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“YOU CAN’T COMBAT NOTHING”: ALLIE BROSH’S *HYPERBOLE AND A HALF*
AND REFRAMING MENTAL ILLNESS THROUGH WEBCOMICS

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“You Can’t Combat Nothing”: Allie Brosh’s *Hyperbole and a Half* and Reframing Mental Illness Through Webcomics

Abstract

Amidst the powerfully democratizing, public spheres of Web 2.0, life writing has taken on new geographies and forms of mobility through webcomics. As an experimental mode of self-representation, webcomics are part of an urgent, digital turn in autobiographical writing, where speaking to one’s personal experiences also takes place within the social economies of the Internet. This paper analyzes webcomics as a compelling new dimension of autobiographical illness narrative, using Allie Brosh’s webcomic blog, *Hyperbole and a Half*, as its case study. Launched in 2009 on the free blog platform, Blogspot, Brosh’s deceptively simplistic aesthetic and comically dark representation of mental illness has since amassed near-cult following online. Drawing on the discipline of life writing and from comics studies, I aim to position Brosh’s webcomics within the field of graphic medicine and to explore how they might expand conventional understandings of illness within this contextual frame. Brosh’s work is a significant precursor to hybrid forms of illness narrative still emerging from digital spaces — this paper asks how webcomics capitalize on both the affordances of the Internet and the aesthetic of comics to connect audiences across vast distances with collective experiences of everyday illness.

In¹ late October 2011, Allie Brosh disappeared. For nearly two years, the writer, blogger, and cartoonist enjoyed public recognition as the creator of the webcomic *Hyperbole and a Half*, which first appeared on Google’s free Blogspot platform in 2009.² Gaining cult-like status amongst young adults online, at the height of its popularity in 2010, the blog averaged 200,000 views and between 1,000 and 2,500 comments per post. The following year Brosh’s public profile expanded into various other digital and social platforms, including Tumblr, YouTube, and Facebook (the latter of which reporting over 594,000 verified followers).³ *Hyperbole* became a regular feature of various “best of” lists online, including PC World’s inaugural compilation of “The Funniest Sites on the Web,”⁴ and in May 2011, Brosh announced a publication deal with Touchstone Books that would turn material from the webcomic into a graphic novel.⁵ With web traffic on the blog site reaching critical mass, and the public eye firmly trained for new uploads, Brosh broke abruptly from her regular schedule of content for six months, during which time details of an untold struggle with mental illness were revealed.⁶ In October, the extended webcomic “Adventures in Depression” appeared online, the first of a promised two-part series that would explore the parameters of grief, trauma, and mental illness through the intimate lens of Brosh’s own depression and anxiety. Shortly

after, however, Brosh resumed her hiatus from the webcomic and public life.⁷ Between October 2011 and May 2013, the *Hyperbole* blog was deactivated and the unreleased second part of its series on depression was presumably cancelled.

The story of Allie Brosh is significant in at least two contexts of interest to life writing scholars. The first is connected to the field of graphic medicine, which has emerged from the medical humanities movement⁸ to explore “the intersection between the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare.”⁹ This interdisciplinary approach towards rethinking subjective aspects of illness, disability, and caregiving was first conceived by Ian Williams, whose broad definition of graphic medicine refers to a variety of publications that enhance patient care, develop medical education, and offer new dynamics to both individual and collective experiences of illness through personal narrative and visual language.¹⁰ The second relates to the interdisciplinary promise Brosh’s work fulfills as autobiographical webcomic, an experimental medium borne out of comics studies and contemporary digital culture, where practices related to blogging, cartooning, and life narrative merge and intersect in the presence of an online audience.

Webcomics occupy a complex and manifold space in relation to illness narrative, responding to the fluid and unstructured writing prevalent online, and likewise a vacillating online community who freely contribute to its story. *Hyperbole* is perhaps the most significant example of webcomics coming into cultural recognition as a mode for challenging stereotypical representations of mental illness and contributing to the developing candor around these experiences.¹¹ Parsed through this unique textual case, this paper explores the structural affordances of webcomics, their distinct visual grammar, and the interconnections between both as highly suggestive spaces for what Susan Squier and Ryan Marks argue makes “graphic medicine — as art, scholarship, and something combining both — [...] subtle, analytic, and complex.”¹²

Brosh’s *Hyperbole* outlines new engagements with intimate stories of mental illness, deploying visual metaphors and symbolic language within an abstract, haphazard kind of artistry to convey an accessible and comedic account of everyday life with depression and anxiety. As the study of webcomics necessitates consideration of both the formal properties of comics and the affordances of digital media, this paper appropriately presents its close reading alongside an analysis of *Hyperbole*’s subjectivity as a hybrid

webcomic blog with a vast, networked audience. How webcomics invite powerful visual disclosures and simultaneously collapse the boundaries between authors and readers is particularly salient to *Hyperbole*, which catalyzed an online community through identification and provided them with a platform to contribute their own experiences into an evolving, collective story of mental illness. Connections between graphic medicine which “can function as [a] [*sic*] portal into individual experience of illness,” and life writing ethics tied to witnessing autobiographical stories online signal a provocative area for future research that positions illness narrative within interdisciplinary fields of comics studies, graphic medicine, and life writing — one that the study of Brosh’s webcomics powerfully discerns.¹³

1_Webcomics in Context: Underground Comix and Graphic Medicine

An exploration of Brosh’s illness narrative requires some theoretical scaffolding around what webcomics are and how this medium links to an established field of autobiographical comics as well as to emerging spaces of life writing and graphic medicine studies. The geographies and subjects of comics are always in motion, responding to new generations of cartoonists and the urgent socio-cultural and political issues emerging out of the contemporary moment. The roots of autobiographical comics are often traced to the literary counterculture of the Underground Comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Comix artists — Robert Crumb, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, and Justin Green among the most prominent — depicted stories of sexual experimentation, explicit drug use, political unrest, and violence in order to challenge dominant taboos and break the silence and censure around such experiences.¹⁴

Cartoonists and comics artists today negotiate similar positions of marginality to continue the tradition of writing against underrepresented cultural and political issues, giving voice to those silenced, and visualizing what has been erased. The modern context for their work is geared towards broad theories and practices of life writing: scholarship which attends to the vast mediums — i.e. written, drawn, performative — through which we attempt to understand our lives and others’.¹⁵ The connecting fibers of comics and autobiography have developed strongly from artists such as Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, and Alison Bechdel, and scholars including Elisabeth El Refaie, Charles Hatfield, and Hillary Chute, the latter of whom has argued convincingly that “[t]he energy around comics and the relation of comics to the question of narrating

lives in our contemporary moment are palpable.”¹⁶ Autobiographical comics prompt new possibilities and challenges around the nature of self-display, shifting and extending the boundaries of what can and cannot be represented in narrative.¹⁷ For example, comics’ formal tensions between word and image, or panel and gutter, allow past experience and memories to exist alongside present, and even future, events. In the same way that temporality is re-envisioned through drawing, the physical referent of the image can also project introspective thoughts or emotions onto the page.

While scholarship surrounding why and how comics are inclined to autobiographical representation is subjective, complex, and beyond the scope of this paper, what I hope to illustrate here is that the relationship between word-and-image forms and documenting lives emerges from deep historical contexts.¹⁸ How both genres contemporaneously shift towards more fragmented, spontaneous, and digital acts of self-display, and seek audiences that are increasingly mobile and interconnected, is another connection we might draw out. Autobiography and comics have undergone significant transformations in terms of how they occupy space and generate audience in accordance with trends in literature and culture. Comics, for instance, has moved between print and digital publishing cultures, from stapled magazines (‘floppies’), newspaper strips and zines, towards the era of Web 2.0, social media and proliferating spaces for public self-expression popularized in the twenty-first century. Autobiographical works that embrace digital media, mix genres, or otherwise push at the form itself have recently dominated life writing research, opening up the field to digital contexts, spaces, and communities in which self-representation is newly produced and mediated.¹⁹ At the intersection of these trajectories is webcomics, known variously within comics and media scholarship as digital comics, download comics, hypercomics and internet comics.²⁰ Once remnants of the early Internet age, now revived with the emergence of social media, webcomics are a precise, hybrid mode connected to increasingly mobile and fluctuating platforms and audiences. In the context of life writing, they provoke new thinking about form, genre, and the personal stakes of representation that appears singularly online.

As a mode of self-representation that challenges and broadens the limits of life narrative through the affordances of the Internet, webcomics are a unique, interdisciplinary technology for intimate self-display. Not limited to word-and-image, they may incorporate sound, animation, and user-led interactivity (e.g. ‘choose-your-own-adventure’

style) in an immersive, representational narrative. These multimodal elements are not pertinent to this paper, however, the notion that webcomics are texts strictly created for digital distribution online, on digital platforms, and for digitally networked audiences is essential to this discussion.²¹ The definition of webcomics I am proposing excludes comics first published in a physical forms like magazines and books, but not those adapted for print since circulating online.²² This is an important distinction, as my lens for examining webcomics as a powerful rhetorical device for graphic medicine considers not only how marginalized or misrepresented experiences of mental illness are presented on a referential level through drawing, but also how this personal narrative traverses digital platforms that broadcast to vast communities of digital readers.

Tensions between the delicate labor of drawing and the spontaneity of posting and sharing means webcomics toggle somewhat precariously between online and offline modes of representation and publication. Scott McCloud was the first to grapple with the complexity of rendering comics online in *Reinventing Comics*, which envisioned a digitally utopian landscape for the graphic form and urged artists to begin embracing new tools for their production and dissemination.²³ Whilst McCloud's predictions have been rigorously debated, his work remains the initial blueprint for how comics and its study could be reinvented for the digital age.²⁴ Sean Fenty, Trena Houp, and Laurie Taylor have since examined the wide distribution of comics online for broad platforms and universal audiences, centering their argument on the aesthetic and artistic potentials of digital storytelling.²⁵ Significantly, Fenty, Houp, and Taylor define webcomics as a modern variant of Underground Comix and identify marked connections between these genres in terms of their themes, subject matter, style, and structure.²⁶ With the turn towards increasingly public, interconnected modes of self-representation, comics scholarship draws on this early theorizing to signal new directions and questions around the future of autobiographical comics online. In *Documentary Comics*, Nina Mickwitz's brief overview of webcomics' scholarship makes two key assertions: the medium is largely absent within the field of life writing, and existing research in comics studies concentrates on webcomics' multimodality (i.e. animation and sound) over their publication, dissemination, and reception online.²⁷ Candida Rifkind, a prominent comics scholar, also makes the not uncontroversial argument that free distribution and newly accessible audiences online may revolutionize autobiographical comics: "[P]latform

diversification must be part of the future of graphic life-narrative studies.”²⁸ As web-comics’ position within genres that tell and show lived experience continues to unfold, what becomes increasingly apparent is the capacity of these texts for marginalized, invisible, or otherwise unknowable experience. From Mickwitz and Rifkind’s work, distinct connections between autobiographical Comix and webcomics are revealed: both carve out radical new spaces in terms of comics publishing, subjectivity, and representation, and respond to the same cultural necessity for untold stories. If Underground Comix sought to engage and disarm taboos around sexuality, gender, war, and addiction, then in a similar tradition, I argue, webcomics gesture towards the equally pervasive silencing around experiences of disability, disease, and mental illness.

The nature of the illness experience continues to capture scholarship from diverse fields of medicine, social science, and the humanities, much of which cites Arthur Frank as its most notable theorist.²⁹ Frank’s seminal work, *The Wounded Storyteller*, provides a typology of illness storytelling drawn from first-person experiences of illness, including his own, that demonstrates how understanding the body is parsed through stories shaped and reshaped by individuals, families, and most overwhelmingly, the force of medical discourse.³⁰ He writes: “The story of illness that trumps all others in the modern period is the medical narrative. The story told by the physician becomes the one against which all others are ultimately judged true or false, useful or not.”³¹ Frank’s emphasis on personal narratives to articulate and reclaim the ill body is borne out in graphic medicine, which takes embodied illness memoir as subject, and mobilizes the perspectives of the individual, family, friends and caregivers for these disclosures.³² Graphic medicine is still emerging as a genre of autobiographical comics which calls for novel spaces in which subjective narratives relating to illness and/or disability might “bridge the gap between knowing about a disease and understanding the patient’s experience of that disease.”³³

In a landmark study, Michael J. Green and Kimberly R. Myers identified “graphic pathographies” as a compelling sub-genre of graphic medicine that might assist doctors in understanding the personal and communal impacts of illness in their clinical practice.³⁴ Their analysis posits two examples of graphic pathographies, Brian Fries’ *Mom’s Cancer* and Marisa Marchetto’s *Cancer Vixen*, that, I argue, reveal something of the shape and subject of graphic medicine. *Mom’s Cancer*, for instance, was originally

serialized online as a webcomic strip and won the inaugural prize for “Best Digital/Webcomic” at the 2005 Eisner Awards.³⁵ Its inclusion in Green and Myers’ study as an early example of graphic medicine not only positions webcomics as a distinct technology for life narrative but suggests firmly their rhetorical power for graphic stories of illness. Further, that two cancer narratives were selected for analysis reveals a broader tendency in comics studies to focus on illnesses manifested in or on the body. The capacity to engage with the “docile bodies” of the mentally ill — rendered invisible, hidden, or illegitimated throughout history — thus points to productive gaps in graphic medicine criticism that modern theorizing aims to address.³⁶

As Underground Comix became “a vehicle for the most personal and unguarded of revelations,”³⁷ graphic medicine, too, builds a legacy of transgression by offering a way into the subjective realities of illness and/or disability, and granting its sufferers agency to challenge dominant cultural attitudes around illness through a hybrid visual-verbal mode.³⁸ This is where I propose graphic medicine and Brosh’s *Hyperbole* powerfully and productively intersect. Webcomics are transgressive texts, in many ways, pointing towards untapped narratives of personal experience and capturing wide audiences within the democratic spaces of digital and social media. Likewise, graphic medicine ‘democratizes’ the discourse of medicine, that is, opens up the visualization of illness experiences beyond medical illustrations in clinical textbooks and pamphlets (although educational comics are included within the genre) for the benefit of doctors, patients, and their families.³⁹ Through the juxtaposition of words and images, graphic medicine allows artists to deploy visual metaphors for illness experiences that are visceral, embodied, and complex. What makes the simplistic style of drawing we see in *Hyperbole* so captivating, for example, is how it frames complex issues surrounding death, pain, and suffering within layers of comedy and absurdity to enable greater knowledge and understanding of these life events.

2_Fracture and Metaphor in Allie Brosh’s *Hyperbole*

Threading visual vignettes of life narrative with technicolored artistry, *Hyperbole* presents a facetious and satirical depiction of the everyday filtered through with allusions to depression and anxiety. Its drawings reproduce real events in periodic, time stamped posts imbued with the immediacy of digital publishing culture and the generic expect-

tations of diary and/or blog in this context. Consider the organization of these webcomics via its host domain, Blogspot, where navigational links to Brosh's social media, thumbnails of featured posts, a list of followers, an archive of previous works, and the number of page loads are displayed along the right-side of the screen. As Kylie Cardell notes, these features mobilize a popular sense of the blog as diary: "This is the effect of certain structural convergences (such as chronological ordering, dated entries, and a present-tense perspective) as well as a perceived rhetorical resonance to forms of personal and autobiographical writing."⁴⁰ As webcomic blog, *Hyperbole* appears to foreground documentary affordances both through drawings that are distinctly quotidian and the mixing of genres that "[tap] into a contemporary aesthetic for immediacy and transparency in representation."⁴¹ The intimacies of mental illness in this context are part of a formulated life narrative that feels immediate and intense while at the same time resembles humorous escapism. Brosh's webcomics speak to an audience primed to witness and engage with personal stories online, in other words, and presents vibrant, embodied webcomics with specific functions to invite commentary, speculation, and scrutiny.

A collection of disconnected, anecdotal webcomics, *Hyperbole* exemplifies digital modes of expression "valued for their perceived more-realistic-because-less-figurative representation of self."⁴² The following reading attempts to draw out the precise visual strategies it leverages as communicative tools that, in conjunction with its positioning as webcomic blog, both produces and solicits certain intimacies between author and audience. Bracketing Brosh's extended hiatus in 2011, "Adventures in Depression" and "Depression Part Two" reframe *Hyperbole*'s unique artistry for the purpose of representing illness, co-opting the visual idiom popularized in Underground Comix to foreground difficult subjects like self-harm and suicidal ideation and render them in a comedic style. As graphic medicine offers representations of illness rich with visual metaphor, analogy, and allusion,⁴³ how Brosh's webcomics mobilize these techniques to create new understandings of mental illness and "bridge the gap"⁴⁴ between its sufferers is pertinent to this analysis.

Graphic medicine is geared towards the personal and communal aspects of illness, layering visual depictions of identities, perspectives, and experiences to develop more subjective knowledge around illness as life event. As Annemarie Mol argues in *The Body Multiple*, literature around disease and illness is a critical frame for understanding

bodies rendered “multiple” by the practices and performances (for example, patient case-files, doctor consults, surgeries, imaging scans) that cohere the medical profession.⁴⁵ For Mol, illnesses are “more than singular,” rather, deeply multifaceted events drawn from, and embedded in, medical and personal experience.⁴⁶ The complex multiplicity of illness — as a biomedical process and also social phenomenon — demands that researchers and practitioners “seek ways, *lay ways* so to speak, to freely talk about them.”⁴⁷ The shifting sites of the ill body that Mol describes are an apt metaphor for our digital times, where notions of the ‘self’ are pluralistic and decentered, and come into our awareness through multiform profiles and platforms of representation. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, two formative life writing theorists, summarized these digital trends more than a decade ago in *Reading Autobiography*, in which they argue “autobiographical storytelling is drawn from multiple, disparate, and discontinuous experiences and the multiple identities constructed from and constituting those experiences.”⁴⁸ Mol, and Smith and Watson, identify two key considerations that shape the following analysis: how Brosh works closely with metaphor and humor to create more accessible language around mental illness, and deploys images of a multiplied or fragmented self to contest common assumptions of depression and anxiety.

Scenes of juvenile light-heartedness, abruptly punctured with references to dark imagery and themes, sets off distinct narrative and comedic effects in *Hyperbole*. As Elisabeth El Refaie notes, the most common metaphors used to describe depression in graphic illness narratives circulate around “darkness, descent, [...] or being trapped in a tight space” whereas “the process of recovery is typically framed in terms of a battle or journey.”⁴⁹ In “Depression Part Two,” for example, Brosh appears in a dark room, distorted to create the visual impression of its walls stretching infinitely towards a small and indistinct exit. In the following image, she stands at the threshold to an unknown door with anonymous, white text floating overhead. Its taunting dialogue — “Oh, are you trying to get away? Go see what’s over there” — accompanies a hastily scribbled arrow, both pointing towards something out of frame to the right of screen.⁵⁰ As the sequence continues, this invisible narrator coerces Brosh into deeper, blacker recesses until she finally confronts a cavernous tunnel, across which the words “WHAT’S IN THERE? Is it nothing??” are chaotically spread.⁵¹ In the typed captions that introduce these drawings, Brosh attempts to describe her experience of depression as “not really negativity or sadness” but a “detached, meaningless fog where you can’t feel anything

about anything.”⁵² Whilst the notion of “descent” that El Refaie prioritizes as a visual metaphor for depression is particularly conspicuous in this example, as Brosh travels through a palimpsest of black scenes into increasingly unknown territories, the juxtaposition between narratorial perspectives is equally compelling. Here, Brosh stages a dialogue between several versions of herself — a cartoonish, physical avatar; internal ‘voice’ similarly drawn; and the captions that retrospectively frame these events. The fracture evidenced by Brosh’s multiple selves is jarring — against a calculably naïve visual idiom, the prose text describes the isolating, overwhelming experience of depression in a diaristic tone that models self-reflexivity. Similar references to a multiplied self are embedded within both “Adventures in Depression” and “Depression Part Two” as a powerful allusion to the complex material experience of mental illness as well as the multiplicity of the ill body highlighted by Mol.

Fracture and duality form part of a distinct framework for subjectivity, narration, and identity in Brosh’s webcomics, constituting a dominant metaphorical trope in “Adventures in Depression,” specifically. These images are divided into unequal halves that re-envision the fractured ill self as separate entities (‘depressed’ versus ‘not-depressed’ Allie) in conversation. In one example, a physically listless Brosh, draped over a couch, is juxtaposed against a close-up of her internal self, with furrowed brows and deep frown-lines belaying the latter’s frustration. These related images form a static background against which Brosh’s self-beratement for “being sad” is visualized as an internal dialogue: “Stop it. Stop being sad. Right now. Stop [...] If you don’t stop being sad right now, I’m going to turn on the garbage disposal and listen to the sound it makes until you cooperate.”⁵³ These metaphors of self, that construct or reference duality, connect Brosh’s artistry to the broader intent of graphic medicine to contrast “subjective feelings and perceptions with the objective visual representation.”⁵⁴ By visualizing its author/avatar as split identities, that is, *Hyperbole* presents visible language for invisible or subliminal effects of mental illness, such as emotional or cognitive dissonance, and translates the complexity of these experiences into a representative life narrative.

The structural composition of split panels, in which one side represents Brosh’s inner psyche and the other her physical reality, is revisited intermittently throughout *Hyperbole*’s two-part “Depression” series. In another example, Brosh’s internal self dominates over two thirds of the image, shouting at its cowering, tearful physical version:

“HEY! What are you doing? Are you crying? Why are you crying? The worst thing that has happened to you in the last three days is tearing the spout on your chocolate milk.”⁵⁵ The depiction of disparate bodies across these webcomics is significant in its connection to the complex and fractured experience of mental illness, but also, in creating a distinct “iconography of illness” bound up in its comically abstract, exaggerated, and experimental art.⁵⁶ Brosh’s aesthetic is a productive frame for graphic medicine and its aim to translate complicated concepts and experiences into narrative that carries somewhat loaded implications for identity and authenticity in life writing.

Williams argues that “comics autobiographies differ from text autobiographies in several ways, tending towards self-reflexivity and often featuring metafictional elements that point to ideas of the self as a construct.”⁵⁷ Brosh’s amorphous self-representation in *Hyperbole* — not immediately recognizable as female, nor human — occupies peculiar space in relation to conventional images of the “autobiographical avatar,” to use Gillian Whitlock’s phrase.⁵⁸ With a body constituting a pink rectangle fused to stick arms and legs, bulging white eyes and a yellow triangle of ‘hair,’ this frog-like figure is an assemblage of caricature, animation, and parody far removed from Brosh’s real appearance. Yet, it is also clearly self-representation, one that both draws upon and dismantles cultural perceptions of the “freaked and Othered bodies” that have historically coded illness as visual difference.⁵⁹ As Krista Quesenberry writes, Brosh’s purposefully ambiguous avatar allows for certain slippages in its representation of gendered illness: “A non-human self-representation eliminates some or all of the predictable identity markers in order to convey a reconstituted identity.”⁶⁰ Brosh’s deceptively simplistic art, then, stands for a complex, fluctuating illness experience which not only engages multiple identity positions within a singular avatar, but levers the plasticity of this representation to re-envision common stereotypes and assumptions around the ‘ill’ identity and body.

3_ The ‘Art’ of Illness: Exaggeration and Abstraction as Counter-narrative

Recently, comics scholars have positioned *Hyperbole* within shifting debates in relation to the representation of illness and/or disability in graphic memoir and autobiographical comics, focusing on the role of style and aesthetic for characterizing and subverting these experiences.⁶¹ What Quesenberry identifies as *Hyperbole*’s non-gendered representation of illness, which highlights particular experiences and knowledge of mental

illness, is echoed by Kristen Gay, who argues Brosh's self-depiction forces audiences to employ covert reading strategies in order to identify mood and emotion on deeper referential levels, through the size and placement of its eyes and mouth, for instance.⁶² In the aforementioned example ("why are you crying?"), the narrowed eyes and furrowed brow of Brosh's internal self contrast with the wide, glistening eyes of the external to visualize the strain of emotional distress and other conflicts experienced by sufferers of mental illness. As these are identical figures, between whom facial expression is the only differentiating feature, Brosh appropriately directs readers to identify nuance, rather than focus broadly on where and how the body appears, in order to understand these key subtleties of depression and anxiety.

Where Gay limits the scope of her analysis to the images or panels in which mental illness is made visible through facial expression, I argue these features reveal a change in tone and subjectivity across the webcomic blog, particularly, where "Adventures in Depression" slips into "Depression Part Two." In the former, Brosh's mouth is a closed frown, depicted as little more than a thin black line, while her eyes are drawn as variously blank, numb, and uncertain. These features are grotesquely amplified and exaggerated in posts that follow, where the mouth resembles a hollow chasm, akin to a silent scream, and its pupils are dilated to such an extent the whiteness around the edges is nearly imperceptible. The implications of these disproportions not only allude to the significant period of interruption that precedes "Depression Part Two," the volatility of this artistry positions fracture as both a theme within the webcomic and an inevitability for its author outside it. That Brosh traces emotional flux onto a deceptively ambiguous avatar produces a new mode of witnessing that requires readers to remain attentive to how artistic style, alongside visual and verbal content, frames and influences acts of interpretation.

In Dave Eggers' foreword to McSweeney's comics anthology, *More Things Like This*, he asks: "Why is it important to some of the artists that the drawings appear casual, even sloppy? Is the loose craftsmanship part of their appeal, in that they seem more intimate and disarming? Is absurdity more appealing when it comes across as humble?"⁶³ Brosh's 'sloppy' aesthetic is perhaps as central to the cultural pervasiveness of her webcomics as to their relatability in relation to intimate displays of mental illness. This rough, yet calculable, method of drawing is what makes *Hyperbole* so successful in removing readers from conventional understandings of how depression and anxiety

‘look’ and ‘feel,’ and towards some of its untouched realities. These webcomics signal their own craftedness, in other words, by calling attention to more diverse ways of seeing and being in the world through the messy distortion of images, lines and shapes.

While Brosh’s cartoons resemble somewhat rudimentary attempts at drawing, even gesturing towards the clunkiness of drawing on screen; they are, in fact, created with meticulous detail on Paintbrush, a version of Microsoft Paint for MacBook.⁶⁴ While seemingly an unexpected medium for a story immersed in daily experiences of depression and anxiety — particularly as Paint offers fairly limited options for drawing — this amateur-like aesthetic allows for vast displays of mood and expression, as discussed, as well as more authentic visualizations of the self, as Brosh explains:

I draw myself this way [because] I feel like this absurd, squiggly thing is actually a much more accurate representation of myself than I am. It’s a better tool for communicating my sense of humour and actually getting across what I’m trying to say than, say, you know, being there in the flesh [...] it’s more of a raw representation of what it feels like to be me.⁶⁵

Through its “rawness” and relatability, *Hyperbole* demonstrates the fundamentals of comics, specifically, “exaggeration, fantasy, caricature, spectacle, irony, disorder, distortion.”⁶⁶ Its stylized scribbles combined with the dense emotional territory it covers means Brosh occupies space near the middle of the spectrum between reality and absurdity. In the “About” section of the blog, she describes herself as “heroic, caring, alert and flammable” before abruptly changing tack and bookending the page with a picture of a unicorn captioned, “this is probably the least informative about page ever.”⁶⁷ *Hyperbole* reveals an urgent representational mode for stories of mental illness that reveals a layered, referential portrayal of illness that is conscious of its own perceived juvenility.

Part way through “Depression Part Two,” for instance, a climactic moment depicts Brosh’s frustration at what she deems the institutionalized dialogues of depression. At two separate points, she writes:

It isn’t always something you can fight back against with hope. It isn’t even something — it’s nothing. And you can’t combat nothing. You can’t fill it up. You can’t cover it. It’s just there, pulling the meaning out of everything.

It would be like having a bunch of dead fish, but no one around you will acknowledge that the fish are dead.⁶⁸

The following scenes re-enact conversations with friends, strangers, and therapists, where the word “fish” is substituted for other well-known axioms of self-help advice:

“Fish are always deadest before the dawn,” quips the smiling face of a brown-haired woman suspended in the top left-hand corner.⁶⁹ In the same frame, a superimposed male figure adds, “you used to have so many fish... what happened?”⁷⁰ These voices are amplified by more strangers, increasing in volume until the penultimate scene which positions Brosh against a blank white background, flinging fish back at this imaginary audience and yelling, “why can’t anyone see how dead these are?”⁷¹ By appropriating language with deep referential ties to common assumptions around mental illness, Brosh exercises a self-consciousness that reveals the precision behind her webcomics, wherein humor and ‘sloppiness’ form the tenets of a particular kind of illness representation.

What results from *Hyperbole*’s comedic impulse is a sharp commentary on conventional illness narratives of transformation and recovery⁷² that outlines absurdity and exaggeration as visual terms for deeply personal experiences. One of the most recognizable images of the webcomic, and the most appropriated by its vast Internet fandom, features a bug-eyed Brosh grinning maniacally next to the words, “I FEEL NOTHING,” printed in underlined, all-capital letters.⁷³ The playful absurdity from which Brosh creates this narrative is powerfully authentic and reflects a self-conscious effort to bracket distressing content against sarcastic humor. In her analysis of *Mom’s Cancer*, Sharon O’Brien suggests authenticity compels our attention towards illness: “Because there are so few honest illness narratives in our culture, readers find those that exist powerful and important because they give voice to their own silenced or submerged stories.”⁷⁴ O’Brien taps an important distinction between lived experiences of illness and its representation in comics, as drawing widens the scope of autobiographical storytelling to capture excess, abstraction, and exaggeration as part of its visual grammar.

Comics offer an experimental framework for disclosure that is less reliant on “honesty” or truth/fullness than traditional testimony yet is undeniably an expression of real experience, emotion, and thought.⁷⁵ The capacity to convey meaning through the breadth of visual, verbal, and digital strategies, for instance, makes webcomics like *Hyperbole* ripe for a similar kind of abstract, layered self-display. Unbound by the traditional structure of print comics (panels, gutters, and frames) and operating instead as scrolling narratives, the form of webcomics constitute streams of images accommodated by the virtually endless digital ‘page.’⁷⁶ The fluidity of *Hyperbole*, that sits in the

generative space where webcomics and blog merge and overlap, means the unpredictable and fractured experience of depression and anxiety is presented not only in drawing, but as part of its structural outlay. By embedding its meaning within multiple referential levels — for example, the image, the post, the webcomic, the blog itself — *Hyperbole* offers up more than one ‘text’ for us to read and interpret as illness narrative.

In the final paragraphs of “Adventures in Depression,” Brosh rejects dominant assumptions of illness narrative as linear or formulaic, instead favoring a fluid and ambiguous kind of storytelling that comes to characterize the form of her webcomic. In a moment of critical self-reflexivity, she challenges resolutions to mental illness built around emotional transformation or discovery with a picture of banal dailiness:

If my life was a movie, the turning point of my depression would have been inspirational and meaningful. It would have involved wisdom-filled epiphanies about discovering my true self and I would conquer my demons and go on to live the rest of my life in happiness. Instead, my turning point mostly hinged upon the fact that I had rented some movies and then I didn’t return them for too long.⁷⁷

Comics artist Nicola Streeten echoes Brosh’s resistance to “epiphany” in illness narratives that position transformation as the centering device for resolution, citing catharsis as equally “problematic, because there’s no consensus of what it means. [...] The idea is of cleaning out pent up trauma with the suggestion of a cure at the end.”⁷⁸ Catharsis is often freighted with cultural weight, a term that invokes an expectation of healing that limits perceptions of mental illness, itself not as easily resolved as physical symptoms or bodily wounds. For Brosh, the perpetual cycle of invisible symptoms and shifting identities that characterize her experience of depression and anxiety can be summarized as the difference between a tunnel and a tube. In interviews, she has described depression as “a tunnel, but also may be a giant tube that just keeps going in a circle. And you can’t tell which one it is while you’re in it. There might be light, but there might just be more tube.”⁷⁹ Whilst a tunnel is a cogent metaphor for what Frank calls “restitution narrative,” a tube elicits an endless negotiation with mental illness that better encapsulates the sentiment of *Hyperbole*, whose author appears in perpetual recovery from, rather than cured of, depression and anxiety.⁸⁰ While the complexity of Brosh’s ill identity undeniably informs the subject of her webcomics, how the blog’s formal structure reinforces this positioning makes a compelling point. Rather than turn pages, readers continually scroll down to reveal new displays of images and captions.

At the bottom, they must scroll up through these frames to reach the navigation pane, or else click a button that says “top” to catapult back to the beginning. This analogy for depression and anxiety thus operates on several referential levels in *Hyperbole*: it suggests Brosh’s attempts to grapple with the cyclical nature of mental illness through visual metaphor and gains deeper significance in practice as a strategy for reading, whereby her audience’s interactions with the text solicit particular engagements with its images, words, and stories.

4_Does Anybody Know What Is Happening with Allie Brosh?

Whilst published stories of trauma, illness, and adversity are often written with the benefit and distortion of hindsight, there is an urgency and an honesty in the quotidian currency of webcomics. By urgency, I mean not to imply the same kind of spontaneity and suddenness of the social media status, but rather, to suggest that the moment new posts appear on *Hyperbole* or elsewhere online is when readers feel closest to its author. The Allie Brosh rendered on our screen is Allie Brosh *right now*. The Internet presents a particular mode of autobiographical writing that facilitates the immediacy of experience, and in this instance brings its vast, virtual audience into contact with mental illness through conversations with its sufferers. In this way, *Hyperbole* is the kind of narrative that Frank advocates in *The Wounded Storyteller*: one that counters the singular medical language with personal voice to achieve “collective force.”⁸¹

Since the publication of Frank’s creative nonfiction monograph, life writing on illness as identity and narrative now constitute a burgeoning, and significant, critical field.⁸² Its foundational theorist is G. Thomas Couser, whose work casts widely towards a range of autobiographical subjects and considers the influence of agency and ethics in self-representation.⁸³ Against conventional thinking that attempts to homogenize illness narratives, Brosh presents an individualistic experience that seemingly aligns with Couser’s notion that representation is how a patient “owns [their] diagnosis.”⁸⁴ That said, a hybrid webcomic blog like *Hyperbole*, widely publicized and deployed on the Internet, navigates diverse audiences and makes visible their illness stories through the affordances of its comments section. Brosh’s work is thus framed through a collective lens of perspectives that complicates the assumption that she “owns” her illness, as *Hyperbole*’s purpose and function extends beyond her singular story of depression and anxiety. As Frank asserts, telling illness stories comes with ethical pressure: “[F]or the

person who is seriously ill, a primary responsibility for service is storytelling as an art of witness.”⁸⁵ The ethics of personal disclosure remains central to life writing debates in the twenty-first century, prompting us to think critically about what these texts make visible, and our responsibility as witnesses to lived experience. Readers of *Hyperbole* occupy an intense relationship to both the webcomics and its author, which contextualizes this consideration of the ethical dimensions to reading and performing illness through personal disclosures online.

During the 19-month span of her absence, *Hyperbole*'s vast fandom set in motion a search that spread to distant corners and communities of the Internet. The comment sections of the blog and Brosh's social media profiles flooded with messages of support and pleas for updates; independent forum sites posted 'sightings' of Brosh in her hometown of Sandpoint, Idaho; online journalists even began writing articles centered on her absence and the viral public response. The Reddit chain, "Does anybody know what is happening with Allie Brosh" was launched and received over 1,300 upvotes and 746 comments from users, many of whom created new accounts for the purpose of joining the chorus of concerned friends and followers. The Subreddit soon became a trending piece on the site's "front page of the internet," prompting Brosh's first public remarks in almost two years. In March 2012, under the pseudonymous username Tubemonster, she commented on the thread with a lengthy apology introduced with the statement:

The last few months (and I suppose also the few months before those few months) have been very difficult for me. As you know, I've been struggling with depression. I made a small breakthrough at the time of my last post, but even though I was feeling a bit better, I was still depressed and I knew I probably wasn't out of the woods yet.⁸⁶

Brosh remained active on the forum briefly after posting to respond to the outpouring of messages from her followers, a vast number of whom included intimate self-disclosures as part of their comments. Two months later, she reactivated *Hyperbole* to publish "Depression Part Two," which saw the blog's following reach critical mass — the post received over 1.5 million unique visits and 5,000 comments in a single day — and record its highest ever user-engagement.⁸⁷

As the technological capaciousness of webcomics allows for the transmission of intimacy in public space, these kinds of interactions are mediated rapidly as never before, and likewise, create reading communities more devoted and attentive to these

works than ever. The interactivity foregrounded in webcomics maps well onto conceptions of graphic medicine as a mode of representation that extends beyond personal storytelling to consider health and illness on the broader scale of community.⁸⁸ That is, graphic medicine can “provide companionship through shared experience in a more immediate manner than might be gained from joining a self-help group or reading patient information leaflets.”⁸⁹ Significantly, this “companionship” online extends beyond family, friends, or medical professionals to include strangers, anonymous people, or those using pseudonyms or usernames online. The immediacy of the webcomic blog engenders a new kind of intimacy between otherwise disparate groups in this regard, translating the individual experience of illness into one built for mass consumption, interaction, and circulation within the sharing ecologies of the Internet.

Addressing herself to largely unknowable audiences across vast global spaces, Brosh engages readers who are not mere spectators of her vibrant, quotidian illness narrative, but form an attentive community broadly connected online. As McCloud has suggested, the visual abstraction and fractured narratives required of comics — where the process of meaning-making relies on filling gutters or gaps with one’s own thoughts, memories, and experiences — make them powerful conduits for engaged acts of looking.⁹⁰ Reading comics therefore “demands tactility, a physical intimacy with the reader in the acts of cognition and visual scrutiny.”⁹¹ One of the ways *Hyperbole* negotiates life writing and ethics is by offering new considerations for the varying risks and responsibilities of graphic witnessing when it moves beyond the interior (reading, thinking, imagining) and accompanies physical and visible acts (liking, commenting, sharing). The archive of likes and comments filed on *Hyperbole* constitute this kind of interaction between reader and text, creating a story richer and more diverse than Brosh alone is capable of telling. One that permits individuals’ intimate disclosures of illness without eliciting the representational risks that Brosh confronts with her own.⁹² That is, her readers can choose to remain anonymous (depending on their username), interact with both the webcomic and other followers throughout the comments section, or validate the stories shared there by liking or subscribing to different posts.

Offering visual, visible representations of illness makes comics a powerful medium for remediation, something that is productively amplified in webcomics that engage with a decentered, digital public to create wholly new, collective stories of illness out of, and alongside, the main. Given the generative digital modes, platforms, and profiles

now available on which to present ourselves and our stories, *Hyperbole* demonstrates how artists like Brosh circulate amongst a reading public and stand up to their scrutiny. The vast readership who encounter her work on the Internet and use its functionality to enter their own narratives into the record reveal the burdens and vulnerabilities of mutual personal disclosure. What are Brosh's responsibilities to her readers? Does she owe *Hyperbole* fans updates on her mental 'status?' Their fanatical search lasting over a year suggests yes. Yet these slippery engagements between author and audience generate pressure to rethink what an ethical relationship with autobiography requires, and perhaps does not require, from us. What is our responsibility as readers to intimate self-display, when it appears in overtly networked, public spaces of the Internet? As Brosh's reclusiveness poses interruptions to her webcomics, reading them is complicated by questions around accessibility and responsibility: are these absences part of what audiences are permitted to consume or investigate? What does this tell us about the expectations of digital readers?

5 Conclusion: Webcomics as Interdisciplinary Illness Narrative

Characterized by abstract, humorous, and quotidian displays of depression and anxiety, *Hyperbole and a Half* reveals how personal stories of illness and suffering continue to influence and attract audiences. These webcomics remain an important touchstone of Internet culture, and a particularly visible example of graphic medicine, that respond to a cultural moment where stories of illness have become high commodities in non-fiction genres.⁹³ Its unprecedented following suggests the emerging potential of webcomics as an interdisciplinary genre of life writing that taps contemporary interest in the 'self' that is produced and solicited in digital spaces, as well as intense cultural demand for stories of illness that are embodied, visual, and subjective.

As I have argued, the digital context of webcomics, including its mode, platform, and audience, offer equally significant indications for understanding these texts as close readings which analyze their drawn elements. The Internet has a precise communicative function for telling stories of the self, within which webcomics illustrate certain tensions around shared disclosure and graphic representation in popular culture. Understanding how autobiographical webcomics operate amidst the digital and social affordances of the Internet and leverage personal experiences to create and build audience requires a new set of critical skills from readers. Crucial to understanding *Hyperbole*

as illness narrative, then, is how the Internet operates as a distinct mode of representation that affords its users unfettered access to personal stories like Brosh's and enables them to embed their own deeply intimate experiences within this work.

This paper proposes an interdisciplinary framework for reading webcomics as illness narratives that push the ideology of graphic medicine — in particular, its emphasis on collective and/or communal spaces for illness disclosure — to its limit. Drawing from a shared history in the Underground Comix movement, both graphic medicine and webcomics present a countercultural aesthetic, tone, and style through which each opens a window into alternative self-display. Webcomics inspire unique possibilities for illness narrative online as the point of intersection between countercultural acts of drawing and the spontaneity of digital engagement. As foremostly graphic representations, their artistry enables broader capacities for intimate, personal disclosure than writing alone, whilst their presence online imbues readers with certain licenses to connect and interact with the author and each other. *Hyperbole* deploys a complex relationship to power, representation, and privacy in this way, the study of which discerns how the confluence of visual and digital media prompts personal storytelling with distinct aesthetic and ethical dimensions. As graphic medicine shifts our understanding of illness towards more subjective experiences, webcomics like *Hyperbole* become critical sites to re-examine how illness narrative operates in proximity to a voracious reading public and creates contemporary, interdisciplinary dialogues of everyday illness through its digital form.

Endnotes

- ¹ I would like to thank the editors of this special issue and the anonymous referees for their insightful comments and suggestions. I also thank Prof Kate Douglas (Flinders University) and Dr Kylie Cardell (Flinders University) for reading drafts of this work in progress.
- ² *Hyperbole and a Half* hereafter abbreviated as *Hyperbole*.
- ³ "Hyperbole and a Half," Facebook, accessed November 13, 2020, <<https://www.facebook.com/pg/Hyperbole-and-a-Half-103009646411654/about/>>.
- ⁴ Mark Sullivan, "The Funniest Sites on the Web," (2011), accessed September 9, 2020, <<https://www.pcworld.com/article/229201/laf.html>>.
- ⁵ Allie Brosh, "About the Book," *Hyperbole and a Half*, accessed September 1, 2020, <<http://hyperboleandahalfbook.blogspot.com/p/about-book.html>>.
- ⁶ In a lengthy note posted to the *Hyperbole* Facebook page, Brosh admitted to experiencing "road blocks (both technically and psychologically)" and "brief lapse[s] into a self-hatred-fueled badness

- spiral” that were to blame for her extended absence. The post received over 3,900 likes and 1,400 comments. Allie Brosh, “You have probably noticed my sudden and prolonged disappearance and I’m sorry,” Facebook, August 12, 2011, accessed November 13, 2020, <<https://www.facebook.com/notes/271361117590315/>>.
- ⁷ Brosh’s periods of absence extend beyond the context discussed here, including a seven-year gap between the publication of her first book, *Hyperbole and a Half: Unfortunate Situations, Flawed Coping Mechanisms, Mayhem and Other Things that Happened* (2013), and its sequel, *Solutions and Other Problems* (2020), the latter prompting a highly anticipated return to public life.
- ⁸ Broadly defined, the medical humanities is a field of research that attempts to shift the institution, culture, and practices of medicine “from an authority-led hierarchy that is doctor-centred to a patient-centred and interprofessional clinical team process.” Alan Bleakley, *Medical Humanities and Medical Education: How the Medical Humanities Can Shape Better Doctors* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 2.
- ⁹ Ian Williams, “What Is Graphic Medicine?,” accessed April 20, 2021, <<https://www.graphicmedicine.org/why-graphic-medicine/>>.
- ¹⁰ Williams, “What is Graphic Medicine?”
- ¹¹ Linda Holmes, “Present Tense: Allie Brosh, Donald Glover, and Hurting Right Now,” NPR, accessed October 7, 2020, <<https://www.npr.org/2013/10/29/241585887/present-tense-allie-brosh-donald-glover-and-hurting-right-now>>.
- ¹² Susan M. Squier and J. Ryan Marks, “Introduction: Special Issue on Graphic Medicine,” in *Configurations* 2.22 (2014), 149–152, here: 151.
- ¹³ Ian Williams, “Autography as Auto-Therapy: Psychic Pain and the Graphic Memoir,” in *Journal of Medical Humanities* 32.4 (2011), 353–366, here: 354.
- ¹⁴ Patrick Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution 1963–1975* (Washington: Fantagraphics Books, 2008), 14. The American Underground Comix movement encapsulates a period between 1963 and 1975 in which artists and publishers on the cultural margins began producing small-press comics magazines (known as ‘floppies’) and comics books that responded to, and portrayed, anti-establishment sentiment and social counterculture. As Rosenkranz states, “[t]hey arose at a critical time, when the convergence of political repression, the protest movement, psychedelic drugs, and innovations in printing technology created the right mix for an impromptu and improvised art movement” (Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions*, 14). The work of Underground artists was highly personal and deeply referential; thus, the movement is often identified as an important precedent to autobiographical comics and graphic memoir that have since become dominant fields of inquiry in contemporary comics studies and life writing. See Stephen Weiner, *Faster than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Nantier, Beal, Minoustchine, [2003] 2012); Hillary Chute, *Why Comics: From Underground to Everywhere* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017); Henry Jenkins, *Comics and Stuff* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).
- ¹⁵ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Reading Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [2001] 2011), 4.
- ¹⁶ Hillary Chute, “Comics Form and Narrating Lives,” in *Profession* (2011), 107–117, here: 107.
- ¹⁷ Elisabeth El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 3.
- ¹⁸ The potential of comics as a mode and medium for autobiographical stories represents a rich and established area of scholarship in life writing, media studies, comics studies, and interdisciplinary research. Prominent examples include, El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*; Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press,

- 2010); Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005); Frederik Byrn Køhlert, *Serial Selves: Identity and Representation in Autobiographical Comics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019); Michael A. Chaney, *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (New York: Continuum, 2007).
- ¹⁹ Sarah Herbe and Julia Novak, “Life Writing Research Past and Present: Interview with Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson,” in *The European Journal of Life Writing* VIII (2019), 8–20, here: 14–15.
- ²⁰ For useful summary and analysis of the evolution of these terms, see Daniel Goodbrey, “From Comic to Hypercomic,” in *Cultural Excavation and Formal Expression in the Graphic Novel*, eds. Jonathan C. Evans and Thomas Giddens (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013), 291–302.
- ²¹ More recently, media studies scholars have used the term ‘born digital’ to describe texts designed for the web. See Jentery Sayers, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 463.
- ²² Allie Brosh, for instance, has published two books that either include images drawn directly from her webcomics (*Unfortunate Situations*) or reference their style, tone, and aesthetic as part of new stories (*Solutions*).
- ²³ Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics: The Evolution of an Art Form* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2000), 146–150.
- ²⁴ See Gary Groth, “McCloud Cuckoo Land,” in *The Comics Journal* 232 (2001), accessed December 2, 2020, <<http://www.tcj.com/the-comics-journal-no-232-april-2001/>>; Roger Sabin, “The Crisis in Modern American and British Comics, and the Possibilities of the Internet as a Solution,” in *Comics Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, ed. Anne Magnuseen (New York: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000), 43–58; Robert Harvey, “Comedy at the Juncture of Word and Image: The Emergence of the Modern Magazine Gag Cartoon Reveals the Vital Blend,” in *The Language of Comics*, eds. Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 75–96.
- ²⁵ Sean Fenty, Trena Houp, and Laurie Taylor, “Webcomics: The Influence and Continuation of the Comix Revolution,” in *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 1.2 (2004), accessed November 7, 2020, <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v1_2/group/index.shtml>.
- ²⁶ Fenty, Houp and Taylor, “Webcomics: The Influence.”
- ²⁷ Nina Mickwitz, *Documentary Comics: Graphic Truth-Telling in a Skeptical Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 143.
- ²⁸ Candida Rifkind, “Graphic Narratives,” in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32.2 (2017), 187–190, here: 189.
- ²⁹ See Anne Jurecic, *Illness as Narrative* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Dan Goodley, *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, [2011] 2017).
- ³⁰ Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, [1995] 2013), 5.
- ³¹ Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 5.
- ³² Susan M. Squier and Irmela Marei Krüger-Fürhoff, “Introduction,” in *PathoGraphics: Narrative, Aesthetics, Contention, Community*, eds. Susan M. Squier and Irmela Marei Krüger-Fürhoff (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2020), 1–6, here: 1–2.

- 33 Ian Williams, “Graphic Medicine: Comics as Medical Narrative,” in *Medical Humanities* 38 (2012), 21–27, here: 21.
- 34 Michael J. Green and Kimberly R. Myers, “Graphic Medicine: Use of Comics in Medical Education and Patient Care,” in *British Medical Journal* 340.863 (2010), 574–577, here: 574.
- 35 Green and Myers, “Graphic Medicine,” 574.
- 36 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 144. Foucault defines “docility” as the force that “joins the analysable body to the manipulable body. A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed” by the institutions and stakeholders of power (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 144).
- 37 Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 7.
- 38 Raghavi Ravi Kasthuri and Sathyaraj Venkatesan have gone as far as to trace the nascence of graphic medicine, particularly its scope for radical personal disclosures of complex and taboo subjects of illness, disability, and disease, directly to the Underground Comix movement. See Raghavi Ravi Kasthuri and Sathyaraj Venkatesan, “Picturing Illness: History, Poetics and Graphic Medicine,” in *Research and Humanities in Medical Education* 2 (2015), 11–17, here: 12; also, Williams, “Autography as Auto-Therapy,” 353–354.
- 39 Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Sweetha Saji, “Capturing Alternate Realities: Visual Metaphors and Patient Perspectives in Graphic Narratives on Mental Illness,” in *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2020), 1–15, here: 2–3.
- 40 Kylie Cardell, *Hello World: Contemporary Uses of the Diary* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 99.
- 41 Cardell, *Hello World*, 96.
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- 43 Kasthuri and Venkatesan, “Picturing Illness,” 12.
- 44 Williams, “Graphic Medicine,” 21.
- 45 Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 4–6.
- 46 Mol, *The Body Multiple*, 5.
- 47 Mol, *The Body Multiple*, 27.
- 48 Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 40.
- 49 Elisabeth El Refaie, “Looking on the Dark and Bright Side: Creative Metaphors of Depression in Two Graphic Memoirs,” in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 29.1 (2014), 149–174, here: 150. Others have discussed the use of metaphors in mental illness narrative, including: Nancy Pedri and Helene Staveley, “Not Playing Around: Games in Graphic Illness Narratives,” in *Literature and Medicine* 36.1 (2018), 230–256; Linda M. McMullen, “Metaphors in the Talk of ‘Depressed’ Women in Psychotherapy,” in *Canadian Psychology* 40.2 (1999), 102–111; Andreas Musolf, “Metaphor Scenarios in Public Discourse,” in *Metaphor and Symbol* 21.1 (2006), 23–38.
- 50 Allie Brosh, “Depression Part Two,” in *Hyperbole and a Half*, May 9, 2013, accessed August 25, 2020, <<http://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com/2013/05/depression-part-two.html>>.
- 51 Brosh, “Depression Part Two.”
- 52 Brosh, “Depression Part Two.”

- 53 Allie Brosh, “Adventures in Depression,” in *Hyperbole and a Half*, October 27, 2011, accessed August 12, 2020, <<http://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com/2011/10/adventures-in-depression.html>>.
- 54 M.K. Czerwiec and Ian Williams, “Introduction,” in *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*, eds. M.K. Czerwiec et al. (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2015), 1–20, here: 19.
- 55 Brosh, “Adventures in Depression.”
- 56 Ian Williams, “Comics and the Iconography of Illness,” in *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*, eds. M.K. Czerwiec et al. (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2015), 115–142, here: 118.
- 57 Williams, “Autography as Auto-Therapy,” 356.
- 58 Gillian Whitlock, “Autographics: The Seeing ‘I’ of Comics,” in *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 52.4 (2006), 965–979, here: 971.
- 59 Krista Quesenberry, “Intersectional and Non-human Self-representation in Women’s Autobiographical Comics,” in *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 8.5 (2017), 417–432, here: 417.
- 60 Quesenberry, “Intersectional and Non-human Self-representation,” 418.
- 61 See Kristen Gay, “Breaking Up [at/with] Illness Narratives,” in *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*, eds. Chris Foss, Jonathan W. Gray and Zach Whalen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 171–186; also, Quesenberry, “Intersectional and Non-human Self-representation.”
- 62 Gay, “Breaking Up [at/with] Illness,” 181.
- 63 Dave Eggers, “Foreword,” in *More Things Like This: 289 Drawings With Funny Words Also on the Same Drawing*, McSweeney’s Publishing (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2009), here: xiii.
- 64 Terry Gross, “Even When It Hurts ‘ALOT,’ Brosh Faces Life With Plenty Of ‘Hyperbole,’” NPR, accessed January 2, 2021, <<http://www.npr.org/2013/11/12/244758140/even-when-it-hurts-alot-brosh-faces-lifewith-plenty-of-hyperbole>>.
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- 74 Sharon O’Brien, “Showing the Voice of the Body: Brian Fies’s *Mom’s Cancer*, the Graphic Illness Memoir, and the Narrative of Hope,” in *Drawing From Life: Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art*, ed. Jane Tolmie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 264–287, here: 285.
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- 77 Brosh, “Adventures in Depression.”
- 78 Williams, “Autography as Auto-Therapy,” 357.

- 79 Catherine Gee, “Hyperbole and a Half: How one of the Internet’s Funniest Writer’s Finally Made it to Print,” in *The Daily Telegraph*, accessed October 12, 2020, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/10381487/Hyperbole-and-a-Half-how-one-of-the-internets-funniest-writers-finally-made-it-to-print.html>>.
- 80 Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 77. Restitution is one of three typologies of illness narrative proposed by Frank (also: chaos, quest), which belies “the modernist expectation that for every suffering there is a remedy” (Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 80).
- 81 Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 12.
- 82 Critical examples that take life writing and illness as subject include: Jeffrey Berman, *Mad Muse: The Mental Illness Memoir in a Writer's Life and Work* (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing, 2019); Kathlyn Conway, *Beyond Words: Illness and the Limits of Expression* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013); Elizabeth J. Donaldson, ed., *Literatures of Madness: Disability Studies and Mental Health* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Chris Foss et al., eds., *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); G. Thomas Couser, “Illness, Disability, and Ethical Life Writing,” in *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 20.5 (2018), 1–7.
- 83 See G. Thomas Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability and Life Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); G. Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004); G. Thomas Couser, “Body Language: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing,” in *Life Writing* 13.1 (2016), 3–10.
- 84 G. Thomas Couser, “Is There a Body in This Text? Embodiment in Graphic Somatography,” in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 33.2 (2018), 347–373, here: 365. Emphasis Couser’s.
- 85 Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 40.
- 86 “Does Anybody Know What Is Happening With Allie Brosh,” Reddit, accessed 27 August, 2020, <https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/qov3p/does_anybody_know_what_is_happening_with_allie/>.
- 87 Gee, “Hyperbole and a Half.”
- 88 Squier and Krüger-Fürhoff, “Introduction,” 4.
- 89 Ian Williams, “Graphic Medicine,” 25.
- 90 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 66–67.
- 91 Chute, “Comics Form,” 112.
- 92 Hillary Chute has written extensively on ‘the risk of representation’ in comics and graphic narrative. See Hillary Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2016), 5.
- 93 See Julie Rak, *Boom!: Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013).