

CHAPTER 15

Panels of the Self: Self-Referentiality, Memory and Speaking Out on Traumatic Abuse in Sole Otero's *Poncho Fue* (2017)

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Sole Otero is a key figure in a new wave of women comics artists that are shaking up the long-standing patriarchal tradition of Argentine comics, which has historically privileged and made more accessible male authors.¹ She has become an internationally recognised artist whose graphic narratives exemplify the transformative changes that are overturning the once marginal position of women comics artists. Otero has published four graphic novels *Poncho fue* (2017), *Intensa* (2019), *Naftalina* (2020) and *Walicho* (2023) among many other works.² She scripts, illustrates, inks and colours her comics and graphic novels. Her artwork constructs an order inhabited by women and expressed through a language that speaks of and about women. The uniqueness of her aesthetic work lies in a style that conveys a sense of female agency and a point of view that seeks to voice modes of women's storytelling and make visible women's life experiences highlighting female subjectivities.

Driven by an interest in probing the rhetorical and compositional characteristics of Sole Otero's artwork, I examine the harrowing story in her first graphic novel *Poncho fue* (2017). The story centres on a stormy and distressing relationship between a female cartoonist called Lucía and her aspiring writer-boyfriend Santiago. It is about the protagonist Lucía's struggles to come to terms with an abusive relationship. What is more, this graphic novel is the verbal and pictorial recollection and voicing of a personal and psychologically violent relationship that Sole Otero herself experienced. *Poncho fue* is essentially a fictionalised autobiographical account.

In this chapter, I situate my discussion within comics theory and broader cultural approaches to demonstrate how the hybrid visual-verbal nature of *Poncho fue* brings violence against women into cultural visibility. The reference to 'panels of the self' in my title speaks to a distinguishing

¹ For an overview of Argentine women comics artists see Acevedo (2019), Arias (2019), Acevedo (Sep./Dec. 2020a), Gandolfo and Turnes (2020) and Páez (2020-2021).

² *La pelusa de los días* (2015), *La de la botas rojas* (2016), *Siempre la misma historia* (2018), *Pangea* (2020) also various webcomics and children's books.

feature in Otero's aesthetic work: self-referentiality. The author narrates and illustrates her own experiences, and this self-referential aspect allows reflection on female subjectivity through the enunciative graphic voice and the representation of the autobiographical self. Remembering, recounting and drawing of a personal experience allow an interrogation into memory, trauma and ideas of self-depiction, which I term 'self-drawographies'. While *Poncho fue* draws on the personal, this chapter argues, the voicing and depiction of abuse towards a woman is of universal value. It carries significant weight about common experiences of gender-based violence against women in Argentina and beyond.

Contextualising Sole Otero's Work

Significant changes in the production of comics by women started to be seen in the Argentine comics industry through works by artists claiming a committed form of art that speaks from and of women. According to Ana Merino (2016), innovative aesthetic ideas and narrative discourses that question established formal and narrative styles and are focused on women's identities have so far helped, and will continue to help, to vindicate the still fringe position of female cartoonists. Merino also argues that artwork by women of the US post-underground comix, with their introspective and personal styles, have influenced contemporary Spanish American female artists such as Powerpaola (Paola Gaviria, Ecuador/Colombia) and Marcela Trujillo (Chile) among others in developing 'graphic voices' that are intimate existential reflections on their lives (2016, 35–36). As a point of reference Merino discusses Argentine artist Maitena Burundarena for her distinctive personal sarcasm on 'lo femenino', and for the paradigmatic shift her artwork represented in the 1990s by introducing women's matters through parodic humour to new audiences and a press readership accustomed to themes relating to men (2016, 33–34).

During the transitional period of the 1990s, the Argentine comics scene witnessed significant transformations that offered opportunities for women comics artists to articulate their own spaces. Various factors dating back decades earlier, such as the civic-military dictatorship (1976– 1983), the shift from local to globalised markets, increased exposure to foreign materials, and inadequate professional and editorial environments, contributed to a crisis of production and publication of comics that prompted a new generation of women artists to cultivate alternative spaces particularly through engaging in a vernacular world of fanzines and self-publishing (Vazquez 2020, 65–67). It is in this context that women cartoonists started taking up space implementing, as Mariela Acevedo

(2020a) argues, 'estrategias de visibilidad' ['strategies of visibility']. Within a feminist resurgence, Acevedo discusses how women comics artists achieved strategic objectives, grouped themselves in collectives, comics fairs and festivals generating their own 'espacios de producción, edición y publicación en el que las autoras y editoras hicieron visibles relatos y experiencias' ['spaces for production, editing and publication in which women authors and editors made stories and experiences visible'] (2020a, 5–6).³

Out of this transitional and transformative period, an energised perspective signalled by women artists and authors emerged and the Argentine comics terrain started opening up to a gradual recognition of the invisibility of women in the field. When in 2018, Sole Otero was asked in an interview about a perceived resistance to women comics artists becoming protagonists, she responded by pointing out aspects of gender in consumption and readership as the root of the problem. Otero indicated that female cartoonists still struggle because comics attract a strong male readership who 'sólo leen cosas de hombres' ['only read men's stuff'] (Benítez 2018). For Otero, women who read and create comics had to get closer to and embrace their own masculine sides while men, according to her, 'no ceden ante su sensibilidad femenina' ['do not give in to their feminine sensibilities'] and still reject gender sensitive comics. And Otero cites the disparaging term 'argolla friendly' ['pussy friendly'] which the comics critic Andrés Accorsi coined to refer to comics with female sensibilities (Benítez 2018). While, as Merino (2016) argues, adopting female sensibilities in their artistic work has created the conditions to legitimise the position of women artists in the field, paradoxically it is also that which keeps them dwelling in a marginal space.

For years, women have battled against gender inequality, discrimination and violence, advocating for women's rights and striving for equality in all spheres of life through women's collectives, protests and legislative efforts. Significant achievements include the legalisation of same-sex marriage (2010), the gender identity law (2012), the #NiUnaMenos movement (2015) and the national campaigns for the legalisation of abortion in Argentina since 2005 and its passing into law in December 2020 (Acevedo et al. 2019; Larrondo and Ponce 2019). These milestones are the result of women speaking out. Feminist activism within the comics milieu represented by women's collectives and festivals since 2010 has further challenged the asymmetry between women and men cartoonists and comics artists (Acevedo 2020a, 5–7). Influential publications like *Clitoris* magazine (2011–2013, 2014 and 2017), *Pibas: Antología de historietistas contemporáneas argentinas* (2019) and *Fantástica*

³ All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

Violeta (2020) alongside numerous individual works published in the past decade, have contributed to what Acevedo calls ‘feminismo gráfico’ [‘comic art feminism’].⁴ This term refers to a research group and project committed to constructing a feminist genealogy in the field of humorous vignettes and sequential graphic arts with the aim of generating spaces and making women’s voices audible (Acevedo 2020a, 3). These socio-cultural shifts have formed and transformed women’s attitudes and subjectivities in Argentina empowering women like Sole Otero to express their experiences of gender abuse through sequential art. It is thus of the utmost importance to acknowledge this space in order to facilitate and strengthen a wider visibility, diffusion and scholarly criticism of comics by female artists to which this chapter is contributing.

A Storm, Temporal Shifts and Memory

Sole Otero’s *Poncho fue* starts with an epigraph suggesting a profound personal transformative experience through enduring adversity—a storm. It is a quotation from *Kafka on the shore* by Japanese author Haruki Murakami.

Y una vez que la tormenta termine, no recordarás cómo lo lograste, cómo sobreviviste. Ni siquiera estarás seguro si la tormenta ha terminado realmente. Pero una cosa sí es segura. Cuando salgas de esa tormenta, no serás la misma persona que entró en ella. De eso se trata la tormenta (Murakami cited in Otero 2017, 5).

[And once the storm is over you won’t remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won’t even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won’t be the same person who walked in. That’s what this storm’s all about (Murakami 2005, 4).]

The figurative representation of the storm appears in the preliminary chapter of Murakami’s novel where the main character’s inner voice foretells the violent upheaval of life-changing experiences he will walk through in life. Otero’s epigraph suggests someone weathering ‘that violent, metaphysical, symbolic storm’ (Murakami 2005, 4). Gérard Genette identifies four key functions of the epigraph, one of which is to indirectly

⁴ Dolores Alcatena, *El fuego que purifica* (2022), *Las locas* (2023); Julia Barata, *Familia* (2022); Paula Boffo, *Santa Sombra* (2022); Cecilia (Gato) Fernández, *El golpe de la cucaracha* (2021); María Luque, *Casa transparente* (2017), *Noticias de Pintores* (2019); Camila Torre Notari, *El ángel negro* (2018); Jazmín Varela, *Guerra de Soda* (2017); Nacha Vollenweider, *Notas al pie* (2017), *Volver* (2023) among many others.

comment on the theme of the narrative text (1987, 157). At this initial stage, however, the reader of *Poncho fue* remains 'in a state of uncertainty' (1987, 153) as to the intrinsic significance of the epigraph to the text but is nonetheless positioned to expect a tempest. The storm most forcefully anticipates the violence and personal turmoil in which Lucía finds herself as she weathers life's vicissitudes in a toxic relationship.

After the epigraph but prior to the main sequential narrative there is a preamble. Pencil sketch-style drawings of a red Beetle car and of a girl and a boy playing a game fill a full page. The game involves spotting Beetle cars and poking the opponent on the arm to the call of 'poncho o moncho' every time one is sighted. The more Beetles the more points one gets until the game is called off to the cry of "'poncho fue" or "poncho no juego más"' (Otero 2017, 7). The reference to the game is didactic for the reader/viewer yet also emblematic. It sheds light on the book's title and also functions as an allegory. In conjunction with the allusion to the storm in Murakami's epigraph, the poncho game progressively reveals the pattern of behaviour in the characters' abusive relationship. A manipulative game, involving emotional and physical abuse, unravels gradually as one character dominates the other, with the initial poking turning into stormy bursts of violence until the game is called off. Sole Otero titles her story *Poncho fue*.

The graphic sequential narration starts with a wide establishing panel of a city skyline. The colour palette is in yellow, blue and green tones. Another equally wide long-shot establishing panel follows, introducing Lucía and Santiago strolling hand in hand across a city park. The drawing style looks child-like. The characters resemble illustrations from a children's book and the panel borders look as if they were unevenly pencilled by hand creating the effect of rough sketches from a personal sketchbook. The characters transition forward in the sequence of panels from action to action: Lucía spots a red Beetle car and they converse about the 'poncho' game. They go into a fish shop and discuss having fish for dinner. The yellow background of the panels engulfs the characters clothed in softer shades of black and blue in a state of warmth and joviality. The serene ambiance is emphasised visually in a wonderful composition of four borderless panels that allow the characters to move unrestrained on the page itself. Santi and Lucía walk together; Santi tells Lucía 'esperame acá un segundo' ['wait for me here a second'] (Otero 2017, 11). She stands alone in a panel waiting—as does the reader—until Santi comes back with a red-flowered plant surprising Lucía with this loving gesture. The borderlessness becomes conceptual, reinforcing the pause that permeates the page with timelessness. This brief harmony is fleeting. That very evening and three pages later, Lucía and Santi are verbally and physically aggressive towards each other. This cycle of harmony and conflict is a constant embodied in this graphic narrative. Furthermore, the hand-drawn

illustration style used throughout the novel emulates naivety and child-like simplicity. This style appears designed to explore certain contradictions. Inspired by the overall approach of Kerascoët's art in *Beautiful Darkness* (2014) of expressing a dark and violent adult world in the whimsical style of a children's book, Otero creates a seemingly innocent world that is simultaneously edgy and transgressive in its graphic depiction of the serious adult subject matter of domestic violence.

Poncho fue is structured as a journey into memory: the memory of someone that scripts and draws the scenes as they are remembered in flashbacks and flashforwards from the enunciative present to where the events are graphically narrated. The correspondence between remembering and temporality reveals some interesting convergences on the question of memory through a sophisticated time structure. Two consecutive days form the enunciative present in the chronology of the story-time. The narrative, however, does not progress linearly. There are temporal jumps that disrupt the chronological order of the storytelling, echoing the non-linearity of the process of memory in the act of recalling the past, but also the future. Back-and-forth time shifts are graphically signalled in the eleven borderless silent full-splash pages strategically placed across the graphic novel each indicating a temporal jump. The first enunciative present day shifts back to 'Un año antes', forward to 'Esa noche' and back to 'Nueve meses antes'. The second day 'Al día siguiente' in the present shifts back to 'Seis meses antes', forward to 'Esa noche', back again to 'Un año antes' and forward to 'Present'. And from that present moment, the chronology moves fast into the future: '6 meses después' and '1 año antes'. Of note, the splash pages also have a small unpanelled illustration of either Lucía by herself or Lucía with Santiago drawn in a narrative action that anticipates a specific moment within that recalled temporal narrative section. The constant movement back and forth signals shifting periods, spaces and narrative segments establishing an allegorical connection to the turbulence of Murasaki's storm. The apparently incongruous structural medley of these chronological disruptions gives way to a strong sense of spatial-temporal confusion and disorder not only in the organisation of the text but more importantly in the act of enunciating the events recounted. It mirrors memory in two important regards: it captures the temporal and narrative interstices in a non-sequential way challenging the very idea of this graphic novel as sequential art. And, it underscores traumatic memory that manifests in a fragmented manner (Chute 2010, 4). I will return to the point of the graphical representation of trauma. However, at this stage, it is worth noting Chute's argument of how movement in memory resembles comics and that 'images in comics appear in fragments, just as they do in actual recollection' (Chute 2010, 4). Following this, I would argue that *Poncho fue*'s sense of memory fragmentation is not only powerfully manifested in

the disruption of the time–space narrative but in fact extends down to each and every individual panel.

Elaborating further upon time–space, in *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud asserts that the reader of comics ‘learned to perceive time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same’ (1994, 100). Temporality and spatiality in comics are graphically expressed in images. Time is spatialised as the reader/viewer moves through comics perceiving time through panel spaces. The eleven splash pages thus serve as temporal dividers to guide and locate the attentive reader/viewer in time. Constitutive of the spatialisation of time is its materialisation. Materialisation here is understood in the same way that Joshua Brown argues Art Spiegelman transformed words and descriptions of his father’s memory into comprehensible images to visualise the past Spiegelman was reconstructing in *Maus* (1988, 98). As time is spatialised so is memory. Following McCloud’s proposition, Chute considers the formal characteristics of comics and its spatial conventions to argue that comics ‘is able to spatialize memory’ (2011, 108). That is, to diagram memory on a page in comic panels. As Chute argues ‘Comics is a wordimage form’ that ‘fundamentally relies on space to represent time, carving punctual moments out of the space of the page. Comics locates the reader in space and for this reason is able to spatialize memory’ (Chute 2011, 108). *Poncho fue* is in essence the spatialisation of time and the materialisation of memory. Specific moments in the past life of an emotionally abused woman are recalled and mapped out visually in panels as Otero attempts to reconstruct her experience.

The materialisation of memory in its process of remembering, recalling as much as drawing the past, converges with the idea of the embodiment of an enunciative voice that speaks out about a life experience in graphic form. Lucía and Santi’s dialogues appear in speech balloons as their thoughts do in bubbles. There is no explicit first-person ‘I’ telling the story, as in the case of *Persepolis* (2003) by Marjane Satrapi, nor are there caption boxes textually (re)presenting a narrator’s voice. And yet, there are significant ‘markers of enunciation’ assuming the narration of the events. Thierry Groensteen discusses ‘markers’ or ‘instances of enunciation’ in comics to refer to particular vantage-points from which narrative events are depicted (2013, 80–81). One marker in Otero’s graphic novel expresses Lucía’s point of view on the events. Akin to Genette’s focaliser, it is Lucía through whose eyes the actions are viewed. It is a limited perspective. Only Lucía’s thoughts and feelings are expressed. Consistent with Lucía’s vantage point, there is one other significant marker of enunciation responsible for the story that is remembered: the author’s memory. Materialised memory in *Poncho fue* signals the return of the author voicing, reorganising and piecing up the events. What is more, these specific

markers of enunciation constitute a subjectivity that comes together as a whole in the form of a recreated graphic memory narrative that unequivocally speaks up about and graphically represents the abuse of one woman.

Autobiography and Self-Referential Drawings

‘...el libro se basa, principalmente, en mi propia experiencia’ [‘... the book is based, principally, in my own experience’] (Otero in Jiménez 2017). This is how, time and time again, Otero has expressed that *Poncho fue* is based on a real instance in her life (Jiménez 2017; Ramos 2017; Soquiransky 2017; Yuszczuk 2017; Benítez 2018). This places her graphic novel within the category of autobiographical comics—a genre leading the world of comics by women artists in Latin America. The telling of the author’s personal life situates the text within the context of autobiography in so far as ‘real life’ is taken as a point of departure and narrated within the bounds of ‘fidelity to such experience’ (Hatfield 2005, 112). These considerations inevitably raise a myriad of questions about the boundaries of fact-fiction. This is how Otero unambiguously recognises this dual dynamic in her work:

La historia surgió por una experiencia personal que tuve. Si bien el libro está ficcionalizado, hay mucho de esa experiencia. Mientras escribía y dibujaba *Poncho fue* fui procesando mi propia historia y logrando entender qué mecanismos internos y externos me habían llevado a meterme en esa relación tan dañina para mí (Otero in Yuszczuk 2017).

[The story emerged from a personal experience I had. Even though the book is fictionalised, there is much of that experience in it. While I was writing and drawing *Poncho fue*, I was processing my own story and coming to understand what internal and external mechanisms had led me to get into a relationship so harmful to me.]

Empecé a dibujarlo y llegó un momento en que dudaba si cambiarle los nombres a los personajes o no. Tuve que hacer un proceso de ficcionalización porque me daba miedo exponerme (Otero in Benítez 2018).

[I started to draw the book and there came a moment when I wondered whether to change the names of the characters or not. I had to go through a process of fictionalisation because I was afraid of revealing too much about myself.]

Two intertwined ideas predominate in the paragraphs above: the authenticity of the autobiographical account and the function of the author

in it. Fact and fiction emerge as fundamental drivers of the debate of autobiography to question the transparency of the autobiographical account. Above, Otero acknowledges fictionalising her real-life experience peppering her artwork simultaneously with autobiographical factual albeit fictionalised details. The author has also spoken candidly about how autobiography still prevails as ‘autoficción’ [‘autofiction’]—that is, as something that has happened to her, that she works into a character and tells by giving it a twist with the aim of getting it away from her and closer to the reader (Valenzuela 2016). This calls for the notion of the ‘referential pact’ between a text and an exterior reality, as argued by Philippe Lejeune, where the text provides ‘resemblance to the truth. Not “the effect of the real,” but the image of the real’ (Lejeune 1989, 22). In this there is a form of pact between what lies outside the text and its resemblance within the text. The authenticity of a narrative truth marked in relation to an experience outside the bounds of the text has also been pointed out by Hatfield (2005, 112). It is therefore the self-referentiality in *Poncho fue* that relies on the autobiographical-self-outside (the author) as a sign of truth and authenticity, while the effect and image of the real is in her self-fictionalisation. There is an additional aspect in autobiographical comics that brings the truthful outside in: that is, the cathartic effect in the creative process through which authors rework an affliction artistically. For Otero the creative treatment of her life-story involved a healing process (Yuszczuk 2017). This is reminiscent of Timothy Dow Adams’s understanding of autobiography as a paradox: ‘a therapeutic fiction-making, rooted in what really happened; and judged both by the standards of truth and falsity and by the standards of success as an artistic creation’ (Adams 1990, 3). As Otero reveals, the process of narrating but also scripting and drawing this graphic novel has been a cathartic process (Yuszczuk 2017; Soquiransky 2017; Bouman 2021). It has helped her reconstruct a consciousness about the abuse she once experienced. And yet she had to have recourse to self-fictionalisation because she feared the ramifications of self-exposure (Benítez 2018). This highlights how emotional rather than literal truths, to refer to Hatfield, play a part in the paradoxical characteristics of autobiographical comics in the fact-fiction and truth-falsity dynamics to bring trustworthiness in from the outside.

Returning to the function of the author, the second of the intertwined ideas mentioned above. The significant critical works dedicated to autobiographical comics attest to this being a continually expanding field—one which paradoxically questions, as Jane Tolmie argues, the death of the author (2013, vii). Jan Baetens (2013) maintains that the trend towards ‘serious’ comics is characterised by the medium’s turn to autobiography and its embrace of subjectivity (Baetens 2013, 67). Central to this idea is Bart Beaty’s argument that by cartoonists adopting autobiography in their

artwork not only did they help to establish autobiographical comics as a valorised genre separate from the mainstream comics market but, above all, they legitimised themselves as authors. As he puts it ‘autobiography in comics holds the possibility of giving the author birth for the first time’ (Beaty 2007, 144). For Beaty, who brings into play Foucault’s concept of the author-function in his argument, cartoonists could assert their identities by means of their autobiographical work. Being identified as authors allowed for their social standing to be improved leading to their recognition as comics artists in the same vein as film’s *auteur*ship where the legitimisation of the artwork came from the artist’s recognition as the *auteur* (Beaty 2007, 142–143). Building on the recognition of the *auteur*, *Poncho fue* explores and represents the interactions and tensions between the artistic expression of the creator (the artist-*auteur*’s subjectivity) and the personal memories and voice within the work (the subjectivity of the autobiographical account).

In *Serial Selves*, Frederik Køhlert questions ‘what happens when you draw yourself in comics form’ (2019, 3). His study of autobiographical comics explores the multiple possibilities opened up by the formal properties of comics with often competing verbal and visual codes to engage with self-referential representations, particularly, from a perspective of marginality. Køhlert examines autobiographical self-expression to argue that ‘the viscosity of the comics form adds a level of expression that allows artists to engage with issues of representation in different and sometimes unexpected ways through the embodiment of the self on the page’ (Køhlert 2019, 3). In *Poncho fue*, Sole Otero self-represents by drawing herself as Lucía. I term these autobiographical self-referential drawings ‘self-drawographies’ to indicate that the author graphically depicts herself in comics form. While there is no ‘I’ that speaks or says ‘this is me...’, the self-drawography embodies both the narrating as well as the narrated ‘I’. Thus, it is my contention that the author’s self-drawographies uncover instances of the artist harnessing the power of female agency and subjectivity in her self-expression.

Otero’s self-representation thinks, speaks and moves in sequential fashion converging on the inside and outside bounds of the text and embodying her graphic self and voice on the page. Like Otero herself, the protagonist Lucía is an artist who draws, paints and earns her living illustrating. In the first panel of the tier below, Lucía is depicted sitting at the artist’s easel (Fig. 15.1). This functions as *mise en abyme*, a mirror picture of the artist drawing herself as an artist drawing. Lucía is depicted as if being looked at from a distance, in high angle resembling the point of view of the artist drawing her. It is also a nod to a film camera shot—cinema has had a strong influence on Otero’s work (Otero n.d. *Domestika*). Lucía is cocooned in a warm yellow lamplight that contrasts with the blue-tinted room ambiance. The vertical gutters lead to a moment-to-moment

transition showing three separate character reactions. Her joyful face brightens up in close up in the second panel matching her delighted thoughts about the work she is doing. In the third panel, the reader/viewer learns for the first time that she paints. ‘Me colgué pintando’ [‘I got caught up in my painting’] suggests an artistic zone the character gets into when she works. It is dinner time and in the blueness of the evening she gets interrupted by Santi who is hungry and unable to work on his novel.



Fig. 15.1 Illustrating Lucía. Poncho fue (2017, 13)

Self-referential and self-reflective aspects are emblematic of Otero's artwork, where she has imagined herself in multiple guises and in a myriad of situations and contexts. For instance, the character 'Pelusa' in Otero's *La pelusa de los días* is the author's 'pseudo "I"' (Bouman 2021). The alien Coco of her graphic novel *Intensa* is the author's alter-ego (Bamfi 2021). And *Naftalina*, Otero's award-winning graphic novel, emerged out of an attempt to understand the bond with her Italian grandmother (Romero 2022). Otero has acknowledged her approach stating that '... en todo lo que hago siempre parto de algo mío, sólo que aprendí a enmascararlo' [... in everything I do I always start from something of mine, only that I've learned to mask it] (Benítez 2018). This masking is a self-referential device Otero relies on to playfully fictionalise and mask her self and her life experiences. Chute connects embodiment with mapping bodies, or something lost in comic panels noting that 'Comics is largely a hand-drawn form that registers the subjective bodily mark on the page' (2011, 12). The character Lucía is the mark embodying the author Sole Otero. The merging and unmerging of autobiographical and narrated voices create a playful (dis)embodying interaction between character and artist-auteur blurring the lines of personal account and storytelling.

Representing Trauma, Speaking Out on Abuse

In *Graphic Women*, Chute studies the aesthetics of self-representation in graphic narratives by women who 'present stories that are both written and drawn documents of real events' (2010, 2). She maintains that women's graphic narratives are often dedicated to telling and showing traumatic stories that 'could not be communicated any other way' (2010, 2). This alludes to a specific aesthetic language that singularly speaks of women's lives. Of particular significance is the stress Chute places on how the authors of graphic narratives 'revisit their pasts, retrace events, and literally repicture' trauma:

[they] offer the work of retracing —materially reimagining trauma. They return to events to literally re-view them, and in so doing, they productively point to the female subject as both an object of looking and a creator of looking and sight. [...] Further, through the form their work takes, they provoke us to think about how women, as both looking and looked-at subjects, are situated in particular times, spaces, and histories (2010, 2).

The artistic creation of *Poncho fue* is situated in the intersection of remembering, reimagining and (re)storying a traumatic lived experience. Chute's crucial point about the woman author as both object and subject of her graphic reworking of trauma is to think about and construct the notion of the self. It reveals a woman's subject position inside and outside of the text. Her account of herself recognises that women's experience is both private and public, and individual and social. This positioning in conjunction with the idea of a distinctive practice of women's writing and, I would add, drawing, that embodies empowered voices of women resonates with Hélène Cixous's ideas of *l'écriture féminine*. In 'The laugh of the medusa', Cixous writes about women's writing but, more importantly, about the insurgent potential of women's creative practices to impact on structures of male dominance. Cixous's overall proposition is of a style of writing from and towards women. It is 'feminine' in the sense that it is new, with a different viewpoint and insurgent as it breaks away from the dark repression of phallogocentric old structures—masculine economy with its publishing imperatives and classic representations— 'where woman has never *her* turn to speak' (1976, 879). This new style of writing becomes women's rebellious space for 'the very possibility of change' and 'transformation of social and cultural structures' but, more importantly, for women to seize their own voice (Cixous 1976, 879–880). Notably, Cixous

points out that the new woman is not cast in the old silent variety, but instead she claims a voice—one that speaks through writing about herself. As she puts it:

I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement (Cixous 1976, 875).

Even if Cixous's arguments of *écriture féminine* are predominantly historically grounded in the French feminism of the late 1970s, her writings are arguably highly relevant today to more contemporary cultural criticism of women comics artists and authors of Argentina. In particular, Cixous's discussion invites a reflection upon women's artistic practices not only as a theory denouncing structures of male dominance in Western thought, but also as a critique with applications and implications far beyond its immediate context. It is my contention that Cixous's ideas provide a point of reflection and speculation on the insurgent potential of voicing a traumatic experience in *Poncho fue*. Sole Otero writes and draws herself in it, and repictures her experience of domestic abuse. In so doing she also facilitates a discussion about gender violence in Argentine society. What is particularly relevant to my argument about *Poncho fue* is Cixous's point on women 'taking up the challenge of speech' (1976, 881) as the factor that registers the existence of a subject that breaks from silence and dares to speak through the textuality of a woman's self-referential writing (and drawing) that writes and draws herself and her experience.

Sole Otero takes up this challenge by speaking through the language of comics. The sequential drawings depict emotional manipulation (Figs. 15.2 and 15.3). An admonishing remark from Lucía will be the trigger for an aggressive verbal argument and subsequent violent fight. Santi undermines Lucía and makes her feel small and guilty. In the third vignette of the first tier, the words 'culpa, culpa, culpa, culpa' are snaking out of Lucía's body. She is frozen, head down and standing sheepishly like a child being scolded (Fig. 15.2). McCloud argues that the power of expressionism, also used in comics, resides in conveying inner feelings and emotions through line, shape and colour (1994, 122–124). The snaky lines communicate in a visually expressionistic way Lucía's emotions.

There is no frame holding in the scene or the character's feelings: a sense of harsh disapproval and Lucía's self-reproach spreads out to the page. The illustrations in this panel are drawn and seen from a distance, from the point of view of one recalling the moment and emotions. The

whole sequence can be read as graphic representations of the author's emotional flashbacks. The bottom tier shows the sequential transition of Lucía's emotional transformation. This is accentuated by colour. Her facial expressions alter from moment to moment and her feelings are cued in colours gradually changing from a disconcerting mix of yellow and blue to a more indignant dark orange. She is not listened to but rather overwhelmed by Santi's aggressive verbosity (Fig. 15.3). He is domineering and bombastic. The posture of Lucía's body indicates a reflex action: she needs to defend herself. His utterances are extreme, unreasonable, unacceptable and forced into the speech balloons. Only cut-off phrases can be read and heard by Lucía: 'orque si vos no h', 'yo no podr', 'o seas capaz de fi', 'todos tus prob', 'odas tus crisi'. The dimensions of the speech balloons mirror the power imbalance between the characters. Santi's own speech balloons grow bigger and heavier overlapping with each other. There is an exquisite expression of motion as Santi's heavy speech balloons move gradually, panel by panel, towards Lucía like a tornado until a single weighty speech balloon loaded with thick black lined and crammed words takes over Lucía. She is being gaslighted.

I would like to return to Chute's discussion of graphic narrative, more specifically, to what she calls 'the risk of representation'. In Chute's argument the representation of trauma is intrinsic to her conceptual understanding of the term 'graphic narrative'. For Chute the graphic telling and showing of trauma is 'invested in the ethics of testimony' and assumes 'the risk of representation' in the complex visualising authors undertake through 'the work of (self-) interpretation' (2010, 3). Her argument considers the challenges posited and risks taken when traumatic first-hand experiences are depicted in the light of the 'unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility' surrounding the telling of trauma. In essence, it is in the speaking, in the making visible and audible through graphic narratives that the artistic work of women comics artists, such as Sole Otero, acquire the power to combat the unspeakability, invisibility and inaudibility of their trauma experiences.



Fig. 15.2 Gaslighting Lucía. *Poncho fue* (2017, 14)

Otero makes deliberate artistic decisions to depict a story-world with distinctive features to speak of real-world acts of abuse and violence and of the contexts that motivated these. For this particular graphic novel, Otero's style can be argued to be intimate and expressionistic with a poignant use of colour for emotional effect. On the intimism of *Poncho fue*, I would like to recall Merino's point about the intimate autobiographical perspective of women authors. Merino argues that artists such as Sole Otero, Powerpaola and Marcela Trujillo among others delve into an intimate and frequently humorous reflection on the self that articulates the feminine in a variety of socio-cultural contexts in their comics. As she puts it: 'En el ámbito de la historieta gráfica, las mujeres creadoras han abierto importantes espacios de reflexión existencial íntima' ['In the field of graphic cartooning, women artists have opened up important spaces for intimate existential reflection'] (Merino 2016, 29). Borrowing from the lexicon of painting and literature, Merino calls this artwork style 'intimismo autobiográfico' ['autobiographical intimism'] (2016, 35). Nothing more aptly describes Sole Otero's graphic art in *Poncho fue*. The intimist/intimate framework of this graphic novel expresses outwardly, visually and verbally the personal, the private as well as the intimacy and secrets of the everyday with her abusive partner in the interior of the sequential frames.

The importance of the use of colour deserves further discussion. Otero has indicated that the theme of colour was thoroughly considered before starting her project, and it was already in the script (Soquiransky 2017). By using acrylic colour in an expressive way, she has crafted a purposely sensory narrative that can be described as 'narrativa cromática'—to use Otero's own words. For this, the author understands a way to tell stories through colour proposing, as she does in her online course on the psychology of colour, to discover the symbolism of colour not solely for aesthetic purposes but also as a means to communicate emotions (Otero n.d. *Domestika*). It is worth quoting the paragraph to understand the crucial role colour plays in *Poncho fue*:

to discover what types of emotions each tone is capable of awakening in the viewer. Being familiar with the nature of symbolism and the ways in which each chromatic scale acts narratively can help you decide what color scheme to use for each project, controlling the meaning created through it and conveying a specific message (Otero n.d. *Domestika*).

If there is something that catches the reader's attention, it is the incredibly colourful image of the book's cover. This calls for the participation of the reader in capturing the moods and feelings of what is being graphically recounted. While the rainbow colours of the cover communicate cheerfulness, the thick black path from where the car is

travelling suggests otherwise. Blue, yellow and red colour tones are used throughout *Poncho fue* to cue the reader into different sensations and environments. The visual-verbal violence and emotional abuse stand out in each panel framed with a different background colour to symbolise different degrees of aggression in actions (Figs. 15.4 and 15.5). Otero paints violence red and monstrous.

The expressive power of colour highlights emotional impact. Santi's manipulative tactics are as impressive as they are disturbing to view. These representations are artistic and beautiful even if they are uncomfortable to witness. Chute and DeKoven (2006) as well as Tolmie (2013) in *Drawing from life* have discussed how traumatic experiences narrated graphically involve and challenge the reader/viewer. Chute and DeKoven argue that 'Graphic narrative, through its most basic composition in frames and gutters [...] calls a reader's attention visually and spatially to the act, process, and duration of interpretation' (2006, 767). Chute elaborates further on this idea maintaining that graphic narratives develop an *idiom of witness* involving the reader/viewer and, in turn, making the individual experience a collective one (Chute 2010, 3). Tolmie, in particular, argues that graphic representations negotiate private trauma publicly with the reader by means of what she calls 'an aesthetics of affect' (2013, ix). For this Tolmie means an aesthetic style that manipulates the reader's emotions through deliberate artistic decisions in trauma representations. Domestic abuse is uncomfortable to see drawn in this graphic novel despite and perhaps because it looks pretty and innocent in its depiction: the child-like style, the expressive postures and gestures of Lucía, and the bright colour palette—all make uncomfortable drawings of abuse and physical violence generating a certain discomfort in the reader/viewer. In addition, it is possible to read an intention of humour in the visual style Otero proposes. Unlike realistic works such as Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2002) which tend to accentuate the real-life potential of what is being depicted by instilling seriousness in the subject matter through realistic illustrations, Otero's style subverts any attempt at seriousness. Instead, *Poncho fue*'s visual language evokes a sense of tragicomedy; it is dreadful and funny at the same time. This makes the reader/ viewer even more uneasy having to reconcile the incongruity between the tragic, disturbing subject matter of domestic abuse and the seemingly humorous visual elements of the graphic depictions. The tragicomic child-like colourful illustrations can be argued to be Otero's artistic style of discomfort.



Fig. 15.4 Violence is red. *Poncho fue* (2017, 20)



Fig. 15.5 Violence is red. Poncho fue (2017, 21)

However, a challenge is equally posed to the artist in her attempt to risk a representation of real experiences of trauma, not only ethically but without defying the realism of her account and a claim to truth. In the quaint tragicomic aspect, I recognise Chute's point about how authors of graphic narratives tend to avoid projecting an identity solely defined by their trauma (2010, 2). Therefore, Sole Otero distances herself from the realm of trauma through her graphic style, implying the subjective presence of an artist who renders her experiences visible, audible and speakable to make them public and collective. In this way, both the graphical expression of trauma as much as the reader's response to it implies a shared experience. Otero's visual-verbal language becomes a safe albeit powerful device to generate socio commentary on intimate partner abuse de-dramatising the matter and defusing at the same time its harrowing impact to allow the reader/viewer to continue engaging with the graphic narrative.

Santi's portrayal conforms to the common understanding of the domestic abuser. He is presented as charming with friends and family but highly manipulative towards Lucía exhibiting a controlling and subjugating behaviour. Santi fosters confusion through manipulative communication undermining Lucía's perception of reality. His conduct is depicted as abusive reminiscent of how Gregory Anton (Charles Boyer) treated Paula Alquist (Ingrid Bergman) in George Cukor's film *Gaslight* (1944). Similarly, Lucía's emotional abuse intensifies graphically as the narrative progresses gradually eroding her self-esteem through Santi's discrediting observations. She begins to doubt herself as she is encouraged to believe she is to blame. While the feeling of guilt in Lucía becomes accentuated, Santi never assumes any responsibility in the generation of conflict. Lucía's lack of self-worth extends across panels spanning many pages and is depicted through the use of colour.



Fig. 15.6 Lucía fading away. *Poncho fue* (2017, 94)

Guilt, confusion, self-reproach and self-doubt are emotions captured in words threaded together forming a meandering pattern of snakelike writing that emanates from Lucía and accentuates, in turn, her deteriorating psychological state. ‘culpa’, ‘nopuedomás’, ‘soyinsoportable’, ‘nosempuededecirnada’, ‘nomelobanconada’, ‘hagotodomal’, ‘manipuladora’, ‘cobarde’, ‘boba’, ‘tonta’, ‘loca’ [‘guilt’, ‘icantanyomore’, ‘imunbearable’, ‘nothingcanbesaidtome’, ‘justcantstandhim’, ‘idoeverythingwrong’, ‘manipulator’, ‘coward’, ‘fool’, ‘idiot’, ‘mad’] appear peppered all over the graphic novel when Lucía is being disciplined, drilled, or lectured at by Santi. Her diminishing is literal: Lucía is drawn tinier and tinier in those situations. Her shrinking alludes to a depreciated sense of self. She becomes depressed, starts paying for a psychologist and a psychiatrist and begins taking tablets for depression. There is a crucial change in the depiction of Lucía’s character which occurs in the temporal jump six months before their final break up. One single wide borderless panel captures her gradual decline (Fig. 15.6). Four drawings show Lucía from the waist up wearing a red t-shirt. There is sadness in her light-tinted face. The colours start fading away the moment Lucía swallows an anti-depression tablet she bought in the previous panel. She turns to ghostly white. Lucía becomes a spectral presence. Her representation remains colourless for a full third of the novel and does not regain colour until the second day of the enunciative present when Santi kicks Lucía out of his place. This is a powerful illustration of the impact of domestic abuse.

Working Through the Trauma: Monsters and Dreams

Graphic representations transform Lucía’s emotional states and her unconscious into colourful visuals. Depression is white, dreams are multicoloured, and anger is red. A pencilled-in monster creature appears as a shadow rising from Lucía herself and looming behind and over her whenever she is angry; it mirrors her anger reactions. It is accompanied by a ‘Basta’ [‘Enough’] scream from her to Santi. The shadow monster and the ‘enough’ shout graphically convey an aggressive response-reaction from Lucía. Her expressive anatomy is depicted in agitated body movements and facial distortions making a sequential visual story of her self-transformation. This is further emphasised by the bright orange-red background of the panels. Her lack of self-control is triggered by Santi’s relentless acts of contempt, undermining, questioning of her judgement and accusations about her mental state. The shadow creature appears as an abject Other that emerges out of her embodying a menacing and unspeakable monstrosity: ‘a monster [...] that the listening devices of the

unconscious do not hear' (Kristeva 1982, 11). Kristeva's perspective on the role of abjection in the constitution of subjectivity offers a framework for an understanding of the representation of Lucía's shadow monster. The notion of the abject as an uncanny force that agitates and unsettles the subject is a relevant perspective in monster theory and serves here to illuminate how private trauma destabilises the subject—Lucía's self. Aside from Kristeva's discourse on the maternal in *Power of horrors*, the abject is understood as the defilement that threatens stability and challenges boundaries 'what disturbs identity, system, order' (1982, 4). Fears, anxieties, the not-known repressed threaten and challenge the very notion of the whole self and that, for Kristeva, creates a sense of identity through a splitting process which serves as a reminder that the self is never whole. The monster depicted taps into the uncanny by embodying the abject in Lucía and making her confront that which she finds repulsive. Hence the need to reinforce the process of abjection, which in turn increases awareness (no matter how repressed) that the abject comes from within, in a continual self-defeating cycle. Figures of monsters have been emblematic symbolic manifestations of the abject Other in art and culture. In his book *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, Richard Kearney explores how figures of otherness such as monsters denote boundaries, margins of trauma and fear. He calls this 'experiences of extremity':

monsters represent experiences of extremity which bring us to the edge. They subvert our established categories and challenge us to think again. And because they threaten the known with the unknown, they are often set apart in fear and trembling. [...] 'Monsters' also signal borderline experiences of uncontainable excess, reminding the ego that it is never wholly sovereign (Kearney 2003, 3).

Lucía's shadow monster has a dual nature: it reflects her ambivalence; it is simultaneously her horror and her defence. In the first instance Lucía's capacity for violence may suggest a representation construed within and by patriarchal thought in which women become monsters when they overstep the boundaries of their passively submissive roles. However, considering the story is recounted from Lucía's perspective, it is possible to argue that the shadow monster is her self-recognition of something she dislikes in herself—the abject within, manifesting as a moment of monstrosity and aberrant behaviour. Simultaneously, it conveys the effect of the abuse Lucía endures. In other words, it is the defiled excess of trauma. This way, the shadow monster in its graphic depiction embodies an unrecognisable destabilisation and disorder in Lucía's self—it is a menace to her own self. It stands for an experience of extremity.

A further reading of the shadow monster can be articulated. In the world of comics, particularly that of superheroes and superheroines, ideas of crime and justice are often highlighted. Caped characters tend to take matters into their own hands and unequivocally express violence, particularly, in punishment and retribution to put right injustices in a deficient social order. As such, the superheroine Lucía acts in retaliation. Lucía's aggressiveness protects her; she is defending herself. The shadow monster, her anger, functions as a violent retribution for the degrading way she has been treated. However, Lucía's aggressive behaviour is uncomfortable to view and the reader is confronted with a moral concern as to whether to justify her violence. Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Coody (2020) may offer a different perspective on this uncomfortable monstrous woman. In their recent *Monstrous Women in Comics*, Langsdale and Coody warn against solely reading the representation of monstrous women as figures of victimisation, degradation and marginalisation. They suggest 'the intersections of gender, ethnicity and monstrosity may also prove empowering' (Langsdale and Coody 2020, 4). To this end, the authors read Elizabeth LaPensée's vignette *Deer Woman* used on their book cover to argue that in her monstrous depiction 'she becomes a means of violent retribution for wrongs done' to Native Women in North America. As they put it: 'our cover image Deer Woman is a reminder that sharp hooves and antlers may be monstrous, but they can also be useful to the oppressed' (Langsdale and Coody 2020, 4). Monstrous women are powerful, they represent women victims upon whom violence has been inflicted. And as such they not only expose 'damaging cultural norms in patriarchal contexts' but also 'how constructions of woman as monster contain within them the potential to destroy the systems of thought that are productive of such norms' (Langsdale and Coody 2020, 5). The shadow monster of/in Lucía depicts a violent retribution and exposes visually the crime of domestic violence through the graphic voice of the abused.

The representation of Lucía's mental processes permeates *Poncho fue*. The fragmentation of memory, her shadow monster, her colour-coded emotional states, all provide an opportunity for the working through of Lucía's trauma. Of particular interest is Freud's paper 'Remembering, repeating and working through' where he explores the link between memory and trauma to assert the importance 'to *work through* it, to overcome it' (Freud 1958 [1914], 155). Past traumas and experiences, for Freud, are repeated and acted out unconsciously. And working through involves gaining insight into those repetitions to find a resolution to the trauma and recover. Lucía's nine dreams in the graphic novel reveal the process of working through trauma. The dreams function 'As a playground in which it is allowed to expand in almost complete freedom and in which it is expected to display to us everything in the way of pathogenic instincts

that is hidden in the patient's mind' (Freud 1958 [1914], 154). The playground, it could be said, is the colourful representation of Lucía's unconscious.

A colourful dream world is realised. Nine dreams provide visual cues to the repressed. Lucía's dreams signify subjectivity and provide a way into the mind that conjures up those painted memories. The first five dreams appear within flashbacks, while the last four belong to flashforward memories. These are embedded narratives, stories within an overarching story, dream memories within a trauma memory. The manifest content of Lucía's dreams is graphically captured in an outburst of colourful drawings containing her repressed wishes. All dream-drawings are depicted in white lines over a palette of saturated red-oranges, yellows, greens and blues. Otero's artwork brings the dreamscape to life with vibrant colours and dream sequences that have no panel borders, while Lucía's waking moments do. This stylistic choice ensures there is no blurring of the lines between reality and the subconscious world. The early dreams contain themes of anxiety and of being controlled and criticised. Lucía's first dream occurs soon after the start of her relationship with Santi. A cable leads her to a hidden room; she discovers Santi filming and she is the subject of his surveillance. She appears in her own dream thinking the relationship was too good to be true. Lucía wakes up. The second dream, approximately three months into their relationship, is one of entrapment and suffocation. Six panels over one page depict how Lucía is sucked into a vortex. The swirling force moves progressively across four panels sucking Lucía's naked body in. Her nakedness points to her vulnerability and exposure. Lucía's expression is one of perplexity, and then of panic and fright when she wakes up with a start. The threatening content of her dreams increases. In a further dream she is punished by Santi and not allowed to return to bed to sleep 'hasta que entiendas' ['until you understand']. After she is kicked out of Santi's apartment, she dreams of it going up in flames. Then, dreams with a different connotation, that of recovery, become more frequent. She is making conscious the unconscious and her realisation, her undergoing a change and her separation from Santi are all depicted. Her final act of separation, in body and mind, is visually represented in two specific dreams.

The first sign of body separation occurs just before the temporal jump to six months later. This dream, an anticipation of Lucía's future, is sequenced in three wide long panels of multicoloured backgrounds (Fig. 15.7). A girl and a boy make one single body with two heads in the first panel. Flowers in blossom complete the sense of joy. The single body pulls itself apart separating boy and girl. The boy ends up on the floor in a dark pool of rain or tears in the final panel. Wilted flowers make the depiction woeful.

The final dream is longer, laid out across three full pages. It is an episodic dream: three episodes unfolding across three pages. With less intensity in the colour saturation, it starts as an anxiety dream. Lucía goes through sensory emotions of guilt, self-doubt, self-blame before uttering 'Basta, ¡estoy loca!' ['Enough! I'm mad!']. Another masked Lucía appears in the following frame. The two Lucías indicate depersonalisation; she feels disconnected from her own body. One Lucía pulls off the other's mask, unveiling her other self who responds to her '¿Y qué?' ['So what?']. In the last panel they finally reconnect as the two embrace. In the second episode, she is being held down in water by a giant hand; in the following two panels she is flailing and starts drowning: '¡Soltame! ¡Soltame, Santi, me ahogo!' ['Let go! Let go, Santi, I'm drowning!']. However, it is not Santi but a giant Lucía, a dissociated giant self that holds her down and says '¡Mala! ¡Te lo merecés!' ['Evil! You deserve it!']. The final panel reveals her giant self uttering '¿Me lo merezco?' ['Do I deserve it?'] while pulling tiny Lucía out of the water. She questions whether she deserves what is happening to her, recognising both her agency and the pain she has experienced. In the final episodic dream, the emotional and libidinal ties that once secured the unity between Lucía and Santi, and the reasons why Lucía let herself be influenced, are now broken. Lucía leaves. Literally, she is illustrated as a yellow figure leaving the panel (Fig. 15.8). The warm yellow tones will accompany this Lucía until the end of the novel. As Lucía recovers from the abusive experience, the shadow monster gradually abandons her to never return. Lucía works through the experience of the abject in this process as 'an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection' (Kristeva 1982, 208). The monster is sketched out of the novel with pencilled lines getting fainter and fainter, erasing her anger monster from her. Lucía recovers, as does Sole Otero.



Fig. 15.7 A dream of separation. *Poncho fue* (2017, 183)

The artistic act of creating *Poncho fue* has been acknowledged as key to Otero's recovery; it can be comprehended as a process through which the author was capable of undoing her traumatic experience. As she put it:

Dibujarlo me ha servido como una especie de catarsis y terapia postraumática. Fue muy complicado de realizar pero, a la vez, me ayudó muchísimo a superar la situación. [...] Escribir este cómic – confiesa – me ha servido como terapia y la idea es que si alguien está pasando o ha pasado por una situación parecida, pueda sentirse identificado o acompañado (Jiménez 2017).

[Drawing it [the graphic novel] has served as a kind of catharsis and posttraumatic therapy for me. It was very complicated to do but, at the same time, it helped me a lot to overcome the situation. [...] Writing this comic – she confesses – has served as therapy for me and the idea is that if someone is going through or has gone through a similar situation, they can feel identified or accompanied.]

Creating the graphic novel had transformative power for Otero and the hope that it would help readers too. This points to art as therapy— a powerful exercise to explore thoughts and feelings and work through past traumatic experiences to heal. Building on this idea, *Poncho fue* can be argued to be the visual-verbal manifestation of the way Otero worked through her trauma to recover. The act of drawing and painting was a way of remembering and repeating. In this case, the playground could also be the graphic novel itself; graphic memory where the behaviour linked to trauma gets repeated in panels. Memory is another word for repeating. And the process of reexperiencing and processing past traumatic events are worked through for Otero to recover.

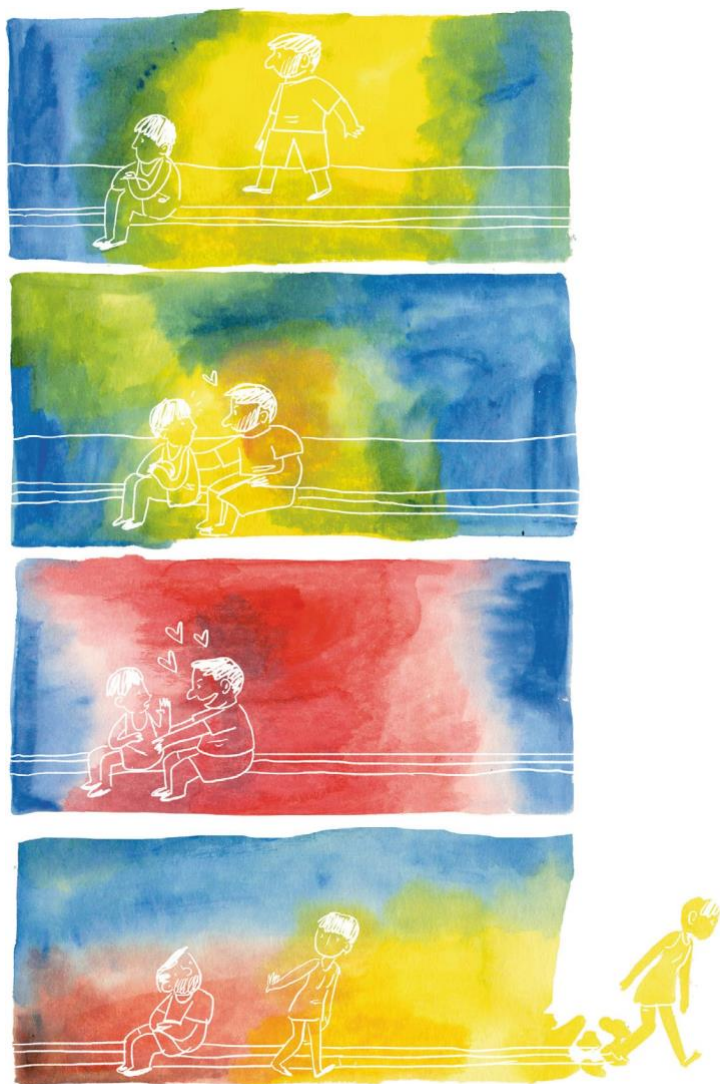


Fig. 15.8 Dreaming of leaving. *Poncho fue* (2017, 198)

Closing Thoughts

Poncho fue is not an unmediated text; it is mediated by a subjectivity that takes upon itself the role of speaking out on abuse. This graphic novel is posited as a personal journey, as Sueldo claims: '*Poncho fue* es un viaje interior y psicológico donde representa la transformación de una subjetividad femenina' [*Poncho fue* is an inner and psychological journey in which the transformation of a feminine subjectivity is represented'] (2021, 11). However, I would argue that it transcends the personal individual. *Poncho fue* occupies the space where the private becomes public—an experience that is no longer individual but rather social. It is a public denunciation. It sheds light on detailed aspects of the mechanisms and consequences of abuse. It also helps to cement democratising transformations in contexts such as that of the world of comics where women's subjectivities have been systematically subordinated. Otero's speaking out on gender violence and abuse in this graphic narrative has encouraged some critics to label either the text or the author as feminist. In this regard, Sole Otero has said:

Han dicho que el libro es desde feminista hasta misógino (Benítez 2018).
[It's been said that the book ranges from feminist to misogynist.]

Trato los temas porque soy mujer, pero no soy una militante feminista, si intento que mis libros cuestionen aspectos de la vida y del patriarcado, pero una militante feminista pone el cuerpo mucho más que yo. Soy feminista ideológicamente como soy ideológicamente socialista, pero no milito. No es un título que me corresponda (Valenzuela 2022).

[I deal with the issues because I am a woman, but I am not a militant feminist; I do try to make my books question aspects of life and patriarchy, but a militant feminist commits herself in body and soul much more than I do. I am ideologically a feminist as I am ideologically a socialist, but I am not a militant. It is not a title that belongs to me.]

Poncho fue addresses issues directly associated with a feminist agenda and I would use Acevedo's phrase to describe it: 'el feminismo dibujado en viñetas' ['feminism drawn in vignettes'] (2020b, 135). Although the author may not identify herself as an activist, Sole Otero '[le] pone el cuerpo' ['puts her body and soul'] into calling out male violence. Like the new woman of Cixous, whose bodily drives equate with creative self-expression, Otero writes and draws as a woman and signifies through her body. She gives logic to her speech as her voice pushes through her body. Bodies become intelligible as they signify women's self-consciousness (Cixous 1976, 881, 886). *Poncho fue* is art pushed through a woman author. It embodies a

woman's voice graphically and has a happy ending: Lucía recovers, envisions an optimistic future for herself and never returns to Santi. The very final panel of *Poncho fue* is a nod to the author's own creative process and the reader/viewer's involvement. Enveloped in a warm positive yellow, Lucía is drawn in a bird's-eye view angle leaving a bar and Santi behind; there are several red Beetle cars in the frame; she is stepping out onto a crossroads which opens onto various paths.

Lucía is a cartoon character, a narrator, the author and every woman that dares to speak out about abuse. The drawn and written language of *Poncho fue* accounts for a space that facilitates Sole Otero's self-fictionalisation in a process of narrating a traumatic personal experience. *Poncho fue* is a combination of different projections of the self conveyed in a language where artistic writing and drawing emerge as a way to come to terms with the memorialisation of experienced traumatic events. The self-drawographies are a decisive source of self-reflection and expression that engage with a past in the form of a memory-narrative and graphic voice that become, in the process, more than just an expression of individual female subjectivity. It embodies women. When Sole Otero set out to write about herself; she put herself into *Poncho fue* and, in the act, put violence against women into the world and history of Argentine comics. *Poncho fue* is social criticism captured in the formal visual-textual language of comics—a space of socially and politically compromised art.

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