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LUCIANA DOS SANTOS

THE CRAZY [FEMALE] ARTIST: ICONOGRAPHIES OF ART, MENTAL ILLNESS AND GENDER IN ELLEN FORNEY'S *MARBLES*

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Luciana dos Santos

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ICONOGRAPHIES OF ART, MENTAL ILLNESS AND GENDER IN ELLEN FORNEY'S *MARBLES*

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Luciana dos Santos

The Crazy [Female] Artist: iconographies of art, mental illness and gender in Ellen Forney's *Marbles*

O presente trabalho em nível de mestrado foi avaliado e aprovado por banca examinadora composta pelos seguintes membros:

Prof.a Nancy Pedri, Dra.
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Prof.a Melina Pereira Savi, Dra.
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Certificamos que esta é a **versão original e final** do trabalho de conclusão que foi julgado adequado para obtenção do título Mestre em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários, na área de concentração Estudos Literários e Culturais.

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Prof. Dr. Lincoln Paulo Fernandes
Coordenador do Programa

____

Prof. Dra. Maria Rita Drumond Viana
Orientadora

____

Prof. Dra. Renata Lucena Dalmaso
Coorientadora

Florianópolis, 25 de Junho de 2024.

Dedico este trabalho ao meu ex-colega Nicolas Bonelli Lima, cuja alma sensível se alinhava à minha em trocas sinceras quando flanávamos pela nossa amada UFSC. Amigo, ainda me pego esperando topar com você por acaso entre os centros pra te contar como estou e saber como você está. Espero que esteja bem, que esteja aliviado do quão pesado este mundo pode ser.

PREFACE

Some words (and images) to you, dear reader:

This preface is mainly in the format of a short graphic memoir called Small Little Things, which I created to help me justify my interest in the research I conducted during my master's degree and put into practice the theories I studied in this period. In addition, the creative prefaces of Renata Lucena Dalmaso's doctorate thesis and Gabriela Zetehaku Araujo's master's thesis were an incentive to consider this endeavor. In Small Little Things, I portray my lifetime relationship with mental illness and other topics that are aligned with themes that we can find in Ellen Forney's *Marbles*, such as sexuality, art, and company. In the short graphic memoir, I focus on a delicate moment of my life until I started living alone and bring highlights of my childhood and teenage years that are related and help explain my mental states in the slice of life I share. Before I present to you the graphic memoir, which follows these lines, I want to clarify a couple of things and tell you a bit about the process of creating this preface in graphic memoir form.

Small Little Things was one of the hardest things I have ever done, and I have done a couple of difficult things in my quarter and a few years of life. Within 7 years of therapy, I did learn how to talk about myself and demystify the ability to "come out" in regard to anything that is originally in the realm of intimacy to allow it to experience the outside world, and get in touch with the worlds of other people. However, I was not prepared to see myself in images, which are an inherent part of comics.

I always unconsciously had a preference for words. When my friend Nicolas, from Law School, told me I should study Letras - Inglês[1], I considered his thoughts and decided to change my life path so it would meet literature, which, for me, meant words. Words were my refuge when I felt lonely: I would read, write, and sing while listening to music... But I would never draw, especially myself. Drawing was an activity I left behind as I designated it to times when I was a naïve kid who drew dolls and clothes, but never herself.

However, I needed this experiment, not only because I paid for drawing classes during the last year of my master's degree but also because I wanted to know what it was like to face again my most obscure facet. Try it out and live with it. Maybe leave it behind, but I am still not sure if I can leave it behind as my history is still inside me and behind everything that I do and feel.

[1] Undergraduate degree in English Literature, Translation and Language Teaching in Brazil.

I also wanted to see what it was like to put into practice what I studied regarding comics: the use of visual strategies, such as metaphors, through drawings; the language of comics, combining visual and text so they can complement each other; the juxtaposition, the size and format of balloons, panels; the lettering choices; the possibility of recreating reality through drawings[2]; etc… And what I studied about life writing: the ethics in portraying real people[3]; the overcoming of trauma through writing; the recounting of trauma as a narrator somewhat detached from the character; and so on… I wanted to make choices as a comic creator and memoirist does. I wanted to put myself in their shoes and see if they could fit me. And to see the activity of creating a comic as an earnest adult taking responsibility, not in the way I did when I made comics to satisfy my desire for revenge against bully boys in school and spent classes drawing and writing stories that made fun of them just because I knew they were using comics to make fun of me. This time, my desire was not vengeance, it was coping with the past.

The comic strips I made in school did not have me. I was not there really. Making the graphic memoir that follows had to have me: my face, my thoughts, and my history. I drew different versions of myself, depending on the life moment I was portraying: as a kid, as a teenager, as an adult… I also brought a version of myself as a vampire, taking advantage of the possibilities that comics offer to convey an idea through unrealistic drawings. This part was very fun to make, but to see myself there, in those pages, was various times unbearable. It was painful to see myself in those situations again. There were moments when I drew myself very realistically and then changed my facial features so that the drawing would not look so much like me. It was easier to pretend it was not me, and that those things did not occur to me. So anyone who could find my work unethical, not truthful, or too "whining" could not do that because I could pretend that the image was not me and claim the work as utterly fictional.

But that would not be honest to you, dear reader. You deserve a truth. And I do, too.

So here is my truth.

---

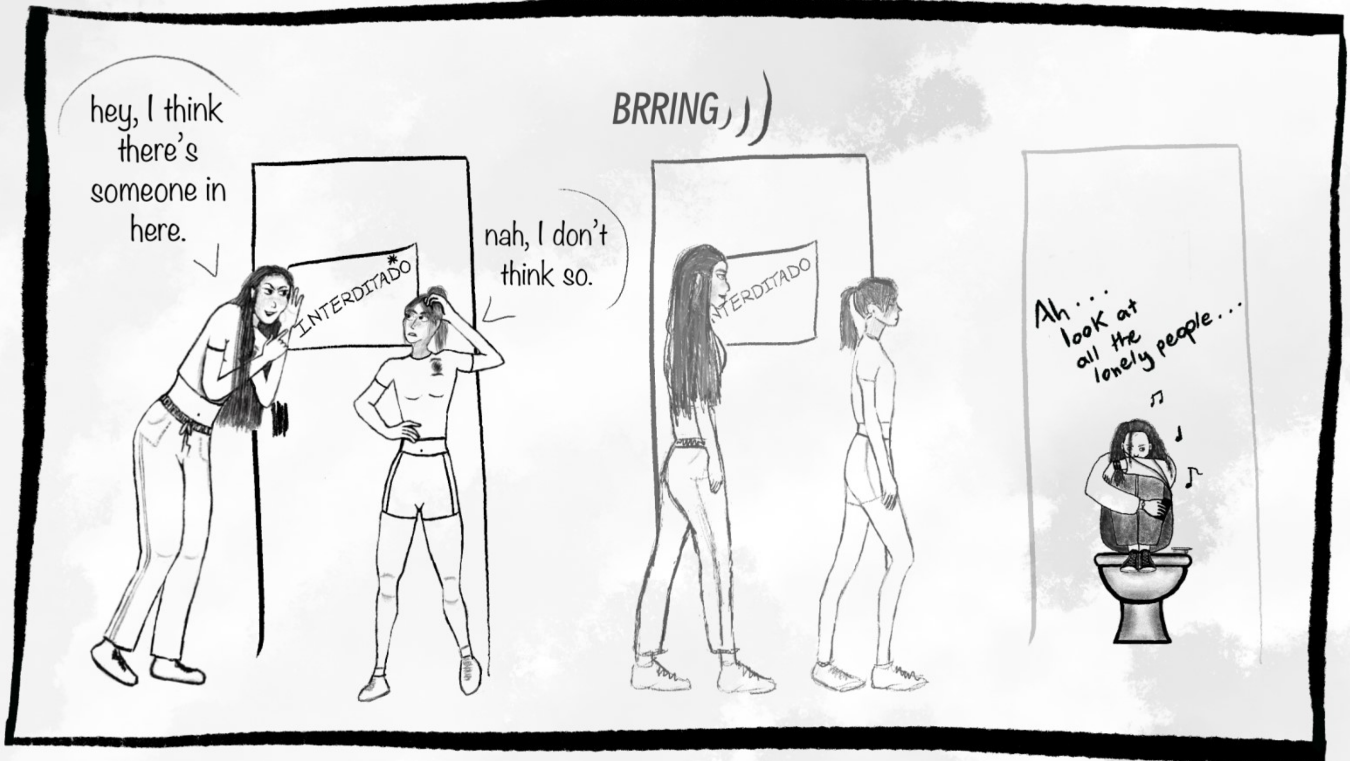
[2] For instance, when my wrist as a baby is shown, originally, the name on the tape was my mother's.

[3] This preoccupation led me to draw characters who were not me changing their facial features or identifying them simply with shadows.

Small Little Things

A short Graphic Memoir

By Luciana dos Santos



That justified the roles
I felt these people gave to me.

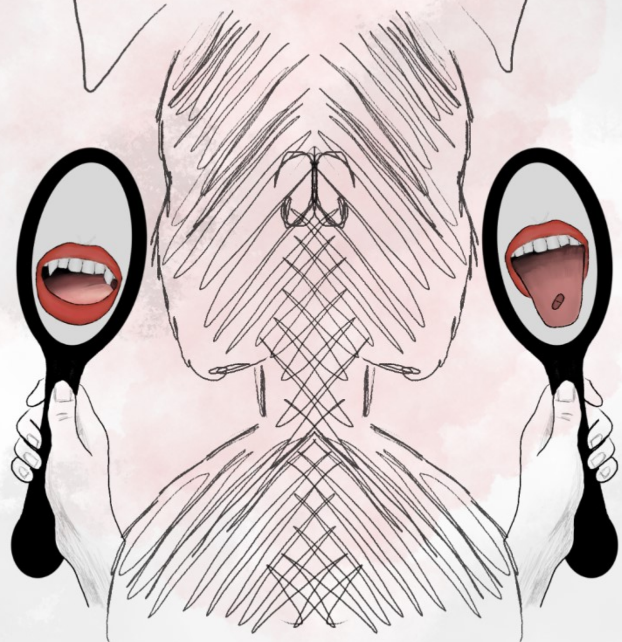
To-be List:

- ☐ A silent company
- ☐ A continuation
- ☐ Something to yell at
- ☐ An income
- ☐ A trophy

*Out-of-order

Flash Tattoos

Many years later,
that baby transformed
into what I felt was
a pain-embracing monster



* MY BAND

That was after I went through painful elementary years.

Both home and school were places
where any little slip could lead to a disaster.
To be silent apparently would bring peace.

But silence doesn't change anything.
And peace must be of collective interest to happen.

In my class, creating comics was an activity that only boys did.
So I decided to be the first girl to do it.

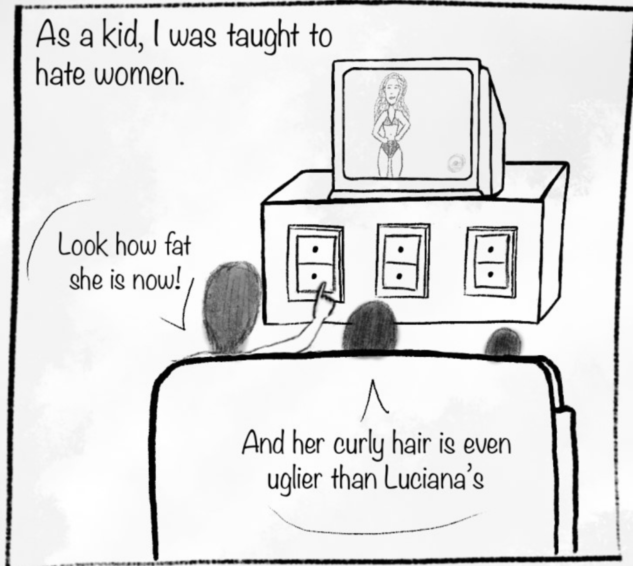
My comics featured a pink flying pen defending me from bully boys since I couldn't do that on my own.

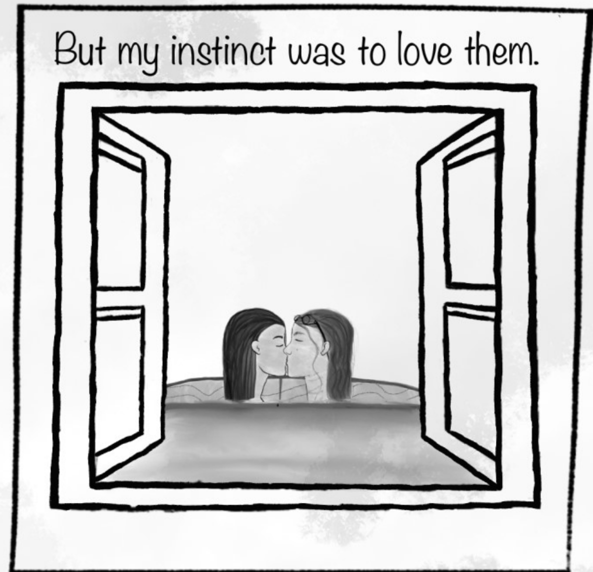
My intense body also spoke for me.

Over the years, trying to keep all this intensity and fruitful imagination inside me made me become like an old tree. Rigid and controlling.

* Is it a bird? No! Is it a plane? Nooo! It's the flying pen!

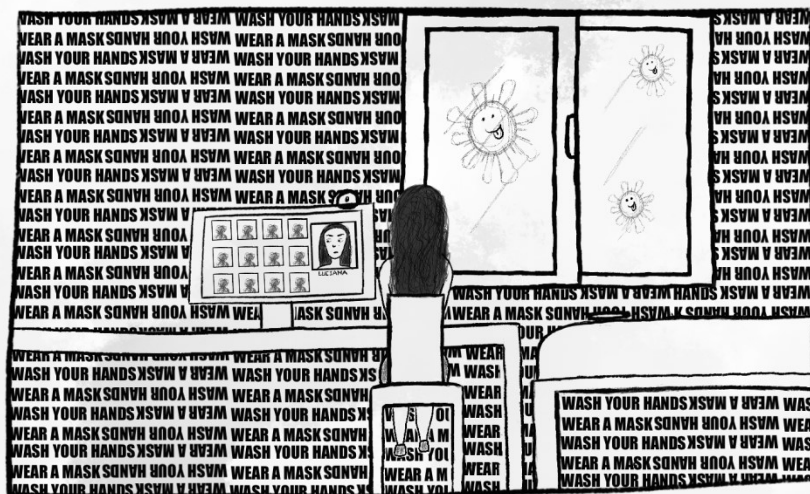
The feeling of inadequacy became more prevalent inside me as I watched and was watched by my surroundings.





What was my existence for?

How was I supposed to live if it was not for others?



These questions came when the world collapsed and made people fade into themselves.

In my case, all the joy I had inside me was found and killed.

When COVID-19 crisis caused a lot of people to struggle with mental health issues, I was already aware I had a tendency to melancholy.
It was pretty clear because, back in the early 2010s, when I was a teen using Tumblr in its golden era, I was a member of the Sad Girls Club.

The Sad Girls Club starter pack

Brainy Girl today
Girl Boss tomorrow
(Still waiting ...)

Write Write Write

Read Read Read

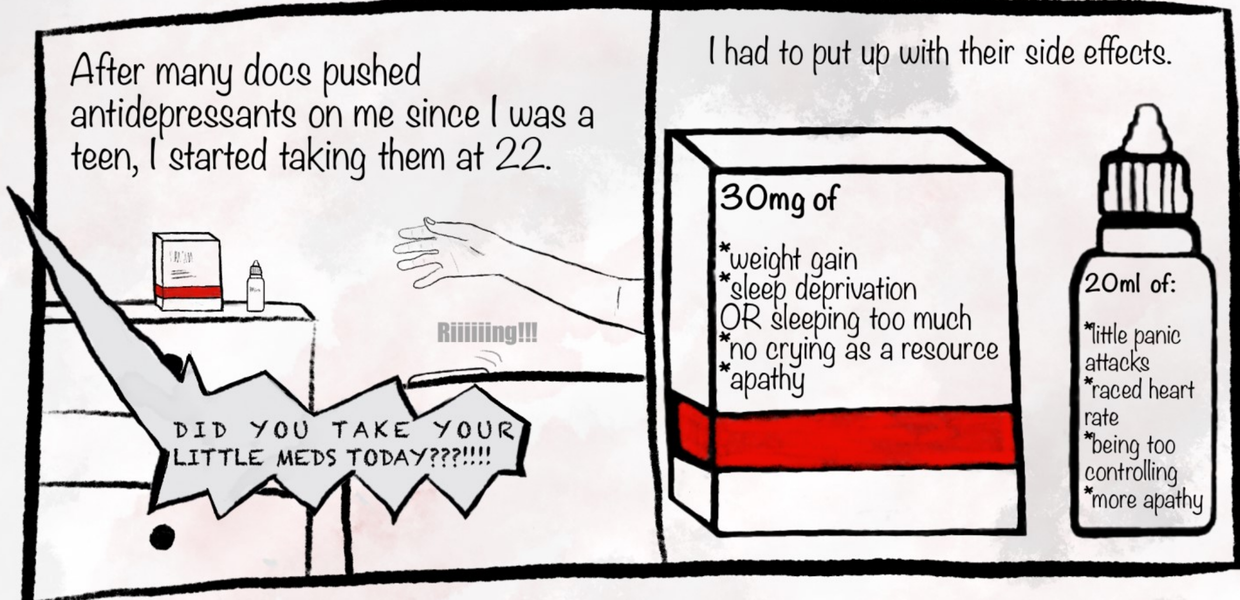
Feminism
optional item

Smoking = gross but aesthetic

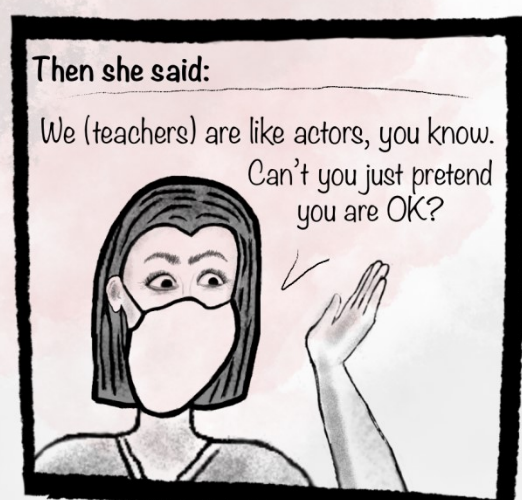
except you are because all girls are "others" (De Beauvoir)

Vintage
Clothing YES
Lifestyle NO

The Sad Girls Club was just a meme. In reality, being a sad girl was less funny.



And I observed the hypocritical effects of being mentally ill in a capitalist society.

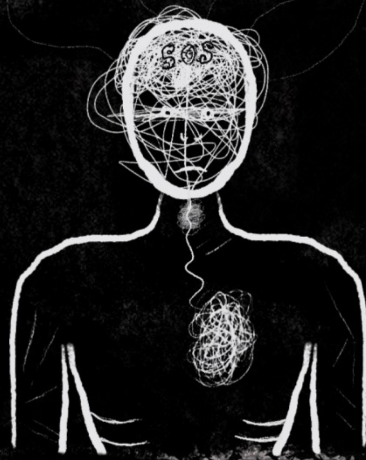


Not much time later, I was fired. She told me it was because of the "things" we had discussed.

A sad girl could also be fetishized.
Once, a guy told me:

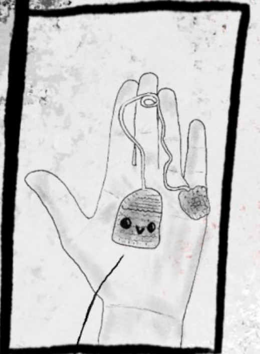
"You look so pretty when you cry"

Soon after I heard that, I got too tired.
Stopped having most meals and washing my face.
My crying broke the cast built by medication,
and I lost control of my mind as I was not the only author of my thoughts anymore.



Fortunately, I told my therapist the plans in my mind and she contacted my closest friends.

Quarta *
-> Escola (work)
-> Farmácia
-> Quarto
-> Dormir



a small gift from a friend that meant "I think about you"

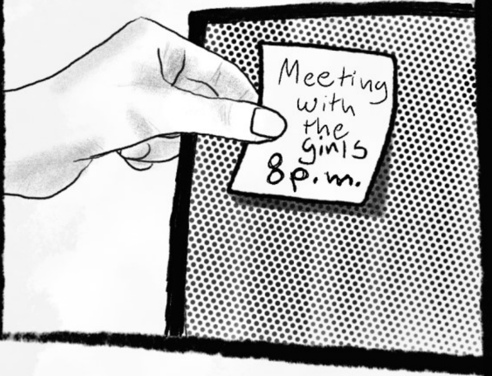
I always pictured myself as Eleanor Rigby.
That I was too small and invisible to be noticed and remembered.

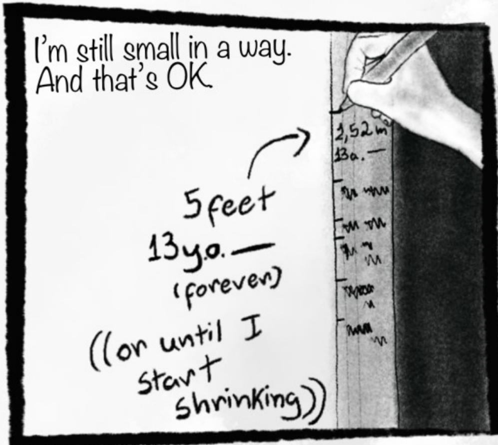
After my friends helped me, that idea started sounding silly, and I finally felt the other voice in my mind fading.

With the intruder's voice away from my mind, I felt so free I saw I could rise with red hair.

LIFE

After all, I found in friends a comprehensive family.





But the bigger I feel inside the more I can try to understand why big people act the way they act and expect what they expect from others (even when I disagree with them, which makes understanding harder...)

To remind myself to focus on what I want to do with my existence, I keep in mind something a friend told me once:

"The reason you were born doesn't need to be the reason you keep living"

Wednesday
To do list:

* Rereread Marbles
* Do yoga
* Cook - Vegan Curry
* Take a walk
* Do my skincare routine

Music and books were my best companies until I got to this point.

The point where I was able to realize I was stronger and more balanced than I thought.

And that I could be safe with myself and live on my own.

Sometimes I'd still feel my mind getting dark, though.

So I'd vent it all out for a while, and trust I'd feel better then.

I'd trust because I learned I could be a good company to myself.

Probably the best one I've ever had.

AGRADECIMENTOS

Gostaria de agradecer à deusa por me agraciar com a jornada que tanto rezei para conseguir e na qual pude aprender enquanto profissional e pessoa. Agradeço às minhas amigas e colegas, que sempre torceram por mim e me ouviram, e são pessoas que admiro igualmente. Agradeço aos meus amigos também pelos incentivos e palavras de encorajamento. Agradeço ao meu companheiro pelo apoio emocional, pelas conversas interessantes, pelos conselhos, e pela paciência em tolerar meu humor em momentos de dificuldades durante o Mestrado. Também agradeço à minha família de sangue pelo apoio às minhas escolhas. Agradeço à minha orientadora e coorientadora por me guiarem no caminho da pesquisa e serem minhas maiores inspirações. Agradeço também à Panorama Escola de Artes e sua equipe por terem me acolhido e me mostrado que eu podia ser arte e artista. Por fim, agradeço à UNIEDU-FUMDES pelo apoio financeiro durante esse Mestrado em um momento tão incerto sobre o futuro das pesquisas de qualidade e diversas realizadas nas Universidades Federais brasileiras.

One of the things that gets said a lot is you are not alone, which is very important. But I really prefer to say you have company. (Forney, 2017)

RESUMO

Este estudo procura investigar a *graphic memoir Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo + Me: A Graphic Memoir* (2012), de Ellen Forney, que chegou ao Brasil em 2014 sob o título de *Parafusos: Mania, depressão Michelangelo e eu: Memórias em quadrinhos.* Trata-se de uma *graphic memoir*, ou seja, memórias contadas como história em quadrinhos em que Forney conta sua narrativa de vida, relatando sua trajetória de vida desde quando recebeu o diagnóstico de Transtorno Bipolar. Para representar sua vivência com doença mental, a autora lança mão de metáforas e recursos possibilitados pela linguagem própria das HQs, uma mídia onde palavras e imagens se mesclam para contar uma história. Ademais, Forney traz em sua obra o conceito de "Crazy Artists", uma categoria na qual ela se vê inserida uma vez que foi diagnosticada com Transtorno Bipolar e temia que sua criatividade fosse podada pela medicação que tinha a função de controlar a doença. No presente estudo, pretende-se adicionar uma camada extra a esta discussão: A intenção é estudar em consonância com a análise da linguagem gráfica de *Marbles*, a história por trás de um estereótipo que une artistas femininas, como Georgia O'Keeffe e Sylvia Plath, retratadas em *Marbles*, e relaciona a arte dessas mulheres às suas doenças mentais. A hipótese proposta é de que a linguagem das HQs possibilita a diversificação da forma como a percepção da figura dessas artistas femininas pode ser representada através de uma nova iconografia.

Palavras-chave: *graphic memoir*, Ellen Forney, Marbles, doenças mentais, história em quadrinhos.

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to investigate the graphic memoir *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo + Me: A Graphic Memoir* (2012), by Ellen Forney. It is a graphic memoir in which Forney recounts her life trajectory since being diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder. To represent her experience with mental illness, the author uses metaphors and resources made possible by the language of comics, a medium where words and images mix to tell a story. Furthermore, Forney brings in her work the concept of "Crazy Artists," a category in which she finds herself inserted since she was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder and feared that her creativity would be curtailed by the medication that had the function of controlling the illness. In the present study, I intend to add an extra layer to this discussion: the intention is to study, in line with the analysis of *Marbles*' graphic language, the story behind a stereotype that unites female artists, such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Sylvia Plath, who are portrayed in *Marbles*, and relates the art of these women to their mental illnesses. The proposed hypothesis is that the language of comics makes it possible to diversify the way in which the perception of the figure of these female artists can be represented through a new iconography.

Keywords: graphic memoir, Ellen Forney, Marbles, mental illnesses.

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INTRODUCTION

This work aims to investigate representations of mental illness in *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo and Me: A Graphic Memoir*, written by Ellen Forney and published in 2012. Forney's graphic memoir traces her episodes in her early journey with mental illness, her theory about the relationship between art and creativity, and her understanding of her concept of the "crazy artist." In this study, I will pay special attention to what I will call the "crazy [female][4] artist." Considering the artistic representation of the "madwoman" stereotype that has been discussed by authors such as Lindsay Haralu (2021), Annette Schlichter (2003), Jane E. Kromm (1994), and Elizabeth J. Donaldson (2002), this thesis aims to discuss and challenge this proposed category of the "madwoman" through the concept of the "crazy artist" as developed by Forney in *Marbles*, a graphic memoir that uses the particular language of the comics medium to depict bipolar disorder and the relationship between art and "madness" as experienced by Ellen[5] after her diagnosis.

Marbles is full of references to "madness," starting from its cover. In its very title, *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo and Me,* the word "marbles" refers to a common expression about going "crazy." According to the Collins Dictionary, when someone "loses their marbles," "their ideas or behaviour are very strange, as if they have become insane." In this sense, *Marbles* depicts Ellen's process of "losing her marbles," a common expression that reveals how this narrative is including the external perception of Ellen's experience with her mental illness since Ellen now is perceived as a "crazy" person. The words "mania" and "depression" come from the medical discourse since these words are used in the medical field to refer to "phases" in bipolar disorders (Santos, 2017, p. 16). The title also alludes to the Italian Renaissance painter Michelangelo Buonarroti, one of the various "crazy artists" portrayed in the graphic memoir. The biographies of "crazy artists," such as Michelangelo's, help Ellen explore the stereotype of the "crazy artist," which becomes part of her identity. Finally, "and me" places the narrator and main character with the other elements listed and

[4] The occasional addition of brackets when discussing the "crazy [female] artist" in this thesis was motivated by the fact that the addition of a discussion on gender applied to Forney's depiction of the "crazy artist" was made by me, not coming originally from a clear discussion of the author on this matter since the "crazy *female* artist" is not mentioned in *Marbles*. I am using brackets instead of parentheses because what I am doing in my work is more than adding extra information, I am inserting a comment into Forney's words, using her original quote as the term "crazy artist" is used by her throughout *Marbles*, and I am including a discussion on gender that was not in her work. As the thesis progressed, I removed the brackets in moments where this concept was already clearer and/or was not mentioned close to analysis of excerpts of *Marbles*.

[5] In order to differentiate between narrator, character, and author, I will call the narrator and character Ellen and the author Forney.

emphasizes the autobiographical nature of the story. Considering Gerard Genette's definitions of paratexts, *Marbles* has what can be considered a thematic title since it makes the audience aware of the "subject matters" of the book (1997, p. 81). The subtitle "a graphic memoir" has a more rhemathic nature since it evokes to a classical custom which was to indicate the genre of the work (Genette, 1997, p. 86). The definition of graphic memoir is within the scope of graphic nonfiction and was brought as the popularity and the attention these works got from literary scholars grew, making it necessary to distinguish them from graphic novels (Cates, 2020, p. 87).

On the cover, we also have the illustration of Ellen herself and bands that represent her disorder as a suggestion about what the reader can expect from the book. Ellen is looking upwards at bands with different colors. Behind two sets of bands with bright colors, there are sets of bands with darker tones, closer to shades of gray and blue. These dark tones would represent Ellen's depressive episodes whereas the colorful ones would represent her mania phases (Santos, 2017, p. 16). She looks at these bands placed above her as if they are imposed on her for being in a higher position, and her face is cut in half. She looks at them as she would be looking at her "madness" (Santos, 2017, p. 16). From the cover, the reader can grasp that *Marbles* is a graphic memoir that depicts Ellen's relationship with mental illness, which comprehends her personal experience with illness and the medical discourse around it. The mentioning of Michelangelo suggests one of the main focuses of the narrative, which is to discuss the "crazy artists."

Marbles attaches Ellen's personal story to life narratives of artists beyond Michelangelo, including Van Gogh, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Mary Shelley, and Edvard Munch. They were part of the group of people she felt she belonged with: the "crazy artists." She even gives this group the name of "Club Van Gogh." Ellen intertwines her own story with those of artists in an attempt to make sense of the connection between illness and art she previously suspected existed and immediately thought about when she received the diagnosis of bipolar disorder. It is implied in the comic that the feeling associated with her diagnosis is bittersweet: she struggles with her new identity as someone who is mentally ill and thus vulnerable to the outcomes of the illness, but worries that the medication that can control these impulses may ruin her ability to do art, since she believes that her "madness" can be the source of her art. The terms "mental illness" and "madness" in this thesis are of great importance: while "mental illness" highlights the medical discourse that pathologizes Ellen's identity, "madness" or, the adjective she uses more often to characterize herself and those like

her, "crazy" refers to a stereotypical view of people with her illness. This stereotype brings up not only a sense of stigma that marks people like her socially but is also connected to a romanticized view of them that Ellen shares and condenses in the figure of the "crazy artist." How she builds her conception of the "crazy artists" will be more thoroughly analyzed in the first Chapter of this thesis.

The "crazy artist," as someone who deals with "madness," is a person who experiences mental illness and its social repercussions. According to Susan Sontag, "Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick" (1978, p. 3). Based on Sontag's metaphor, it is also possible to draw a parallel between the notion of traveling between spaces of health and disease with the practice of confining the "mad" and people with tuberculosis in sanatoriums. In Sontag's words:

> The fancies associated with tuberculosis and insanity have many parallels. With both illnesses, there is confinement. Sufferers are sent to a "sanatorium,"(...) Once put away, the patient enters a duplicate world with special rules. Like TB, insanity is a kind of exile. (...) It is not an accident that the most common metaphor for an extreme psychological experience viewed positively—whether produced by drugs or by becoming psychotic—is a trip. (Sontag, 1978, p. 35-36).

Therefore, the "trip" brought through insanity and loss of mind control is connected to the trip to the realm of the ill, the sick and the mad. As stated by the author, illness is a place where people find themselves at different stages of life. Humans are always in transit between the place of health and the place of illness. When Forney is diagnosed, she realizes she is somewhere in the realm of illness, understanding that she was not in the place she thought she inhabited. Instead, she is propelled to the place of illness, apart from those who live in the land of good health.

Before the diagnosis, Ellen had the experience of working in a psychiatric unit as a "mental health specialist" and the experience made her realize she had always been terrified by the idea of becoming one of the "mad people" she knew there and of losing her ability to do art due to disability (Forney, 2012, p. 24). Her fear was built when she had an outside perspective since she had not been diagnosed yet and it revealed to her that becoming ill brings social consequences such as exclusion. Ellen's fear of losing her ability to keep working with her art results from the fact that becoming ill can limit one's role in capitalist society; individuals can be doomed to changed social roles when they are no longer perceived as contributing to the economic system as usual. In other words, when someone "falls" ill, according to Virginia Woolf, they are no longer soldiers in the army of the upright; rather,

they become deserters (1926, p. 36-37). In this sense, Woolf's account reveals that the ill is often socially perceived as someone who is not part of the army, which can be interpreted as the workforce. Michel Foucault explained that the creation of the asylum came from the moment when madness was perceived as incapacity for work and, thus, began to be one of the problems of the city (1965, p. 64). According to the author, not long before this shift, the perception of madness as part of an allowed imaginary freedom used to be common, but the inability to work due to madness started being perceived on the social horizon of poverty, which was a problem in the city that needed to be eradicated (1965, p. 64). In this context, a greater importance on the obligation to work was given and ethical values were connected to it, encompassing the experience of madness as against the moral (Foucault, 1965, p. 64). Foucault's thoughts highlight a critique of how the capitalist world works when illness manifests in the subject since, and according to Cheryl Hindrichs (2016), disabled individuals are considered worthless because they may not be productive" (p. 49). This lack of productivity associated with persons with disability is one of the main sources for the social exclusion of these individuals. According to Wendell,

> The "normal" worker is supposed to be energetic, have high concentration abilities, be alert to adapt to changing conditions, and be able to withstand physical, mental or interactive stress in good humor. Workers who fail to measure up to one or more of these standards are "normally" considered lazy, slackers, uncooperative or otherwise inadequate. (Wendell, 2001, p. 27).

The ill do not correspond to Wendell's description of the "normal" worker who is expected to integrate the workforce in capitalist societies. Instead, the ill body and/or mental conditions, in addition to medical treatment, may affect people's performance at work. Therefore, the ill are compelled to leave their place as ideal soldiers of capitalism, as workers, and take their place outside of society. The creation and development of psychiatry and institutions was motivated to eradicate and separate these people from the rest of society, as they revealed that not all people corresponded to the expected ideal of worker and, consequently, to working as a foundational moral. Even when the individual is not institutionalized, this exclusionary view towards the mentally ill makes the experience of illness socially exclusionary in general since the individual is not considered a perfect example of a community member, but somewhat of an outsider. As Sontag has pointed out, the ill are taken to the realm of the disease. For the "mad," there is even a specific realm for them to inhabit: for many, their *locus* is the sanatorium, the madhouse.

Forney portrays the struggles of living with a disability. I stress Ellen's condition as a disability because of the effects of bipolar disorder in her life. The exclusion of people with illnesses might be experienced occasionally, as in the case of a temporary illness, but exclusion is a reality that a chronically ill or disabled person might go through recurrently. In the case of some mental conditions, such as Ellen's bipolar disorder, they can fall into the category of chronic illnesses since individuals who live with such conditions do not know whether their situation is temporary or not, creating difficulties in defining the identity of the person since they might ask themselves if they are disabled or just sick for a while (Wendell, 2001, p. 21). Their concern results in anxiety in relation to illness, which is justified by the fact that, sooner or later, anyone can become disabled, and most people will develop impairments with age. Then, as Michael Bérubé asks, "Why isn't disability seen as a potentially universal condition - as it most assuredly is?" (Bérubé, 1997, B5). Bérubé inquires that because the relentlessness of illness and disability do not make them realities widely understood by most people, placing sick and disabled people in a position of otherness in relation to the rest of society. Forney portrays the ups and downs of her illness and the feeling of otherness since she was labeled as a "crazy" person with bipolar disorder and has to face the stigma that comes along with it. She also has dedicated her career to giving her testimony as a person who, after the struggles she went through in *Marbles*, has reached stability, as she explains in her TED Talk (Forney, 2020). Considering how Ellen's narrative includes the life experiences of people with disabilities, disability theory was used through authors such as Tobin Siebers, Thomas G. Couser, Simi Linton, Susan Wendell, and Robert McRuer, to develop my thesis concerning the feeling of otherness and the label of "crazy" portrayed in *Marbles*.

Illness is often solely related to loneliness and suffering, which defines how people who live with chronic illnesses and disabilities are perceived by society. According to Sontag, "etymologically, patient means sufferer" (1990, p. 125), and the source of this suffering does not influence only the consequences of illness in the body and mind, but also loneliness. Sontag refers to Donne's 1624 work *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, and severall steps in my Sicknes*, in which he states that sickness is everything that provokes disorder of a faculty and its function (Donne, 1923, p. 48) and describes solitude as "the greatest misery" (Donne, 1923, p. 22). No wonder the figure of the "crazy artist" is commonly imagined as a solitary and reclusive person who struggles with the burden of translating the suffering caused by their mental illness into art. In contrast to the imagined heaviness of solitude in illness,

narratives like *Marbles* highlight the importance of finding company. Ellen, during her trajectory, experienced the solitude that came with her illness, and found a company in Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind* and William Styron's *Darkness Visible*, memoirs about living with mental disorders, saying "She was company" (Forney, 2012, p. 90) and "He was company" (Forney, 2012, p. 91). This idea of company is also implied in the complete title of Forney's book: *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, + Me*. That is, her reality is not only dealing with mania and depression, and she is not alone, having the "crazy artists" with her here represented through Michelangelo. Through *Marbles*, Ellen also offers herself as a company to the reader. Therefore, *Marbles* is a work that gives continuation to a thread of offering company to those who, like Ellen, also deal with the suffering considered by Donne the "greatest misery" of the "greatest misery": the solitude of sickness.

Among other reasons, this offering of a company made illness narratives as *Marbles* proliferate. Thomas Couser notes that, in the last several decades, illness narratives have been published often (1997, p. 5). Disability and illness narratives are positioned to expose what we usually ignore due to social constructs (Couser, 1997, p. 9) and provide a voice to the patient, who can claim more authority over their treatment by narrating their stories and "take their lives literarily into their own hands in part to reestablish their subjectivity in the face of objectifying treatment" (Couser, 1997, p. 11). Those writings can become a way to give the individual a speaking position that represents untraditional embodiedness on nonmarginalizing terms (Køhlert, 2019, p. 127). In this sense, when works such as *Marbles* get attention, they highlight how, nowadays, people have gained the power to tell their stories on illness and disability through their perspectives, respecting their subjectivity.

In this context, narratives that address illness from an individual perspective have been used for a better understanding of the experience of illness for authors, doctors, and readers in general. In the case of the authors, illness narratives can provide an empowering way for individuals to bear witness to their unique experiences and understand their identity (El Refaie, 2014, 151). In this sense, they can have a better understanding of what happened to them and take ownership of this experience as an individual. In the case of the audience, from the medical perspective, literature has been used as a tool to bridge the gap between knowing about a disease from a medical perspective and understanding their patient's experience with that illness (Williams, 2012, p. 1). By reading those stories, doctors can adopt a more considerate attitude when dealing with patients, getting insights from the subjective story that aid in their work and their understanding of patients' illness narratives (Williams,

2012, p. 6). Particularly the experience of living with a *mental* illness has become more common in graphic and nongraphic literary genres and useful to doctors (Donaldson, 2020, p. 157) since these works can reveal affective and social dimensions of trauma that formal psychiatric diagnoses interpret only fragmentarily (Burdock, 2020, p. 188). The portrayal of an individual's experience with illness is also impactful to readers in general, since it reveals to the reader the patient's daily life, incorporating both the details and the strongest moments of this bodily and emotional experience. In this sense, these narratives can capture people's lives in their social settings and experiences while also providing discussions on body and identity to the general reader (Krüger-Fürhof, 2020, p. 74). They also offer comfort to the reader who has suffered from the illness or who wants to understand and empathize with what someone else is going through (El Refaie, 2014, p. 151). Hence, illness narratives, while giving the writer more authority over their experience, can provide a unique perspective of illness that informs the general reader and doctors.

The medium that Forney uses to give her perspective on her illness experience is the comic. But before I bring the illness narratives movement in comics, in order to keep my readers on the same pace when it comes comics studies and how to analyze comics, I am going to briefly explain certain aspects that are going to be examined in *Marbles* throughout my work, based on the theories of the field. With Scott McCloud's 1993 book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art,* new possibilities for the study of comics were opened, offering a vocabulary for analyzing comics formally (Smith, 2015, p. 26) and giving substance to this area of study. Besides McCloud's specialized contribution to the field, the analysis process of a comic is made by applying terms that have been shared from fields such as film theory, cognitive theory, semiology, narratology, and the discourse of comics artists and fans (Kuhlman, 2020, p. 172). In terms of structure, among the basic components of comics design, we have the panels (the frames), the sequencing of images, the gutters (the spaces between the panels), and word balloons. In practice, we can analyze comics through their parts: the panels, each of them representing a moment, a series of moments, or an idea, usually bordered by a line that, usually, forms a square or a rectangle; the page, where we can see the panels' relationship to one another; and the book, which was constructed by those pages (Kuhlman, 2020, p. 172). The analysis of the relative size, shape, and positioning of elements and panels is also necessary to describe and examine the design of the page and what it can convey (Kuhlman, 2020, 177). The reading process of a comic is also important: the gutter that marks the gap between the panels is completed through the cognitive process of

"closure," which was defined by McCloud as the effort the reader makes for "observing the parts but perceiving the whole," (McCloud, 1993, p. 63). It also must be kept in mind that, following most Western conventions, a page is read from left to right, top to bottom, even though the creator of the comics can creatively challenge this standard.

In comics studies, the hybrid format of this medium, which is composed of both words and images, is very much highlighted. Historically, discussions about words and images are frequently discussions of words versus images. Western history tends to logocentrism, considering language more valuable than images, as an opposition to iconoclasm, which devalues the image in favor of language (Baetens, 2020, p. 194). Comics transcend this opposition since they propose an interrelation of words and images. Not only the intertwining of words and images define comics but also their systematic visualization of speech (Baetens, 2020, p. 200) since the verbal elements of a comic can be placed in different positions in relation to the visual elements to which they are connected (Baetens, 2020, p. 200). The verbal elements can be presented as captions, clearly separated from the drawings, or inserted into the text, where they can be either free-floating or "framed," distinguished by a speech or thought balloons (Baetens, 2020, p. 200). The material form and size of letters, words, punctuation, and more generally, the segmentation of each respective unit also has to do with the visualization of speech. In contrast to plain, unmarked text, emphatic visual letterforms, such as the boldface, can be used (Baetens, 2020, p. 201). Different uses of lettering can also play a role in the configuration of the words in the speech balloons, in the presence of letters and other written symbols in the setting, and in the presence of onomatopoeia (Baetens, 2020, p. 201). The distinction between handwritten and machine-printed words also plays an important role in analyzing a comic (Baetens, 2020, p. 205) as handwritten might seem more personal.

Comics is a medium that is known for its rebellious history and format that aids the representation of taboo and sensitive themes, influencing their use to explore the realities of illness. The underground "comix" movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which established the idea of comics as a form for adults (Hatfield, 2005, p. 7) was considered a countercultural movement described by Charles Hatfield with words such as "scurrilous, wild and liberating, innovative, [and] radical" (2005, p. ix) and as an "out-law" genre by Julia Watson (2008, p. 124) since it confronted conservative ideals that were predominant at the time by portraying sexuality, for instance (Hatfield, 2005, p. 7). Considering that comics have this radical countercultural background, they have an advantageous position in criticizing prevailing

practices and institutions, especially medical and healthcare systems (Spandler, 2020, p. 115). Within this context, activists of a range of social movements have used comics and cartoons as a form of resistance resulting in recent calls for a more "critical" medical humanities project to engage with the countercultural creative practices of activist movements (Spandler, 2020, p. 115). The reason comics are considered so useful for this purpose is partially connected to their characteristic form of telling a story:

> There is something about the juxtaposition of drawings and handwritten text in comics that subverts the normal rules about what can be depicted, how it can be described, what one should think of that description and the subtle meanings and counter meanings that can be read into it. (Williams, 2012, p. 5).

As Williams points out, it seems that the format of comics makes them inviting to the representation of themes that are usually difficult to address through a more traditional form of storytelling since comics have the differential of uniting drawings and handwritten text. Hence, comics can ease the depiction of topics that are considered "unspeakable" due to social constraints or a particular hesitation that an author might feel. This is partially due to its visuality: in comics, the number of strategies for rhetorical devices is wider than in prose since ambiguity and metaphor can be layered in comics through its visual language, facilitating the portrayal of complex or taboo narratives that depict complex emotional states, for instance (Williams, 2012, p. 5). In this sense, comics became an effective form of telling illness narratives since illness is a theme that evokes emotions and traumas, and can be considered a sensitive topic for disclosing social issues, such as exclusion and stigma, as addressed above. We are going to see in Chapter 1 how Forney used visual metaphors to layer her message on the "crazy artists."

In the area of Graphic Medicine[6], in which *Marbles* is a studied work, comics are considered a form of exploring the realities of illness also because of their characteristic way of mixing visual and written elements. Graphic memoirs[7] can productively discuss health and medicine by providing an understanding of health embodiment and experience (Donovan, 2014, p. 239). The representation of these complex experiences is pervaded by the combination of visual imagery and written text (Donovan, 2014, p. 245). Squier also points out that comics can show things that cannot be said since they narrate experiences without

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[6] Graphic Medicine is "the intersection of the medium of comics and the discourse of health care" (Czerwiec et al., 2015). It is an area formed by scholars from different backgrounds, but focused on medical humanities, exploring the possibilities of medical discourse in comics.

[7] Graphic Memoir is a form that begins with a personal narrative, communicating experiences and perspectives with both written text and imagery, allowing the emphasis of the author on health, medicine, and embodiment (Danovan, 2014, p. 245).

relying solely on words, conveying through images a rich sense of the different magnitudes at which people experience illness, disability, medical treatment, and healing (2008, p. 131). Beyond making the conditions of their illnesses visible, graphic memoirists can also control the aesthetic of what is being portrayed through stylistic drawing techniques, enabling the exposition of the comparison between the artists' perspectives and the dominant cultural ideas about illness (Venkatesan & Saji, 2021, p. 150). In this sense, memoirists have a freedom that can be used to subvert dominant discourses, or even to reinforce these ideas since their narratives can end up reproducing them. When they intend to offer divergence from the dominant cultural ideas, graphic memoirs on illness can counterweigh the control of biomedical and popular discourses on debates about illness (Venkatesan & Saji, 2021, p. 158). Against medical and social models that attempt to homogenize bipolar disorder, Ellen individualizes her experiences in *Marbles*, and the medium allows her to become more active about her condition, addressing it through her point of view and personal experience. Readers of *Marbles* are thus stimulated to reflect on mental illness beyond stereotypes and notice its complexities through a Ellen's perspective. By having visuality as one of the means to tell a story, comics can build a new form of what Deborah Lupton calls the "iconography of illness" (2003, p. 75), that is, a new visual portrayal of illness. In this sense, works as *Marbles* are recognized for having the potential of creating a new iconography of illness, a new way of picturing illness. Especially a way that is freed from a homogenizing perspective of people with disability and illness in favor of giving voice to the individual so they can share their reality as a counterpoint to how it is assumed to be in common sense.

The complexity of comics' form also makes it propitious for memoirs, and this affected how women started using them as a tool for representing themselves decades before Forney decided to create *Marbles*. The rise of comics with an autobiographical proposal coincided with the memoir "boom" of the 1990s and early 2000s and a tendency to thinking more about memory as a self-reflexive construction of cultural, social, and historical past (Whitlock, 2020, p. 234). Therefore, similarly to the "memoir boom"[8] in the literary field in

[8] In 2012, Thomas Couser stated that there was a recent memoir boom (2012, p. 141) due to an increased attention and valorization of the memoir. According to Laura Marcus, such popularization of the memoir could be considered a response to the problematics of expecting from the autobiographies that they would portray life in its entirety (2018, p. 4). On that, Marcus mentions Charles Darwin's sayings that "the record of a fully completed life could only be written by 'a dead man'" (Marcus, 2018). In this sense, only Machado de Assis' Brás Cubas would be able to record his life in its totality and fulfill the objective of writing a complete autobiography. The memoir, on the other hand, according to Couser (2012), derives from the French word for memory, signaling that it is based on memory, an unreliable and selective source, which builds a more subjective rather than authoritative narrative (p. 19). In a context in which autobiographies were more distinguished from memoirs and were expected to perform an objective very difficult to be achieved, the memoir proposed to speak

general, comics also went through a process of portraying more "slices of life"[9], with Harvey Pekar, in the 1980s with the *American Splendor* series, demonstrating that comics with an autobiographical perspective did not have to be about exceptional lives to be interesting to other people (El Refaie, 2012, p. 39). But even before Pekar, an early version of this kind of memoir was done. The roots of self-referential comics are traced to the underground American comix movement, with the publication, in the 1970s, of Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin* (1972) and Robert Crumb's *The Confessions of R. Crumb* (1987)[10]. These underground works revealed the desire of their creators to be brutally honest about their personal experiences and shock puritanical American society (El Refaie, 2012, p. 38). However, this did not prevent them from reproducing mainstream patriarchal thoughts. Crumb's autobiographical works, for instance, focused on his male fantasies involving the objectification of women's bodies (El Refaie, 2012, p. 37). At the same time, female comix creators also had a big influence on the development of an earlier version of the graphic memoir (El Refaie, 2012, p. 38) since comix became a tool for women to revolt against the patriarchal ideals of society that were replicated even in the countercultural comics sphere. Artists such as Aline Kominsky and Phoebe Gloeckner used comics to discuss difficult moments of their lives, including trauma from sexual abuse, for example. Differently from other comics genres, the field of autobiographical comics had more influence and more presence of women (El Refaie, 2012, p. 39). *Wimmen's Comix*, for instance, opened a space for women, such as Lynda Barry, Alison Bechdel, Mary Fleener, Melinda Gebbie, Roberta Gregory, Aline Kominsky Crumb, Diane Noomin, Sharon Rudahl, and Dori Seda, as well as Phoebe Gloeckner and Doucet to draw and publish their comics (Køhlert, 2019, p. 25).

The participation of women in the comix movement reminds us that comics have the potential to change iconographies since, after being depicted in a way to corresponds to the male fantasy, women were able to use the same medium to represent themselves in their own terms. This reminder serves not only the past but also the present and future of comics because they are a way of revisiting and changing representations of female figures. In a

about lives focusing on a particular experience or an event without the commitment of representing a self in its totality, being more focused and selective (Couser, 2012, p. 24).

[9] According to the Oxford Dictionary Online, "slide of life" is a realistic representation of everyday experience in a movie, play, or book.

[10] In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the autobiography was considered "a significant literary and historical form" (Marcus, 2018, p. 4); it was exclusively for those who were considered the protagonists of History, men such as Saint Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* was written between AD 397 and 400 and *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* was published in 1782. When Crumb made his own confessions in a comic book entitled *The Confessions of R. Crumb*, he was making reference to the traditional and male-centered autobiography while giving it a new and countercultural format, which is the comic.

culture increasingly dominated by the visual due to the internet, comics offer a way of taking control of representation with the visual self directly (Køhlert, 2019, p. 3). Through the representation of herself and other "crazy [female] artists," Ellen offers the opportunity of discussing the representation of "madwomen" in *Marbles*.

As stated, Forney highlights a set of celebrated artists by discussing their biographies, which helped her understand the "crazy artist" stereotype. Georgia O'Keeffe and Sylvia Plath are the "crazy [female] artists" more thoroughly analyzed by Forney in the comic. They represent different types of art: Plath represents writers and O'Keeffe visual artists. Sylvia Plath's figure epitomizes the "madwoman" stereotype applied to women who write. For instance, when discussing Elizabeth Wurtzel's biography, Lisa Appignanesi describes Wurtzel's illness as something that increasingly "emerged as a portrait of the artist as a young, depressive, often self-destructive woman, *aka Sylvia Plath*" (2008, p. 456, emphasis added). Considering that Plath's figure is attached to "madness" to the point the manifestation of mental illness in female artists received her name ("The Sylvia Plath Effect", coined by James C. Kaufman), it is understandable that Forney found it necessary to bring her to the representation of the "crazy [female] artists." The depiction of O'Keeffe in *Marbles* raises discussions regarding the representation of female bodies in comics and the multiplicity of images that run through the public's imagination regarding female artists. The discussion about how Plath and O'Keeffe were represented in Forney's graphic memoir is concentrated in the second Chapter of this thesis.

By depicting these "crazy [female] artists," Forney gives us the opportunity to start a discussion on the "madwoman" stereotype. Ellen places her experience alongside and against the history of female insanity and discourses of normativity that oppressed women artists (Pedri & Velentzas, 2020, p. 367). A connection between female creativity, artistic tendency, and "madness" has been made for centuries and is one of the issues a woman who intends to do art is fated to deal with. In *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar wonder: "is it crazy, neurotic, splenetic, to want to be a writer?" (p. 104). According to the authors, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women writers and some living in the nineteenth century felt that writing would be "madness" because of the stereotype of the "madwoman" that was prominent in all these centuries. The title of Gilbert and Gubar's book was inspired by the character Bertha Mason, a "madwoman" imprisoned in her husband's attic in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Other "madwoman" characters like Bertha Mason were present in texts by women writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as in

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), and, according to Elizabeth J. Donaldson, they projected women writers' anxiety about authorship in a male-dominated literary tradition (2002, p. 99). Although the “madwoman” character might be considered a symbol of the oppression of women writers, who feared being limited to the “madwoman” stereotype, it was revisited as a representation of female empowerment. Characters such as Bertha Mason were compared to the women who fueled feminism in the 1960s and 1970s and had their image reconfigured to start being considered rebels against the strictures of patriarchal authority (Donaldson, 2002, p. 99). This established the cultural figure of the “madwoman” as a feminist rebel (Donaldson, 2002, p. 99). Such a stereotype is present in the representation of mentally ill women in both reality and fiction, and we can have a glimpse of it when Forney depicts “crazy [female] artists.” This will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Regardless of its romanticization among certain feminist agendas, the stereotype of the “madwoman” is intrinsically connected to patriarchal medical discourses over time that labeled mentally ill women. According to Anne Rüggemeier, medicine, for many centuries, has connected female sexuality, mental deviance or illness, and dangerous women since sexually active women were considered potentially insane (2020, p. 3). This stereotype was used to control women who challenged gender normativity, and they were defined as a threat to the community or a threat to their own health. As an illness narrative that intends to show Ellen’s perspective on the experience with her disorder, in essence, the graphic memoir can play a part in dismantling medical discourses around the “madwoman.” As a “crazy female artist” herself, Ellen depicts her “madness” on her own terms, which might challenge stereotypical views of the madwoman or reproduce them.

Taking all that into consideration, *Marbles* is going to be analyzed in the following chapters, and the themes that were briefly tackled in this Introduction, such as disability, comics, and gender, will be developed around Forney’s “crazy artist” and help to build the “crazy female artist.” In order to do that, I will analyze Forney’s representations of the “crazy artists” to discuss the stereotype of the “crazy female artist,” find out the relevance of gender in adding another layer to her considerations and clarify how Forney’s representations could contribute to a better understanding of the relation between mental illness, art and gender.

1 CHAPTER ONE: THE “CRAZY ARTISTS”

In *Marbles*, Forney builds her representation and reflections on “crazy artists” from the moment Ellen is diagnosed with bipolar disorder by her psychiatrist, Karen. The term “crazy artist” is constantly revisited throughout the book, becoming one of its main themes. Forney provides in various excerpts facts about artists who were recognized as brilliant in their respective artistic fields, but also as people who dealt with mental suffering, possibly disorders (Forney, 2012, p. 40-41). These artists are identified as members of a club composed of “crazy artists,” of which Forney becomes herself a member when she is diagnosed. Throughout the graphic memoir, the life story and works of artists such as Van Gogh, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Edvard Munch are portrayed while the notion of the “crazy artists” group is discussed by the main character, taking these artists as examples that contribute to the understanding of such an identity they supposedly share.

In the first chapter, Ellen realizes she has a condition that is shared by a group of people (p. 19), and concludes she might formally be a “crazy” person now. The flashy phrase “YOU ARE CRAZY” (Forney, 2012, p. 20) is visually spread across the page. The sentence is written in bold white lettering against a solid black background that is against a white margin on which the white-lettered sentence “let's take a look at the symptoms” is scrolled across it repeatedly. This builds on the assumed conclusion that Ellen now may be officially considered a “crazy person.” “YOU ARE CRAZY” is a message that used to be hidden behind the investigation of the symptoms. Now it is clearer. As if it were examined through a powerful lens now, the perception is in 3-D, including a grounding reality that Forney invites us to be struck by (Forney, 2012, p. 20). The stigma of being a “crazy” person becomes evident. In terms of the font and size of the words, the analysis of the symptoms is portrayed as repetitive and small, and the label of being “crazy” is impactful to the reader, popping up in bold letters. The message “YOU ARE CRAZY” seems accusative and condemning, darkening the tone of the narrative by breaking it with Ellen’s new discovery about herself.

Figure 1 – YOU ARE CRAZY

Source: Forney, 2012, p. 20

In sequence, Ellen jokingly displays her fictional club card, which confirms she is now officially a member of the "crazy artists," a club nicknamed by her the "Club Van Gogh" (Forney, 2012, p. 22). On the right, around Ellen's hand holding the card, some words refer to the club. Two of them suggest contrast: "fire" and "ice." Some of the words are heavy but can be romanticized, such as "passionate," "eccentric," "tortured," and even "dangerous." There are also words with a darker meaning: "scary," "deadly," "unmoored," "unbridled," and "unpredictable." The fonts of the words are aligned with each of their meanings, which are diverse because each of them can be connected to the fascination or the danger of being a "crazy artist." Therefore, it is possible to infer that Ellen's feeling of being diagnosed with

bipolar disorder and finding herself among the “crazy artists” is very likely considered bittersweet. At the bottom of the same page, the somber side of the diagnosis is more present since Ellen has a serious look on her face, and expresses insecurity with her body, holding herself. A few “crazy artists” are listed: Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Van Gogh, “some street artists,” Jimi Hendrix, “some classical composer.” These people behind her are inside figures with a format that may remind readers of tombs (Forney, 2012, p. 22). The protagonist is going through a complexity of emotions: on the one hand, she is frightened by the diagnosis; on the other, she gets enthusiastic about the “exciting” aspects of it.

Figure 2 – The “Club Van Gogh”

Source: Forney, 2012, p. 22

This chapter is going to start from this presentation of the “crazy artists” in order to address how Forney depicts them and herself as a “crazy artist,” and develops her ideas on this concept throughout *Marbles*. In order to understand the origins of the stereotype of the “crazy artist,” it will be discussed from its traces in history to when it was appropriated by Forney in her graphic memoir. The questions that guided this chapter are the following: “How does Forney address the concept of the ‘crazy artist’?,” and “How might the experience of

mental illness affect the life of an artist as portrayed in Forney's *Marbles*?." This chapter is going to delve into the concept, the representation, and the experience of the "crazy artist" in 5 sections: "With a touch of fire", "A self-study", "The mind represented", "Stigma", and "The super ability in disability."

1.1 WITH A TOUCH OF FIRE

When Ellen brings her idea of the "crazy artist," she is pulling a thread of references that associate the union of "madness" and art through a natural force that is placed upon humanity and influences certain individuals. The relationship between art and "madness" that influenced Forney's interpretations of the "crazy artist" has been part of the popular imagination for centuries (White, 2007, p. 25), connecting it to people who were touched by something as powerful — and dangerous — as fire. In ancient Greece, it was believed that "madness" had a divine nature. According to the historian Roy Porter, the hubristic hero punished by the gods by loss of his reason was an instigating profile and, in many works attributed to Aristotle, there is the presence of the melancholic genius, whose "discontent fired his imagination to produce works of originality" (Porter, 2002, p. 66). Porter states that, in ancient Greece, the artist was perceived as inspired by the spirit of the gods or touched by a divine fire (Porter, 2002, p. 66). Fire as a metaphor for describing the awakening of art by "madness" was still prevalent in contemporary years. The symbol in the opening of the first chapter of *Marbles* is fire (Forney, 2012, p.1), representing Ellen's mania phase that marks the beginning of the story and leads to the diagnosis. The fire that opens this chapter suggests that that moment in her journey was interpreted as the realization that she was touched by fire. This can be corroborated by the fact that this symbol is there probably because the psychologist and writer Kay Redfield Jamison, who was mentioned in *Marbles* as one of the main influences in Ellen's journey (Forney, 2012, p. 40-41; 209-210), also made this connection between fire and "madness" in her 1993 book *Touched with Fire*. According to Jamison, the works of artists such as Lord Byron, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, and others were touched with fire (Jamison, 1993, p. 104) in the sense that they were influenced by a sort of external force, which is interpreted as being "madness." To be touched with fire in Jamison's book is also an analogy based on the myth of Icarus (Jamison 1993, p. 08), who flew too high to the point he got burned by the sun. This metaphor can be related to having

great creative ideas and getting close to the sun, but falling soon after (Santos, 2017, p. 36). Concerning Ellen, the mania would give her “explosive” ideas (Forney, 2014, p. 217), but every manic episode was followed by an inevitable fall into a depressive one (Forney, 2014, p. 232). Therefore, Ellen’s relationship with her illness also connects to the myth of Icarus, as it is marked by both the appeal and the danger of reaching what is not supposed to be reached by humans. In this sense, to be touched with fire is a reference to the supposed relationship between creativity and bipolar disorder (Santos, 2017, p. 36). The metaphor of fire helps define the “crazy artist” as someone who was in contact with an element that should not be touched and cannot be controlled. Instead, fire is in control, subduing reason. Fire is as dangerous as it is appealing to the eye. According to the story of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods to give it to humans and was punished for that, fire is a gift to humanity that was supposed to be exclusive to the divine. It is relevant to point out that the “crazy artist” is passively touched by fire, emphasizing how “madness” can be conceived as an imposed gift or a curse, taking away the artist's control over themselves and perhaps even diminishing the authorship of their work, which is credited to a power that one is not supposed to touch but, oddly, the artist could.

Between ancient Greece and contemporary times, the romantic view of the relationship between “madness” and art was put aside as mental illnesses went through a stigmatization process until the idealization of them was brought back in recent decades. During the Renaissance, artists of the time were said to receive visions in dreams, and play characters like Hamlet, melancholic and discontented, were also portrayed as geniuses (Porter, 2002, p. 67). In Romanticism, “madness” was understood as a price to pay for creation (Porter, 1987, p. 63), a side effect of being an artist, and the artist was considered a sort of prophet, gifted with otherworldly powers (Porter, 1987, p. 64). A decline of this romantic view of “madness” as a source for the artist started with the rise of the degenerationist theory, which associated mental disorders with diseases such as syphilis and tuberculosis, and the theories of Cesare Lombroso, who believed that all artists suffered from mental disorders, highlighting that they needed to be treated psychiatrically (Porter, 2002, p. 81). The discussion about the relationship between “madness” and art was continued by Sigmund Freud, for whom the creative process was a form of expression to deal with the neurosis derived from psychological traumas during infancy (Porter, 1990, p. 61). Diego Santos (2017) notes that, in the last decades of the 20th century, when the story narrated by Ellen takes place, the subject of art and “madness” was again in the spotlight, especially in the

press, cinema, and academia (p. 113). These debates might have been triggered by the popularization of discussions about bipolar disorder in the United States between 1980 and 1990 (Healy, 2008, p. 150). According to David Healy, Kay R. Jamison was responsible for this dissemination of debates on bipolar disorder. It was during this period that Jamison published *An Unquiet Mind* (1995), her autobiography, and *Touched with Fire* (1993), her study intending to discuss the higher creativity that people with bipolar disorder might have. Jamison's work was of great importance to Ellen, resonating in *Marbles*, as it is mentioned as a source of company for Ellen (Forney, 2012, p. 90). Considering how its perception has changed, the "crazy artist" is a rather contradictory figure: at times, perceived as an ideal, being romanticized, or negatively judged with the support of psychiatry.

The perception of the stereotype of the "crazy artist" that Ellen had prior to her diagnosis is more linked to an idealized view of it, and this way of looking makes her relationship with her illness involve her art productivity. Creativity and intelligence might be some of the few areas in which mental illness can be perceived differently from the medical discourse because, through the stereotype of the "mad genius[11]," "instead of being portrayed as something to be feared or avoided, mental illness has been shown in a more positive (if idealized) light" (Kaufman & Bromley, 2006, p. 150). Ellen, as an artist, was aware of the stereotype prior to her diagnosis. According to research conducted by Kaufman & Bromley (2006), the more creative someone considers themselves to be, the more they will endorse the stereotype of the "mad genius" (Kaufman & Bromley, 2006, p. 156). Those who may feel that mental illness is a burden may consider it differently when starting to understand illness in terms of creativity (Kaufman & Bromley, 2006, p. 157). In this sense, when *mental illness* starts being expressed as *madness,* that vents into geniality, and "everyday battles with depression or mania may be inflated to be struggles with the muse" (Kaufman & Bromley, 2006, p. 157). That is possibly why, when Ellen is struggling with her disorder, many times her focus shifts to her ability to create and to be an artist. She recognized herself as being one of the "crazy artists" she knew and idealized. She was not only concerned and dealing with the illness but also with her art.

The idealization of the "crazy artist" brings negative consequences to her life in the sense that it makes it more difficult for her to treat her illness. Ellen presents herself as a queer artist and activist who loves excess and has a lifestyle that is so chaotic that it shocks her

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[11] The "mad genius" here involves not only the artists but also people from other fields who might have their works associated with mental disorders, such as scientists.

psychiatrist (Forney, 2012, p. 49). She also points out how her family background was unconventional, as her family members were tolerant of drug use and queerness, for instance, and this influenced her eccentricity (Forney, 2012, p. 61). Regardless of whether her intense way of living was a result of her mania, Ellen suggests that this is part of her identity since it is how she is used to live her life until the diagnosis. Although idealizing mental illness might enable a more positive view on it, this idealization can be harmful to those who have the impression that being "normal" is boring and undesirable (Kaufman & Bromley, 2006, p. 158). On this, Kaufman & Bromley (2006) state that:

> If there is an enduring belief that treatment (i.e., medication or psychotherapy) intended to attenuate or prevent the recurrence of mental illnesses also harms the creative process, then this belief may also discourage people who value creativity from seeking appropriate treatment or taking needed psychotropic drugs. In light of this, it is uncertain what relevance should be given to the affinity on the part of the creative person to proclaim that there is truth to the "mad genius" stereotype. Regardless of whether creativity and madness are linked—and it is important to re-state that based on the empirical literature, there is no clear verdict one way or another—the pursuit of creative success may lead one to also pursue madness. (Kaufman & Bromley, 2006, p. 158).

Thus, the stereotype of the "crazy artist" can lead people to pursue this identity they identify with, taking for granted the importance of stability in their lives regardless of how true the stereotype can be. Ellen feared becoming "normal," and having a "boring" life, as she herself stated (Forney, 2012, p. 233). This influences how she wants her treatment to be conducted and hinders her treatment and her perception of herself, thinking she needs to be "crazy" to have an interesting life.

Due to Ellen's prior beliefs on the "crazy artist" stereotype, the journey of the protagonist of *Marbles* after the diagnosis initiates with the conflict between the upcoming treatment and her suppositions about the relationship between medication and creativity. Forney explained in her TED Talk: "I'm an artist, so I have to admit that part of me was intrigued by the idea of being officially a crazy artist. But along with my romantic idea of what it meant to be a crazy artist was my terrified idea of what it meant to be a medicated crazy artist" (Forney, 2020). In *Marbles*, Ellen has preconceived ideas about what it is like to be a "crazy artist" and sees medication as a threat to her art. She verbally states that to her psychiatrist, but gets speechless after her doctor points out the high suicide rate and increased chances of hospitalization and episodes that the lack of medication can trigger in people with bipolar disorder (Forney, 2012, p. 39). Ellen is also afraid because she has in mind that the "crazy artists" she admires probably were not medicated. In the drawings of the comic, they even speak from their "tombs" to talk her into refusing medication (Forney, 2012, p. 24).

Their speeches are in fluttering balloons like ghosts behind Ellen. In the comics, this visual metaphor of the "crazy artists" insisting that Ellen refuse medication attributes a comical character to a thought of Ellen herself (Lins, 2012). For her, taking medication was against the

Figure 3 – The "crazy artists" ask her to refuse medication

Source: Forney, 2012, p. 24

behavior of a "crazy artist" because she believed that "madness" was the source of the best works of these artists (Santos, 2017, p. 123). For Ellen, to be an artist was not only about making art, she thought that it was necessary to adopt some attitudes to match those of an artist (Santos, 2017, p. 116). This is present in the book, for instance, when Ellen states that being an outlaw was part of being an artist and being a stoner was part of her identity (Forney, 2012, p. 156). But the characteristics that, for Ellen, were part of her artistic identity came to be understood as symptoms of an illness in the light of psychiatry (Santos, 2017, p. 117). Seeing her personality framed and classified through the DSM was as if her individuality was taken away from her (Santos, 2017, p. 117). Because she received a label from the DSM, she is marked by the medical discourse and treatment. In Ellen's context, having bipolar disorder means that Lithium might be part of the routine of the "crazy artist," but Ellen's references of "crazy artists" were prior to lithium. Ellen is attached to the romanticized view of the "crazy artist" that makes her idiosyncrasies a gift. The stereotype of the "crazy artist" helps her not feel limited to the treatment a patient receives, but medication is a reminder that she is now a patient and it threatens her attempt to feel she is actually special for being touched with the gift of fire.

Several artists have expressed similar worries when portraying or pondering about the impact of medication and other forms of treatment on creative activities. For instance, in

The Left Hand of Darkness (1969), by Ursula Le Guin, when meeting a group of foretellers, the main character and narrator, Ai, learns that two of them are "insane," "schizophrenics," and asks Goss, who is guiding him, if these people could be cured. Goss answers “would you cure a singer of his voice?,” pointing out insanity as a source of talent according to their people’s way of thinking. In this sense, the treatment, and a cure could neutralize the uniqueness of a being what is considered extraordinary. Similarly, in *On writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000), when reflecting on how terrified he felt about the possibility of giving up on his drugs and alcohol addiction, Stephen King wonders “what would happen to me without dope?” (p. 96). In addition, he makes reference to a common claim that drugs and alcohol are necessary for the artist to have a finer sensibility, supposedly granting them better access to their feelings and creativity. As these and similar examples indicate, neurodivergence and other sources of influence in the brain are frequently linked to an artist's talent and, consequently, treatment and medication are deduced as possible threats to this brilliance, this touch with fire. Thus, Ellen is not alone in hesitating to follow her psychiatrist's recommendations. She is reproducing common sense and reacting protectively to preserve what she believes makes her unique.

1.2 A SELF-STUDY

Towards the end of *Marbles*, Ellen states that, after finding her “own path,” it was time to tackle her beliefs on “Club Van Gogh” and admits that part of her wondered if the “crazy artist” would be “just a stereotype” (Forney, 2012, p. 201). Ellen questions: “are bipolar disorder + creativity actually linked?” (2012, p. 201). After that, she dives into what could be considered a self-study through others: she studies her disorder and its connection to her art by reading several biographies of other “crazy artists,” including Van Gogh, Michelangelo, and Munch. She also reads Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind* (1995) and William Styron's *Darkness Visible* (1989), stating that they were company and that these autobiographies became hugely important for her (Forney, 2012, p. 90). The researchers Ellen reads and the life of some members of “Club Van Gogh” contribute to the protagonist's understanding of the phenomenon of the “crazy artist.”

Among the “crazy artists” that are mentioned, Van Gogh becomes more prevalent in the book; He is a figure that seems to represent the collective of “crazy artists” since the club

Forney depicts, the “Club Van Gogh,” is named after him. Forney also dedicates some time to portraying his life and art more thoroughly than she depicts other “crazy artists,” addressing him in four pages (Forney, 2012, p. 117-120). Therefore, examining Van Gogh’s biography is indispensable when we discuss Forney’s ideas about the group of “crazy artists” and how they help her build her identity. Among other famous quotes, Gogh stated “the more I become decomposed, the more sick and fragile I am, the more I become an artist” (Van Gogh quoted in Meerloo, 1963, p. 188). Meerloo (1963) explains this phrase by affirming that “the more a tragic, unbearable outside world penetrated his weak ego boundaries the more he had to defend himself by giving this world a shape of his own creation” (Meerloo, 1963, p. 188). Through this perception of art as a result of vulnerability and sickness, it is possible to see why Ellen chose Van Gogh to be the representative of the club. Ellen refers to Van Gogh as “the ultimate crazy tortured genius artist” (Forney 2012, p. 118).

Van Gogh also was a source of comfort to Ellen. She tries to find similarities between her story and that of Van Gogh’s, questioning whether the motivations that led them to make self-portraits were the same (Forney, 2012, p. 119-120). Santos (2017) highlights her concluding sentence in this passage: “I like to think so. I hope so” (Forney, 2012, p. 120). For Santos (2017), this means that comparing herself to these artists was important for her, as feeling like part of this “group” was good for her (p. 130). Therefore, feeling like a “crazy artist” like Van Gogh brought Ellen some comfort. This is clearly pictured in the peaceful look on her face when she is comfortably lying on the floor with open arms and legs and surrounded by a Macbook and books about Van Gogh, Munch, Michelangelo, Philip Guston, Diane Arbus, Jackson Pollock, and Jamison's *Touched With Fire* (Forney, 2012, p. 129). In this moment, which follows the passages in which Ellen discussed Van Gogh’s and Munch’s biographies, she is making reference to the study she has been doing through those books. She wears a “Club Van Gogh” shirt with the symbol of a nut and has thinking cloud balloons with her thoughts “I'm just so glad to be feeling better” and “Please… let it stay” (p. 129). Here is one of the numerous moments in which Van Gogh features as one of the “crazy artists” that helped Ellen feel better. Before the diagnosis, she was already an artist who found artists like Van Gogh a source of inspiration, but after that, they also became her references to make sense of what was happening to her after she realized she could be labeled as a “crazy artist.”

Figure 4 – The comfort of "Club Van Gogh"

Source: Forney, 2012, p. 129

It is important to emphasize that labeling an individual as a "crazy artist" can be questioned and possibly considered anachronistic depending on the case. This becomes apparent when Ellen focuses on Michelangelo, one of the "crazy artists" she analyzes and the one collectively representing them in the title of the graphic memoir. Despite Michelangelo's presence in the title, Forney features him less prominently than Van Gogh, who, as already mentioned, appears in four dedicated pages (Forney, 2012, p. 117-120). It is after the Dutch painter that we have a page about Michelangelo (Forney, 2012, p. 127), where she relays having encountered the information that he was depressive, about which she inquires: "sad paintings? + some sad poems. Equals depression? Did these people really have mood disorders?" (Forney, 2012, p. 127). Ellen's consideration of Michelangelo is brief, but it is a turning point in her narrative since it is when she starts questioning the accuracy of labeling these "crazy artists" from the past with mental disorders.

As Ellen's point of view on the "crazy artist" changes comparing to the initial one, they also become contradictory at a certain point in the graphic memoir. The way Ellen discusses the biography and art of these two female "crazy artists" — Georgia O'Keeffe and Sylvia Plath — elucidates this contradiction she might be falling in. In a self-reflexive scene,

she considers whether the concept of the “crazy artist” could be merely a stereotype (Forney, 2012, p. 42). When mentioning Georgia O’Keeffe’s life and art (Forney, 2012, p. 142), Ellen becomes skeptical about the concept of the “crazy artists” she drew from at the beginning of the book, since O’Keeffe’s artwork, according to Ellen, bears no relation to her well-documented mental condition, even though she had been patient in a medical institution (Forney, 2012, p. 142). Ellen concludes: “crazy doesn't necessarily leave out into your work” (Forney, 2012, p. 142). Therefore, although Ellen and others may readily draw a link between art and “madness,” sometimes they do not necessarily or evidently exist in relation one to another.

In contrast to Ellen’s conclusion incited by Georgia O’Keeffe’s biography, how she talks about Sylvia Plath with her friend Di reinforces the relationship between “madness” and art as an inseparable bond: it is highlighted how knowing Plath’s biography is necessary to understand her work (Forney, 2012, p. 169). Therefore, in Ellen’s investigation of the “crazy artist” stereotype, she is analyzing each case individually, using these discoveries to make broader assumptions. However, these assumptions become contradictory as Ellen discusses more biographies of “crazy artists” since each case of “crazy artists” is very individual. Considering that the passage about Plath’s life comes after O’Keeffe’s, it is possible to infer that Ellen tends to insist on the concreteness of the “crazy artist,” a concept whose consistency might be threatened by examples that challenge the supposed connection between “madness” and art. Plath’s and O’Keeffe’s cases also raise other discussions on the representation of the “crazy artist” and Ellen’s point of view on “crazy [female] artists.” This will be more thoroughly discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, where Ellen’s insights that contribute to the comprehension of the stereotype of the “crazy [female] artists” will be analyzed. Either way, they exemplify Ellen’s feelings towards the “crazy artist” and the confusion she feels while trying to make sense of this stereotype.

In the end, Ellen stands for affirming the reality of the “crazy artist” through pieces of evidence she had found. As Ellen advances in her study of artists that were or may have been mentally ill, among other conclusions, she confirms that the “crazy artist” is a scientific phenomenon (Forney, 2012, p. 211) since she has found it in many sources during her research, such as Goodwin & Jamison (2007), Nancy Andreasen (1987), Jamison (1993) and Arnold Ludwig (1992). Researchers such as Dr. Arnold M. Ludwig, Dr. Felix Post, and Nancy Andreasan have presented their research concluding that psychiatric illnesses were more common among artists (Lombardi, 1997). According to them, among the reasons

instability could be a prerequisite of inventiveness, there could be (1) genetics and (2) the way manic depressive episodes can affect brain activity, which could be the essence of creativity since it is related to feelings of power, euphoria, endless energy, and optimism (Lombardi, 1997). In addition, another explanation is that the roots of both creativity and "madness" are in the unconscious. However, researchers such as Dr. Barten disagreed with those studies by stating that many of them were flawed and dogged by empirical and methodological problems (Lombardi, 1997). Still, Ellen in *Marbles* is inclined to agree with studies that attest to the connection between "madness" and creativity, based on her own life experience. According to Ellen, the theory she agrees more with sees a connection between mood disorders and artistic creativity because the characteristics of creatives and of bipolars overlap (Forney, 2012, p. 211). At the beginning of the graphic memoir, Ellen used to have a more romantic and distant view of the "crazy artists," influenced by popular culture and her preconceived ideas about them, but as she studies this phenomenon, she can see it more realistically since she is now basing her assumptions on her own examination of actual studies and conclusions. This is relevant for showing the development of the character in the narrative; as she learns new things, she informs the readers about them.

Ellen also admits that the medications she took played a role in helping her find balance. In the end of the graphic memoir, she meets her younger self, who did not have yet

Figure 5 – The "crazy artists" in their clouds

Source: Forney, 2012, p. 222

the experience portrayed in *Marbles* and thought that medication would ruin her art (Forney, 2012, p. 234). She concludes with a positive view on taking medication even after considering their side effects such as weight gain, acne, and memory problems, and their drawbacks, which include an expensive price and inefficient relief from symptoms. The closure she finds for herself in the book is an attainment of balance with the aid of medication, and the general tone of the book is not in favor of abandoning treatment to indiscriminately embrace the stereotype of the "crazy artist." Although she admits that the stereotype of the "crazy artist" is real, by pooling together a range of examples of lives that fit in different points of the spectrum between art and "madness," she advises the reader to understand its complexities and, consequently, its various tones.

At the end of the book, she gradually opens a smile while quietly mentioning many "crazy artists" inside cloud balloons, showing those people around her head, forming a circle with Ellen in the center (Forney, 2012, p. 219 to 222). In comparison to the beginning of the book, when the "crazy artists" were drawn in tomb-like figures (Forney, 2012, p. 22), Ellen now appears less overwhelmed about being among the "crazy artists." This can be inferred by the fact that she is not portraying them as dead figures in the ground anymore, but as people who have reached the skies. Their dates of birth and death are stated, but Ellen is smiling and celebrates their lives. She has found her community. Her imagined community is a kind of community that is not based on physical proximity or day-to-day interaction, but rather on a created sense of belonging (El Refaie, 2012, p. 189). This gives Ellen enough peace to conclude that stability is good for creativity (Forney, 2012, p. 218) and can be part of a being a "crazy artist."

1.3 THE MIND REPRESENTED

With *Marbles*, Forney portrays her good and painful experiences through the graphic memoir, drawing and writing about being a "crazy artist." The idea of the "crazy artist" can be connected to the view of the artist as an exemplary sufferer who depicts their suffering through art. According to Susan Sontag, for two thousand years, in societies with Jewish and Christian background, it has been "spiritually fashionable to be in pain;" therefore, it is not love that is predominantly most valued in western society, but the spiritual merits and benefits of suffering (Sontag, 1966, p. 47-48). Once, saints were seen as exemplary sufferers through

their spiritual learnings and achievements. For the modem consciousness, the artist is the exemplary sufferer, replacing the saint in this position (Sontag, 1966, p. 42). In this sense, by being legitimated to represent suffering, artists became spokespeople of suffering, bringing their experiences of pain so that others could learn from the wisdom thus acquired. Among the artists who are seen as exemplary sufferers, the writer is expected to be most suited to express their suffering (Sontag, 1966, p. 42), and this reflects how writing is a frequent tool for venting difficult and personal experiences such as mental illness. In this sense, artists can use writing to cope with their suffering by representing them in autobiographical modes.

Writers can testify differently from each other, contributing with their personal perspectives in counterpoint to others', and enriching discussions on mental illness, for instance. As an example, Ann Cvetkovich discusses the power the writing of memories has in depathologizing the negative feelings about mental illness so that they can be perceived as a resource for political action (2012, p. 2). It is not that traumatic experiences of depression would be converted into positive ones since depression is characterized by inertia, despair, apathy, and indifference, "but these feelings, moods, and sensibilities become sites of publicity and community formation" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 2). Cvetkovich believes that, whereas depression is marked by an impasse or being stuck, its cure might be in flexibility or creativity more than the person having different genetics or even taking pills (2012, p. 21). In this sense, creativity is a form of movement that drives the mind through an impasse, a form of agency through a movement that is more emotional, sensational, or tactile, involving various ways of movements, such as solving problems, having ideas, being joyful in relation to the present, and making things (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 21). Hence, Cvetkovich's point of view suggests creativity as a mechanism of cure that leads out of the inertia of depression.

It is possible to draw parallels between Cvetkovich's and Ellen's experiences and beliefs related to mental illness. Both discuss the relationship between creativity and neurodivergence. Ellen concludes from her personal journey that the medication and the stability it provides help with her creativity, whereas Cvetkovich deduces from her experience that creativity would be the best medication, replacing pills. Hence, their points of view are in parallel but running in different directions: both argue that creativity is relevant in traumatic mental illness experiences, but Ellen thinks medication is irreplaceable while Cvetkovich disagrees. In both cases, writing is a way out of suffering, or the way into themselves in a productive way by composing memoirs, owning their stories, and facing and sharing their

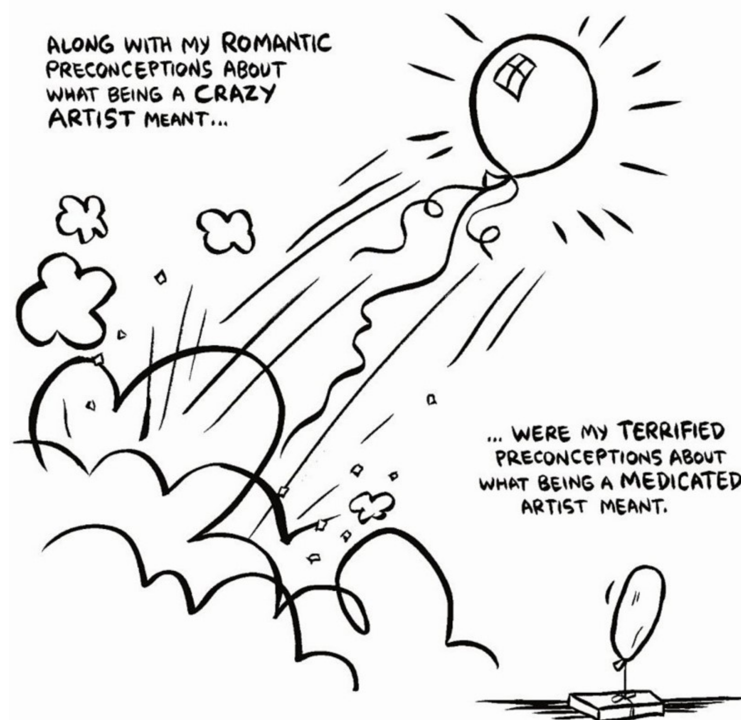
traumas. The artist is expected to translate trauma into art and this representation of suffering can occur via words and images in comics.

A key element for representing the suffering from mental illness is using metaphors. Before the early 1980s, the use of metaphor was seen as a poetic way of expressing something that could also be expressed literally, and verbal metaphors were the only mode most authors analyzed, ignoring visual forms of metaphor (El Refaie, 2003, p. 76). However, cognitive theorists started proposing that any form of communication could be seen as an example of metaphor (El Refaie, 2003, p. 76). Since then, this perception of metaphors as cognitive phenomena instead of merely linguistic resources has been corroborated (El Refaie, 2003, p. 76). Such a point of view enabled more research addressing visual metaphors. Differently from the verbal mode, in which probably any abstract concept can receive a verbal description, in the visual mode, the depiction of an abstract entity is impossible without the use of metaphors (El Refaie, 2003, p. 91). Therefore, visual metaphors are necessary to express visually abstract things, such as ideas and feelings. These metaphors are not expressed directly in the image, though. Instead, they are implied by the context, making visual metaphors implicit rather than explicit (El Refaie, 2003, p. 91). In this context, verbal-visual mediums such as comics can rely on visual metaphors to implicitly represent an abstract element, such as suffering.

Through visual metaphors, readers are able to actually see how Ellen feels about issues with her mental illness. The second chapter, in which the conflict between Ellen and medication is presented, opens with a flying balloon (Forney, 2012, p. 23). Initially, Ellen proudly feels part of the selected and special group of the "crazy artists," and fears being medicated due to her preconceptions about this form of treatment. Her concern with medication is represented by a deflating balloon, tied down to a box on the ground whereas a full and upward moving flying balloon represents Ellen's romantic preconceptions of the "crazy artist" (Forney, 2012, p. 23) as mobile and full of life. On the one hand, the flying balloon occupies most of the page and mainly its top, it is full and shiny (we see reflections in its surface, movement lines below it and a halo of radiating shine around it). This balloon reaches for the sky with all of its potential since it crosses the clouds quickly, "breaking" them. It is filled with air and air here may represent inspiration, which triggers creativity. On the other hand, the balloon that represents being medicated is at the right bottom, deflated and small, anchored to the ground by what could be medication packaging due to its rectangular shape. The balloon on the ground has less air in it than the other one, but it does have some air

in it as it can fluctuate and the rope that ties it to the box is tensioned due to this attempt of flying. This suggests that the balloon on the ground had a potential that was limited, transmitting a sense of frustration that maybe would not be evoked by a balloon without any air and literally on the ground. Instead, it is tied to the ground, but it can support itself in the air and probably could fly if it were allowed to do it. In this sense, it represents a loss of potential and the limited air, or inspiration, allowed to the "crazy artist" by medication. Although close in the drawing for comparison, it is possible to infer that the balloons are apart through a very long distance. One is up in the sky, going above the clouds while the other is on the ground and occupies a small space on the page compared with the freer "crazy artist" balloon. On this page, the metaphors play a big role in helping the reader understand how

Figure 6 – The balloons



Source: Forney, 2012, p. 23

disastrous Ellen believes will be the effects of taking medication. Due to this visual metaphor, her ideas and feelings could be translated into something as tangible balloons, with an understandable way of performing with and without air.

Particularly in works that tackle illness, such as *Marbles*, visual metaphors are also an important resource to represent embodied experience. Visual metaphors are very effective for expressing the complexity of the experience of the protagonist in a way that makes sense to the readers (Pedri & Staveley, 2018, p. 233). The experience of someone who lives with an

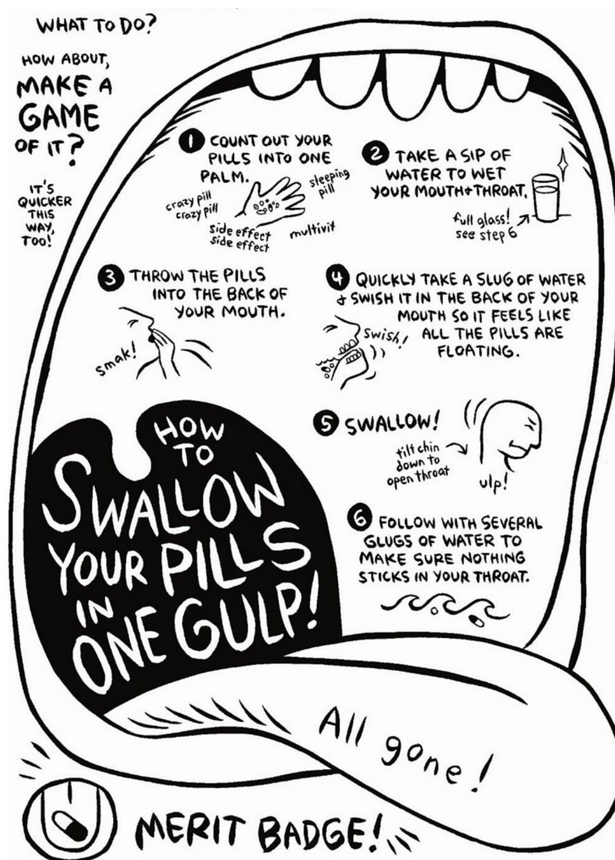
illness contrasts to the one of bodies that live more frequently in the wellness realm than in the one of sickness. According to Dalmaso, the use of visual metaphor to represent illness may be an attempt to evoke in the reader emotions that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies (Dalmaso, 2015, p. 84). Moreover, for George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, metaphors help the creation of connections between people by involving individuals' connection with the material world that they experience in common (Dalmaso, 2015, p. 84). In this sense, the embodied self of the protagonist is the catalyst for making moods and emotions more accessible to the readers (Pedri & Staveley, 2018, p. 233). Therefore, visual metaphors in works that portray illness enable the representation of aspects of the body that are not tangible but are identifiable through the reader's relatability with the feelings and senses of the creator.

A particular form of visual metaphor that is often used in graphic illness narratives is the game, which is a type of visual metaphor that is also present in *Marbles*. The game metaphor is used to describe the feeling of disintegration of the self, who is moving to different places and losing parts of their identity in the process as the illness progresses. Whereas most graphic memoirs are focused on a self that is being constructed, graphic illness narratives portray a self that is being unmade due to illness (Pedri & Staveley, 2018, p. 233), so the feeling that the narrative of illness portrays is of disintegration. The ill self is often split, moving between the kingdoms of health and of illness, as Susan Sontag called these situations, and becomes more aware of the difference between the internal world, in the body, and the external world (Pedri & Staveley, 2018, p. 233). The difference in game metaphors is that they tap into a concrete physical, embodied experience, representing both a concept and an action (Pedri & Staveley, 2018, p. 234): the recognizable action of playing. Game metaphors confront readers who may not be familiar with a game but can recognize memories of game-play that grant them a sort of access to the illness experience (Pedri & Staveley, 2018, p. 253). When a ludic metaphor such as a game is brought to the narrative of *Marbles*, it is there to evoke a familiar feeling and experience the reader has. By getting access to the perspective of the player who needs to take action to surpass the challenges of the game, the reader can have an idea of what it is like to be in the player's shoes, taking into consideration that the player is the one narrating the story. In the case of *Marbles*, the story and the ludic experiences are about dealing with bipolar disorder.

Forney uses ludic metaphors (metaphors linked to games and fun activities) to describe some of the negative aspects of living with a mood disorder. This is particularly

evident in two passages, one about taking pills and one about mood swings. The first I am going to address is on taking pills. Ellen portrays the consequences of medication in various parts of the narrative, including a whole section (from pages 181 to 186, in the seventh chapter) in which she details the effects each medicine she had taken had on her. The symbol of this chapter is a Magic 8 Ball[12] (Forney, 2012, p. 179), alluding to playing games and unpredictability, which connects to the unpredictable consequences of taking medication, the main theme of the chapter. On a page of this part of the book, she mentions unpleasant aspects of taking medication such as side effects and multiple pills bottles, and comes up with an idea:

Figure 7 – How to swallow pills game



Source: Forney, 2012, p. 185

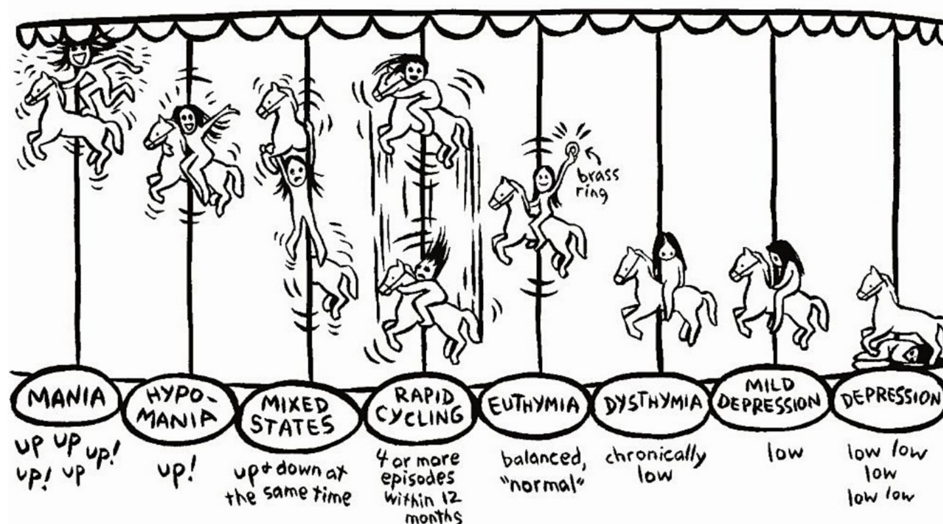
"how about, make a game of it?" (Forney, 2012, p. 185). Then, she gamifies the act of swallowing pills, which can be a frustrating part of a treatment for some patients, by didactically showing inside of a wide-open mouth the steps of taking pills in a faster and less difficult way (Forney, 2012, p. 185). In this game, there are all the steps for having the medication from (1) counting all the pills that must be taken into one hand to (6) drinking

[12] The Magic 8 Ball is a plastic sphere used for fortune-telling or seeking advice. It is popular toy in the US and playing with it consists in asking the ball a yes–no question and turning its window up to know the answer.

water, which takes the pills away as sea waves, to make sure it is all gone. The title, "How to swallow your pills in one gulp!" instead of being at the top, is placed in the darkness of the deepness of a throat, the final destination of the pills, and the purpose of the whole game. The person taking the pills has an uncomfortable expression on their face when swallowing the pills, but Ellen did not guarantee the process would be comfortable. The game has the intention of making this ritual quicker and without much space for too much thinking. For being a game, the purpose of this passage is also to propose a different perspective on the process of taking pills, maybe making it slightly more fun. At the end of the game, the player gets a merit badge with the symbol of a tongue with a pill placed on it (Forney, 2012, p. 185). The game is over, at least until it is time for the next medication intake.

Ellen also uses a ludic metaphor to explain how mood states of bipolar disorder work. She does that through the swings of a carousel (Forney, 2012, p. 59). The states represented are mania, hypomania, mixed states, rapid cycling, euthymia, dysthymia, mild depression, and depression. Each height on the carousel represents each state, and the person affected by the illness is portrayed as a long-haired figure who rides a horse, and we cannot be

Figure 8 – Carousel of moods



Source: Forney, 2012, p. 59

sure if this person is Ellen herself or not. On the extreme left, there is mania, where the person who rides the horse is at the highest height, to the point they hit their head on the roof of the ride, but they keep smiling as they are anesthetized by their mania. On the extreme right, we are led to depression, the lowest point, where the horse itself is on top of the person, who is crushed by it. The very term "depression" alludes to being in a place lower than the ground and feeling down. Mania, represented at the highest height, would be the complete opposite of

depression. In the middle, there are the most intermediate states, with mixed states of the two extremes, and normality (euthymia). According to Pedri & Staveley, this metaphor shows how exciting, effervescent, crushing, and nauseating the experience of bipolar disorder can be within its cycles (2008, p. 242). It also shows how what happens to the character is not in their control. Instead, it is the motion of the carousel that is taking them up and down. The hair of the character shows movement in ways that suggests that the person is being shaken, pulled up and down by an external force in phases that are closer to mania and chaotic mixed stages. In depressive states their hair is down, showing no movement. The motion increases the sense of dizziness and Ellen's unpleasant sense of being displaced from regular embodied experience (Pedri & Staveley, 2008, p. 242). She is unable to reach a definitive, stable sense of self (Pedri & Staveley, 2008, p. 242). With the carousel, Ellen makes visual her sensation of being led by the illness and, consequently, of losing control over herself. The "crazy artist" is associated with a lack of control. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the "crazy artist" is recognized for supposedly being touched with fire, they are dominated by a force that has authority over their art and is poorly understood, being generally labeled as "madness." It is worth reminding that Ellen did not want to be deprived of her ability to self-manage, live without medication and treatment, and be able to be the artist she had always been. Therefore, her mental illness also deconstructed her sense of self as she used to know - or thought she knew.

Again, the bittersweetness of being a "crazy artist" falls upon her since she is able to build ludic metaphors to describe experiences that can be unpleasant and nerve-racking. Although making reference to amusement, evoking fun, and childhood activities, the metaphors about the taking pills game and the carrousel give a darker tone to Ellen's narrative. The negative aspects of living in her condition concern the dizziness; the small pains in the routine that build up, such as taking big pills; and the lack of self-control. All of this is mentioned through a sort of dark humor that tells how being a "crazy artist" involves not only brilliance, creativity, and artistic productions. She is translating into visual metaphors how the experience of dealing with a mental illness can be on a daily basis with medication and mood swings. The lack of emotional control in the pattern of the illness and the commitment to take pills regularly highlight Ellen's loss of control over her routine and feelings and show how she had to conform to that reality and make the best of it. She ends up managing well these uncomfortable situations by creating a graphic memoir in which these

harsh experiences could be described as ordinary games. After all that she has experienced, she could represent what happened to her mind.

2.4 STIGMA

To elucidate how having a mental illness has social effects to Ellen's and other "crazy artists'" lives, disability theory guided my research in terms of providing discussions for a better understanding of Ellen's identity and experience as a person with disability. I believe her lived experiences can be analyzed through the lens of disability studies since, according to Linton, disability is best understood as a marker of identity, building a coalition of people with disabilities that make them targets of discrimination (1998, p. 12). In this sense, the question of who "qualifies" as disabled is answerable with the identity status of the individual (Linton, 1998, p. 12). As someone can be labeled by themselves and others as "crazy," Ellen is automatically marked by the social stigma associated with mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder because people who live with such a condition are often called "crazy." The reason why Ellen's status as "disabled" might be questioned is because disability shares a concept that is used in black communities and queer culture, which is the one of "passing." It refers to black people who pass for white and lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and trans who pass for straight or cis, for a variety of reasons. Similarly, disabled people whose disability may not be easily perceptible have been known to pass (Linton, 1998, p. 20), and this is very common among people who have mental illnesses since these afflictions are not immediately visible. In this sense, Ellen is very "passable" as she needs to "come out" when telling her friends she is bipolar (Forney, 2012, p. 144). But that does not exclude the fact that she depicts in *Marbles* experiences of a person who has the identity of a disabled person, and this becomes clear as we investigate the "crazy artist," which she incorporates as her identity after the diagnosis. Taking into consideration that we can describe *Marbles* as a narrative about disability, Forney's graphic memoir can be a fruitful source of knowledge on the social implications of being considered disabled.

In *Marbles*, Ellen receives the label of "crazy" after she is diagnosed. The very act of diagnosing a patient can be considered putting a label on an individual. People who struggle with mental illness suffer from what Spandler calls a "labeling behavior" that has a negative impact on the patient, labeling them as manipulative, attention-seeking, and so on (2020, p.

120). This labeling concerns stigmatizing diagnoses that many self-harmers, especially women, often receive (Spandler, 2020, p. 121). This is shown in *Marbles* when Ellen is with her psychiatrist and they read together the list of indications described in the DSM hat leads them to conclude that Ellen is bipolar (Forney, 2012, p. 15-18). Here, we can build "closure" by following Ellen moving her hand with her index finger guiding her reading as she attentively reads the DSM sentence by sentence and invites us to read it with her, pointing at its sentences (Forney, 2012, p. 16-18). She also gives us the access to the correspondent aspects of her life that match those sentences (Forney, 2012, p. 16-18). To each of the symptoms described in each panel on the left, a cloud panel on the right depicts Ellen's behaviors that are interpreted as the manifestation of each symptom (Forney, 2012, p. 16-18). These clouds that portray Ellen's practices are in contrast with the straight lines that limit the panels in which the pages of the DSM are being shown (Forney, 2012, p. 16-18). These cloud panels are in this format because, in comics, that is the way of representing characters' thoughts, as Ellen and her psychiatrist are thinking about Ellen's behavior while reading the DSM (Forney, 2012, p. 16-18). Inside the clouds, Ellen's symptoms are portrayed as Ellen hedonistically enjoying life at parties and being happy with herself. These clouds can also refer to how light Ellen's way of living is when compared to the DSM with its straightforward medical descriptions. Some of the symptoms that can be highlighted concerning the "labeling behavior" of the diagnosis are "inflated self-esteem or grandiosity," "more talkative than usual or pressure to keep talking," and "distractability." These symptoms can weigh very heavily on how Ellen might be perceived as a person with bipolar disorder. She may be seen

Figure 9 – DSM Vs Ellen

Source: Forney, 2012, p. 16

as egotistical, self-centered, and too sexual. When Ellen tells others she is bipolar, she might be immediately regarded as someone who has these flaws and gets excluded due to them. In this sense, the psychiatric diagnosis can play a role in labeling negatively a patient and influencing how they are going to be perceived by others.

A symptom that is very stressed in the passage of the clouds versus the DSM is how sexual her behavior is, which is portrayed in a whole page (Forney, 2020, p. 18). Rüggemeier's (2020) reading of *Marbles* highlights that, at this beginning of the graphic memoir, Ellen is portrayed playing with old stereotypes about female sexuality and "madness" as she lives what could be considered an excessive lifestyle, due to the mania phase she was experiencing (Rüggemeier, 2020, p. 4). Ellen is openly bisexual and flirty, which are aspects of her life that become alarming and negative when she gets the diagnosis. Once she discovers that her sexual behavior can be pathologized, a stigmatizing label is placed on her non-normative sexuality, which is part of her identity. A part that she seemed to have no problems with.

A label can be used to exclude certain people from social activities and determine they cannot interact with other groups. Such an exclusion that a disabled person might suffer from is often described as stigma. People like Ellen, as people with mental illnesses, deal not only with the effects of illness on the body and the mind but also with the stigma of being disabled. In her memoir *Unsettled* (2021), Rosaleen MacDonagh, a disability activist and writer, defines the stigma people with disability suffer from as something that "manifests as a smell. A persistent odour. Nobody will sit beside you. Nobody will be your friend. People tell each other about the smell you carry. They warn others to stay away" (p. 19). Therefore, the experience of exclusion is the experience of facing stigma. The stigmatization of people with disabilities is caused by a fear of disability and a distance from it that is stimulated in society. In *Marbles*, this is evident when Ellen considers selling her eggs to make some money since her treatment for bipolar disorder was bankrupting her, but she realizes that no one would want her eggs because of her disability (Forney, 2012, p. 149). According to Tobin Siebers, the prejudice towards people with disability is a reflection of people's fear of pain (2008, p. 20) and, consequently, the fear of being vulnerable, which is a condition of living, of being human. Concerning the fact that illness and disability are natural in the human body, Tuan states:

> Despite the common claim that human beings are a part of nature and therefore must adapt or submit to its rules, nowhere in the world do people accept sickness and death as perfectly natural and thus in no need of special notice or explanation. Night follows day, winter follows summer. People take these great rhythms of nature as given, but not the alternations of sickness and health, not death as the inevitable goal of life. (Tuan, 1979, p. 87).

Hence, humans' unconformity with illness is general, and, even though perfectly natural, illness and disability might be perceived with disregard. Disability politics, then,

intends to replace fear with the understanding that disability can be a valuable difference and that people with disabilities can be proud of being different (Wendell, 2001, p. 30). However, issues that people with disability go through are frequently ignored by those who do not share the same experience since they do not think this is their problem. Michael Bérubé describes the resistance to discourses that come from disability politics as a piece of a larger cultural form of resistance he calls "the politics of disavowal," which is a result of the distance most people put between themselves and disability (1997, p. B5). Hence, regardless of how common and natural disability and illness are, there is still resistance in admitting the problem of stigma against people with disability.

For these reasons, narratives by people who experience disability offer them the opportunity to discuss issues that are analogous to stigma. According to Siebers (2008), although all identities encompass social knowledge, mainstream identities are less critical of social differences since they are normative. By contrast, minority identities can make epistemological claims about society (Siebers, 2008, p. 15). The experiences of minority groups can "resound backward in history," like a reversed echo, to remark on the reality of minority people from the past, whereas the experiences of these minorities from the past help build an understanding of the way oppression performs in society (Siebers, 2008, p. 16). Therefore, although critics of identity politics often relate having a minority identity to suffering, to Siebers, that pain may be a resource for epistemological insight (2008, p. 20). These conceptions become stronger when considering disability identities because they are highly associated with pain and suffering (Siebers, 2008, p. 20). The perception that reduces disability to pain is even more apparent when taking into account the depersonalizing treatment of the medical discourse, which associates disability and disease with symptoms such as pain, instead of viewing it subjectively as an identity composed of illness (Couser, 1997). Although able-people insistently point out the sufferings of disability from imagining themselves in this position, in actuality, disabled people do not necessarily think they are in pain all the time (Siebers, 2008, p. 20). Minorities can also perceive their lives with optimism. That is probably why Ellen can see through "Club Van Gogh" a sort of comfort in the idea of having an illness since being bipolar might be the reason why she feels so unique and creative.

Because of this more complex view of what it is like to be disabled or ill, people who live with these conditions can come to peace with their difficulties, which eventually can be seen simply as part of their identities and not as a threat anymore. Siebers (2008) states that, in most cases, “people with disabilities have a better chance of future happiness and health if they accept their disability as a positive identity and benefit from the knowledge embodied in it” (Siebers, p. 27). This perspective is highly connected to the narrative format of *Marbles*, because it is a story that does not offer cure as closure, as sometimes it is seen in literature about illness. Instead, Ellen symbolically holds hands with her disorder (Forney, 2012, p. 226) as she is getting married with it for better and for worse: the hand that represents the disorder

Figure 10 – Ellen holds hands with her disorder

Source: Forney, 2012, p. 226

as a monstrous-like aspect that resembles claws, while Ellen’s hand is soft and made with round traces, and they are opposites since her hand is white and the illness' hand is black, showing she is now in peace with her “darker” side. She says smiling that she is “okay!”

(Forney, 2012, p. 237) and makes it clear that she is still on a journey that is in process. It is possible to conclude that, in the individual case of the protagonist of *Marbles*, she gets at ease with her condition and gives a sort of closure to her struggles by accepting it and owning the identity of a "*crazy* artist."

One of the indications that Ellen is at ease with her identity as a "crazy artist" is that she refers to symbols of "madness" without reluctance and with humor. In fact, she is appropriating what is evoked from the term "crazy," which once sounded offensive to her and shocked her and the reader with capital words in the phrase "YOU ARE CRAZY" in the beginning of the graphic memoir (Forney, 2012, p. 20). She also mentions moments in which the word "crazy" used to be a trigger to anxiety even when it was used colloquially, without having to do with her and her disorder (Forney, 2012, p. 143). By using the word "crazy" more spontaneously and numerously in her graphic memoir, Forney is using a common strategy of communities that are called names that always carried a stigma and eventually ended up making peace with these terms by adopting them. The word "crip," for instance, is a term that causes some sort of discomfort that helps challenge people's common understandings of bodies and minds, and of normalcy and deviance, by recognizing the usual response of nondisabled people to disabled people, of the normative to the deviant (Kafer, 2013, p. 5). The discomfort, or wince, as Alison Kafer puts it, is frequent to many disabled people, and the use of the term "crip," in this sense, could be a response, a wince back, such as the word "queer" (Kafer, 2013, p. 5). In this sense, it is possible to notice that Forney went through an overcoming experience until the point she could use a word that used to hurt her with humor and without reservations.

Similarly, the term "crazy artist" that Forney uses can be perceived as negative at first sight. "Crazy" is a word used in quotes here in this thesis, but Forney does not have the same hesitation. Being a "crazy artist" was less offensive for her than it could be because it was how she called the artists she admired and wanted to be among. According to the Cambridge Dictionary online, "crazy" makes reference to "stupid or not reasonable; mentally ill; or annoyed or angry." The negative connotation of this word recalls the stigma placed on those who are called that. Although Forney points out the stigma this word carries since when she felt labeled with it, she does not seem to have a problem with using it extensively throughout the book. In addition, Forney also jokingly refers to "madness" when the symbol of a nut appears in various moments of her work, including the "Club Van Gogh" card (2012, p. 22), and the opening of Chapter 8. Forney brings the nut to allude to some of its meanings

related to madness in a funny way, using it as a symbol of “Club Van Gogh.” According to the *Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (2013), among other meanings of “nut,” it can be defined as “a crazy person, an eccentric, a crank,” a connotation that dates back to 1908, US, and was probably derived from “nutty.” When ironically using the word “crazy” and making it visible through the symbol of a nut, Ellen is recalling her eccentricity, bringing these elements to reinforce that the label of being a “mad person” is part of her and she does not have a problem with boldly naming it with words that are difficult to use unhesitantly due to their stigmatization.

It is interesting that Ellen needs this process of deconstructing her identity as a “crazy” person, when — at least in *Marbles* — she never struggles with her queerness. Ellen is a woman who has always been outside of the norm and has an unconventional family background (Forney, 2012, p. 61). Both of Ellen’s identities, as a bisexual woman and a person with a neurodivergence, can be connected because they oppose systems that reinforce the supposed existence of an “ideal” person, and charge people with a compulsory normative existence. Adrienne Rich examined compulsory heterosexuality, pointing out the need to recognize and study heterosexuality as a political institution since the assumption of heterosexuality has very silently glided into the foundations women's thoughts (1980, p. 637), affecting ideas of “mothering, sex roles, relationships, and societal prescriptions for women” (Rich, 1980, p. 633). According to Robert McRuer (2006), compulsory heterosexuality can be related to compulsory able-bodiedness since these systems reproduce heterosexuality and the able-body (p. 31). Heterosexual and able-bodiness structures depend on queer and disabled existence to be reaffirmed (McRuer, 2006, p. 31), at the expense of the stigmatization of these identities. Therefore, compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness are social apparatuses that reinforce the idea that an ideal body, sexuality, and identification exist when these conceptions are in actuality an illusion and haunt queer and disabled people with the image of who they possibly could be if they did not have their diverse identities. McRuer states that, by queering disability studies or claiming disability in and around queer theory, there will be a promotion of the creation of critically disabled spaces with the critically queer spaces. Those spaces, formed by activists and scholars in recent decades, are useful in challenging the consolidation of heterosexual, able-bodied hegemony (McRuer, 2006, p. 19). Hence, spaces where queer and disability experiences can collide contribute to a better understanding of what it is like to be outside of the norm and protest normativity. *Marbles* is a narrative that creates one of these spaces where both disability and queerness can be

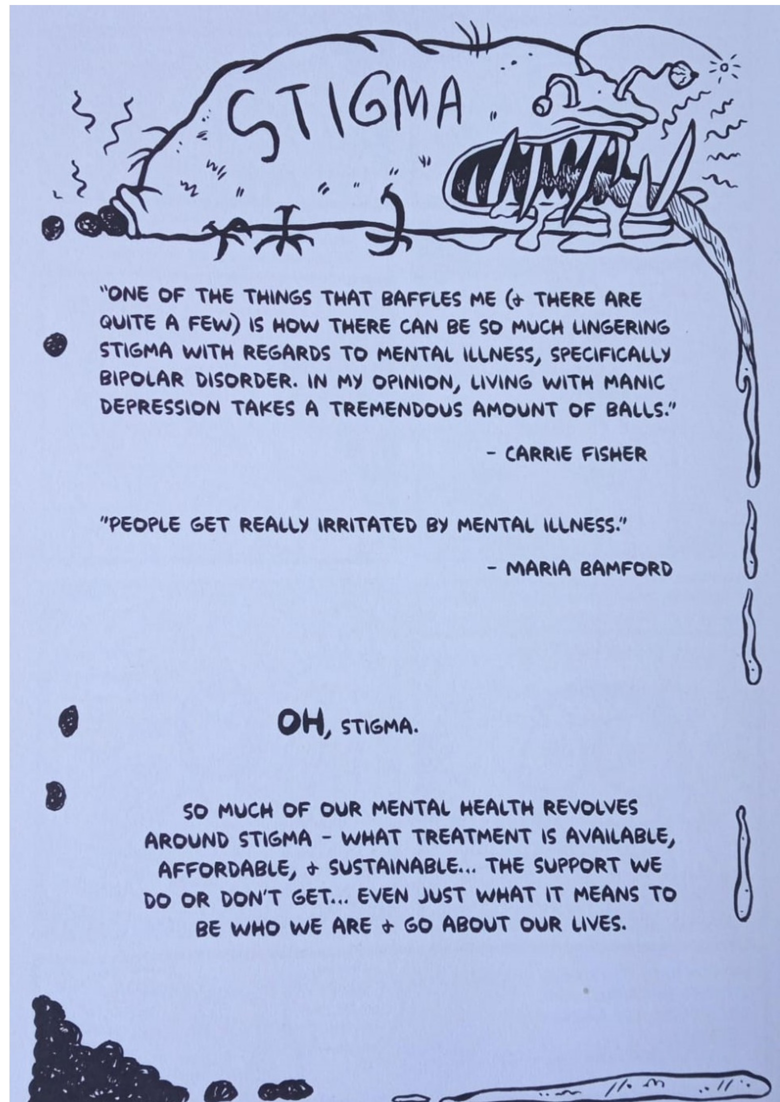
discussed. Sexuality in *Marbles* has been referred to and analyzed (Cressman, 2018; Rüggemeier, 2020; Pedri & Velentzas, 2020), especially considering how Ellen talks about her queer experiences in a very natural way. She does not problematize being bisexual or finds the need to explain it; this topic is not discussed, it is just casually mentioned by her (Forney, 2012, p. 18). This naturality is possibly as challenging to the dominant ideology McRuer explains as her discussion on mental illness is.

Mental illness is at the core not only of *Marbles* but also of other works by Forney. After she struggled with learning how to deal with bipolar disorder for years, talking publicly about mental illness became one of her main activities. *Rock Steady: brilliant advice from my bipolar life* (2018), published 6 years after *Marbles,* is a good example of that. *Rock Steady* is not a personal narrative like *Marbles*. Instead, it focuses on bipolar disorder as one among other mood disorders and presents tools to bring comfort and to recognize signs, besides showing how to live with the uncertainty and "craziness" (Forney, 2018, p. 7). Some metaphors of *Marbles* are revisited, such as the carousel (Forney, 2018, p. 27) and the "crazy artists" (Forney, 2018, p. 166). In *Rock Steady*, Forney discusses medication, symptoms, and alternative forms of dealing with a mental disorder, such as meditation.

In *Rock Steady*, Forney also portrays stigma as a scary monster that is made up of parts, such as the body and eyes, which appear to be from a slug and a deep-sea anglerfish with claws, and like a cycle that frames the page, it feeds itself back, in which what it drools connects to its secretions (Forney, 2018, p. 158). The slug usually is related to a sense of viscosity since it leaves a trail of slime behind as it drags its body on the floor. It is an animal that is known for its slowness, connecting it to laziness. Most slugs also have a simple vision and rely much more on other senses to navigate the earth. In this sense, the snail parts of the monster might represent a level of blindness and to leave unpleasant mucus behind as if it does not care about the consequences of what it leaves in the world and makes it muckier. It also does not mind in navigating slowly either. In the case of the anglerfish, it is an animal that lives in the depths of the sea, a poorly known world, where its light that comes from symbiotic bacteria is the only form of luminosity and is used to lure preys. The anglerfish navigates in the darkness, unseen by others, and attracts them through its privileged bioluminesce. The symbol of an anglerfish, then, transmits a sense of dealing with the unknown, or almost unknown, a self-sufficient predator that lives in the darkness and devours its prey when it is vulnerable. The monstrous figure that Forney created was inspired by real animals and is a metaphor for stigma. Stigma as a mixture of these animals is portrayed as an

infinite figure that feeds on its secretion, which it leaves behind with traces, but is not, in itself, seen much, and attacks others manipulatively. Stigma, in the same way, survives in the

Figure 11 – The monster of stigma



Source: Forney, 2018, p. 158

depths of the collective consciousness, and it could go unnoticed because of how seep it is, but it still leaves a mucky trace behind it, which denounces its existence. It also appears to be lazy, contenting itself with superficial and prejudiced notions of the individuals it attacks, and it is difficult to change, as it is so slow, and difficult to eradicate since it is independent and can survive on its own with its light. The choice for a mixed fictional animal means that it is not a real one that can represent stigma. By mixing the animals and giving it claws, which nor the anglerfish or the slug have, Forney creates a new one, highlighting that it is a constructed monster, a monster created by humans, not something that comes from nature.

Forney does not provide much information on why she chose these characteristics for this figure. However, she delves into the notion of stigma as a real problem that mentally ill people face. She reflects: “so much of our mental health revolves around stigma — what treatment is available, affordable, and sustainable... the support we do or don't get... even just what it means to be who we are and go about our lives” (Forney, 2018, p. 158). In addition, she points out two forms of stigma a person with a mental disorder has to deal with: public stigma and self-stigma (Forney, 2018, p. 159). Public stigma results in self-stigma, when the ill internalize shame and low respect for themselves. By tackling the experience of living with a mental disorder and publishing it parting from a personal perspective, as a personal narrative in *Marbles* and as a guidebook with pieces of advice in *Rock Steady*, Forney assumes a career path and a resolution to the journey she portrayed in *Marbles*. Her works call attention to stigma and preconceptions about mental disorders.

Works such as *Rock Steady* and *Marbles* destigmatize preconceptions related to mental illness, which still prevail in the post-pandemic world, when mental illness rates have increased and worsened the discrimination faced by minority groups (Ran et al., 2022, p. 89). Despite being written prior to the COVID pandemic, Forney’s works can effectively draw attention to the matter of stigma against the ill and clarify the experience of illness. During the COVID pandemic, xenophobia and prejudice towards the ill and inhabitants of the supposed origin of the virus were other replications of old beliefs of humans in the face of illness. Who is to blame for the spread of a disease has always been a preoccupation and a practice in various events in human history involving contagious maladies since, according to Sontag (1990), “plagues are no longer ‘sent,’ as in Biblical and Greek antiquity, for the question of agency has blurred. Instead, peoples are ‘visited’ by plagues (Sontag, 1990, p. 138). Thus, the blame for an illness is placed on the “visitors,” the outsiders who “invade” a territory whose population is then devoured by disease. Although this is more related to the context of epidemics, it is another reflection of how individuals are blamed for illnesses and casted out of society for it. As the sanitariums were the place for the ones living with tuberculosis so they would live isolated from society for aspects such as slower contamination and reparative clean air, the very same name is used to call the hospital of the “mad,” where they live in exile among each other, with less benefits. Historically, the ones who were blamed for their illness have been the “others,” that is, “the poor, immigrants, refugees, the Jews, the Irish and, in coronavirus' times, the Chinese” (Wills, 2020); and the dispute regarding the causes of the spread of the disease, if they were from superstition, an influence of the deities, or simply the

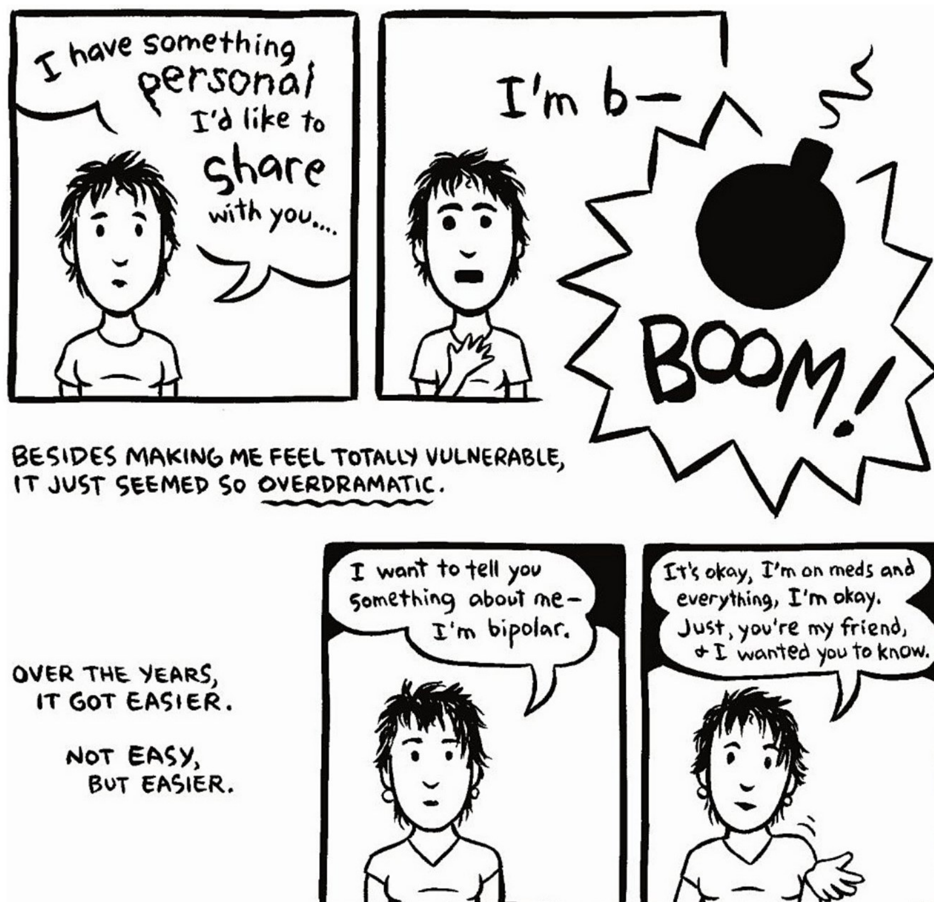
air breathed out by an ill individual, it was a matter of which theory was most politically powerful, not necessarily the most rational and scientific (Wills, 2020). The theory that blames and stigmatizes the ill does not include only people with infectious diseases. The mentally ill also deal with the effects of such beliefs. When telling her story about her schizophrenic son called David in "Personal Account" (2001), published in the online Schizophrenia Bulletin, Sarah Ben-Dor said that

> although we knew that David was sick, to most of the world, he was simply crazy and, therefore, not deserving of much attention. My then 13-year-old daughter summed it up this way: "If David's body were hurting, people would send gifts, but because it is his mind that's hurting, they throw bricks." (Ben-Dor, 2001, p. 330).

Therefore, when one is affected by an infectious disease or a mental illness, they might have bricks thrown at them as a result of preconceived ideas that make it easier to blame the ill instead of proposing a better understanding of these conditions, which is what Forney does.

Letting people know about these conditions is like taking a leap. Ellen was hesitant in telling her friends she was bipolar and, even when her friends reacted positively, she still felt like "coming out" about her illness was like dropping a bomb (Forney, 2012, p. 144-145), which falls with a "BOOM!," interrupting her speech, in one of the panels to represent that

Figure 12 – Ellen coming out as bipolar



Source: Forney, 2012, p. 144

metaphor in the comic. The letters of the word "personal" inside the first panel are shaky, and the word "overdramatic" below it is stressed, highlighting the excess of its meaning (Forney, 2012, p. 144). In addition, Ellen's facial expression is of hesitancy and fear (Forney, 2012, p. 144): in the second panel, she is portrayed with eyes wide open and mouth agape. She is alone in the frames, looking at us. As she becomes more accustomed with revealing her disorder, her facial expression turns less fearful and the balloons contain more speech, but got smaller in size. Although scared, Forney decided to drop the bomb once and for all, letting everyone know that she was a "crazy artist" who would speak for her community.

1.5 THE SUPER ABILITY IN DISABILITY

Forney's concept of the "crazy artist" opens a field for a fruitful discussion on how ability and disability can become coexistent, making the term "crazy artist" paradoxical. Siebers (2008) states that the difference between ability and disability is that the former is exemplified through "natural gifts, talents, intelligence, creativity, physical prowess, imagination, dedication, the eagerness to strive, including the capacity and desire to strive-in brief, the essence of the human spirit" (p. 9), when disability is considered, in essence, a medical matter. It is evident that the list of abilities is much longer than disabilities and, according to Siebers (2008), this is a reflection of how people are always obsessed with the idea of ability, desiring it (p. 9), as if it is a search for perfection. In this sense, the search for able-bodiedness is nearly a search for impeccable humanity, which is a mere illusion. But in *Marbles*, Forney shows a different search, this time for being a full "crazy artist," wanting to use all the potential of her "madness" without the interference of medication. With the term "crazy artist," she shows that ability and disability may coexist.

Ellen explains that she thought she was a bipolar person without depression, and that would be her superpower. In her words, Ellen says "Good thing that kind of depression isn't a problem of mine. Right? Maybe I'll be a genius artist with a superpower, too. Maybe being bipolar is a gift!" (Forney, 2012, p. 45). In this sense, the medication could be the kryptonite, a possible threat to her super ability, her power, that characterizes a "crazy artist" (2012, p. 45). She states "I don't want balance, I want brilliance! Meds would hold me down" (Forney, 2012, p. 45) with the sword of Damocles hanging in the air. Knowledge on the story of that

sword is essential for understanding it as a metaphor in this moment Forney portrays. The myth is the following:

> Dionysius the Tyrant of the city of Syracuse in Sicily, tiring of the sycophantic comments of his courtier Damocles, invited him to a banquet. Damocles was enjoying the delights of the rich fare until his attention was directed upwards to a sharp sword suspended above him by a single horsehair. Thus, Dionysius made Damocles aware of the insecurity of life even for those who seem to be the most fortunate. (Sanderson, 1996).

The sword of Damocles hung in the air represents the imminent danger that is faced by those who are in positions of power, as Ellen is with her superpower. Here we have a

Figure 13 – Damocles' sword

Source: Forney, 2012, p. 45

foreshadow, the suggestion of an edge where the possibility of fall is there. Even though Ellen, in that moment, feels she has an unshakable power, a few pages later, she will have to

face the depression that she thought she did not have. In this context, brilliance would be the superpower of the "crazy artist." However, taking into account Sieber's (2008) definitions of ability and disability, it is possible to question whether these "crazy artists" are so "disabled" for having a mental illness. Many of the words used by Siebers (2008) to describe what able-bodiedness means in society can refer to Ellen and other members of "Club Van Gogh:" natural gift, talent, intelligence, creativity, and imagination are qualities frequently applied to artists to define their brilliance. Yet, the prefix "dis" in disability means to deprive of capability or effectiveness, creating a barrier and making disability the "not" condition (Linton, 1998, p. 30). How could they be considered *dis*abled if they have all these abilities?

What could be seen as a disability can perceived by Ellen as a superpower. In this sense, Ellen's "crazy artist" stereotype is aligned with the stereotype of the "supercrip" from superhero comics. Although the "supercrip" may sound empowering at first glance, it can also become an unnecessary source of struggle for a person with a disability. In supercrip narratives, strength or willpower makes the disability no longer a hindrance (Linton, 1998, p. 17). But, in the eyes of critics, the "supercrip" "denies lived reality" (Alaniz, 2014, p. 33) as an example of applicability of the "supercrip" is the fact that disability is a common aspect in characters who are superheroes, who, either way, have an inaccessible super body that does not correspond to reality. Even less the reality of a real disabled person. The "supercrip" also distracts from the lived daily reality of most disabled people because such narratives can marginalize people who are unable to perform exceptional tasks in a similar way (Køhlert, 2019, p. 147). In this sense, it makes the reality "boring" and less important, reproducing and giving emphasis, instead, to unrealistic portrayals of disability, whereas supposedly offering representativeness to disabled bodies. According to Couser (2001), the "supercrip" may try to represent true stories but they are congruous with a medical paradigm that perceives disability as present in a "defective" or "abnormal" body, as a problem that individuals must overcome through will and determination (p. 80). Therefore, we need to be careful with stereotypes such as the "crazy artist" since there are different realities that a disability can bring to one's life and the expectation of being a "supercrip" might complicate even more the person's relationship with their disability since they might not correspond to the super-ability assumptions that match with the "supercrip" or the "crazy artist."

In the way Ellen describes her relationship with her illness we can find this identity of the "crazy artist" as a super able person with disability. However, we can also see the depiction of the reality of a vulnerable person who has conflicts with her illness, portraying it

with soft metaphors to enlighten harsh experiences of illness. In this sense, the relentlessness of the mythical figure of the "crazy artist" could be mitigated by the realism of mental illness. But, in *Marbles*, it is not. For Siebers (2008), the main purpose of disability studies is to overturn the negative connotations of disability spread in society, involving disability as something that forms an identity rather than merely a physical or mental characteristic (p. 4). Due to this shift in the viewpoint about disability that the field urges to do, disability politics ought to account for both the negative and positive capacities of disability. To do that, it is important "to resist the negative by advocating the positive and to resist the positive by acknowledging the negative - while never forgetting that its reason for being is to speak about, for, and with disabled people" (Siebers, 2008, p. 5). And that is precisely what Forney does in *Marbles*: her graphic memoir advocates the positive by accepting the identity and community of the "crazy artists," whereas it acknowledges the negative as Ellen also describes the struggles of being neurodivergent, which is an inescapable part of being a "crazy artist." The bitter side of being a "crazy artist" does not exist without its sweeter one, and vice-versa, since it is impossible to be a brilliant "crazy artist" and not be affected by the stigma and the embodiment experience of mental illness. In this sense, the portrayal of being a "crazy artist" in *Marbles* might not have bittersweetness as just one of its sub-themes, as it was brought up in the beginning of this chapter. Bittersweetness is in fact the essence of this experience and, after all that was discussed in this chapter, is the best word I can find to describe it.

2 CHAPTER TWO: THE "CRAZY [FEMALE] ARTISTS"

Female protagonism is part of *Marbles* and Forney's narrative even though she does not take an overt political stance on the topic. In *Marbles*, Ellen is a female protagonist who overcomes some of her anxieties about mental illness, including accepting medical treatment. At the beginning of the book, Ellen mentions she used to think she had the calling to help other women (Forney, 2012, p. 30):

> I started on what I thought of as mission in my life and in my career – I found my body beautiful and I found other women's body beautiful, and many women don't find their bodies beautiful… so I felt like my universe-given role to help the women of the world to see themselves as beautiful, and sexy! (Forney, 2012, p. 30).

Ellen sees herself as someone who has a mission to help other women find their self-esteem. On her tendency to engage in such projects, she also mentions having the same role in relation to other bisexuals:

> [it] has to do with me, too, being really out, a kind of bisexual role model, because there's anti-bi attitudes even in the queer community… we need liberal identity politics… and anyone who can be out should be out, people are social animals and I want to help people believe in themselves. (Forney, 2012, p. 49).

Ellen wants to help people to believe in themselves and become less invisible in the LGBTQIAPN+ community (Forney, 2012, p. 49). In *Marbles,* we can also find other important female characters, such as Ellen's psychiatrist, Karen, and Ellen's mother, who give her the support she needs. Ellen's mother is portrayed as a progressive and independent woman, a role model for Ellen, who proudly says she was always mistaken for her mother (Forney, 2012, p. 56). Ellen also gets the help of her friends and ex-girlfriends, such as Risa and Di (Forney, 2012, pp. 81; 157; 169; 145). Given the diversity of female characters, we would expect that Forney could tackle the gender politics of mental illness more overtly, but that is not what happens in *Marbles*. Ellen could be seen as having a feminist attitude because she is a character that represents how many women, especially "crazy [female] artists," have experienced this identity, even though the word "feminism" or an equivalent is never mentioned.

Nevertheless, positioning Forney as a mental health activist does not discount how gender plays a role in considerations about mental disorders: in *Rock Steady*, Forney states that "men tend to feel pressure to not seem weak, and people in groups already contending with racism + other sets of restrictive cultural norms are less likely to get support or seek help" (p. 159). Therefore, the author of *Marbles* is aware of gender and other intersecting

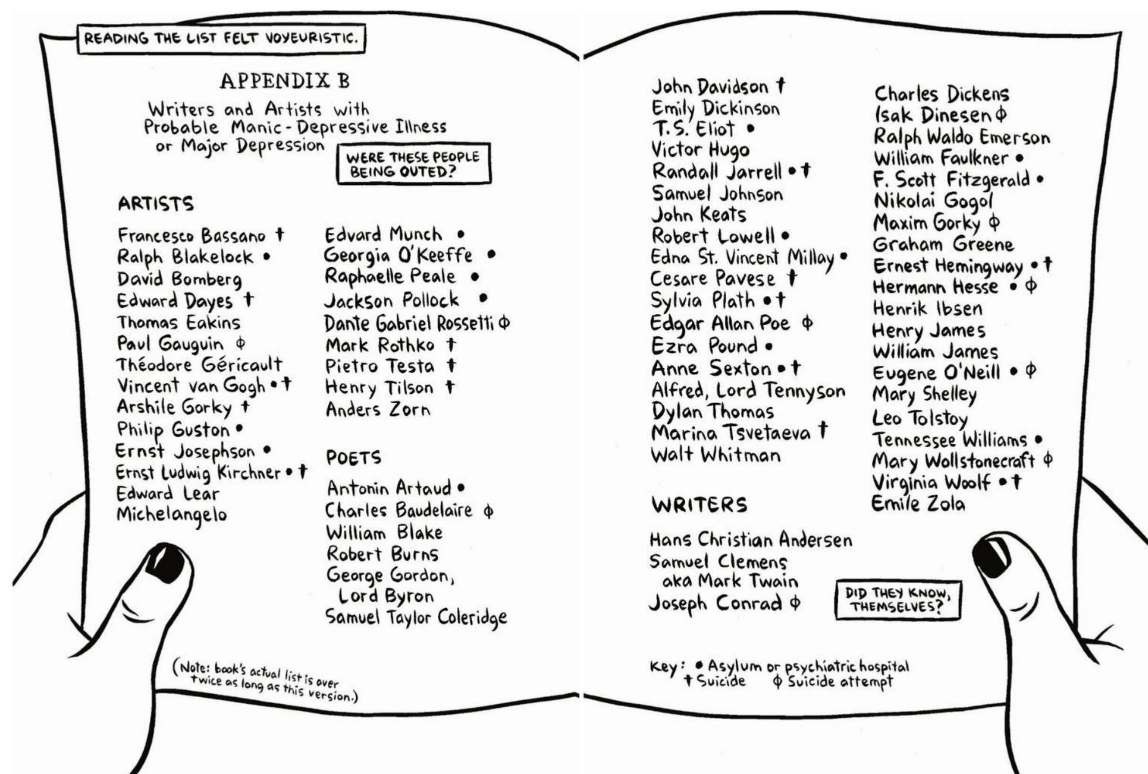
aspects of identity negatively impacting how someone with a mental disorder feels about themselves and how they navigate the stereotypical views other groups have of them. Whereas men are expected not to be vulnerable, including about their mental health, women are expected to be highly sensitive, in a negative way as "overdramatic," and this contributes to the "madwoman" stereotype, further developed in this chapter. This stereotype is present in what Forney calls the "crazy artist" identity even if gender is not mentioned overtly in *Marbles*. Little has been published on how Forney develops the idea of the "crazy artist" in its intersection with gender, even though gender has been central in our understanding of this concept since gender roles are one of the foundational aspects of normative patriarchal society. Women in art, such as Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Anne Sexton, have often been reduced to stereotypes of the "madwoman," which affects the way these figures are known by the public. Their mental illnesses are often given more prominence than their artistic productions, making their representation often attached to a stereotype based on perceiving their lives through the lenses of "madness." In this context, Ellen Forney's *Marbles* showcases and offers examples for a discussion that expands the concept of the "crazy artist" to the "crazy *female* artist."

After the diagnosis, Ellen finds a list of "crazy artists" in a book. In this passage, the reader can view the "crazy artists" through Ellen's perspective since we have a view of her hands holding the list in a bleed on two pages (Forney, 2012, p. 40-41). According to Elisabeth El Refaie, a way of inviting the reader's identification is by showing a character from behind or over their shoulder, offering the reader the opportunity to see the world through the character's eyes (2012, p. 195). This is what Forney does here: she invites us to put ourselves in Ellen's shoes, facing the long list of "crazy artists" and keep them in mind throughout the narrative and her discussion on the "crazy artists." The list is an adapted reproduction from an Appendix in Kay Redfield Jamison's *Touched with Fire* (1993), and we are informed that the original list was twice longer. Further comments are included in small boxes: "Were these people being outed?" and "did they know, themselves?." In this sense, although Forney is reproducing Jamison's work, she is giving it Ellen's reception of it by showing her selection of "crazy artists" she wanted readers to see, with her personal comments attached, making this list more personal. This excerpt represents a conversation she had with her psychiatrist about suicide rates among bipolars, which is a reason Ellen considers for giving up on being an unmedicated "crazy artist." In order to visualize the dangers of mental illness among the "crazy artists," at the side of each name on the list, there are codes to

represent if they have been to an asylum or psychiatric hospital, and if they committed suicide or have attempted it (Forney, 2012, p. 40-41). Through this list, Ellen faces the negative consequences of being a "crazy artist," which she was not considering before, and invites the reader to follow this process of confronting the risks of being a "crazy artist."

Figure 14 – The list of "Crazy Artists"

On these unnumbered pages where Ellen opens the list, she finds the artists' names in



Source: Forney, 2012, p. 40-41

three categories: artists, poets, and writers (Forney, 2012, p. 40-41). This is an interesting choice of categorization since "artists" here refers to *visual* artists, and writers are differentiated from poets even though some of the names listed wrote both poetry and prose, meaning that Forney had in mind in which category each artist would fit. In the (visual) artists section, we find Georgia O'Keeffe, and, in the poets' list, Sylvia Plath. Their art became emblematic in different forms of artistic expression, one through images and the other with words, aspects that Forney combines by choosing the medium of comics to tell her stories, including her memoir.

Plath and O'Keeffe, are two of the figures Ellen focuses on in *Marbles*. They are the only examples of women who are part of the "Club Van Gogh" represented more prominently in the graphic memoir and thus, the passages on Plath and O'Keeffe are going to be analyzed

in this Chapter in order to provide more substance to how the concept of the “crazy female artist” can be developed in relation to *Marbles*. With this objective in mind, this chapter is going to discuss the representation of women with mental illness and address how Forney depicts the “crazy [female] artists” in her graphic memoir in comparison with the stereotype of the “madwoman” and its representation in other works. The questions that guided this chapter are the following: “How can Forney’s observations about crazy artists contribute to a better understanding of the public image of the ‘crazy female artist’?,” “How was the representation of the ‘crazy [female] artists'' in *Marbles* affected by the stereotype of the ‘madwoman?’,” “How can comics help resignify the image of the ‘crazy female artist’ taking *Marbles* as an example?” The chapter is divided into 5 sections: “Plath + O’Keeffe,” with its subsections “O’Keeffe’s nice body” and “The Sylvia Plath Effect;” “The ‘madwoman’ stereotype;” “Representing the self and others;” and “A new iconography.”

2.1 PLATH + O’KEEFFE

Plath and O’Keeffe appear side by side at the end of the book when Forney represents the “crazy artists” in clouds (Forney, 2012, p. 219). On this page, Plath is portrayed similarly to her appearance in a photo taken in 1958. The similarity between Forney’s reproduction and the photo that might have inspired it is in Plath’s hair: it is very dark, and the way Plath’s bangs are distributed is in slightly separated curls. They are not as full and dense as they are in most Plath’s photos. In the photo in question, however, she is not wearing a

Figure 15 – Plath and O’Keeffe side by side

Source: Forney, 2012, p. 219

headband, but it was an accessory she used frequently and could have been added by Forney to identify Plath's image even better with elements that composed her look throughout her

Figure 16 – Comparison between Forney's Plath with dark hair and photograph

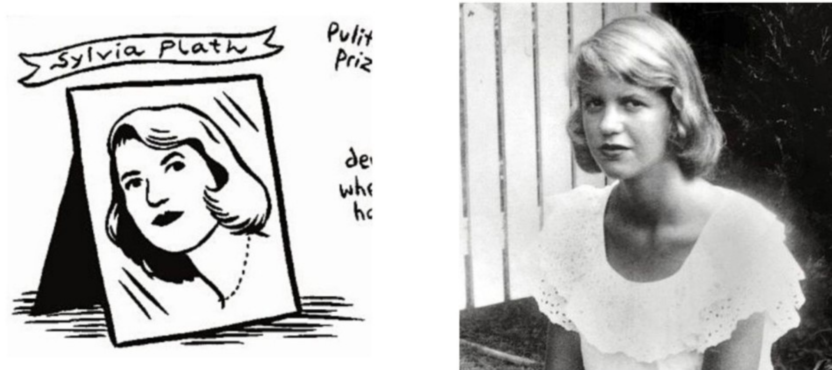
Sources: Forney, 2012, p. 219; National Portrait Gallery

life. Regardless of not being an exact reproduction of that moment of the photo, this version of Plath, from that period of her life, represents a mature version of her. In 1958, she was already a married woman as she had married Ted Hughes in 1956. Besides being married at this point, this is a Plath that had the experience of being institutionalized after her first and most known suicide attempt, in 1953. According to the biographer Heather Clark, in 1950s, women such as Plath were institutionalized for refusing gender roles as housewives, and psychiatrists were trained to "regard high ambition and strong will in women as pathological" (2020, p. 276). In Plath's case, this is evident in the way her doctor, Ruth Beuscher, listed, among other Plath's "main problems," her "authority" and her "difficulty with the feminine role" (Clark, 2020, p. 302). Plath was a patient at McLean Hospital for six months and her experiences at the institution inspired her only novel *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963. In this sense, it is an image that evokes a more mature Plath, after going through what probably was one of the darkest and most known times of her life.

On the other hand, when she is mentioned earlier, her portraiture is from when she had a lighter hair (Forney, 2012, p. 169) and it is very similar to a photo of her High School graduation day, in 1950, shortly before she started attending Smith College. Although she does not wear a pearls necklace in the photo, again, it was an accessory that was very common to wear in the 1940s and 1950s. She looks up both in the picture and Forney's drawing, and her hair is practically identical in both versions since it is light with her bangs towards the left side of her face. This version of Plath is younger, and it marks the transition

to the beginning of her academic career. Considering the importance of using Plath’s hairstyle to understand her life phases, the light hair also evokes to the period she dyed her hair bright yellow in 1954, which shocked her mother (Clark, 2020, p. 326), when she returned to Smith

Figure 17 – Comparison between Forney’s Plath with light hair and photograph

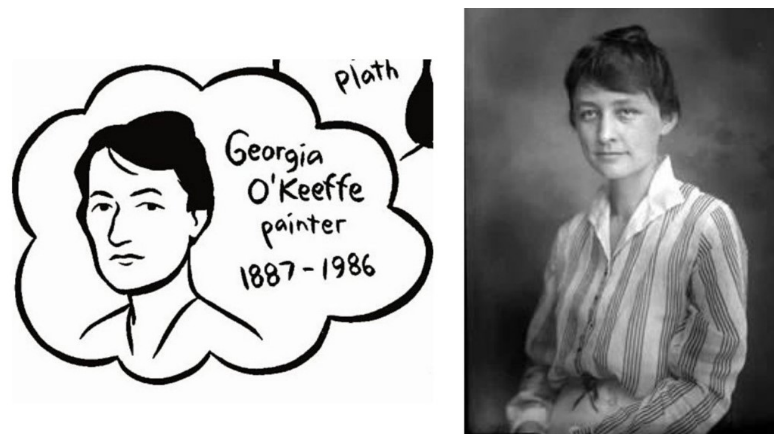


Sources: Forney, 2012, p. 169; Clark, 2020

after the psychiatric hospital experience and was trying out a more “daring, adventuresome personality” (Clark, 2020, p. 326). Therefore, we have in *Marbles* different versions of Plath, younger and more experienced, from before and after a turning point in her life that almost killed her but she was able to overcome.

In the case of O’Keeffe’s representations by Forney, we can notice the difference between the formal public image of an artist and her private but disseminated image when she was going “crazy.” At the end, side by side with Plath, O’Keeffe is represented with a severe look and tied hair (Forney, 2012, p. 219), very similar to a portrait of her in 1915. In both images, her hair is tied up, not down, as it is in most pictures of her older self, and her bangs

Figure 18 – Comparison between Forney’s O’Keeffe with photograph



Sources: Forney, 2012, p. 219; Texas State Histprical Association

cross her forehead towards her left. In Forney’s depiction, though, her look is more serious and she looks straight to the reader, whereas her facial expression in the photo does not look

so intimidating. In the context of the picture, she was a teaching assistant at the University of Virginia and had not met the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, her future husband and the one who would make her portraits, yet. She has a more formal look here than in the other depictions of her brought by Forney, in which O'Keeffe has long untied - or "crazy"? - hair and is more sensual, showing more of her body, in a Forney's reproduction of one of O'Keeffe's portraits (Forney, 2012, p. 141). Forney also portrayed an imagined picture she had of the artist with fuzzy hair and an obsessive look (2012, p. 141). But O'Keeffe's portraits tell a different story. She gives the impression she is austere, as Ellen points out, due to the serious look on her face in her portraits.

Figure 19 – Public *versus* Imagined Private images of O'Keeffe

Sources: Forney, 2012, p. 141 ; thecollector.com

Forney is using sequentiality to depict these women in different contexts of their lives. According to Watson and Smith, "sequential self-presentation enables women artists to propose subjectivity as processual rather than static and to insist that identity is performative, not essentialized" (2016, p. 383). In this sense, when Forney presents O'Keeffe and Plath in different ways and moments, she is showing that their identities can be shaped into different

ideas, as “crazy” or “severe,” as “young” or “experienced.” In addition, the different depictions of these artists in the same book, *Marbles*, reveal that the lives of those artists were made of ups and downs. Besides, they show that the image of a “crazy person” is made by them in the sense that their images are made public in the same way their work is: with these artists' bias on how they want to be perceived. However, there is also the image that can be created based on stereotypes and identification, as when Ellen shows how she imagines O’Keeffe in a mania phase similar to when she was in her mania phase. The contrasts between all these images suggest that Forney wants to offer more than one version of these artists, showing that “crazy [female] artists” have more than one facet and have biased public and private representations of them in circulation.

Similarly to what she does with O’Keeffe and Plath, Ellen, as a “crazy [female] artist,” depicts herself in different versions throughout *Marbles* (Figure 20 from left to right, top to bottom): we have her version with mania, when she is drawn with big sparkly eyes (Forney, 2012, p. 52); her version with depression, in simple strokes (Forney, 2012, p. 92); her main version in the comic, made with thick strokes and short hair that is sometimes messy (Forney, 2012, p. 168) and other times with curls meticulously framing her face (Forney, 2012, p. 42); her version that was rendered from real photographs, that are very detailed drawings (Forney, 2012, p. 33); and, finally, her version from her sketches, many of them made when she was depressed and used metaphors to describe her suffering (Forney, 2012, p.

Figure 20 – Different Versions of Ellen

Source: Forney, 2012, p. 52, 92, 168, 42, 33, 100, and 97

100), sometimes altering her image to surrealistic representations (Forney, 2012, p. 97). All of these representations are technically of a "madwoman," except for when she is depicted brushing her teeth, in 2012, when she published the book and had found more stability in her relationship with mental health (Forney, 2012, p. 227). The representation of the body in a variety of images is highly important for building a political statement in the comics medium. Embodiment concerns the idea that the body has the important role of giving us a sense of our existence and identity (El Refaie, 2012, p. 50-51) and, particularly for women and people with disabilities, it is at the core of their life stories (El Refaie, 2012, p. 51). The fact that Forney works with more than one version of herself reflects what El Refaie calls "pictorial embodiment." According to the author, "pictorial embodiment" is the "process of engaging with one's own identity through multiple self-portraits" (2012, p. 51). Graphic memorialists often visually portray themselves over and over again, at different stages of their lives and in different situations, so they are constantly compelled to engage with their physical identities (El Refaie, 2012, p. 62). When artists create their comics based on their lives, they must engage with the sociocultural models of body image, including categories of sex, gender, health, and beauty (El Refaie, 2012, p. 73). In this sense, pictorial embodiment is a social and political activity (El Refaie, 2012, p. 73). When disabled bodies, for instance, are portrayed in a variety of ways, they are showing how one standard representation of them is not enough, which is usually what society is satisfied with doing through stereotypes.

2.1.1 O'Keeffe's "nice" body

The way "crazy female artists" are represented publicly has to do with a simplification of their representation. O'Keeffe's biography reveals that her public image was frequently reduced to her struggles with her mental illness and suppositions about its impact in her art. O'Keeffe was diagnosed with an ambiguous illness called "nervous exhaustion,"[13] and experienced an episode of depression and panic that resulted in hospitalization (Kassels, 1991, p. 50). O'Keeffe was hospitalized in 1928 (Akiya, 2019, p. 12). In 1922, O'Keeffe's health difficulties were publicly discussed when a journalist wrote about O'Keeffe describing she was "sensitive," "intellectual and introspective," displaying an "aloofness from life,"

[13] At that time, the term "depression" was not much used to describe this mental illness in women. Instead, terms such as "nervous exhaustion," "mental conflict," or "anxiety and nervous tension" were used in articles that tackled the issue (Clark, 2020, p. 267)

while wondering if illness could be a factor in the "secret of that personality," speculating: "Is there after all, a connection between genius and ill health? Miss O'Keeffe has known a great deal of illness in her life: she has, we imagine, been thrown back upon her own resources to a large extent" (Udall, 2006, p. 21). This is an example of how O'Keeffe's public image was attached to her mental illnesses and reduced to the stereotype of the "crazy female artist."

Ellen, influenced by the romantic idea of the "crazy artist," reproduces this curiosity by trying to find hints of mental disorder in O'Keeffe's art, but she gets disappointed with her findings. Ellen goes to the library to try to find references to vaginal art and finds a book about O'Keeffe, who was on the list of bipolar artists described in the beginning of this chapter of my thesis. Ellen wonders if O'Keeffe's mental disorder appears in her work and if Ellen's disorder might appear in her own art. Ellen comments she always found O'Keeffe very austere (Forney, 2012, p. 140), probably because she does not associate formalism with bipolars, or "crazy people" in general. Forney reproduces one of O'Keeffe's portraits in which she has a serious look on her face and shows her cleavage holding her breasts (Forney, 2012, p. 141) (this image can be found on page 69). The erotic tone of this portrait is commented on by Ellen, who wonders if O'Keeffe was actually in mania during her "sexy" photoshoots as she used to be in her own "sexy" photoshoots. Then, unsuccessfully, Ellen tries to find in O'Keeffe's photos (Forney, 2012, p. 141) and her paintings (Forney, 2012, p. 142) any suggestion of her depression and concludes that it does not necessarily leak out into someone's work (Forney, 2012, p. 142). Indeed, as Ellen suggests, O'Keeffe's art was recognized for characteristics that are not usually connected to depression since it became original contributions to American Modernism for its vibrant colorful flowers and landscapes that were influenced by regional culture and indigenous art from Taos (Akiya, 2019, p. 12). A tone of disappointment is present in the scene when Ellen realizes O'Keeffe's art is not attached to her mental illness. This passage represents a transition from the stereotypical view Ellen used to have about the "'crazy artists" as artistic due to their mental illnesses and is slowly being broken down.

O'Keeffe's example actually reveals another perspective that can be used to analyze the "crazy artist," which is by not perceiving them as creative because of their illness but as creative *despite* their illness. For Udall, in spite of periods of illness, depression, and inactivity, O'Keeffe had the will to create and that was part of her personality (Udall, 2006, p. 24). Her sickness led her to confront her own self, where creativity and despair mingle, acquiring a larger understanding of herself, and what it means to be whole and human (Udall,

2006, p. 25). Similarly, Ellen is on a journey with her own self, trying to understand what it means to be a “crazy artist” and, at this point, she might be starting to realize that art is not intimately connected to “madness” because it is not found everywhere in all “crazy artists’” work.

O’Keeffe’s example in *Marbles* also suggests how the gender of a “crazy artist” influences the way they might be described. Curiously, when Ellen talks about O’Keeffe, she comments on her body, describing it as “nice” (Forney, 2012, p. 142). This is an interesting commentary of hers considering that, throughout *Marbles*, when Ellen comments on male “crazy artists,” she does not make observations on their bodies from an erotic perspective. Besides, according to Elisa Kay Sparks, it was O’Keeffe’s wish to differentiate herself from the sexual intent created by the pictures of her taken by Alfred Stieglitz (2016, p. 16), such as the one Forney brings in *Marbles* (Forney, 2012, p. 142). Hence, when Ellen comments about O’Keeffe’s body with a sexual tone, she is not only describing O’Keeffe differently from how she did with other “crazy artists” but also reinforcing an overly sexualized image of O'Keeffe that the artist herself was not comfortable with since such commentaries took attention away from what actually mattered, which was her work. This was not the first time in *Marbles* that a sexual tone in relation to women — without comparable examples including men in the narrative — was used. In the beginning of the memoir, Ellen comments about finding women's bodies beautiful during a nude photoshoot project of hers with other women mentioned and rendered in the comic (Forney, 2012, p. 31-38). Therefore, the narrative in *Marbles* tends to sexualize women beyond Ellen’s sexuality and projects but also when she is discussing the “crazy artists” using O’Keeffe’s example. When Ellen comments about O’Keeffe’s body, she is reinforcing she is attracted to women as she did with the photoshoots, but she does that in a moment in which the focus was on portraying O’Keeffe as a “crazy artist.” The comment demonstrates that when it comes to analyzing artistic and mental health aspects of a female “crazy artist,” the image of this woman can be eroticized. Forney could have left this comment out, but it was included among other important facts that are there to summarize O’Keeffe’s legacy for the reader to know, as Ellen did with Van Gogh, for instance. But when discussing Van Gogh’s art and biography, no comment on attractiveness was drawn. Taking into consideration that, in society, the image of women is frequently sexually objectified, it is possible to perceive in *Marbles* a reflection of this culture when Ellen makes different remarks on the “crazy artists” depending on their gender. Therefore, when I consider implications of this sort, I bring up the importance of talking about the “crazy

female artist" too since gender plays a role in what kind of perception we might have of a "crazy artist."

Unconscious and established ideas within the comics industry might also be behind Forney's choice of way of representing women's bodies. In comics, there is a traditional view that prioritizes the portrayal of a female body that corresponds to what is appealing to the male eye (Køhlert, 2019, p. 23), depicting women as idealized objects of male authority and desire (Køhlert, 2019, p. 54). The drawings in comics can unrealistically exaggerate certain physical features, making of this medium an appealing tool for men to portray the female body, accentuating characteristics of it that endorse male fantasies that the reader — regardless of their gender and sexuality — presumably has as someone living in a patriarchal society. It is a challenge for women creators of especially autobiographical comics to draw the female body without succumbing to established sexist and objectifying visual paradigms, that is, culture's dominant ways of seeing and representing women (Køhlert, 2019, p. 24). Those visual paradigms of portraying the female body as appealing to male expectations have been so influential that they have been adopted and reproduced unconsciously, even by Forney, who is known for being an activist who is aware of questions of gender and sexuality.

Another aspect that is an inherent part of comics and contributes to the way Forney addresses women's bodies, especially O'Keeffe's, is the comicality of comics. Humor is so inherently part of comics, it is in its terminology since the term "comic" comes from the Latin "comicus" and means "of comedy," creating the expectation that all comics should be intentionally funny. To be funny is one of comics' most important tools since it is a way of tackling sensitive topics with a lighter tone that makes them more digestible to the reader. In this sense, comicality can also be a form of conveying ideas and revealing social paradigms, by reproducing them or challenging them. According to El Refaie, jokes in comics are a socially acceptable way of breaking taboos (2012, p. 214). So, when Ellen humorously comments on O'Keeffe's body, she is also attempting to break the taboo of female sexuality and sapphic tendencies, which is a valid proposal. However, the portrayal of female bodies through a male and standard objectifying view has marked the representation of female bodies in comics, and this is a history that cannot be ignored. Instead, more productive attempts to break away from the representation patterns of female bodies must be considered. Forney's *Marbles* is a good reminder of this because it is a graphic memoir that, on the one hand, tries to break taboos and ends up reinforcing others by representing sexuality, but, on the other, it offers a representation of mental illness in women in a diverse and informative way.

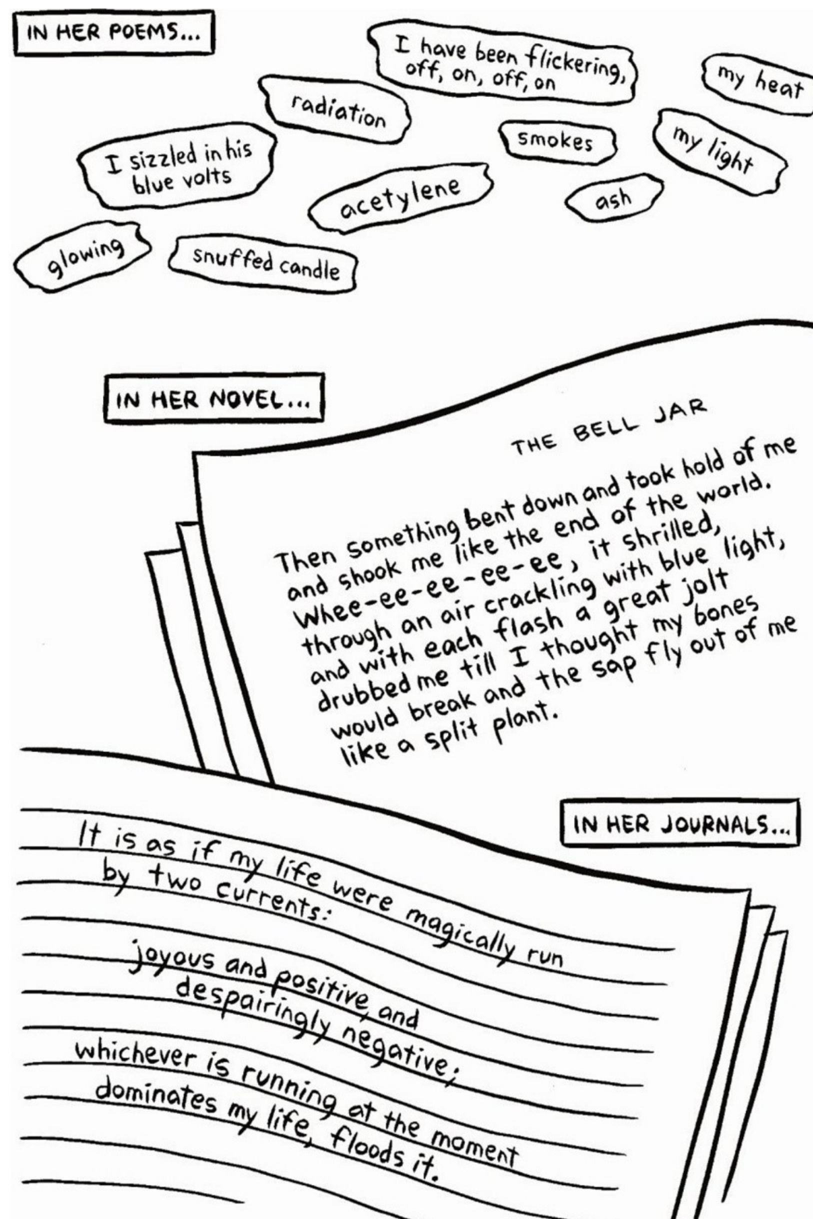
2.1.2 The Sylvia Plath Effect

As Van Gogh can be the representative of the "crazy artists," Sylvia Plath could be of the "crazy female artists." She had the illness-art connection so often reinforced publicly that it became "imperative" to make this connection when analyzing her work. Ellen mentions that, before learning about Van Gogh's legacy, she came across jokes about him as a man who had only one ear because, according to the popular tale, he had cut off his other ear (Forney, 2012, p. 117). Similarly, when I started to get interested in female writers in both the English and the Portuguese language literary canon, using the internet as my main resource, I got in contact first with images of these women that stressed how sad and/or suicidal they were. Clarice Lispector was always remembered for an interview in which she appeared to be sad, even though she stated in that very interview she was not a sad person, that she was just tired (TV CULTURA, 2012). The image of Virginia Woolf was always associated with her last day, extensively described as the day when she put stones in the pockets of her coat and threw herself into the river Ouse. Many times before I read Sylvia Plath's work, I had encountered, mainly on TV shows, jokes about her being a woman who had died with her head in the oven. My impression of that first contact with Plath's life story – more specifically, with her death story – countless times is not a coincidence: the Ph.D. student Holly Genovese has listed on an online article many of the times in which TV shows inappropriately mentioned Plath's suicide when a character was sad, and that might instigate "the ways in which Plath has become a cultural stand in for suicide and women's emotions" (Genovese, 2018). In this sense, gender plays a role in the creation of the *mythos* around "crazy artists" who happened to be women.

Plath's case is the main example of the "crazy female artist" whose art is directly affected by her individual experiences with her disorder. In *Marbles*, the portrayal of Sylvia Plath reproduces the received idea that her struggle with mental illness is the core of her art. Ellen mentions Plath when portraying a conversation with a scholar friend, Di, who had studied her (Forney, 2012, p. 169). On that matter, Di says "you'd need to know her biography to really understand her work" (Forney, 2012, p. 169). In this sense, Plath's life story, which was marked by her experience with her mental illness, would be the source of her art and the origin of the aspects found in it. After Di's insights, Ellen decides to study

Plath. Ellen points out that fire and electricity were frequent elements in Plath's writing and would be a reference to her experience with shock treatment (Forney, 2012, p. 169). Ellen then compares Plath's poetry, her only novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), and her journals and shows some excerpts of her works to prove this fire-and-electricity theory she came up with (Forney, 2012, p. 170).

Figure 21 – Fire and electricity in Plath



Source: Forney, 2012, p. 170

When she transcribes the poems' extracts, they float as loose words on small slips of paper that were cut out from the original composition and therefore their context. To represent

The Bell Jar, an open page of the novel is reproduced by Forney with the paragraph of interest for what Ellen wants to show. In the case of the journals, they are presented as pages with lines that resemble those of a notebook page and the formatting makes them look like handwritten notes. They are also not justified, as they would not be in a printed book, which is the format Ellen would have had access. How Forney represents these excerpts from Plath shows how they are reimagined and taken out of their context, in a similar way to what is done commonly in literature research to show an aspect that one wants to highlight from the original text. Therefore, this decontextualization made by Forney is an understandable thing to do. However, Ellen later says that coming into contact with these references from Plath made her realize that her personal experience with mania also had to do with electricity, even though Ellen never had the electroshock experience (Forney, 2012, p. 171). In this way, what Ellen identifies in Plath's works are not just about Plath's own experience with electroshock, but resonates with Ellen, who connects her bond with Plath through electricity in relation to the latter's supposed mania, not her depression.

The metaphor of fire that was discussed in the first chapter of this thesis also demonstrates how these arbitrary symbols of "madness," such as electricity and fire, are common. The reason they are so widely reproduced is that these metaphors can permeate different individual experiences. Even if the reason for that metaphor to exist is often attributed only to the author's individual experience – as it is done with Plath and electricity metaphor – those metaphors, such as fire and electricity, are collective. In this sense, although there is the tendency to individualize such metaphors, using the biography of the author to pinpoint a source of them, these images are shared as they are part of a collective consciousness on what is comparable to common feelings in the experience of mental illness. Those metaphors, then, are connected to the human experience in general, which explains the identification that Forney finds in Plath's writing, even though they had different disorders, went through different treatments, and lived decades apart.

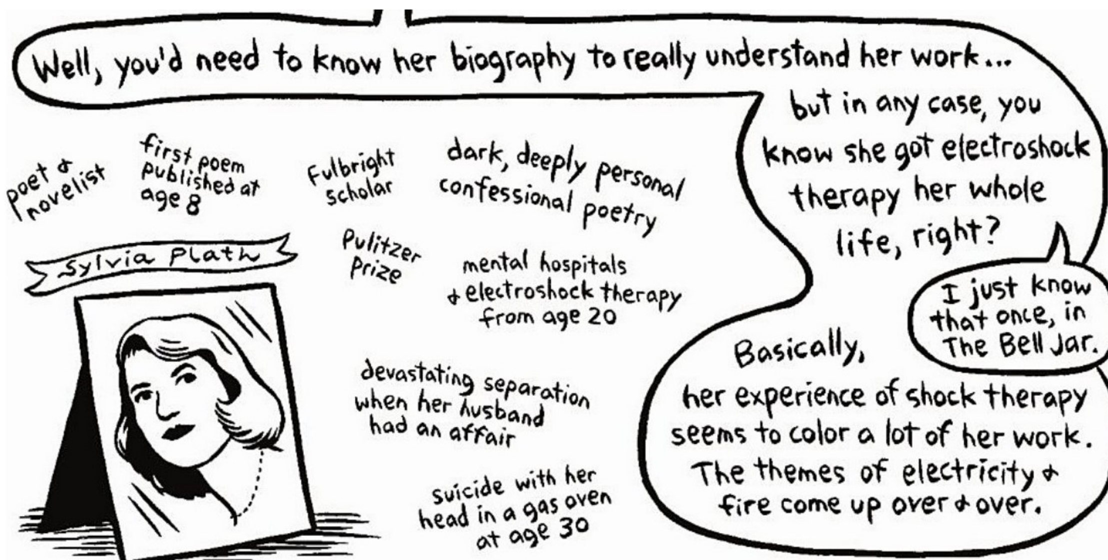
As discussed in the first chapter, the idea that artists go through a mental hell during their lives is popular. As Ellen had "always been drawn to the 'tortured' artist ideal: passionate and driven, sacrificing sleep, health, blood, sweat, tears" (Forney, 2012, p. 195). This thought might be connected to Winston Churchill's famous speech "blood, toil, tears and sweat," his first speech as Prime Minister to House of Commons in 1940, in the Second World War context, mentioning that he had "nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat," in the war. Such a connection is corroborated by the fact that, in the same page, Ellen makes

reference to the idea that, in yoga, "accepting challenges is sometimes referred to as "surrender," not as defeat, but as acceptance (Forney, 2012, p. 195). The romanticized view she had of the suffering of the artist had led her to believe any other "steadier" life than that would not be correspondent to an artist's way of living and would mean losing a war. This is particularly stressed when we discuss writers. The vision of writers living disturbed, troubled lives was supported in various studies such as Andreasen (1987) Andreasen & Glick (1988), Ludwig (1994), and Jamison (1989) (Kaufman, 2001, p. 37). Rothenberg (1995) has criticized this past research for their lack of rigor in statistical interpretation and for their reinforcement of the fact that writers' biographies tend to emphasize signs of mental illness because this makes them better subjects for books and turn them into more complex and interesting people (Kaufman, 2001, p. 38). Therefore, by emphasizing writers' mental illnesses, their own lives become entertainment, as if they were as much fictional as the stories they have published and as troubled as if they were in a war context.

In the case of female poets with mental illness, this stereotype has been called the "Sylvia Plath Effect" (Kaufman, 2001, p. 46), concentrating on the image of Plath as the symbol of a "crazy female writer." The "Sylvia Plath Effect" was the name given to the finding in James C. Kaufman's research that poets were more likely to suffer from mental illness than other professionals. Years later, the author revisited his work, but now highlighting that preconceptions regarding the likeliness of female poets being mentally ill might be actually connected to social gender expectations, not any natural tendency. According to the author, there persists a frequent stereotype that male poets tend to write about less personal issues, such as war and spirituality, whereas female poets would turn inward for writing (Kaufman & Baer, 2002, p. 276). Regardless of whether there is any truth to this stereotype, it appears to influence expectations about writers. People may unconsciously expect that a quality poem written by a woman will be emotional and moving without expecting the same from a poem written by a man (Kaufman & Baer, 2002, p. 276). In this sense, more attention would be given to works by female poets who suffer from mental illness and show that in their poetry than to those who choose a less intimate approach to their writing (Kaufman & Baer, 2002, p. 276). Therefore, the "Sylvia Plath Effect" results from social expectations towards women, who are led to expose themselves more intimately in their writing for the entertainment of the public, which expects the portrayal of female suffering.

Attempts to explain the association of depression in female writers have given rise to theories that diminish the recognition of their art for the sake of reducing these artists to a romantic image of them that evokes solitude, fragility, and insecurity. Nolen-Hoeksema's (1990) theory, for instance, stated that female writers would have a predisposition to depression and lower self-esteem (Kaufman, 2001, p. 47). The problem with theories such as this one is that they end up highlighting this aspect of these female writers' lives and creating images of them as lonely women who struggled with their self-esteem and lack of freedom. There is, for instance, the vision of "an isolated Emily Dickinson, writing poetry on the back of old envelopes while hiding in her attic" (Kaufman, 2001, p. 37), a type of representation that is often reproduced. Something that is usually taken for granted for the maintenance of this image of "crazy female artists" is that their lives were not composed solely by those moments of solitude and struggle; after all, they were able to be published and receive recognition for their work. In *Marbles*, Ellen mentions Plath's professional achievements and brilliance, such as having her first poem published at the age of eight and being a known Fulbright scholar who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. These accomplishments are visually displayed in the graphic memoir alongside Plath's "darker" life story, more specifically, episodes of mental breakdowns and hospitalization, and her eventual death by suicide (Forney, 2012, p. 169). These aspects of her life are differentiated but are nonetheless drawn against the same background on the panel. Their commingling opens the possibility of

Figure 22 – Plath's two sides



Source: Forney, 2012, p. 169

interpreting them as different facets of Plath that cannot be separated. The page layout strongly suggests that all aspects made Plath the artist she was, and they are demonstrated

conceptually as inseparable and interdependent: they are parts of the same person. And Ellen does not ignore that. As a "crazy [female] artist" herself, she understands the importance of assessing the work of an artist and not focusing solely on mental health struggles. Her conflict with medication was triggered by her fear of losing her art. However, even though present on the same area of the panel and without a separation between them, the way these pieces of information are distributed, considering the western way of reading, which is from left to right and top to bottom, suggest a time line of Plath's life that starts positive, with "first published poem at 8" and ends at her suicide at age 30, below dark moments of her life, that are concentrated in the right, drawing the reader's attention to this conclusion. In the sense, Forney represents Plath's life leading the reader to its tragic ending, even though she remarkably mentions Plath's achievements and talent, which are not that frequently remembered, often overlapped by tragic aspects of her life. In Forney's representation, they are not overlapped, they are side by side, and equal in number, as there are 4 positive highlights and 4 negative, and we can argue that by choosing this disposition, Forney was just constructing a time line rather than emphasizing the somber aspects of Plath's life.

The importance of awareness of the way "crazy female artists'" biographies are portrayed lies in the fact that this stereotype has effects on how disabled women in general are perceived. Critics have psychoanalyzed Plath's works, pathologizing her using the language of the medical model of disability, driven by patriarchal norms and institutions (Rovito, 2020, p. 317). This ended up emphasizing the stereotype and diminishing the voices of disabled women since it delegitimizes the speech of these women, marked by the status of "crazy" with the support of medical language, which suggests that they should not be taken seriously, as they would not be in their proper state of mind. In the late nineteenth century, with the beginning of psychoanalytic criticism, literary critics started reproducing this discourse by applying diagnostic terminology to authors and characters, labeling them as "mad," "bipolar," "schizophrenic," and so on (Rovito, 2020, p. 318). From a critical disability studies perspective, this practice is not only problematic but also ethically questionable (Rovito, 2020, p. 318). As Elaine Showalter states in *The Female Malady* (1985), psychiatry and psychoanalysis nineteenth-century psychiatry described "madness" as a female malady (p. 7) and revealed a history of invasive medicalization and labeling of disabled women without their consent, an oppression literary psychoanalytic criticism expanded (Rovito, 2020, p. 319). I add that not only literary but art criticism, in general, is part of this — taking O'Keeffe's biography, for instance — and affects how women can perceive themselves and each other

having in mind the stereotypes that are being reinforced since it leads women to become overly doubtful of themselves and fearful of becoming as dangerous as someone like Sylvia Plath. Plath became the symbol of this structural discourse since it was represented through her and marked the way mentally ill women would be represented in the media.

Even though the portrayal of Plath's image and works have started to become less biased since awareness of how she became this sort of myth started has increased, the process of understanding her and people who identify with her beyond the stereotype of the "crazy female artist" is still in progress. Feminist critics highlighted that Plath and her legacy were controlled by patriarchal and misogynist attempts by her husband Ted Hughes and the social apparatus of her time (Rovito, 2020, p. 321). In the end, her legacy marked the anglophone canon despite literary and medical scholars having labeled her as "ill" even more extensively back then (Rovito, 2020, p. 321). In a sense, she survived, as her art persisted, even though pathologizing eyes are still upon her art when analyzing it. Maria Rovito (2020) points out the need to privilege the writings of disabled individuals who identify as women, valuing their narratives and voices over critics who attempt to label them and obscure their lived experiences, doing a disservice to the memories and productions of these figures while stigmatizing people who live with similar psychiatric conditions (p. 322). In this sense, to value the voices of women with disability over stereotypes of them is a process to which works such as *Marbles* collaborate because, in it, we have the testimonial of a woman who deals with her mental illness and shares her thoughts about the existing stereotypes and where she personally thinks she fits in.

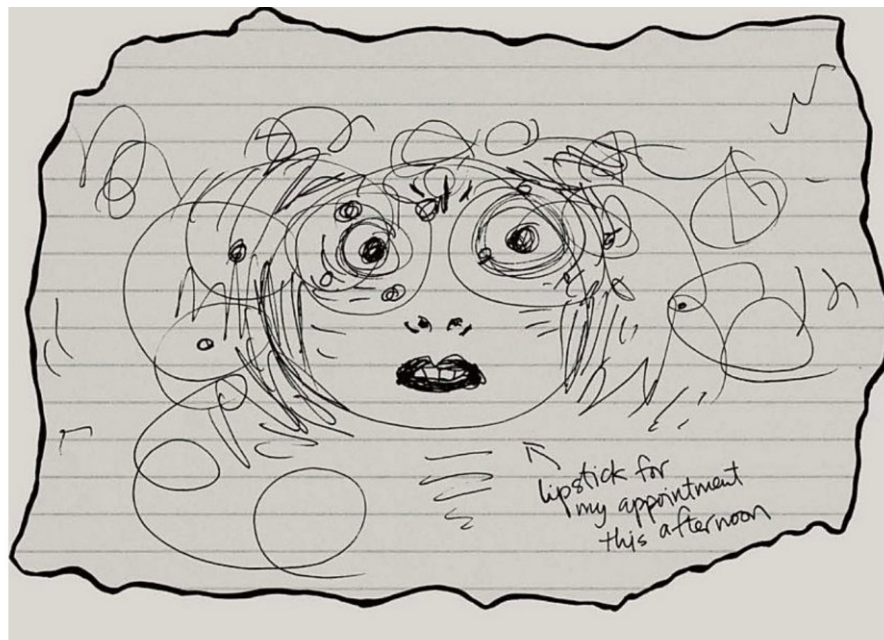
Sylvia Plath and her supposed effect are nothing less than a branch of a much bigger stereotype: the "madwoman."

2.2 THE "MADWOMAN" STEREOTYPE

The way Ellen depicts her states of mental health is highly connected to her perception of femininity and women. When she mentions elements that helped her cope with her mental illness and made her feel better, she mentions wearing the MAC-branded lipstick on the shade Paramount (Forney, 2012, p. 139). The representation of it in this panel is from one of her sketches among other facsimiles Forney brought to *Marbles*. We have the lines of the original paper and the strokes contrast with the main style of the comic, which is thicker.

Instead, the lines here are very thin and round. Ellen is depicted as made by spiraling, curved, and messy lines, big intense eyes, and a slightly open mouth. The spirals form her facial features and are randomly framing her face, making her hair not definable, and building the circle of her eyes, one bigger than the other. As spirals can be associated with madness, Forney is working with spirals to highlight the messy and uncontrollable aspects of madness. We might say she has a scary look on her face made with loose strokes that can be associated with "madness." In the sketch, she explains that this is herself with lipstick for an appointment that afternoon. The lipstick, according to Ellen, made her look "not crazy," in her words: "neatly-applied lipstick = not crazy." According to her point of view, by carefully applying and wearing MAC Paramount, she could "pass" as a normal person. Paramount was a lipstick

Figure 23 – Ellen wearing MAC's Paramount



Source: Forney, 2012, p. 139

shade by the Canadian company MAC Cosmetics that was a "fad" during the 90s, when *Marbles* is mostly set. It was worn by celebrities, such as Jennifer Aniston in "Friends," and any woman who wanted to wear an everyday but intense lipstick with a reddish brown shade that was popular in that decade. No wonder Ellen liked it. It was a choice for keeping up with what was in vogue, that is, "blending in" as a "not-crazy" person as she wanted to convey, but also showing personality since it was a dark reddish lipstick that contrasted with her light skin tone. It probably called people's attention but not too much. Make-up, as its own termination suggests, is meant to create, invent a look. Due to this role, make-up is often worn to hide "imperfections." Hence, Ellen is trying to conceal her "madness" from others so she can go through her routine, and her appointments, without worrying about "looking mad." Make-up

is also a gendered tool. It is associated with women and the performance of femininity. It is also a form of artistic expression, involving colors, textures, creativity, and techniques. In this sense, it is a tool that Ellen used to present herself to others within social norms while she could express herself as a woman artist who understood art and its power of manipulation.

In addition to the lipstick as cover-up, Ellen's view of stability is represented through female elegance. In the end of her narration, readers see the image Ellen used to have of a "high functioning bipolar" as an elegant woman she longed to meet and would treat for coffee (Forney, 2012, p. 227). She explains that "In my head, she looked like a high school friend's mother – elegant + comfortingly bland." This older woman wears a tailored suit and skirt set, flat shoes, which are "stylish but practical," a silk scarf, and tidy hair. She is a responsible, educated, and busy woman. She is a mixture of two tropes of impeccable femininity: the traditional mother and the businesswoman. She takes her morning pills with a "light

Figure 24 – Ellen's ideal of a steady "madwoman"

Source: Forney, 2012, p. 227

breakfast," as she is a standard slim woman. She is a woman who does not remind Ellen of herself and who was actually Ellen's fantasy of the personification of stability, which is much more complex and indefinable in real life than Ellen expected. Interestingly, Ellen placed her entire expectation about the future on this image of a woman. The idealization of Ellen permeates the idealization of women, who should be calm, controlled, organized, and tidy; the

complete opposite of a "madwoman." In this sense, the vision of a steady "madwoman" was a fiction Ellen created to give her hope to encounter a kind of "madwoman" that she would not find represented. A madwoman who does not look mad and does not correspond to common representations of the madwoman, such as the "mad" Georgia O'Keeffe Ellen imagined pages earlier.

The image that Ellen created of the steady and medicated "madwoman" can be put alongside and against the common representation of the "madwoman," who cannot control her insanity, and also some of the ways Ellen represents herself in *Marbles,* especially when she is in mania. In this sense, Ellen is showing that some of her images are among a long historical thread of the portrayal of "madwomen," which is a stereotypical view of mentally ill women. The "madwoman" stereotype became prevalent in the cultural field in representations of madness in the theater after asylum statistics, by the 1850s, confirmed a common impression that female inmates were more numerous than male inmates (Kromm, 1994, p. 507). This tendency revealed in data persists even nowadays, when the statistics of the World Health Organization show that common mental disorders are higher in women than in men (Senicato et al., 2018, p. 2543), demonstrating that maybe we can find illness in so many female artists because women are more likely to be mentally ill. Women in all sectors of society struggle with mental illness, although mainly women in art have been marked by the stereotype.

The high rates of mental illness in women have been investigated to try to explain it. According to the American Psychiatric Association (2017), among the reasons why women are more prone to develop mental health issues is the fact that women are full-time workers who earn about one-fourth less than men in a year, poverty rates for women are higher than for men, women experience more sexual and physical violence by their intimate partners, and 65% of caregivers are women. This reflects on data that show that physicians diagnose depression more often in women than in men, even when both have identical symptoms and women are more likely to be prescribed psychotropic medications than men (American Psychiatric Association, 2017). Therefore, women are more prone to struggle with mental health, but it does not seem to be a natural problem. Rather, it is a social construct, both in the lack of material conditions for women to enjoy good mental health, such as salary and time to dedicate to themselves, and a culture that naturalizes women's suffering with the stereotype of the "madwoman." According to Schlichter (2003, p. 310)

> The madwoman, one of the stereotypes of femininity in modern Western culture, holds a central position within the gendered system of representation, enabling and

> outlining the locus of the masculine subject of reason, while simultaneously epitomizing a negation of women's discursive authority. In this sense, the association of woman and madness dramatically exposes the role of an irrational, feminine Other-of-man, which cannot occupy the place of a subject of culture.

Hence, the "madwoman" stereotype is part of a much larger chain of social aggressions that fall onto women, reducing them to the inability to even tell their own stories to explain why they suffer. According to Schlichter (2003), the stereotype aggravates the possibilities of self-representation for women (p. 310) because what they have to tell is not taken seriously. Therefore, the way women are represented through the "madwoman" stereotype reinforces a supposed irrationality in women, diminishing the possibility of them being heard, making it imperative for us to look at their own representations in which they can tell what the real problem that haunts them is.

The representation of the stereotype of the "madwoman" reveals the differentiation that is often made between the effects of mental illness in women and men. In nineteenth-century England and France, the perception of "madness" as a "female malady" was a result of the popularization of the figure of the "madwoman," which dominated the cultural field in representations of "madness" in the theater, for instance (Kromm, 1994, p. 507). This and the data at the time that proved women were more prone to be institutionalized for mental health issues influenced the understanding of madness as a gendered disorder, distinguishing the "madman" from the "madwoman". The "madman" was seen as an aggressive, potentially combative figure, while the "madwoman" would be a sexually provocative and self-abusing figure (Kromm, 1994, p. 507). Both stereotypes were structured from a masculine point of view that was concerned with domination and survival, perceiving the violent "madman" as a competitor for authority and control, whereas the "madwoman" was challenging the male viewer's desire for sexual authority and domination (Kromm, 1994, p. 508). The "madwoman" stereotype can be *fetishized* due to the sexual aspect that identified and differentiated the representation of this figure from her male counterpart as seen in Ellen's depiction of Georgia O'Keeffe in mania as a sexy woman with messy hair, and the fixation on Ellen's sexuality to define her diagnosis (Forney, 2012, p. 17-18).

In the same way the "madwoman" can be fetishized, she can be romanticized, such as the "crazy artist" that Forney discusses in *Marbles*. Taking into consideration that, as Michel Foucault showed in *Madness and Civilization* (1963), the asylum is primarily a form of institutional control, the figure of the madwoman became an appealing metaphor for women's rebellion (Donaldson, 2002, p. 100). In *Women and Madness* (2018), Phyllis

Chesler views women's madness as an escape from repression, stating that “women have already been bitterly and totally repressed sexually; many may be reacting to or trying to escape from just such repression, and the powerlessness that it signifies, by ‘going mad’” (Chesler, 2018, position 1630). In the face of repression, “to go mad,” or, “to lose your marbles” might be considered the only sane response to a system where everything is insane (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977, p. 374). The romanticization of such an act also developed a sort of appeal in being institutionalized: in *Mockingbird Years* (2000), Emily Fox Gordon describes her stay at a mental hospital as “the fulfillment of an adolescent fantasy” (2000, p. 5). In this sense, gender adds another layer to the romanticization of the “crazy artist,” bringing to this stereotype a female version of “madness” blended with art.

The romanticization of the “madwoman” stereotype also reveals the importance of being attentive to the differentiation between “madness” and “mental illness,” and how this influences the perspectives on the same issue. When Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and established Bertha Mason from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) as a representative of the stereotype of the “madwoman” in feminist criticism, their discussion concerned “madness” as a metaphor, not “mental illness” as a medical concern (Donaldson, 2002, p. 101). However, fictional representations of “madness” tend to influence clinical discourses of mental illness and vice versa (Donaldson, 2002, p. 101), as the circulation of Bertha Mason's behavior, for instance, influenced Victorian readers, including psychiatrists, who used her to build medical accounts of female insanity (Donaldson, 2002, p. 101). If we leave the romanticization aside, “madness” does not offer women much possibility for true resistance or productive rebellion (Donaldson, 2002, p. 101). In reality, as expressed in Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s book title, *The Madwoman Can't Speak* because the “madwoman” stereotype just offers an illusory power (Donaldson, 2002, p. 101). Mental illness is actually a request for help, a manifestation of cultural impotence and political castration (Felman, 1997, p. 2). In this sense, the reproduction of the “madwoman” stereotype, even in the field of fiction, has real consequences that can impact women's lives.

Marbles shows how impotent Ellen felt during her depression and how chaotic her life was when in mania. Her honest depiction of what at first seemed to be the concretization of her view of a “crazy [female] artist,” in reality, showed the problems of being mentally ill. When “madness” or “craziness” are used as a metaphor for rebellion and uniqueness, mental *illness* is ignored. Although “madness” as a feminist rebellion might at first seem like a

positive strategy for combating the stigmas associated with mental illness, it ends up diminishing the lived experience of many people disabled by mental illness (Donaldson, 2002, p. 102). In the end, the “madwoman” stereotype involves both the identity of a woman and of a person with a disability, even though the latter is taken for granted. Rosemary Garland-Thomson states that “no woman is ever only a woman,” having other identities, such as of disabled or of nondisabled woman (Brueggemann et al., 2005, p. 32). In this sense, gender as a system operates in tandem with disability (Brueggemann et al., 2005, p. 32). In the same way we must advocate for the representation of disability in a way that respects the person with disability, the way women with disability are portrayed and can portray themselves has to be more respectful.

The stereotype of the “madwoman” has become stretched out by feminists and nonfeminists, influenced by both points of view. Recovering a view of the “madwoman” as dangerous and erotic is not considerate to real women who do not want to be portrayed as a character in an attic or an asylum, whereas the romanticization and view of the “madwoman” as rebellious and empowered disregard the weaknesses and pain of being mentally ill. Forney opts for a representation of the “madwoman” through “crazy [female] artists” and herself in a milder and more complex way, not portraying herself and other “crazy [female] artists” as feminist “madwomen” nor contributing to a negative view of the stereotype since the way she represents it is even romanticized by her in some moments. Instead, she portrays an honest account of what it is like for a woman to be mentally ill. She glamorizes that she can be an eccentric, sexy, and rebellious “madwoman” in some moments. In others, she uses makeup to hide her “madness” and yearns to be like the image of a stable woman, so she can get rid of her image as a “madwoman.” In the end of the graphic memoir, she concludes that she could be an audacious woman even though she is medicated, coming to amends with her personality as a “madwoman” and her treatment that enables her to be steady without killing it.

2.3 REPRESENTING THE SELF AND OTHERS

There is a reason the construction of the stereotype of “madwoman” was made to label women such as Ellen. Stereotyping happens because it is a helpful cognitive process, reducing the complexity of the world around us through simplification and generalization (Køhlert, 2019, p. 162). One of the problems with this “facilitation” is that limiting a group of

people to a stereotype is a practice that leads to ignoring the diversity that composes it. Stereotypes have the potential to deny individuality by discounting differences and placing people in categories based on certain attributes or characteristics. In this sense, they reduce people based on superficial differences to achieve some purpose, determining which traits will be equalized so that individuality can be ignored (Køhlert, 2019, p. 162). Stereotypes are highly related to subjectivity, power, and ideology. Stereotyping is also a practice that segregates groups: stereotyping social groups creates a sense of order in the world that expresses values and beliefs and, by differentiating people through stereotypes, boundaries between insiders and outsiders in a given society are built (Køhlert, 2019, p. 163). Those who belong to the outsider group must share some fundamental trait that serves to demarcate them as different (Køhlert, 2019, p. 163). Women, in particular, are perceived as Others in order to define a woman not in herself but as relative to a man, and not be regarded as an autonomous being (De Beauvoir, 1956, p. 16). In this sense, otherness is an effective tool for the perpetuation of patriarchal ideals, which place men as central figures. The "madwoman" stereotype is part of the repertoire of patriarchy to place women in this position of otherness and ignore their individualities as persons.

Interestingly, comics are an art for which representation of stereotypes is necessarily part of, and it is up to the author how these stereotypes are going to be used. Comics art relies on simplified iconic abstraction, depending on reductionist and stereotyped imagery. Since it is a medium in which the author must communicate clearly and directly, the simplification of images into symbols becomes imperative (Køhlert, 2019, p. 165). The question is whether the author will give in to comfortably representing stereotypes, reproducing prejudices and discourses that suggest the exclusion of one or more social groups, or whether they will make use of the medium's tools, such as humor, creativity, and freedom, to use stereotypes in favor of these groups and give them voice for more authentic representations. In *Marbles*, Forney portrayed the stereotype of the "crazy [female] artists" with her perspective of what it is like to be a "crazy [female] artist." She appropriated a vision of her that took away her individuality, limiting her to another "crazy artist," and built a memoir about this experience, which is a very effective way of individualizing a stereotype and showing publicly that there are individuals within this group and each one of them has their relationship with the identity by which they are socially recognized.

Although it has an autobiographical aspect to it as it is a self-referential text that recounts Forney's life, *Marbles* is better described and cataloged as a memoir instead of an

autobiography for historical reasons. This is an interesting starting point to discuss how women, such as Forney, found in graphic memoirs a refuge from more traditional genres to represent themselves. When discussing the history of autobiography as a genre, it becomes evident that gender played a role in its definition, making it tainted by patriarchal expectations. According to Leigh Gilmore, “the representative man seems always to have been at the center of the production of autobiography” (1994, p. 1-2). This representative man is in roles such as the poet, the scholar, the citizen, and the hero. He is the presumed main character of the story. In this sense, autobiography is perceived as what men write (Gilmore, 1994, p. 2). A result of this perception is that a woman's autobiography is frequently not recognized as “autobiography” since it is against the dominant representations of identity and authority, which are masculine. Consequently, when a woman becomes both the agent and the subject of self-representation, its possibility starts being questioned (Gilmore, 1994, p. 2) because, since the presumed protagonist and writer is a man, how does a woman represent and gets represented? Gilmore (1994) encourages the analysis of how women use self-representation and its possibilities to exchange from the position of object to self-representational agency (Gilmore, 1994, p. 12). In this sense, self-referential works by women such as Forney’s *Marbles* serve as examples of how female self-representational works offer resistance in the artistic field.

Gender inevitably plays a role in self-referential texts also because identity is a vital element in this type of work. In this context, identity can be perceived in categories such as “personhood,” “citizenship,” and “women” and, as the reader identifies with a text that portrays an individual's life, they construct an imaginary relation to the situation the text is depicting. In this sense, identification is aligned with politics and possibilities in the cultural development of self-representational writing (Gilmore, 1994, p. 24). These writings also incorporate biographies and history: according to William Spengemann, the act of writing about oneself is related to historical biography since “each individual life contributes something to the endlessly evolving history of mankind and is therefore of interest to the one who lives it and, at least potentially, to everyone else” (Spengemann, 1980, p. 176). In this sense, individual lives are tied together, building human history. These texts form and express categories that were developed throughout history such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class, aspects of identity represented through and in relation to discourses of gender, which are always present (Gilmore, 1994, p. 24). According to Gilmore, gender is always present because the very existence of gender as a category that is often used to sum women up

legitimates the existence of the women category, which can be analyzed when we discuss autobiographies (Gilmore, 1994, p. 24). Therefore, gender is there, even when it is not overtly mentioned, such as we find in *Marbles*.

Comics are an invitation to write and draw about ourselves. Trauma is often the fuel for this kind of writing, and comics offer more than words to describe situations of trauma. According to Chute, the visualization in them suggests that it is necessary to reflect on the unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility that usually are used to characterize trauma in comics (Chute, 2010, p. 3), putting in image what cannot be described through words. Besides, the medium of comics offers multiple layers of possible temporalities. By situating the reader in the past while bringing a retrospective perception in the textual narration, a tension between the past and the present is created in the comic (Køhlert, 2019, p. 84). This is especially valuable when one writes about their life story since the author can be both the victim of the trauma situated in the past and a detached observer who is recreating the story (Gardner, 2008, p. 12), which helps them assimilate the traumatic events they went through with a different perspective.

Comics' suitability to portray trauma, made it appealing to women's self-representation. As Sandra Cox has stated, "if feminism is a verb, then making and reading comics are certainly an important and useful way 'to feminism'" (2021, p. 265). In comics history, many women used the medium to express their struggles and represent themselves and each other as a group. In the late 1960s to early 1970s, the era of underground comix was established and, during this period, "comix" set the idea of comics as a form for adults, surpassing the notion that it was a medium for kids (Hatfield, 2005, p. 7). They also declared the arrival of comic books for adults, and most of these books were for adults *only* (Hatfield, 2005, p. 7). This opened up space for comics that depicted images that confronted conservative ideals that were predominant at the time, portraying sexuality, for instance. This open-mindedness did not prevent the underground context from still being male-dominant and reinforcing misogynistic ideas through the artists' creations (Sabin, 2020, p. 43). However, even in this context, there was a miniboom in comix by and for women (Sabin, 2020, p. 43). In the 60s, Aline Kominsky-Crumb was a significant female author in comics who decided to write autobiographical works (Chute, 2010, p. 17). These works not only paved the way for Forney's *Marbles* but also shed light on women's lives and their collective worries, making comics a medium for practicing feminism. Hillary Chute (2010) even connects this growth of the underground comix movement by women to the second wave of feminism, in which

female activists pointed out the misogyny they struggled with that was mirrored in the underground comics they made.

The empowerment of women in comics made this medium a way to combat gender stereotypes and restrictions. Gilmore suggests that women and other life writers who are marginalized by the mainstream culture might prefer alternative genres, such as comics, since they can offer a more enjoyable environment for self-representation than the traditional autobiography (1994, p. 96). In women's graphic narratives, especially memoirs, there are many sorts of challenging images not to be found elsewhere (Chute, 2010, p. 4) because comics encourage women to work with a medium that incites freer endeavors since it allows them to represent themselves however they want to, not needing to correspond to stereotypes that can interfere the way women are represented. In this way, they can show a different version of what it is like to be a woman, not from a male-dominant perspective that can limit the female identity in stereotypes. On this, Susie Bright has stated that:

> “there is literally no other place besides Comix where you can find women speaking the truth and using their pictures to show you, in vivid detail, what it means to live your life outside of the stereotypes and delusions that we see on television, in shopping malls, and at newsstands.” (Bright, 1994, p. 7).

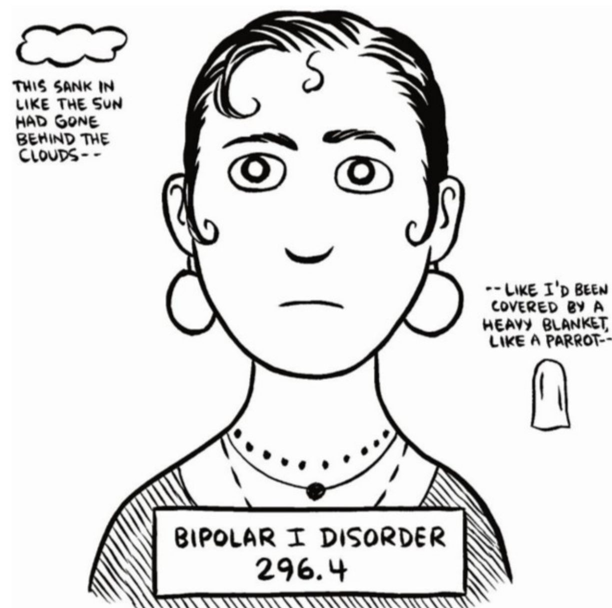
Therefore, from a woman's point of view, the reader of a comic, an “out-law” genre per se, can get access to an actual “out-law perspective.” By “out-law” I mean outside of established stereotypes on women who do not correspond to social norms, such as the “madwoman.”

2.4 A NEW ICONOGRAPHY

The reader of *Marbles* can empathize with Ellen in the first chapters, where her fear of bearing the label of a “crazy [female] artist” is emphasized. In a close-up scene, we have access to the representation of her feeling right after being diagnosed (Forney, 2012, p. 19). She looks static in the sense that it appears that her look is frozen, processing the information she just received, in a representation of a mugshot. She reflects on the realization that her personality was actually a reflection of a disorder, which, as the term itself suggests, is something that refers to a lack of control and chaos. Ellen narrates “my own BRILLANT, UNIQUE personality was neatly outlined right there, in that inanimate stack of paper” (Forney, 2012, p. 19). On her chest, a plate identifies her as “Bipolar I Disorder 296.4.” The number refers to the number assigned to Bipolar I Disorder in the DSM, which is a worldwide

used handbook used by health care professionals as an authoritative guide to diagnose patients with mental disorders. In this sense, Ellen became just a number, someone who lost the originality of her personality, which she was proud of and had no idea that had already been predicted and cataloged by the medical establishment. The fact that this page has a mugshot aesthetic suggests that she is literally being labeled with the DSM code where her name and date of "arrest" would be in the plate in real mugshot. That becomes her identity and how she is perceived. She associates her diagnosis with being apprehended by the police for committing a crime. This "crime" is her identity, her personality and her behavior, which now are condemning. This page can also be considered one of *Marbles'* most important autobiographical depictions as it is so focused on Ellen's face. Her expression is one of

Figure 25 – Ellen is labeled with Bipolar I Disorder



Source: Forney, 2012, p. 19

astonishment and suggests a passive expectation regarding the future that awaits her: the closed lips, the distant gaze, the neutral eyebrows, and eyes directed to the horizon, to what the future holds. All these details on the portrayal of her face at that moment communicate to the reader that they must notice that Ellen is fearful and frozen. The use of close-ups like this one in *Marbles* is a common strategy in comics to provoke feelings in the reader. When characters in comics are shown in a way that portrays details of their facial expressions, this probably encourages the reader to feel empathy (El Refaie, 2012, p. 201) because, by showing facial expressions in detail, the character's feelings are emphasized. The first account of Ellen as officially a "crazy [female] artist" asks the reader to carefully look at Ellen's expressed feelings, proving the ability of graphic memoirs to provoke empathy.

Graphic memoirs can also incite the readers' identification with the main character, potentially building a community. According to El Refaie, identification in comics can be defined as “the tendency for readers to become attached to the protagonist of a graphic memoir on the basis of qualities, values, or experiences that are roughly congruent with their own” (2012, p. 188). A key element for this identification to occur is the reader’s ability and willingness to draw parallels between their lives and those of the people about whom they are reading (El Refaie, 2012, p. 188). A way for the reader to identify with the narrator is by perceiving that they belong to the same gender, social class, or generation, or share the same values, interests, and experiences (El Refaie, 2012, p. 188). In the case of illness narratives such as *Marbles*, the identification with the protagonists is probably most common when readers have experienced the same illness or have witnessed someone go through a similar situation (El Refaie, 2012, p. 188). The emotions portrayed are also helpful in showing the character’s inner experiences that can provoke identification (El Refaie, 2012, p. 196). In this sense, the more creators open up to readers, the more they can build an identification bond with the audience. When the author and many readers identify with each other, such a bond can become a wider net. In this sense, identification can build an “imagined community,” which is described by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1991) as a community that is based on a created sense of belonging and sharing important characteristics, experiences, and values. El Refaie appropriated this term, which originally was about nationalism spread through newspapers, to apply to other kinds of imagined communities that are formed parting from widely circulated texts (El Refaie, 2012, p. 189). Therefore, comics can encourage the audience to relate to what they are reading by empathizing and identifying with the characters. In this sense, by provoking feelings such as empathy and identification, comics show promise in being a vehicle for stories where the representation of an identity is important.

Graphic illness narratives, for instance, can resignify the experience of illness by creating a new image of the author for themselves and for the readers. Graphic memoirs about illness can offer the author the opportunity of a “refacement” with themselves as they have to draw themselves various times (Chute, 2010, p. 80-81). Moreover, a visual illness narrative is a form of building a self-definition, considering that the continuous reiteration of the story can change the way that authors perceive themselves and think about the events they describe (Williams, 2014, p. 74). In this sense, narrating the story of an illness can become a means to reconstruct the patient's identity and the narrative can also help us understand the world and

how it relates to identity (Whitehead, 2014, p. 112) since the author is portraying their surroundings while depicting their personal experiences. In this sense, these works do not offer only the author the opportunity to perceive themselves in a different way when revisiting their experience through drawings and words. Readers who identify with the author also can have this chance. The reason comics have the potential to build these communities is that, as Michael A. Chaney has pointed out, comics "make abstractions of identity visible" since the self is drawn on the page, where it gets materiality (2016, p. 31). By seeing the character concretized in drawing, readers who identify with them can make more sense of what is part of their identity. In this sense, the concretization of this identity in an image can be revisited and reformulated however the author wants, which is particularly important in the portrayal of illness experiences, since the images of the ill are often stigmatized. That is why graphic memoirs on illness not only articulate the subjective experience but also forge a new iconography, affecting the way individuals experience illness (Williams, 2014, p. 74; 82). With a new iconography made through visual media, such as comics, identities can be revisited and resignified.

One of these identities that can be revisited is the "crazy female artist." This is what Forney does towards the end of *Marbles*. In the image of Ellen that was discussed at the beginning of this section, she was scared after the label of being bipolar, or "crazy," was placed on her by the DSM with an identification plate (Forney, 2012, p. 19). In contrast to this image that associates Ellen with the "madwoman," and to the fictional view of a stable "madwoman" Ellen fantasized about (Forney, 2012, p. 227), towards the end of *Marbles*, Ellen shows us her stable self, which has the personality she used to associate with her disorder but is actually part of her unique identity as *Ellen*. She drew a version of a photograph (Figure 27) in which she is in Lake Washington wearing a gala dress and posing humorously for the photo (Forney, 2012, p. 233). She is being "goofy" and fun in the image and stresses that at that moment she was having a balanced life (Forney, 2012, p. 233). Even stable, she still considered herself a "bipolar artist" (Forney, 2012, p. 218), but her image in the lake does not refer to a version of Ellen about to jump into the lake with stones in her pockets just as the image of Virginia Woolf was marked. Thus, Ellen offers us another perspective, a new iconography: a "crazy female artist" does not need to be represented as a portrait of sadness. At least, not only. Giving a real account of being a woman with a mental illness may include suffering, but needs to go beyond this since the identity of a person who goes through this experience is much broader. It is the identity of a woman who may have

gone through institutions, medications, and the process of being eroticized, and stereotyped. Yet, she can survive this experience since there can be company, a support network. Although Forney does not use feminist terms to determine her ideals in *Marbles*, the presence of Jamison, Di, Risa, Karen, Ellen's mother, the "crazy female artists" such as O'Keeffe, Plath, and Ellen herself, among other women, is there represented.

Figure 26 – Stable Ellen in real life and in *Marbles*

Sources: blog.fantagraphics.com ; Forney, 2012, p. 233

3 FINAL REMARKS

In this thesis, I analyzed Forney's representations of the "crazy artists," which served as a foundation to build a discussion on the stereotype of the "crazy female artist." I considered the contributions that social constructs on gender interfere in Forney's depiction of the "crazy artists" in order to learn how Forney's representations could intertwine mental illness, art and gender as well. I also found, in this process, the discussion of madness and mental health as different ideas that built the depiction of the "crazy artist," as an identity that encompasses the social stigmas of being "crazy," with the romanticization that can come along with the idea of the "crazy artist" being rebellious, and of being a person with disability who might feel excluded from society and negatively marked by their illness, aside having to deal with the difficulties of affection itself in their body and/or in their mind.

The questions that were kept in mind during the first chapter were: "How does Forney address the concept of the 'crazy artist'?," and "How might the experience of mental illness affect the life of an artist as portrayed in Forney's *Marbles*?." In the first chapter, I delved into the concept of the "crazy artist" and other versions of it before *Marbles*. It was found that mental illness affects the identity of an artist in the sense they can associate art with disorders even before getting diagnosed, as happened to Ellen, making them feel contrasting feelings about that. They may feel gifted by being touched with fire but also suffocated by the stigma of being mentally ill in a society that casts these people out from it since they do not correspond to an ideal worker that would serve capitalism. I also saw that Forney addressed and represented the stereotype of the "crazy artists" as a sort of bittersweet experience since being a "crazy artist" cannot be described solely as "bad" or simply as "good." One cannot be "mad" without being "mentally ill," regardless of how appealingly subversive being "mad" might sound like. The "crazy artist" is a diverse imaginary community where each integrant has a unique experience, as each of the "crazy artists" Ellen brought to her narrative demonstrated. Even different from each other in certain aspects, "crazy artists" can bond, and such a company can offer a better understanding of their identity as "crazy artists."

In the case of the second chapter, the guiding questions were: "How can Forney's observations about crazy artists contribute to a better understanding of the public image of the

'crazy female artist'?", "How was the representation of the "crazy [female] artists" in *Marbles* affected by the stereotype of the 'madwoman?'", and "How can comics help resignify the image of the 'crazy female artist' taking *Marbles* as an example?." In the second chapter, I bracketed off things and zoomed in one aspect of *Marbles* to discuss a particular subcommunity in the "crazy artists:" The "crazy [female] artists." And I analyzed how Forney's observations about "crazy artists" could contribute to a better understanding of the public image of the "crazy female artist" since she portrays herself and other women artists in her graphic memoir with images that make reference to the possible ways of representing "crazy [female] artists:" as sexy, such as O'Keeffe; as manic, such as Ellen; and as talented, such as Plath, for instance. The stereotype of the "madwoman" was particularly present in some of the ways Forney visually represented Ellen, especially in her mania, and her imagined image of a "crazy" Georgia O'Keeffe. In terms of words, standing for a view of Plath through a reflection of "Sylvia Plath Effect" also showed us a glimpse of how the old stereotype of the "madwoman" might be pictured, and revealed that she is still in our contemporary repertoire. The diverse way Forney represents herself and those artists, offering examples of versions of them, is striking, which can insight a questioning on why these women are usually not so diversely portrayed. The fact that Ellen herself is a "crazy [female] artist" suggests why she does not forget to mention the works of those women and how important they are as artists, not focusing only in their mental issues. Her choice of using the medium of comics also helped representing the image of the "crazy [female] artist," because it is possible to resignify the experience of illness through this medium due to its visual aspect in combination with words and its rebellious history. In this sense, the image of women with mental illnesses can benefit from the portrayal of them through a more complex way of narrating since the words help us better comprehend the images and vice versa. This combination of formats also explains why Forney could discuss these topics respecting their complexities.

In addition to what was proposed since the beginning of the thesis, *Marbles* also guided us to discuss the power of difficult words and violent images. Ellen showed how triggering the word "crazy" used to be. Still, she used it extensively during her narrative. In this sense, she naturalized in her speech a word that once hurt her. In relation to images, her work proposed a particular view of the experience of being a "crazy [female] artist," a woman who is capable of doing exceptional art, but is still limited by her mental illness and the social aggressions she might face due to its stigma. A way of perpetuating this oppression is through

the violent images of women in their last day, such as Woolf, objectified women, as O'Keeffe, and as a trope, in Plath's case. However, Ellen does not address the discussion this way since she does not make clear statements on that. Instead, she offered the context for our discussion.

Forney chose the comics medium to tell her experience with mental illness to the public because "a mood disorder is such an internal thing. It is about emotions and ways of thinking" (Forney, 2020). Through drawings, she could make visible her invisible demons so she "could see them" (Forney, 2020), and she gained authority over both her madness, through the "crazy artists" community, and her mental illness, as a Bipolar I patient that went through treatment to find stability in her life. In the end, she made visible not only her demons but also the image of the "madwoman," who still haunts the basements of fiction and affects the way real women with mood disorders like Ellen feel represented. By showing different versions of the "madwoman," Forney portrayed the layers of this stereotype and revealed the importance of building awareness on its complexity through the compound format of comics, which contributes to more complex depictions, as the disposition and choice of images and words complement each other, creating more than one layer of interpretation. By portraying these intricacies of the "madwoman" experience and representation, Forney's work showed it is possible to create new iconographies, new ways of being represented and represent.

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