



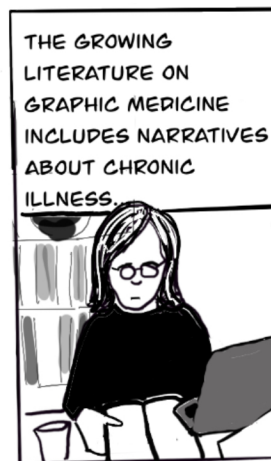
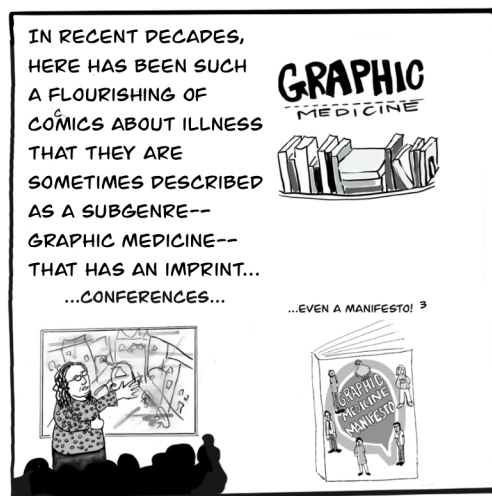
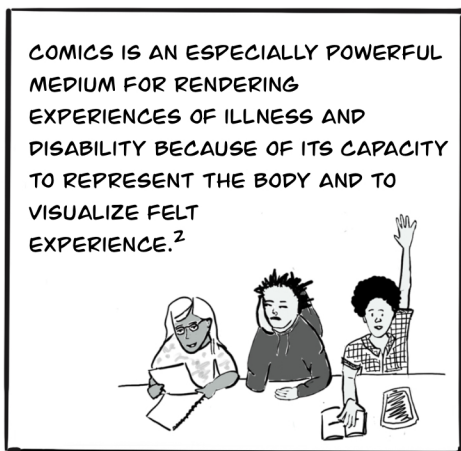
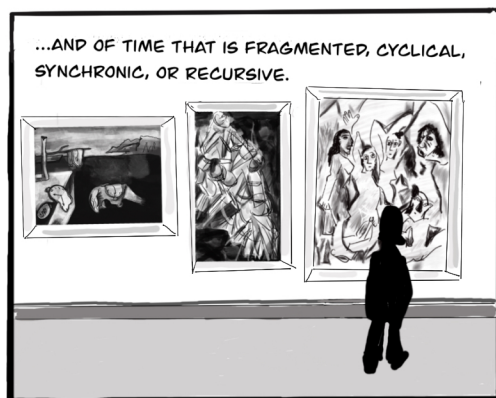
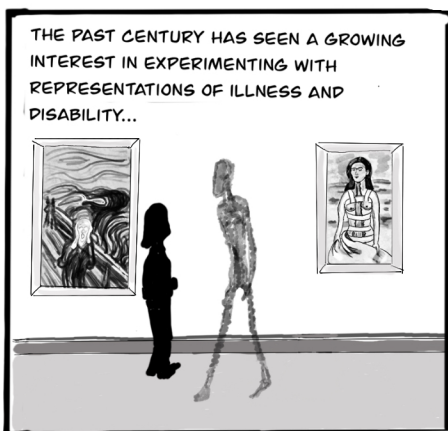
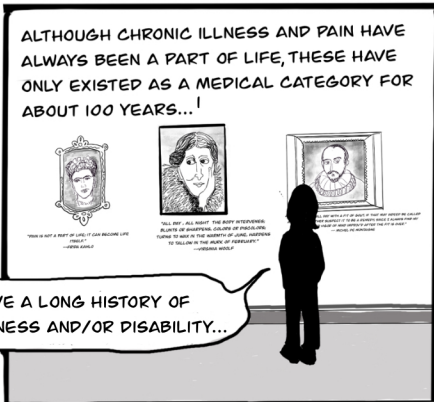
COMICHRONICITY

GRAPHIC NARRATIVE,
CHRONIC TIME, & EMBODIED
DIFFERENCE

AN ESSAY IN COMICS FORM
BY RACHEL ADAMS



"COMICHRONICITY" IS MY PORTMANTEAU FOR GRAPHIC NARRATIVES THAT REPRESENT CHRONIC ILLNESS AND DISABILITY



We understand the gutter in between frames to mean time has elapsed

the reader needs to infer the duration of time that passes between one frame and the next



IT IS ALSO WORTH NOTING THE LONG HISTORY OF SERIAL COMICS, AN OPEN-ENDED NARRATIVE FORM THAT MOVES IN RECURRENT EPISODES AKIN TO THE EXPERIENCE OF CHRONIC ILLNESS. 5



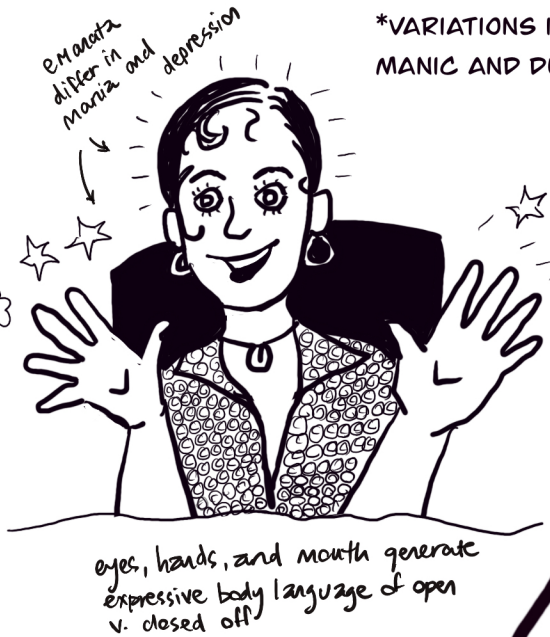
LET ME SHOW YOU SOME EXAMPLES...

ARTIST ELLEN FORNEY USES COMICS TO NARRATE HER EXPERIENCE OF BEING DIAGNOSED AND LEARNING TO LIVE WITH BIPOLAR DISORDER...⁶



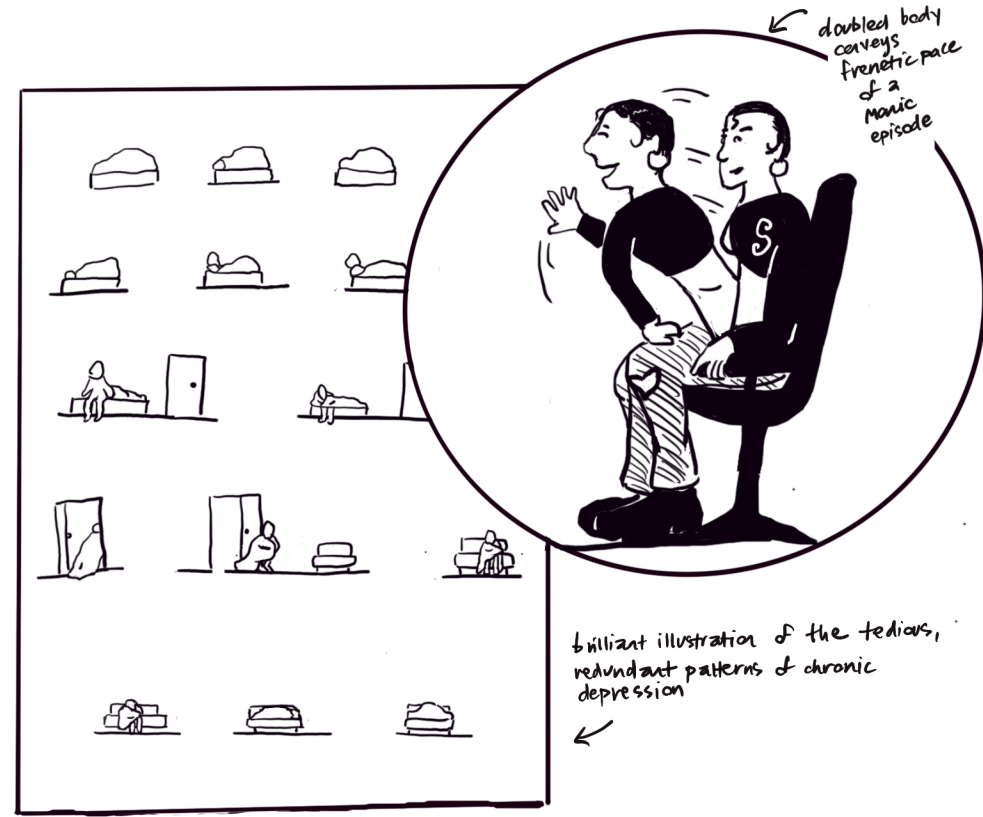
SHE REPRESENTS CHRONICITY IN SEVERAL WAYS THAT INCLUDE:

*VARIATIONS IN STYLE TO SHOW THE PACE OF MANIC AND DEPRESSIVE EPISODES



4

*WITHIN THESE EPISODES, HER PERCEPTION OF TIME ALSO DIFFERS, MOVING WITH AGONIZING SLOWNESS AND REDUNDANCY (DEPRESSION) VS. FRENETIC RACING (MANIA)



*AND THE SOMETIMES-TEDIOUS RHYTHMS OF ONGOINGNESS SHE EVENTUALLY LEARNS TO LIVE WITH

What better illustration of the banal rhythms of daily life than tooth-brushing?



5

A MORE RECENT EXAMPLE IS MARIA SWEENEY, WHO WRITES ABOUT THE TEMPORALITIES OF LIVING WITH BRUCK SYNDROME IN HER MEMOIR, *BRITTLE JOINTS*. THE BOOK IS ABOUT CHRONIC ILLNESS, BUT IT IS ALSO A MEDITATION ON TEMPORALITY. 7



I APPRECIATE SWEENEY'S AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY: HER ART IS GORGEOUSLY DRAWN AND COLORED, BUT ITS BEAUTY DOESN'T MINIMIZE THE SUFFERING CAUSED BY HER CONDITION.



*THE PATTERNS OF CHRONIC TIME ARE CYCLICAL AND RESPONSIVE TO THE ENVIRONMENT. SWEENEY EXPERIENCES SEASONAL CHANGE ACUTELY.

SPRING: enjoying the outdoors, with no visible signs of impairment



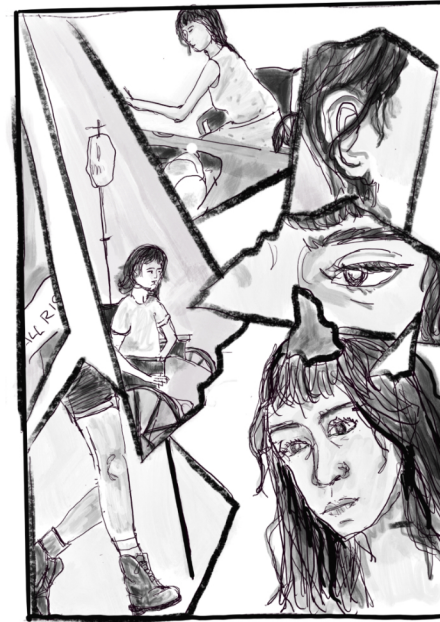
SUMMER: seated with cane



FALL: in a wheelchair

WINTER: confined indoors but yearning to be out

*CHRONIC TIME IS CYCLICAL BUT ALSO FRAGMENTED, OVERLAPPING, AND UNPREDICTABLE.



*CHRONIC TIME SOMETIMES JUMPS ERRATICALLY BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT.



SWEENEY (WHO WAS ADOPTED AS A CHILD) REMARKS ON THE ODD SENSATION OF LOOKING AT A FAMILY ALBUM, "I DON'T RECOGNIZE MYSELF." BEYOND THE DISTANCE FROM A CHILDHOOD SELF THAT ANY ADULT MEMOIRIST MIGHT FEEL, HER MISRECOGNITION COMES FROM A BODY TRANSFORMED BY PROGRESSIVE ILLNESS.

THIS ACCOUNT OF CHRONIC TIME ALSO SHOWS LIFE PERSISTING AMIDST ILLNESS.



sitting in a cafe

sharing a joint with friends



romance



THESE ARE JUST A FEW EXAMPLES OF COMICS WRITTEN ABOUT LIVING WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS.

IT MAKES SENSE THAT MOST ARE AUTHORED BY WOMEN, GIVEN THAT ILLNESS--ESPECIALLY THE KINDS THAT INVOLVE FATIGUE--HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN FEMINIZED, AND THAT WOMEN CONTINUE TO BE MORE WILLING TO WRITE ABOUT THEIR OWN VULNERABILITY.

IT ALSO MAKES SENSE THAT MOST ARE WRITTEN BY WHITE WOMEN, GIVEN THAT BIPOC WOMEN CONTINUE TO HAVE LESS ACCESS TO PUBLISHED SELF EXPRESSION, EVEN AS THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE THE KINDS OF CHRONIC ILLNESSES CAUSED BY STRESS, POLLUTION, POVERTY, AND OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS.

BUT THE WORLD OF COMICS IS BECOMING MORE DIVERSE, INCLUDING MORE NON-WHITE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS, AS WELL AS MORE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE HEALTH-RELATED EXPERIENCES OF BIPOC.

SOMETIMES THAT MEANS CHANGES IN CONTENT AND FORM...



EBONY FLOWERS'S *HOT COMB* IS A GREAT EXAMPLE...⁸

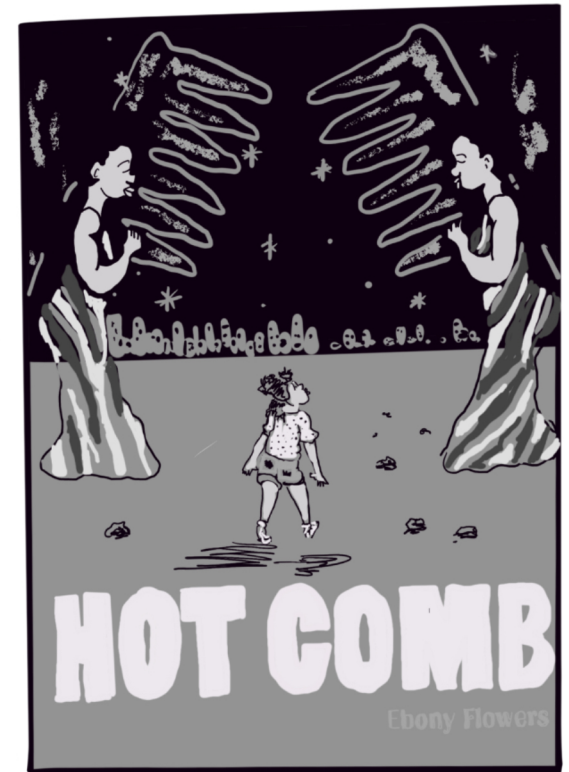
LIKE OTHER AUTHORS I'VE DISCUSSED, FLOWERS LEVERAGES THE COMIC FORM TO WRITE ABOUT CHRONIC TIME. BUT THERE ARE SOME FORMAL DIFFERENCES: FLOWERS'S BOOK IS A COLLECTION OF STORIES RATHER THAN A SINGLE NARRATIVE, AND ITS STORIES ARE FICTIONAL RATHER THAN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL.

THE COMPILATION OF INDIVIDUAL STORIES SUGGESTS THAT THE WORK AS A WHOLE SPEAKS OF COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE.

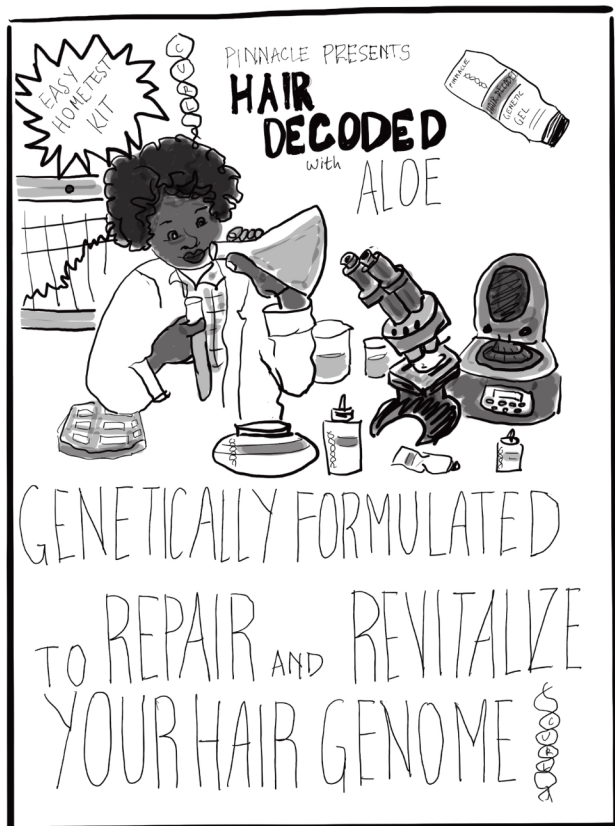
SOME OF HER STORIES DEAL DIRECTLY WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS AND DISABILITIES LIKE ANXIETY, ADDICTION, AND OCD. OTHERS ARE SET IN ENVIRONMENTS DAMAGED BY POVERTY AND DISCRIMINATION, EVEN AS THEY ALSO SHOW THE FORTITUDE AND TENACITY OF BLACK WOMEN CARING FOR THEMSELVES, FRIENDS, AND FAMILY.

PRESENTED AS FICTION, THEY SPEAK TO THE TRUTH OF BLACK WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE WITH THE CHRONIC, WEATHERING EFFECTS OF RACISM ON HEALTH...

...ALL CENTERED AROUND THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BLACK HAIR!



IN BETWEEN STORIES, FULL-PAGE ADS FOR FICTITIOUS HAIR PRODUCTS SUGGEST THE OVERDETERMINED SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BLACK WOMEN'S HAIR...



BLACK WOMEN'S HAIR IS A SOURCE OF CREATIVE MEANING-MAKING AND COMMUNITY, AND ALSO OF CHRONIC EXPENSE, LOST TIME, AND STRESS.

ACROSS THESE STORIES WE SEE DIFFERENT MANIFESTATIONS OF RACISM THAT CAUSE CHRONIC STRESS

MICROGRESSIONS OF STRANGERS...



Flowers alternates her style, sometimes using a finer line and fewer environmental cues...

INVOLNTARY PANIC RESPONSE CAUSED BY CONSTANT REQUESTS TO TOUCH HAIR...



A STORY NARRATED BY THE SISTER OF A GIRL WHO DEVELOPED TRICHOTILLOMANIA (OBSESSIVE HAIR-PULLING) AFTER HER HAIR DREW TOO MUCH ATTENTION FROM HER ALL-WHITE SOFTBALL TEAM...



AS NANCY K. MILLER WRITES OF THE CHRONIC, "THERE HAS TO BE A SPACE BETWEEN EPISODES."⁹

WE HAVE ALREADY SEEN HOW STORIES OF CHRONICITY SHOW ILLNESS EMBEDDED IN THE ONGOINGNESS OF LIFE.

IN *HOT COMB*, CHRONIC STRESS, ANXIETY, AND EXHAUSTION ARE PUNCTUATED BY MOMENTS OF CONNECTION, SUSTENANCE, AND EVEN JOY....



PUTTING ON A WIG AND DANCING WITH YOURSELF WHILE MOM DOES GRANDMA'S HAIR...

OLD FRIENDS ON VACATION IN ANGOLA...



WOMEN CARING FOR EACH OTHERS' HAIR BECOMES THE OCCASION FOR EXPRESSIONS OF COMPASSION AND SOLIDARITY, CONFESSION, VENTING, LAUGHTER AND SADNESS.



READING THESE WORKS TOGETHER, SOME COMMON ELEMENTS EMERGE:

*CHRONICITY AS REPETITION WITH A DIFFERENCE

*ALERTNESS TO THE CYCLICAL TIME OF DAYS AND SEASONS, AS WELL AS ROUTINE HUMAN ACTIVITIES

*A HEIGHTENED AWARENESS OF BEING EMBEDDED IN ENVIRONMENTS AND INTERDEPENDENCIES WITH OTHERS

*EMPHASIS ON ONGOINGNESS RATHER THAN BEGINNINGS, ENDINGS, OR SUDDEN CHANGES

WELLNESS IS CAST INTO RELIEF BY EXPERIENCES OF ILLNESS. RATHER THAN BEING AN INVISIBLE BACKGROUND STATE, WE SEE THAT IT IS A PRESENCE LIKE RACE, GENDER, OR AGE.

BUT I'M ALSO STRUCK BY THE RANGE OF CONTENT AND STYLES. THERE IS NO SINGULAR EXPERIENCE OF CHRONIC ILLNESS, AND THE WAYS TO CHRONICLE ITS VARIETIES IN COMICS SEEM WIDE OPEN.

THAT DIVERSITY SPEAKS TO THE AFFORDANCES OF COMICS AS A MEDIUM FOR REPRESENTING TIME AND EMBODIED EXPERIENCE.

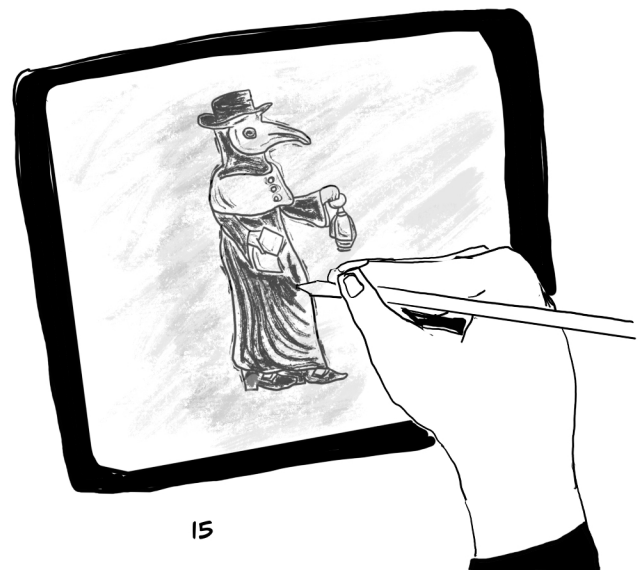


A NOTE ON METHOD:

I HAVE NO TRAINING AS AN ARTIST, AND MY DRAWING METHOD INVOLVES A LOT OF BORROWING. I USUALLY LOOK AT THE WORK OF OTHER ARTISTS TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO DRAW POSES OR EXPRESSIONS. IN CREATING THIS COMIC, I WENT FURTHER, ATTEMPTING TO MAKE MY OWN COPIES OF THE ART WORKS I WAS DISCUSSING. I SEE THIS AS A KIND OF CLOSE READING THAT ALLOWS ME TO FOCUS INTENTLY ON STYLE AND COMPOSITION. A COMIC--AT LEAST ONE THAT IS HANDMADE-- DIFFERS FROM A PRINT NARRATIVE IN THAT THE IMAGE WAS DRAWN BY THE ARTIST, SO COPYING IT MEANS YOU ARE RETRACING THE BODILY GESTURES OF THE MAKER'S HAND.



...AND ISN'T COPYING--REPRODUCTION WITH A DIFFERENCE --AN IDEAL FORM FOR WRITING ABOUT CHRONICITY?



NOTES

1. ON THE EMERGENCE OF CHRONIC ILLNESS AS A DIAGNOSTIC CATEGORY
SEE BILL BYNUM, "A HISTORY OF CHRONIC DISEASES," *THE LANCET* 385
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WEISZ, "EPIDEMIOLOGY AND HEALTHCARE REFORM: THE NATIONAL HEALTH
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438-447. [HTTP://AJPH.APHAPUBLICATIONS.ORG/DOI/FULL/10.2105/
AJPH.2010.196519](http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/ajph.2010.196519)
2. HILLARY CHUTE, "WHY ILLNESS AND DISABILITY?" *WHY COMICS? FROM
UNDERGROUND TO EVERYWHERE* (HARPER COLLINS, 2017).
3. M.K.CZERWIEC, IAN WILLIAMS, SUSAN MERRILL SQUIER, MICHAEL J.
GREEN, KIMBERLY R. MYERS, AND SCOTT T. SMITH, *THE GRAPHIC MEDICINE
MANIFESTO* (PENN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2015).
4. HILLARY CHUTE AND MARIANNE DEKOVEN, "INTRODUCTION: GRAPHIC
NARRATIVE," *MFS MODERN FICTION STUDIES* 52.4 (WINTER 2006):
767-782.
5. THIS IMAGE OF SERIALITY IS INSPIRED BY PAUL KARASIK AND MARK
NEWGARDEN'S EXCELLENT BOOK, *HOW TO READ NANCY: THE ELEMENTS OF
COMICS IN THREE EASY PANELS* (FANTAGRAPHICS, 2017).
6. ELLEN FOURNEY, *MARBLES: MANIA, DEPRESSION, MICHAELANGELO, AND
ME* (AVERY, 2012).
7. MARIA SWEENEY, *BRITTLE JOINTS* (STREET NOISE BOOKS, 2024).
8. EBONY FLOWERS, *HOT COMB* (DRAWN AND QUARTERLY, 2019).
9. NANCY K. MILLER, "IS THIS RECOVERY? CHRONICITY AND CLOSURE IN
GRAPHIC ILLNESS MEMOIR," *BIOGRAPHY* 44.2-3 (2021); 59; 53-70.