ARTICLE

Drawing the Body In: A Comic Essay on Trans Mobility and Materiality

KC Councilor

Department of Communication, Media, and Screen Studies, Southern Connecticut State University, New Haven, Connecticut, USA

ABSTRACT

This comic essay engages trans embodiment and temporality, representation and identity, passing, and drawing as a form of thinking. Although uncommon, comics have been established in academia as a genre worthy of literary study as well as scholarly inquiry in the broader humanities, social sciences, and the arts (Bukatman, 2012; Chute, 2010; Howard & Jackson, 2013; Cox, 2016). Recently, scholars have also studied the use of comics making as an analytical tool in qualitative research (Katz, 2013; Sousanis, 2015; Weaver-Hightower, 2013; Flowers, 2017; Henningsen, 2017; Johnson, 2018). This comic essay invites communication scholars to consider transgender embodiment and mobility through a visual medium that can illustrate complex problems of precarity, passing, and the crossing of both material and symbolic borders and boundaries. As a genre, comics allow for dense and layered information to be conveyed very quickly, and its affordances lend themselves well to portraying the tensions in and between trans and gender-nonconforming experiences. The speech bubble and the thought bubble, for example, can juxtapose in a single panel what two characters are saying to one another and what they are thinking and feeling as well as how they are interacting and communicating non-verbally. This graphic scholarship demonstrates why the unique genre of comics is particularly apt in rendering instances of microagression or passing. I argue that comics as a form enable a shift from abstract concepts back into the body, the materiality of which can get lost in academic discourse.

KEYWORDS

Comic essay; embodiment; mobility; transgender

CONTACT KC Councilor councilork1@southernct.edu Department of Communication, Media, and Screen Studies, Southern Connecticut State University, 501 Crescent Street, New Haven, CT 06515, USA.

© 2019 The Organization for Research on Women and Communication
DRAWING THE BODY IN: A COMIC ESSAY
ON TRANS MOBILITY & MATERIALITY by KC COUNCILOR

ACADEMIC ARTICLES AREN’T USUALLY COMICS.

BUT THIS ONE IS.

I'M DRAWING IT AS A COMIC
BECAUSE IT'S THE
BEST WAY I KNOW
TO REPRESENT THE COMPLEXITIES
OF MOVING THROUGH THE WORLD

AS A TRANSGENDER PERSON.
I'M GOING TO USE MY EXPERIENCES
AS AN EXAMPLE—TO EXPLORE
BIG IDEAS AND ASK QUESTIONS

NOT TO MAKE UNIVERSAL CLAIMS
ABOUT TRANS EXPERIENCE.

COMICS ARE A TRANS
PROJECT OF DISIDENTIFICATION.

BEAR WITH ME.
I SHOULD POINT OUT THAT I AM A TRANS ACADEMIC WHO DRAWS COMICS

YOU WOULDN'T KNOW IT FROM MY PICTURE

I DIDN'T START COMING OUT AS TRANS UNTIL THE SUMMER BEFORE MY 35TH BIRTHDAY

HONEY... I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT THIS EVERY DAY FOR YEARS. I WANNA TRANSITION

I'M WITH YOU, BOO, JUST DON'T TURN INTO A JERK

NOW I COME OUT ALL THE TIME.

AND I DIDN'T START DRAWING UNTIL I WAS 33

WHAT TRANSPRISES

IT STARTED WITH ONE WORKSHOP WHICH LED TO 4 YEARS OF STUDY;

LYNDA BARRY TAUGHT A WORKSHOP FOR TRANS AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING PEOPLE

I WANTED TO SEE WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF WE GOT A ROOM OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE TOGETHER TO WRITE STORIES—NOT ABOUT BEING TRANS, AND IT WAS INCREDIBLE

THIS MAY SOUND CRAZY BUT IT WAS THROUGH DRAWING MYSELF OVER AND OVER THAT I REALIZED

I STILL CAN'T FULLY EXPLAIN HOW IT HAPPENED

I WAS TRANS AND WANTED TO TRANSITION.
ELISABETH EL REFAIE WRITES, the “requirement to produce multiple drawn versions of one’s self necessarily involves an intense engagement with embodied aspects of identity.”

DRAWING COMICS IS A VERY GOOD WAY TO OWN YOUR EXPERIENCES INSTEAD OF SUFFERING FROM THEM.

BEFORE

YOU’RE A GIRL—YOU KNOW THAT, RIGHT?

HEY HONEY, HOW WAS YOUR NIGHT?

AFTER

YOU’RE A GIRL—YOU KNOW THAT, RIGHT?

HEY HONEY, HOW WAS YOUR NIGHT?

MAKING A COMIC ABOUT IT

CAN’T WAIT TO SHOW YOU!
ON PASSING

BECOMING A WHITE MAN IN THE TRUMP ERA IS A MIND BENDER

BECAUSE HOW I AM AS A MAN IS BASED ON 35 YEARS OF LIVING AS A WOMAN.

EXCUSE ME, I DON'T WANT TO STARTLE YOU

OH GOD

OH

THANKS

AFTER THE WHITE SUPREMACIST TIKI TORCH DESCENT ON CHARLOTTESVILLE, I COULD FEEL THE THREAT MY PRESENCE WAS IN THE WORLD EVEN MORE STRONGLY.

ALL OF IT?

TAKING THE TOP OFF

IT LOOKS TOO MUCH LIKE THOSE ALT RIGHT JERKS

NO NEO-NAZI WOULD SPORT A RAINBOW RIBBON, RIGHT?

THE QUESTION IS STILL: HOW DO I MARK MY WHITE MALE BODY AS SAFE TO WOMEN, PEOPLE OF COLOR, QUEERS, COMBINATIONS OF THE THREE?
I COME OUT ALL THE TIME.

SO HOW DID YOU TWO MEET?

WHEN MY PARTNER AND I GOT TOGETHER, WE WERE BOTH NAMED KATIE!

ONE THING YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ME IS THAT I'M TRAN.

COMM 200 DIGITAL COMMUNICATION DAY #1

I DIDN'T USE TO HAVE TO COME OUT - MY BODY DID IT FOR ME. PEOPLE READ ME AS QUEER.

IF I DON'T SAY ANYTHING, I'M READ AS A CIS WHITE MAN

WHICH IS OFTEN EXCRUCIATING BECAUSE IT'S THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING TREATED LIKE A FULL HUMAN BEING

YOU HAVE AN IMPORTANT OPINION.

ME?

YES, SO GLAD YOU'RE HERE. WHAT DO YOU THINK?

SOMETHING SO MANY PEOPLE I LOVE DON'T EXPERIENCE.
PASSING AS A CIS WHITE MAN MEANS BEING READ AS "BORN A MAN, ALWAYS A MAN"; THIS IS SIMPLY NOT THE CASE, NOT MY EXPERIENCE.

C. RILEY SNORTON WRITES ABOUT THE PSYCHIC LIFE OF PASSING. IN "NOT PASSING" AS WHO YOU KNOW YOURSELF TO BE, THE EXPERIENCE OF DISIDENTIFICATION CAN ACTUALLY REAFFIRM WHO YOU ARE.

THESE DAYS SOMETIMES EVEN PEOPLE I KNOW DON'T RECOGNIZE ME

OH, HEY! HOW'RE YOU DOING?

GOOD FOOD

FINE

WORK ACQUAINTANCE

THEY RECOGNIZE ME AS A DUDE, BUT DON'T RECOGNIZE ME AS MYSELF.

GOOD FOOD

WHEN I PASS AS A CIS MAN, I DISIDENTIFY WITH THAT. I WANT TO BE RECOGNIZED IN FULL.

AND STILL, SOMETIMES PASSING IS A SWEET RELIEF.

GOOD FOOD

OH NO NO NO NO! I WASN'T HITTING ON YOU! WE KNOW EACH OTHER!!

LOOKS LIKE IT'S JUST YOU AND ME TONIGHT, BUD

YUP
COMICS & THE BODY

QUEER AND FEMINIST SCHOLARS CHALLENGE THE IDEA THAT THE RESEARCHER IS SEPARATE FROM THEIR WORK.

DRAWING COMICS DEMANDS THAT WE STAY CLOSE.

TOO OFTEN, TRANS SCHOLARSHIP DOESN'T ACTUALLY DEAL WITH TRANS PEOPLE'S EVERYDAY LIVES.

Ebony Flowers writes, “Corporeal responsiveness in research matters, particularly in studies that directly involve people, because empirical knowledge is also created through embodiment, affect, and movement.”

COMICS CAN GET US THERE.

Nick Sousanis writes, “Drawing is a way of seeing and thus, a way of knowing, in which we touch more directly the perceptual and embodied processes underlying thinking.”
WOMEN'S STUDIES IN COMMUNICATION

*Graphic journalist Joe Sacco has said, “It was repulsive doing that book [Footnotes in Gaza]... Drawing is a weird thing because you just inherit everything you draw and that means you sort of have to appreciate holding up a bat to hit someone over the head. You have to appreciate holding up your arm to stop the bat and you kind of have to go through the motions of it...”*

*When you're drawing, you can't put yourself out of it. To get it better you have to be in it. Drawing is harder than hearing it. Drawing is a lot harder than being there."

"The soldier hit the first one on his head."

"Now the three of us are entering the school."

"The second one escaped."

"I made like this."

"And I jumped over the ditch."

"There was a soldier inside. With a heavy stick."

"When you went in you couldn't see this soldier."

"Now it's my turn."

"Drawing means relating deeply to your subject; it can't stay abstract or separate from you. You are implicated."
Since I started this comic, the U.S. policy of family separation and the zero tolerance immigration policy has come square into the mass public consciousness.

How can I make a comic about precarity, about mobility, without talking about this mass trauma? About trans experience. Without talking about Roksana Hernandez, a 33-year-old trans woman who died in ICE custody in May 2018, who was HIV-positive, whose trans-ness forced her migrations, transphobic violence swinging her from the trauma of forced migration to the trauma of incarceration?
THE SYSTEMS THAT CREATE BORDERS AND THEN PROHIBIT CROSSINGS — OF NATION, GENDER — IMPACT ALL OF US.

THOSE WHO LIVE IN DEFIANCE OF THESE SYSTEMS (BECAUSE THEIR SURVIVAL DEMANDS IT) EXPERIENCE THE MOST VIOLENT EXTREMES.

TRANS PRISONERS ARE OFTEN KEPT IN SOLITARY FOR THEIR "SAFETY."

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT IS TORTURE.

TRANS PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY TRANS WOMEN OF COLOR, ARE AT THE GREATEST RISK OF VIOLENCE AND IMPRISONMENT.

TRANS, INTERSEX, GENDER FLUID PEOPLE ARE CONSTANTLY IN A STATE OF CROSSING.

CALLING THE LIE ON RIGID BINARIES: MAN-WOMAN, US-THEM, "CITIZEN"-"ALIEN," NO PRIDE FOR SOME OF US WITH LIBERATION FOR ALL OF US.

AND DEMANDING RADICAL NEW SYSTEMS.

IN INSTANCES OF SYSTEMATIC OPPRESSION, LIKE PRISONS, THERE IS NO WAY FOR IT TO BE REFORMED. THAT'S JUST LIKE SAYING WE CAN REFORM RACISM — THERE'S NO "BETTER" FORM OF RACISM — YOU HAVE TO ABOLISH IT.
Notes

Page 2: The character in the first panel thought bubble is Kadin Henningsen, drawn in his style, and his quote is from an MLA panel presentation he did as a performative comic. For other academic work drawn as a comic, see for example, Flowers, Katz, Sousanis, and Wilson and Jacot.

Page 4: El Refaie (4). The full quote reads, “the requirement to produce multiple drawn versions of one’s self necessarily involves an intense engagement with embodied aspects of identity, as well as with the sociocultural models underpinning body image.” She terms the practice of engaging with one’s identity through drawing self-portraits “pictorial embodiment.”

Page 8: Flowers (textual quote from p. 32 and drawings copied from p. 31). Flowers writes, “Inhabitation extended my analysis to include sharing in the production of corporeal forms of agency that emerged during fieldwork. … Comics making was an explicit means for me to show and experience these more tacit ways of knowing about complex terms like agency, identity, and meaning-making” (32); quote from Sousanis (Unflattening 78) and drawing copied from Sousanis (Unflattening 9).

Page 9: Quoted in Wilson and Jacot (151–52), which is an interview with Joe Sacco in comic form. Sacco is referring to his experiences of witnessing violence and conflict and then recreating them through drawing as a journalist. The trauma of experiencing direct violence is distinct from
the vicarious trauma of witnessing it. As Sacco’s quote suggests, drawing forces one to inhabit every part of an interaction, which he argues makes the vicarious trauma more intense.

**Page 11:** McDonald (2). You can find more of Favianna Rodriguez’s work at favianna.com and more from Micah Bazant at micahbazant.com.

**Page 12:** The suggestions I include on this page for how to engage comics making are based on the training and practice Flowers and I have shared and those she offers in her 2017 article.

**Works cited**


