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Wounds That Won't Stay Past: Trauma, the Female Body, and Interrupted Girlhood in the Graphic Memoir *Becoming Unbecoming*

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ABSTRACT

Una's graphic memoir Becoming Unbecoming (2015) offers a sustained and unflinching examination of sexual trauma and its developmental consequences, tracing the long aftermath of childhood molestation and adolescent rape against the backdrop of the Yorkshire Ripper murders in 1970s northern England. This paper argues that Una's memoir does more than bear witness to sexual violence; it anatomises the way trauma inhabits girl, restructuring her relationship to her own body, to other people, and to the future at precisely the developmental stage when those relationships are most vulnerable to disruption. Drawing on Judith Herman's framework of traumatic disruption and recovery, Simone de Beauvoir's concept of feminine "becoming," and Hillary Chute's theorisation of the graphic memoir body, the paper examines how Post Traumatic Stress Disorder operates not as a discrete clinical condition but as a lived, embodied, developmental experience that reshapes girlhood from within. Close reading of Una's formal strategies reveals the graphic memoir form as uniquely suited to representing both the fragmentation of traumatic memory and the gradual reclamation of

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narrative authority. The paper further argues that recovery is neither linear nor complete it is the ongoing, partial, and courageous work of reinvention.

Introduction

Sexual assault rarely ceases with the act. Rather, it includes the survivor's experience of her social world, her body relationship, and her sense of self. Una's graphic memoir *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015) begins with a child folding in on herself and stepping away from a world that has already begun to impact her. There is no single dramatic scene that shows the violation. Instead, the damage done is gradually revealed in posture and empty space, in things that are not spoken and not written. There is a purpose for this formal restriction, it is a reflection of the precise situation the book tries to investigate, that trauma, especially sexual trauma as a girl seeps into the body, rearranges it from the inside out, and subtly interferes with the normal process of growing up. On one level, *Becoming Unbecoming* is a survival memoir. On the other hand, it is a slow and heart-wrenching depiction of the life of a girl and what it means to live, not just during one big and dramatic burst of violence, but throughout the years that come after.

Una grew up in the north of England, the same time when the Yorkshire Ripper carried out his years of brutal attacks on women, and the police and media slowly pointed fingers at the victims. In the context of this institutionalized dread of women, Una is raped as a teenager and sexually abused as a child. These personal sufferings are not isolated from the public setting in the novel. Instead, it shows through texts and images that the same culture that shamed Una into silence was the one that failed to protect the victims of the Ripper, that both forms of violence are the same, that the female body is an ungoverned, ungovernable entity, therefore accountable for what is done to it.

The memoir is a literary and cultural work of importance as it gives attention to what psychologists and trauma experts term developmental derailment, which results from early and repeated sexual trauma. The symptoms that emerged during her adolescence, such as withdrawal, hypervigilance, self-destruction, and disregard for her own body, are signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), not character defects. Una is not only a victim who heals but also a girl who experiences the process of becoming a person.

A graphic memoir is an apt medium to tell Una’s story. As Hillary Chute suggests in *Graphic Women* (2010), “graphic narrative represents unseen wounds in a readable form of visuality, a combination of words and pictures linked graphically in sequence provides an alternate means of depicting trauma’s ineffable and disorienting nature”(3). Una's portrayals of herself as a child or adolescent are not only about what

happened to her; they are also about a radical reclamation of authorship over her body, reclaiming control over it, over what has been said about her body, from others who have spoken, interpreted, and humiliated her over it for years. Fractured panels, gaps, and the tension between what is drawn and what is not drawn all have an emotional resonance that is just right for the depiction of traumatic memory.

This paper explores the path of trauma as mapped out in *Becoming Unbecoming*, which follows the trajectory of traumatic disruption and healing as experienced in Una's childhood and adolescent years, as outlined by various trauma theorists, and Hillary Chute's work on graphic life narrative. The paper argues that Una's vivid memoir does more than just document instances of sexual assault. It gently and sensibly explores the effect of trauma on a girl and the traumas that a girl carries within herself and into the future. The theme of the book is that recovery is not about returning to a state of normalcy. It is a difficult and ongoing journey to become a person who has not been manufactured by trauma.

Childhood Molestation and the Confused Body

One of the most well-thought-out formal choices in the book is Una's portrayal of the abuse she endured as a child. She does not depict violence in any of the panels in the book. It is a sound and beautiful choice that does not make the survivor's experience big and consumable for readers' eyes and available just as it was for the abuser's eyes and body. Instead, Una embodies the before and after of the experience, the homes in which abuse occurred, and the textures of everyday childhood life that were forever altered by what happened in those homes. The way of doing this is in perfect harmony with Cathy Caruth's statement in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) that “lies precisely in its belatedness in its refusal to be simply located in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any singe space or time” (9). In Una's story, all the evidence for what happened is left behind, and the reader has to use deduction and inference to piece it together, as Una did. The final product is a reader's experience that resembles what it is like living with an unprocessed traumatic memory. In these early encounters, the little Una makes an incredibly faithful and heartfelt guess as to what has happened to her. She wonders how she can overcome her intense unhappiness.

In this context, the cultural background of the 1970s is crucial. No kids are allowed to have conversations about their bodies, and no adults are mature enough to have conversations about sexual assault without judgment. Thus, the child's confusion is exacerbated by the environment that impedes disclosure, and this isolation is not just psychological but also physical. Una's experience with abuse when she was a child was not a one-off event. It sets a trend for the rest of her life, which affects her entire identity. When words are not enough, the body speaks. The child's response to the discovery that the world is unsafe is to shrink, become less conspicuous, and take up less space. This withdrawal is a jarring collection of a cultural process

of feminine constriction: the kid who has once perhaps inhabited space slowly comes to realize, in a flash, that her body is not fully her. The becoming that de Beauvoir describes as a slow and gradual societal imposition here is revealed to be something that can also be brought about by one instance of a single act of violation. The segment ends with a quiet moment rather than a conclusion. This silence is carried over to the next stage of Una's development.

Growing Up Under the Ripper

Una masterfully weaves her personal story with that of Sutcliffe's murders, making it impossible to understand both stories separately. While women are terrorized in the streets of Yorkshire, Una experiences sexual assault by people familiar to her. Una's prime focus is not on Sutcliffe but on the institutional and societal responses to his actions as a barometer of societal attitudes towards violence and gender. "I had grown up with the knowledge that I had not been careful enough so the ripper might especially want to get me. Because bad things don't happen to good people" (Una 148). The theme of fear is continually experienced as part of the narrative atmosphere. The culture uses the serial killer as a means to accomplish a goal they had already been trying to achieve in other ways. It also taught Una what her society thought of women like her, including the limits of institutional protection and what happened to women who transgressed them in the most public and authoritative ways imaginable. Herman's idea of secondary wounding takes on a specific quality here: the wounded is not particular but structural, embedded in the language of ordinary social interactions, police reports, and the media. In this society, to be a female victim of male aggression was to be immediately subject to a scrutiny and blame system that operated irrespective of the motives of any particular attacker. It told Una, in the most public way possible, that it was probably better for her not to speak.

Adolescence Derailed: Self Destruction As Symptom

Adolescence is a developmental stage where the self is trying to find its way between the child it was and the adult it is supposed to be, tearing itself down as it puts itself back together. These years are active in shaping identity, bodily autonomy, social belonging, and the ability to be intimate. All these factors are based on a foundation of fundamental psychological stability, which allows adolescents to risk the challenges of growth. Una had nothing like that. She enters adolescence with an unfinished history of trauma, a body she has learned to view as alien and dangerous, and mastery of the language of silence and self-concealment learned in her early years. The cultural interpretation of Una's behavior in her town, school, and social milieu is blatantly moralistic. She is a difficult, unpredictable child who makes bad choices and is therefore partly to blame for what happens to her later in life. This moralistic reading is not

incidental to Una's narrative; it is one of its chief themes, for it is a reading she has partly internalized, and she cannot entirely separate her own sense of self from the language that her society has provided her with.

The Title

The two phrases in the memoir's title reveal the plot of the story. In its most severe form, Una's becoming is de Beauvoir's becoming: "one is not born, but rather becomes"(273). Throughout the book, she transforms into the person her culture intended her to be. The term unbecoming carries its own weight of meaning. The process of creating a graphic book is an act of active unbecoming. In this way, she attempts to reclaim narrative authority over an experience from which all narrative authority was robbed. Una does not merely narrate her tragedy; she draws it, and in drawing it, she takes back from the culture, from the abusers, from the machinery of shame and silence, the power to determine what her experience means and what it will be made to say.

Conclusion

Becoming Unbecoming is one of the most important graphic memoirs of all time because it accurately and candidly charts the course of trauma throughout Una's childhood and adolescence. Although Una's work is strongly autobiographical, it is more than that; it is a long-term argument about the connection between sexual assault, cultural complicity, and the evolving female self. It is not a conventional recovery narrative. There was no recovery or evidence of wound healing. Una's recovery is incomplete and ongoing. The memoir is the product of her partial recovery and resistance against the forces that tried to ensure it would remain undocumented. The damage continues. The final sections of the novel show the coexistence of ongoing trauma and genuine life. The memoir teaches the readers that a girl is inhabited by sexual trauma rather than just being wounded by it. The purpose of *Becoming Unbecoming* is to bring to light issues that the society it depicts struggles to keep hidden. Una's memoir is exquisite formally inventive, visually arresting, and, in some cases, deeply affecting. The change of what was done to mute and diminish into something that speaks, demands to be seen, and refuses to be anything less than fully, boldly, irrevocably present on the page is actually the most comprehensive expression of active unbecoming itself.

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