

2018

## Still Moving: Gabrielle Bell's Graphic Auto-Fiction

Shiamin Kwa

*Bryn Mawr College*, [skwa@brynmawr.edu](mailto:skwa@brynmawr.edu)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.brynmawr.edu/eastasian\\_pubs](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/eastasian_pubs)

Part of the [East Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

---

### Custom Citation

Kwa, Shiamin. 2018, "Still Moving: Gabrielle Bell's Graphic Auto-Fiction." In K. Jacobson, K. Allukian, R.A. Legleitner, L. Allison (eds.), *Liminality, Hybridity, and American Women's Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan: 247-263.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. [https://repository.brynmawr.edu/eastasian\\_pubs/9](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/eastasian_pubs/9)

For more information, please contact [repository@brynmawr.edu](mailto:repository@brynmawr.edu).

## Still Moving: Gabrielle Bell's Graphic Auto-fiction

In her daily “July Diary” comics from July, 2013, Gabrielle Bell (b. 1976) has moved from New York City to upstate New York for a self-designated writer’s residency because she “can’t get it together to apply for, let alone be accepted to [a real] one” (Bell, *Truth Is Fragmentary: Travelogues & Diaries* 115). The “diary comic” is Bell’s chosen genre, and the page follows formal characteristics consistently used in her work: a grid made up of six panels, each approximately 2 x 2 inches in diameter, with the thickly-lined frames drawn in by hand. The subject matter is consistent: Bell records her protagonist, also named Gabrielle Bell, engaged in mundane activities such as vacuuming, reading, talking with friends, and practicing yoga in makeshift tents. In one daily comic, she describes the subtle victories of the mundane: buying a perfect table for five dollars at a yard sale (Bell, *Truth Is Fragmentary: Travelogues & Diaries* 142–3). In others, she leaves her family because she remembers that she is already married to a polar bear, and returns to her cubs and their cave (Bell, *Truth Is Fragmentary: Travelogues & Diaries* 140). Bell’s comics straddle the boundaries between deeply personal, confessional self-scrutiny, and absurd invention. For two decades, she has been producing whimsically imagined short comics that take the form of the diary entry, in which she presents daily activities as well as the increasingly frequent occasions of domestic and international travel that result from the success of the comics. Bell’s stories balance documentary elements with fictionally inflected elements of surprise and the absurd; eliding her musings on mundane activities with meditations on her status as a woman writer, a comics writer, and a traveler, all categories that share the distinction of being “threshold,” or liminal, categories.

Bell’s practice runs counter to the conventions of the traditional superhero comic, whose protagonists, like Spiderman or Superman, vacillate between being superhero and

everyman, calling into question which persona in the binary is the actual disguise. Instead, her comics adopt a pose of the insistent identified, but paradoxically mutable, autobiographical self that questions the very possibility of autobiography. Bell appears in nearly every panel of these diary comics, but this emphatic presence cannot be dismissed as narcissism. Rather, Bell's interest in the autofictional persona in her comics, who combines elements of the autobiographical, the self-portrait, and the fictional, is narcissistic only to the extent that it is a "narcissistic text," that kind of text that reveals a "self-awareness in explicit thematizations or allegorizations of their diegetic or linguistic identity within the texts themselves" (Hutcheon 7). The self-portraitist, unlike the creator of landscapes or the painter of portraits, is not practicing in a potentially lucrative field: how many artists can survive selling images of themselves? The representation of the non-celebrity, in autobiography and in self-portrait, is traditionally an accounting of the self that is fraught with the threat of disappointment, a disappointment does not result from the work of art's adherence to the truth but rather with the loneliness of representing oneself. Cumming describes the self-portrait as making "artists present as the embodiment of their art...but they often do so only to ask who or what this person is who is looking back from the mirror, how dismaying it is to be alone, how hard it is to represent or even just to be oneself in the wide world of mankind" (Cumming 7-8). Yet the twenty-first century has also seen a growing interest in reading projections of selves, from the relentless self-surveillance from artists and authors like Ai Weiwei and Karl Ove Knausgaard, where selves are both living things and patchworks of fictions, real experience and aesthetic object of contemplation. Bell's comics use the forms and conventions of comics to explore the labor of representing herself when her "self" is in constant flux. The popularity of the memoir, the distrust of pretense, and the performative nature of reality are all objects of her scrutiny. This essay

discusses works that demonstrate her manipulation of the conventions of memoir and diary to make a claim for the truths inherent in fiction. Her hand-drawn renderings of a quasi-autobiographical, narrating, and inconstant self ironically describe the very irregularity of tying identity to physical appearance, suggesting that the irregularity might be the guarantee of identity.

Derrida warns that an over-reliance on the singular and unique is exactly what allows for the possibility of creating a substitute copy, one that also possesses its own singularity and uniqueness, which makes it thus impossible to be caught out (Derrida 18). Bell instead repeatedly draws her “self,” the Gabrielle who features not only in every story, but in every panel, with few exceptions. In an interview, Bell described the hybridized form of her magical realist comics: “I think that straight autobiographical work, it’s very problematic—you can’t really get too truthful” (Bell, “Nimble Surrealism: Talking with Gabrielle Bell”). The stories discussed here, diary comics taken from the collections *Truth is Fragmentary* and *The Voyeurs*, interrogate the categories of autobiography and self-portraiture. Bell shows the reader how she sees herself, using distances of space, time, and other personae, to emphasize the careful construction and distanced scrutiny of self-presentation. In this artistic practice, which is aimed precisely at getting closest to the truth, she claims the variable, the liminal, and the inconclusive, as the most authentic ways to preserve and present individual identity in the twenty-first century.

### ***Singularity, Seeing Double, and the Autobiographical Comic***

In the comic labeled “Tuesday, July ninth” in *Truth is Fragmentary*, “Gabrielle Bell” appears eight times in a one-page comic that describes the activities of one day. Although the comics pages are labeled with a date, the date does not correspond to the content as much as serve as a cataloguing number. As a small Gabrielle on the inside cover of *July Diary*, which

depicts July 2011, helpfully instructs, “By the way: the dates indicate the day it was drawn, not the day it happened. So July second is actually talking about July first, and so on” (Bell, *July Diary* inside cover). Similarly, with this 2013 diary, although the date in *Truth is Fragmentary* is given as the ninth, the page when published by Bell online was marked “July 3.” The diary comics have presumably been rearranged in the second publishing to achieve greater narrative clarity. If the real sequence of events is not significant, why are dates given at all? Bell’s comics suggest that the presence of the date highlight the comics status as a trace, separating the “then” of the action from the “now” of the reader. Time is an essential element in these comics; the arrested moment in the still frame of the comic allows for fluidity of motion, or passing, of time. It allows for a state of “still moving,” implied by actions completed from frame to frame and sometimes within a single frame. Time can also be extended in the comic frame. For example, many sentences of dialogue can be exchanged in a single frame, indicating an interval of time that surpasses the “instant” that is frozen by the visual image. A sweeping motion, a body shown multiple times in a sequence of movements, can also be described within a single panel.

Just as easily as time can be stretched in the comics panel without confusing the reader, drastically different positions from one panel to the next do not interfere with the reader’s ability to follow its actors and their actions. With its presentation of a labile version of identity, the autobiographical comic flouts the surveilling eye with competing, varying, yet still compatible, versions of the self. In “Tuesday, July ninth,” Gabrielle is seen in six different situations over the course of the day (Figure 1). In the first panel, a grimacing and wide-eyed Gabrielle tries to draw at a table, knee pulled up against her chest. In the next panel, Gabrielle is seen again in a similar position, knees drawn up under her, but this time she crouches to pick berries. In that same panel, another Gabrielle is shown picking flowers,

and the panel is crowded with her anxious concerns: “I hope a bear doesn’t sneak up and attack me,” “Hope I don’t get Lyme disease,” and “I hope a ranger doesn’t come up and arrest me.” In the remaining four panels, she is pictured five more times. In the sixth panel, as with the second, Gabrielle is pictured twice in the panel; both panels also show her standing with left leg in front of right, with arms extended downwards: in the second panel she is picking flowers, and in the sixth she carries a three-gallon container of water in the same position (Bell, *Truth Is Fragmentary: Travelogues & Diaries* 123). These Gabrielle iterations are part of the grammar of comics, but they also point to the multiple ways that the self is presented, and the way that the reader derives meaning from the contextual elements to identify her as “her.” The play on the same position used in different activities, and the different bodies engaged in the same location, draw attention to the ways that we are in fact quite comfortable with seeing double.

(Figure 1 here)

Comics, by deploying both visual and verbal tools of communication, uses a narrativizing language, unfixing the mechanisms of identity native to the official identification document, like the passport, that operate on the assumption that there is one true authorized image attached to one true authorizing document. The comics form, on the other hand, challenges our conceptions of static identity. The sequential graphic narrative, in general, has as its basic unit images in isolation. The nature of this form also means that each of these basic units is connected to what comes before and after it, and each of the individual units can offer its own version of the depicted character’s identity. Comics constantly participate in a “process of resignification, where one must continually loop back to reconsider meanings and make new meanings as one goes forward in the text” (Postema 50). The gutter, the term given to the empty space between comics panels, is likened by

McCloud to ellipses in sentences, as the site where meaning is constructed (McCloud 8). Postema makes the further distinction: “Although the gutter creates meaning, this does not mean it calls for an explicit ‘filling in the blanks’...thus, gutters do not ‘stand for’ or represent anything beyond elision. They only create the conventions for the process of signification (e.g. narrative) to occur and invite a focus on what is given” (Postema 80). Bell’s work uses that formal structure of the comic to theorize the questions of identity and self-presentation that she addresses.

The autobiographical comic is a medium for the self-examining artist to elide identity with the bodily, both by depicting their own bodies on the page and by using their own bodies, their drawing hands, to do so, so that the self on the page is both aesthetic object and sociohistorical object. Graphic memoirists, in their commitment to producing repeated self-portraits on a page, engage these notions of body to the extent that “*all* autobiographical comics artists are, in the course of their work, constantly being compelled to engage with their physical identities” (Refaie 62). Charles Hatfield identifies Harvey Pekar as the creator of this mode of comics: the “quotidian autobiographical series, focused on the events and textures of everyday existence” (Hatfield 109). In the comics autobiography, Hatfield notes the way that:

We see how the cartoonist envisions..herself; the inward vision takes on an outward form. This graphic self-representation literalizes a process already implied in prose autobiography, for...the genre consists less in faithfulness to outward appearances, more in the encounter between “successive self-images” and the world, a world that repeatedly distorts or misrecognizes those self-images (Hatfield 114).

In her book *Graphic Women*, Hilary Chute focuses on autobiographical comics made by women that explore how these artists routinely return to and depict moments of trauma using the comics medium, which deploys its “rich narrative texture” to “perform the enabling political and aesthetic work of bearing witness” (Chute 4). Although her book specifically addresses the way that the comics art form is used by these women with respect to returning to and reimagining trauma, specifically, Chute’s analysis of the capacities of the medium to those ends also informs a broader understanding of how the graphic memoir form can, in the hands of women, have a decidedly feminist and ethical valence:

They return to events to literally re-view them, and in so doing, they productively point to the female subject as both an object of looking and a creator of looking and sight. Further, through the form their work takes, they provoke us to think about how women, as both looking and looked-at subjects, are situated in particular times, spaces, and histories...[they] revisit their pasts, retrace events, and literally repicture them (Chute 2).

By making themselves the objects of these works, these autobiographical women assert control of the narrative form. Bell’s stories provide a way of answering the question of “what is at stake in telling our life stories in pictures and how it is that we have come to visualize identity in particular ways and according to particular sociohistorical contexts” (Chaney 7).

Bell’s works are concerned with an autobiographical or documentary style, but they transcend those limits by combining lived experience with fictional elements of the absurdist and the magical. The protagonist of these comics is the “I” whose experiences bear a close resemblance to the author, but the comics are less invested in direct representation as they are in representing nested observations of Gabrielle, as viewed through lenses of various



kinds: windows, camera frames, and, finally, the eyes of another.

### ***Seeing Through Frames***

The narrating voice in the story “Michel and Me” is decidedly separated from the action shown in the comics frame, and presents a point of view that is detached from the ongoing scene. The title, with its use of the pronoun “me,” implies an identification between the narrating “me” and Bell, but this narrator adopts a position defined by the distance of both time and space. The narrating voice is visually distinct from the dialogue, which is represented in all caps. The text is not attached with speech bubbles to any of the figures depicted in the panels, and it is further distanced from the action, delivering a matter of fact summary of events in the past tense, again pointing out the distance of time between the action, the representation of the action, and the reading. The disembodied voice looks back on a past that is unaware of itself as an in-progress memory. The capacities of a single comics panel to contain multiple renditions of time and movement are expressed from the very first frame. In addition to the first-person narration at the top of the panel, Michel is shown having a conversation with Gabrielle while also addressing unseen crew members in response to her observations about the scene being filmed.

The first panel demonstrates the individual panel’s capacity to efficiently present multiple versions of the same person in one panel—frames within frames—with no confusion or questioning of identity. Michel’s face is shown in profile, and also facing forward, in a representation of different moments in his conversation: the comics-literate reader is expected to immediately recognize and apprehend this image as a representation of discrete movements by the same person. The page again shows Bell’s preoccupation with the autobiographical self-portrait in these comics. Although each panel roughly corresponds in size, it flouts every other regulation of consistency. The edges of each panel are wavy instead

of straight. Gabrielle appears in all but one of the six panels on the page: seated, upright, asleep, facing left, facing right, and in three quarter view, mouth opened, eyes closed. In spite all of this, “Gabrielle” remains recognizable as the same person, even as she does not remain the same.

(Figure 2 here)

True to the title of the whole collection, the comic is concerned with voyeurism, and makes the connection between reading the comic and spying on other people’s lives. The comics frame has its surrogates: the peephole, the camera, the window. As much as the reader intently watches the characters, the characters, too, are busy intently watching others. In the “July 31<sup>st</sup>” entry (Figure 2), Gabrielle hides in the hotel room and watches the activities outside her room through the door’s peephole. The first panel shows her view of Michel as seen through the peephole, as he approaches the door. The second panel shows her skittering away from it. In a highly self-conscious exchange that is comedic to the point of parody, the dialogue both describes the moment and, by virtue of the page’s existence, demonstrate the fulfillment of Michel’s prophesy that she will include this story in her diary comic. When he observes that she was spying, and that she should put this in her journal, she responds “It’s not that interesting. Everyone looks through peepholes,” to which he replies “But it’s funny, and honest. You should be honest in your work.” And although she responds “I am honest in my work. But I don’t need to show *everything*, like going to the bathroom or picking my nose,” the fact that we are reading this exchange undoes her claims to the contrary. Here again, she introduces the self-consciously knowing hand and voice of the artist who does after all draw the scene that the Gabrielle in the panel denied she would (Bell, *The Voyeurs* 36). Gabrielle Bell the narrator, and Gabrielle Bell the character in the pages are the plural voyeurs in the book, interested in observing others, but actually more

interested in observing herself and how others perceive her. While there is indeed a good amount of spying on other people in the collection, it is more accurate to understand “The Voyeurs” as one would an infinite nest of reflections created by mirrors set facing each other.

The camera features prominently in the “Michel & Me” series. The ubiquitous use of photography in these comics is another visual reminder of the way that the characters imagine themselves being perceived by each other. Like the photograph, the comics that record these exchanges are recording devices of the future that always gesture to a moment in the past that is now over. The camera is used here as a tool for immediate capture, which can later be relied on for reference when Bell draws her comic. This makes the comic based on photograph a proto-selfie tool, a technology of self-representation that replaces the outstretched arm with different evidence of its bodily presence: the hand-drawn figures necessarily imply the outstretched arm. The camera-facilitated drawing suggests a social history based on corresponding moments in these recorded actions: the incident as it occurred, the act of recording the incident with photography, the reproduction of the image in the comic, and finally the reader’s encounter with the text. This chain of representation already excludes other possible intermediary steps, such as the collection of images, their organization, and the broadcasting of the comic online, and its production at the printers. Bell’s comics repeatedly insinuate these space-time distances, while asserting the immediacy and accessibility of the “I” in each panel.

The August 4<sup>th</sup> page, which begins succinctly: “Another fight,” demonstrates Bell’s facility with the limitless nesting of photographic representation and identity in her work. The fight escalates as Michel threatens to get his camera to “show [Gabrielle] how [she is]” when she is “crazy” (Bell, *The Voyeurs* 41). A second panel depicts Gabrielle shaking, with

fingers clenched, and the third panel shows Gabrielle and Michel each threatening to show each other how the other “is.” In the fourth panel, Michel presents himself in a credible posture of how Gabrielle has been drawn (drawn herself) in the second panel, saying “This is you!” to which Gabrielle, taking a photograph, says “That looks more like YOU to me!” The exchange is comedic because of its deftness in juxtaposing word and image, *awareness* of representation in word and image, and a nonsensical parrying with pronouns that reverse the vectors of accusation. It is also comedic because the reader of the comic, all drawn by Bell and lacking the objective camera record, cannot judge whose statement is accurate. Barthes commented that the photograph is “never anything but an antiphon of “Look,” “See,” “Here it is,” with the “it” always contextually specific but also, in practice, necessarily replaceable (Barthes 5). The camera and the image drawn from the photograph both record the distance of time and space between the action and its image.

Later, in the “August 11<sup>th</sup>” entry, in which Gabrielle decides to go swimming, the comic becomes a self-referential record of these nested moments of recording and the interference of that self-consciousness on actual lived experience. As she begins to remove her clothing at the top of page 52, Michel asks “You’re just doing this for your journal, aren’t you? I wish I had my camera!” These two pages document the act of documenting, when she asks Michel to photograph her with her own camera. He triumphantly responds, “You ARE! You’re doing it for *Lucky!*” (Bell, *The Voyeurs* 52). Once the camera is out, the comic again becomes *comical*: a series of failed attempts to capture an adequate picture to use for her comic. Of course, the failure to capture is itself captured in the comic beheld by the reader. The last eight panels of the comic behave like couplets, the panel on the left presenting a setup, and the panel on the right the punchline, as the two attempt to capture a spontaneous moment four separate times. Over and over, in the panel on the left, Michel tells her to

jump, and in the panel on the right, we see her failed attempts (Bell, *The Voyeurs* 52–3). The panels are not only records of the action as it is remembered, but also are gestures to the fact of their own belatedness: they are, after all, drawn after that moment has passed. The failed attempts are not failures after all, and have instead become the subjects of the comic. The reader can even imagine that these images of Gabrielle jumping into the water, or the images of the splashes themselves, may well have been drawn from the photographs as captured by the camera. The camera, like the comics panel, records mere remnants of a moment that is past. Gabrielle's own camera, naturally, is even more belated. As she cautions, "the camera's slow" (Bell, *The Voyeurs* 52).

With its attention to windows and the other kinds of frames with which the world and others are viewed, with its balances of the alternations of speed and languor in travel, with its attention to belatedness, with its keen awareness of the sense of an ending marked by its narrator's vantage point in the future, the "Michel & Me" comics end with a page that provides a fitting elegy. The page begins with Michel and Gabrielle rushing to catch up to Gabrielle's TGV train, complete with the characteristic motion lines trailing the characters to denote that they are running. Even as Michel says to her "Okay, here's your assignment for the ride; draw me a picture of the moving landscape as you see it out the window" (Bell, *The Voyeurs* 58). This recalls the earlier strip on August 6<sup>th</sup> of a TGV train ride they have taken together in which he had asked her, "Are you trying to draw the landscape as it passes?" (Bell, *The Voyeurs* 42). The narrating voice, the disembodied future voice, immediately chimes in, knowingly, "I already knew in just a couple days I would break up with him by email./He would rush to New York to convince me to change my mind, and this would go on for another year until he'd move to Los Angeles to film *The Green Hornet*." The next panel is wordless; the voyeur looks out of the window at the landscape speeding by with those same

motion lines that trailed their running figures at the top of the page. The last panel of the page is uncharacteristically two panels wide. Unlike the views from the window in the preceding panels, which are impressionistic, this panel is a wordless and static vista drawn in shaded and deliberate detail (Bell, *The Voyeurs* 58). A window on a moving train is not a camera lens or a comics panel; what the frame holds is always leaving. Looking at these views together on the same page, we are asked to contemplate what it is that the artist sees; what it is that she sees herself seeing; and, finally, what she wants us to see. The moment is fixed. It is held within a steady frame. Gabrielle is not in it. It is complete.

### ***Seeing Through Other I's***

The fluidity of identity is one of the hallmarks of Bell's work, and her comics repeatedly return to the divisions of her self, whether as subject or object of her steady observation, or as private or public figure. In addition to using literal frames within her comics that show the artist appraising herself, she also uses other characters within the comic as frames, whose impressions of her give her another opportunity to hold herself at arm's length. In the preface to *Truth is Fragmentary*, Bell discusses the changed nature of the diary once its context is changed:

When a diary is public, it becomes a different thing. You no longer do it for yourself, you do it for us, the readers. Your life and self become 'material,' and you learn to take yourself less seriously. You make yourself accountable. And then, when you find yourself editing and rewriting and twisting the truth here and there, and even living life differently than you ordinarily would in order to serve the "story," is it even a diary anymore? (Bell, *Truth Is Fragmentary: Travelogues & Diaries* 7)

The complicated use of pronouns in this preface point to the confusions of the various “Gabrielle Bell”s, even to the author writing the preface. The sentence “You no longer do it for yourself, you do it for us, the readers,” contorts the grammar so that the reader questions where she is with respect to the narrator. The “You” in the sentence is initially read as the informal vernacular stand in for “one” (i.e. “One no longer does it for oneself, one does it for...”); but, even then, the “one” would presumably be the narrating voice, referring to herself in the third person. She then goes on to further complicate matters by including herself in the same group as the readers by using “us,” so that “you” is writing for “us.” Yet, this complicated syntax may well be the only logical solution for Bell to use in talking about her practice; her comics are the process of reading, after all, herself. To put it more accurately, she is reading her selves.

Bell’s entry for July 22<sup>nd</sup> from the 2011 “July Comic” takes the ubiquity of her self-representation head on. The comic, labeled “July 22<sup>nd</sup>” in *Truth is Fragmentary*, and as “July 23<sup>rd</sup>” in *July Diary*, again creates a premise of reading based on sequence, but also suggests an authorial disregard for exactitude that implies that historical exactitude is not Bell’s primary concern in the production of these diaries (Bell, *July Diary* 22; Bell, *Truth Is Fragmentary: Travelogues & Diaries* 50). The comic addresses her creation of these comics, and the ways that autobiographical comics are also necessarily biographical comics for others who may not wish to be featured in them. “July 22<sup>nd</sup>” thus directly confronts the ways in which she compromises her authority as narrator so that she may maintain her presence in the world. The comic presents a series of various Gabrielles, different in presentation as well as in attitude. The first panel draws herself as a clichéd melting puddle and the next presents a crazed and goggle-eyed Gabrielle crying “Omigod,” her own version of the visual and textual language of the hysterical comic woman; in short, the “Ack!” of “Cathy” comics. In the next

three panels, she discusses the autobiography and its process: “I have to try to reveal enough to create some sort of emotional impact but not so much that anyone feels compromised. And the most interesting stories are the ones I can never tell.” She depicts herself playing with doll-sized figures of her friends standing on a building rooftop, not unlike how they appear on the cover of *Lucky* or in the title story of *The Voyeurs*. Finally the comic ends by asking: “But why am I even doing this? Why not simply write fiction? Why do I have to put my own feeble life into these panels? Is it a natural reaction in today’s alienated society or is it a disorder?” (Bell, *Truth Is Fragmentary: Travelogues & Diaries* 50). Indeed, this is precisely the unspoken question of her practice, a poetics of her comics making articulated in six simple panels.

Bell continues to explore the nature of her identity by attempting to use comics to see Gabrielle through the eyes of another. This is most directly explored near the end of the collection *Truth is Fragmentary* in a chronicle of a trip to Colombia, “Festival Entreviñetas, Bogotá & Medellín, Colombia, September 14<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013.” In these comics, Bell does not adopt the narrative pose of a later Gabrielle Bell, looking back on past events from a vantage point in the future. Instead, Bell introduces a new narrative device, inventing an amanuensis to whom she has outsourced the task of keeping her diary:

Welcome to Gabrielle Bell’s Diary of Colombia. Miss Bell has employed me to depict her experiences. I will do my best to approximate her style. She is seated a couple seats ahead, waiting for the Xanax to kick in. Miss Bell got the idea of hiring a secretary to keep her diary when she read that Michel de Montaigne, during some of his travels, did so, in order to participate more fully in the life around him.



This narration is then illustrated with an image of Gabrielle pictured, attempting to more fully participate in the life around her, as she asks if she can have the dessert of the sleeping passenger seated next to her (Bell, *Truth Is Fragmentary: Travelogues & Diaries* 145). This inspired invention invites the question of whether the narrative is changed when the “same” person is pictured narrating a past event in her life, as is the case with most of Bell’s comics, and if it is different when she is viewed by a purportedly impassive third party narrating the events as they happen in the present tense. By asking whether the comic that the reader holds depicts Bell’s impression of herself, or whether it depicts Bell’s impression of the impression that a fictional narrator has of herself, the diary comic mocks attempts to tease out evidence of a “real” Gabrielle in any of these comics. This invented narrator cheekily takes frequent opportunities to criticize Gabrielle, who continues to remain the subject (both textually and graphically) of each of the panels. Eventually the scribe is left behind in Colombia while Gabrielle returns home, and although the narrator appears to continue to know about Gabrielle’s activities after their separation, the reader only knows the narrator as a genderless, faceless, literally disembodied voice who nevertheless remains as real to the reader as the other characters in the comic.

The comic that Bell created as an epilogue to *The Voyeurs* balances the ludic and the formal in a reverie that is entirely about Gabrielle Bell but, as with the previous comic narrated by her Montaignean secretary, it also depicts a Gabrielle seen through the eyes of another. Bell transcribes, and supplies the images, for a narrator who evaluates her as she passes through these various scenarios. The comic, titled “Sa Vie” references Godard’s film *Vivre Sa Vie*, a film about a woman, Nana, who also ubiquitously occupies the frames of the film for the watcher’s gaze. As with Godard, Bell’s comics elide observed action with “voiceover” commentary, in the case of “Sa Vie” the commentary is narrated by her friend

Tony. The comic begins, as most of the diary comics do, with the typical narration from the point of view of an implied future, creating, version of Gabrielle Bell: “Sometimes I can’t believe how lucky I am, like when I visit my dear friend Tony, who lives right around the corner from me” (Bell, *The Voyeurs* 153). The two of them engage in a conversation about film, in which Tony explains the Brechtian metatheatrical gesture, in which the audience is reminded that they are watching a play; and he explains how Godard achieves the same effect in his film. On the second page, however, the comic begins to change. Tony’s speech bubbles, although still in all caps, move to the tops of the panels, occupying the position where the third person past tense narrator’s text usually appears.

The panels that follow mark this shift even more dramatically. In response to Gabrielle’s parting remarks, Tony says: “When you come over here it’s like a ghost is passing through” (Bell, *The Voyeurs* 154). The next five panels are illustrations of the various similes that he uses to compare her, in turn, to a specter, a rollercoaster stuck on a precipice, a headless snake coiled around a room, a cloud formation, and a coke dealer working a room. The descriptions are lyrical and transporting, even as they describe Gabrielle as an identity that is itself in transit: “You’re like an airport. It’s an interesting place, but it’s a place that’s between places, the thing that transports you to other places” (Bell, *The Voyeurs* 155). Dipping out of the voiceover, the third to last panel shows the two in dialogue again. Tony says, “It’s not a criticism. It’s just a criticism. Your work is your consciousness. I don’t even know if you’re the same person anymore. Are you the same person?” “As who?” asks Gabrielle. “As you,” he answers. We are back to the question of how a person persists in both time and space: to herself and, also, to those who perceive her. After these ten panels in which Tony describes her, he turns the lens on himself. Subjected to his own scrutiny, his own not-criticism-just-a-criticism, he describes himself in the same way: “When I’m with

people, my face smiles. I try to be welcoming and engaging, to make people liked but I stare down at myself with a detachment that frightens me.” Gabrielle asks, “Are you now?” His response is “I...is someone else.” This is Rimbaud’s statement “je est un’autre,” which famously distinguishes the “I” as always an “other,” just as Godard’s film *Vivre Sa Vie* asks who we live our lives for (Bell, *The Voyeurs* 156).

The nested versions of ourselves are as complicated as the pronouns we use, switching meanings and identities as they appear in different contexts. It is the kind of work that Bell’s version of herself in the comics is deeply accustomed to this state of being, blissfully unaware of what lies ahead, but painfully aware of the way that she has to occupy every frame of her comic in the same way that we have to occupy every frame of our own lives. It is the desperation of the liminal state of being that animates these works and drives their production. The constant searching for where one is, where one is with respect to another, where one is when one *is* the other, how one can possibly not be there even as one’s body is palpably and unmistakably there; all of it is what ties these characters together. A shared understanding exists, even as it is unclear who is doing the sharing. The self cannot be distilled into a singular. And that is what makes it singular.

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. Hill and Wang, 1982. Print.
- Bell, Gabrielle. *July Diary*. Minneapolis: Uncivilized Books, 2012. Print.
- . Nimble Surrealism: Talking with Gabrielle Bell. 12 Nov. 2012. Web.
- . *The Voyeurs*. Minneapolis: Uncivilized Books, 2012. Print.
- . *Truth Is Fragmentary: Travelogues & Diaries*. Minneapolis: Uncivilized Books, 2014. Print.
- Chaney, Michael A. *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*. 1 edition. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011. Print.
- Chute, Hillary L. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. Print.
- Cumming, Laura. *A Face to the World: On Self-Portraits*. Hammersmith, London England: HarperPress, 2010. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Limited, Inc.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988. Print.
- Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013. Print.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993. Print.
- Postema, Barbara. *Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments*. Rochester, New York: RIT Press, 2013. Print.
- Refaie, Elisabeth El. *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*. Jackson, MS: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2012. Print.

