

**AN EXPLORATION OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL, THE FEMALE BODY AND
TRAUMATIC MEMORY**

By

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Abstract

This paper discusses my research and artistic practice during the MFA program. My research is focused on how semi-autobiographical narratives in the form of graphic novels facilitate self-exploration and trauma representation. Through my art projects *Tentacles* and *A Bouquet for You*, I explore and reconnect with my female body and my Chinese culture. Together with graphic and narrative experiments conducted in comic form, I reexamine the relationship between myself as the author, my body, and my memories.

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Utero

Because of the connection my research has to the female body and reproduction, I decided to refer to sections of my research discussed in this paper as specific organs that exist in a reproductive sequence, and relating to the biological human conceiving process. Often seen in medical terms as a prefix, the word utero commonly represents the uterus, the womb, the female reproductive organ. In this chapter I will make a brief introduction of this thesis support document and my thesis project.

My MFA practice explores the personal relationship between myself, my female body and the art form of the graphic novel. In this paper, the specific term comics often refer to a shorter project or a specific section of pages from a bigger project, while the term graphic novel or sometimes graphic narrative refers to the entirety of a project larger in scale. My projects will all be discussed throughout the paper with the assumption that they will be printed and published in a book form when finished.

In the creative research I conducted during the first year of the MFA program, I started to conceptually explore the tangibility and physicality of comics as an art form. More specifically, the comics I've made become a form of connecting with myself, the world and my readers. To a certain extent, my past works are autobiographical. It is true that I make my works mainly with the intention of expressing and discovering myself, but only with partial honesty. While in the first semester, I was exploring the relationship between truth-telling and artistic representation, slowly, with some experimentation, the exploration later became research about the lack of an "erotic body" in my comics and how telling half-truths has been as a way of searching for an authentic body.

Jean-Luc Nancy's article "Corpus" ^[1] develops a discourse around body, signs and meaning. A body is touchable, sharable, measurable, extendible, and also impenetrable. As my work addresses, a body is given, unable to generate itself into existence relying purely on internal will power, and it is external in its unarguable physical existence in relation to our mind. However, the first step to recognizing and understanding one's impenetrable body is through

the body's manifestation of its interior. Nancy mentions that the actions of writing and reading are a tactile gesture more than anything, and I have been considering whether my graphic novel is a visual caress, an extension of my body touching outwards to my readers and simultaneously gazing inwards.

My newest collection of short comics, which I developed as my second creative research, depicts my own traumatic experiences. The project connects me to a concept derived from Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" ^[2]. Erotic power is an energy that is connected deeply to our ability to feel pleasure and to form an intimate and responsible relationship with our spiritual and physical needs. By exploring our capacity for joy, erotic power grants us the motivation to evaluate our lives.

My own works, while being generally devoid of the traditional definition of erotic elements, are predominantly about individuals' psychological needs. More specifically, they are about how desires are repressed, and the subversive power such deprivation of fulfilment possesses. The characters in my stories are always isolated and withdrawn from their pleasures and needs because of either some environmental limitations or restrictions originating from within themselves. These repressions not only obstruct their understanding of their erotic power but also remove their agency and means of accessing that power. As a result, the characters are often seen displaying behaviours that can be considered as euphemisms of poorly performed attempts to reach for their erotic power. They live with numbed pleasure and experiential paralysis and even their actions of rebellion are led astray by self-denial and self-destruction. Sometimes they reach a realization of their needs, but their erotic power is already distorted and contaminated. This is reflected in depictions from characters from my earlier work, *Tentacles*, and in an auto-biographical artifice of myself in *A Bouquet for You*.

Expanding and building upon these two key concepts, I developed my research question: How can I reconnect to my detached female and Chinese cultural body through the creation of comics? I will introduce more comprehensively in this paper, the theories, research and principles that have informed the creation of *Tentacles* and *A Bouquet for You*.

Amniotic Sac

The Amniotic sac is the container of amniotic fluid which encompasses the foetus during conception. While it surrounds, protects and exchanges between the mother and the embryo, it remains constant and grounding for the existence of both entities. In this chapter I will explain my position in depth in relation to my creative projects.

Spending the majority of my life in China as a child born after 1995, my culture is deeply influential to my artistic practice. My experience of growing up in this socialist country has in various ways shaped my approach to research, engagement and the examination of my society. Although in the collection of my first year MFA work titled *Tentacles* I never specifically named a cultural reference, my Chinese experience has unarguably penetrated into the work.

Growing up in an era not long after the Chinese economic reform in 1978 when Western culture had been slowly introduced to the Chinese public, the general understanding and media depiction of the West was filled with curiosity and confusion. A common philosophy about Western society in China during my youth was that there was a dichotomy between China and the “West” which was often reinforced by mainstream media as well as school education. The two cultures of the Chinese (the “East”) and the “West” were considered as always in conflict with each other and a broad definition of Western culture was commonly used as a comparison when developing our own theories on Chinese culture. This was a mind-set that could be easily encountered in multiple mundane situations and even sometimes in academic discussions. Growing up in this environment emphasised the existence and the concept of the “West” as a foreign entity that I was constantly aware of in my younger years.

Experiences and memories with the influence of this dichotomy had essentially decentralised my own culture within my home country, along with my personal understandings of the Chinese culture. It is also important to know that my younger years took place during a period not long after China started to reintroduce itself to the world as a special socialist country, and with the development of internet technology Chinese citizens were able to exchange information with other countries globally.

Accompanied by a sense of doubt regarding my culture and experience, my education during adulthood, however, was mainly completed in “Western” countries. While living as a Chinese person in North America, I familiarised myself with frequent feelings of torn detachments from both my experience with Chinese culture and my understandings of it. It was absolutely clear that there were differences and distances between my engagement with these separate cultures, but the differences were not as simplistic as the well-known dichotomy seemed to inform. The realisation of the decentralisation of my culture prevailed much more strongly the longer I lived in North America. The works I make here are almost always about China and my culture and I believe that could be because I am trying to recentralise or reposition my culture in my personal philosophical space quite intuitively without a clear statement.

The time I’ve spent and the knowledge I’ve received here in North America has inevitably created a gap between my adult self and my younger self and all my relationships that came with it. I was also constantly reminded of my difference in this “Western” society as well, both passively and actively, especially in academia. I am now stuck in this distance from both places that is impossible to ignore anymore, as it has become an unwelcome constant in my life. My relationship with Chinese culture was always under the lens of a colonised and Westernised society that due to intricate historical reasons appeared to be rather isolated from the world, and that isolation has shadowed and accompanied me on a personal level through most of my educational life. I have decided to envisage such displacement within my art practice and to consciously recentralise the relationship I have with my culture.

Embryo

An embryo is a foetus in its early development stage when vital visceral structures are developed. I have decided to employ this term when referring to my two current projects because of the possibility of growth in the future. In this chapter, I will thoroughly describe my two graphic narratives created during the MFA program.

Project *Tentacles*

Trained as a comic artist, my practice is focused on the creation of comics and graphic novels. The culmination of my first year of study in the MFA program, *Tentacles* is a black-and-white graphic novel comprised of fifty-five pages. *Tentacles* uses conventional graphic novel methods: it is drawn fully with pencils by hand and touched-up digitally.

The two prologues that preceded this project were two short coloured digital works in which I had abandoned my traditional drawing process. The return to my old hand-drawing way of making comics for *Tentacles* was not a habitual or unconsidered decision, but rather a reconnection and re-examination of my most familiar drawing gestures. The gestures, positions, and movements of my body are integrated into the drawing process and recorded with my pencils. Presenting as a meta-comic depicting an autobiographical comic artist's journey of creating, *Tentacles* is the third and the last work in the series of my critique of state cultural moderation, especially in its control of cultural production and education by the state. I have relied on my personal experience when constructing this work, but the specific state is left ambiguous in this section of my work.

Tentacles Prologue I

Taking place in an old Chinese apartment building, *Tentacles Prologue I* depicts the story of young children facing the horror of being consumed by an unknown entity residing in their living space, while the adults refuse to validate that fear. I chose to create this narrative by following a young boy's journey of going downstairs to the gate of the apartment building, then coming back to his fate of being eaten by his home.

Both the character and the readers are only given limited and repetitive views of the environmental setting, while the characters are composed of ambiguous shapes with minimal identifiable features. The dialogs are deliberately restrained as well, and some of the visceral images are intentionally manipulated graphically to create a distance between the fictional brutality and the readers.



Siyi An. *Tentacles Prologue I*. p. 6.

Throughout project *Tentacles*, my artistic style varies to reflect different parts of the story. Drawing inspiration from old English textbooks for Chinese children, *Tentacles Prologue I* adopts a childish, simplistic language that divulges little information both graphically and textually even with the horrifying events happening around the characters.

To reflect this, I chose to use a slightly didactic tone for the narration and conversational dialogues. Combined with an almost architectural visual style, I try to create an aloof and detached point of view for the readers to evoke a sense of doubt regarding the factuality of the brutal events taking place in this constructed space. By dividing panels into uniformly small boxes of fixed shots of an old apartment building, the third-person perspective suggests that the readers are at a place of observing as a detached spectator.



Siyi An. *Tentacles Prologue I*. Cover page.

Tentacles Prologue II

The perspective changes in *Tentacles Prologue II*, and is mostly told in first-person with a Chinese girl as the protagonist. She is often shown watching her own body in the mirror and

trying to battle for control with her organs and body parts. Compared to the first part of the story, the monochrome style is a reduction of colour which also represents the reduction of people's humanity as a consequence of cultural control from the state.



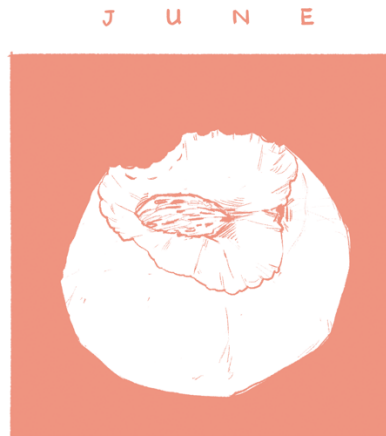
Siyi An. *Tentacles Prologue II*. p. 23

The graphic novel as a medium, with either printed or digital distribution, contains the quality of privacy and freedom for the readers. As shown in the image above, an intimate moment is being represented by digitally drawn lines. The readers are watching the young woman watching her own reflection, while being unaware of her audience. This indirect interaction between the characters and my readers is essential for this part of my project because it allows the reader to be in a position of power and to gaze at the protagonist as she's gazing at herself. From the image above the readers can see the reflection of the protagonist brushing her tongue.

This scene and many other similar scenes from *Tentacles Prologue II* put the readers in the position of an intruder who's peeking at a private moment. The protagonist especially in this work is, ultimately, only drawn marks on paper to be interpreted, in the subjective minds of either the reader or the author, as the fictional existence who is an object being showcased that is unable to give consent.

The page-turning aspect of my medium is an embodied movement that parallels the reducing action depicted in the artwork: A physical thinning and consummation of the printed material during the reading process becomes the readers' unwittingly participatory action, serving as a metaphor for the protagonist's digestive reduction of her own body. With each page turned, the reader consumes the content. The turning of the page echoes the protagonist's actions in the story.

As a work with four chapters in total, the first three chapters are represented as peaches, grapes and oranges. Each of these chapters contains three smaller sections which are named by months chronologically. The naming and the images accompanying these names become another indicator for the consuming action, in the sense that fruits are being eaten, and time is being spent. I have experimented with storytelling methods in these three fruit chapters where the narrative presentation varies from chapter to chapter to metaphorically utilise the different ways the three varieties of fruit are consumed or reduced. The narration of the peach chapter follows the process of skin peeling, meat-eating, then core revealing; In the grape chapter the stories are divided into equal segments that parallel each other but happen in a linear timeline; The orange chapter however is an accumulation of unnaturally cut/consumed scenes with a leftover skin as the result. With each fruit chapter, I have assigned a specific colour to serve as the visual connection from the story to the fruit, and they are combined digitally to render the colour of the fourth and the final chapter in a rusty red. Stripping away the fruit metaphors in the last chapter reveals the visceral cannibalism the young woman committed of herself and her foetus.



Siyi An. *Tentacles Prologue II*. p. 7

The two prologues of *Tentacles* are not done chronologically, as the second story was driven by a more primitive fear of mine thus was created the first after the concept for the cultural moderation was confirmed.

Tentacles

The linear timeline of my movements as the artist during this project is split between references to my own image (a young woman in front of a mirror) and drawing images from my memory (the old apartment building). The third part of *Tentacles* again went back to using myself as a reference. As the only black and white comics of this project, the deprivation of colour is another element to describe the reductive consequences of cultural moderation.



Siyi An. *Tentacles*. p. 40,41.

This reduction of the self is then further internalised by the “author”-character in the story when her body, memory and expectations are challenged by the existence of the “character”. I sought to honestly record my movements, decisions and thoughts during the creative process to better incorporate these into the character of the “author”. And while my thoughts and emotions had transitioned onto paper as planned, my actions--including the labour of making comics--were ignored and were deliberately insufficiently presented in the form of drawings and panels. This neglect of the comic itself is tightly related to my current research where I seek to reconnect myself with this form.

The starting point for almost any of my school projects is the format of the graphic novel, and usually they begin with an abstract concept. But accompanying these concepts, many images and visual aspects of the project simultaneously develop in my imagination. I can depict the general tone of the project and a few detailed moments that are essential for my work. The first step of my process, by comparison, is similar to the process by which a sculptor carves a dissembled human figure out of a piece of stone. Because my chosen medium is primarily a visual experience, organizing the creative process of abstraction in my head is absolutely crucial for my works to come into existence.

Being deeply influenced by traditional Chinese art and literature, the prominent use of metaphor in my work is a way of carving physical elements out of the conceptual rock that is my imagination. I use the bodies of objects and life forms to create symbols and signifiers of things that I am incapable of speaking about plainly. This euphemistic redirection is my attempt to tell the truth but also reflects my inability to do so. It is my unmasking, without unveiling. However, in *Tentacles*, along with its two prologues, because I have never closely examined personal issues in my work before, my emotional reaction towards the subject both fuelled and restrained my expression at the early stages of the production.

After exploring my internal responses with journaling notes and writings, I started composing a rough structure for the storyline. But to my own surprise, I was unable to envision the full picture of the story. This was a work I could only understand by following the process. An

omnipresent author's perspective was no longer applicable as I had given my control of the characters and stories away to my unconsciousness when I projected myself into this work.



Siyi An. *Tentacles*. p. 7.

At first, I followed my habitual process. I tried to predict my characters' actions. I started making layouts and writing scripts for the first few pages because I had limited time. It did not occur to me that this inability to foresee was the solid consequence of my choice of subject, and it was unavoidable. My unwillingly divergence and my reluctant pencilling was not an accident caused by a shortage of time. Without the full picture ahead, the layout phase was crowded with doubt for I could not use as many comic techniques and effective panel arrangements as I used to when I lacked the personal investment in the story. But the uncertainty

forced me to be less technical and focused on my body in that present. After making a few pages of layouts, I started to plan them out on a larger paper. I made a conscious decision of reducing the amount of my panels because I felt that the full-page panels of my past works were limiting. The pencilled drawings came then rather smoothly. The entire process consisted of this back and forth movement and headspace between planning and labour. The labour of drawing squares, lines, letters, blocks of black consists of such highly repetitive movements that I can barely retrace my exact body at those times. This mindlessness which overtook my rational consciousness felt dangerous in its surrender of control.

Accompanying the paralleled labour visually manifesting itself on the page, the story arc following the author character also reflects my own state of mind during the process of creating this work. The “author” in the story continues to dehumanize the “character” by reducing its existence purely to its function while ignoring the potential signification of its “birth” and rejecting the visceral connection between the “author” themselves and the “character”. This reflection of my own fear and hesitation of touching my inner self, while earning for the acquirement of my erotic body, was presented with metaphoric images and sequences.

The final stage of this piece was not to be presented as pencilled papers but instead as scanned digital images which may be understood as more valuable from a utilitarian perspective in this modern world with its potentially wider reproductive value and digitalised distribution. The pencilled pages on which I had recorded most of my movements remained in my folder and were never taken out again.

A Bouquet for You

(The description of this work is incomplete because it's still a work in progress. -)

Transitioning from the first year of the MFA program to the second year, I found myself at loss after the creation of project *Tentacles*. While the struggle of my estranged detached body stayed unresolved, I felt that my hesitant expression in *Tentacles* has exhausted my fear towards the actions of control and being controlled. Horror, one of the most commonly used words in

critiques commenting on the entire three parts of project *Tentacles*, summarises my intention and emotion towards the willful dehumanising of pieces of myself manifested in my first-year project. Inspired by artists like Alison Bechdel who I will be introducing more thoroughly in the following chapters, I felt at this stage of my studies that I was ready to reclaim control of my experience of dehumanisation instead of rejecting my traumatic memory, and this has led to my new project *A Bouquet for You*.

A Bouquet for You is a collection of short comics with each chapter named *A Flower for You*. I have made the choice of creating each chapter with different artistic styles as a way of experimenting with visual narrations in the limited time I have through the MFA program. The story is an autobiographical record of my memory of a moment when I experienced child sexual abuse. It was the first time I realised that my body is a sexual object. I remember that moment as the beginning of my sexually related trauma. Using flowers as a visual and textual indicator for the female reproductive system, I present this work to my readers and myself with the hope of reclaiming my erotic body.

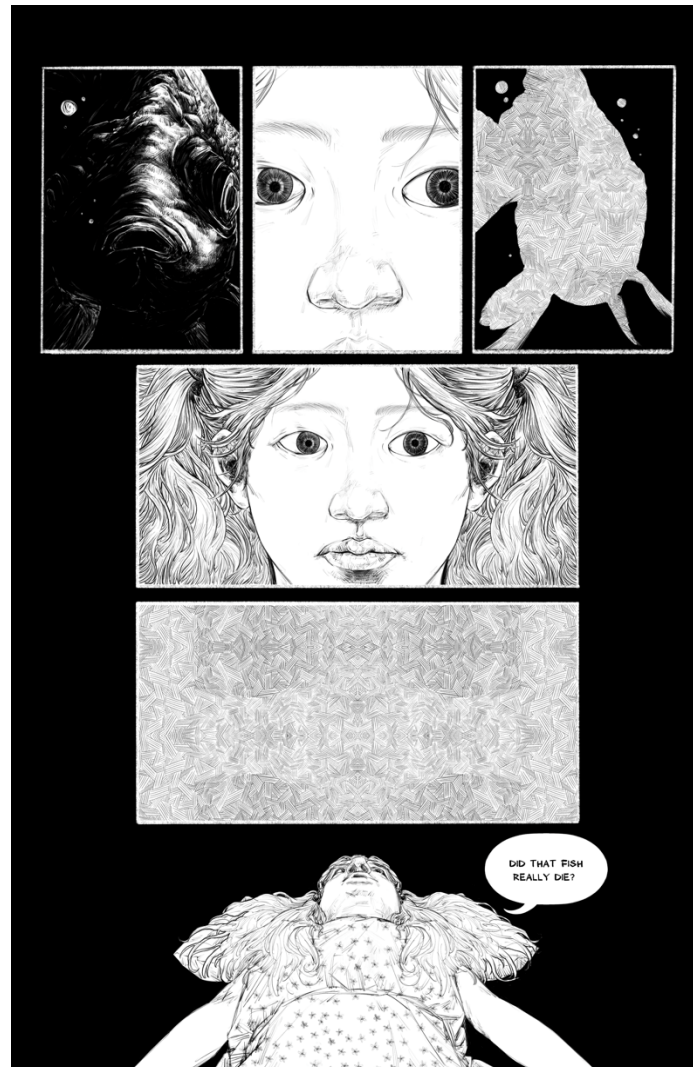
The first “flower” is a direct representation of the traumatic event itself. Characters are deliberately designed with a cartoony and childish style, and I have chosen a digital watercolour brush to paint this chapter. The colour palette consists of a pastel blue and a soft pink, but because of the transparent aspect of the brush, the colour can become intensified to a bloody red when layering together. This specific attribute allows the story to transform visually from innocent childish conversations to sexual trauma. As my memory suggests, I have trapped an adult *me* in a gender-neutral room. Starting with using the bed and my sleeping position as the grounding objectification of vulnerability and privacy, the insinuation of an intimate moment of sleep and domestic safety is then violated by a sudden transition to a narrative from the past. The neutrality is then broken into a childhood *me* with feminine attire trapped in a room with masculine decorations. The privacy is also damaged by inserting the existence of two other boys as the narrative of sexual abuse unveils.



Siyi An. *A Bouquet for You*. p. 8.

The first chapter starts this work by addressing the traumatic event itself, and the second chapter depicts the echo of that particular memory. The visual style changes drastically in the next “flower” from pastel watercolour to black and white pencil drawings. From the violent ending of the previous chapter to the contained, suppressed, and unconnected memory about a goldfish, this chapter creates a shadow that calls for attention to its existence under the mask of the mundane. The drawings in this chapter are relatively realistic compared to the previous chapter as my distance from my memory shortens during the creation of the work. I made a cross-hatching pattern to fill the spaces of furniture in another unfamiliar, enclosed room, and that specific pattern polluted the goldfish as its life is being taken away. The girl (my younger self as a character) and her sexualised body stare straight into the pattern meant for objects, as her

attention was averted from her dehumanization to the supposed death of something else, only to find the insignificance of both.



Siyi An. *A Bouquet for You*. p. 16.

The third chapter transforms from enclosed rooms to an open space of my childhood apartment building. The transition of artistic style from the previous chapter to the third “flower” is gradual, as the narrative starts with a modern me as a character drawing scenes in the last chapter. It suggests that the process itself of creating this work is a process of reflecting and reconnecting. Trying to test my ability with colour and environments, I have placed my childhood character in a wider setting while the narration is introducing the backstory of the traumatic event. Although the character is no longer in an isolated room, the loneliness

continues to prevail throughout this chapter. In this chapter, I wish to address the “you” from my titles, and that you are whoever may be reading this work, including myself. My experience, in the creation these pages, envisages my childhood trauma while the character stares right back at me, directly out of the pages, with uneasiness. I only made her exist under the shadows.



Siyi An. *A Bouquet for You*. p. 20.

Due to the limited time of the program, there are some noticeable clumsy aspects in the latter portions of the work. I do not present this as a finished work, but as a work in progress. My intention for the remaining portion of the project involves more of my experimental transitions of graphic style and storytelling. The creative decisions in this project are made with mindfulness, honouring my emotional process in response to my traumatic memory and my

own expressive desire. As it will be indicated in the next chapter, in which I will explain my methodology in detail, it is the process of creating that I cherish where I conduct my self-exploration and artistic research.



Siyi An. *A Bouquet for You*. Cover.

Umbilical Cord

Functioning as one of the most essential connections between the host and the embryo, the umbilical cord is the vital anatomical organ of blood transmission for the embryo's development and survival. I will in this chapter discuss the methodology of my MFA projects.

As I have explained in my position statement during the previous chapter, my cultural background forms an important focus in my research and practice. However, as my recent works have reflected, the most prominent stories are mostly centred around my female body and emotional and psychic experiences of that embodiment. Almost echoing the examination of my own culture through another more dominant culture's lens, my experience of understanding my female body is through the male gaze. My exploration of psychological challenges that resulted from the structures of patriarchal violence that I experienced all lead to the discourse of social power structure.

Although coming from a male-dominated industry, like many other forms found in the art world, graphic novels are now appearing to be more and more feminist as female authors started using this form to voice and address their sexuality and experience, especially in recent years.

Images and texts in graphic narratives are used by female authors as a means of reaching inside their bodies and trauma, and then expressing them to the world. Quoting from Cathy Caruth, "...to be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event ^[3]", and images in graphic novels hold the weight of transcending traumatic narratives into a reading experience between shown and not shown, told and not told, touched and not touched. In order to be distinct from films, which comics and graphic narratives are often compared to, and even considered as intertwined in both the art industry and academia, in my work, panel images, empty spaces in gutters, and the suggestive gestures of texts and dialogues are private, intimate, repetitive, insistent, stubborn, static, fragmenting metaphors of traumatic memories. At the same time the entire picture of the page is laid visible. Through the research process, I have found *Graphic Women* ^[4] by Hillary Chute tremendously helpful in articulating my experience as both an author and a reader of graphic narratives. This work is significantly informative in situating my

research on expressing my own trauma through the form of comics. It offers insight into the relationship between drawn representations and real-life experiences and how the stories of these female artists change what the industry's perception of comics.

The graphic novel form aligns subtly with the female experience of reforming one's relationship of one's body and potentially traumatic thought formation, in the sense that the duality of the whole self and the isolation, objectification, penetration, and compartmentalisation of the self exist simultaneously when being looked at and gazed upon as the alienated object. Although graphic novels seem to act inherently as the passive object for the readers, the authors discussed in *Graphic Women* including Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, Marjane Satrapi and Alison Bechdel chose to present traumatic narratives that also inevitably exhibit their own bodies and memories as the object in their self-alienating process of creating the traumatic narrative. For the creators themselves, the laborious process of drawing, pencilling, inking and lettering of the graphic novel are most commonly divided into different time slots in the work schedule, whereas it is the prior layouts and scripts contain the vision of the entire project. Metaphorically the creation process, with its intensive gestural movements becomes the author's exercise of reattaching or reconnecting to their bodies in a physical and conceptual way.

Essays and articles from *Drawing from Life: Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art* ^[5] are another source that helped the establishment of my theoretical analysis on comics, graphic novels and semi-autobiographies. Edited by Jane Tolmie, this book consists of essays by writers including David M. Ball and Yaël Schlick. This collection of essays focused on the discourse of "memory and subjectivity without a strict definition of autobiographic form." ^[6] The variety of relationships between readers/authors/characters and the distance between graphic autobiography and the accurate transmission of real-life experience are two of the most critical questions involved in my work. The examination of artists like Debbie Drechsler, Alison Bechdel and Lynda Barry's works discusses how they utilise the graphic elements of comics to summon the rawest emotions from readers in a way that pure text or image can never achieve. This book is immensely helpful in articulating my own graphic ideas with drawings, and

grounds my drawing process. It reminds me constantly of being vigilant of wandering astray from honesty to my erotic body.

My personal experience with working on graphic novels has resulted intentionally and unintentionally in moving in closer and closer to re-examine my detached relationship with my female body and memory. In my most recent works, I purposefully deemed my body as the object for me to touch, to reveal, to hide in metaphors and euphemisms when exploring potentially subversive narratives. Adapting the familiar gesture of drawing which is a movement I have practiced constantly in my life, I find that reacquiring my awareness of the physical body using drawn images and hand-written texts is immensely helpful in my hesitant and tentative approaching of trauma. The images drawn on paper are representative illusions of desires and fears that I had no courage of facing in any other situation.

My hand marking the paper during my creation process asserts my control over my techniques, emotions, and experiences. I offer myself assurance and comfort in the form of visual language to exhibit intimate graphic dialogues to the public. Evidently, the research process does not end at a certain stage during the creation but is significantly intertwined with my physical and psychological journey throughout the pre-existence and the existence of the artwork.

With the periodical conclusion of each piece of graphic narrative, I examine my process. This forms a part of my research into my relationship with my body and sequentially into my relationship with comics and graphic novels. Many narrative graphic moments I created are partly autobiographical, and by creating characters as my agents and putting them in environments simulating particular situations, I can experiment with many of my personal and intimate questions through the creative process. Conducting experiments through a controlled, safe, occasionally limiting environment is a widely used research method and I'd like to think that drawing semi-autobiographic stories aligns with that methodology. This parallels real-life events but always includes variables that differentiate themselves from the outcomes or experiences in reality.

Placenta

The placenta offers nutrition, and storages waste. I will be introducing my artistic influences in this chapter and examine how have their works become the inspiration in the comic culture framework.

Asterios Polyp

The critical examination of other's works has helped me better situate my own creations. My works are influenced by artists and creators from a wide spectrum of fields, but I wish to inform my readers about the two comic artists who have had profoundly positive influences on my own practice.

The first artist I'm introducing whose influence is vital to my artistic practice is David Mazzucchelli. He is a New York-based comic artist and writer. In his early career he worked on mainstream superhero comic books like the *Batman* and *Daredevil* series. He then moved on to more personal projects like a graphic adaption of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* and several indie comics magazines. The work I find most significant in shaping my graphic language is *Asterios Polyp* ^[7]. It was a graphic novel published in 2009 which Mazzucchelli worked on for decades. According to Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp* was the essence of his dedication to comic art. Asterios Polyp is also the name of the protagonist in the story who is an architecture professor teaching at a New York University. This book tells the story of Asterios Polyp's childhood memories, his troubled marriage, his work as an auto mechanic after his retirement from university and how he faced his own imperfections during different time periods in his life.

Mazzucchelli used plot, dialogue and most importantly visual representations to explore the idea of duality. Asterios Polyp has a stillborn twin brother whose voice exists as the narrator and readers are introduced to the story through the perspective of a dead and conceptual twin protagonist while simultaneously peeking into the physical Asterios Polyp's life. Occasionally we are shown Asterios Polyp's abstract realm where he explains some philosophical dichotomies between rational and emotional, life and death, destiny and free will.

The most prominent duality throughout this graphic novel is between Asterios Polyp and his wife, Hana. One of the most obvious visual cues is that Hana is represented by the colour pink while Asterios by blue. Although superficially these two colours are the stereotypical representations of boys and girls, male and female, in this work this particular visual representation is exhibited as a false dichotomy that evolves together with the subjective opinions of the protagonists. The use of colour engages with the narrative and the emotional journey of the main character.

David Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp*. p. 59, p. 149.

As an example of how Mazzucchelli utilises graphic elements that flow with the narrative, these two pages have shown the dynamic in Asterios and Hana's marriage. The lines around the figures and objects are purple which is the combination of pink and blue (a visual clue hinted also by the cover and the printing process). But a division of these two colours fills the background as the focus changes from one character to another. It is an indication of Asterios Polyp's narcissistic tendencies when the metaphorical spotlight shifts from Hana to himself

with Hana retreating further back on the page. Mazzuchelli's storytelling is highly visual and this quality is deeply influential to my methods of creating a graphic narrative. His knowledge in comics is a great inspiration for me in terms of finding a fluidity and freedom within graphic storytelling. I have learned a lot from him about what kind of panel arrangements work with which intentions, which relationships between text and images are best suited for certain situations, and most importantly, how to build a scaffolding to conceptualise a graphic narrative. Many comic techniques that have become an intuitive to me when visualising my voice and thoughts are acquired under his guidance.

Fun Home

The second artist that I am influenced by is Alison Bechdel, an American cartoonist. *Fun Home* ^[8] is an auto-biographical memoir published in 2006. This graphic memoir records mainly Allison's relationship with her father who committed suicide when she was 20 years old. In this book, Allison Bechdel shares her struggle with her family, gender, and sexuality. With a non-linear narrative Bechdel divulges some of her past trauma through anatomical texts and a drawing style that recalls Western cartooning traditions.

The memoir starts by introducing Bechdel's father's meticulous passion in maintaining the family's Victorian home. Later, readers learn that the father, Bruce, was an English teacher who had inappropriate sexual relationships with young boys. Coming out to her parents as a lesbian when Bechdel was in college, she then learned from her mother that her father had been having many affairs with different men through the years before and after their marriage. Growing up, her father was always a distant figure and within this story she seeks the opportunity to have some connection after her coming out. However, her father does not disclose his sexuality directly to her, possibly as a result of his own shame and self-disgust.

Alison Bechdel. *Fun Home*, p. 221.

This page acts as an example of how Bechdel conducts her graphic storytelling choices. It shows Bechdel on the way to the theatre with her father when she came home from college after her coming out. This brief conversation was the most intimate conversation they had before her father's possible suicide. The repetitive images, incomplete conversations and the abundance of internal dialogues are often nostalgic and suggestive for readers to recollect a similar moment from their own lives. The drawings are coloured with a minimal palette, which was a consistent aesthetic choice with the story's non-linear structure and fragmented narrations as they work together to put distance between the readers and narrator and at the same time implying the narrator's own distance between her experience.

Each chapter of the graphic memoir is oriented around a literature reference as literature occupies a significant portion of Bechdel and her father's life. Bechdel shows connections between characters from classical literature to characters in real life throughout *Fun Home*. As the plot continues, the literary characters Bechdel makes from her own family members raise one of the most important questions of an auto-biographical memoir. The line of honesty and representation is blurred and with the literature references overlapping with real person-characters, readers are made to question the integrity of the narrator and the either unconsciously or intentionally twisted truth.

This graphic memoir is presented as a painfully honest confession on Allison Bechdel's life and her traumatic experience. It leads me to reflect on why graphic narratives are so appropriate for expressing memories, recollections and traumatic events. When I try to recreate images about my own experience, I struggle to find the line between illusion and truth. This book offers me a great example of a way to deal with intimate visual conversations in the form of a graphic novel. Although its form is a graphic memoir, *Fun Home* creates a comprehensive narrative that can not be easily regarded as a direct representation of lived experience. In multiple scenes, Bechdel illustrates private conversations between other characters, images and environment settings, when it would be impossible for her to acquire such detailed memory. Bechdel makes it clear that the narrative is an altered memory, that the memory itself is usually unreliable, that there is a difference between the narrator of *Fun Home* and the author herself. The attempt of organizing the chaos of her life and memory and the inability to do so is a constant presence throughout the graphic memoir. "*Fun Home* yearns for elegance and order, for a means of closing the gap 'between word and meaning', while knowing the endeavour to be impossible. [9]" This earnest presentation of the struggle with authenticity of subjective experience and its graphic representation has helped me to reconsider my process. Maybe instead of trying to completely disregard my earlier euphemistic attempts to process trauma (*Tentacles prologue I&II*) as unsuccessful experiments, and expecting my later direct approach to traumatic events (*A Bouquet for You*) to overcome those limitations, I should embrace the process itself, of struggling to find a structure, as a valid part of my MFA research and experience.

Perineal Laceration

A perineal laceration is a possible tear of the flesh and tissue to the vaginal area during the process of childbirth.

The process of creating *Tentacles* and *A Bouquet for You* is ultimately, a conversation with myself. My intention to reconnect with my female body started with the literal metaphor of self-digesting female organs (*Tentacles Prologue II*), then resided briefly in a detached nod to my childhood memory (*Tentacles Prologue I*), and subsequently evolved to the layered tension of pretence, and the unveiling of myself in *Tentacles*. The intention then stopped being just an intention after the laboured solitude during which *Tentacles* was made with my hands, retracing the familiar comfort of the drawing gesture. I started to re-examine my relationship with drawing, sequential images and comics.

It was abundantly clear to me that my deeply metaphoric reinvention of traumatic events in my past works came from a place of avoidance and hesitation. The images in the two prologues of *Tentacles* that I chose to create digitally are an active gesture of masking any truthful dialogue with myself, with the visceral depiction of body parts and the dream-like recreation of my childhood home (the old apartment building). As a result, those two short works display as more voyeuristic than conversational.

Looking back at my hand-made marks on the original drafts of *Tentacles* after months of its creation, I noticed that the pages are filled with dirty fingerprints as an indication of me marking the pages with not only pencil but with also my hands and sweat. I have returned to a more honest approach to recreate the less filtered or self-censored images and texts in conversation with my body and identity. Other than seeking the familiarity of the drawing gesture, the graphic narratives that I produced echoed with my natural storytelling flow with less intentional play with technicalities that were often too present and were sometimes even the focus in my past practice.

A Bouquet for You is my attempt to manifest an authentic traumatic event. The labour-intensive

creative process forced me to envisage the actual trauma repeatedly without the obscurity of metaphors and graphic manipulations. I must emphasise that the process of drawing and producing such a graphic narrative about trauma is essentially more revealing to me as the creator than the finished graphic novel as a readable object. The action of reconnecting to my body happened, is happening and will continue to happen in the process of drawing, inking, lettering, and editing of the possibly endless collections of *flowers for you*.

As an artist, I used to be hesitant to find the courage of bridging gap between me and my erotic self. But maybe the courage can be given to me internally, instead of trying to find it elsewhere. My struggle is mirrored in my work in which I ask myself if I possess that energy to find a resolution. I do not believe that the end of the MFA program marks the end of any projects of mine that were mentioned above. I anticipate that my effort to reconnect my body using graphic narratives will continue being one of the major themes in my future practice without any foreseeable conclusion to my exploration.

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