THE COMICS GRID
Journal of comics scholarship

Fonioková, Z 2024 Identity Construction in Graphic Life Narratives by Aline Kominsky Crumb and Katie Green. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 14(1): pp. 1–18. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.11034

Open Library of Humanities

Identity Construction in Graphic Life Narratives by Aline Kominsky Crumb and Katie Green

Zuzana Fonioková, Masaryk University, Czech Republic, foniokova@phil.muni.cz

Bringing together comics analysis, autobiography studies, and narrative theory, this article aims to analyse different ways in which graphic life narratives expose the illusion of a stable and unified autobiographical subject. The first part focuses on the perceived split between the present and past self and its manifestation in autobiographical discourse as the narrating-I and narrated-I, exploring different methods autobiographical comics employ to foreground the fragmented self and to favour the perspective of the past or of the present. The next part analyses the interplay between the narrating-I and the narrated-I in a short comic story from Aline Kominsky Crumb's *Need More Love* (2007). Not only does this story challenge the divide between the two positions of the self, it also illustrates the view of identity as a performative construct. The final part of this article offers an interpretation of Katie Green's *Lighter than My Shadow* (2013), focusing on the way this graphic memoir enacts narrative self-construction as an interpretative and meaning-making process that can facilitate healing. While this process typically involves finding coherence and continuity in the narrated experience, the memoir also reveals that such coherence-building has its limitations.

The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Open Library of Humanities. © 2024 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.
OPEN ACCESS

Introduction

Autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin contends that traditional autobiographical writing overemphasizes the self's coherence and unity as well as its continuity over time, creating an illusion of a unified self, sustained by the I-pronoun: "Use of the first person […] compounds our sense of being in full command of our knowledge of our selves and stories; it not only conveniently bridges the gaps between who we were once and who we are today, but it tends as well to make our sense of self in any present moment seem more unified and organized than it possibly could be" (1985: ix). Similarly, Philippe Lejeune points out "the illusory effect of the first person" that cloaks the duality of the subject of autobiographical discourse, which is split between the level of discourse and the level of story (Lejeune 1977: 35). Traditional autobiographical narratives, therefore, often work with and help circulate the notion of the self as an autonomous and unitary entity pre-existing the autobiographical act.

It has been argued that autobiographical comics, which requires their creators not only to represent themselves visually but also to depict themselves anew in each panel, seems to be an especially apt medium for questioning "notions of a single, monolithic identity" and the self as a fixed and autonomous essence (Kohlert 2019: 17). The medium's discontinuous self-portrayal highlights the view of the autobiographical subject as unstable, fragmented, and fluid. The cartoonist's hand-drawn and necessarily simplified – or even caricatured – avatar renders the unavoidable difference between the autobiographer as a person and her self-representation apparent, underscoring the interpretative nature of the self and challenging conventional notions of "truth" in life narratives (see, e.g., El Refaie 2012, Kunka 2017, and Miller 2011).

Leaving aside the fact that many creative prose autobiographies challenge the conventionally perceived unity of the autobiographical subject (e.g., by experimenting with different pronouns, such as referring to the past self in the third person), this article examines self-construction in graphic life narratives. What means of self-representation does the medium of comics offer and what can it tell us about identity construction in life writing in general? This article aims to analyse different ways in which graphic life narratives expose the illusion of a stable and unified autobiographical self. The first part focuses on the perceived split between the present and past self and its manifestation in autobiographical discourse as the narrating-I and narrated-I, exploring different methods autobiographical comics employ to foreground the fragmented self and to favour the perspective of the past or of the present. The next part analyses the interplay between the narrating-I and the narrated-I in a short comic story from Aline Kominsky Crumb's composite autobiographical work *Need More Love* (2007). Not only does this story challenge the divide between the two positions of the self, it also illustrates the view of identity as a performative construct. The final part of this article offers an interpretation of Katie Green's *Lighter than My Shadow* (2013), focusing on the way this graphic memoir enacts narrative self-construction as an interpretative and meaning-making process. While this process typically involves finding coherence and continuity in the narrated experience, the memoir also reveals that such coherence-building has its limitations.

The Split Autobiographical Subject in Comics

An important aspect of the absence of a single, unified, and stable subject of autobiographical discourse is the split of the narrator into the narrating-I and the narrated-I. In narrative theory, this dichotomy helps analyse first-person narration (primarily in fiction) by differentiating between the narrator at the time of narrating (that is, the narrating subject) and the narrator as a character in the story, the experiencing self at the narrated time (the object of narration). These two positions mostly correspond to the distinction between the present and the past self, "the I-now (the narrator) and the I-then (the narrator's earlier self)" (Couser 2012: 38). When applying such distinctions to life writing, one needs to bear in mind that in terms of the construction and performance of identity, these selves are constituted in the narrative and are variable and interdependent; both the narrating-I and the narrated-I are "multiple, fragmented, and heterogeneous" (Smith and Watson 2010: 75). Nonetheless, the distinction can be fruitfully used to discuss how authors engage with different positions of the autobiographical self, often revealing their attitude to the depicted past, such as whether they lay emphasis on a sense of self-continuity or, on the contrary, a sense of dissociation from or inaccessibility of the I-then.

The medium of comics enables its authors to represent the heterogeneity of the autobiographical subject visually and thus to "destabilize the coherence of the subject over time through the presence of visible […] narrators on pages that depict that same narrator in the past" (Chute 2010: 6). Numerous examples of the narrating self entering the domain of the characters exist in autobiographical comics. To name just a few: in *Playboy* by Chester Brown, a small Chester with devil-like wings flying around the character of young Chester is responsible for the voice-over narration.[1] Ellen Forney in *Marbles* draws a conversation between the present Ellen and her younger incarnation struggling with mental illness. In Liz Prince's *Tomboy*, the narrating self is repeatedly given visual presence in the panels, sometimes directly interacting with her younger version: interviewing the past self with a microphone labelled "Liz News" (2014: 78) or putting her "adult" words into the child protagonist's mouth, where little Liz reacts with a confused question "…why did you tell me to say that?" (2014: 73). This scene indicates that the earlier self of an autobiographical narrative is not an autonomous entity but the narrator's own creation. These and similar self-reflexive passages disrupt the illusion that an autobiographical narrative is a straightforward, mimetic representation, and emphasize the process of narrative construction of the past, including one's earlier selves, which is always moulded by the present perspective.

---

[1] In all my discussions of autobiographical comics, I use the author's first name to refer to the textual subject (the narrator and the protagonist of the story) and their surname to refer to the flesh-and-blood author.

However, the split between the I-then and the I-now often manifests itself in less explicit ways. Awareness of these positions may facilitate, among other things, insight into which perspective[2] the story is rendered from: whether it is the narrating self's perspective informed by hindsight or whether the narrative purports to reconstruct the narrated self's perception at the time. In conventional autobiographical narratives in prose, there is usually a subtle emphasis on the narrating self's perspective: the autobiographical narrator interprets her past from her present standpoint of temporal distance and awareness of future developments. She ascribes to the narrated events a meaning that she had not yet discerned, and often could not have discerned, at the time they took place. Using the knowledge now available, she analyses their causes and evaluates their consequences, often correcting her earlier views and lack of understanding of the situation.

In graphic life narratives, these two perspectives often coexist on the page: the present, narrating self is usually dominant in the captions as a narratorial voice-over (the explicit narrator), while the images, including speech and thought bubbles, mostly depict the narrated self's actions, thoughts, and feelings (cf. Herman 2011: 240; Kukkonen 2013: 59; Smith and Watson 2010: 169). The narrating-I might therefore correct the narrated-I's perception or interpret and evaluate the earlier self's actions represented in the same panel. In other words, the subject on the discourse level and the subject on the story level with their differing perspectives can appear within one frame. Graphic memoirists can choose how much space (in both the literal and metaphorical sense) they dedicate to each level. In some narratives, the narrating-I's voice-over is an overbearing feature. For example, in Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!*, the story is conveyed primarily by voice-over narration from the perspective of the narrating-I. The images often impart the impression of merely illustrating what is being said in the caption box, rather than driving the narrative forward (although they are significant as a symbolic representation of the "gappiness" of memory, especially traumatic memory, as Olga Michael demonstrates [2018: 112–14]). The dominance of the discourse level is also reflected in the structure of the frames, where the caption boxes frequently take up the whole top half of the panel (or even more).

---

[2] I use the term *perspective* in the narratological sense of "who perceives?" with regard to restrictions on information (often referred to as *focalization*), in line with Nancy Pedri's call for "[a]n understanding that extends the concept of perspective from vision in the literal sense to vision in the figurative sense (interpretation and evaluation)" (2015: 26).

By contrast, in Chester Brown's *I Never Liked You* (1994) most pages do not include any commentary by the narrating-I – the narrator does not tell the reader what the depicted memories mean for him now at the moment of narrating and leaves the images open to interpretation. Drawing on David Herman, Andrew J. Kunka claims that caption texts "often dictate the reader's understanding of the events and their importance, while the absence of such narration can create a more ambiguous effect" (2017: 62). In *I Never Liked You*, one of the few appearances of the narrating-I's voice in caption boxes occurs when the story relates Chester's mother's death. This might signal the lasting significance of the event for the narrator, but it also reveals his wish to control the interpretation of the incident.

Self as a Performative Construct: Aline Kominsky Crumb's Bunch

Some autobiographical comics experiment with the difference between the narrating-I and the narrated-I in rather complex ways, "us[ing] the inbuilt duality of the form – its word and image cross-discursivity – to stage dialogues among versions of self, underscoring the importance of an ongoing, unclosed project of self-representation and self-narration" (Chute 2010: 5). As an example, let us consider one of Aline Kominsky Crumb's graphic narratives included in her multimodal memoir *Need More Love* (2007: 108–111). On the first two pages, the narrator's voice in the caption boxes presents a present-perspective summary and provides the narrating self's interpretation of the past coloured by hindsight, such as: "It is surprising how happy I was once I was out of N.Y.... because like many New Yorkers I thought of N.Y. as the center of the universe and every place else as a black hole" (109). The drawn part is set in the past, showing the autobiographical protagonist Aline in various situations typical for her life at that time. The panels also contain inserts of the narrating-I in the form of caption boxes with arrows pointing to a specific part of the narrative world, like tags, some of them self-reflexive, commenting on the narration itself, such as: "Oh yeah, I forgot to say my marriage [...] didn't last very long" (109). Here the narrator comments ironically on the fact that her marriage – conventionally one of the key points in life stories – is apparently of very low significance to her if she could "forget" to mention its ending. In sum, so far the narrating and the narrated selves mostly coexist on the page in two separate tracks.

However, things get more complicated on the next page (see **Figure 1**). At first sight the situation appears to be the same – the voice of the narrating-I inhabits the caption boxes (at the top of the panel as well as tags or a footnote-like asterisk) while the drawn part shows the narrated self and her experience. The narrator uses irony and humour to comment on her unwise actions in the past depicted in the panel, for example: "Working on my two addictions... male attention and alcohol" (110). As many of us tend to do in our everyday storytelling as well as more global self-narratives (cf. Linde 123–24; Bruner 95–96), the narrator highlights the difference between her current insight and her past foolishness: "Now I can see what a total crock o' shit this was!!" (110). From the standpoint of the present, the past self is constructed as naïve and gullible.

Yet a closer look reveals that on this page the narrating-I's perspective is not limited to the caption boxes: the present self's knowledge is inserted into the thought bubbles as well. The thoughts attributed to the character of Aline could possibly reflect the narrated-I's actual thoughts that were accessible to her at the time and therefore do not automatically signal the narrating-I's point of view. Yet the presented naivety of Aline at the time is incompatible with her having guessed the thoughts of the other character – such as when Aline is shown thinking about her art, hoping for encouragement and advice from her teacher, while the teacher is presented as being less interested in Aline as an artist than as a sexual object. Thoughts like "Those legs!" and "Oh my God, what a delectable creature!" are attributed to him (110). Reading the minds of other characters, the autobiographical narrator pretends to be omniscient. However, these thought bubbles do not represent what really happened but serve as a vehicle for expressing the narrating self's view of the significance of the depicted situations: the present is superimposed on the past. The narrating-I indirectly sneaks into the diegetic world, reaching from the discourse level to the story level.

In the last panel of the page, the narrating-I enters the diegetic world directly, occupying the whole panel and disrupting the flow of the story by addressing the reader. Although formally and visually the gap between the narrator and the protagonist diminishes (the narrator's present incarnation looks similar to the younger character in the preceding panels), the verbal component emphasizes the split. The difference is not only temporal, but also epistemological and ethical: the present self criticizes her younger incarnation from the distance of 30 years. This panel foregrounds the retrospective nature of autobiographical writing. It draws attention to the narrator trying to (re)construct her earlier self, thus preparing the ground for the next page, a meta-autobiographical ending to this short story about Aline's becoming a cartoonist.

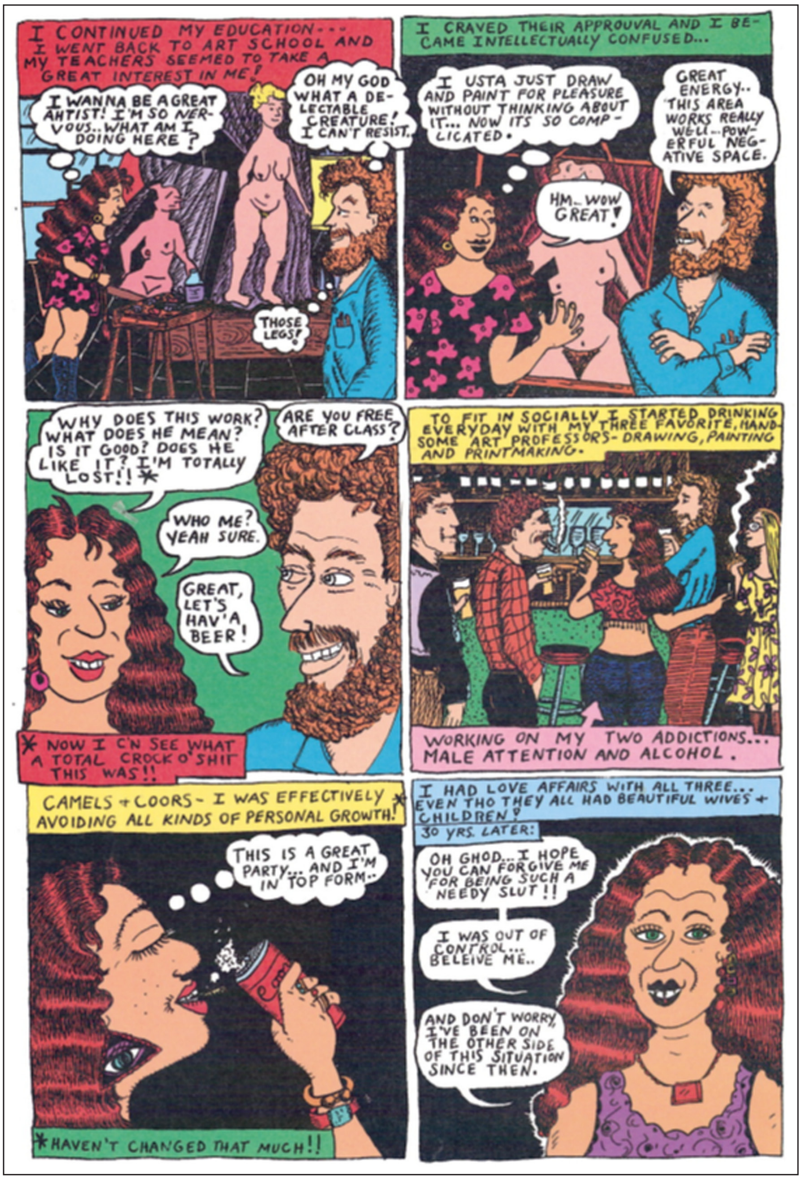
I CONTINUED MY EDUCATION... I WENT BACK TO ART SCHOOL AND MY TEACHERS SEEMED TO TAKE A GREAT INTEREST IN ME!
I WANNA BE A GREAT AHTIST! I'M SO NERVOUS.. WHAT AM I DOING HERE?
OH MY GOD WHAT A DELECTABLE CREATURE! I CAN'T RESIST.
THOSE LEGS!
I CRAVED THEIR APPROUVAL AND I BECAME INTELLECTUALLY CONFUSED...
I USTA JUST DRAW AND PAINT FOR PLEASURE WITHOUT THINKING ABOUT IT... NOW ITS SO COMPLICATED.
GREAT ENERGY.. THIS AREA WORKS REALLY WELL--POWERFUL NEGATIVE SPACE.
HM.. WOW GREAT!
WHY DOES THIS WORK? WHAT DOES HE MEAN? IS IT GOOD? DOES HE LIKE IT? I'M TOTALLY LOST!! *
ARE YOU FREE AFTER CLASS?
WHO ME? YEAH SURE.
GREAT, LET'S HAV'A BEER!
* NOW I C'N SEE WHAT A TOTAL CROCK O' SHIT THIS WAS!!
TO FIT IN SOCIALLY I STARTED DRINKING EVERYDAY WITH MY THREE FAVORITE, HANDSOME ART PROFESSORS- DRAWING, PAINTING AND PRINTMAKING.
WORKING ON MY TWO ADDICTIONS... MALE ATTENTION AND ALCOHOL.
CAMELS + COORS - I WAS EFFECTIVELY AVOIDING ALL KINDS OF PERSONAL GROWTH! *
THIS IS A GREAT PARTY... AND I'M IN TOP FORM..
* HAVEN'T CHANGED THAT MUCH!!
I HAD LOVE AFFAIRS WITH ALL THREE... EVEN THO THEY ALL HAD BEAUTIFUL WIVES + CHILDREN!
30 YRS. LATER:
OH GHOD... I HOPE YOU CAN FORGIVE ME FOR BEING SUCH A NEEDY SLUT!!
I WAS OUT OF CONTROL... BELEIVE ME..
AND DON'T WORRY, I'VE BEEN ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS SITUATION SINCE THEN.

Figure 1: Kominsky Crumb, Aline. *Need More Love: A Graphic Memoir*, p. 110. London: MQ, 2007. © 2007 MQ.

On the righthand page of the double spread (111), the narrating self returns to the caption boxes, but the "I" suddenly turns into "the Bunch," that is, Kominsky Crumb's alter ego present in many comics. Now the narrator refers to her past self in the third person, and this shift goes hand in hand with increased self-referentiality. The last three panels of that page portray the birth of the Bunch alter ego. Inspired by Justin Green's seminal graphic memoir *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972), Aline gets the idea to create autobiographical comics: “I need a character. / I’m a character” (111). The form supports the content: the fissure between the narrating and narrated selves widens as they cease to be connected by the same pronoun, while in the diegetic world Aline becomes split into an artist and a character. The switch from first-person to third-person narration does not cancel out the announced identity of the author, narrator, and protagonist, but it complicates it and urges the reader not to take it at face value. The Bunch character embodies the inevitable “gap between the actual and the represented self” (El Refaie 2012: 44) and accentuates that the autobiographical protagonist is not a facsimile but always just a version of the real-world author (the historical-I).

The increased distance between the narrating and the narrated self also reflects the notion that the autobiographical act requires one to step back and approach oneself in the past as an “other” (cf. Folkenflik 1993: 234). Kominsky Crumb makes the process of creating a character out of one’s past self explicit (Aline literally becomes an object when she turns herself into the character of the Bunch), foregrounding the construction of one’s self-image inherent in any autobiographical act. While graphic self-representation may require a higher degree of self-objectification than prose autobiography, it also offers unique means of rendering subjectivity. As Charles Hatfield points out, “the cartoonist projects and objectifies his or her inward sense of self, achieving at once a sense of intimacy and a critical distance” (2005: 115), for “the outward guise reflects inward attitudes” (116). Indeed, “artists may be concerned to give shape to an inner sense of self as much as, or more than, to outward features” (Miller 2011: 243). The drawn self is literally crafted by the author in a way that reflects their current self-understanding, epitomizing the notion that autobiographical narration is a “process of self-discovery and self-creation” rather than a description of an already formed self (Eakin 1985: 3).

One’s “pictorial embodiment,” as El Refaie calls the “process of engaging with one’s own identity” in autobiographical comics by way of “multiple drawn versions of one’s self” (2012: 51), may become especially significant for authors belonging to groups whose socially imposed identity is closely related to their bodies, such as women, people of colour, or people with disabilities (cf. El Refaie 2012: 73). Aline’s clearly hyperbolic ugliness in Kominsky Crumb’s comics expresses the experiencing self’s feelings about her appearance, induced primarily by her father’s view, represented in the comics by his recurring comment “Ya can’t shine shit.” Picturing herself as ugly and in unflattering situations (e.g., sitting on a toilet or masturbating), Kominsky Crumb chooses a visual self-representation that flouts the convention that women and their images should yield “visual pleasure” to the “male gaze” (to borrow terms from Laura Mulvey’s influential analysis of Hollywood cinema) and thus critiques normative ideas about how female bodies should be depicted (Mulvey 1975).

The avatar's transformations in Kominsky Crumb's comics, including changes to its appearance (including clothes) from panel to panel (cf. Chute 2010: 31), also serve as a case in point of how the sequentiality of self-representation in graphic autobiography illustrates the idea that autobiographical narration (be it the everyday sharing of micro-stories or larger and more public autobiographical projects such as published autobiographies) is performative. It is not "a self-expressive act," a translation of an inner essence into narrative, for no such essence exists: "There is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating" (Smith 1998: 108). Instead, the self is produced by autobiographical narrative acts that are guided by discursively generated notions of what the self is (Smith 1998: 108). This conception draws on Judith Butler's theory of gender as performative, according to which gender does not exist autonomously but is constantly constituted by the repetitive performances of certain acts and practices that are regarded as manifestations of gender identity in a given culture. Long-term repetition of the same patterns then gives rise to the illusion of an unchanging inner core – the (gendered) subject is created by "sedimentation" of the constantly repeated acts that constitute it (Butler 1988: 524). Identity in this approach is therefore "an ongoing process of becoming, rather than an ontological state of being" (Cover 2014: 56). In autobiographical comics, then, "[t]he discontinuity of the subject that is built into the medium offers a powerful resource for expressing this open-endedness," this continuous becoming (Miller 2011: 251). Instead of being abstracted into a single "I," the drawn self "is afforded a concretized reality through performative and repeated iterations" (Kohlert 2019: 11). By its means of representation, therefore, comics helps deconstruct the belief in a unitary and autonomous self.

To sum up, Kominsky Crumb's comics gathered in *Need More Love* contest the idea of a unified self and at the same time expose the untenability of a neat division between the present and past self. They exhibit the present perspective as a determining force in (re)constructing the past, including the earlier versions of oneself. Moreover, Kominsky Crumb's open presentation of her autobiographical avatar as a character she has created, together with her fluid and caricatured self-representation, effectively communicate the perception of self as a discursive and performative construct.

Narrative Self-construction as a Meaning-making Process in Katie Green's *Lighter Than My Shadow*

The interpretative process of self-construction through autobiographical narration is staged in Katie Green's graphic memoir *Lighter Than My Shadow* (2013). This book tells the story of the author's struggle with eating disorders, which started in her teenage years and continued into adulthood. The autobiographical protagonist Katie's first disorder is anorexia. In a well-meant attempt to help her, her parents take her to an alternative therapist, Jake. Katie feels cured after she starts seeing Jake until one day he tries to seduce her. She stops meeting with him, suppresses the experience, and develops another eating disorder (overeating followed by remorse and self-flagellation). Later she realizes Jake had been touching her against her will all along during their "therapy" sessions. After a failed suicide attempt Katie begins a healing process, which is connected with her becoming an artist.

The book opens with a visual foreshadowing of the story to come: the protagonist is drawn standing on the scales, lying in a hospital bed, and as if flying around in numerous shapes, sizes, and orientations. The primary visual metaphor of a black "scribble" (as Eszter Szép calls this "shadow created out of dynamic and multidirectional black lines" [2020:167]) is introduced here – first above the head of the girl standing on the scales, then as background for the flying figures. As becomes obvious later, the scribble mostly represents the autobiographical protagonist's mental health issues related primarily to self-image and eating.[3] Page 5 depicts the author at her desk, about to draw on a blank sheet of paper; this common authentication strategy signalling autobiographical narration in comics (cf. Kunka 2017: 11) amounts to a cartoon variation on Lejeune's "signature" (the identity of the name of the author, narrator, and main character) that indicates the autobiographical pact in prose. However, Green defamiliarizes this common trope by picturing her present-self avatar first looking up at the scribble with the figures of the younger self (5), then beginning to draw with the scribble either coming out of her pen or going into it (7; see **Figure 2**), and finally drawing the scribble with her pen on the otherwise still blank sheet of paper, the scribble having disappeared from her surroundings.

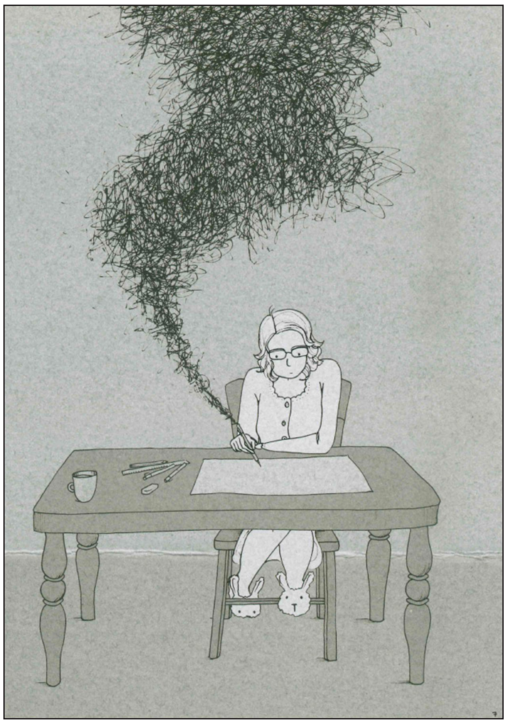

Figure 2: Green, Katie. *Lighter Than My Shadow*, p. 7. London: Johnathan Cape, 2013. © 2013 Johnathan Cape.

---

[3] See Szép for an analysis of other functions of the scribble, such as an environment for metaphorical visualizations of Katie's thoughts, memories, and bodily sensations, or a means of structuring the page (2020: 167–170).

This opening sequence points at the processing of trauma and difficult memories through art — again foreshadowing the story, as taking up art is going to play a significant role in Katie's recovery. On one level the scribble represents the autobiographical narrator's earlier self's feelings, which are being reworked into the graphic narrative. The figures embody her younger selves in her memory, as becomes clearer when the image of the artist recurs on page 35. This time she is shown crying at her desk while the scribble with the waning figures of her earlier incarnations takes the form of a thought bubble. The figures in this black bubble are a continuation of the series of Katie-figures becoming less clearly drawn as a symbol of her succumbing to anorexia (34). This part of the page presents a prolepsis (flash-forward) in the story and is differentiated in colour from the temporal plane of childhood. However, the boundary between the two temporal levels is not sharply demarcated: a regular gutter is substituted by a faint and uneven line between the different backgrounds (see **Figure 3**). On the next page (36), the blurring of the colour-coded boundary between different temporal planes becomes even more pronounced: a childhood memory "bleeds" into the panels showing the author in front of scribble-covered pages on her desk. These imprecise boundaries symbolize the interweaving of the past and the present, the past being necessarily (re)constructed through the lens of the present on the one hand and on the other hand the present being haunted by the past.

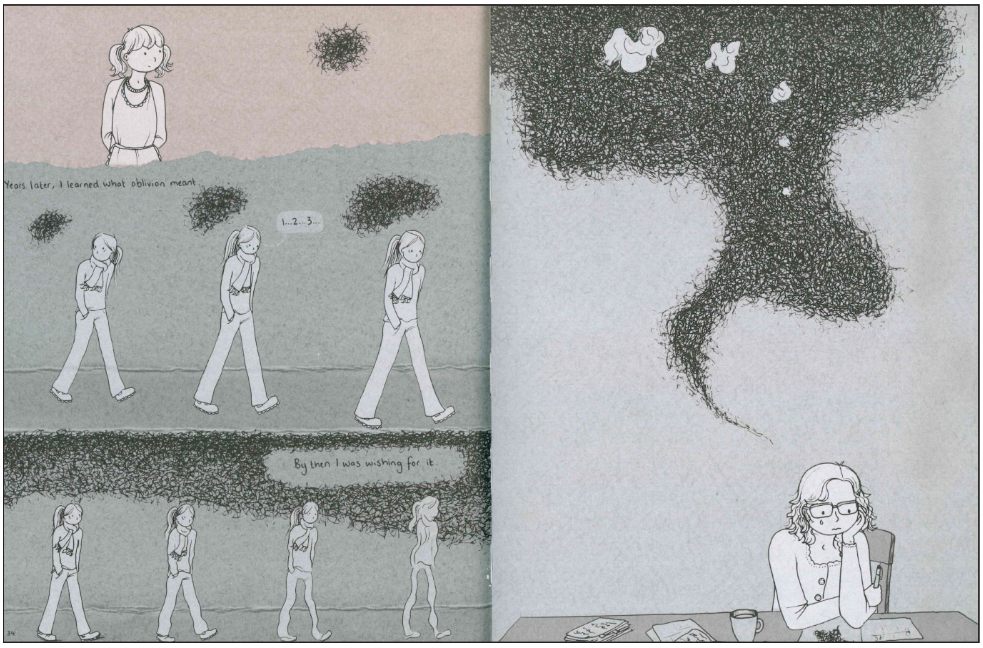
Years later, I learned what oblivion meant.
1...2...3...
By then I was wishing for it.
34

Figure 3: Green, Katie. *Lighter Than My Shadow*, double spread, p. 34–35. London: Johnathan Cape, 2013. © 2013 Johnathan Cape.

In this context, the scribble in the opening sequence can be read as an expression of experience that resists narrativization. The scribble connected to the artist's pen (**Figure 2**) represents the younger selves' traumatic memories that are now being subjected to narrative meaning-making although in part they might remain resistant to verbalization and can only be expressed by visual metaphors such as this scribble. The scribble therefore exemplifies the way the comics medium offers specific means to express subjectivity, including difficult memories: as Ann Miller observes, "the medium allows for considerable permeability of inner and outer worlds. […] [I]t can simply introduce conscious or unconscious elements of mental life into the external reality of the scene" (2011: 248). It also hints at the narrator's sense of continuity with her earlier selves – even though she has recovered from her eating disorders, in the final sequence showing the drawing author (501–03) the scribble hovers above her head, thus revealing that her anxiety has not completely disappeared. Again, the past continues to affect the present. Interestingly, this sense of continuity between the narrating and narrated self is further symbolized by the slippers the cartoonist seated at her desk is wearing; in other panels it can be seen that as a child, Katie had the same slippers (see p. 26). Similarly, the almost-recovered Katie at the end of the story, sleeping in bed with her partner, is clutching the same teddy bear she used to sleep with as a child.

Perceived self-continuity is also expressed by different means towards the end of the narrative: after Katie has changed her haircut, desiring a split from her previous existence and a new beginning, she gets into the old rut of being hard on herself and having a sense of unworthiness. While drawing, she is thinking: "I'll never be good enough" (475). The scribble reappears above her head. However, another inner voice recognizes the harmful pattern: "Here we go again" (475). Green represents this mental polyphony by splitting the drawn Katie into two look-alike figures, as if into two different selves, an experiencer and an observer. In the next panel the "reasonable" observer-self is looking at the self caught up in a trance, asking herself whether she has "always been like this" (475). In the following panel the observer-figure is viewing the current, unhappy self and a row of past selves pictured striving for perfection while doing school- or artwork, surrounded by the scribble of mental health problems. This visual metaphor epitomizes Katie's recognition of the recurring pattern. Her later attempt to break free from it is symbolized by her literal burning of photos and metaphorical (though visually materialized) "burning" of painful memories, including her earlier selves (489). This act could hint at a rupture between the present and past identities. Nevertheless, the closing image of the book shows that the present self has come to terms with the past when the adult Katie is pictured expressing compassion towards her child self, who is again holding the teddy bear indicating a sense of self-continuity. The scribble, still present on the preceding double spread, has disappeared.

The position of this image as the very last one in the book suggests that it was, at least in part, the narrativization of the experience that has helped Katie (and Green) accept her personal history and move on.

In this narrativization, Green's memoir makes use of *showing* more often than *telling* – the narrating-I's voice-over is absent in most pages, and the story is mostly conveyed via the images dominated by the narrated self. However, the narrative also makes visible the meaning-making, self-interpretative process of autobiographical narration. For instance, the aforementioned colour-coded childhood memory is shown to be prompted by the narrating-I's (materialized here as the authorial figure) effort to impose coherence on the remembered past by looking for the roots of her eating disorder in early childhood (36). On other occasions, the sense-making, coherence-seeking tendency of narrative self-construction is represented less explicitly by recurring motifs, primarily body image and striving for control and perfection. The narrating-I introduces the body-image theme by pinpointing a change in Katie's perception of her own body: "I was becoming more aware of my body" (56). Afterwards Katie's relation to her own body is rendered in the showing mode: by juxtaposing images, a link is tacitly made between Katie's ballet dancing (which favours slim figures) and her experimentation with her body when she explores masturbation. When she is disturbed by her mother while touching herself, a memory within a memory is presented by means of the blurred boundary between temporal levels, which here embodies the associative nature of memory. The earlier memory is of an incident when her mother imposed a taboo regarding sex. When the story goes back to the temporal level of the more recent past with a panel showing Katie sitting in her room after her mother has left, the narrating-I comments: "I felt ashamed" (60). Significantly, this shame relates to both incidents – the narrated self's present and her memory, pointing to shame about the body and sex as one of the potential triggers of Katie's later disorders (see **Figure 4**).

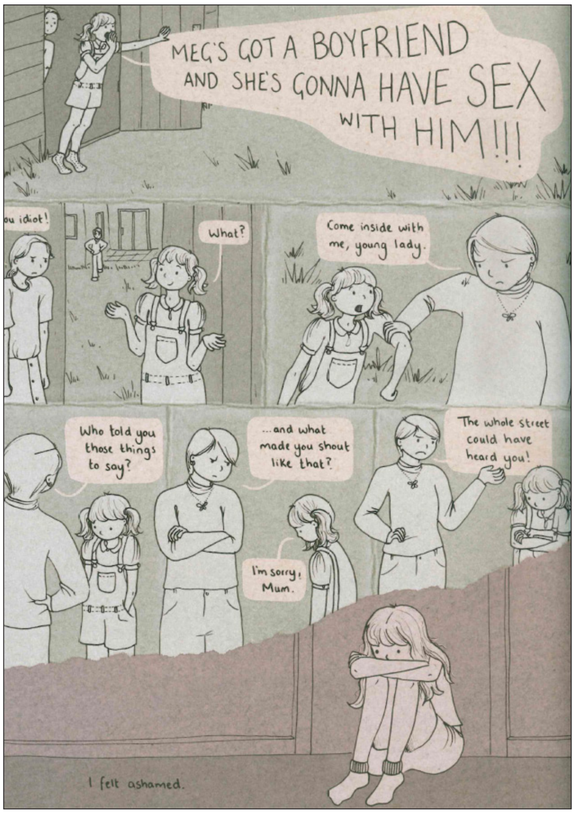
MEG'S GOT A BOYFRIEND AND SHE'S GONNA HAVE SEX WITH HIM!!!
ou idiot!
What?
Come inside with me, young lady.
Who told you those things to say?
...and what made you shout like that?
The whole street could have heard you!
I'm sorry, Mum.
I felt ashamed.

Figure 4: Green, Katie. *Lighter Than My Shadow*, p. 60. London: Johnathan Cape, 2013. © 2013 Johnathan Cape.

The presentation of this topic critiques dominant cultural narratives on women and sex (“Since then, I’d learned that sex made you pregnant... / ...and later that it made you a slut” [61]) as well as the role of female bodies in the social context as the object of gazing (“Suddenly, it seemed everyone had something to say about my body” [88]) and the prevalent beauty standards (Katie’s girl friends’ obsession with weight). At a much later point in the story, after she attempts suicide, Katie is depicted picking up a pencil and drawing herself – she literally draws herself to life, just as in the story she saves her life by taking up drawing. The life-saving reinvention that materializes in this image is, on another level, a synecdoche for Green’s reclaiming her body image by choosing how to represent herself publicly in this graphic memoir. In doing that, she takes “control of her own pictorial embodiment, and reject[s] any attempts [...] to impose extraneous body images on her,” as El Refaie claims about Kominsky Crumb (2012: 82).

The recurring motif of a negative body image is linked to the crucial theme of striving for perfection and control. Page 64 contains a sequence of four panels depicting Katie seated at her desk, her body reflected in a mirror situated next to the desk (see **Figure 5**). While in the first panel she is looking directly at her reflection, in the following three she becomes increasingly absorbed in her schoolwork, working late into the night (the clock in the final panel indicates it is midnight). The more attention she pays to her assignment, the less she notices her body image. The character’s dissociation from her body materializes in the waning mirror reflection, with the last one just a silhouette symbolizing a disembodied state of mind. Crucially, the scribble above her head, epitomizing her anxiety or dissatisfaction, diminishes in each panel, until in the final panel of the page it is not present at all. Katie’s compulsion to be perfect at school is linked to her body-image problems, as schoolwork helps her forget her body.

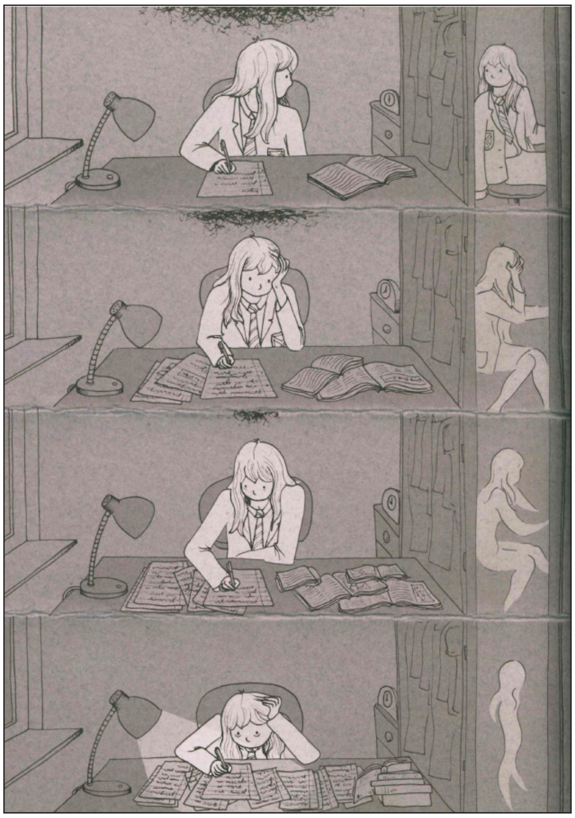

Figure 5: Green, Katie. *Lighter Than My Shadow*, p. 64. London: Johnathan Cape, 2013. © 2013 Johnathan Cape.

However, the narrative reveals that Katie's occasional sense of control is illusory. This information is sometimes communicated by the scribble above her head not disappearing even though she is following all her rules (which offer her a sense of control; e.g. 181). Later, a four-page representation of a therapy session provides an explanation of Katie's feelings underlying her disorder (186–89). While the voice of the narrating-I is completely absent from this scene, the two characters' dialogue, especially Katie's side of it, presents a self-interpretation compatible with the one presented by the memoir as a whole. On these four pages, the narrating self's meaning-making is delegated to the narrated self. This situation contrasts with other parts of the narrative, which present events from the perspective of the narrated self who does not yet have an explanation for her actions or feelings. With regard to Jake, the narrator withholds the knowledge accessed later and only reveals that which the narrated self knew at the time. For example, Katie does not know why she is unable to have sex with her boyfriend (274–75). Also, Katie's mother and Katie's friend Megan both, on different occasions, express their distrust towards Jake, the alternative therapist who is sexually abusing Katie without her being aware of it. Although these and other situations will probably make readers suspicious of Jake's intentions and practices, they only learn the "truth" when the story gets to the point where Katie herself realizes Jake's abuse. In this way, the graphic narrative recreates the gaps of knowing that traumatic erasure of memory might induce.

The mirror plays a significant role on a later occasion as well: not satisfied with what she sees in it, Katie resolves that she will "have to be in control from now on" (91). This scene, portraying Katie's first decision to restrict eating, functions as a turning point in the story. Turning points in identity narratives constitute a frequent means of explaining the incoherence of individual parts of the life story (Bruner 1990: 121), and this particular instance bridges over the unselfconscious Katie, who used to light-heartedly eat more than her friends, and her later anorexic incarnation. However, on another occasion Green provides a fitting commentary on the tendency to pinpoint such turning points. The visual portrayal of Katie's suicide attempt together with her decision to take up drawing (380–402) is followed by the longest utterance by the explicit narrator – a written page. The first paragraph reads: "The months around that turning point are a muddle in my memory. Looking back, it's easy to think that things changed in that single moment. Certainly it's more dramatic to tell it that way. Though I don't remember much of when or how, I know I had to make that decision more than once. More than a few times" (403). The narrating-I explains that the depicted events were more complex than a coherent narrative could present. Even though turning points make good stories ("it's more dramatic"), they might not always reflect the felt experience. Narrativization with its coherence-seeking tendency has its limits.

Like Kominsky Crumb's work, *Lighter Than My Shadow* displays the intertwining of the past and the present, where the current perspective moulds the portrayal of the past, yet difficult memories continue to affect the narrator and shape her self-definition at present. While the autobiographical narrator hints at identity ruptures and exhibits the perceived multiplicity of selves, she also creates a sense of self-continuity by weaving her disparate and often painful experiences into a more-or-less coherent narrative. Furthermore, the memoir succeeds in fashioning an effective and relatable representation of the protagonist's subjectivity, particularly her traumatic memories that resist verbalization, by externalizing it in drawing as well as by giving space to the formerly silenced perspective of the narrator's earlier incarnation.

Therefore, the varied examples explored in this paper have hopefully demonstrated that autobiographical comics can not only give shape to a wide range of subjective experience but also make visible the processes inherent in any act of autobiographical narration. In this way, graphic life narratives offer a new perspective on identity as an ongoing performance without succumbing to the danger of regarding the self as non-existent or as an irrelevant fiction. Even if one accepts the constructed, fragmented, and instable nature of self, self-representation as an interpretative activity can facilitate making sense of one's experience and support healing.

Acknowledgements

Work on this paper was supported by the Czech Science Foundation grant GA21-12454S *Fact and Fiction in Life Stories: Life Writing and Its Narrative Strategies*.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Barry, L 2002 *One! Hundred! Demons!* Seattle: Sasquatch Books.

Brown, C 1994 *I Never Liked You: A Comic-Strip Narrative*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.

Brown, C 2013 *The Playboy: A Comic-Strip Memoir*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.

Bruner, J 1990 *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Butler, J 1988 Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4): 519–31. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893

Chute, H L 2010 *Graphic Women. Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Couser, G T 2012 *Memoir: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199826902.001.0001

Cover, R 2014 Becoming and Belonging: Performativity, Subjectivity, and the Cultural Purposes of Social Networking. In: A Poletti and J Rak, eds. 2014 *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. pp.55–69.

Eakin, P J 1985 *Fictions in Autobiography. Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

El Refaie, E 2012 *Autobiographical Comics. Life Writing in Pictures*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781617036132.001.0001

Folkenflik, R 1993 The Self as Other. In: R Folkenflik, ed. 1993 *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self- Representation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. pp.215–34. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503622043-014

Forney, E 2013 *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me: A Graphic Memoir*. London: Robinson.

Green, K 2013 *Lighter Than My Shadow*. London: Johnathan Cape.

Hatfield, C 2005 *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Herman, D 2011 Narrative Worldmaking in Graphic Life Writing. In: M A Chaney, ed. 2011 *Graphic Subjects. Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. pp.231–43.

Kohlert, F B 2019 *Serial Selves: Identity and Representation in Autobiographical Comics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813592282

Kominsky Crumb, A 2007 *Need More Love: A Graphic Memoir*. London: MQ.

Kukkonen, K 2013 *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*. Hoboken: Wiley.

Kunka, A J 2017 *Autobiographical Comics*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Lejeune, P 1977 Autobiography in the Third Person. In: P J Eakin, ed. 1989 *On Autobiography*, translated by Katherine Leary, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. pp.31–52.

Linde, C 1993 *Life Stories. The Creation of Coherence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195073720.001.0001

Michael, O 2018 Graphic Autofiction and the Visualization of Trauma in Lynda Barry and Phoebe Gloeckner's Graphic Memoirs. In: H Dix, ed. 2018 *Autofiction in English*. London: Palgrave. pp.105–24. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89902-2_6

Miller, A 2011 Autobiography in Bande Dessinée. In: N Edwards, ed. 2011 *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. pp.235–262. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1df4gqm.15

Mulvey, L 1975 Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In: L Mulvey 1989 *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp.14–26. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19798-9_3

Pedri, N 2015 What's the Matter of Seeing in Graphic Memoir? *South Central Review*, 32(3): 8–29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/scr.2015.0036

Prince, L 2014 *Tomboy. A Graphic Memoir*. San Francisco: Zest Books.

Smith, S 1998 Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance. In: S Smith and J Watson, eds. 1998 *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. pp.108–115.

Smith, S and **Watson, J** 2010 *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Narratives*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Szép, E 2020 *Comics and the Body: Drawing, Reading, and Vulnerability*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.26818/9780814214541