

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

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ARTICLE



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

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### 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 microaggression 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

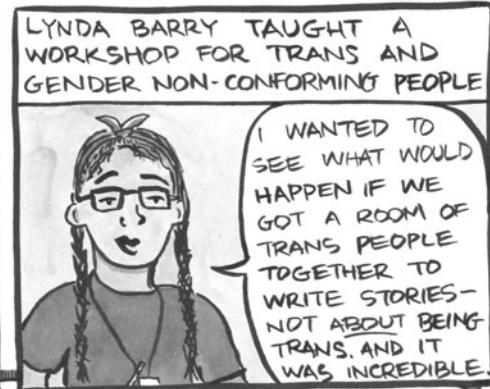


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# DRAWING THE BODY IN: A COMIC ESSAY ON TRANS MOBILITY & MATERIALITY <sup>by KC COUNCILOR</sup>





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



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."

I WAS DRAWING MYSELF, CREATING MY IMAGE, AND WITHOUT REALIZING WHAT WAS HAPPENING...



I RECEIVED THE MESSAGE

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

BEFORE



AFTER



# 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.



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

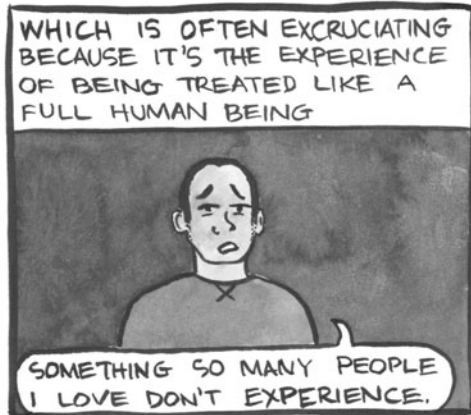


NO NEO-NAZI WOULD SPORT A RAINBOW RIBBON, RIGHT?



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







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.





# 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 EVERY-DAY LIVES.

K VIVIANE NAMASTE

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



GRAPHIC JOURNALIST JOE SACCO HAS SAID, "IT WAS REPULSIVE DOING THAT BOOK [FOOTNOTES IN GAZA]... DRAWING IS A WEIRD THING BECAUSE YOU JUST INHABIT 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."



COPIED FROM JOE SACCO'S FOOTNOTES IN GAZA, P. 235.

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<sup>1</sup> TRAUMA?



ABOUT TRANS EXPERIENCE WITHOUT TALKING ABOUT ROXSANA 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 & IMPRISONMENT.



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



BASED ON ART BY FAVIANNA RODRIGUEZ

CALLING THE LIE ON RIGID BINARIES: MAN-WOMAN, US-THEM, "CITIZEN"- "ALIEN,"

NO PRIDE FOR SOME OF US WITHOUT LIBERATION FOR ALL OF US.



BASED ON MICAH BAZANT'S POSTER OF MARSHA P. JOHNSON

AND DEMANDING RADICAL NEW SYSTEMS.



CECE McDONALD

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](http://favianna.com) and more from Micah Bazant at [micahbazant.com](http://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.

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