizing it. Eleanor Ty (2018) argues that "[i]n spite of this girlyface graphiation, she is able to depict a fully rounded, interesting female character without anger, without taking the conventional positions of the enraged feminist or the helpless victim" (124). This delicate balance—serious content communicated through an apparently naïve visual form—allows Rancourt to compose a complex portrait of a sex worker from an autobiographical perspective.

While many narratives authored by sex workers are marked by guilt, shame, and sometimes resentment, Rancourt's text does not express any of these feelings.[8] Instead, she presents her job as an exotic dancer as a choice and she rejects the role of victim. For example, the panels below show her first striptease on stage, on her first day on the job. As soon as she starts to dance, she is so nervous that she begins sweating, trembling, and crying:

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[8] For example, in *Putain* by Nelly Arcan, the narrator recounts her experience as a prostitute, presenting sex as a commercial transaction devoid of actual desire but filled with shame and disgust. It also depicts a society that places an enormous value of women's worth on physical beauty.

Figure 4.9. Sylvie Rancourt, *Mélody (Ego comme X, 2013), p. 22.*

These panels portray Melody's initial reaction by focusing on the gaze of three clients who watch her dance. The first row of panels shows her taking off her clothes to the music playing in the background, her discomfort evident only in the small drop of sweat that appears on her forehead in the third panel. In the second row, two clients who are watching her dance comment on how nervous she looks: the first remarks "Celle-là, elle danse tout croche!," to which the second answers "Pensez-vous qu'elle est droguée?" (22). Their immediate assumption that she might be intoxicated is quickly erased by the comment of the third client: "Hum!... Quel cul! Mais quel cul!!" (22). This objectifying remark reminds the reader of the practical reality of the job, as Melody is there to excite and arouse the men who watch her. At the bottom of the page, an overwhelmed Melody decides to leave the stage before the song ends, declaring: "Jamais je ne pourrai faire ça!" (22). But after a few minutes, she decides to try again, and very soon she becomes more comfortable. From that moment on, she adopts the matter-of-fact approach to nude dancing that is seen throughout the graphic novel.

Instead of portraying herself—and the other dancers—as victims, Rancourt focuses on the inner workings of a job where she gets a lot of attention from both men and women, in a gaze where the reader is complicit. She quickly settles into her trade, as evidenced by the dream where she sees a "crowd" of erect penises, shaped like the hearts that signal their adoration:

Figure 4.10. Sylvie Rancourt, *Mélody (Ego comme X, 2013), pp. 27-28.*

Exhausted upon her return home after her first day as a stripper, Mélody falls asleep and starts dreaming of a multitude of penises. Her facial expression and two drops of sweat on her forehead show the mixed feelings that this kind of attention provokes in her; it is left to the reader to decipher if the dream is positive or negative. In the same panel, however, Rancourt's drawing reduces her customers to their genitalia, which underscores the fact that—for a nude dancer—what matters

most is her customers' sexual desire. Although the opening of her body to the gaze of the clients still maintains a physical distance between them that must be kept at all times, the fact that she is offering her body for their (and the reader's) enjoyment is a different way of destroying the barriers that would figure the body and the self as closed to others, thus opening herself up to all who see her—and read her. Her graphic novel thus functions as an extension of her body that is put out into the world for readers. This provides a glimpse into the inner workings of a trade that refuses the exclusively (re)productive view of sex, thus rejecting an immunitary vision of community. Instead, it celebrates the communion of bodies and selves enjoying one another as a form of resistance. The candor of Rancourt's portrayal of her open practice of sex—which includes orgies—is not sanctioned by reproductive biopolitics, but is rather enjoyed and portrayed as a mode of revolt. By opening her the self to difference and establishing communion with others, Rancourt's work is one of the first examples of a graphic memoir that openly rejects the biopolitical ideals governing female sexuality.

Following *Melody*'s relative success in Quebec, Rancourt decided to expand her readership to the US, where she found a publisher in Kitchen Sink Press. For this iteration of her comics, the publisher demanded that she find a more professional illustrator to do the drawings and that she start the story well before the moment she decided to become a nude dancer. Having previously collaborated with Jacques Boivin—who had drawn the covers of the self-distributed *Melody*— Rancourt decided to entrust the drawings to him. As a result, Rancourt wrote ten new issues that were drawn by Boivin, narrating the events that would eventually bring her to Montreal and to her life as a dancer. This type of collaboration, where one person writes the story and another draws it, is very common to the superhero genre, but graphic memoirs are usually written and drawn by the same person. While Hillary Chute points to Harvey Pekar's work as one notable exception of this (221), I can cite two cases of such a collaboration in the francophone world of comics—though they

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might not be considered "literary book-length comics" by Chute due to their intended audience of young adults: the *Marzi* series, written by Marzena Sowa and illustrated by Sylvain Savoia, and the *Aya de Yopougon* series, written by Marguerite Abouet and illustrated by Clément Oubrerie.[9] For Chute's project in *Graphic Women*, this particular feature of authorship is important to her analysis of graphic narratives: "I am interested in work—unlike what is produced in the commercial comic book industry—in which the same hand is responsible for both the drawing and the writing" (6). In contrast with Chute's approach, Jan Baetens's (2004) comments regarding this type of collaboration in autobiographical comics seem to be more positive:

> Rejeter comme inauthentique la collaboration entre deux narrateurs différents, le premier chargé du récit, le second chargé du dessin, sous-estime, je pense, les possibilités de « fusion » qui peuvent se produire lors d'une collaboration réussie. (4)

Baetens's comments focus on the problem of authenticity that emerges from bringing an external perspective into the creation of autobiographical works. In what follows, I will focus instead on the implications of the male gaze in the portrayal of eroticism, especially when comparing Rancourt's early work with the co-authored issues.

The issues published by Kitchen Sink are thematically different from the original series: while the events narrated in her barzines begin with the day she auditioned to become a dancer, the American iteration covers her life in rural Quebec with her husband Nick, their sexual freedom and their move to Montreal, with the series ending right before Melody started dancing at the club.[10] However, the biggest difference that I want to analyze between the two series concerns the style of the drawings. While Boivin's drawings are more "accomplished" in a traditional sense, their greater realism takes away from the naïve perspective that garnered Rancourt praise from comics scholar

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[9] Both of these autobiographical works narrate the life of the women who write them, and both are illustrated by their romantic partners, which speaks to a particular kind of intimacy in play in these collaborative works.

[10] In both versions, Nick is portrayed as a lazy man of questionable morals who cannot keep a job and has no problem making a living through illicit means. Throughout both series of comics Melody doesn't seem too bothered by Nick's behavior, and she rarely ever judges his choices.

Thierry Groensteen, who calls *Melody* "a little jewel of raw art" in an issue of *Les Cahiers de la Bande Dessinée* focused on autobiographical comics (1987). In his introduction to the reprint of Rancourt's self-published issues, *Melody, Story of a Nude Dancer* (2015), renowned comics artist Chris Ware says of *Melody*: "The apparent childishness of Rancourt's drawings is a quality that extends throughout the story in both its tone and in its text, and it is no affectation or posture; without it, in fact, the book would lose its strength" (np). I argue that this change in visual approach takes away from the uniqueness of Rancourt's work. What's more, the issues drawn by Boivin include considerably more depictions of orgies and sexual encounters, which seem gratuitous since they rarely add to the story.[11] Instead, these sequences seem to suspend the action in time and serve no apparent narrative purpose. These modifications fundamentally change the tone and the appeal of *Melody*, depriving it of the features that led the first version to receive critical acclaim from scholars and fellow artists. While the first issues drawn by Rancourt have stood the test of time—with new compilations published in 2015 in English and in 2013 in French—the issues drawn by Boivin have not generated the same interest or praise. While this does not necessarily imply that they are of inferior quality, it does speak to the unique value of Rancourt's work.

Throughout this project, I have shown how women graphic artists use their depictions of the self through the body to frame themselves as part of an affirmative community that is based on accepting the individual singularities of its members. It is by disrupting the body in various ways— exposing it, disfiguring it, showing it as other—that the authors in my corpus figure a self that is open to difference. Starting with the depiction of the self, I have looked outward to understand that individuals necessarily interact with others. This interdependency affects—positively or negatively— the embodied experience of the individual and those around them, including their family and other

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[11] In the issues drawn by Rancourt, there are fewer than ten erotically explicit panels in a total of 315 pages; in the issues drawn by Boivin, there are thirty-three in a total of 289 pages.

loved ones. However, I am aware that the authors I studied in this project are mostly white cisgender women living in their country of birth—with the exception of Nadja—so their personal experiences only account for a very specific group. For a different project with a larger scope, the next logical step would be to move beyond gender as a category of analysis to consider how race, class and national or linguistic identity shape graphic memoirs.

For instance, the works of comics authors like Marjane Satrapi, Zeina Abirached and Keum Suk Gendry-Kim could enlighten such a study in several ways. The first because their depictions of war and the diasporic experience from their personal viewpoint offer a glimpse into the complexities of such a subject. But more importantly because, as non-Western authors, their views on autobiography as a collective endeavor could provide unique insight into understanding conflict between cultures, especially when told from the perspective of women who are minorities not only based on their gender and their national origin, but also on their native language, religion and race. In order to think beyond gender, the work of other thinkers such as Audre Lorde (1984) may offer a way to rethink difference:

> As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist. […] It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. (107)

A similar view of community beyond difference might allow those who are unseen and unheard to enter the "partage du sensible"—as defined by Rancière and make a space for themselves. We need to move beyond these categories of belonging and recognize that difference legitimates hierarchies and subjugation. The key, I contend, is opening up the self to experience community as "freedom with" others, rather than "freedom from" the powers that oppress us. As a form, the graphic novel offers multiple possibilities to map out the search for this kind of affirmative community.

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