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Ecofeminism, Trauma, and Visual Metamorphosis in Una's *Becoming Unbecoming*

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This paper applies an ecofeminist lens to Una's *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015), a graphic memoir that addresses sexual trauma and gender violence. While much of the existing scholarship has examined the text through trauma studies, this analysis focuses on how nature-related imagery—particularly trees, hills, and landscapes—serves not only as a metaphor for trauma but also as a means of recovery and healing. By drawing on ecofeminism, this paper explores the deep connections between the protagonist's internal struggles embodied through natural imagery in reaction to society's complacency toward gender violence. Tree imagery is central to the memoir, reflecting both the weight of trauma and the potential for resilience and growth. Hills and landscapes further depict emotional turmoil and the uphill battle of overcoming shame and grief. Additionally, the recurring presence of natural imagery in Una's nightmares illustrates how deeply trauma is embedded in her psyche. By incorporating ecofeminism with the embodied, transformative power of graphic storytelling, the paper offers a fresh perspective on *Becoming Unbecoming*, emphasizing how the natural world is not only a backdrop for the narrative but a key player in the process of healing.

In *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015), Una tells a story of sexual trauma through an anonymous female voice by blending personal and collective narratives of gender violence. Starting at the age of 10, Una describes her experiences, emotions, and memories through trees, human-tree hybrids, hills, and other natural landscapes. While this graphic memoir has been largely analyzed through trauma studies (Donovan and Ustundag 2017; Appleton and Mallan 2018; Michael 2020; and Ruiz 2020), this paper shifts the focus to ecofeminism—a literary lens that examines the theoretical relationship between women and nature and their collective experience of male-oriented domination (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: xxiv). Although the abstract art presents "sequential confusion and fragmentation," that "appears out of alignment with the accompanying images," it "mimics how traumatic memory often functions" through an embodied, transformative experience (Appleton and Mallan 2018: 57, referencing *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* by Cathy Caruth 1995). Yes, Una's abstract art aligns with how people recover from and express traumatic events, tying into trauma theory. However, through braiding, it is the use of natural images like trees, hills, and insects that present compelling evidence about how expressing pain is sometimes easier to express through multimodal mediums like art. Termed by Thierry Groensteen, braiding refers to the use of images and their sequences in understanding graphic narratives (2007, 146). Braiding in *Becoming Unbecoming* is analyzed in more detail by Olga Michael's (2020) and Nancy Pedri's (2018) articles. Ecofeminism uncovers how nature imagery—particularly trees, hills, and other natural elements—serves as a symbolic tool for representing trauma and emotional recovery in a "misogynistic social system that produces violence" (Davies 2020: 13). This analysis reveals the connection between nature, women, and trauma to represent emotional pain and resilience, which ultimately shows how ecofeminism and graphic storytelling serves as a healing force for trauma survivors.

Donovan (2017), Ustundag (2017), Appleton (2018), Mallan (2018), Michael (2020), and Ruiz (2020) analyze *Becoming Unbecoming* through a trauma lens, focusing on themes of female sexuality, sexual trauma, social justice, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). At times, these scholars discuss natural landscapes connected to a trauma lens. For instance, Appleton and Mallan briefly note the significance of the landscape in Una's navigation of shame and confusion, but the landscape is not their focus (2018: 59). Pedri (2018) explores Una's experimentation of breaking out of the comic panel, tying Una's visuals into mental anguish and trauma. Discussing Una's depiction of hills, Pedri believes that the "hill[s] not only alludes to the landscape of her first encounter with sexual violence but also suggestively communicates Una's confusing, numbing processing of rape and the uncertain, mystifying, terrifying sense of self that taints all of her experience" (2018: 308). While these scholars

analyze the memoir from a trauma perspective, using ecofeminism allows for a deeper understanding of how Una's personal experiences with sexual violence are closely tied to her relationship with nature and society's compliancy to gender violence. Discussing Miriam Katin's graphic novels *We Are on Our Own* (2006) and *Letting it Go* (2013), Diederik Oostdijk recognizes "...the power of multimodal creativity, as finding words, visualizing a past experience..." as essential for processing trauma (2018: 79). Oostdijk's findings about Katin's graphic novels apply directly to Una's storytelling and ability to process her past trauma. By interpreting the natural elements as reflections of her trauma, ecofeminism reveals how the environment becomes an embodiment of her emotional state and a tool for processing her pain.

Ecocriticism in *Becoming Unbecoming*

Ecocriticism, as defined by Greg Garrard (2012), Cheryll Glotfelty (1996), and Harold Fromm (1996), studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: xviii). Garrard describes the challenge eco-critics have in balancing the "complex negotiations of nature and culture" with "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (2012: 5). Ecocriticism is a vast field with differing perspectives from literary ideas on the pastoral, sublime, wilderness, and apocalypse to ideas surrounding pollution, environmentalism, animism, and the Anthropocene (Garrard 2012 and Barry 2017). Within each of these categories, there is scholarship on classical pastoral versus romantic pastoral and on old world versus new old wilderness, which differs between cultures as there are different perspectives even between American to British eco-scholarship. The aim is to use an ecocritical framework to explain how nature related images enhance Una's transformative story (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: xix).

Becoming Unbecoming focuses on gender-based violence. As part of the ecocriticism tradition, ecofeminism—a subcategory of ecocriticism linked to deep ecology—extends the critique of anthropocentrism by addressing gender and is concerned with women and the domination of nature (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: xxiv). As Garrard explains, deep ecology "identifies the anthropocentric dualism humanity/nature as the ultimate source of anti-ecological beliefs and practices," while ecofeminism "blames the androcentric dualism man/woman" (Garrard 2012: 26). Ecofeminists argue that women are often symbolically linked to nature, as men are aligned with culture, leading to a "common cause between feminists and ecologists" (Garrard 2012: 26). Prudence Gibson elaborates that "Nature has conventionally been cast as a womanly figure. Nature is a mother, a fecund vessel, within which life (that is, the human) can grow" (2018: 123). Una's use of nature symbolizes loss, pain, and transformation rooted in embodied

imagery. For instance, when she blends her body with an insect, it illustrates how "My body was changing. My wings didn't seem to work very well. Perhaps they were just decorative?" (Una 2015: 40–41). Other scholars connect Una's human-insect hybrid as a metaphor, illustrating her transition into a woman after experiencing sexual abuse (Donovan and Ustundag 2017: 231; Appleton and Mallan 2018: 54; and Michael 2020: 407). Although her form is evolving, she still feels disconnected from her own body and unable to control or fully use it (lack of agency over one's body stems from trauma as explored by Oostdijk 2018). By aligning her transformation with nature, Una creates a powerful commentary on the way trauma intertwines with women in the natural world through graphic storytelling.

Contemporary female artists Ana Mendieta and Philippa Beale created arboreal imagery to explore ecocritical themes of identity, belonging, and the feminine, which is like Una casting herself mixed with nature. Connecting the idea of women symbolically linked with nature, Mendieta's artwork "Tree of Life" is an example of the intertwining image of nature and woman where the woman is the tree (1976). Similarly, Beale, a founder of the Arborealist Movement, explores themes of the tree and its power to share lessons with humankind in her artwork. Trees were a cherished part of her childhood, offering hope and a place of reassurance, but "trees are not without their political side as we become more aware of the need for sustainability…" and the awareness to protect and learn from them (Summerfield 2016: 64). Beale reclaims arboreal imagery as a site of resistance to visualize the possibility of regrowth and healing as well as a means for human lessons. By situating *Becoming Unbecoming* within this broader tradition, we see how Una's visual strategies resonate with environmental art. This larger context reinforces the deeply entangled relationship between narratives and ecological studies.

Drawing on ecofeminism, Una uses nature-related visuals to express her emotions and explore what it means to be human in a world that dehumanizes and ostracizes women following sexual assault. Her memoir is set against the backdrop of the Yorkshire Ripper's murders in the late 1970s, during which the serial killer targeted women in northern England. Una highlights how the police struggled to catch him, and how both law enforcement and segments of the public justified his actions by labeling the victims as prostitutes or immoral women. Thirteen women lost their lives while the police failed to apprehend the perpetrator. By paralleling her own story of sexual assault with the events surrounding the Yorkshire Ripper, Una reveals her personal battles with self-blame and slut-shaming in a society that discredits women in the face of a serial killer (Ruiz 2020 analyzes Una's memoir with emphasis on her graphic choices to tell her singular yet collective story). She illustrates how deeply she internalized societal judgment, drawing herself lying prone on the ground with tree roots growing beneath

her (Una 2015: 14). She uses hills to represent emotional obstacles, such as when she climbs a hill accompanied by an empty speech bubble, symbolizing the weight of silence and regret (Una 2015: 46). Similarly, Donovan and Ustundag mark how "the absence of words in the balloon foreshadows the cumulative effects of unspoken trauma" (2017: 229). In Una's case, the recurring imagery of trees reflect pauses in her journey, symbolizing moments of pain and loss, while also serving as extensions of her identity. Ecofeminism helps explain how Una uses nature to express the pain, loss, and isolation resulting from her trauma after society ostracized and shunned her.

Trees As Metaphors in Una's Story

In *Becoming Unbecoming*, tree imagery plays a significant role in Una's memoir. Trees, as metaphors, illustrate the lasting impact of trauma on survivors and serve as a common literary trope. The use of anthropocentrism—seeing human qualities in nature—aligns with Adele Tutter's concept of "tree-metaphoric myths," where trees symbolize mourning and loss (2011: 427). She describes "tree-metaphoric myths" as stories where women are transformed into a tree or plant-like form after a traumatic event. These traumatic events are typically tied to sexual trauma where these tree-metaphoric stories "are argued to metaphorically represent, mourn, and negate unbearable realities, including the developmental challenges of adolescence and adulthood – in particular loss" (Tutter 2011: 427). One of the primary examples from Tutter's research is the story between Apollo and Daphne—an example of the feminine and nature aligning against gender violence. However, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is full of examples of women being turned into trees from Daphne to Dryope to Philyra to Myrrha (Fantham 2004). Other mythological examples include Pitys who is pursued by Pan and then turned into a pine tree while Acantha, who is also lusted after by Apollo, becomes an acanthus plant. In these examples, women and plants form an alliance against male advances. Literary examples extend beyond mythology to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* with Lavinia whose "mutilated body is described in the speech of others as treelike, shorn, and trimmed" to even more contemporary examples like *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, which was turned into a graphic novel in 2018 (Anderson 1999; Shakespeare 1995/1592; Snider 2014: 302). Like Una, the main character in *Speak* uses tree depictions to express how she views herself and to describe the anger and grief she feels after her sexual assault (Anderson 1999). The continual use of tree-images in relation to trauma is a long tradition, which demonstrates how humans like Una relate to nature, and more specifically, trees to express pain and loss.

Humans, like Una, naturally use trees to depict trauma and represent themselves, which is a comparison directly linked to ecocriticism through anthropocentrism. While anthropocentrism and the Anthropocene are related, they are distinct: the

Anthropocene refers to how "human activity, much of it environmentally negative, can be found in the geological record," whereas anthropocentrism positions humans as the central species, or the focus of everything (Barry 2017: 264; Macfarlane 2016). This human-centered view explains why Una uses trees to symbolize herself. As Tutter notes, "The tree is an inherently pluripotent metaphorical vehicle for the affairs of man" (2011: 429). Trees mirror human growth and form—trunk, limbs, and feet—making them an inevitable metaphor for the human figure (Tutter 2011: 429). In Una's case, the tree becomes an extension of her body, symbolizing her limbs and representing her identity in various instances. Trees also offer a profound metaphor for human qualities beyond physical resemblance. As Tutter highlights, "Some trees weep; others bleed. They lose limbs and carry scars; inscribed upon, they bear witness and testimony" (2011: 429). Humans, more specifically in the previous examples, women, recognize these similarities and turn to trees to express their pain, grief, and loss. As Tzachi Zamir observes, trees "embody the long-standing steadfast resilience of an overpowering entity that cannot merely be plucked and discarded but grows and sets everlasting roots in one's mind and body" (2008: 285). This anthropocentric and anthropomorphic tendency to project human qualities onto trees, such as seeing a weeping willow's drooping branches as a symbol of mourning, is evident in how Una uses trees in *Becoming Unbecoming* to reflect her trauma and emotional experiences.

Una immediately incorporates the power of the tree on the cover of the book. Una floats above a skyline of trees with an empty speech bubble carrying her above the forest. Her legs appear to be slightly entangled in the tree's branches as she barely floats above the tree line. After reading the graphic novel, this entanglement represents Una finally being able to rise above her depression and loneliness caused by sexual trauma. Towards the end of the graphic novel, Una describes how "The past finally fell away like an echo. I found my feet and began to walk away from it" (2015: 168). She was able to create lasting friendships, return to school to earn a degree, and get married (Una 2015: 168–169). In other words, she was able to rise above the trauma, or the trees, and share her story. However, the trees are noticeably leafless, so it appears that it is either late fall or wintertime. Late fall and winter typically represent the end of the cycle of life. By deliberately using bleak-forest-like imagery, the imagery connects to Una's feelings of desperation, depression, loneliness, and unworthiness. The barren trees symbolize not only her emotional desolation, but also the cyclical nature of trauma and healing.

Una unites her words with tree-imagery to demonstrate the connection to nature as a stable force (2015: 10). In **Figure 1,** her words are captured in clouds above the tree line. The words are not connected to her body and are floating above space from one cloud to the next. The reader begins with "Una, meaning one," before Una establishes

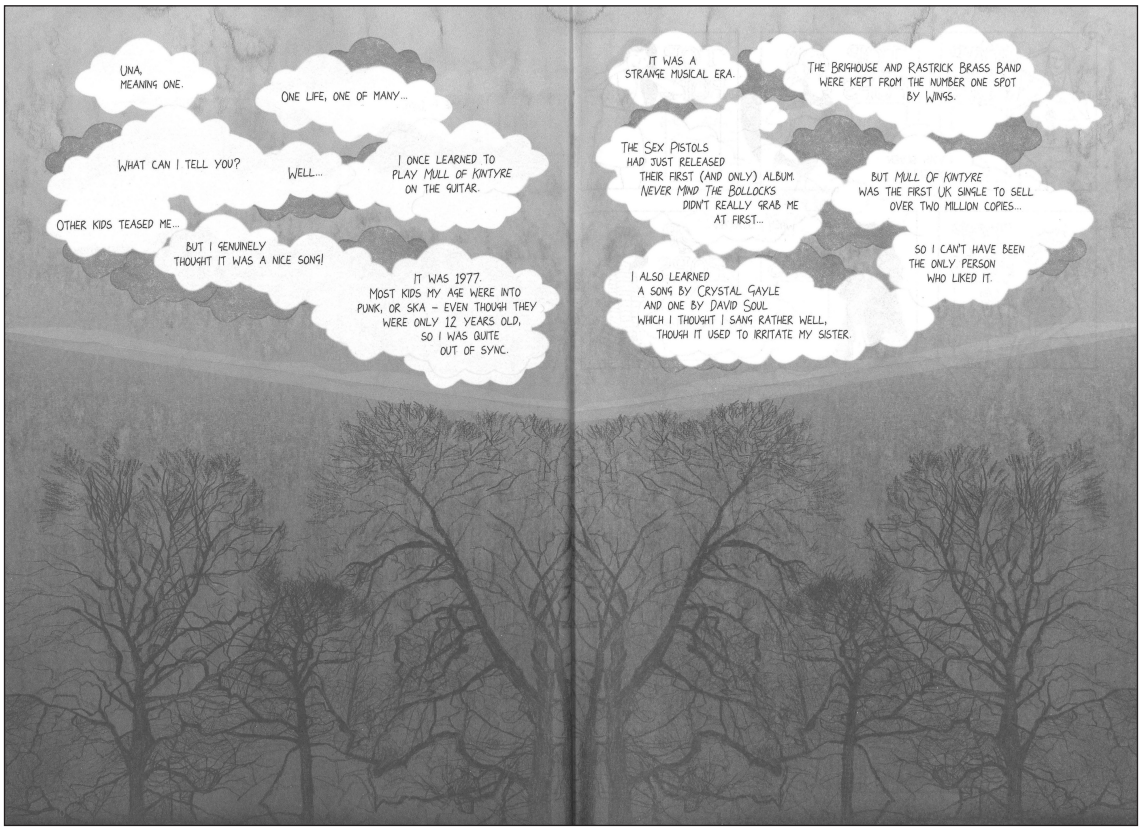

Figure 1: Una's story in *Becoming Unbecoming*. © Arsenal Pulp Press, 2015.

that this story is "One life, one of many" who are affected by sexual assault and gender violence (Una 2015: 10). Like Una on the front cover, the readers drift with her above the tree line. Once she establishes that this is her story as well as others' stories, she introduces herself and explains how "I once learned to play Mull of Kintyre on the guitar" (Una 2015: 10). Although these two images create a sense of timelessness where Una and the readers are not connected to anything but words within clouds and trees, she is a human being with thoughts, experiences, and a physical presence—even if she is not visible in these examples. The timelessness is interrupted when she shares that her childhood was during the 1970s. Suddenly, the readers are placed in a specific time and can imagine her playing guitar, listening to music, and singing. The trees in these panels are dormant. Much like the front cover, these trees are presumably depicted during the middle of winter, but their presence reminds readers of the stability of nature. She changes, but nature like clouds and trees remain relatively the same even after decades of human growth.

The tree becomes Una as she shares her story. The plant contract between Una and the tree-imagery mirrors the relationship between man and the cutting down of trees for expansion in a material world (Gibson 2018: 1). Both experienced dominations. The true tragedy of her story is presented when she says, "...adults are excused while

children are blamed," because like any other child trying to cope with a traumatic past, she acts out and is then considered the problem (Una 2015: 45). After this comment, she is seen carrying an empty, gray speech balloon— the grayness representing how it is full of unsaid and unformed words (Una 2015: 46). More important than the gray speech balloon is the tree on the following page that speaks Una's unsaid and unformed words (2015: 47). The tree is partially formed with four long outstretched limbs on the right side. Although these four limbs are long, the little branches in between these four limbs are short. The left side of the tree appears to not have any longer limbs, but these branches are shorter and more congregated. This depiction of a broken and lopsided tree demonstrates the brokenness and unevenness Una experiences as a survivor of sexual assault. She was broken into by older men and never fully recovered like a tree that is dismembered and cannot grow back the original limb or limbs despite nature's resilience. She is healing by sharing her story, but like the incongruent tree, she will never return to her original state before sexual assault.

Human-Tree Hybrids As Metaphors of Trauma and Recovery

The human-tree hybrid imagery used in *Becoming Unbecoming* reveals the complex negotiation between Una understanding herself and recalling her memories about surviving sexual trauma. Una depicts her head turning into tree branches, symbolizing how her identity has become entangled with her trauma, and how she struggles to recover from it (Una 2015: 16; **Figure 2**). The human-tree hybrid meant to represent Una is free of a panel and is the only image on the page—highlighting the importance of the comparison. The use of the tree as the head is a tragic image. A person's face is typically associated with someone's identity, which she does not have in this example—no eyes, no nose, no mouth, nothing. Along with an identity, the brain is the chamber where memories are kept. The branches, however, take over this space. As she relives some of these painful memories, perhaps it is easier for her to forget them in the lifeless branches, especially as she later recounts "Life continued...The incident with Damian was thoroughly

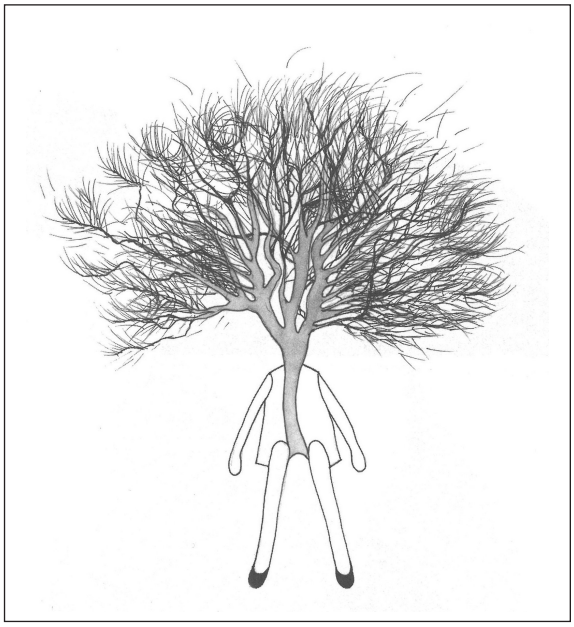

Figure 2: Una's depiction of herself as a human-tree hybrid in *Becoming Unbecoming*. © Arsenal Pulp Press, 2015.

buried" or was released into the twigs falling out of the image's branches (Una 2105: 16, 25). When Damian showed her attention, she "was wearing one of my big sister's dresses, pretending to be a princess" (Una 2015: 24). In hindsight, Una knows that she "looked like a 10-year-old in a big dress, but he pretended that he thought I was older... so I was flattered" (Una 2015: 24). At no fault of her own, she was taken advantage of by an older man. Her parents and sister were distracted with their own problems, so she kept the encounter with Damian to herself (Una 2015: 24). The floating twigs and branches could represent the memories that she no longer has or wants to keep—they are floating away just as she is sitting on the page without a panel or frame to hold her (Una 2015: 16). Similarly, Michael argues that the human-tree hybrid is connected to her sexuality: "the emergence of the tree particularly from her genital area... can be understood as visually displaying the centrality of her sexuality and her sexual suffering on her psychosexual development" (2020: 407). Despite this similarity in analysis, Michael's standpoint focuses on sexual violence and PTSD rather than through an ecofeminism lens.

Caruth (2016), Loumeau-May (2019), and Bond and Craps (2020) highlight how trauma victims often struggle to articulate their experiences through words, a challenge that Una transcends by using nature-related imagery in *Becoming Unbecoming*. Una's combination of text and visual representation to communicate trauma is one of Donovan's and Ustundag's (2017) focal points. Their conclusion, specifically, highlights the importance Una's work does in bringing attention to social recognition in trauma studies. Through an ecocritical lens, we see how Una relies on abstract visuals—like human-tree hybrids—to convey the unspeakable aspects of her trauma. Joshua Pederson's call to "focus on depictions of experiences that are temporally, physically, or ontologically distorted" is realized in Una's work, where the distortion of the human form into natural elements like trees reflects the fractured nature of trauma (2014: 339). By merging her body with trees, Una illustrates how deeply intertwined her trauma is with her sense of self, bypassing the limitations of language. Appleton and Mallan (2018: 59) and Oostdijk (2018: 87) argue that the combination of abstract art and text in graphic novels allows trauma victims to express experiences that evade verbal articulation. For Una, the use of abstract nature imagery—such as tree branches replacing her head—visually externalizes her internal suffering in ways that words alone cannot. Loumeau-May (2019) supports this by explaining that art offers a therapeutic outlet for trauma victims to represent their experiences in concrete form. Empty speech balloons in *Becoming Unbecoming* emphasize Una's inability to speak about her trauma, but her use of nature-related imagery compensates for this silence, enabling her to process and communicate her pain. As Loumeau-May notes, images transform the "visual and sensorial memories" of trauma into a medium that allows

victims to reclaim their narratives (2019: 88). For Una, nature becomes a critical part of that transformation—her fragmented body and its connection to the earth symbolize the deep-rooted nature of her trauma and her struggle for recovery. The power of these visuals lies in their ability to convey emotions and memories that defy verbal expression, making graphic narratives a vital tool in understanding how Una expresses and navigates her trauma through the natural world.

The arboreal imagery in *Becoming Unbecoming* functions as both a metaphor and as a reflection of deeper ecofeminist concerns about human-nonhuman interconnectedness, particularly between women and nature. As Plumwood (1993) explains, "Nature, as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason [which aligns with the masculine], includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilized, the nonhuman world, matter, physicality, and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness" (19). These same qualities have historically been used to define women, which reinforces their symbolic and ideological connection to nature. While Plumwood acknowledges that this perspective may seem outdated, she argues that it "...forms the basis for a critical ecological feminism in which women consciously position themselves *with* nature" (1993: 21). This paper adopts that view, challenging anthropocentric frameworks that separate women from nature. Together, women and nature, or Una and natural imagery, resist exclusion and domination in a male-dominated society. Ultimately, Una's visual metamorphosis strengthens this connection by using arboreal imagery to depict the shared struggle of women and nature against domination.

Hills and Roots As Metaphors for Emotional Struggle

The use of trees and human-tree hybrids are reflections of pain and growth whereas hills are metaphors representing emotional obstacles. As noted by Pedri, these hills represent Una's first encounter with sexual assault and her inability to process what has happened to her (2018: 308). Hills represent obstacles that she must confront on her path to healing. Returning to the image of Una climbing a hill with an empty speech balloon on her back, this image indicates the weight of her silence and the emotional burden of trauma. Even though Una is hunched over from the burden of carrying her silence with her, there is hope as she reaches the top of the hill. She has accomplished the hardest feat—gathering her courage to tell her story, face the past, and share the collective experience of gender-based violence. Pedri's analysis of the hill neglects to account for trees that continually make an appearance either on the hills or in other abstract images. The lone tree at the top of the hill represents several possibilities. The tree could represent a halfway point on her journey to uncover her past and testify on behalf of herself and other women. The tree could also mirror her loneliness because

it is alone on the hill just like Una. Unlike on the front cover, the tree in the first image of the graphic memoir has leaves and represents life, so this tree might also symbolize how Una is on her journey to restoration and healing.

Although Una introduces a human-tree hybrid, Una incorporates an abstract image with tree-like roots that presents a complex image of her being degraded by society (Una 2015: 14, 16). In the image, she is lying on the ground where the viewer can see the earth underneath her (**Figure 3**). Her hair has grown into the ground like roots. This imagery continues to her wrists and ankles where a black mass is wrapped around her appendages, which binds her to the ground. The bondages appear to grow underneath her like black, ominous blobs that extend into tree-like roots. The ominous blobs mirror the imagery of her reputation being stained (Una 2015: 51). If this imagery connects to her reputation being ruined, then the appendages are like ink that connect her to the ground and grow and spread beneath the earth (Una 2015: 51). The blobs and the tree-like roots are about to meet the next layer of earth, which leads to a darker, deeper layer of Una's pain, isolation, and shame. Her eyes are closed, and her hands appear to be fisted. With her eyes closed, it might seem like she is in a state of serenity enjoying her surroundings, but her fisted hands and bonds hint at a darker message. She is captive to her emotional pain. The speech bubble on the page is not placed by her mouth and is instead on the edge of the page, which demonstrates a separation between speaker and words—a dissociation between the person and the spoken word. The speech bubble is turned away from her and is even higher than the cloud as she says, "I soon learned to lower my gaze" (Una 2015: 14). Society failed to help her overcome trauma, and instead made it worse as she was shamed, pushed aside, and forgotten. Instead of overcoming her trauma at an early age, she learned to keep her pain contained (containment of trauma is also discussed by Oostdijk 2018) within herself where it grew unseen like the roots of a tree.

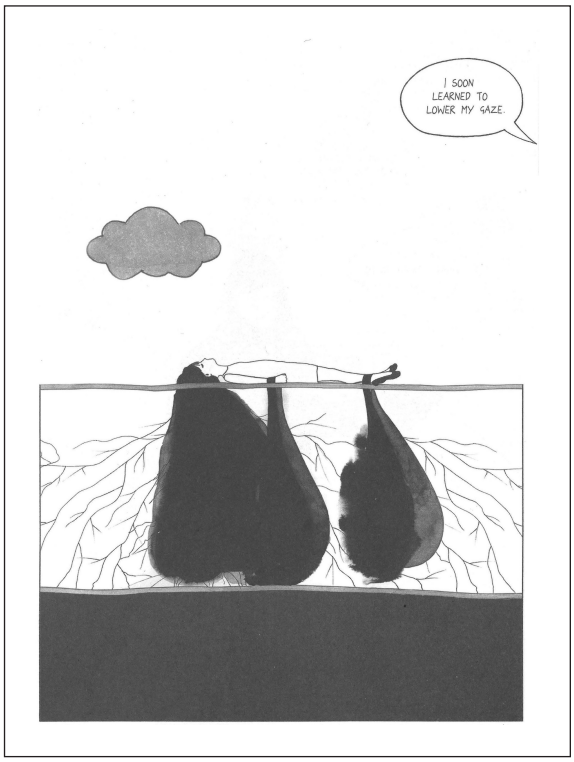

Figure 3: Una's depiction of herself in *Becoming Unbecoming*. © Arsenal Pulp Press, 2015.

Una creates a similar image of bondage to demonstrate passivity and victimhood in high school. While at school, she came to an assembly "and was greeted by a baying mob" (Una 2015: 81). Una never discloses why she was met by a 'baying mob,' but the readers are led to believe that it had something to do with her supposedly promiscuous behavior and the rumors that spread about her reputation (Una 2015: 80). She describes how a group of boys at school sang the pop song "Embarrassment" by Madness (Una 2015: 80). She was a target of hate and misunderstanding. Meaning to help her from the baying mob, her teacher "came to take me quietly out of [the] assembly," so Una would not be subject to the whispers, stares, and judgment (Una 2015: 81). This depiction shows Una once again lying prone on the ground (**Figure 4**). In both images (**Figure 3** and **Figure 4**), she is outside lying on the ground. She is not in her bedroom or inside a building, but is instead, outside among nature. Nature, or green space, has a healing element to it (Bhui 2018). On the other hand, perhaps being outside makes her more vulnerable since anyone can see her. Unlike the first image with the black bonds holding her to the ground, these bonds are gone, and the roots are no longer apparent. Once again, the viewer can see the ground underneath where the earth takes up most of the frame than the sky above her. Unlike the first image of her lying prone on the ground, she is closer to the top of the page rather than towards the bottom and her words are not contained in a speech bubble as she states, "So I became an unreliable witness and a perfect victim" (Una 2015: 82). It seems that no matter what she does and even when her teacher tries to help her get out of an uncomfortable situation, she will always be viewed as the problem, especially since no one tried to stop the baying mob—the real problem. Even though there are differences between the root-like images, the meaning remains about the same. She continues to be trapped within her own pain and grief.

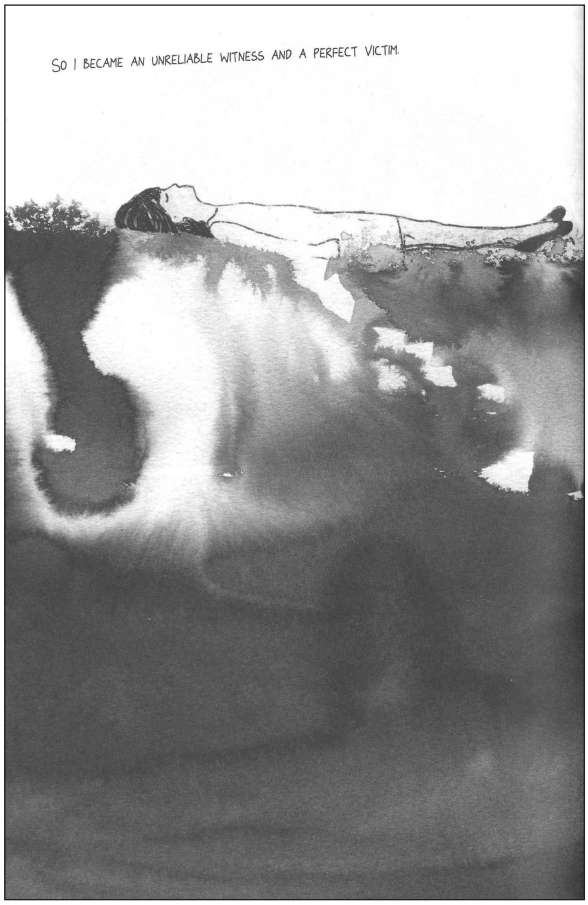

Figure 4: Una in *Becoming Unbecoming*. © Arsenal Pulp Press, 2015.

The recurring imagery of roots highlight how nature serves as both a representation of trauma's lasting impact and a potential source of healing. The roots in both figures "symbolize both the lasting effect of the trauma and yet the possibility of moving beyond it, as a being affected but not destroyed" (Snider 2014: 304). Although the roots and bonds are holding her to the ground, the roots also signify growth, and hopefully, healing as she processes and expresses her grief, pain, and anger. Michael (2020) also gives voice to these images of rooted-bondedness and their importance to Una's story. Michael describes Una as "sleeping or dead-like," which mirrors the emotional turmoil raging in Una despite being outwardly silent (2020: 401). Although the depictions of Una have a dark side, as noted by Michael, the roots are also what makes a tree strong and immovable. The act of creating these images, although dark and oftentimes disturbing, allows Una a chance to depict and recreate herself, experiences, and memories in a safe and therapeutic way to "contemplate it, which empowers the healing process," because she "is no longer controlled by the emotional impact of the image but has achieved some distance and is in control of it" (Loumeau-May 2019: 90). Drawing has the potential to restore people to peace and lead them to healing (Loumeau-May 2019; Oostdijk 2018; and Szép 2020), which is for Una, connected to natural imagery like roots, branches, twigs, and trees.

Nightmares in Nature As a Reflection of Trauma

Una's recurring nightmares involving wolves, grassy hills, and dark, shadowy landscapes further explore the role of nature in expressing trauma. These dreams are visually dominated by natural elements that represent fear and danger. The wolves chasing her symbolize predatory men, and the barren landscapes mirror her feelings of isolation and vulnerability. Trauma is often repressed and manifests itself through nightmares, hallucinations, sleepwalking, and flashbacks (Bonds and Craps 2020: 4, 22). She begins by explaining how "The thing about recurring nightmares is that they develop over time. I first started having my dream when I was about ten years old" (Una 2015: 92). The reader is left assuming this dream began after her first sexual encounter with Damian. She claims that she was "pursued by something unseen…" but she draws herself caught in the jaws of a wolf. The wolf is meant to represent Damian—at least at first. Later, the wolf could represent any of the men who sexually abused her and perhaps even the passiveness of society toward gender violence, which is equally as damaging. On the next page, she continues to run away from the pursuer. She shows herself stumbling in the grass with the wolf catching up to her (Una 2015: 93). Surrounded by shadows and grass, she is alone with no one to help her. It is her and nature against the pursuer(s). Eventually, the wolf howls at an unpictured moon while she glances back before she is seen lying on the ground and then, yet again, carrying a

giant, empty speech balloon (Una 2015: 94–95). The empty speech balloon mirrors how she feels in real life where words cannot help her. As three wolves join the chase, she continues to display her helplessness as she hauls her empty speech balloon over her shoulder (Una 2015: 96–97). Suddenly, the panels become darker with a man holding a knife in the shadows (Una 2015: 98). The fear behind this recurring nightmare has finally taken its true form in the man (or men) who wants to hurt her. She continues to struggle and army crawls "through tight spaces," determined to find a sanctuary (Una 2015: 100–101). This recurring nightmare, which occupies ten pages in the memoir, underscores how deeply trauma is embedded in her psyche, both in her waking and subconscious mind.

Healing Through Nature, Art, and Graphic Narratives

Ecotherapy and art therapy suggests that nature, particularly tree imagery, has therapeutic potential for trauma survivors. Jessi Snider (2014) explores art therapy, trauma, and tree-images in the article "'Be the Tree': Classical Literature, Art Therapy, and Transcending Trauma in *Speak*." Snider argues how young adult literature is important to teach and in understanding how young adults can use art therapy to heal from trauma. Although Snider focuses on the novel *Speak*, this same argument applies to *Becoming Unbecoming*. Danielle Meyer and Richard Ponton provide a healthy tree metaphor for counselors to use while helping clients heal from trauma (2006). What makes their article interesting is not just the emphasis on counselors being proactive in recognizing vicarious traumatization (though that is important), but their use of a tree metaphor for self-care, which highlights the powerful connection between humans and nature-related imagery in the healing process. They use the framework of a tree to lead to healthy counseling: recognizing internal and external parasites, tending to vibrant branches, and ensuring the soil is rich for deep roots (Meyer and Ponton 2006: 194–198). Their research enhances the importance in teaching and spreading awareness of the benefits of art therapy and tree-metaphoric stories like *Speak* and *Becoming Unbecoming* to help trauma victims.

While ecotherapy highlights nature's therapeutic role in trauma recovery, ecofeminism expands this perspective by examining how women's connection to nature is shaped by broader sociocultural power structures. Una merges her physical body with nature in many instances—reflecting how nature and women are viewed as the same through an ecofeminist lens. Both nature and women are victims of domination and violence. For example, tree roots and branches, while initially representing the weight of trauma, also symbolize growth, regeneration, and strength she gains from her experiences. As described by Loumeau-May, "as a nonverbal, sensory-based, enactive

modality that has narrative and symbolic potential, the act of making art within a therapeutic relationship can access aspects of trauma experiences that have evaded verbal processing," so art can help trauma victims (2019: 87). As reflected through ecofeminism, these collective examples surrounding sexual assault and gender violence can show others that they are not alone and that their voices are restored (Michael 395). Together, eco and art therapy, graphic narratives, and ecofeminism can serve as a therapeutic way to heal.

Comics and graphic novels uniquely embody vulnerability and empathy, which offers a visual pathway to healing. In *Comics and the Body: Drawing, Reading, and Vulnerability* (2020), Eszter Szép explores the ethical dimensions of bodily vulnerability in comics, arguing that "...drawing, reading, and the interaction enabled by nonfiction comics are rooted in, and offer means to find out more about the experience of being vulnerable" (2). This interaction between artist, author, and reader creates a dynamic space where vulnerability is not a weakness but a form of strength— an opportunity to externalize trauma and cultivate empathy. Oostdijk echoes this argument: "It is the dual accomplishment of finding both appropriate words and images that allow the graphic memoirists to fill these spaces with a new narrative that does justice to both the pain of the past, but also the possibilities of the future" (2018: 87). In *Becoming Unbecoming*, Una's visual narrative and text exemplifies this interplay. The drawn lines, fragmented compositions, and evolving character representations make the experience of trauma more tangible by immersing the reader in Una's emotional and psychological struggles. By witnessing her metamorphosis through these visual elements, readers engage with her story on a visceral level. This unique experience to comic and graphic novel story telling reinforces the power of comics and art as a medium for expression and understanding vulnerability, trauma, and healing.

Conclusion

Ecofeminism offers a compelling analysis of *Becoming Unbecoming* by revealing the profound relationship between natural imagery, women, and trauma. By focusing on the embodied use of natural elements, the graphic memoir shows how survivors of sexual violence can use the natural world to express and process pain. Nature functions as a metaphoric mirror to Una's emotional turmoil, which represents the complexity of her trauma while also offering a path to healing. The tree imagery reflects Una's journey from trauma to recovery by illustrating how trauma can be both grounding and transformative. Hills and landscapes symbolize the emotional obstacles she must navigate. The recurring presence of nature in her nightmares underscores how deeply trauma is intertwined with the subconscious, and how natural elements in art

and graphic narratives can provide a medium for experiences that often defy words. Through an ecofeminist lens, Una's depiction of nature not only conveys her suffering but also acts as a source of strength and regeneration.

This analysis does not merely catalog instances of tree and nature related imagery in *Becoming Unbecoming* but instead situates Una's visual storytelling within ecofeminist frameworks between the human-nonhuman in women-nature depictions. By using recurring nature-related imagery to depict both trauma and recovery, Una does not just reference nature—she actively reconfigures it as part of her embodied experience from gender violence. This metamorphic embodiment challenges patriarchal and anthropocentric notions that cast nature and women as passive. This approach enriches the understanding of trauma by showing that the physical environment in images and artwork can be an integral part of emotional recovery (as explored by Bhui). By intertwining her personal narrative with environmental imagery, Una reclaims her identity and demonstrates the healing potential of nature in the face of profound emotional pain. In this way, *Becoming Unbecoming* aligns with a broader tradition of using arboreal imagery to explore human experiences. This ecocritical reading emphasizes that recovery from trauma, much like the cycles of nature, involves both destruction and renewal—highlighting the power of the natural world not only to reflect human suffering but to also help survivors reclaim their lives—to discover hope for a better future (Oostdijk 2018).

Una's graphic memoir is a reality for people searching for ways to safely express and overcome their own painful pasts. After years of healing, she ends by sharing how she is happy or as "happy" as she can be knowing that "too many girls have to fight in silence, alone, to stay afloat" (Una 2015: 171). Because ecocriticism, and in extension ecofeminism, invites humans to understand themselves through the physical environment, these nature-related images in conjunction with human qualities demonstrate the power in depicting pain, loss, and healing through an embodied experience (Szép 2020). Although this paper focuses on sexual assault and gender violence through examples from *Becoming Unbecoming*, the scope of traumatic scenarios that are covered in the representation between human beings and their physical environment, more specifically how humans use nature imagery, is vast. Donovan (2017), Ustundag (2017), Appleton (2018), Mallan (2018), Michael (2020), and Ruiz (2020) analyzed *Becoming Unbecoming* through a trauma lens, but ecofeminism reveals how nature plays an active role in emotional recovery. This analysis of *Becoming Unbecoming* reveals the therapeutic potential of nature and power of the transformative embodiment in graphic storytelling, offering a unique perspective on the interconnectedness of trauma, healing, and the natural world.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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