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## *Exiles: Trauma, Art & Design*

Edwin Lew-Højbak Paquette  
*Portland State University*

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*Exiles: Trauma, Art & Design*

by

Edwin Lew-Højbak Paquette

An undergraduate thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

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in

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and

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Thesis Advisor

Sean Schumacher

Portland State University

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## INTRODUCTION

Last year, I was put on Wellbutrin for my depression and ADHD.

It felt like melting after a lifetime of being encased in ice. I could suddenly see and feel the world around me, and my quality of life improved dramatically. However, I also began to experience frequent nightmares and auditory hallucinations. My therapist and psychiatrist had privately suspected I had experienced and repressed some sort of childhood trauma, and they were right. I was just beginning to remember what had laid frozen and forgotten in my body for decades.

Immediately, I knew my thesis project was going to be focused on my own personal journey with PTSD. At the time, it was essential I learn to take care of myself and feel well. So, with a good chunk of allotted time set aside, I got to work. Outside of formal psychotherapy, I spent my freetime reading academically about childhood trauma. I wanted to understand the roots of what was happening to me, and begin the process of unraveling.

## RESEARCH

As expected, my research began within the field of psychology. My roommate, by a stroke of luck, was a psych major devoted to researching early childhood trauma, and had a fair collection of books she was happy to share with me. I began with what is essentially the bible on trauma and PTSD, *The Body Keeps the Score*, by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk. Here, I learned a lot about the physiology of trauma. I saw brain scans of patients with PTSD, who when triggered, looked like their nerves had been set on fire. I also learned a lot about the opposite reaction: dissociation, my greatest struggle. When things reach a breaking point, your brain will protect itself by going on autopilot and trying its best not to save much new information. The contrast between these two trauma reactions, while of personal interest, also piqued my creative interest.

Trauma, while not genetic, is often passed down to the next generations, adequately called “transgenerational trauma.” This effect is exacerbated by being a member of a persecuted ethnic or religious minority that may have consistently experienced trauma for several generations. Similarly, children of military service members are at high risk for trauma and psychological issues via a process known as “intergenerational transmission.” This can be the result of growing up in lifelong instability, being raised by a parent with PTSD, and/or parental distress leading to

neglect or abuse (Sogomonyan, 2010). Coming to understand this cycle, and how it affects my family, allowed me appropriate empathy towards my parents while exploring topics that sometimes made me question everything I thought I knew. I could feel the deep importance of maintaining this empathy, and took a tangent into the study of love through struggle with bell hooks' *All About Love*.

Though it has to be approached with some scrutiny, YouTube has an active community of therapists and LCSWs. The first source I accessed for this project was Patrick Teahan's video, "My 7 Types of Toxic Family Systems." I was recommended to his channel by my psychiatrist, therapist, and good friend all independently of each other, and for good reason. His channel is a free goldmine of information on childhood trauma, and introduced me to the concept of the inner child. Similar to Jungian shadow work, it's the idea that you have a semi-independent entity inside of you reflecting who you were as a child. For me, this visualization of a little shadow was my gateway to self compassion. It taught me how truly destructive it is to suppress your emotions, whether consciously or unconsciously. I began to think about how I might communicate the wonders this practice had done for me.

Though not traditional research, I have found attending regular Codependents Anonymous meetings to be the single most important “source” for this project. Learning from the shared experiences and wisdom of the community revealed so much to me about myself, the greater patterns at work within dysfunctional family systems, and their lasting effect on the health and wellbeing of people well into adulthood.

Through my independent trauma research, I gained a deeper understanding of where my personal trauma responses come from, and an awareness of the havoc they have been wreaking on my life. Three concepts especially stood out to me: Jungian shadow work, the related concept of the inner child, and Internal Family Systems (IFS).

## IDEATION

For a bit, I considered the possibility of designing an educational campaign about trauma, that would include posters and a print publication. My passion in graphic design is page layout and typography, and knew if I put the work in, I could create a shocking and beautiful campaign. However, I wanted to challenge myself by going a more personal route with something narrative and illustrative. Following my research and personal therapy, I began to daydream a story about someone’s inner child

manifesting physically. What would I do, if I suddenly had an eight-year old version of myself haunting me?

I decided to construct a narrative around an adult character dealing with the aftermath of childhood trauma. I could never aim to represent everyone's story in one go, so I decided to just focus on one: mine. As they say, write what you know. Comics and graphic novels are ideal for communicating the unspeakable, invisible experiences of trauma, since you have both words and pictures on your side (Davies, 2020). It's a medium I've always been attracted to, and I've always wanted to create one since I was a kid, so I thought this medium would be the perfect way to bring things all together.

There was a small hiccup when I began to consider who the audience for this kind of comic would even be. Would no one read it? However, with modern internet communication and mental health awareness, trauma is being more freely discussed than ever before, even leading some to question how this generation became so traumatized. While growing up in the post-9/11 era undoubtedly plays a part, the truth is that trauma is just more common than people realize. Most people (about 70 percent of the world's population) have experienced at least one traumatic event, and a little under

a third (30.5 percent) have experienced four or more (Benjet, 2016). Realizing this, I saw that the audience for this story could actually be incredibly broad. Though I had initially planned to use proper psych terminology in the story, I chose to omit it in favor of more general words for the same experience in order to keep the story accessible to anyone who might resonate with it.

## VISUAL RESEARCH

Once I'd decided on the medium of a comic, visual research and experimentation was vital to finding the appropriate style for this work. This included everything from illustration & writing to lettering, panel structure, & color. Most of my research during this time was from primary sources: comics and graphic novels. I poured through my favorites, like *Mob Psycho 100*, *Nimona*, and *Fullmetal Alchemist* and took note of what I liked. Full-page spreads, panels bleeding into the background, and experimental treatment of text were a few of my favorite techniques. However, I was not drawn to the style of clean linework typical for comics. Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics*, 1993) would argue that a comic's illustrative simplicity is its greatest strength, allowing the mind to immerse itself in the story by filling in the gaps with the reader's own personal imagination. He is correct, and that technique has produced some of my favorite visual



stories. However, I was going for a different effect. Because of the subject matter, I almost wanted the comic to feel a bit uncomfortable. I wanted the effect to be shockingly raw.

I was heavily inspired by the work of Frank Santaro in his graphic novel *Pittsburgh*. His use of watercolor pencil over sketches gives the story an incredibly vivid and eerie tone that I wanted to emulate. However, I acknowledged the skill required to make that sketchy quality look intentional and effective without any digital interference. Gratefully, my professor loaned me an iPad for the semester, and after years of dedication to hand-done illustration, I dipped my toes into digital illustration for the first time. Procreate became my best friend as I practiced sketching and writing in multiple styles and brushes, until I hit something that was enjoyable and appropriate for the topic: the watercolor brush. It gave me just enough control to be able to hand letter the text, and still enough freedom for things to bleed and change a bit unpredictably. The pressure sensitivity of the pen also allowed me to get these eerie transparencies reminiscent of Santaro's work. I was adequately satisfied, and committed to using the brush for the project.

Knowing that I would be illustrating a shadow/inner-child version of myself for this project, I had a small crisis figuring out how I should depict them, as I am a transgender man who lived as a girl for most of my youth. So, I started reading again, this time, transgender literature. I wanted to know, how had other transgender people faced this question, and expressed it creatively? The depiction that resonated with me was in *A Natural History of Transition* by Callum Angus, whose writing addressed the confusion with raw simplicity, blunt and unadorned statements of physical appearance. It felt right, so that's how I decided to draw her: a young girl with a striped shirt, frizzy hair and enormous eyes.

I also needed to figure out the logistics of how I would print and distribute the comic once it was finished. Luckily, the perfect medium fell into my hands in the form of a workshop class I took in my last semester: risography. For the unfamiliar, the Riso is an automated screenprinter that will burn the screen and press vivid ink to paper for you in bulk. It was originally designed as a simple copy machine back in 1980s Japan, but was quickly adopted by the art and graphic design community for its quirky textures and misregistration mishaps. After I made my first print, I too fell in love with the machine and planned to return with my comic once it was ready.

## THE PROJECT

Like any narrative project, first I had to write a script. As I was going semi-autobiographical, I focused my creative energy on keeping the writing engaging for the reader. I chose to use second-person narrative, as it's rather strange to see it used in print media, and wanted to push the feeling of general unease and uncertainty.

The story went similarly to my introduction here: I got on medication, felt better, but began experiencing my PTSD in full force. Incorporating magical realism, I used arguments between myself and the character of my little shadow to make my emotional conflict material. She symbolized several ideas I was in conflict with at the time: flashbacks, triggers, and difficult emotions. In the story, and in real life, I tried my best to ignore it all until it was impossible. The story ends with me accepting the shadow, and everything that comes with it, lovingly as a part of myself.

I blocked out what words would appear on which pages, and made sure to keep the page count divisible by four so the book could be appropriately bound. After some brief thumbnails for each page, I selected my chosen watercolor brush, and dived in.

Due to the emotional nature of the narrative, I wanted things to feel spontaneous, and with the power of digital illustration, was able to make edits afterwards if things weren't working. Each page was crafted as its own original piece of art, with overlapping textures, text running in and out of boxes, and expressive faces to convey the chaotic and conflicting emotions occurring over the course of the story.

To keep production costs low, I printed everything at the PSUGD Rad Lab individually. I used regular legal-sized paper, staple saddle stitch binding, and black ink for the same reason: affordability, though I splurged on some heavier red paper for the cover. I imposed my illustrations on a document for Riso printing, and made sure each page was correctly formatted to go in order when I folded everything together. For the amount of time the research, writing, and illustrations took, I'm glad I decided on such an ergonomic approach to the printing process: the first print of 10 issues, including all of the printing, folding, and binding, only took about 2 hours. Each issue cost less than a dollar to make, and though I haven't listed them for sale on my website yet, could be sold for a very affordable price. Accessibility to the story is a priority of mine, so I will be working over the summer to add image descriptions to the web version.

## CONCLUSION

My specific interest with childhood trauma, and how it interferes with a person's ability to form healthy and loving relationships as an adult, led me to create a comic that taught me a lot about illustration, storytelling, print production, and myself. I've seen what can happen when you let trauma go unaddressed, and I don't want to repeat those same mistakes. I want to choose a different future by learning how to take good care of my mind and body, accepting myself and living an authentic life. With my comic, I wanted it to express those same desires, and show that they are possible to achieve.

Though I kept the audience for my project broad, the research and process was primarily self-work. However, it was also a gathering and sharing of knowledge for my community, who have had similar experiences to me. I felt my emotions and saw myself through this project in a way I never have before, and I hope the comic can offer others some of the same.

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