

# Graphic Trauma

## Drawing as Working Through Sexual Violence

### ABSTRACT

In this essay, I explore examples of what I call graphic trauma and the process of drawing as a form of working through the experience and event of sexual violence. I contend that comics and graphic narratives are a medium well-suited for rendering trauma, and the trauma of sexual violence in particular, as I show in an analysis of Una's graphic narrative *Becoming Unbecoming* and Chanel Miller's animated short film *I Am With You*. I argue that for both artists, drawing becomes a form of consciousness-raising, a collaborative feminist practice of memory work that attempts to create conditions – formal, therapeutic, and political – for women to say #MeToo and “we.” In my readings of Una's and Miller's drawing as working through sexual violence, I also demonstrate close verbal/visual description as a practice of care that keeps the testimony moving, drawing out the feminist practice of memory work in time and space and across modalities. A brief coda at the end of the essay offers an image of a hybrid figure from Miller's graphic iconography and a concept and practice she calls “the third element.” I argue that this third element functions as a formal provocation for counter-modalities that change the story of sexual assault, creating a portal to resistance and healing.

**Keywords:** graphic trauma, working through, sexual violence, graphic medicine, #MeToo

**STORIES OF SEXUAL** harassment and assault are currently reverberating through cultural and political life across the globe, and #MeToo has become shorthand for the hard work of testifying to experiences of violence and trauma and the difficult private and public working through of feelings of shame, pain, and anger. We have also in recent years seen the publication of several graphic narratives that deal directly or indirectly with sexual violence and its aftermath. In this essay, I will explore examples of what I call graphic trauma and the process of drawing as a form of working through the experience and event of sexual violence. I contend that comics and graphic narratives are a medium well-suited for rendering trauma, and the trauma of sexual violence in particular, as I will show in an analysis of Una's graphic narrative *Becoming Unbecoming* from 2015 and Chanel Miller's animated short film *I Am With You* (2019a).<sup>1</sup>

Both artists turn to drawing to work through sexual assault and its aftermath. *Becoming Unbecoming* shows how girls and young women often first experience sex and sexuality as traumatic, because their sexuality is often taken away from them through a violent experience at the very moment they become sexual. *I Am With You* also emphasizes how sexual violence can interrupt the transition from childhood to adulthood, opening with a statement about timing and subjectivity: "It happened when I was 22, on the cusp of adulthood." Beginning with the victim impact statement she read to her assailant Brock Turner in court, first published anonymously by *Buzzfeed News*, and continuing with *I Am With You* and her memoir *Know My Name*,<sup>2</sup> Miller's work shows how a woman becomes, in critical theorist Leigh Gilmore's terminology, a "tainted witness", unable to be heard, as in Miller's case, in the context of the law. For Gilmore, "a tainted witness is not who someone is but what someone can become. 'Tainted witness' names the identity produced in an encounter between testimony and judgment" (2017: 17–18) – or, as we might say utilizing Una's formulation: a tainted witness is a figure who undergoes the process of becoming unbecoming before the law. Yet, Miller also demonstrates Gilmore's contention that testimony is an "event and practice" (2015: 5) that keeps moving across time and space

and genres and forms. Drawing for Miller and Una becomes a means by which they demonstrate endurance, the hard work of accessing what one can't remember and can't forget at the same time. Drawing also offers a counter-modality to the more typical #MeToo stories circulating on social media, combining the haptic (the hand that draws the line on the page), the verbal, and the visual to offer a kind of graphic medicine (as remedy) against the violence and objectification of sexual assault.<sup>3</sup>

In my analysis, I situate Una's and Miller's work in relation to what I call the gendered history of graphic trauma. I first discuss Hillary Chute's important critical work foregrounding the relationship between the comics form and visual witnessing of trauma, before briefly exploring the feminist sexual politics of Aline Kominsky-Crumb's "Goldie: A Neurotic Woman", which Chute identifies as the "first women's autobiographical story" (Chute 2014: 81). The point in tracing this gendered history of graphic trauma is not to stabilize binary gender identity categories, but rather to emphasize the importance of comics and graphic narratives as a queer form for doing and undoing the self in words and images – that is, a queer form and practice of both/and. I will then examine in detail Una's and Miller's experiments in form and genre as integral to their practices of working through sexual violence in comics. I argue that for both artists, drawing becomes a form of consciousness-raising, a collaborative feminist practice of memory work<sup>4</sup> that attempts to create conditions – formal, therapeutic, and political – for women to say #MeToo and "we."<sup>5</sup> In my readings of Una's and Miller's drawing as working through sexual violence, I also seek to demonstrate close verbal/visual description as a practice of care that keeps the testimony moving, drawing out the feminist practice of memory work in time and space and across modalities. A brief coda at the end of the essay offers an image of a hybrid figure from Miller's graphic iconography and a concept and practice she calls "the third element." I argue that this third element functions as a formal provocation for counter-modalities that change the story of sexual assault, creating a portal to resistance and healing.

## A gendered history of graphic trauma

In her recent book *Disaster Drawn*, on visual witnessing in documentary comics, Chute pinpoints 1972 as the moment of the emergence of what she takes to be a new form – “comics as a form of bearing witness to war and historical devastation” (2016:111). This is the year of the publication of both Keiji Nakazawa’s manga comic *I Saw It*, about his experience as a 6-year-old boy in Hiroshima at the time of the atomic bomb explosion and its aftermath, and Art Spiegelman’s autobiographical comic “Maus”, published in the comics compilation *Funny Animals*, edited by R. Crumb. Spiegelman’s three-page comic is the first instantiation of what would become the two-volume graphic narrative, *Maus*, based on interviews with his father Vladek about his experience of World War II and his survival of Auschwitz. Chute discusses some of the aesthetic, social, and political factors that led to the emergence of this new documentary form in the particular historical moment of the early 1970s, including transnational anti-Vietnam War activism and an active underground comix scene that arose out of San Francisco’s diverse countercultural milieu. The experience and event of war, Chute argues, “spurs formal innovation” (2016: 8), and she demonstrates how this happens by discussing the comics of a primary witness (Nakazawa) and secondary witness (Spiegelman) created a generation after the war they are witnessing and as another war is happening.

Chute’s book continues the important work on trauma and the comics medium that she began with *Graphic Women: Life Narratives and Contemporary Comics* (2010). We might even say *Disaster Drawn* offers several graphic men (Nakazawa, Spiegelman, and also graphic journalist Joe Sacco) as companions for her earlier line-up of graphic women (Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, Marjane Satrapi, and Alison Bechdel). I point this out not to take Chute to task for a gender dimorphism in her work, but rather to suggest that the two books – together and apart – work to historicize trauma while also re-enacting, on a meta-conceptual level, what has been, historically, a gendered bifurcation of the trauma diagnosis, which has tended to associate women’s experiences of trauma with sexual violence and men’s

experiences with war.<sup>6</sup> Hysteria and shellshock, for example, are early gendered trauma diagnostic categories; the term shellshock is created to differentiate what was seen as a male form of hysteria from hysteria proper, historically and etymologically gendered as a woman's illness. It bears mentioning that among Chute's graphic women, Satrapi is the only non-American and also the only comic artist to draw the experience of war trauma rather than, or along with, sexual trauma in her two-volume graphic memoir *Persepolis*, which she later adapted into an animated film of the same name.<sup>7</sup>

As Chute clearly knows, having opened her deservedly acclaimed analysis of women and comics with a brilliant chapter on the groundbreaking work of Aline Kominsky-Crumb, the year 1972 is also the year of the publication of Kominsky's innovative autobiographical comic "Goldie: A Neurotic Woman" in the first issue of *Wimmen's Comix*. *Wimmen's Comix* emerged out of the same underground comix scene in San Francisco in the late 1960s that nurtured Spiegelman, a scene centered around Kominsky's future husband R. Crumb and *Zap Comix*, which Crumb edited. Yet, *Wimmen's Comix* arose less from within this milieu and more as a response to women's exclusion from it. As Trina Robbins (2016) explains in her introduction to the recently published bound box set of the entire *Wimmen's Comix* collection, "Life in the Bay Area was creative and exciting, and comix were the art form of the future. The big problem, if you were one of the few cartoonists of the female persuasion, was that 98% of the cartoonists were male, and they all seemed to belong to a boys' club that didn't accept women." Inspired by the women's liberation movement and the practice of consciousness-raising, *Wimmen's Comix* became a space for women to challenge the patriarchal structures that excluded them from participating in certain domains, even countercultural ones. Emboldened by the feminist dictum that "the personal is political", *Wimmen's Comix* explored sexuality as a domain of power and possibility. By drawing women's bodies and pleasures, comics like Kominsky's "Goldie: A Neurotic Woman" assert the existence of women's sexuality and desire and challenge the double standard that allows men but not women to "fuck a lot" without conse-

quences, as Goldie describes it (Kominsky 2016: 41). What frees Goldie is the ability “to analyze the past events of [her] life”, which motivates a desire for freedom expressed as the possibility of movement – the comic ends with Goldie leaving her stultifying marriage and heading on a cross-country road trip to San Francisco (ibid. 43). Kominsky draws a link, then, between analysis and movement as interconnected practices of freedom, and comics becomes a formal mode for expressing one’s sexuality and sexual politics, and a means of delivering this message to other women. As a delivery system of a healing message of sexual freedom, Kominsky’s “Goldie” is graphic medicine *avant la lettre*, presaging the many later comics and graphic narratives that deal with sexual violence and its aftermath.

### **Una’s *Becoming Unbecoming*: drawing trauma as feminist politics**

I begin with this brief look back at the gendered history of graphic trauma to signal a link between the women’s liberation movement and the feminist political practice of consciousness-raising and the emergence of comics as a medium for working through experiences of sexuality and sexual violence. I turn now to Una’s graphic narrative *Becoming Unbecoming*, first published in the UK in 2015, which juxtaposes two stories from the period just after the publication of Kominsky’s “Goldie”: Una’s own personal story of becoming sexual through experiences of sexual violence and the related trauma of her besmeared reputation as word spreads of her “slutty” behavior, as well as the widely reported story in the news of the Yorkshire Ripper murders and investigation, beginning in 1975. As Una notes, distinguishing these two stories happening at the same time and in close proximity to each other, one is her own “small story” and the other a “bigger story” (21). Yet, as *Becoming Unbecoming* shows, they are stories that are interconnected in important ways, and the text scales up and down between the small personal story and the big social and political story, drawing verbal and visual links between them as a kind of feminist memory work.

We might say they are both stories about becoming unbecoming, Una’s shorthand for how one becomes a woman (that is, comes into existence

as a woman), as well as about how one is becoming (or not) as a woman (that is, attractively suitable, fitting, proper as a woman). Her own story of becoming unbecoming happens in the midst of a series of murders of women who police immediately and mistakenly assumed were targeted because they were prostitutes. Small and big stories of women becoming unbecoming as a result of typical assumptions by ordinary men about women and sexuality. As Una also documents, nearly 40 years later, the #MeToo movement suggests both the possibility of breaking the silence surrounding sexual abuse, and also the many ways victims continue to be blamed for their harassment and assault. In the following section, I will show how Miller's assault in 2015, and its legal and political aftermath, gives us insight into the many systemic and institutional ways that victims continue to be shamed and silenced, as well as how victims like Miller resist, politically and formally, this process of unbecoming.

Una's first experiences of sex and sexuality are traumatic. These formative experiences begin with an "incident" with a man called Damian when she is ten, which she says she "thoroughly buried", even as we see that this is the moment she begins to carry an empty speech balloon on her back as a sign of the burden of all she cannot say about what happened to her (25). This is followed by her rape by another man called Terry a couple years later, and a still later incident where she is set up by a boyfriend to be raped by two men in a car. She does not call these incidents rape in the text itself, but a footnote after the scene with Terry explains that this is what happened. She says in the footnote, "It's impossible to say why," she didn't name it rape at the time, but she also states, "Terry was not interested in whether I consented, or whether I was old enough to consent. He also didn't care whether I was hurt or shocked or whether I cried, which I did" (note 4, 208). Una's decision to use notes is somewhat unusual for a graphic narrative, and, except in this one instance, the notes are mainly used to cite sources and provide additional information about the Yorkshire Ripper case. In not calling what happened to her rape in the text, but footnoting the fact that it was, Una demonstrates how trauma is often experienced as not fully understood in the moment it is happening, or put another way, how

trauma disorients by disordering experience and distorting memory and temporality. In the text, Una explains this disorientation, disordering, and distortion with a simple statement about not knowing: “And still no one knew or guessed what had happened to me... In fact, I didn’t know what had happened to me!” (37).

She draws rape, then, by showing it from the perspective of a young girl not knowing what is happening to her. She begins the sequence in which Terry rapes her with an image of a small grey cloud at the center of an entirely white page (32). Clouds are frequently used as text boxes in *Becoming Unbecoming*, but this one is empty, foreboding, silent. On the facing page, she has drawn several paper doll outfits – one of the visual tropes Una uses in several places in the text to suggest the relationship between trauma and feminine identity and sexuality (33). Here, a nurse’s uniform, a girl scout’s uniform, onesies for young girls, and a tutu are drawn without the image of the doll who might wear them. The person behind the dress-up clothes is missing, has disappeared, has been disappeared from the scene. The next page shows what looks like a giant Una as a girl, sitting on a hill while straddling and holding onto a tree (34). Words outline this image and describe how Una and a friend were making a den when “two young men happened upon us.” Una explains that she was excited by the attention and made to feel grown up because “an older man was interested in me!” Under the image below the hill upon which she sits is another statement of not knowing: “I hadn’t really understood the situation” (34).

Visually, Una shows how words and interpretation can now give shape to this traumatic childhood experience. The words literally wrap around the image of her younger self, drawn larger than life, as if to show how her excitement over the attention – her openness and vulnerability – makes her an easy mark. Una explains that the man first got her to trust him and then got her alone, and she expresses certainty that this also happened to her friend “though we never spoke of it” (35). Here, sexual violence is rendered as a commonly shared experience that the two girls cannot share with each other. Una seeks to show how this dynamic works: isolation and silence prevent the recognition of a shared

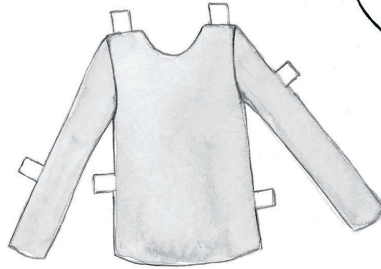


experience of violence. The visual motif of the paper doll clothes is used again on the next page [Figure 1]: Una recreates the outfit she was wearing on the day she was raped as another paper doll outfit: a simple white top and flared jeans that she remembers had a stiff button (36). At the bottom of the page, below one of the empty black shoes under the paper doll clothes, a rectangular speech balloon with lettering that is in a different, bolder font, depicts her assailant's words detached from his person, as if he is just off the page communicating into it: "It'd be a lot easier next time if you wore a skirt." Next to these disembodied words, brutal in their stark presumptuousness, is another free-floating speech balloon with words that speak back in the present to the remembered presumptuous words of her assailant: "Yes, that is actually what he said" (36). Here, the graphic form allows Una to experiment with showing "different voices coming from different directions" as an effect of trauma's co-temporality, but also, importantly, as a way to provide analysis after the event, which introduces the possibility of healing into the scene of trauma.<sup>8</sup> At the end of this statement is the footnote that explains that although Una hasn't used the word "rape" to describe this incident, it was rape.

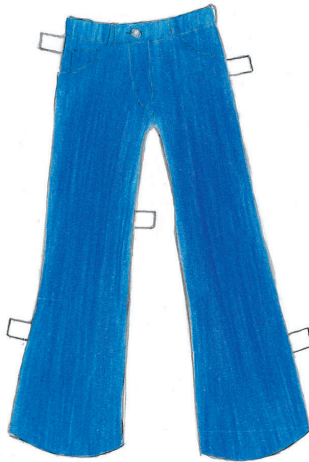
Rape, then, is depicted on this page. The actual violation is not shown, except as a traumatic memory attached to a commonly worn piece of clothing. Una will forever associate jeans and the feeling of wearing them with her violation. We also realize the paper-doll-clothes motif makes visible the violent disjunction between a young girl's desire to play dress up – to be perceived as older than she is – and her violator's desire for easy access to the bodies of little girls, as if they are play things for grown men. Here Una makes us see and feel what Elaine Scarry (1985: 44) has described in her work on the phenomenology of torture: that violence often unmakes the world of the person violated by transforming the objects of everyday life into persistent reminders of violation.

Throughout the book, Una draws herself iconically, in a simple style with few lines. In this iconic avatar of herself, her hair is cut in a black shoulder-length bob with bangs, creating a frame for a face with eyes

JEANS (N): HARD-WEARING CASUAL TROUSERS MADE OF DENIM OR OTHER COTTON FABRIC.



IT WAS THE SEVENTIES, SO  
THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN FLARED.  
I USED TO FIND THE BUTTON  
TOO STIFF.



It'd be a lot easier next time  
if you wore a skirt.

YES, THAT IS ACTUALLY  
WHAT HE SAID.<sup>4</sup>

*Figure 1: Rape is depicted on this page. The actual violation is not shown, except as a traumatic memory attached to a commonly worn piece of clothing. Reprinted by permission: Una, Becoming Unbecoming, p. 36 © Myriad Editions.*

and mouth formed by three black dots. Iconic Una wears a sleeveless dress (white in the text but red on the cover) and flat slip-on black shoes. This iconic image exemplifies what Scott McCloud (1994) has described as comics' ability to amplify and universalize through abstraction and simplification.<sup>9</sup> Una's avatar captures an idea of "girlness" that is relatable but also suggesting a dissociative quality, as if in danger of disappearing off the page, carried away by an empty speech balloon: dissociation as another form of becoming unbecoming. This iconic Una contrasts with a more realistic self-portrait that is on the page facing the rape scene (37). The more realistic Una is drawn looking at the reader with a smile, wearing the dress she wore on the day of her first sexual encounter – the "incident" with Damian. She has told us that she would borrow this dress without asking her sister, and that she would pretend she was a princess when she wore it (24). In this more realistic drawing of a young girl in her big sister's dress, she stands in front of three hills with clouds in the background with text describing that no one knew what had happened to her and how this is part of a larger silence around the fact that in everyday life "adults use and exploit children." As on the facing page, disembodied speech balloons add more contemporary commentary, such as, "Do people talk about it more nowadays?" The final text clouds on the page explain that people don't talk about these things because it scares them and "No one likes to be scared!" (37). This statement hangs next to the young Una's smiling face, reminding us by verbal-visual association that the people most afraid are of course the children who are exploited.

I read the realistically-rendered Una as a depiction of Una before she is violated the first time – becoming before becoming unbecoming. This is the Una who will be transformed by her experience of sexual violence into a new creature, captured on the following page as an image of the iconic Una drawn as bits and pieces, fragmented on the page (black helmet of hair, featureless face, eyes, nose, and mouth as four dots, red sleeveless dress, arms and legs barely discernable from each other, shoes) (39). Turning the page again, we see two images of the feeling of her body changing, drawn as an insect-like vulva, certainly less iconic though not particularly realistic, emerging from a hairy chrysalis and sprouting wings that the

caption explains “didn’t seem to work very well. Perhaps they were just decorative?” (40–41) This series of pages shows how Una experiments with form as a means of working through trauma. In an interview she describes this experimental process as an attempt to “explore the shapes and forms within the feeling of what you might call the traumatic space that’s left when violence of any kind happens” (Whitehead 2016). In this description of her process, Una delineates more generally why and how comics is a form suitable for working through trauma.

At the very center of the book, we see a similar process of exploring shapes and forms to render the feeling of the traumatic space of violence. Una draws a recurring dream that begins when she is ten, the same age as her first traumatic sexual violation, suggesting the repression of an experience not fully understood. In visualizing the look and feeling of the dream, she depicts herself pursued through landscapes that look like cuts or open wounds across the page. Across several pages, she is shown walking and crawling on the wounded landscape, laying on it, and dragging her speech balloon across it. She is pursued by a “man...in the shadows” with a knife (98); the only escape is to run and crawl through tight spaces closing in on her. The recurring dream sequence echoes an earlier drawing in which she discusses PTSD by depicting the look and feel of mohair, which had been the fabric of a sweater worn by one of the men who raped her in a car [Figure 2]. And in an echo of the memory of a pair of jeans with a stiff button, the text on this page about PTSD describes how “seemingly random things” can be distressing and function as triggers for people with PTSD, like “the feel of mohair” (85). A mohair sweater barely visible on a man in the back seat of a car on the facing page is now drawn magnified; PTSD is visualized as an insidious, fibrous materiality drawn to also look and feel like a slashing knife wound that won’t heal. In the rendering of the recurring dream, Una draws herself crawling through a mohair landscape, a psychic passage externalized on the page. A small detail from the scene of violation becomes the texture of the world around her long after the rape – this is trauma as becoming unbecoming the world, to adapt Scarry’s terminology in *The Body in Pain*.

THOSE WHO LIVE WITH POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS FIND SEEMINGLY RANDOM THINGS DEEPLY DISTRESSING.

THINGS THAT TEAR OPEN THE TRAUMATIC WOUND.

THIS IS ONE OF THE REASONS WHY, NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU'D LIKE TO, IT'S DIFFICULT TO PUT  
A TRAUMATIC EVENT COMPLETELY IN THE PAST - BEHIND YOU.

TRIGGERS CAN BE SIGHTS, SOUNDS AND SENSATIONS. FOR EXAMPLE...

THE FEEL OF MOHAIR.

*Figure 2: How "seemingly random things" can be distressing and function as triggers for people with PTSD, like "the feel of mohair." Reprinted by permission: Una, Becoming Unbecoming, p. 85 © Myriad Editions.*



Una describes many ways she struggled to work through the trauma of sexual violence and the inability to communicate this experience of trauma to others. She mentions attempts at therapy and alternative treatments, drink, drugs, and even rock 'n' roll. But it is only by combining her art practices with feminist politics that she begins to understand what happened to her and work through in drawing the personal and social impact of sexual violence. Put simply, she visualizes her experience in comics and offers what Chute calls a “counterinscription” by drawing together the shame she was made to feel by others with the police’s inept handling of the Yorkshire Ripper case – both founded, she comes to realize, on a virgin/whore dichotomy structuring social norms of female sexuality. Una’s counterinscription is made possible by the feminist analysis of the Ripper case she discovers in Joan Smith’s essay “There’s Only One Yorkshire Ripper”, published in the book *Misogynies: Reflections on Myth and Malice* (1992). In the afterword, Una describes her experience of reading Smith’s book as “mindblowing” (203). Smith goes back over the police case and its coverage in the media, and argues that the police made several major errors: 1) they excluded several early victims, including a 14-year-old girl whose photofit of her attacker would provide an almost perfect likeness of the killer, Peter Sutcliffe; 2) on very little evidence, police became certain the killer was targeting prostitutes and, thus, expected him to behave like a contemporary version of Jack the Ripper; and 3) the police thought they were searching for a man who would be obviously other from them, so much so that, despite interviewing Sutcliffe nine times, they never saw him as a likely killer. Thus, police operated under binary assumptions about gender. They divided women into two mutually exclusive categories: those with “loose morals,” who somehow deserved it if they were attacked and killed, and innocent women, who they needed to protect. If they’d had some insight into the everyday sexism and violence of such ideas, they might have realized they were looking for a man not so unlike themselves. Una shows how, as a young girl, she absorbed this lesson about women becoming unbecoming. *Becoming Unbecoming* works through not only the trauma of sexual violence but also the ideas and institutions that make this trauma ordinary.

Una argues that we still “can’t count on the justice system” and she provides a page of statistics to indicate the widespread incidence of sexual violence as well as the paucity of conviction rates.<sup>10</sup> This is followed by a page that begins “Then there is the ocean of sexual crime that goes unreported” (125). Below this caption is a sea of blue numbers covering the whole page with a woman in a rowboat at the center viewed from above. The rowboat contains the text, “In 2012...[the] two most common reasons given for not reporting the most serious sexual assaults were... embarrassment and thinking police can’t do much to help” (125). At the bottom of the page, at the base of the ocean of numbers, are the words, “Of course, if you don’t report, you don’t count, but it doesn’t seem you count much more if you do” (125). This is the double bind that victims of harassment and sexual assault find themselves in. Una challenges a misogynist sexual culture in which male sexual violence is ordinary and women are deemed either virgins or whores (130) by creating a verbal and visual counterinscription beyond the virgin/whore dichotomy that undergirds the process of women becoming unbecoming.

### **Chanel Miller’s *I Am With You*: drawing trauma as a portal to resistance and healing**

According to Una’s data from the US, UK, and Canadian contexts, conviction happens in only 2 percent of the reported cases of sexual assault. In a case of assault on the Stanford University campus in 2015 that would garner worldwide media attention, Chanel Miller pressed charges against her assailant, Stanford student and swim team member Brock Turner, and he was eventually convicted of sexual assault. Yet, even despite a rare conviction, on many levels, the justice system failed in this case too. I would argue that it was only via other means of testimony that went beyond the framework of the law – writing and drawing, verbal and visual counterinscriptions – that Miller was able to open a portal to resistance and healing for herself and other survivors of sexual assault.

Leigh Gilmore’s analysis of how women testifying about their experiences of sexual harassment and assault are discredited and become “tainted witnesses” is instructive here, even as Miller won her case against

Turner. In her work, Gilmore explores formal antidotes to the problem, and in particular she considers how life writing can provide a more elastic form than legal testimony “to assert legitimacy, to challenge power, and to enable counterpublics to coalesce around life stories” (2017: 9). In her work, Gilmore analyzes a “series of contentious cases”, including Anita Hill’s testimony at the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, Rigoberta Menchú’s Nobel Prize-winning *testimonio* and challenges to the veracity of the story it tells, and immigrant hotel cleaner Nafissatou Diallo’s accusation of rape against powerful French politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn. She ends with a discussion of the figure and critical practice of literary witness, which, she explains, denotes a “mode of carrying the narrative to other witnesses” (Gilmore 2017: 155). Miller’s story adds another, multi-modal, example of literary witness, around which a counterpublic of survivors emerged, first in response to her victim impact statement, read directly to her attacker in a court of law, and then spread virally via the Internet and social media. This message would be amplified further via her animated short film and memoir, as well as through the posting of her drawings and other art on Instagram.

In her memoir *Know My Name*, Miller acknowledges that she agreed to press charges without fully understanding what it would mean for her to do so. At the time, she had not even told her parents about the assault. And compounding this incomprehension is the fact that she was unconscious from alcohol at the time of her assault. Again, as with Una’s graphic witness, we see an attempt to describe a traumatic experience from the perspective of someone who doesn’t fully understand what has happened to her. Recall Una’s statements regarding her younger self: “In fact, I didn’t know what had happened to me!” and “I hadn’t really understood the situation” (34). In the preface to *Know My Name*, Miller explains how she is transformed by this decision to press charges: “My old life left me, and a new one began. I was given a new name to protect my identity: I became Emily Doe” (vii).

In her animated short film, Miller visually depicts the process of becoming Emily Doe. The film opens with a young woman standing next to a short-sleeved blouse on a hanger; in the first shot, the outline



of the woman and blouse are drawn with broken black lines, suggesting a not fully formed sense of self as well as lines for cutting – a visual echo of Una’s paper doll trope as metaphor for the process of becoming-woman. The young woman throws off the clothes she is wearing and puts on the blouse from the hanger as the words “It happened when I was 22, on the cusp of my adulthood” are both written letter-by-letter in black ink across the bottom of the white frame and spoken in an unmodulated voiceover. Echoing a theme in Una’s *Becoming Unbecoming*, Miller verbally and visually links becoming-woman with sexual violation as a kind of unbecoming. She also suggests the associations between clothes and traumatic memory – an ordinary, everydayness underpinning the traumatic experience of sexual violation.

In Miller’s graphic iconography, the violation is rendered as a black scrawl, drawn with a thick black marker as if trying to disappear something underneath the markings. This dark, disturbing image is a kind of anti-drawing that threatens to take over the frame. The black tangled scrawl cloud first appears from the top of the frame, descending on the young woman as she sits at a desk typing on a computer. The black scrawl cloud materializes trauma’s intrusiveness into everyday life and its capacity to take hold of a person’s thoughts and transform time and space. As the black scrawl cloud descends and grows, the young woman looks up in fear. Like Una’s iconic self-portrait, Miller’s graphic rendering of herself is drawn with a few simple marks: two dots for her avatar’s eyes, two dots for her nose, a line for her mouth, and a black ball on top of her head for her distinctive hair bun. In the opening scene, one of the eye dots is drawn off the plane of the face and this eye-in-space is a wonky and playful expressive feature of Miller’s cartoon avatar as she goes about her business in the film’s first ten seconds. Yet, in the scene where the black scrawl cloud descends, the eye-in-space becomes less playful and more ominous, as, startled by the intrusive black tangle, it jumps off the face, seemingly attempting to confront what it is seeing. The words “when you are assaulted” are spoken and written below this image [Figure 3]. Thus, in Miller’s self-portrait, the eye is animated by the traumatic memory, a dissociative experience literalized as the

eye becomes untethered from the person who sees. The eye acts as the image's punctum. The viewer's gaze is drawn to the tiny black dot at the center of the image, the eye popped off the face framed by two emanata lines indicating anxiety, as the rest of the body stiffens in horror as arms emerge from the black scrawl cloud to reach out and take hold of Miller's cartoon avatar.<sup>11</sup>



*Figure 3: In Miller's self-portrait, the eye is animated by the traumatic memory, a dissociative experience literalized as the eye becomes untethered from the person who sees. Screen capture from I Am With You (Miller, 2019a).*

The black scrawl cloud then covers the face of Miller's cartoon avatar, as the voiceover states, "I became Emily Doe", and this phrase is written in white lettering in the middle of the black tangle. Graphically, Miller becomes her trauma. The loss of identity is both a protection and a further violation, because, as Miller states in *I Am With You*, "Nobody wants to be defined by the worst thing that's happened to them." As these words are written on the screen, we see Miller's avatar looking down at a pinecone and pine needles at her feet. This is a specific pictorial reference to the fact, detailed in *Know My Name*, that when she woke up in the hospital the morning after the assault, she had pine needles tangled in her hair – a marker of her experience that now becomes another material emblem of the trauma. The voiceover then tells us that "Assault teaches you to shrink", as we see Miller's avatar naked in the shower shrink to a tiny, crouched figure, barely recognizable as human, with arms wrapped around legs, head down, and face hidden in shame. Feelings of shame emerge not just because of the physical violation, but also because of the emotional violation that comes from the coverage of the case in the media and its adjudication in a court of law, where Miller's drinking on the night of her assault is as much on trial as Turner's violence. In an analysis of the Hill/Thomas hearings, Gilmore discusses "how women's witness is tainted through the permissible protocols of legal processes, as well as a range of tactics that amount to smears. These smears rely on stereotype and bias, often have little relation to truth, and can be fed into legal processes where they discredit women as if they were factual" (2017: 31).<sup>12</sup>

We see this process of smearing at work in *I Am With You*. The first time Miller's name is used in the short film is when the defense attorney speaks, his words contained within a black speech balloon: "Chanel knows how you get in blackouts." The locution of this sentence is odd; it begins with certainty – "Chanel knows" – and then shifts from third to second person to bring home the personalized force of the accusation against Miller's character – "you get in blackouts." In her memoir, Miller analyzes the attorney's tactics further, noting that, when questioning his client, the defense attorney worked to lead Turner "back into the herd,

where he could blend into the comfort of community” (271). In contrast, when he questioned Miller, “It was *you* and *you*, the lens fixed so close I was stripped of surrounding. For Brock, his goal was to integrate, for me it was to isolate” (271). From viewing the animated film and reading the memoir, it is clear that Miller has carefully examined the transcripts of the trial. As she shows in the film, words matter – they can give shape and substance to an experience or diminish its impact. If we consider Miller’s process of making *I Am With You*, we can see how important different modes of expression are for her – she draws, writes, and speaks these words, both the ones that seek to shame her and the ones that will help set her and other survivors free. The sentence “Chanel knows how you get in blackouts” is reanimated by the film. Miller draws the defense attorney speaking these words, she draws the words themselves and places them in a black speech balloon, and she reads the words in her own voice. This verbal, visual, and vocal performance becomes a portal out of the context of the trial into other domains opened by the film. The words that sought to isolate Miller through blame and shame now become a relay to other survivors whose voices have also not been heard in and by the law.

*I Am With You* depicts Miller reading her victim impact statement at the sentencing hearing. “But the judge did not hear me,” Miller states in voiceover and writes under an image of the judge on his bench with purple headphones covering his ears. A blank speech balloon arises from his mouth and eventually is filled with “6 months” – the exceedingly light sentence the judge gave to Turner because he was more concerned about the impact of the conviction and punishment on Turner’s future than about the impact of the assault and its aftermath on Miller’s. Despite Turner’s conviction, the judge turned Miller into a tainted witness, and this was then used to justify his lenient sentence. However, the trial and sentencing would not be the end of Miller’s testimony. She would utilize other modes and modalities to carry the narrative to other witnesses.<sup>13</sup> Or, as Miller describes the phenomenon in *I Am With You*, “The world breathed life into my words.” In the film, Miller talks back to the law, using the defense attorney’s words and then supplements them with other statements about what Chanel knows. “Chanel knows how

you get in blackouts,” Miller repeats, and then adds: “But Chanel also knows how to write. And Chanel knows how to draw.” Miller says these words as her cartoon avatar sits cross-legged on the white background. She looks to her right, and one eye is again animated off her face, as the film cuts to footage of Miller herself drawing on white poster board on a wall. As the image of Miller drawing in real life takes over the frame, she says, “My name is Chanel. And I am with you” and looks back at her viewer and smiles. In her connection with other survivors, Miller becomes herself – no longer Emily Doe, nor her cartoon avatar, but Chanel writing and drawing.

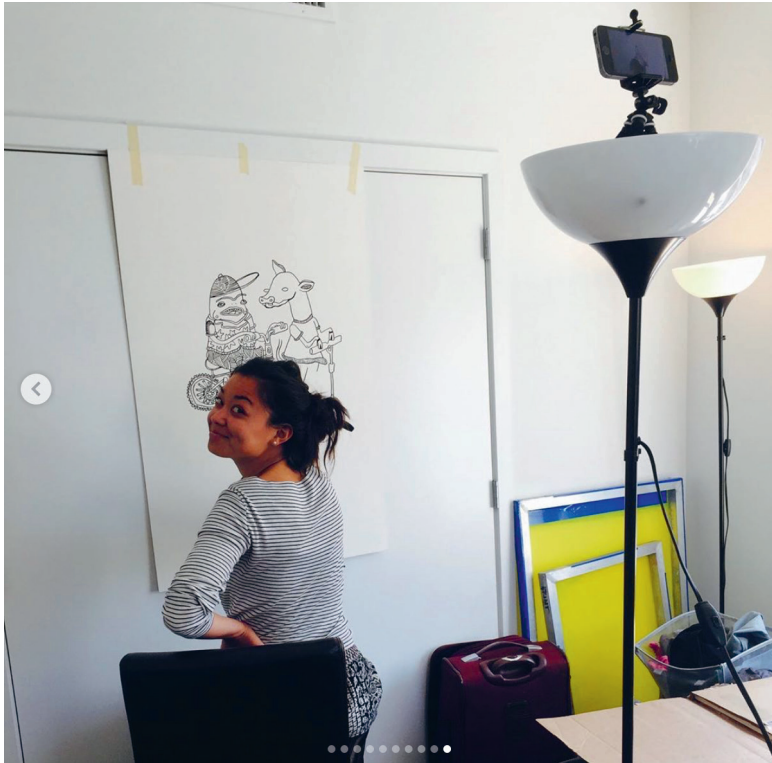
In a recent post on Instagram, Miller shares a portrait of herself with a drawing in the background, as well as several short films of her at work drawing and coloring her drawings. In a comment that accompanies the images, Miller provides some backstory. She writes:

On May 16, 2016, I taped up card stock to lucas’s [sic; Miller’s boyfriend] closet door and balanced my phone on a tall lamp as my tripod. That week we were packing to move out of Philly and my victim impact statement deadline was looming but I hadn’t written anything. I was unemployed and pretty despondent. I drew for hours that day, thinking that whatever happens next, as long as a [sic] I have a pen I’ll be okay. I can create creatures to make me feel less lonely, I can be playful even when I’m scared. Even if I’m silenced or hurt, at the end of the day I’ll still be drawing. This is the part that cannot be taken from me. [red heart emoji]<sup>14</sup>

In my reading of this post, Miller is again showing how drawing was, and continues to be, a means to being okay, feeling less lonely, and dealing with fear and hurt. She also shows how it was, and continues to be, a portal to resistance and healing, directly connecting the therapeutic creative work she documented on film that day in 2016 with the writing of the victim impact statement that was yet to come.

The final image in the Instagram sequence is a still photograph of Miller drawing two hybrid figures – one with an amphibious face on a

bicycle and another with a horse-like snout, hooves, and tail on a scooter. In the shot, she turns to look behind her with a smile on her face, her left hand on her hip and right hand blocked by her body but apparently raised in the act of drawing [Figure 4]. The shot also captures evidence of the impending move in a suitcase and two picture frames on the floor to her right, as well as her phone attached to a lamp in the top right of the photo, recording the same scene but from a slightly different angle.



*Figure 4: The final image in the Instagram sequence is a still photograph of Miller drawing two hybrid figures. Screen capture @chanel\_miller, May 21, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAdOJpSgqmA/>.*

On the phone's screen we can just discern an image of Miller turning, along with a view of what appears to be her arm raised to the poster board, drawing. The photograph is a remarkably complex document of multiple modes of testimony. Miller draws and films herself drawing as a friend photographs her drawing and filming her drawing. Implied in Miller's account of the backstory, this moment is a kind of preparation for the writing of her victim impact statement, which would, as she describes in *Know My Name*, create "a room, a place for survivors to step into and speak aloud their heaviest truths, to revisit the untouched parts of their past" (252). The Instagram image captures this idea of the room, not as the actual place in which she is photographed drawing (she is moving out of that place imminently), but in the way her drawing – as event and practice – is nested in the film, still photograph, social media post, and linked to her writing of the victim impact statement.

### **Coda: the Swedes (the third element)**

The bicycle that the hybrid figure rides is important in Miller's graphic iconography, and I conclude with a brief coda about bicycles, Swedes, and the concept and practice of what Miller calls "the third element." In *Know My Name*, Miller describes a night when she is unable to sleep and so picks up a pencil and begins drawing. Miller writes that she "drew the two bicycles that had found me bringing them to life, spoke by spoke" (92). In Miller's drawing as memory work, the two Swedish graduate students – Carl-Fredrik Arndt and Peter Lars Jonsson – become the bicycles they were riding when they saw her being assaulted, decided to intervene to help her, and confronted and detained Turner. "I drew smooth handlebars, tiny pedals, lumpy asymmetrical wheels," she continues. "I stuck it to the wall above my pillow, pressing it flat. An omen of protection. Send help. I rolled back into the sheets and took a breath. If they were out there I could rest. I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep" (92). The bicycles again arrive on the scene, this time through drawing, and watch over her as she sleeps.

Later in her memoir, Miller discusses the Swedes as a "third element," between victim and perpetrator, representing "the seers, the doers, who

chose to act and change the story” (123). Although she does not meet them at the trial, she reads their testimonies in the trial transcripts and is moved by their ability to recognize in the instant of seeing her being assaulted that what they were witnessing was wrong. In recalling what they saw and did on that night, they became visibly upset in their testimonies. What Miller calls the “third element,” then, is also about gender, suggesting a different kind of masculinity than that represented by Turner and the men who defended his actions – his father, the defense attorney, the judge, all ordinary men, like the police officers investigating the Yorkshire Ripper case. She notes that while the Swedes used physical strength to chase down, tackle, and hold Turner until the police came, they also showed concern for her by checking on her before they went after Turner. In the transcripts, she learns that they said to Turner “What the fuck are you doing? She’s unconscious” (123). She describes their testimony as introducing a “new voice” inside her that would help her to “one day face her attacker and say, What the fuck are you doing” (123) – as a statement not a question. In Miller’s and Una’s multi-modal testimonies, the third element also becomes a formal provocation to change the story of sexual assault through words, images, and a multiplicity of voices.

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## NOTES

1. Subsequent references to both are cited parenthetically in the text.
2. Miller's victim impact statement was first published unedited by reporter Katie J. M. Baker, "Here's the Powerful Letter the Stanford Victim Read to Her Attacker", *Buzzfeed News* (June 3, 2016). Available at <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her-ra>. The statement is reprinted in Chanel Miller (2019b).
3. "Graphic medicine" is a term coined by British general practitioner and cartoonist Ian Williams to describe the use of comics and graphic narratives as resources for communicating a range ethical and clinical issues related to the experience and event of illness. For Williams, graphic medicine is a "handy term to denote the role comics can play in the study and delivery of healthcare." The medicine in graphic medicine is not just the institution of medicine, but also a remedy or treatment regimen we might take to improve both individuals and institutions. See Williams (n.d.).
4. Memory work is a method that allows its practitioners to actively and directly approach both the personal and social aspects of memory. The practice was first articulated by a German feminist collective in Frigga Haug et al. (1987). The group worked with photographs, but it seems to me that drawing would also be an excellent way to do memory work. For another example of how to do memory work with photographs, see Annette Kuhn (1995). Kuhn describes memory work as "a method and a practice of unearthing and making public untold stories" (1995:8).
5. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argued that women will not bring about a change in their situation as the other to man's self unless they are able to say "we" and recognize that their quest for freedom is served by their ability to see themselves in relation to other women rather than to the men (fathers, brothers, husbands) whom they are personally attached to.
6. In an analysis of the emergence of PTSD as a new diagnostic category in 1980, I have elsewhere argued that PTSD "combines in a single diagnostic category a range of symptoms arising from the experiences and events of both sexual trauma and war neurosis, creating a transgendered and transgenerational trauma diagnostic category—both/and: both male and female, both war and sexual trauma" (Diedrich 2018: 88).
7. The animated film version was directed by Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud and released in 2007.
8. In an interview with Joanna Whitehead (2016), Una discusses the possibilities of experimentation with the comics form, explaining that "You can do so much with framing or not framing, different voices coming from different directions and just playing with the layout [...]".

9. McCloud (1994: 30) argues that cartoons amplify meaning through simplification.
10. Una cites statistics from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, using data from the UK Office of National Statistics, the US Centers for Disease Control, and Statistics Canada.
11. Images of eyes are prominent in graphic narratives, often as a means to highlight different ways of seeing and angles of vision. See, for examples, my analysis of eyes “as creating a grotesque landscape of stigmatization” in David B.’s *Epileptic* (Diedrich 2016: 153).
12. In *Know My Name* (2019b), Miller connects her story to Anita Hill’s, noting that, “The year before I was born, Anita Hill testified before the Senate” (316). She places her own testimony and victim impact statement within a longer history of testimony.
13. See Gilmore (2017:155).
14. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/chanelmillerknowmyname/>, posted May 21, 2020.