Dwelling with Traumatic Memory through Embodied Drawing in the Structure of Graphic Novels

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Abstract. Autobiographical graphic novels dealing with personal trauma have gained widespread popularity and critical recognition over the past ten years. The depiction of traumatic memory in graphic narrative has been characterized by writers such as Harriet Earle in terms of recurrence and non-integration. In this paper I will examine the difficulties of representing memories that occupy a space between forgetting and re-experience, and how these difficulties have led graphic novelists to foreground the materiality of the comics form and rethink elements of its formal structure. I will consider the representation of traumatic memory in two graphic novels, Lighter than my Shadow by Katie Green (2013), and Becoming Unbecoming by Una (2015), which tell stories of recovery from trauma related to eating disorders and sexual abuse. I will examine such representations through a discussion of the materials and processes used in the production of these works and argue that these works utilize a convergence of haptic visuality and embodied drawing to appeal to the reader’s embodied experience of memory through indexicality. Through a discussion of braided visual relationships, grounded in theory developed by Thierry Groensteen, I will argue that haptic forms of mark-making, which include soaking, scribbling, and folding, generate recurring networks of haptically charged engagement, allowing the reader to dwell with the trauma of the protagonist in spaces outside of the temporal logic of the main narrative. The central argument of this paper is that such networks are structurally embedded in the narrative of these works and constitute an overlooked modality through which unintegrated and unspeakable elements of traumatic experience can be expressed.

The rise in popularity of the graphic novel has coincided with an interest in the representation of personal and autobiographical histories in alternative cartooning. With the canonization of such works as Fun Home by Alison Bechdel, the swiftly developing field of the academic study of graphic novels has produced new theories regarding the representation of subjective memory in graphic narrative. It has been argued by such scholars as Hillary Chute, Jared Gardner, and Eszter Szép that narrative drawings are able to access unique
registers in the representation of autobiography. The reasoning for this is that each mark of a drawing is an index of the artist/author's body, and that a claim to authorial subjectivity is therefore encoded in each mark. Nina Mickwitz argues that non-fiction comics mediated through the first-person perspective represent a specific 'mode of address' in which the reader is positioned in relation to drawings made by the body of a witnessing 'autographer'.

For all that has been achieved in establishing the importance of the drawing body in autobiographical comics, very little has been said about the role of the materials that these drawing bodies manipulate. Many comics scholars refer to 'the line' in drawing as if its material composition were self-evident, but comics creators use a wide variety of different methods to produce images, and, as Henri Focillon argues, 'the substances of art are not interchangeable'. The aim of this paper is to establish that the materials and processes involved in the production of the graphic novels Becoming Unbecoming by Una, and Lighter than my Shadow by Katie Green contribute significantly to the meaning of these works. I will argue that the materials and processes used in the representation of traumatic memory, an experience characterized by non-integration, forgetting, and recurrence, are key to understanding the narratological structure of these works. With reference to the work of Szép and her development of Rosalyn Diprose's concept of 'dwelling', I will demonstrate that the haptic surfaces of these graphic novels can generate metaphorical spaces in which the reader can 'dwell with' the author's subjective experience of trauma, and that the repetition of such surfaces can produce a specific type of relationship that has not yet been recognized by comics scholarship.

In order to make this argument, I must briefly detour into some theory regarding the representation of memory through the static images that comprise a comic. Most comics are made up of panels containing images and

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2 In this essay I will use the term 'comics' to refer to the medium of sequential art, a category which includes graphic novels. I will use the term 'graphic novel' when referring to a work that identifies itself in this way, or to a tendency or approach which is more typical of graphic novels than of comics in general. There has been much debate over the last forty years as to what differentiates the two terms, the only consensus that has emerged being that graphic novels are generally more 'serious' in content, generally longer in length, and make use of higher levels of production techniques leading to a higher retail price. As Roger Sabin notes, rather than being a separate genre, the graphic novel can be defined most clearly as a marketing term. (Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction*, New Accents (London; New York: Routledge, 1993.)


words which sit beside one another on the page. These panels have an implicit relationship to one another, the suggestion being that these enclosed images exist in a temporal relationship. The information contained within the panel borders framing these images is a snapshot, and it is the task of the reader to imaginatively ‘fill in’ the gaps between one panel and another.6

When a comic’s narrative continues across several pages, a new relationship between panels emerges. This is called ‘braiding’, a term coined by comics theorist Thierry Groensteen to account for the relationship between networks of panels or images at a distance.7 The reader makes connections between similar images at different points in the comic as a whole, and not just between the panels immediately following or preceding the one they are reading. A classic example of braiding is found in the graphic novel Watchmen, where the image of the smiley badge appears in the first and final panels of the book and recurs throughout, forming a network with other circular motifs.8 The term is somewhat contested: Groensteen has resisted the expansion of his concept by other scholars and maintained an insistence on braiding’s arbitrary nature. He maintains that it is ‘a supplementary, contingent procedure, which is never necessary to the structuring and intelligibility of the narrative — at least at the first level of meaning that is perfectly satisfactory in itself’.9

Nonetheless, an example of a graphic novel in which braiding is essential to the intelligibility of the narrative is provided by Richard McGuire, whose graphic novel Here relies on the reader to navigate a complex network of spatial and temporal relationships.10 The action of Here takes place in a single room. Through the device of the panel, different temporal spaces open up simultaneously within the room, revealing images and narratives that reach far into the past or future.11 Fragments of these narratives include panels showing prehistoric landscapes and an underwater future. As the graphic novel progresses, other recurring narratives emerge involving the history of the family who occupy the room. These networks rely on the reader recognizing braided relationships between panels or sequences of narrative on distant pages and connecting temporal strands presented in the space of the room through their own memory of reading the text. Groensteen has dismissed such examples as being atypical or experimental. However, I would argue that since the model of braiding was first proposed, a growing tendency has emerged in graphic novels to use such networks as an intrinsic, structuring element of their narratives, and that a revision of braiding, or a formulation of a new term to account for such examples, is necessary.

One example of this tendency is Una’s *Becoming Unbecoming*. This graphic novel relates the author’s experiences of male violence against the backdrop of seventies Yorkshire, in a community gripped by the unfolding events of the Yorkshire Ripper case. The attitudes of society laid bare by the botched police investigation contribute to and prevent recovery from the trauma represented in the book.

Olga Michael has studied these recurring images in *Becoming Unbecoming* and identifies several braided elements relating to the representation of recurring traumatic memory. One example is the image of Una’s avatar climbing over a mountain, dragging an empty speech balloon behind her. Michael writes that ‘this motif reappears frequently throughout the book to illustrate the weight of the unspeakable secret and the psychological burden it causes her’. Michael identifies networked images in a braided relationship based solely on image content and the similarity between what these images depict. While this approach is successful in supporting Michael’s argument, it overlooks another type of recurrence present in this book, wherein images are connected in a braided network through specific types of haptic surface.

The majority of the pages that comprise *Becoming Unbecoming* are informational in their nature. They are text heavy, and utilize visual devices from infographics, such as diagrams which help the reader to visualize and digest the information Una is relating. These pages form a stark contrast with other, largely wordless pages, with backgrounds rendered in a diffused ink wash. These types of marks form regular intervals in which informational tone of the narrative drops away, and the reader enters a quieter space wherein Una’s avatar can reflect on her traumatic memories.

Compare the two images shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. According to Michael’s analysis, and following Groensteen’s definition of braiding, the second image (which appears forty-eight pages after the first) can be said to have a braided relationship to the first image, as both depict Una dragging or carrying a speech balloon. But what of the ink wash that appears behind Una’s avatar in the second image? I would argue that this wash forms a braided relationship with nineteen other pages that appear at various places in the book which employ the same washy brushwork. This includes the page shown in Figure 3, in which no representational image is apparent, but for a single horizontal ink brush stroke which bleeds into the paper, seeming to signify an opening or wound forming on the surface. Such images do not merely suggest a connection with each other based on memory, but through the haptic surfaces they present, suggest metaphors related to fluidity, diffusion, and drowning. Understood as a braided network, these passages signal an alternative narratological space where Una’s subjectivity is expressed metaphorically through tactility and

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Figs. 3 & 4. Una, *Becoming Unbecoming* (Myriad Editions, 2015)
an imaginative engagement with haptic surface. These surfaces are not just an index of the author/artist’s body, but also an index of a material process involving the water, ink, and paper which produced them.

Consider this image of Una’s avatar sinking into the ground (Figure 4) which Michael describes as follows: ‘Una’s sleeping or dead-like representation visually embodies her inability to escape from sexual trauma... The surface on which she is lying dominates the page and her figure almost blends into darkness, illustrating her inability to detach herself from it’.13 One can sense in Michael’s use of words such as ‘surface’, ‘blends’, and ‘inability to detach’, responses to the materiality of the image, but she stops short of analysing the meaning of this ink wash or connecting it with the presence of ink wash on other pages. Consider, also, Henri Micheaux’s description of the loss of control he experiences when using watercolours in his 1963 work ‘Untitled Passages’:

This letting go that becomes ever more pronounced and leaves me feeling ever more helpless... making an absurd muddle of my lines that were clearly marked out to begin with, that swim away on all sides, carrying off my subject towards a blur that increasingly dilates, or changes tack, (a) surface of dissolution.14

The intentional gesture of Micheaux and his control over the expression of his subjective trace is thwarted by the agency of his materials. He experiences a dissolution of the self, a blurring of the subject on all sides. For Micheaux, materials themselves represent a theatre of conflict between his will and the seemingly counteractive will of his materials, in which the memory of his past is active. He writes:

Panic, then, on seeing the paper soak up too quickly, or the blob turn me away from my purpose, that panic is almost immediately echoed in me by a thousand other moments of panic, called up from my not too happy past.15

This description of the experience of producing an ink wash suggests a psychological catalyst to the reexperience of the author’s half-forgotten past and provides a succinct summary of some of the metaphors I believe are at play in Una’s image, where her connection to selfhood and agency is dissolved by her reflection on trauma. This metaphor is recurring and is present each time the ink wash is deployed. This forms a braided relationship to a network of similar material-based metaphors, which can be identified through Elisabeth El Refaie’s term ‘indexical metaphor’ defined as ‘higher order features of style that point to the creative process and/or the modes of production involved,

13 Michael, p. 401.
15 In Zegher, p. 195.
which in turn evokes metaphorical meanings.\textsuperscript{16} El Refaie’s work, alongside that of scholars such as John Miers, highlight the fiendish complexity of analysing visual metaphor.\textsuperscript{17} El Refaie’s approach is fruitful in identifying dozens of visual metaphors active in the panels of comics and in articulating them as propositions. However, I believe this approach does not offer a full account of the metaphors arising from materiality discussed here. While El Refaie recognizes that ‘one of the defining characteristics of alternative comics is that they typically include at least some self-reflexive engagement with the tools, materials, and processes of their own creation’,\textsuperscript{18} and that consequently such narratives ‘are able to exploit the metaphorical meaning potentials of both diegetic space and of the physical space of the page/book’,\textsuperscript{19} I would question the term’s utility in offering a complete account of what such tools, materials and processes are and what they might mean. Indexical metaphor gives us a useful definition to work from but requires expansion. It is the final category in El Refaie’s system; it is the one she does least to clarify, and the examples she offers are few.

I believe that rather than indicating the obscurity of indexical metaphor in comics, this gap in its theorization highlights the limitations of applying models of analysis based on the propositional nature of language to haptic imagery. Put simply, the metaphorical meanings of narrative drawings are ascribed to what such drawings represent as can be expressed through language, but our understanding would benefit from a consideration, largely absent from comics scholarship, of what such drawings are made of and how they are felt by the body. Alternative models of understanding metaphor through embodiment may here be more appropriate. Mark Johnson, for example, proposes a model of understanding metaphorical meaning based on embodied feeling and experience.\textsuperscript{20} This seems the correct approach when analysing metaphors arising from the experience of interpreting haptic surfaces visually. I would argue that such an analysis in comics would require a revision of the terms by which indexical metaphors are understood based on an embodied understanding of the materiality of surface. This clarification would in turn suggest a revision of the terms by which braiding is recognized to accommodate recurring indexical metaphor.

A further example of the foregrounding of a comic’s materiality in the representation of traumatic memory is provided by Katie Green’s \textit{Lighter than my Shadow}. As I will argue, this graphic novel employs haptic elements to alter the dynamic between reading and drawing bodies through engagement with

\textsuperscript{18} El Refaie, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{19} El Refaie, p. 78.
the inter-constitutive touching point of surface. The book relates the author’s struggles with, and slow recovery from an eating disorder. The artwork is backdropped, and occasionally interrupted by, the ominous presence of what Green calls ‘the scribble’ (Figure 5). This amorphous cloud of marks is constantly present in the book, and at times when Katie is at the mercy of the disorder, overwhelms the narrative space of the comic. The panel borders and background are over-run by ‘the scribble’, producing a space outside the main narrative where Green is able to present distorted and highly morphological representations of the authorial body. These include a sequence where Katie’s stomach becomes a mouth which consumes large amounts of food; in another, Katie’s body appears to be dissolving. Much in the same way that the ink wash background works as a space of reflection in Becoming Unbecoming, these sequences are presented upon the ground of the scribble, offering a space of metaphor where traumatic experience can be represented in silence.

The densely drawn space of the scribble, which present the marks of the artist’s body in a compressed and laborious way, produce a space which Eszter Szép calls ‘dwelling’.21 Szép is one of the few comics scholars who addresses the act of drawing in a way that is attentive to the materials involved. In Comics and the Body, Szép suggests that highly worked haptic spaces affect the temporal reading of a comic, slowing down the reading process and emphasising surface as a ‘site of dynamic engagement’ that represents both place and process.22 Dwelling is a concept borrowed from Rosalyn Diprose, which Szép uses to argue that certain collections of marks invite the reader to ‘dwell with’ the author of the trace in certain locations on the surface of a page. It offers a connection between the bodies of artist and reader that is defined by separation: ‘it is the separation of bodies in communion that maintains the event of dwelling.’23 The application of Diprose’s term is compelling. Szép foregrounds the density of the creator’s trace through a discussion of the highly crosshatched work of Joe Sacco, arguing that his haptic surfaces ‘offer immersion and invite the reader to exit from the temporality of action and dwell with both the represented subject and the artist’.24 Szép does not give an account of networks of such haptic surfaces and the effect they have on narrative, but it seems reasonable to propose that passages that slow down the reading of a comic must produce a structural change in the way a text is read. In both of the graphic novels I have discussed, haptic surfaces appear in passages that deal with the impact of traumatic experience in a way that offers a recurring invitation to the reader to dwell with the author’s subjectivity. This recurring invitation comprises a structural element of these works that has been largely overlooked.

In order to further understand how material elements communicate meaning

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21 Szép, pp. 123–34.
22 Szép, p. 130.
23 Drichel and Diprose, p. 198.
24 Szép, p. 124.
to the reader, it will be necessary to consider haptic surfaces more deeply. *Lighter than my Shadow* offers an opportunity to do so, if we examine the paper support upon which the comic is drawn. To represent the panel borders of the narrative, Green has chosen to use folds or creases in the paper support of the comic. This intervention on the physical material of representation puts the reader in a unique embodied relationship with the page’s surface. The creases suggest something folded that has remained secret, coming to light only through an action of unfolding, but threatening at any moment to collapse back, beyond the perception of the reader.

Both the creases in Green’s *Lighter than my Shadow*, and the inky, haptically charged surfaces in Una’s *Becoming Unbecoming* make an appeal to what Laura U. Marks calls haptic visuality. In describing the mechanism of haptic visuality, Marks describes a process where the eye becomes an organ of touch: ‘the viewer has to work to constitute the image, to bring it forth from latency. Thus, the
act of viewing [...] is one in which both I and the object of my vision constitute each other.\textsuperscript{25} 

Film theorist Tarja Laine similarly describes a process of affect where the spectator of the film ‘reaches out and opens up to touch, touches the screen in order to be touched back’.\textsuperscript{26} This ‘touching eye’ is an openness waiting to touch and to be touched. For Laine this invitation to touch, and openness to the reciprocating touch of the spectator, is what separates classical from post-classical cinema. It replaces identification with ‘being with’, a strategy of engagement with the trace of the body that is inter-constitutive and operates through the touch of imaginative embodiment.

Of course, reading a book is different from watching a film in that it includes


\textsuperscript{26} Tarja Laine, “‘It’s the Sense of Touch’: Skin in the Making of Cinematic Consciousness”, \textit{Discourse}, 29.1 (2007), 35–48.
an element of actual, as well as imaginative, touch in the performance of reading. This sense of touch is usually left far in the background of the sensory awareness of the reader and is automatic enough to barely merit consideration. However, the touching of these haptic surfaces and the fact that the thumb does not encounter wetness in the case of Becoming Unbecoming, nor the raised surface of actual creases in Lighter than my Shadow, refocuses our attention on touch, albeit in a way that reveals the deceptive nature of the image we are encountering.

This potential for confusing the embodied response of the reading subject, so habituated to the privileging of the visual in western thought and art, represents further possibilities for haptic visuality to generate meaning through embodied response to the comic's surface. In the following quote, Szép describes reading a page of Miriam Katin’s graphic novel We Are On Our Own, during which she finds herself responding to marks drawn onto the comic's surface with soft black pencil:

> Though it is part of a printed book, touching the page or tracing any of its lines carries a sense of risk; the risk of making one’s hands dirty by touching the intense black lines, and the risk of causing damage to this intensely woven surface.27

The body of the reader is thus confused by the mimetic surface of representation. A similar mechanism is at play in the aforementioned panel borders in Lighter than my Shadow. These creases offer no dent in the paper surface to the touching hand. If the reader attempts through an effort of haptic visuality to imaginatively refold the surface, they will encounter an impossibility, since no paper could ever be folded or unfolded in such a way. The surface of the page, upon which so many tense domestic scenes ‘unfold’, reveals itself to be a strange and uncanny puzzle (Figure 6).

Consider Jill Bennett’s description of the ‘squirm’ response to images in horror films: Bennett argues that the viewer squirms in order to feel their own body, fulfilling a need arising from the lack of touch relationship either to the surface of the cinematic projection or to the subjects depicted. She describes this as ‘a moment of regrouping’ where the viewer feels the image and at the same time maintains a distance from it, a recoil that allows us to incorporate the image’s impact while maintaining our own subjectivity:

> Although the squirm is a recoil, a moment of regrouping the self, it is also the condition of continued participation... The squirm lets us feel the image, but also maintain a tension between self and image.28

These accounts offer evidence of visceral embodied responses to haptically charged surfaces. They suggest that the materiality of drawing can be felt by the

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27 Szép, p. 142.
body through the eye as touching organ, and that the inter-constitutive space of haptic visuality offers alternative spaces of reading.

In this paper I have called for a recognition of drawing’s materiality as part of the experience of its meaning both metaphorically and inter-constitutively. My contention is that such drawings should be understood in an embodied way, attentive to how they are felt by the body, and that networks grounded in embodied response to materiality should be recognized as an essential component of the narrative framework of the graphic novels I have discussed. This will require a focus on both materiality and the body in comics scholarship, as well as a revision of how we understand structure in comic’s braided relationships. Such a shift is essential to an analysis of the representation of non-integrated memory in the two trauma narratives I have discussed, and new terms of analysis will become increasingly necessary as comics continue to experiment with self-reflexive and metaphorical approaches to the materials involved in their production.