

## Making the Unspeakable Seen?

### Trauma and Disability in David Small's *Stitches*

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**ABSTRACT:** Over the last two decades, the 'graphic novel' has increasingly become of interest to literary scholars of trauma, who praise the form for its innovative approach to storytelling. This article critically examines Marianne Hirsch and Edward Brunner's thesis that multimodal trauma narratives succeed in making the unspeakable visible and audible to the reader. By analyzing David Small's graphic memoir *Stitches*, I shed light on the potential as well as on the limitations that the comics medium faces in its representation of trauma. In so doing, this paper aims to demonstrate the ambivalent effects that the negotiation of disability has on graphic trauma narratives.

**KEYWORDS:** trauma theory; disability studies; multi-modality; autobiographical comics; David Small; *Stitches*

The feeling of being exempt from calamity stimulates interest in looking at painful pictures, and looking at them suggests and strengthens the feeling that one is exempt. Partly it is because one is "here," not "there," and partly it is the character of inevitability that all events acquire when they are transmuted into images.

(Susan Sontag, *On Photography* 131)

### The Development of Graphic Trauma Narratives

When studying trauma and trauma narratives, a problem that according to Cathy Caruth remains central to the task of therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists, and filmmakers alike, is "the difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story" (vii). Over the last two decades, graphic narratives have increasingly been praised for reshaping trauma narratives in so far unimaginable ways of breaking up linear and representational storytelling. Mimetic imagery has, however, functioned as a central element of trauma narratives ever since the times of ancient Greek mythology: Ovid's character Philomela, for instance, turns to the art of tapestry to tell her traumatic story. She is able to reveal the sexual and physical violence experienced by her perpetrator Tereus,

despite his effort to silence her by cutting off her tongue (cf. Ovid 486–619). The loss of her tongue does not only literally mute Philomela but also visualizes the unspeakability of trauma.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of Ovid’s story lies the inaccessibility to spoken language that characterizes the trauma of Philomela. Transformed by the gods into a nightingale, Philomela remains wordless, yet not without a voice. Although Philomela’s trauma remains mostly unintelligible, Ovid successfully captures the unspeakability of trauma by using highly poetic language and the imagery of disability. Ever since, literary accounts of trauma have not only continued to rely heavily on mimetic imagery, but they have also increasingly utilized different visual art forms (e.g., photography, paintings, and comics) as they continue to question the potentials and limitations of spoken and written language. While the non-normative body is perhaps one of the most frequent images used in the endeavour to depict trauma, disability often remains to function as a “narrative prosthesis,” a mere “opportunistic metaphorical device” (Mitchell and Snyder 47), that does not acknowledge the materiality of its signifier. By looking at the close entanglement of trauma and disability, this article engages with what appears to be a blank space within trauma theory and the field of literary disability studies.

Postmodern literature has come to include visual elements as an additional mode to the text-bound book more than any other literary era before as it frequently challenges its formal limitations and self-consciously experiments with its medium (cf. Maziarczyk 169-70). By making use of multimodality in varying ways and to different extents, American literature written after World War II attempts to negotiate the great disruptions and calamities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the U.S. is still occupied with the impact of 9/11 as one of its greatest national traumata, the increasing interest in typographic experimentation and multi-modality has paved the way for a belated recognition of comic books as a serious art form. Particularly their engagement with trauma, I argue, continues to generate literary scholars’ fairly new interest in the comics medium

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<sup>1</sup> One of the central images used in David Small’s *Stitches*, the image of the protagonist’s missing vocal cord and his respective scar, resemble and directly allude to the imagery used in Ovid. The following analysis discusses the ambivalent effects that such a use of disability imagery has on Small’s trauma narrative.

<sup>2</sup> The critical acclaim of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* emphasizes perhaps like no other publication of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the growing public and academic acknowledgment of multimodal narrative.

since the late 1990s. Books such as Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* and David Small's *Stitches* can be understood as an attempt of contemporary literature to avoid the cliché of trauma narratives, that Caruth problematizes (cf. Caruth vii). In doing so, these graphic narratives challenge and go beyond already given structures and forms of literary archetexts.<sup>3</sup> In order to manifest the impact of trauma, more and more writers choose to visualize its features and consequences on the page. This presents a shift from earlier text-bound representations of trauma to multimodal narratives of trauma, which are quickly establishing themselves within the literary market. Thus, graphic trauma narratives risk to become the new cliché while they continue to challenge older versions of trauma narratives at the same time.

Over the last years, numerous literary scholars have embraced the possibilities that the comics medium offers to the narration of trauma. "[T]he visual/verbal arrangement of the graphic novel," writes Edward Brunner, "contributes enhanced understanding to a project that is intent on examining what goes hidden and unsaid" (196). In a similar fashion, Marianne Hirsch points out in her analysis of Art Spiegelman's graphic account of 9/11 that, as the towers collapse on the page in front of her, "not seeing becomes visible, and even audible" (1213). Using the comics medium in *In the Shadow of No Towers* as well as in *Maus*, Spiegelman creates, as Hirsch argues, "an aesthetics of trauma: it is fragmentary, composed of small boxes that cannot contain the material which exceeds their frames and the structure of the page" (1213). Yet, rather than "making the unseen and the unspoken visible and audible" (Brunner 185) and "imagining the unimaginable" (Neuhaus 1), the merging of multiple modi seems to further draw attention to the difficulties that the representation of trauma faces in the first place. At the very heart of the increasing use of multimodality lies the lack of representability that, among other features, defines trauma.<sup>4</sup> The enthusiasm

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that not all of the attempts of narrating trauma through the use of multimodality are met with praise, particularly when they feature the events of 9/11. Despite his success with *Maus*, Spiegelman struggled to find a U.S. press willing to publish his *In the Shadow of No Towers* (cf. Thill n. pag.). In a similar fashion, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* became subject of great controversy because it includes photos of a man falling to his death from the World Trade Center (cf. Siegel n. pag.).

<sup>4</sup> According to trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, trauma is defined by its lack of representability. The traumatic event is dissociated from cognitive and representational processes and is only available as a fragmented and repetitive phenomenon that haunts those who

surrounding such a multimodal approach to trauma reinforces the idea that trauma can be represented after all.<sup>5</sup> Yet as Brunner rightfully emphasizes, “[t]he existence of trauma is never patent but must be deduced: it is evident in traces that it leaves behind and that requires skillful and patient reading” (186). While the attempt to narrate trauma through the use of multimodality seems to satisfy the basic human need to comprehend and integrate past events, trauma in its very nature remains invisible.

### The Semantics of Trauma and Disability

Despite the fact that, etymologically, the word “trauma” directly refers to the wounded body, trauma theory has received only little attention within disability studies and vice versa. While disability and literary scholars such as Rosemarie Garland Thomson have put great emphasis on the premise that everyone can and eventually will become disabled if they just live long enough (cf. Garland Thomson, “Integrating Disability” 5), the traumatic experience of becoming disabled as such has been widely ignored within much of the field. While the connection of trauma and physical disability is certainly not inherent, trauma can play a crucial role in sudden processes of becoming disabled. In their article on the intersections of trauma and disability studies, Daniel R. Morrison and Monica J. Casper point out that disability studies and its cultural locations “have been remarkably silent on matters of the traumatic origins of many disabilities, and on the ongoing relationship between shocking events, their abrupt and chronic impacts, and experiences of disability” (n.pag.). Yet, whether an acquired disability is the result of a sickness, caused by an individual accident, or is inflicted by human hand, the idea that the human mind can be hurt by such extreme and

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are traumatized. Testimonies of trauma thus require the breakdown of representational forms (cf. Caruth 4-5, 153-54; LaCapra 61).

<sup>5</sup> This article sets out to challenge the perception that trauma has been rendered intellectually accessible by some graphic narratives. Although scholars like Edward Brunner have enthusiastically argued that comics make the “unseen and unspoken visible and audible” (cf. 185), psychological traumata as such have remained inaccessible to the reader. Instead, comics have succeeded in visualizing this very inaccessibility of trauma. In a similarly powerful fashion, older literary texts like Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) negotiate the unrepresentability and fragmented nature of trauma by use of structural means. Comics can thus be argued to contribute new elements to the literary negotiation of trauma, yet like other literary texts before they are only able to emphasize trauma’s unrepresentability.

disruptive experiences of violence is as old as human consciousness itself (cf. Kopf 43). Thus, including trauma theory in interpretations of (acquired) disability narratives does not only seem to be a highly productive but a truly necessary endeavor.

While literary scholars within the field of disability studies rightfully emphasize the social dimensions of disability and its shared narrative, individualized disability narratives like *Stitches* that feature a character who acquires a disability, appear to be mostly disregarded by disability scholars for their negative imagery. This disapproval of certain disability narratives is not only linked to the activist roots that underlie the emergence of the field.<sup>6</sup> Much of the resentment to these narratives developed due to the questionably high number of disability stories that feature tragic characters who acquire or have just recently acquired a disability. Stories that represent disability as a non-dreadful part of human life remain few, because characters who were born with a disability are rarely portrayed. Furthermore, traumatic narratives of acquired disability seem—although, I would argue, only at first glance—to counterpoint the very premise of disability studies:

The foundational premise for disability studies, circulated widely in the past 10-15 years, is that disability is not a state of bodily impairment, inadequacy, failing, misfortune, or excess—that it is not about marking the things gone “wrong” with the body. Rather, disability, as it is conceived in disability studies, is a culturally composed (and shared) narrative of the body. (Brueggemann 283)

While disability studies’ general focus on the construction and the social implications of disability is highly productive and a positive approach to disability is more than needed, disability scholars’ neglect of “the things gone ‘wrong’ with the body” appears to be rather restrictive. Over the last years, disability scholars have increasingly argued that representations of physical pain are necessary to grasp the complexity of disability experiences (cf. Price 286-88). I propose that the experience and literary negotiation of trauma needs to be considered in a literary analysis of acquired disability in a similar fashion. By rejecting the possible interrelatedness of trauma and disability, an opportunity is lost to engender more complex representations and interpretations of disability.

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<sup>6</sup> In the U.S., disability studies emerged from the disability rights movement, which not only aims to remove the physical barriers that people with disabilities face but also seeks to change the negative image of disability that predominates all cultural spheres.

## **Ambivalent Images: Graphic Narratives of Illness, Disability, and Trauma**

The increasing popularity of graphic narratives has sparked an interest in a wide range of different subject matters that go beyond trauma. Over the past decade, graphic illness and disability memoirs have become highly successful. Graphic cancer memoirs like Marisa Acocella Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen* (2006) and David Small's *Stitches* (2009) made it onto the *New York Times* best sellers list. The increasing interest in graphic memoirs of illness and disability, however, seems to go beyond the longing to make sense of collective experiences of trauma: given the opportunity to look at the individual and visualized trauma of others, these memoirs further function to satisfy a voyeuristic desire. As Susan Sontag asserts in her 1973 book *On Photography*:

A society which makes it normative to aspire never to experience privation, failure, misery, pain, dread disease, and in which death itself is regarded not as natural and inevitable but as a cruel, unmerited disaster, creates a tremendous curiosity about these events—a curiosity that is partly satisfied through picture-taking. (131)

Sontag tries to capture the omnipresence of images and our fascination with photographs of pain and disaster by creating the notion of the “image-world” (119). Beyond the extensive use of photography (and film), this “image-world” continues to manifest itself in the use of imagery in literature. The urge to visualize and look at experiences of trauma, illness, and disability is thus embedded in a discourse that uses images to distinguish the traumatized and disabled “other” from the normative reader it imagines. I propose that normative practices of looking and staring need to be considered whenever graphic memoirs of trauma and disability are analyzed. Thus my analysis aims to neither dismiss the narrative potential of the visual mode nor to overestimate the merits of textual representations.

Whenever graphic trauma narratives are entangled with disability narratives, the multimodal approach draws attention to the visuality of disability. In doing so, multi-modal narratives manifest disability as a concept that, according to Dale Jacobs and Jay Dolmage, has traditionally been visually overdetermined (cf. 76). Indeed, this overdetermined emphasis on the visuality of disability is demonstrated most vividly within the film business. In recent years, stories that feature a disabled protagonist (even though these stories are rare) have been highly successful on the big screen. The Oscar nominations for films like *The Sessions* (2012), *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012), *Still Alice* (2014), or *The Theory of Everything* (2014)

highlight the appeal of visualized disability stories. Contrary to a textual negotiation, these films make use of the visual spectacle of disability that has historically been used in the practice of the freak show. They thus continue to culturally cast disability as an object that audiences are invited to stare at (cf. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 26). The visual overdetermination of disability allows a predominantly nondisabled audience to stare at “the other” in order to manifest its own normative status. The depiction of disability in graphic narratives of trauma, whether intentionally or unintentionally, relies upon and further manifests these viewing habits. Disability remains something to be looked at rather than to be read about. Long before the current “era of the image” (Siebers, “Words Stare” 1315), readers have been trained to read about and look at images of pain, suffering, and disability. “The most compelling images,” writes Tobin Siebers, “often summon visions of the human body, and of these the ones that picture wounds or markers of physical or mental difference are the most potent for the imagination” (Siebers, “Words Stare” 1318). Over the last two decades, disability studies scholars have taken considerable effort to examine and criticize the use of disability as mere imagery in literary texts (cf. Mitchell and Snyder 47-63). In fact, multi-modal trauma and disability narratives appear to be caught in a constant struggle caused by the ambivalence of their images. On the one hand, they offer an alternative approach to trauma and provide visibility to the relatively large, yet still fairly underrepresented group of Americans with a disability. On the other hand, graphic narratives visually exploit both trauma and disability. The question arises whether graphic narratives of trauma go beyond this tradition or further reinforce it.

David Small’s graphic account of his traumatic childhood and of his disability experience can be seen, I argue, as paradigmatic for the ambivalent space that graphic narratives open up in this regard. Through its engagement with both disability and trauma, Small’s *Stitches* sheds light on the close entanglement of both of these human experiences. Published in 2009, the memoir portrays the traumatic childhood and youth of its protagonist David. A quiet member of a family who has a long history of failed communication, David is unwillingly exposed to frequent doses of radiation through which his father aims to improve his son’s health. When David develops cancer due to this therapy, his parents only hesitantly bring him to a hospital where one of his vocal cords is removed. Being unable to speak, David finds himself in a world ever more threatening, surrounded by a family that seems to be falling

apart. Throughout its story, *Stitches* clearly invites its reader to stare at the disabled body, yet at the same time, critically reflects upon the process of staring. In the following analysis, I will highlight the subversive potential that great parts of Small's acquired disability narrative offer to the reader. At the same time, I will problematize the book's multimodal approach to trauma and disability and point to moments of tension between the book's subversive potential and its compliance to an ableist gaze.

Disability narratives indeed seem to lend themselves to the comics medium. After all, comics create a constant confrontation with the materiality of the body. In sequential art, the ever-present image of the body becomes a material reality as well as a fundamental feature of characterization. Only slight changes of facial features can create varied impressions of a character's personality. Referring back to the nineteenth-century physiognomic studies of Rodolphe Töpffer, comics artist Will Eisner observes that "[c]ommonly the face is the part of the body that attracts most immediate attention. The first process in recognizing a person is most often a scan of the face" (149). By frequently employing iconic abstraction, comics traditionally make use of these physiognomic observations. They simplify facial and other bodily features to amplify the most important traits of their characters (cf. McCloud 27-30). Contemporary comics artists like David Small seem to critically engage with this semantics of the body. Published in 2011, Small's *Stitches* self-consciously uses the faces of its characters to challenge a normative gaze at the body. Predominantly grim-faced, the personality of the characters in *Stitches* cannot be entirely distinguished by means of their expression and physiognomy. Instead, their shared sharp facial features and opaque glasses function as a recurring motif. They create an eerie atmosphere throughout the book as the face frequently fails as a visual marker of distinction. This can, for instance, be observed in a large panel that depicts the protagonist's father and his medical colleagues. In their white coats, the "soldiers of science," as the narrator calls them, all look alike because their nearly undistinguishable faces blur into one huddled mass (27). The panel thus features one of the most subversive images in Small's memoir: the visibly non-disabled doctors look terrifyingly inhuman and remain, much like the other characters, unintelligible to the reader; the face of medicine becomes inhuman(e). The protagonist's face is drawn in different ways, displaying numerous emotions such as fear and pain. The doctors' faces are, in contrast, turned into countless copies of the same grotesque and emotionless face. Rather than objectifying the

disabled body, the non-disabled faces of the doctors thus become part of a grotesque spectacle. In the end, it is the unquestioned faith in medical inventions that becomes the source of the protagonist's trauma as he has to endure unnecessary cancer-causing procedures ordered and supervised by his father.

### **The Inevitability of Traumatic Images**

Although there is a need to critically analyze multimodal narratives of trauma and disability, a number of literary scholars have rightfully emphasized their potential over the last years (cf. Hein, Earle, Adams, Hirsch, Brunner). Nourishing the hype that has recently come to surround graphic trauma narratives, Blandy Ball Brake claims that there is "one type of literature, the graphic novel, [which] has an ideal form for representing trauma" (n.pag.). While I see a danger in underestimating the potential of text-bound books, the visual nature of the comics medium does indeed lend itself to the depiction of trauma because, as Cathy Caruth asserts, "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (*Trauma* 4). While traumatic dreams are marked by non-symbolic flashbacks, memory itself is created through imagination and the assembling of images. Traumatic scenes that are simply repeated in dreams without having undergone major alterations thus interact with otherwise highly symbolic images that the memory unconsciously assembles in dreams (cf. Freud, "Dreams and Telepathy" 208). Using a visual-textual approach, David Small's *Stitches* represents this interaction of recurring traumatic dream-images and symbolic memories in a collage-like manner. The fragmented images of *Stitches* not only invite readers to learn about the protagonist's past, but encourage them to engage with the process of remembering and sense making itself. Traumatic dreams function as a recurring motif throughout *Stitches*. These dreams are presented in the form of panels that are primarily visual and do not include speech balloons or box commentaries (cf. 45, 165, 197-200, 315). The absence of words in these panels suggests that David remains voiceless even in his dreams (cf. 45, 165, 197-200, 315). While the textual elements of his story are mainly present as captions that frame his narrative and provide basic information, the reader is forced to look directly at the images that are stuck in the traumatized mind of the homodiegetic narrator. Although the story is told in retrospective by a grown-up David, the

narration employs a child-like language. In doing so, the narration does not disrupt the visual representation and thus creates a certain immediacy that helps the reader to remain absorbed by Small's fictionalized world. The memoir preserves the innocence of David's younger self while, at the same time, making the narrator also resonate with a younger readership (cf. Gilmore and Marshall 19).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, this linguistic strategy unconsciously creates the impression that the narrator is completely drawn back into his trauma and re-inhabits his helpless position as a child, unable to fight the urge to repeat the violent experiences of his past.

Throughout the entire novel, the reader does not encounter any happy memories of David's childhood. Instead, the reading experience resembles David's experience of remembering: the reader and David quickly slide into the pages of the book and are lost within it (cf. 4). Like David, who is mentally haunted by the repetition and his own incomprehension of a number of traumatic events he suffered through, the reader cannot escape the impact of the presented panels and their recurring images. Due to the visuality of the medium, it becomes nearly impossible for the reader to skip parts of the narrative on a double-page. While details of the presented panels can be lost or missed throughout the reading process, the overall image cannot be escaped. This effect on the reading process mirrors the violence experienced by the traumatized protagonist and can even be experienced as a violent act itself. Employing the disruptive function of bigger panels, Small forces the reader to look at the pain that his protagonist experiences as his eyes fill with tears (cf. 20, 258). Inevitability is certainly one of the unique features that the visual mode of the trauma narrative offers in this regard. But the inherent emotional potential of graphic trauma narratives also demands of the reader a willingness to lose some of the safe distance that a textual negotiation of trauma can offer instead.

*Stitches* also employs repetition as a further strategy of mimicking the effects of trauma. Throughout the memoir a number of recurring images are used. The memory of his stern

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<sup>7</sup> Although the primary readership of *Stitches* are adults, the book was also promoted (and awarded) as young adult literature. Small's previous work within children's and young adult fiction fueled a discussion on whether to consider *Stitches* as adult or young adult literature and raised questions about the appropriateness of such a graphic trauma narrative for young readers (cf. Gilmore and Marshall 16-17). Although the book deals with traumatic issues not fit for children, I would like to argue that the language employed in *Stitches* helps to make it accessible to young adult readers.

and angry-looking mother haunts the narrator within a countless number of panels, while images of David's frightened face reappear in medium and close-up shots throughout the narrative. When he finally learns about his cancer, the panels multiply the image of his puzzled eyes over the course of two pages (cf. 204-5). Yet, while the book celebrates the visual arts as a means of its meaning making process, the protagonist learns about his cancer and thus understands what happened to him through a written letter he secretly reads. The letter emphasizes the power that words hold, whether they might be used to keep or reveal a secret. While the images in *Stitches* help David to narrate his story, they also serve as an omnipresent reminder of his lost voice. In the end, the images create a constant tension between their liberating effect and the protagonist's continuing search for words—a search that is represented on every page, yet never solved.

While *Stitches* adheres to the basic structure of an *Entwicklungsroman*, some of its features are reversed. Thus, throughout his journey towards adulthood, David stays at home where he seeks to uncover the secrets of his family in order to make sense of his traumatic childhood and adolescence. Although he is slowly able to fill in the gaps of his own story, he does not find an answer to his family's inner conflict, the most pressing issue at hand. The lack of communication that characterizes the protagonist's family life remains. Intradiegetically, both image and text fail David as he is unable to resolve the barriers between him and his family. What *Stitches* emphasizes on this intradiegetic level seems to also hold true on the extradiegetic level of its narrative: while the inevitability of the image stresses the importance that visuality holds for the construction of David's memory, words or the lack thereof become the crucial element that these images evolve around.

### **Of Black Holes and Shrinking Bodies: The Traumatized Body's Lack of Agency**

Throughout his journey of meaning-making, David's experiences are repeatedly visualized by black holes and waves that he gets drawn into (cf. 45, 47, 63, 123). As he falls and is swept away, his own body escapes his control. The blackness that repeatedly surrounds him in these and other panels emphasizes his overall feeling of loss and total surrender. When he first awakes after the operation that costs him his voice, a black surface fills main parts of

the enlarged panel that shows his image (cf. 181). In contrast to the black surface, David's body appears smaller and more fragile than ever before. In the following panels, David imagines stepping into his own mouth in order to look at the physical evidence of his newly acquired disability. His own body overwhelms him when yet another black hole opens up at the spot of his missing vocal cord (181-82). Being unable to speak in a logocentric world, he seems to have lost almost all agency over his body. This lack of agency over his physical body, I argue, becomes symptomatic for the over-all loss of agency that David experiences throughout his traumatic childhood. In the end, David does not lose agency because of the loss of his physical voice but because his social surrounding fails to grant him a voice by other means.

In his despair, David flees into imaginary worlds. The six-year-old David loves to play Alice, a character that remains central to his imagination. While he reads numerous books, of which most are not mentioned by name, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* becomes by far the most frequent intertextual reference throughout *Stitches*. Like Alice, David flees his abusive home by imagining friendly characters of an alternative world. His escape into the imaginary emphasizes his inability to cope with his trauma. Even in Alice's world, David lacks control over his own body. Like the characters in Lewis Carroll's text, David encounters the shrinking of his body or dreams about doors that are too small for him to enter (cf. 216, 222). Mice and other animals become David's companions throughout the book and fall alongside him into the various black holes that await him on his way to adulthood (cf. 63). His imagined animal friends emphasize David's extreme loneliness throughout his childhood. In fact, David does not seem to have any friends. Instead, the kids in the neighborhood either bully him or are told to avoid him. Not being able to talk about his experiences of violence and his loss of agency with anyone, his trauma remains hidden inside him. Emphasizing his loneliness, the memoir sheds light on the different layers of trauma. The unspeakability of trauma is as much marked by the absence of David's physical voice as it is marked by the fact that he has no one to talk to. Fantastic elements like his imagined friends fail David; he is not able to talk about his trauma or to successfully flee the external determination of his body. It is this heteronomy that, reflected in his shrinking and falling body, lies at the very heart of his traumatic experiences. David can neither escape the materiality of his body by means of the imaginary nor does it enable him to (re)gain control over his body.

### **“Surely This Is Not Me”: Trauma and Its Physical Wound**

Next to David’s lack of agency, his muteness as well as his scar on the throat become powerful representatives of his trauma. With a cancerous tumor growing right along one of his vocal cords, David has to endure two risky, yet lifesaving, operations. The trauma caused by the fatal threat of cancer, its hidden diagnosis, and his father’s malpractice is embodied in the form of David’s scar, which runs right underneath his face along his neck. Etymologically referring back to his trauma, the scar in *Stitches* becomes both a corporeal reminder and a central metaphor of David’s trauma. A prominent metaphor in literature, the actual image of the scar presented in *Stitches* becomes even more universally accessible than its linguistic signifier. Images of scars are universally understood because, as Tobin Siebers comments, “while customs may change, technology evolve, and languages differ, human beings always have skin, and their deepest wounds always heal with a scar” (“Words Stare” 1317). David’s unalterable scar thus becomes a vivid reminder of his traumatic childhood, which, just as his scar, remains to be a part of him.

The images of David’s body serve as powerful and embodied metaphors, yet they also take recourse to pathology and its normative gaze upon the body. *Stitches* consciously reproduces medical views that up until today dominate discourses surrounding the non-normative body (cf. Brueggemann 284). It is through the enlarged images of a medical textbook that the protagonist as well as the reader first encounter the physical symptoms of cancer that David later exhibits (cf. 54). By being able to stare and closely examine the disabled body on the pages of the intra-diegetic textbook, the reader is not only introduced to David’s form of cancer, but is encouraged to trace the signs of his sickness that develops over the following pages. In doing so, the reading process begins to mirror a diagnostic process. This process of constant staring is, however, guided critically as the reader is not invited to merely adopt the medical stare, but is confronted with the perspective of the disabled protagonist. This clear focalization through David is one of the most daring features of *Stitches* as it invites the reader to reflect upon and critically engage in the process of staring (cf. Jacobs and Dolmage 80).

The mirrors that reoccur throughout *Stitches* offer such a critical engagement with the medical gaze. More than a mere reflection of the medical stare at the body, the mirrors in

*Stitches* allude to the Lacanian idea of the self that comes to recognize itself (cf. Lacan 503). It is through the bathroom mirror that David notices the cancer growth at his neck and later encounters his scar for the first time (cf. 146, 190). Still holding on to the image of his former self, David at first refuses to accept the changes of his body: “Surely this is not me,” he thinks as he looks at his scar (191). Although David initially rejects to accept his disability, the story does not further follow the conventions of what Thomas Couser coins a nostalgic narrative nor does it employ any triumphalist rhetorics (cf. Couser 80-85).<sup>8</sup> The protagonist does not seem to yearn for his pre-disabled body. Neither does he celebrate his success of having overcome his disability after he partially learned to speak again. Instead he comes to accept his weak voice and his scar; he thus recognizes the markers of his trauma as part of himself. The almost fatal experience of cancer, which is visualized by his scar, is no longer something “that surely cannot be [him].” In the end, David is able to integrate his disability and traumatic experiences into his own story and self. Instead of being overdetermined as the central causes of his trauma, illness and disability are intertwined in the protagonist’s story of physical abuse and emotional neglect. *Stitches* stresses the different layers of David’s multiple traumata. He has to cope with numerous experiences of violence: he is mentally abused by his entire family and has to watch while his grandmother willingly inflicts pain on him by pouring hot water over his hands. He further suffers from the radiation his father exposes him to as well as from the near death experience this mistreatment causes. Last but not least, he has to cope with the sudden changes of his body, not knowing why the excision of his vocal cord was necessary. It is this incomprehensibility, the missing agency over his own body and life that is emphasized throughout *Stitches*. In doing so, the memoir differs from more conventional acquired disability narratives as disability does not become the central cause of David’s misery.

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<sup>8</sup> Couser defines nostalgic disability narratives as narratives in which a narrator mourns the loss of their previously able-bodied life. In contrast to nostalgic narratives, triumphalist rhetorics of disability focus on the overcoming of disability. According to Couser, these narratives are similarly restricting as they reify stigma for others with similar disabilities by creating the image of a “supercrip” (cf. 80-85).

## The Sound and the Fury: Subverting Home as a Place of Trauma

While the comics medium inherently employs disability as a visual concept, the focus of *Stitches* on a mostly invisible disability further complicates a one-sided analysis of Small's book. Unlike the spectacle of a freak show, the memoir does not exploit a predominantly visible disability. Through the medical images of his cancer and the later depiction of his scar, *Stitches* attempts to imagine two concepts on page that otherwise remain invisible: David's trauma and his muteness. In addition to his trauma, which David continues to suffer from, physical and selective muteness has a long-lasting effect on the protagonist. In fact, David seems to be silent long before he becomes physically unable to speak. Beyond disability's and trauma's shared relation to the physical wound, David's muteness interacts with his trauma on various levels. His physical incapability to speak further manifests his voiceless position among his family members and thus characterizes the helplessness he experiences at home. Being raised as a second child, neither his parents nor his brother communicate much with him or one another. In contrast to this overall silence, the sounds and noises that substitute the missing communication at David's house are uncomfortably harsh and loud and seem to suggest yet another form of violence (cf. Gilmore and Marshall 25): each of his family member's feeling of frustration is emphasized through sound; his mother is slamming the kitchen cupboards, his brother is intensely playing the kettledrum, and his father is either punching a bag or is taking off with the family car (cf. 15-17, 188).

While his family's failed communication is expressed through noises that drown any chance of a conversation, getting sick becomes the protagonist's form of language—"a way of expressing myself wordlessly" (18). The disability that David acquires metaphorically signifies the silence and secret-keeping habit of his parents, who do not tell him about his cancer even after his operation. What lies at the heart of David's trauma is this shared and all too familiar silence, accompanied by the withdrawal of information about his own body. While the removal of his vocal cord and his consequential muteness add to those traumatic experiences and visualize them in form of a scar, the disability itself is not presented as the center of his misfortune. Even more than his body, his family's house becomes a space in which his trauma is negotiated. Anything but a safe haven, the suburban house and its inhabitants fundamentally disturb and subvert the concept of "home" as a safe place. As

Courtney Donovan concludes in her analysis of *Stitches*, “[t]he home is a vessel that contains and reflects the emotions of its inhabitants as well as secrets, yet it does not promote healing” (291). The causes of David’s trauma are clearly located within the home and family structure rather than within his body. The medical mistreatment that David suffers from is particularly telling in this regard. His father’s role as his doctor problematizes the concept of home because it moves the medical space into the sphere of the home. Transgressing the boundaries of these two spaces, David’s family is neither able to provide domestic care and love nor are they able to offer him proper medical treatment. It is this malfunction of the home that reinforces David’s trauma and that leaves him devastated.

Unlike other illness and disability memoirs that construct the home as a space of loving recovery and the medical space as bleak and untrustworthy (cf. Fries, Lorde, Kaysen), Small’s book depicts the hospital as a mysterious, yet safe space. Only in the hospital does David’s mother ever demonstrate empathy for her son (cf. 172). Yet even when he is in his most serious condition, she fails to clearly communicate her feelings for him. As he has never learned to use words as a proper form of communication and remains unable to speak with a clear voice, David turns to art as his expressive means. In the end, not only does he use art as a successful way of communication, but art also becomes a substitute for the home he never had (cf. 302). On an extradiegetic level the visuality of the comics medium similarly offers the possibility of communication outside the realm of spoken and written language. In doing so, the graphic memoir neatly illustrates what Tobin Siebers proposes when he argues that “[d]ifferent bodies require and create new modes of representation” (cf. *Disability Aesthetics* 54). Being physically muted, visual art becomes David’s new mode of representation, on the intradiegetic as well as on the extradiegetic level.

## Conclusion

To highlight the narrative potential of the comics medium certainly remains a necessary task since, despite the increasing enthusiasm, comics remain undervalued in scholarly circles (cf. Earle n.pag.). My analysis has shown that comics indeed offer captivating ways of representing trauma in that they offer a visual and fragmentized structure that helps to

negotiate the fragmented nature of trauma. Yet the ambivalent ways in which images—just like texts—work demand for a careful reading that pays attention to the intersections of trauma with other experiences of the body. Precisely because (graphic) negotiations of disability and trauma are closely interlinked, they open up a number of contested spaces. As has been demonstrated throughout this paper, such intersections include but are not limited to the different perspectives of trauma theory, disability studies, comics studies, and neoclassical narratology. David Small's *Stitches* satisfies a voyeuristic desire, inviting its reader not only to read about trauma but also to look at the traumatic experiences of its protagonist. The visuality of the graphic memoir thus reinforces the voyeuristic effect that literary memoirs frequently employ. *Stitches* further invites its reader to stare at the non-normative body of its protagonist and thus makes use of the visual spectacle of disability. While the process of becoming disabled is only one of the various forms of violence that David experiences throughout *Stitches*, the overall imagery relies heavily on his experience of physically being muted. Yet, as his narrative of illness and disability intertwines with the protagonist's experiences of physical abuse and emotional neglect, disability does not become overdetermined as the central cause behind his traumatic past. Rather, the image of David's scar is used to visually embody the overall trauma that is caused by the protagonist's numerous experiences of violence. While disability still serves as a highly metaphorical device, *Stitches* successfully emphasizes David's muteness as a first and foremost embodied experience.

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