

Compassionate Comics Unflattening Scholarship with (Auto)Graphic Research

BD empathique Désapplatir la connaissance grâce à la recherche (auto)graphique

Maureen Burdock

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Résumé de l'article

La publication en 2015 de la thèse graphique de Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening*, a ouvert des portes aux artistes-chercheurs qui défient les méthodologies de recherche conventionnelles en produisant des thèses graphiques, des recherches graphiques et des publications basées sur la bande dessinée dans des revues universitaires, scientifiques et médicales. *Unflattening* a été publié un an après que j'ai commencé un programme de doctorat en études culturelles à l'Université de Californie, à Davis, avec un projet de thèse graphique de mon cru. Dans cet essai, je vais expliquer comment mon projet, un récit graphique sur ma grand-mère maternelle et son expérience de la Seconde Guerre mondiale en Allemagne, est devenu un mémoire graphique - un Bildungsroman féministe intersectionnel qui explore les thèmes de la mémoire transgénérationnelle, du déplacement et des abus sexuels pendant l'enfance. Comme l'a dit un universitaire avisé de ma cohorte, "vous avez trouvé une nouvelle façon de "faire" de la psychologie et de l'histoire". En quoi le type de subjectivité très particulier, une vision à partir de la base ou d'une "vue d'escargot", engendré par la forme de la bande dessinée, est-il utile à la recherche décoloniale contemporaine ? En plus d'écrire sur mes mémoires graphiques, *Queen of Snails* (à paraître chez Graphic Mundi, un label de Penn State University Press en 2022), j'interrogerai Kay Sohini, candidate au doctorat à Stonybrook, sur *Unbelonging*, sa thèse graphique en cours, Helen Blejerman (*Lulu La Sensationnelle*, Presque Lune Editions, 2014) et Sarah Lightman (*Book of Sarah*, Myriad Press et Penn State University Press, 2021). Comment le processus de création de leurs récits graphiques a-t-il modifié leur approche de la recherche ? Qu'ont-ils appris en utilisant le dessin et l'écriture pour créer des œuvres comportant des éléments autobiographiques ? Comment certains de ces processus pourraient-ils être utiles aux chercheurs qui cherchent à décortiquer les questions intersectionnelles de traumatisme transgénérationnel, de misogynie et de racisme ?

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Compassionate Comics: Unflattening Scholarship with (Auto)Graphic Research

 alternative francophone
pour une francophonie en mode mineur

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Abstract. *The 2015 publication of Nick Sousanis’s graphic dissertation, Unflattening, opened doors for artist-scholars who challenge conventional research methodologies by producing graphic dissertations, graphic research, and comics-based publications in academic, scientific, and medical journals. Unflattening came out one year after I began a PhD program in cultural studies at the University of California, Davis, with a proposed graphic dissertation of my own. In this essay, I will discuss how my intended project, a graphic narrative about my maternal grandmother and her experiences of the Second World War in Germany, became a graphic memoir—an intersectional feminist Bildungsroman that explores themes of transgenerational memory, displacement, and childhood sexual abuse. As an astute scholar in my cohort put it, “You’ve found a new way of ‘doing’ psychology and history.” How is the very particular kind of subjectivity, a seeing from the ground up, or from a “snail’s eye view,” engendered by the comics form, useful for contemporary decolonial scholarship? In addition to writing about my graphic memoir, Queen of Snails (forthcoming by Graphic Mundi, an imprint of Penn State University Press in 2022), I will interview Kay Sohini, a PhD candidate at Stonybrook, about Unbelonging, her graphic dissertation in progress, Helen Blejerman (Lulu La Sensationelle, Presque Lune Editions, 2014), and Sarah Lightman (Book of Sarah, Myriad Press and Penn State University Press, 2021). How has the process of creating their graphic narratives changed their approaches to research? What have they learned by employing drawing and writing in crafting works that include autobiographical elements? How might some of these processes be useful to scholars seeking to unpack intersectional issues of transgenerational trauma, misogyny, and racism?*

Keywords: *graphic research; graphic memoir; autographics; decolonizing scholarship; decolonizing academia*

Résumé. *La publication en 2015 de la thèse graphique de Nick Sousanis, Unflattening, a ouvert des portes aux artistes-chercheurs qui défient les méthodologies de recherche conventionnelles en produisant des thèses graphiques, des recherches graphiques et des publications basées sur la bande dessinée dans des revues universitaires, scientifiques et médicales. Unflattening a été publié un an après que j'ai commencé un programme de doctorat en études culturelles à l'Université de Californie, Davis, avec un projet de thèse graphique de mon cru. Dans cet essai, je vais expliquer comment mon projet, un récit graphique sur ma grand-mère maternelle et son expérience de la Seconde Guerre mondiale en Allemagne, est devenu un mémoire graphique - un Bildungsroman féministe intersectionnel qui explore les thèmes de la mémoire transgénérationnelle, du déplacement et des abus sexuels pendant l'enfance. Comme l'a dit un universitaire avisé de ma cohorte, "vous avez trouvé une nouvelle façon de "faire" de la psychologie et de l'histoire". En quoi le type de subjectivité très particulier, une vision à partir de la base ou d'une "vue d'escargot", engendré par la forme de la bande dessinée, est-il utile à la recherche décoloniale contemporaine ? En plus d'écrire sur mes mémoires graphiques, Queen of Snails (à paraître chez Graphic Mundi, un label de Penn State University Press en 2022), j'interrogerai Kay Sohini, candidate au doctorat à Stonybrook, sur Unbelonging, sa thèse graphique en cours, Helen Blejerman (Lulu La Sensationnelle, Presque Lune Editions, 2014) et Sarah Lightman (Book of Sarah, Myriad Press et Penn State University Press, 2021). Comment le processus de création de leurs récits graphiques a-t-il modifié leur approche de la recherche ? Qu'ont-ils appris en utilisant le dessin et l'écriture pour créer des œuvres comportant des éléments autobiographiques ? Comment certains de ces processus pourraient-ils être utiles aux chercheurs qui cherchent à décortiquer les questions intersectionnelles de traumatisme transgénérationnel, de misogynie et de racisme ?*

Mots clés : *recherche graphique; mémoire graphique; autobiographie; décolonisation du savoir; décolonisation de l'université*

UNFLATTENING OURSELVES, OUR WORLD

The word “decolonizing” is floating around quite freely these days, in academia and elsewhere. But what does it mean, really? Of course, it means different things for different people. To be colonized is to be brutally overrun by groups, religions, or nations that believe themselves and their beliefs and needs to be more important, more correct, more morally righteous, and so forth. Most often, colonization is an extension of state power. Ultimately, the experience of being colonized is to have one’s own way of being and thinking eroded, bulldozed, flattened, so that the colonizers can establish themselves right on top of where one was once living and growing. It is a complex form of violence that is total, leaving little room for recovery. Many colonizers insist that “nothing” had been there when they arrived, and as evidence they show the flattened field that had previously been a lush forest full of life.

The bank, school, church, or new nation that now squats there is the only reality that the colonizer deems relevant.

In academia, expectations that everyone within its walls should speak a common language—one borne of white male European thinkers—has notoriously “bulldozed” the languages and life experiences of marginalized faculty and students. But in recent decades, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, and other scholars (most notably black and Latinx feminists) have begun to reclaim the marshy margins between personal experiences and languages and academic work as a fertile space. Today, there are many more options for scholars wanting to move away from academic conventions; they recognize that norms such as expository writing devoid of first-person perspectives (or pictures!) fetters the expressive potential of scholarship. Feminist scholarship insists on reclaiming individual experience as generative and urgent.

For me, art has always been an important tool for reinterpreting memories and for navigating complex ideas and emotions. Drawing materializes and externalizes conceptions that I can then much more readily analyze. It was thus only natural that I would employ drawing in my academic as well as in my creative work.

When Nick Sousanis wrote and drew his award-winning graphic dissertation, *Unflattening* (2015), he opened doors for graduate students wanting to create similar academic projects. His work is a powerful manifesto condemning flatness of vision¹, an evocation of forgotten dimensions, and an invitation to readers and academic institutions to metamorphose. Sousanis offers an Escheresque view, where the individual mind is infected with the same flatness that exists outside in the world at large, a world that exists as “boxes within boxes” (Sousanis 10). Sousanis presents a portrait of a colonized mind, wherein “distinct territories were drawn up, delineating provinces of exclusion...claims staked...areas carved out...fields defined” (35). To counter this flatness, he suggests that drawing brings an idea within reach, where it can be manipulated—turned over and over to examine all its aspects. “Drawing,” according to Sousanis, “is a way of seeing and thus a way of knowing, in which we touch more directly the perceptual and embodied processes underlying thinking” (78). Drawing engages the body and reconnects the mental divides Sousanis describes. Right and left hemispheres of the brain become equal partners in making meaning. The right brain, so often deemed inferior by scientific traditionalists, informs the left brain; the left brain responds enthusiastically with new information; the two converse and touch and move one another until there are no longer two, but one lit up globe, a strobe in the darkness. Sousanis presents a second portrait in contrast to the earlier image of the colonized mind. This drawing shows an illuminated, interconnected mind: “In this new integrated landscape lies the potential for a more comprehensive understanding” (37). In describing the limits of language, he writes, “The medium we think in defines what we can see” (52). Sousanis echoes Marshall McLuhan’s notorious phrase, “the medium is the message,” (first coined in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964). McLuhan proposed that the medium of communication, not just the message, should be studied.

Of course, there is no such thing as an objective view regardless of the media used. Postmodern thinkers and transnational feminists have shown that a multiplicity of viewpoints is essential to more thorough understanding of any topic. The “objective” god’s-eye view is a tyrannical fiction. For some, and perhaps for women and minoritized people particularly, the autobiographical “I” is the gateway to the cultural and political. The comics form does an especially good job of reuniting the disembodied and universalized

¹ By “flatness”, Sousanis means narrow, rigid ways of thinking that most often preclude multimodal, multidimensional forms of comprehension and expression.

voice with the body, as evidenced by marks made by a living hand, and as shown by drawn self-representations of artist-authors.

In this article, I discuss the work of four artist-scholars who have created autobiographical comics as research. For at least three of us, making comics is one of several viable methods among a variety of pictorial practices. I base this writing on careful readings and on interviews with my three peers. I ask them how making their graphic narratives may have changed their perceptions of how we might “do” psychology and/or history and/or other humanities topics differently as scholars; what they have learned by employing drawing and writing in crafting works that include autobiographical elements; and how some of these processes could be useful to scholars seeking to unpack and unflatten intersectional issues such as transgenerational trauma, misogyny, and racism. In other words, how might comics—and autobiographical comics in particular—be useful in “decolonizing” academic research?

Based on these interviews and on my own experience of creating my graphic memoir, another question began to emerge as I noticed a common theme: meaningful engagement with the viewpoints and experiences of others—compassion. What is the importance of compassion in academia? And how might the making and reading of autobiographical comics help create a more empathetic viewpoint towards the narrating self and towards each other in a university setting? Does the more comprehensive, integrated understanding generated by the process of drawing described by Sousanis give rise to greater compassion for ourselves and for others?

A GRAPHIC DISSERTATION COMES TO LIFE

I had not yet heard of Sousanis’ work when I applied to the University of California, Davis (UC Davis) with my proposed graphic dissertation (fall of 2013). In my application, I outlined a plan to write and draw a graphic narrative about my maternal grandmother, the late Baroness Magdalene von Reitzenstein. I had started this project a few years earlier, but felt I needed to conduct more research to better understand the context of her life in Silesia (formerly a part of Germany) before partitioning and expulsion by the Russian Army in 1946. I wanted to gain a more thorough cultural perspective as well as a clearer understanding of historical events. Moreover, I was not just interested in the Baroness’s stories, but in the way she recalled, curated, and narrated her memories, and in the transgenerational effects of her experiences on my mother and on me.

The Cultural studies graduate group at UC Davis was a fitting laboratory for this research. I was able to study with scholars from several disciplines, including German literature, memory studies, sociology, comparative literature, and gender studies. I was able to work with an engaging and supportive dissertation committee. By then, *Unflattening* had been published (2015), and I had contacted Nick Sousanis to ask if he had any tips for me. In fact, it turned out that we both lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. He had laid the groundwork for other artist-scholars wanting to create graphic dissertations, and he was generous and forthcoming. Armed with Sousanis’s ground-breaking work and with the backing of my committee, I was given the greenlight to write and draw *The Baroness of Have-Nothing* without writing additional text. For anyone who has made longform comics, they understand how incredibly labor- and time-intensive this sort of project is. As with a traditional dissertation, there is the usual amount of research, and then there is also *image* research (clothing, architecture, machinery, plants, animals, figures, faces...all that one intends to render with any degree of accuracy). All this work

typically precedes writing and drawing (and possibly, as in my case, hand-lettering and coloring and scanning).

Much of my academic research was focused on German autobiographical literature by Jewish and non-Jewish women. The head of my dissertation committee, Elisabeth Krimmer, was my ideal guide here, as her own research centered on German women's literature and the complexity of non-Jewish German women's involvements and complicity in Nazi Germany. At this point, I was still thinking primarily about my grandmother's (*Omi's*) stories, and about her silences—the gaps in her narratives.

As I began to write and draw my dissertation, I noticed that my early childhood understanding of *Omi's* tales—the mental images I held when I was little—changed significantly as I matured and as I heard the stories repeated often, each time with different nuances. I became interested in how I, as a child, had received and interpreted *Omi's* and my mother's narratives, how that understanding had changed over time, and how their worldviews and psychological baggage had influenced me. My focus thus began to shift away from *Omi* to my own formative years. I began to draw my own memories so that I could study them, make sense of them. At this point, the work resembled a copiously illustrated autoethnography, a bit like Nora Krug's *Belonging*, which would be published several years later (2018). The first-person narrator of my story stood outside of the drawings, explaining the sequence of memories and events. She haunted the margins of these pages but had not quite claimed her own story. As is often the case with the children and grandchildren of mass trauma survivors, I stood in the long shadows of my grandmother's and mother's stories about their violent displacement and refugeeism. I realized that the somewhat overbearing Baroness, who had been quite unsympathetic towards me when I was young, needed to step aside to allow me to see my way through the tangle of narratives, omissions, and emotions. Moreover, I saw how utilizing more of the available comics conventions would bring the work to life. For example, by drawing younger versions of myself, I found greater self-compassion—a sense of tenderness towards my child self, the girl who had endured sudden separation from her father and grandparents, sexual abuse by a family member, and terrible isolation coupled with her mother's intense religiosity. I also began to see my own intelligence, resilience, and humor in the face of neglect and abuse. I was now learning new things from each panel and page that I sketched. Drawing my memories made me see them differently. I scrapped a year's worth of fully realized drawings and writing and began again. This time, I inhabited my own narrative and made full use of comics conventions and techniques: panels and margins, speech and thought bubbles, hand-lettered text. No longer an illustrated autobiography, *Queen of Snails* came to life as a graphic memoir. I chose this new title in honor of the title my sweet paternal grandmother, who I called *Oma*, bestowed upon me when I was little because I loved to play with the little critters in her garden. The snail became a metaphor for identity. The mantle of history and culture that is always already a part of an individual cannot be entirely shed. It is at once protective and confining. Coming to terms with this innate part of the self requires slow (snail-like), humble working through, a retracing of remembered paths with every open pore. This is not a lofty process, but a deeply loving one, rife with opportunities for empathy and forgiveness.

In drawing my mother, grandmother, and other family members, I gained a more compassionate, more complete understanding of their experiences. I continued to research the sociopolitical circumstances that had affected them, from my mother's childhood and young adulthood in Nazi Germany to my grandmother's disturbing alliances with the Nazi party and her nostalgic rambling about the war years. I felt special empathy as I read and translated my mother Ingrid's postcards that she had written to her mother over a period of three years while she was left in a postwar orphanage (figure 1).



Figure 1 My translations of my mother's postcards from the orphanage, *Queen of Snails*, pp. 116-17, ©Maureen Burdock

As I interpreted those missives, I gained insight about my own feelings of abandonment that had arisen because my mother had often been distant when I needed her as a child. I began to see more clearly that “I” had begun long before my birth. It made sense that family history should be a vital part of my autobiography.

My mother had given me the box full of dozens of postcards a few years before I drew these pages. She had always told me that her mother hadn't known where she was, and that this was why she hadn't come to retrieve her young daughter or even visited her during those years. The postcards were evidence that my grandmother *had indeed* known where my mother was but had chosen to leave her there, nonetheless. While I perceived this as tragic, I felt annoyed with my mother for not facing the truth, probably because this type of familial fiction (like numerous tales of my grandmother's selfless heroism and stoicism in the face of unmitigated hardship, with no acknowledgement of her Nazism or of her harshness) had affected me quite negatively. My stance was calloused! However, as I sat drawing young Ingrid in the orphanage, revealing how she sat and wrote the postcards while months turned into years, I began to see how her young mind had struggled to make sense of that abandonment, of her parents' separation, and of the recent loss of her home and family when Ingrid was just seven and the Russian army violently forced them out of the former German region of Silesia. It became very clear that the fiction that her mother hadn't known where to find her wasn't something she had concocted to protect her mother, but to shield her own vulnerable heart from further pain. In the spread pictured (figure 1), the first panels show Ingrid, aged nine to eleven, as she describes lists of items she received in the mail. As a twelve-year-old, however, her concerns shift away from chocolate and games to more adult matters. She tries to make sense of her parents' impending divorce and comes close to confronting her mother: “Please come as soon as possible. I'm in an orphanage here.” As I drew little Ingrid maturing, the worry line between her eyes deepening into a permanent punctuation mark, my impatience with my mother's self-protective fictions melted away. In its stead, greater compassion for her took root.

My experience of growing up with a parent who was a trauma survivor is in line with memory theorist Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory.² She describes memory as an affective link to the past that is "powerfully mediated by technologies such as literature, photography, and testimony" (Hirsch 32). She is thus interested in "second-generation fiction, art, memoir, and testimony [that] are shaped by the attempt to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma. They are shaped by the child's confusion and responsibility, by a desire to repair" (34). The term "postmemory" denotes identification *with*, rather than rememory, which signifies identification *as*. Hirsch notes that this is significant, as she argues for a "heteropathic" postmemory that allows identification with mother (for instance) as other, as "not-me," which enables empathy without appropriating that person's memories (82-87).

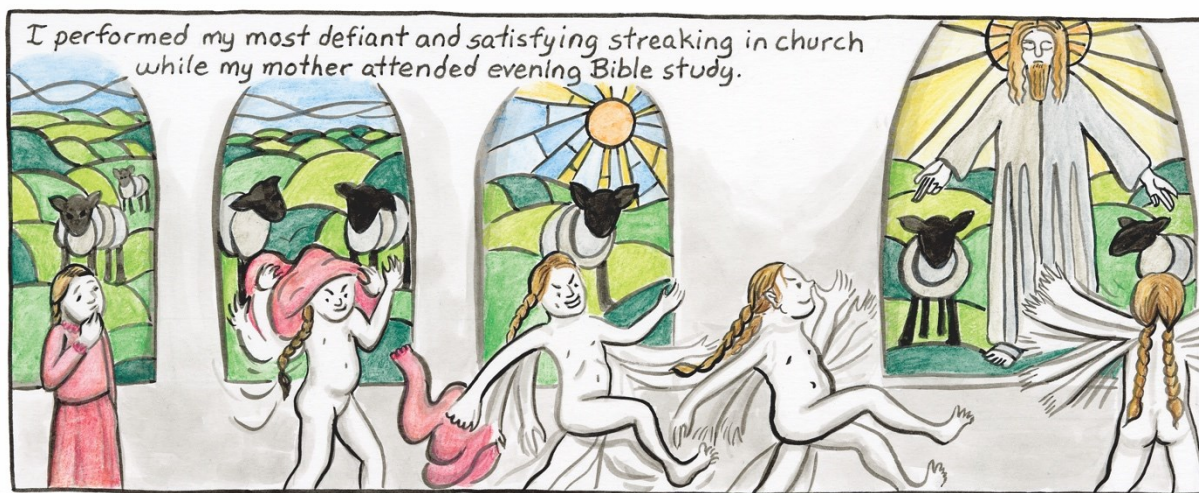


Figure 2 Panel from *Queen of Snails*, p. 110, ©Maureen Burdock

Part of my motivation for writing and drawing my own story, rather than primarily focusing on my mother's and maternal grandmother's narratives, is that I did not want to over-identify with my relatives. I had struggled for many years to emerge from the long shadows of their wartime memories, to find strength and joy despite the heavy history into which I had been born. As I drew younger versions of myself, I clearly saw that childhood is a time of greatest vulnerability, especially as a girl and an immigrant, but simultaneously a time of nascent strength. For example, my tiny acts of protest to my mother's fundamentalism took on profounder meaning as I recreated them in my graphic memoir. When I drew myself, around age eight, streaking gleefully through the church basement while my mother was at Bible study upstairs, for instance, I marveled at my rebellious young spirit, and giggled at my impish outburst (figure 2). Before drawing the scene, this had been just an embarrassing memory. The stained-glass windows, depicting grazing sheep and Jesus the shepherd, are completely invented. I don't remember much at all about that church. But I do remember hating the idea of belonging to a docile flock and needing a male protector. In my experience at that point, men were more often threats than allies. In protesting Evangelical indoctrination by streaking in the late 1970s, and then again in the present moment, by re-presenting my individuated young self, scorning the sheep-and-savior doctrine, my whole colorful self emerges from my ancestors' shadows.

² I find Hirsch's framework useful even though I do not suggest that my experiences or those of my family compare with those of the families that were victims of the Holocaust. German literary scholar Elisabeth Krimmer rightfully suggests we might better describe the experiences of contemporary non-Jewish Germans as "postguilt" rather than "postmemory."

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND COMPASSIONATE RECONSTRUCTION : *LULU SENSATIONNELLE*

In numerous ways, my experience of finding compassion while drawing my younger self in context—and of thereby learning things about myself, my family, and the world at large that had appeared murky in the morass of memories and histories—mirrors those of several of my colleagues who have also created autographics as conduits for artistic and academic discovery. Helen Blejerman, who teaches fine art practice to BA students at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK, describes her academic and her artistic work as one practice with many facets. She explains that, for her, “the borders between the territories of researching, making art, sharing work and teaching art are blurred” (Blejerman). She has used graphic narratives in her teaching to explore understanding and empathy in personal histories. This thread of compassionate comprehension is palpable in Blejerman’s projects, from her autobiographical work, *Lulu the Sensational and the Family Secret* (first published in France as *Lulu la Sensationnelle*), to more recent work she has done in response to the horrendous femicides in Juarez, Mexico.

Helen Blejerman was born in Mexico City. Her father’s parents were born in an area of Ukraine that was then part of Russia and her mother’s father was born in Istanbul. All of them were received in a 1920s Mexico that welcomed migrants escaping xenophobia. Blejerman explains, “My background gives me... perhaps without me knowing, an internal possibility that has taken me to discover other continents. Literally and metaphorically.” She muses, “But perhaps I came to Europe wanting to know more about myself and about my past” (Blejerman). She quotes Sebald’s *Rings of Saturn*: “We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was” (70). This filmic perspective is in line with Blejerman’s love of cinema. She admires filmmakers like Bergman, Tarkovsky, and Fellini, “the way they make the heart of the story interact with what we see on the screen” (Blejerman). In *Lulu*, Blejerman chose not to draw the human actors in her story, but to allow readers to experience them solely through their environments, speech, and objects.

Theorists have put forward conflicting views about the significance of material objects in relation to memory. Hirsch notes that Young and Huyssen are “sceptical of what they deem a sentimental Romantic notion that endows objects and places with aura or with memory” (211). Hirsch’s thinking is more in line with Aleida Assmann’s, who proposes that objects and places don’t themselves carry qualities of past moments but that they hold what we project onto them. She suggests that we take some of the qualities of those objects or places with us, and leave part of the qualities behind, embedded in the objects. This seems a bit cumbersome to me. I find materialist feminist ideas the most helpful in understanding how something like a lamp, an old pair of roller skates, or a set of Russian nesting dolls can powerfully conjure memories. As Jane Bennett puts it, “agentic capacity is now seen as differently distributed across a wider range of ontological types” (9). Just as humans act upon objects, animals, the world and its natural forces, so do those entities act upon and change us. Our memories are never separate from places and things. Rather, we are inextricably interconnected with those material actants.

In *Lulu*, Blejerman names the wind as an actant as she delves into her childhood memories of discovering that her mother was mentally ill: “That day the wind was getting stronger,” Blejerman recalls, “The wind. And my mother moved against all odds to the bathroom” (*Lulu* no page numbers). Instead of drawing her mother here, the artist presents a series of objects: a pillow, a hairdryer, suitcase, cookpot, and cooking utensils. Bright squares of sunlight, interrupted by shadows of windowpanes, birds, and branches

illuminate objects, floors, and walls of the family residence. “She closed the door like in a silent film,” the artist recalls, “The wind didn’t care” (*Lulu* no page numbers). The indifference of the wind and the silence of the objects in their home reflects Blejerman’s father’s reaction to this odd turn. He said nothing.

Despite her daughter’s pleading, the mother refused to come out. Their only connection after that was through food. The mother prepared meals in the bathroom and invited her daughter in to eat with her. This tenuous relationship between the two caused the girl to regard food as surrogate for her mother’s love. Blejerman recounts how she began to lock herself in her wardrobe to eat sweets. She alternated between sharing meals with her mother in the bathroom and snacking on sweets in her wardrobe, until her clothes no longer fit. Her peers at school cruelly put her in a rubbish bin with signage pronouncing that she was “The Fattest Beast on Earth,” and wheeled her around the city, charging admission, as though she were a one-act sideshow. On one such journey through the streets, the girl spotted a large poster on the side of a building, featuring a bikini-clad performer straddling a star. This image transformed her: “The air whispered in my ear and said: Look what you can be...My aim was clear: To reach the stars” (*Lulu* no page numbers). Through this creative impulse to build a spaceship and ride to the stars, and to thereby transform herself into “Lulu the Sensational,” the young artist finds her voice. She finally asks her mother, “Mami, why do you live in the f**** bathroom?” She is met with a torrent of her mother’s ravings about combatting a global conspiracy and saving the world (*Lulu* no page numbers).

The child’s brave confrontation finally prompts her father to act, and together they bring the mother to “another home” where the girl is still able to visit her. She had brought the terrible family secret to light. In doing so, she said goodbye to girlhood, but she also noticed the empowering objects she had made: a paper airplane that is her spaceship to cross the skies; a map to reach the tallest mountain on earth; and a kaleidoscope that works as a telescope to focus on a star. Blejerman realizes that these objects made her feel less lonely and gave her “a strange hope” (*Lulu*).

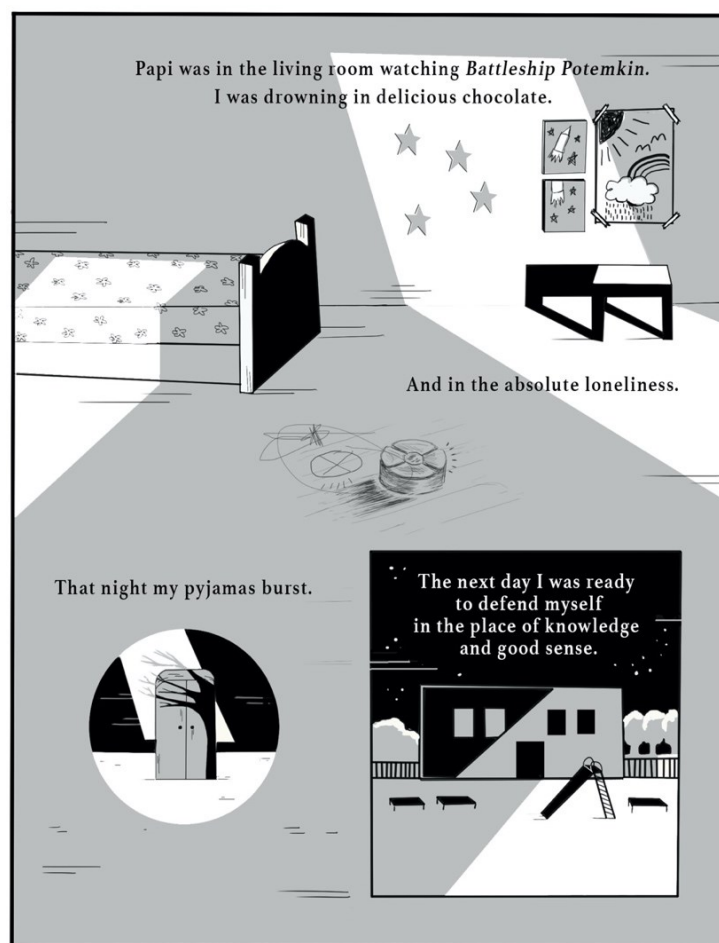


Figure 3 Page from the book *Lulu la Sensationnelle* ©Helen Blejerman

Throughout the book, Blejerman relies on objects to carry her through and finally beyond the tangled landscape of her memories and feelings about her mother and the family secret. I asked the artist if her work had changed her perception of the past. In response, she pointed to the page reproduced here (Figure 3):

This page... showed me, a few years after publication, that the messianic paranoia of my mother was too much and too complicated to be understood by any of the adults around me as a child (in Mexico in the 1980s). That difficulty created a silence and a secret that I believe added to my mother's illness. This page helped me understand better the devastating effect that a mother with schizophrenia can have on a family when the sufferer has no awareness of it. (Blejerman)

Blejerman's pages are almost devoid of human or animal figures. Instead, she recreates memory objects, like the sunlit bed with its star-spangled coverlet (Figure 3), and she invites the reader to connect with these items as portals to her remembered past. Most often, the objects are rendered with confident linear precision, and filled with black, a medium grey, and white. But there are also some smaller objects—a slinky, Rubik's cube, bird's cage, bird, book, or film reel—that are drawn with thin, scribbly lines. These

material entities create a second plane of meaning on the page, as though the artist had found another set of memories, eroded and made faint by time, that she added to the scenes as an afterthought.

As in cultural critic and writer Walter Benjamin's *A Berlin Childhood*, objects transport the artist and her readership into past times and rediscovered spaces. They create specificity and reconnect the human actant with other material actants in a series of evocative assemblages. Blejerman recalls a night where she went up on the roof and witnessed a star, shining brighter than the rest, that ultimately gave her the courage to break her family's oppressive silence. She asks, "'Mami, why do you live in the f*** bathroom?'" (*Lulu* no page numbers). Like the child in the tale of the emperor's new clothes, she could finally voice what the adults couldn't.

Little Lulu's interactions with objects ranging from chocolates to wind and stars offer readers opportunities to connect with the young girl. Compassion is sympathetic consciousness of others' feelings and experiences, and the familiarity of such objects, experienced across cultures and ages, help to evoke a sympathetic mindset. Her spaceship to cross the skies, for example, is depicted simply as a paper airplane, yet it is a powerful metaphor for how the discovery of one's creative power truly *can* help one reach the stars. There is a humble acceptance palpable in Blejerman's drawings of material objects, too. Like the black holes she references in her story, her mother's mental illness simply is, and her father's state of inertia, like a calm day, shifts to movement without agenda as indifferently as a rising gale. Even the school children who exploit young Helen are treated with this kind of detachment. By creating these human and nonhuman constellations, the artist evokes nonjudgement, and she invites her readers to become compassionate witnesses with her.

SARAH, SARAH, COME OUT OF THE SHADOWS

London-based artist and scholar Sarah Lightman also draws memory objects and architectural structures to evoke her own as well as readers' compassion and deeper understanding in her graphic memoir, *The Book of Sarah*. Lightman's is a feminist reclamation of childhood memories and a coming to terms with her ambivalence about motherhood. She explains, "In *The Book of Sarah*, I write my life story intertwined with the narrative of Sarah, the matriarch from Genesis. Where Sarah's experiences of being a late mother seem to be saccharine sweet, the only acceptable response to motherhood in a patriarchal society, my text and images vocalize our struggle and anxiety" (Lightman). Lightman also writes about *The Book of Sarah* in her dissertation entitled *Dressing Eve and Other Feminist Reparative Acts in Women's Autobiographical Comics*. In it, she examines four artists—Miriam Katin, Sharon Rudahl, Bobby Baker, and herself—and how they borrow patriarchal stories and images from the *Bible* and transform them. Lightman explains:

I could never have realized *The Book of Sarah* without the works of Rudahl, Katin, and Baker; so, in *Dressing Eve*, the chapter about my own work is deliberately placed after theirs, an act succinctly described by British art historian Lisa Tickner in her essay "Mediating Generation: The Mother–Daughter Plot" as finding my "elective rather than natural mothers." Since Jewish traditional texts propose an almost exclusively male intellectual heritage, and the art historical canon emphasizes male creative lineage, I had to privilege my female intellectual and creative ancestry of choice. (Lightman)

Lightman's creation of this artistic-intellectual-canonical space for herself and for her work can be understood as a feminist act, and one of self-compassion. Educational psychologist Kristin Neff defines self-compassion as "an emotionally positive self-attitude that should protect against the negative consequences of self-judgment, isolation, and rumination (such as depression)" (85). The second point Neff makes, that self-compassion negates isolation and creates a sense of connection with the human (and, we might add, the posthuman) condition, is especially important here. For marginalized creators,

including women, the simple act of observing oneself thoughtfully and respectfully within a larger socio-environmental climate can be seen as a political act of reclamation and reparation. Sarah Lightman explains, “It was so important for me to write about my work. It was a feminist act, as someone writing commentary about my work, my book of the Bible, in a way that traditionally only men wrote commentary on the Bible. I needed to find a tone of voice both academic and personal to do this” (Lightman). It strikes me that female and sidelined cultural creators often seem compelled to analyze our own projects, thus blurring the line between art and academia, because we know that we must carve out a place for our work while we make it. Creating art or comics without having a place for those works to live would be like cooking an elaborate meal without anyone showing up to taste it. To quest for a sense of belonging within a family and culture that allows admission only very conditionally: what a treacherous proposition!

In Lightman’s *Book of Sarah*, she plays with concepts of I and other, presence versus absence. She sees herself through the eyes of others; Sarah shows up, then disappears again, like a flickering image on a screen, an old film. The artist looks for herself in the bodies and faces of her family, friends, and in the architecture, books, and objects surrounding herself and her kin. “Families are like glass,” she expounds, “You see yourself and reality through them. Constructing yourself...in an already established community” (*Book of Sarah* 35). Hers is a hide and seek game, a deeply self-reflective multiyear project of drawing herself and her life as sometimes found, sometimes lost again, fragmentarily appearing in connection with places, things, and people.



Sarah, Sarah, come out of the shadows.
This is your life. This is your time.

Figure 4 Image from *The Book of Sarah*, p. 231, by Sarah Lightman, © Sarah Lightman.
Reproduced with permission from Myriad Editions (www.myriadeditions.com).

Lightman's work is an extended conversation with younger versions of herself. Towards the end of the book, having confronted the fraught realities of intimate relationships and of motherhood, she urges, "Sarah, Sarah, come out of the shadows. This is your life. This is your time." This invocation, in a font created from the artist's handwriting, is placed beneath a detailed pencil drawing based on Rembrandt's 1656 etching of the Biblical story of Abraham entertaining God and two angels who have come to announce that Sarah would become pregnant within the year. Sarah (the *Old Testament* personage) timidly peers out from behind a doorway and Ishmael, Abraham's son from his servant, Hagar, plays with a strung bow (Figure 4). Sarah is well past childbearing age, so she laughs to herself when she hears this announcement. As art historian Iris Haist has observed, in Lightman's version, Sarah's expression is more grim than amused (Haist). Perhaps she is tired of waiting endlessly in the shadows; or maybe the prospect of motherhood does not spark joy in the elderly woman. This page in Lightman's graphic memoir

foreshadows a series of paintings she is working on now. She recreates Biblical stories with female characters, but she reimagines these women as contemporized feminist icons who don't love their domestic duties. Lightman's disidentification with Biblical characters is humorous and hard-hitting, expressive of conflicting needs—to belong and to assert herself.

DRAWING UNBELONGING

As I write this, Kay Sohini has just defended her graphic dissertation in English literature at State University of New York (SUNY), Stonybrook. Like the artists previously discussed here, she employs an autobiographical perspective. She says:

I remember being given the general advice during my undergrad/masters, that one should always avoid 'I' in academic writing. There is this assumption that removing that one word makes one's opinion automatically objective...which never really made sense to me. The personal is often anecdotal, yes, but that does not mean that it cannot be a way to understand the political. I am interested in using the personal as a way into the political. (Sohini)

Sohini's work deals with topics of racism, sexism, and ableism, and she uses the personal as a way into each of these topics. She explains that her own experiences of injustice give her access to a more profound understanding of these issues. Further, she wants her work to be clearly comprehensible to her readership. This is one of several reasons she conceived her dissertation, *Drawing Unbelonging*, as a graphic narrative. Sohini explains, "Recently, the momentum gathering around graphic scholarship also leads us to important questions surrounding what constitutes scholarship, what modes of delivery are deemed acceptable, by whom, and why, and why pushing against certain conventions can be a good thing" (Sohini). She believes that scholarship must be accessible to be useful, and credits such luminaries as Sarah Ahmed, Cathy Park Hong, and bell hooks for inspiring her to produce insightful public-facing work. Sohini also encountered Nick Sousanis's graphic dissertation while she was finishing her master's degree, and it inspired her tremendously.

Like Lightman and Blejerman, Sohini creates detailed panels and pages that most often feature architectural environments and common objects. She also incorporates data visualization to illustrate topics like climate change and economic and racial disparities. Sohini's work is complex and comprehensive. She re-members herself through the graphic narrative form, speaks to several urgent social justice-oriented topics, and expounds upon the method of making comics, and the peculiarities and advantages of the form, as she does so.

The young artist describes how she was diagnosed with clinical depression, borderline personality disorder, and then bipolar disorder (all in succession) in her late teens. In her chapter titled "Diagnosis," Sohini pushes back against the cultural attitude that mental illness can be traced back to a chemical imbalance without taking sociological and environmental factors into account. She looks at how comics make mental illness legible, partly due to the way in which graphic narratives treat time and space. In discussing her chapter, "The Peculiarity of Time," Sohini notes that drawing comics helped her understand the nonlinear nature of grief (pages from that chapter are reproduced as figure 5, below). The artist explains, "I investigate how scalar and temporal distortions enabled by the medium are conducive to producing image-textual narratives that delineate the elasticity of what I call *grief time*; where the linear directionality of time is interrupted by traumatic memories that hold us captive in the moment of

infliction” (Sohini). As I do in *Queen of Snails*, Sohini looks at transgenerational issues that affect mental health, as well as socio-environmental factors that should be considered. This unflattening of the besieged self is a self-compassionate reclamation, an insistence that the narrating “I” not be reduced to an easily legible persona, but that she instead be allowed to unfold multidirectionally and multidimensionally.



Figure 5 Pages from *Drawing Unbelonging*, ©Kay Sohini.

Sohini points out the incredible complexity inherent in the comics form. She cites numerous comics theorists—Sousanis, McCloud, Chute, Moore, Eisner—who have expounded on the unique ways in which the form is able to reveal the simultaneity of events occurring in time-space. Similarly, comics have the capacity to illuminate the intersectional identities of their creators, to *unflatten* the storyteller.

A KALEIDOSCOPE OF VIEWS

In the words of Sousanis, “We need a kaleidoscope of views, that convey both our dimensionality and dynamic capability. While standardization has its uses, conforming to another’s expectations is detrimental—if the shoe doesn’t fit, it’s hard to move freely” (146). Here, Sousanis fills three pages with hundreds of footsteps that illuminate the darkness like strings of twinkling holiday lights, a celebration of all our unique journeys, specific life experiences and intelligences. He writes, “Rather than funneling our time here down narrow paths, following a series of prescribed steps, let us open this out...and see what possibilities emerge when we author paths as uniquely our own as our feet themselves, in shoe sizes determined by the wearer” (Sousanis 147-148).

In unique ways, each of the graphic narratives I have discussed here address this theme of conformity and belonging versus freely expressing intersectional identities shaped by transgenerational, societal, and environmental influences. Sohini observes: “that belonging is contingent upon conforming can be understood by how it is mediated by acceptance, and acceptance is mediated by social relations, which, in

turn, are heavily dependent on the normative culture of any given geographical space” (Sohini). Lightman’s *Book of Sarah* is a feminist reclamation of her voice and vision, a recognition that her life as a woman, as an artist, and as a mother have too often been fettered by familial and societal expectations. Blejerman’s Lulu the Sensational sparkles as she brings a distressing family secret to life and discovers the brilliance of her own constellation. She quite literally climbs her way out of the rubbish bin in which her peers had confined her, and out of the wardrobe in which she had once found solace with her chocolates. At what point is the price of belonging too high?

At the end of *Queen of Snails*, I too draw a conclusion I could not have realized without first engaging in the journey of drawing so many pages, reimagining myself with a compassionate pen: “Somewhere between the embodied past and the future worlds of which we dream lies home—a process of continual reckoning and reinvention. I don’t need to belong to a particular religion, group, or nation in order to find purpose and contentment. I just need to keep being and unfolding, with an open heart and mind” (*Queen of Snails* 223). This is a political act, this loosing oneself from the fetters, from the flatness of academic, societal, and self-imposed limitations. This is a compassionate act, this redrawing—re-membering—of the self in cahoots with human and more-than-human actants.

In *Queen of Snails*, I point out that our (familial) histories, cultures, and biological constraints protectively cling to us the way a snail’s calcareous shell protects its soft body. The unassuming little snail is an apt metaphor for cultural humility; its slow, close-to-the-ground movement models a methodology for more compassionate and self-reflective research. Autobiographical comics offer a powerful method to bring complex ways of seeing and of being into contemporary scholarship. As more students and scholars recognize the potential of this form, graphic research will increasingly expand beyond works that seek to establish the legitimacy of the form within academia to works that tackle issues across disciplines from the humanities to the sciences.

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