Living in Ink: Embodiment in the Diary Comics of Julie Doucet and Gabrielle Bell

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Living in Ink: Embodiment in the Diary Comics of Julie Doucet and Gabrielle Bell

A Graphic Essay

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A-Term
Prologue

To write an academic thesis in the form of a graphic novel, or a “graphic essay,” is a specific choice. I chose this format partly because of the visual nature of my subject. The diary comic form is a hybrid of diaries and comics – a unique visual-textual extension of the author’s life. Diaries are inherently embodied in that the author imbues a tangible page “body” with her or his life writing; the diary comic, however, takes embodiment one step further in that the author gives shape to her or his lived experiences with a unique physicality involving text, image, and space. Diaries live textually, while comics – already a hybrid form of words and pictures – bring about embodiment visually and spatially; thus by combining diaries and comics, comic diarists explore and uncover new facets of experiences for readers in innovative ways.

Borrowing from Philippe Lejeune’s brief personal asides punctuating his scholarly articles in his essay collection, On Diary, as well as Scott McCloud narrating his own graphic essay, Understanding Comics, I decided to embody my thesis so I could replicate the same position as the authors I am writing about, Julie Doucet and Gabrielle Bell, in their complex process of internal reflection made external. Comic diarists can live a life of fuller possibility in their comics, whether they choose to reinvent themselves on the page or expose their own traumatic experiences to an audience that will be receptive in multiple sensory ways. Their comics portray worlds that each artist has full autonomy in creating, incorporating their impressions of the world into their own and adding commentary. For Bell and Doucet, I imagine diary comic-making as both a chore and an escape: it is therapeutic, but also involves the author confronting personal anxieties and revisiting painful moments. By placing an embodied version of myself as a narrator in their worlds, I am inhabiting their spaces, mimicking the process of text-exploration in an aestheti-patial context. One could try to accomplish this in a typed essay.
format with quoted images of specific panels, but it was inadequate for me to have an embodied engagement with Bell and Doucet’s work and not produce my findings in the form of a comic. While writing about a medium that is a marriage of text and image, I didn’t want to privilege words over pictures. Another benefit of embodying a graphic-essay form is that the medium allows for visual explanations of ideas that words cannot articulate. For example, in comics, one can graphically deconstruct the meaning behind an artist’s visual language and style, or reproduce images from a work while also adding visual commentary (also referred to as “double commentary”).

To quote sources in an embodied graphic essay, both primary and critical, I decided to cite both verbal quotes and comic panels visually. I “quote” Doucet and Bell by including images of their worlds, reproducing entire panels as well as replicating elements within them (such as text and specific objects), and I quote critics by drawing them onto my page as bodies in a conversation. In doing so, each artist and critic, as well as their work, is incorporated into the visual world of the graphic essay. As an embodied figure in my own essay, I can interact with the authors, have dialogues with academic theorists, and incorporate my own personal experiences and thought processes while working on this project.

In the process of creating comic, I was also learning from Doucet and Bell – both as an artist, and as a woman who occupies a similar space in society. My thesis argues that diary comic-making is a significant medium within feminism, in that comic diarists use tactics of embodiment and “doubling” to ease the tension between acting on their own desires as opposed to acting patriarchal expectations of them. These expectations split many women’s subjectivities in half, forcing them to struggle between clashing visions of identity in public and private realms. To heal this fragmentation – a feeling that many women are familiar with – comic
diarists live between their real-life persona and their essential “icon” persona. Their page is where they can work out and publicly reflect on past experiences, whether they were good, bad, They are publicly asserting their own experiences, giving themselves more of a say in a world that splits their subjectivity in half.
Wednesday, November 26th, 2014

My name is Emma Gregoire. My nickname is Gregs. I am writing about women's autobiographical diary comics, which is a subject that, for me, is very close to home.

Diaries and comic books have a lot in common. For example, they are both episodic—they construct narratives in fragments, offering readers periodic glimpses of a larger narrative that the reader must piece together between entries, or comic panels.

Scott McCloud, in his book Understanding Comics, discusses the importance of the "gutter" in graphic narratives: the blank space between panels on a comic page, where the narrative takes shape. The reader must "connect" the panels in order to make sense of the relationships between them.

The diary, similarly, asks the reader to imagine what may have happened in between diary entries. The diary is not only fragmented, it is fixed in what literary theorist Margo Culley calls "the continuous present." (20)

Naturally, then, comics and diaries mesh together nicely as a form of graphic literature. However, there is very little scholarship on diary comics, let alone diaries in general. In his work, French diary theorist Philippe Lejeune laments the undervalued and overlooked status of diary writing in the literary world.

We all know that people generally look down on the diary form. The diary is said to have no form of its own, to be marred from being facile, "The Art of Non-Artists." (182).
In his essay "The Diary on Trial," Lejeune discusses how the diary is regarded by critics as "unhealthy, hypocritical, cowardly, worthless, artificial, sterile, shriveling, feminine, etc." (147). Feminine: the ultimate insult, the ultimate detractor from the diary's literary legitimacy. Many other scholars project misogynistic misconceptions onto the diary as a gendered form—especially the young girl's diary—as a recreational activity, "like stitching or playing the piano: meek, sickly sentimental, and boring" (147).

Like diaries, comics have been similarly dismissed within literature circles; so female-authored diary comics are triply overlooked. Though autobiographical comics are gaining esteem, there is still a reigning preference for fictional "graphic novels." Feminist theorist Marjolijn Culley defends the diary tradition, usually upheld by women in her critical study of notable American women's diaries. One Day at a Time:

DIARIES KEPT BY WOMEN PROVIDE AN INCREDIBLE, EMOTIONALLY TRUTHFUL LENS INTO THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE AND FEMALE EXPRESSION (xii).

Culley also notes that men kept diaries in greater numbers than women until the mid-nineteenth century, but what caused this shift?

Actually, the diary as the arena of the "private inner life" is a relatively modern idea. Many eighteenth and nineteenth-century journals, or diaries, were semi-public documents, and those written by men, in particular, were especially filled with a sense of public purpose or audience. But over the course of the nineteenth century, as a massive shift in the public and private came to shape the relative lives of women and men, "those aspects of culture associated with the private became the domain of women" (Culley, 3).

The familiar modern-day diary and all of its accoutrements—locks, keys, secrets, and personification as the ideal, faithful confidant—is a phenomenon that sprouted from 19th-century romanticism, the industrial revolution, the "discovery" of the unconscious, and the emergence of the self as a dominant subject of study. It was a practice usually for wealthy white women of "refinement" and leisure, and as the "inner life" grew in importance, women looked to diaries to indulge in "full self-centeredness."*

* (Culley, 3).
Margo Culley identifies the act of embodiment that is inherent to the diary making process. "Embodiment" referring to the author's selection and arrangement of life details. This process of personal presentation raises important literary questions of motif, narrative, structure, persona, voice, and especially audience, as the presence or absence of an audience has a crucial influence over what is revealed.

For example, I can include myself in this graphic essay, but I can't get too personal because
1) It is not a "diary comic"
2) It is meant for an academic audience

Culley likens the diary to a mirror, before which the self stands apart to view the self. It is a paradox—
the diary is frequently a means to establish self-continuity, but this process involves a dislocation of
the self, or a "turning of subject into object" (10). This framework of
distance places the diarist in the middle of an extremely complex literary and
psychological process, one that can't be dismissed as simple self-indulgence.

I argue that in our culture, women are already "split" between themselves and
expectations of them.

The process of distanced self-examination, as we will call it, is the reason for
the diary's meandering structure. Culley and Lejeune both agree that the diary,
due to its "daily" nature, doesn't prioritize a narrative horizon, unlike
autobiography. What this means for the author's self-hood is that the text need
not present the protagonist as a fully actualized individual from the beginning.
Lejeune argues that the problem with autobiography is the beginning, "the
gaping hole of the origin," whereas for the diary, as a "living" text, it is the
ending—"the gaping hole of death" (202).

Literary critic Natalie Pendergast argues that the meandering plot of a traditional diary
resembles the genre coined by Ross Chambers, "loiterature." Literature relies on digression,
interruption, and episodicity, and its subject matter is oriented towards the everyday
and the trivial. This technique in a
diary honors the ongoing development of
the Self so that the reader is participating
in an evolving presentation of the author's
persona by "connecting the dots" between
entries. From a feminist perspective, "loiterly"
diary has particular significance for
marginalized authors, who are constantly
forced to negotiate between hegemony's
voice and their own voices.

As a visual medium as well, diary comics
explore further layers of embodiment in
their life-writing because the author herself
depicts herself as a body, and asserts her
perspective on her own lived experiences
in ways that aren't possible in a purely textual
diary. Diary comics' command an overtly
honest or confessional tone, but the
fact that they are published and cannot
divulge all of one's secrets—subverts
antiquated lines between public and private
and raises questions of performativity.
So, what distinguishes a diary comic from a graphic memoir, a textual diary, or any other form of autobiography?

**diary comic** *diərᵊˈkæmik] n. (pl. -comics) A unique genre of honest, episodic life writing that examines one's lived experiences through a critical lens. As a graphic and textual form, diary comics lend themselves to the technique of double commentary, both visual and verbal, that is not available through any other literary form. Created by women, diary comics constitute a self-made space for feminist writers to negotiate between the competing voices of patriarchal demands for women and their own personal desires, leaving room to address issues of identity, authorship, personal anxiety, trauma, and feminist discourse in their own lives. Periodic and continuous, the comic diary allows the self to be fully expressed as a constantly evolving personal in perpetual response to these doubled voices.

Many comic diarists, and women cartoonists in general, work out this "doubleness" on the comic page through embodiment. As a combination of two already embodied forms of literature, diary comics are a particularly apt space to discuss such issues. Feminist theorist Susan Gubar discusses the history behind women using their own bodies in their artwork as a dominant theme in female creativity. She argues that throughout Western history, sexuality has been a metaphor for sexuality. Women have been mythologized as "blank [virginal] pages on which men write with a phallic "pen."

This myth associates women's sexuality with "pliability, physicality, and subordination to a man's will, a narrative which leaves no room for women creators. Gubar argues that men invented this myth to deal with the humiliation that all life is actually created from the female body. In her essay "The Blank Page and Female Creativity" (1982), Gubar illustrates how women have resisted being "blank pages" by "filling their own pages in" through artwork involving their bodies, re-conceptualizing the idea that the closest medium of self-expression available to a woman is her body (and in a more general sense, her private life).

One cartoonist who writes diary comics (AKA a "comic diarist"), Julie Doucet explicitly addresses her identity inside a woman's body surrounded by men. In her book *My New York Diary*, the French-Canadian Doucet embodies her younger self while re-living traumatic experiences where men exploited her and her body. The "doubling" she feels between her inner autonomy and outside forces compelling her to act in a certain way are central to the fragmented, episodic narrative in which Doucet's present self conflates with her past self in diary form.

American cartoonist Gabrielle Bell creates diary comics in the classical sense, recording everyday events while also revisiting past experiences of "doubleness," also utilizing the episodic diary form. Bell's embodied diary comic "entries" are more frequently written soon after the events happen, which implies that her current self is always evolving, reinvented, and worked out on her diary page. Bell explores themes of personal reinvention in response to social anxiety and gender inequality.

*Gubar, 41.*

FOLLOW ME, AND WE'LL FURTHER EXPLORE THE WORK OF EACH OF THESE PIONEERING ARTISTS.
julie doucet
Julie Doucet seems to have come of age in one messy room after another, and revels in incorporating them onto her diary page. The way she portrays this mess is beautiful. But does she find it beautiful?

In My New York Diary, Doucet uses mess to expose and explore the sinister sides of the men in her life during her younger years.

But by drawing all of these spaces herself, Doucet reconstitutes them as her own. In doing so, Doucet utilizes a sort of double-commentary. Though the men she meets don’t seem threatening at first glance, Doucet exposes their inner creepiness, duplicitous nature, and disrespect for her as a woman through visual cues, such as the mess in their homes.

In recording her own narrative, Doucet is able to critique and expose these men who altered her life by taking control of their representation.

COME WITH US!

WASHINGTON HEIGHTS
Julie's account of her "first time" sets the scene for her string of diary entries (and creepy men) to follow as it depicts the experience as terrifying, but visually traumatic. At 17, Julie follows her friend Nathalie from her all-girls convene school to meet Nathalie's older boyfriend.

But Julie empathizes with herself at that age. When she depicts herself in her own room, it's clean—she's even drinking a glass of "milk."

This mild clutter is nothing compared to later in the book, as we watch her grow more accustomed to greater amounts of mess (including those messes that are self-imposed).

After a gross kiss from Nathalie's "boyfriend," Julie ends up getting pressured to go home with a much older man under the guise of "looking at his paintings."

The fact is, the older man put Julie in a position where she couldn't possibly say no, and never said yes—which was a violation of her agency and bodily integrity. Not once does he ask for her consent, and one could infer that Julie was not properly educated about sex at her convene school...

As Julie re-traces the events from 10 years before she is writing the comic, it's clear that she has become more aware of her power dynamic with this man and his equally creepy friends, who are socializing with young Catholic girls and taking advantage of their naivety.

"I just got out of the hospital last week but I'm fine now. Oh! Uh... Good, good! You know, I'm fine. I still can get it up, no problem!"
After this first sexual encounter, Julie feels free. Here, she mistakes her own submission and rape by this man for a moment of self-discovery, which Ducet conveys by representing herself as a blank silhouette, walking into the distance.

This moment brings to mind Cixous's essay on "The Blank Page." Perhaps here, Ducet is acknowledging that her younger self, at this stage, is playing into her socialized role of the woman as a negation—an embodied page for male authors to inscribe. Regardless of whether Julie chose to play into this role, she feels empty—she visually equates her body with a blank space.

Yet it seems that from a more recent perspective Ducet is writing from. Ducet is actually anxious about empty spaces. She rarely leaves any blankness on the page, as if she were afraid of negative space. This is especially true of her book 365, in which she writes a page-long comic every day for a year.

14.10.14 Thrus. In 365 Ducet writes about every small thing that occurs in her life. Every day, and each page is filled to the border, like as she records things she eats, people she knows, the sky. She doesn't write down any detail, but just the essence of each day. She asks, "What is it that I don't know that I know?"

This negation of the body starkly contrasts with the strong presence of Julie's physicality elsewhere in her New York Diary, which is openly sexual and unapologetic.

**JULIE'S PAGE IS AS EMBODIED AS HER "SELF," AND THUS SHE IMBUES EVERY INCH OF THE PAGE WITH HER IDENTITY, ESSENCE, AND ENERGY; THE SPACE SHE CREATES NOT ONLY BECOMES HER OWN, IT BECOMES HER.**

**EVEN THE OBJECTS ON HER PAGE SEEM ANIMATED—OR EMBODIED.**

*Having her toilet mishap!*

*Answering the phone during sex.*

*Somedays her body bursts even leave the panel wall.*
In one strip called "Heavy Flow," Julie is on her period and can't find tampons, so she turns into a bulging, giant period monster who floods the streets of New York City with menstrual blood.

In the whole book, it is rife with references to menstruation, blood, sex, nakedness, guts, and surreal violence. It's also full of hilarious scenes and casual perversions of everyday events. But Julie manages to handle every issue with wit and unabashed zest.

In another strip, "My Conscience is Bugging Me" (1989), Julie introduces us to her conscience—a woman who walks next to her on the street whose nose is falling off, making loud comments at men and farting in the faces of Strangers.

In one strip, "My Conscience is Bugging Me" (1989), Julie introduces us to her conscience—a woman who walks next to her on the street whose nose is falling off, making loud comments at men and farting in the faces of Strangers.

Though Julie is afraid of this side of herself in public, her embodied "Conscience" is able to live in full form on Julie's comic page. As she articulates at the end of the strip, Julie and her conscience learn to live in peace together, and love each other—a union between her public and private selves through comics.
Thinking back to Gubar's essay, Doucet is participating in the tendency for women to use and manipulate their bodies in their artwork for creative self-expression throughout Western history. First, many women experience their own bodies as the only available medium for their art, with the result that the distance between the woman artist and her art is often radically diminished; second, one of the primary and most resonant metaphors provided by the female body is blood, and cultural forms of creativity are often experienced as a painful wounding.

I agree with your first point, but I believe Doucet in particular subverts your framework of "artwork-as-blood." Her body plays a huge role in her work, but her comic are too satirical to be experienced as a "bleeding wound." I believe Doucet asserts herself as an active critic of her life and her surroundings...

But in My New York Diary, Doucet's authorial perspective has become more nuanced with age. She still infuses her page with her body and her identity; however, she has become more retroactively critical of her past self—she critiques the people she surrounded herself with, the spaces she was drawn into, and the choices she made based on the men in her life. She always acknowledges how her body is treated as a woman's body, but a diarist can only write from her (or his) current perspective. In that sense, as a woman artist who is constantly growing and changing, Julie is still embodying the pages of My New York Diary with her present self.

I believe Doucet's critical feminist perspective has roots in her earlier work, but I get the sense that her bodily subjected matter of the past fits better into the "bleeding artwork" model of women's creativity. At that time, she was a victim of many men who treated her poorly.

...rather than a passive victim who can't help but hemorrhage her life story.

Hmm yes...very interesting.

Even the way she draws her boyfriend in New York changes. Compared to the skinny and narcissistic way he is portrayed in Doucet's work from 1999, there are several stories from the early 90s where he is presented as a much more sympathetic character, because she is still in love with him.

Thus, in her more recent work, it seems that Doucet is either working on or has finished working out her past tensions between expectation and desire that still linger.

The END
Girls
July 1998

Meow!
Her string of emotionally abusive relationships with men after this encounter play out in a predictable way according to trauma theory, as the men in her life have not only been a source of pain and terror, but also a source of relief from that pain. Sandra Bloom calls this phenomenon “trauma bonding.”

For young Julie, it seems that it is hard for her to engage in relationships that are not based on an abuse of power because this particular dynamic feels right to her. Thus, her trauma does her to “repetition compulsion” until she gives words and meaning to these events. Though Bloom argues that the main care is counseling, I believe fleshing her stories into comic strips helps her to work out what happened. If she is not remembering exactly what happened, she is re-tracing and solidifying her lived experiences with all these grief and confusion-inducing men.

This traumatic re-processing is also a site for potential double commentary. The mind often goes blank during disturbing experiences because it is so shocked— it doesn’t know how to handle trauma. Thus, Julie can illustrate what happened with her own imagery. During her “first time,” if she can’t verbally articulate how creepy this man was, she can draw it— thus mocking him by re-appropriating his visual representation (and the dumb things he said).

At His Place...
In the case of Louis, she even titles the story about him "A LESSON". Doucet clearly writes from a reflective perspective. It isn't regretful in that she justifies her train of thought at the time. Instead, she graphically conveys the lessons she has learned about how men can be abusive and disrespectful of women's personhood and personal desires, as well as take advantage of the socialization of women to be passive and agreeable.

Thus, Julie uses comics as a medium for their potential for double commentary, both visual and textual. But she uses autobiographical diary comics to reflect the constant tension she, Gabrielle Bell, and many other women face—choosing (or not) between what they want to do, and what men want them to do. Diary comics let Doucet claim authorship over her own life in a world where men try to control everything else. She writes her life, examines it, and critiques it episodically, as if she is peering into her past selves in a museum. Each panel is a pane of glass.

**MUSÉE DE DOUCET**
GABRIELLE BELL
One notable thing about Gabrielle Bell is that she is constantly thinking about her work.

When I was fortunate enough to meet Gabrielle at her apartment, she came to the door and was very sweet and welcoming.

I was so shocked that the interview was even happening at all, knowing how shy and private she claims to be in her comics (which for me is one of the most relatable elements in her work). She even signed one of her emails to me "Gab," which I reacted to with awe, incredulity, and joy.

If you have trouble, call
See you tomorrow at 7!

-Gab
She was sick, so we sat on opposite sides of her kitchen table. She really didn't want me to get sick because of her. She made us both fancy chamomile tea with Jameson and orange and lemon slices.

It's very painful for me to go back and listen to the recording of our conversation and hear all of my nervous laughter. At the time it was too surreal... I thought I couldn't possibly be sitting where I was.

At the beginning of our interview, Gabrielle told me about a crazy story that had just happened in front of her—a mother mouse had just frantically saved three of her babies from underneath Gabrielle's burning oven. The mother scampered across the front doorway from oven to radiator in order to rescue each one.

This led to a conversation about whether motherhood is instinctual, the burden of saving someone from a burning building, and Ratsabouille. But the point is, this anecdote is an example of how Bell is able to find sources of inspiration for her comics everywhere in her daily life, and always relate them back to her underlying themes of feminism, social anxiety, and everyday tensions.

And unlike Doucet in My New York Diary, Gabrielle works much more in the present. The mouse drama could easily have appeared in her book The Voyeurs, an autobiographical anthology of everyday diary vignettes—many written very soon or immediately after the events take place, out of compulsion or necessity.

In The Voyeurs, she writes mini-narratives as "public diary" entries—her content is honest and vulnerable, but self-aware in that she knows it will be published. Bell addresses this in-between duality that she occupies in the forward to her other diary comic anthology, Truth is Fragmenting:

When a diary is public, it becomes a different thing. You no longer do it for yourself, you do it for us, the readers. Your life and self become "material," and you learn to take yourself less seriously. You make yourself accountable. And then, when you find yourself editing and rewriting and twisting the truth here and there, and even living differently than you ordinarily would in order to serve the "story," is it even a diary anymore?
Bell works every day, living partly in the world of her comics—always sketching and looking for material, with her eyes and ears peeled for a good story to re-tell.

As an artist who inhabits her work, and whose work is so inseparable from her real life, Bell navigates the tangible world at a critical distance. And while she is around other people, though she is present, she is often found hanging out and drawing at the same time.

She addresses this in *The Voyeurs* during a conversation with her friend Tony, who refers to her as a "place that's between places, the thing that transports you to other places".

"When you come over here it's like a ghost is passing through."

Yet the distance between herself and her work is diminished the more we read. She inhabits the real world and her comics simultaneously, in that she is always re-living her recent experiences in her brain and conscious of how they will appear on the page.

I argue that her work has led her to merge her "doubled" selves—her public tangible self and her private, embodied "iconic" self. Yet her private self in her diaries also takes on the performativity of acting in public, just through a different medium once the diary comic is published. Is this a contradiction?

Walking Around Greenwich, thinking about what I'm thinking. I spend a lot of time composing, rewriting and editing anecdotes for Ren...
Judith Butler may be able to help us out with this question of the “performance” of an ‘authentic’ self. In her essay, “Performativity is a social construct with positive consequences, thus it is a performance comprised of a series of acts’. But the reality of it is performative – it requires actions to become actualized.

Okay so... Does self in her comics is actually a performance all along? The personal self is the political self? Can your gender argument even be applied to the self?

I DON’T KNOW... I’M ONLY A DRAWING OF JUDITH BUTLER.

Gabrielle also talked to me about how she experiences a distance from her life in the moment, but also feels vulnerable when her comics are released in a book or online because many times, the distance between her and her comics is almost nonexistent. This complicates things.

DO YOU FEEL A KIND OF DISTANCE FROM YOURSELF DURING THIS REINVENTION?

YEAH... SOMETIMES I’M HAVING AN EXPERIENCE AND I’LL BE THINKING ABOUT HOW I WOULD DO IT AS A COMIC AT THE SAME TIME. IF SOMEBODY’S TELLING ME A STORY, EVEN A SAD STORY, I’LL BE VERY INTERESTED—BUT IN THE KIND OF EXPLOITATIVE WAY. BUT IN MY WORK, ESPECIALLY MY JULY DIARIES, I DON’T FEEL DISTANT FROM IT AT ALL BECAUSE THEY’RE SO IMMEDIATE AND I DO THEM EVERY DAY. AND IT’S ALWAYS HARD TO POST MY COMICS BECAUSE THEY’RE SO CLOSE TO ME. IT’S PAINFULLY EMBARRASSING, BUT I JUST HAVE TO KEEP DOING IT.

Bell’s relationship with her in her comics is a complex one, as well as her relationship to her past. In her essay “Traces of Subjectivity: The Embodied Author in the work of Ariel Schrag,” literary critic Natalie B. Pendergast examines the intimate comics (though not called “diaries”) of Ariel Schrag, who happens to be one of Gabrielle’s closest friends. According to Pendergast, a comic diarist’s self-made “icon” projects her or his “essential character.”

SCHRAG’S VOLUMES COULD BE CATEGORIZED AS VISUAL AND PERFORMANCE DIARIES THAT MEDIATE THE AUTHOR’S LIFE STORY THROUGH AN ICONIC CHARACTER...WHO PRESERVES HER EXPRESSIVE GESTURES...


* (Pendergast, III).
For both Schrag and Bell, their work slowly becomes their consciousness as they continue to record their evolution as characters and as people. This is why diary comics are so important for an artist like Bell—they prioritize the ongoing development of the autobiographical writer, rather than resting on the notion that someone is already a fully-formed individual. The diary form, over the autobiography, honors the self as a process, especially for women who must deal with competing patriarchal and personal voices telling them what is "right.”

In this way, the page for Bell becomes a space to negotiate these two competing voices—one telling her to live her life a certain way, which she may have internalized, and her instinct telling her to reject patriarchal ideas of a happy and fulfilling life.

While Julie Doucet’s comics dwell on the past and revise it in order to heal the effects of this “doubling,” Bell tucks the past away, always trying to seal herself in the present. She has always been figuring out her life, but she is also figuring out herself.

I JUST THOUGHT BY AGE I’D HAVE MORE THINGS FIGURED OUT.

WELL YOU’RE ALWAYS LEARNING. IT'S NOT LIKE YOU STOP.

I JUST ENJOY WHAT I’VE LEARNED.

YOU HAVE TO ENJOY IT ON THE FLY!

In The Voyeurs, this inner doubling is illustrated in a moment on page 65, where Gabrielle is pressuring herself diligently to work on comics while she admits to feeling distracted by almost everything else. She experiences an inner split between what feels natural for her to do and what she thinks she should do.

And no matter how psychologically intimate her diaries feel, it gradually becomes clear how many autobiographical details Bell leaves out of her comics. Moments where she reveals her past are rare—one of the few is called “Hit Me” (2006), in Cecil and Jordan in New York Stories, where she unpacks memories of childhood ostracization.

I have to dig into a place where I absolutely don’t want to go...

NO NO NO! I DON'T WANNA!

IT'S THE ONLY WAY OUT OF IT IS THROUGH IT!

*What my yoga teacher said

Hey Gabri-Spell... Nice outfit!

Did your grandma buy it for you at K-Mart?
When I asked Gabrielle where she draws the line in terms of what is too personal to include in her comics, she said that she wasn’t comfortable dealing with sex, and she didn’t want to hurt or offend anybody. But it also seems like she wants to erase her past and always create a newer present, rather than Dovets approach—to rewrite her past in order to deal with the present.

Instead, she weaves an elaborate web of truth, honesty, fiction, and surrealism, she alludes to having a persistent anxiety and in one comic, “demons” that haunt her while she runs. She tells us that she is escaping some kind of dark past, but she never says what may be at its center. Perhaps she is still trying to figure out where her “demons” are coming from, as we all are. Or perhaps it is therapeutic enough to admit their existence.

I don’t run for my physical health, though that’s a lucky side effect. I run because I’m tortured inside. The violence in depression, the disappointment, the frustration, the shame, the helplessness against time.

And even though Bell is reluctant to discuss her childhood, it seems like there may be something there. As Bell talks about adapting Valeria Solanas’ radical feminist text, The SCUM Manifesto, she mentions how her mother, though a great thinker and wonderful person, was not a conventional “mom” figure.

MY MOTHER DIDN’T TEACH ME TO COOK OR SEW OR TO DO MY HAIR OR HOW TO TALK TO BOYS. SHE WAS MORE INTERESTED IN READING DIFFICULT BOOKS AND THINKING. AS A HOMEMAKER SHE UNWORKED AND SHE PUSHED ME INTO THE WORLD NEITHER A GIRL OR A BOY, JUST A BABY, A WANDERING, IGNORANT THING, FORCING ME TO INVENT MYSELF AS I WENT ALONG. I AM DEEPLY GRATEFUL FOR THAT.

This is a very charged moment, where Gabrielle seems to see the similarities between her and her mother—and she examines herself from a distance. Her mother mentions that, as a feminist from an early age, she felt like there was something wrong with her—something she needed to hide, perhaps behind a man.

It is interesting for Bell to bring up the idea of “hiding” here. In our conversation, she mentioned that she didn’t want to include sex, her body, or things like menstruation in her comics because a) it doesn’t feel comfortable for her and b) she wants her work to be taken as seriously as a man’s work, so it can be relatable to readers of all genders.

I’VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT HOW WHITE MEN’S CREATIVE WORK IS CONSIDERED UNIVERSAL IN THE COMICS WORLD TOO, BUT WOMEN’S COMIC ABOUT THEIR BODIES ARE OTHERED DUE TO HOW PATRIARCHY TREATS WOMEN IN GENERAL.

She has begun to rethink that, but for a while this was how she operated—as a woman spy in a man’s industry. She has gotten sexist comments like, “Oh, are you at this festival with your boyfriend?” or been told that she should try writing children’s books.

WHEN YOU HIDE ALL YOUR LIFE, THERE IS A DISCONNECT BETWEEN YOU AND THE WORLD.

No, I know what you mean. Julie Orzech says how does that—she includes her body. Do you know that strip “Heavy Flow” where she becomes a giant period monster? It’s so funny, and periods are such a critical part of life! They deserve universal importance.

Yeah, no one talks about that stuff! Julie does it so well... and tastefully. I wish I could... Part of it is that I don’t feel comfortable. I don’t know, maybe how I’ll make a mental note to make more comics about periods.

No, I didn’t mean it like that! You should do whatever you want!
Unlike Doucet's treatment of the body Bell's body in the text is much more invisible—her line work is disconnected, the topic of sex is rarely discussed, and she divulges little about her bodily habits. Instead, emotional and circumstantial minutiae in her daily life, tied to the daillness in her use of the diary comic form, account for the greater part of her life's fabric which she chooses to publish.

Notice how many of her lines don't connect, like she wants to disappear.

Bell seems to tackle the issue of blankness on a page in her entry entitled "Whiteout" (148), where she reflects on the arduousness of writing her own comics. Though this passage doesn't address Gubar's ideas specifically, it carries some sly commentary.

In other news, there's a tremendous blizzard here in New York. The whole city is shut down. So I put on my long johns, my white pants, my white coat and white hat and went for a walk.

I walked along the West Side and crossed the Triborough Bridge into Queens, where an albino offered me a glass of milk. We went to see Rockhenge's erased De Koonig at the MoMA.

Perhaps "Whiteout" is an act of resistance against blankness, in that she dances around it. She creates a space where she can bring her doubled selves—one socially anxious and one who is comfortable and honest about that anxiety—together in a union, all while still being able to "disappear" to where she is comfortable.

But stronger than the guilt was the desire to hide myself away from the world.
Her comics are very funny, and she uses wit and irony in the arcs of her stories—especially those in surreal or fantastical settings. She often looks to humor in order to think about her position in society as a woman, and how she interacts in public. In a strip entitled "What the," a guy on the street accosts Gabrielle of hitting his car on her bike. And she flees, feeling slightly guilty and haunted by him ever since. It's unclear whether she did it or not, which is the joke.

The point is that he'll never catch her, and neither will we. She wins.

So, even though Bell's comics seem relatively neat with clean forms, she still feels compelled to fill up her own diary page and exert as much control over her life narrative as she can. I believe that the force behind this habit comes from Gubai's ideas about female creativity—it is often rooted in a fear of blankness or emptiness as a woman, and a fear of the erasure of one's own agency. Bell confronts that emptiness by filling up her page with her life and her humor, thus embodying it. But perhaps for Bell, claiming that space is a constant struggle given internalized modesty (or blankness), her discrete linework leaves the emptiness partially visible, and her embodied parts partially "invisible."

When I left her apartment, I asked Gabrielle Bell if I could give her a hug very awkwardly. How could I have done such a thing, when I know how she feels about hugs?

And lately I've realized whenever I'm hugged, I retreat somewhere inside myself and wait for it to be over.

Along with her "disappearance," Bell's style is also very minimal. Her verbal language and her visual language are given equal weight, while it seems that many other cartoonists rely more on aesthetics to tell their stories. We discussed this in the interview, and I had an a-ha moment.

HOW DO YOU NAVIGATE THE SPACE OF YOUR PAGE?

I GUESS I JUST TRY TO FILL UP THE SPACE, WHICH IS NOT NECESSARILY THE BEST APPROACH...

BUT I THINK IT'S SOMETHING I PICKED UP FROM JULIE DOUCET.

OH REALLY... (!)

YEAH, IT'S SORT OF A NERVOUS TICK I HAVE, I TRY NOT TO. I SHOULD BE MORE AWARE OF LEAVING EMPTY SPACE.

When I was in high school, I kept private agenda diaries that were part writing, part drawing, and to a lesser extent, due dates for homework assignments. When I would write, I would write down every small thought I had, and the more I was going through something, the more I filled up the page. It was the one place where I felt I could truly vent. It's embarrassing to be reminded of them. When I told Bell this, she said that she used to do the same thing.
CONCLUSION

Sunday, December 7th, 2014

So, we looked at how Gabriele Bell and Julie Doucet write diary comics that each individually help them "heal" the doubleness they experience in a world that tells women what to do.

Individually, through a process of embodiment, they each create "doubled" 2-D worlds that both incorporate and resist doubleness.

Both artists embody themselves on the page, occupying a self-created world that constitutes their impressions of the tangible world. Comic diarists embody their texts (and graphics) through their bodily movements in the comic-making process, their choice of visual language, their autonomy over what they create, their handwriting, and their style of self-representation. When bits of the real world enter this personal space, it is usually within a critical context.

Finding Wholeness in Diary Comics

They have a conversation.

Public self AND/OR

Private self

Alignment of doubled selves

Ideal self

The result is a synthesis of preexisting, discordant selves.

The autonomous process of diary comic creation, I believe, is a form of feminist resistance. As a form that evolved from two marginalized genres, diaries as "women's" writing and comics as a trivialized, countercultural art form, diary comics have historical significance in opposition to the dominant hegemonic heteropatriarchal agenda.
And one needn't focus solely on women-identified women's issues. Diary comics as an accessible literary and art form have tremendous potential as an empowering tool for anyone to cope with sexism and trauma. They acknowledge the fluidity of the self that is permeable to dominant cultural behaviors, while giving value to subjective, lived experiences over "factual" written narratives. In a post-modern way, they question how facts are really defined in an age where facts (physical and emotional) are constantly disputed. Diary comics' narrative power lies in their partnership of forms—the "honest" diary text, and the graphic force of comics that can illustrate ineffable emotions and attitudes. They beg to be shared between individuals who can bond over similar feelings across differences. Like zines and third-wave 1990s riot grrl culture, diary comics could be the pivotal medium that defines a contemporary generation of feminist community building.

DIARY COMICS DESERVE MORE RECOGNITION!

AUTHORSHIP!!

DEAR DIARY DOWN WITH PATRIARCHY!

COMMUNITÉ!

AND WE CAN'T FORGET DOUCET AND BELL ARE NOT THE ONLY TWO COMIC DIARISTS—LYNDA BARRY, ARIEL SCHRAG, ANNIE MOK, AND DEBBIE DRECHSHEL HAVE ALL Experimented With THE MEDIUM!

JOIN THE MOVEMENT!

Emme Gregoline 2014
Bibliography


