

# Controlled Bodies, Mental Wounds: Vulnerability in Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim*

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## KEYWORDS

Jillian Tamaki; Mariko Tamaki; Canada; Graphic Novel; Vulnerability; Surveillance.

## ABSTRACT

This paper provides a study of vulnerability in Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim* (2008), a graphic novel about Kimberly Keiko Cameron (known as *Skim*), a Japanese Canadian teenage girl interested in Wicca and struggling through high school. By analysing selected panels and scenes, I explore the multiple ways in which control is exerted over the othered individuals in this graphic novel, that ultimately leads to the production of vulnerability. My research draws on a selection of theoretical concepts by authors like Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, such as linguistic injury or surveillance and disciplinary institutions, all of which are proven useful to the articulation of the strategies of representation favoured by Tamaki and Tamaki. I begin with an analysis of racial remarks in *Skim* in order to show how they work in (in)visible ways in the narrative. Secondly, I consider how *Skim* faces institutional control and oppression, as her high school operates as an institution of invisible surveillance that creates obedient subjects and that contributes to the further stigmatization of vulnerable characters. Thirdly, I research the mental illness of the protagonist, which is closely linked to surveillance and also works to stigmatize her. Lastly, I explore how the analysis of injurious language in *Skim* proves that language functions as a tool of hegemonic power to create valid subjects while silencing othered subjects that cannot fit in the domain of the speakable. Throughout, I argue that comics, as a hybrid medium composed by the visual and the verbal, have the capacity to represent the vulnerability of the non-normative subject.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo proporciona un estudio de la vulnerabilidad en *Skim* (2008) de Mariko Tamaki y Jillian Tamaki, una novela gráfica sobre Kimberly Keiko Cameron (conocida como *Skim*), una adolescente japonesa-canadiense aficionada a la Wicca que se enfrenta a su vida estudiantil con dificultades. Mediante el análisis de las viñetas seleccionadas, exploro las múltiples formas en que se ejerce control sobre los individuos en otredad en esta novela gráfica, lo cual conduce a la producción de vulnerabilidad. Mi investigación se basa en una selección de conceptos teóricos de autores como Judith Butler y Michel Foucault, tales como daño lingüístico, vigilancia e instituciones disciplinarias, que resultan útiles para analizar la articulación de las estrategias de representación elegidas por Tamaki y Tamaki. Comienzo con un análisis de las observaciones raciales en *Skim* para mostrar cómo éstas funcionan de manera (in)visible en la narración. En segundo lugar, examino la manera en que *Skim* afronta el control institucional y la opresión, ya que su instituto opera como una institución de vigilancia invisible que crea sujetos obedientes, contribuyendo así a una mayor estigmatización de los personajes vulnerables. En tercer lugar, investigo la enfermedad mental de la protagonista, que está estrechamente vinculada a la estigmatización y a la vigilancia. Por último, estudio el habla injuriosa en *Skim* para demostrar que el lenguaje funciona como una herramienta del poder hegemónico que crea sujetos válidos mientras silencia otros sujetos que no pertenecen al dominio de lo decible. A través de este artículo sostengo que los cómics, como medio híbrido compuesto por lo visual y lo verbal, tienen capacidad para representar la vulnerabilidad del sujeto no normativo.



“This is the Diary of Kimberly Keiko Cameron (aka Skim).” These words illustrate the cover of Walker Books’ 2009 edition of *Skim*, a graphic novel by Canadian authors Mariko Tamaki (writer) and Jillian Tamaki (artist). The line is accompanied by a drawing of the main character’s head, a profile where only her eyes and her long, black hair are seen, outlined against a blue sky. The cover of this work introduces the most notorious feature of comics: the blending of drawings and words, the interaction between the visual and the verbal.

Narrated in three parts, *Skim* follows the story of Kimberly Keiko Cameron, known as Skim, a Japanese Canadian teenage girl interested in Wicca and struggling through high school. The story, set in Toronto in 1993, deals with topics such as teenage suicide, unrequited love, mental illness and homosexual desire. Skim is a chubby 16-year-old whose reserved personality and uncommon interests isolate her among her peers. Besides, the protagonist is secretly in love with Ms. Archer, her English teacher. The story unfolds as Skim studies Wicca, goes out with her best friend Lisa Soor and tries to understand her feelings towards her teacher. Her otherwise quiet school life is affected by the suicide of John Reddear, the ex-boyfriend of one of her classmates, Katie Matthews. Overall, the narrative in *Skim* offers an interesting interplay between the verbal and the visual, taking full advantage of the most prominent feature of comics.

Comics have been progressively gathering academic attention in the last decades. As several authors have argued, the combined work of images and words create representations of artificial, drawn realities, allowing the reader to fill in the details between the visual and the textual (Hughes and King 67). Being a hybrid of words and pictures, comics offer an opportunity to bring to light the invisible, forcing “the viewer to ‘see’ an often-invisible culture of shaming and silencing” (Tolmie xi). Moreover, “[t]raumatic memory of something as intangible as being unable to speak can be made visible in the comics medium” (Tolmie xi). Accordingly, comic authors belonging to oppressed groups, such as women and LGTB+ creators, have taken advantage of the openness of comics and its capacity to show the invisible, shamed and silenced aspects of hegemonic culture. Women authors revolted against the conservative status quo in the 1960s and 1970s, establishing what is known as the “underground” period in comics and creating works that “were raw, emotionally honest, politically charged and sexually frank” (McCloud 102). In *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010), scholar Hillary Chute highlights “the importance of innovative textual practice offered by the rich visual-verbal form of comics to be able to represent trauma productively and ethically,” which serves to rethink the dominant tropes of unspeakability and invisibility that permeate society (3).

*Skim*’s authors create a graphic novel that turns to the intimate experiences of a quiet, depressed teenager. One crucial aspect of the narration is the diary form, which strategically fuses words and graphics while setting the narrative pace. As seen in the opening line of this paper, the story is told through Skim’s diary entries. The diary offers Skim a safe, intimate space to shield herself from her public life and to document her thoughts and experiences. The diary is a liminal space that exists between worlds—between Skim’s own private world and the reader’s world, who sees it unfolding as a witness of the protagonist’s most personal thoughts. Moreover, Skim is shown both writing and drawing in her diary. She constantly doodles on her class homework and fills her diary entries with drawings, stickers and big bold decorated letters. In a way, even if she does not do it consciously, she uses the tools of comics to express herself. There are times, however, where both pictures and words fail her—she is unable to put her feelings into words or images. It is to those unsayable moments, and the mark they imprint in the protagonist, that this paper pays attention.

As a chubby, Japanese Canadian teenage girl crushing on a woman older than her, Skim faces multiple moments of vulnerability through her daily life. Scholars such as Catriona Mackenzie et al. link the term vulnerability “to its derivation from the Latin word *vulnus* (‘wound’) and to the capacity to suffer that is inherent in human embodiment,” and thus, according to this conceptualization, “[t]o be vulnerable is to be fragile, to be susceptible to wounding and to suffering” (4). Judith Butler considers vulnerability to be “not a subjective disposition, but a relation to a field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge upon or affect us in some way” (“Rethinking Vulnerability” 16). Individuals are vulnerable to the discourses that surround them, since every subject lives in a world of categories and descriptions that they never chose, being constantly acting and acted upon in performative repetition (*Gender Trouble* 15).

This paper explores the multiple ways in which vulnerability is produced in *Skim*, considering how it is translated to the pages of a graphic novel, through an interplay between visible and invisible, and in the tensions between image and text. *Skim* shows how institutional control preys on vulnerable individuals and exerts its power over them. I begin with a consideration of racial remarks in *Skim* in order to show how they work in (in)visible ways in the narrative. In the second section I examine how institutional control marks the individual by employing Michel Foucault’s concept of the Panopticon as a medium that serves to enforce surveillance and produce obedient subjects. In the third section I further research how mental trauma affects vulnerable characters, such as Skim and Katie, and I argue that the vulnerability that comes from sexual identity and mental illness works invisibly.

bly and it is shown only in the visual. The last section turns to study the power of language to create valid subjects while “othering” subjects that cannot fit in the domain of the speakable, following Judith Butler’s notions of linguistic injury.

### I. Representation and Racial (In)Visibility

Before considering how institutional control operates in *Skim*, it is important to explore other issues directly related to the notion of (in)visibility, such as race. In *Skim*, remarks about race interplay with the visible and the invisible, as scholar Monica Chiu argues that race and homosexuality in this graphic novel are present in pictures but absent in prose (29). This argument serves to explore the tensions between text and image along with the representation of race in contemporary Canadian comics. *Skim* raises questions about race representation due to its many verbal silences and its eloquent visual manifestations. Writer Mariko Tamaki comments that some readers have questioned why Skim did not act “very Japanese,” to which she argues: “What is Japanese Canadian in a comic? Should Jillian have drawn her with chopsticks in her hair?” (Chiu 42; qtd. in Chan). What is, indeed, Japanese Canadian in a (fictional) graphic novel?

*Skim* does not offer clear answers, but, as Candida Rifkind and Linda Warley remark, Tamaki and Tamaki “draw readers into the fictional lives of Asian Canadian characters without explicitly thematising race” (5). Even if it is not a central issue to the plot, race is still present in their works and it intersects with other issues proposed in the story. Moreover, artist Jillian Tamaki has spoken on interviews about the “burden on artists and writers of colour to be cultural representatives” (Rifkind and Warley 5). Previously, scholars of Canadian literature such as Eva Darias-Beautell have drawn attention to the lack of success of “an analysis that transcends systemic reading expectations based on the authors’ racial/cultural backgrounds” (185-186) to liberate “minoritized Canadian writing from the burden of representation” (186). In the field of Canadian comics, while white cartoonists have turned to graphic life narratives—favouring autobiographical genres such as confession and memoir—contemporary cartoonists of colour and Indigenous cartoonists have resisted its pull, turning instead to fictional works (Rifkind and Warley 4-5). With works like *Skim* and *This One Summer* (2014), Tamaki and Tamaki follow the line of other cartoonists and writers of colour and have succeeded in challenging this expectation that minoritized Canadian writers and artists can only write autobiographically (Rifkind and Warley 6), dealing instead with the lives and experiences of fictional characters. Additionally, Jillian Tamaki points out the work that needs to be carried out in the field of alternative comics: on the one hand, resisting “the demand for cartoonists from traditionally under-represented groups to

take on the burden of community representation” and, on the other, being “attentive to how race informs all graphic narratives, so that whiteness is no longer the invisible norm but a visible and contested category” (Rifkind and Warley 6).

Going through the pages of this graphic novel, it is easy to see that Skim is the only Japanese Canadian girl in a high school full of white Canadian girls. As Chiu states, “the presence on nearly every page of Skim’s long black hair and almond-shaped eyes distinguishes her visually from her blonde-haired, blue-eyed, predominantly white peers” (41). While *Skim* does not propose a critical account of the situation of Asian Canadians in Toronto at the beginning of the 1990s, it does offer some clever insights about race. The scenes that serves to engage with this argument are found in the second part of the graphic novel. In a flashback, Skim narrates the time when she attended her classmate Julie Peter’s thirteenth birthday party. It was a costume party, and Skim went dressed as the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz*, while Julie and the other white girls were dressed as ballerinas or figure skaters (Tamaki and Tamaki 83). The only girl who did not go as a ballerina or figure skater was Hien Warshowski, a Vietnamese Canadian girl dressed as a soldier. During the party, Julie and her group of friends got together and talked about their country clubs and the boys they liked, while Skim and Hien watched a movie in the living room. Halfway into the night, a sudden cry of “AIR RAID!! AIR RAID!!” startled the two girls (84). In the blink of an eye, the other girls expelled Skim and Hien out of the house and threw their stuff at them. Figure 1 shows the moment after the two girls are thrown out of the house, when they sit outside in the porch, being each other’s only company. The word “SLAM” in big, bold capital letters appears in the first panel, as Skim looks at the closed door. In the second panel, Hien turns to look at Skim, but the composition of the panel makes it seem as if she was addressing the reader, perhaps demanding a reaction about the shocking event that has just happened to her. In the third and fourth panels, the girls wait to go back into the house, until, in the fifth panel, Hien leaves, her tiny figure marching on the street at night.

This scene contains the most evident verbal remark about race in *Skim*: “Hien’s parents adopted her from Vietnam two years earlier and she never got invited to parties. Maybe she thought that’s how people left parties in Canada. Asians first” (86). Even if in the story Julie and the other girls do not take the blame for throwing the Asian girls out of the house, the graphic representation and the racist undertones of their act are clearly visible in the narrative. Except from this scene, there is verbal silence in this graphic novel about race issues. Besides, it is important to mention that, in a similar manner to race, social class is never addressed in prose but it is manifested in the visual. Skim’s uniform



Fig. 1: “Asians first” From *Skim*, p. 86. By Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, House of Anansi Press, 2008.

and the fact that she attends an all-girls high school leads the reader to believe that she belongs to a privileged social class.

Chiu brings forward the work of novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen, who explores the difficulty of representing visual registers of race in Asian American literature (2). As he argues, “[t]he problem for an Asian American literature composed purely of the written word is that there is no formal way for it to deal with race’s visual dimension, only its narrative dimension” (12; qtd. in Chiu 2). Graphic narratives are one venue that can effectively visualize race, as it can write and rewrite the stories of race, and the looks of race as well (Nguyen 12; qtd. in Chiu 2). Thus, race in *Skim* is in the interplay between the visible and the invisible: visible because it is perceived through sight, being present in the physical depictions of Skim—the looks of race, using Nguyen’s words—and invisible because it is absent from the textual.

## II. Alive Bodies, Docile Bodies: High School as an Institution of Surveillance

Vulnerability is perpetuated with methods such as surveillance, which plays an important role in *Skim*. The physical space that Skim and her classmates inhabit marks and control the main character, and for this reason it can be analysed following Michel Foucault’s Panopticon. Although Foucault applies this concept mainly to prisons in *Discipline*

and Punish (1979), it can be used to examine other institutions that enforce obedience, such as high schools. The Panopticon is described as a mechanism to exert disciplinary power where each subject is “perfectly individualized and constantly visible” (Foucault 200). This is evident in the case of *Skim*, where there are several instances of Skim’s all-girls high school exerting its power over the students. After John Reddear’s suicide, the institution becomes concerned about suicidal ideas spreading among the students and takes direct action to face this situation. This idea is illustrated in the following scene (see figure 2), where Skim explains in her diary entry (located at the top left of the page, placed inside a blackboard) that her class must do “self-love exercises” with a specialist from an institute for teenage problems. The scene is narrated in five panels, the first one occupying most of the page and showing a classroom full of girls with similar bored expressions on their faces. The second panel portrays Skim’s impression of the woman who leads the exercises: “The woman had huge bug eyes and kept trying to make eye contact with everyone, like a crazy person or a serial killer” (Tamaki and Tamaki 60). In the next two panels, Skim explains the content of the activity: “We had to write down the things that made us sad and share it with the class, if we felt comfortable. People wrote: Suicide, Illness, Death and Loss. One girl said that Unhappiness made her sad” (60). Skim writes in her paper the word “Ignorance” when she hears her classmate’s answer.

The woman who talks exerts invisible control over the girls. Her position in the room allows her to look at everyone and, as Skim writes, she constantly tries to make eye contact with the students, engaging them in the activity. Even if the girls are not obligated to share their lists publicly, they must write down things that make them sad. The scene goes on the next page, as the next step for the girls is to write down what makes them happy. Skim does not know what to write, and after class Mrs. Hornet, one of her teachers, asks her to see her list, thus invading Skim’s own privacy to check on her mental health. Even though the psychiatric institution is not explicitly present in *Skim*, the reader can discern the effect that it has on the students—adult figures like Mrs. Hornet and the woman from the teenage problems institute constantly supervise the students, who are made to follow these “self-love exercises” that do not directly address the causes of depression or teenage suicide. This attitude highlights the lack of address of mental health issues, which isolates individuals from one another.

Apart from the teachers, the students also enforce surveillance on other students. The best example of someone who suffers the effects of peer surveillance is Katie, who is constantly surrounded by her classmates after her ex-boyfriend’s death. This idea is best seen in a scene from the second part of the graphic novel. The scene, narrated in a

double-spread, shows a panoramic view of the girls in their schoolyard. It takes place after Katie is back to school, the news of her ex-boyfriend's suicide already known by the rest of her classmates. Lisa and Skim, on the left with their backs turned to the reader (see figure 3), watch as Katie and a horde of girls surrounding her cross the schoolyard (see figure 4). Observing the scene, Lisa remarks that Katie is "on tons of anti-depressants" (Tamaki and Tamaki 68). The blackness of the girls' uniforms contrast with the white background of the page, as the gloomy figure of Katie contrasts with the figures of the smiling, cheerful girls.

Katie does not only face surveillance in its most physical sense. Her mental strain comes from not being left alone to mourn or deal with the traumatic events on her own, as she is always kept in the role of a victim by the GCL club. The reader does not know Katie's point of view of the events until the girl starts hanging out with Skim, their friendship flourishing after they are excused from gym class for having casted arms. Katie is always seen by other characters in the story, who portray her as a devastated, damaged girl, especially during the first part of the story. Then, as her friendship with Skim deepens, the reader learns about the rage she feels at the scrutiny and the oppressive treatment she is receiving. Skim describes her face as "funny" and "wrinkly" (Tamaki and Tamaki 68-69), and she usually sits apart from her classmates and isolates herself, not participating in the activities organized by the GCL club. As she explains to Skim, the girls from the club constantly stalk her to know more about John's death: "Katie scratched all the GCL daisies and peace signs off her cast. She said the GCL call her like, fifty times a day and are constantly stalking her. She said all they want to talk about is John" (Tamaki and Tamaki 135). When Skim sees Katie trying to destroy the GCL board with her casted arm, she



Fig. 2: "Self-love exercises." From *Skim*, p. 60. By Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, House of Anansi Press, 2008.



Figs. 3 and 4: Lisa and Skim observe Katie. From *Skim*, p. 68-69. By Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, House of Anansi Press, 2008.

learns that what the girl feels goes beyond a heartbreak: “I guess I always thought of Katie Matthews as being heartbroken. But maybe it’s way more complicated than that” (Tamaki and Tamaki 129). Eventually, Katie is able to move on with her life, to a new future that may include a closer relationship with Skim. For her, the only release from trauma comes after confronting and rejecting the GCL club and deciding not to talk about her ex-boyfriend anymore: “I don’t want to talk about him anymore” (Tamaki and Tamaki 135).

### III. (In)visible Wounds: Mental Illness and Unfulfilled Desire

Surveillance is closely related to the presence of mental illness and trauma, as disciplining institutions exert their power specifically on those who are most vulnerable. Following Chiu’s argument on the visual character of race in *Skim* (Chiu 29), I argue that mental illness is also shown in a visual way in this graphic novel, while its verbal manifestation is scarce and unclear. Through Skim’s diary entries, the reader can see the struggles that she faces for being a depressed teenager in a school that tries to enforce normalcy on her. *Skim*’s narrative offers many visual clues of the main character’s depression and the effects it has on her life: pictures narrate what Skim cannot put into words, and the visual is able to show the detachment and solitude that the girl feels when words fail her.

It is interesting to consider the institutional response to mental illness in *Skim*, since the constant demand to be happy is criticised in the story. This idea is expressed in the scene where Skim is given a private guidance session with Mrs. Hornet: “Mrs. Hornet said she’s particularly concerned about people like me, because people like me are prone to depression and depressing stimuli. Mrs. Hornet says students who are members of the ‘gothic’ culture (i.e. ME) are very fragile” (Tamaki and Tamaki 22). The teacher offers Skim tissues and sits very close to her, to the point of making the girl uncomfortable. Her office’s wall is decorated with positive, inspirational images. Skim also questions the nature of this guidance session (see figure 5). As she notes, John, the boy who actually committed suicide, “was on the VOLLEYBALL TEAM, not a goth, and he KILLED HIMSELF!!!” (22). While Mrs. Hornet shows her a diagram about the circle of grief, Skim ponders about the nature of her depression, as she considers that it is not directly related to her being a goth: “Truthfully I am always a little depressed but that is just because I am sixteen and everyone is stupid (ha-ha-ha). I doubt it has anything to do with being a goth” (22). In the last panel, she wonders why the girls on the soccer team are not in counselling. Skim’s anger at the treatment she is receiving manifests in her drawing: a broken heart with the word “FUCK” drawn in big, bold letters.



Fig. 5: Guidance with Mrs. Hornet. From *Skim*, p. 22. By Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, House of Anansi Press, 2008.

Skim faces a close scrutiny on her mental wellbeing at home as well: “This morning over breakfast, Mom asked me about suicide. Because of John Reddear, who is now suddenly part of my life. I said I am not planning on committing suicide. Apparently I look unwell. Mom says possibly I am losing weight” (Tamaki and Tamaki 32). Even Lisa notices Skim’s negative outward appearance and recommends her to cheer up: “Maybe if you lightened up, people wouldn’t think you were looking to off yourself” (Tamaki and Tamaki 78). These scenes serve to point out how not being cheerful or happy enough is a social indicative of being suicidal, which serves to engage with Andrea Nicki’s critique of the cultural insistence on cheerfulness. In “The Abused mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability, and Trauma” (2001), Nicki offers a feminist theory of psychiatric disability drawing on feminist theory of physical disability. She compares the rejection of physically disabled people, based on the social insistence of the control of the body, to the rejection of psychiatrically disabled people, based on the control of the mind (Nicki 82). Society marginalises people with mental illness “and assume that they can simply ‘snap out’ of their conditions” (Nicki 81). As explained in the previous section, “self-love exercises” in *Skim* are good examples of this idea: depression and suicidal tendencies on teenagers are treated as an issue that can be solved with some positive messages and lists of things that make an

individual happy. Nicki criticizes what she calls the “cultural insistence on cheerfulness” where “we are always supposed to appear as though life were happy and carefree” (94). Mentally ill people like Skim face social pressure to “snap out” of her depression and appear “normal” and functioning.

Interestingly, Skim’s depression is also perceived by herself, which is clearly seen when she confesses in her diary that she feels watched by everyone (see figure 6). With a turned back, Skim walks away as a series of characters observe her: Julie Peters, her friend Lisa, Mrs. Hornet and her mother. These figures are drawn with thin lines against a white background, with no ink filling their forms. The eyes of the reader follow these lined characters from left to right, to stop in at the right corner, where a figure that looks exactly like Skim directs her gaze to herself. The word “me” is missing from Skim’s head, as the names of the other characters that observe her are included in the panel. The analysis of Foucault’s Panopticon can be applied here, as Skim watches herself, facing her own scrutiny. Skim ignores everyone as she walks past them, but the composition of the panel, setting the girl before her own self, suggests that she cannot ignore her own examination. There is no authoritarian figure—no teachers, no mother or classmates—asking her about suicide or insisting on positive thinking. Still, Skim watches herself, the invisible power of close, personal surveillance now fully adopted. Even though her act of watching herself is left unwritten, it is shown in the visual, and what Skim has been unable to voice is manifested in a panel that highlights the tensions between what is speakable and what is not.

Another scene that shows the visual character of Skim’s depression is found in figure 7. It opens with Skim addressing her diary and explaining how she got “a sick feeling” while singing “Joyful, Joyful” at school prayers (80). She is completely detached from her surroundings, which is shown in the lack of frames containing the panels, and in the blurry



Fig. 6: Watched by others and watched by oneself. From *Skim*, p. 105. By Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, House of Anansi Press, 2008.

contours. Her face is either completely obscured or not visible, and when her expression is shown, her eyes are downcast. Lisa and other classmates appear in the background of some of these panels, but Skim never interacts with them. She barely performs what is expected of her in her daily life at school, and readers do not have a clear account of the order or the time when these actions are taking place. The images are connected only by visual clues that show that she is at school—like papers and books, lab instruments or her friend Lisa in the bathroom. All the reader knows is that she is physically attending school, but her mind seems to be elsewhere. Moreover, the composition of the page, with text only in the first panels, makes it seem as if Skim’s “sick feeling” lasted all day.

Skim’s mental state is deeply affected by her feelings towards Ms. Archer, while she attempts to untangle, verbalize and understand the attraction she feels towards the older woman. The visual is able to portray the moments of vulnerability that spring from Skim’s unanswered desire, as shown in figure 8. The composition of this page, divided into



Fig. 7: Skim’s lack of focus. From *Skim*, p. 80. By Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, House of Anansi Press, 2008.

eight panels of diverse sizes and shapes, allows the reader to dive into Skim's subjectivity through a parallel of images. It is the first scene of the second part of the graphic novel, taking place after the double spread of Skim and Ms. Archer kissing in the woods outside the school. The first panel shows the bus stop where Skim takes the bus every morning, the words "It feels like there's a broken machine inside my chest..." (Tamaki and Tamaki 44) written inside the frame. The next four panels portray individual moments of Skim's day at school: a teacher in the classroom, Lisa talking to her during lunch, a close-up of Skim's hand writing down the date of a painting, and two students smoking. The sixth and seventh panels depict leaves on the ground and a vacuum cleaner at home. The last panel shows Skim lying on her bed, covered in sheets, with her cat lying on top of her. The vertical black lines disrupt the narration of the whole page, symbolizing Skim's heartbeats that accompany her throughout her day, from the bus stop to her bed at night. The text shows that girl attempts to verbalize what she feels: "or... or... something..." (Tamaki and Tamaki 44). The multiple silences in this page, interrupted by the bold heartbeats, are revealing when one considers how loud the visual register in this story can be. The artistic choice of not showing Skim until the last panel manifests the detachment that Skim feels towards her own life, as in the scene from figure 7—she is not emotionally present or involved in the activities she goes through, as her mind is somewhere else trying to untangle her feelings towards Ms. Archer. Another similarity to figure 7 is found in the fact that both scenes show seemingly unconnected images about Skim's day seen from her point of view that allow the reader to see what the girl sees.

Chiu points out that the picture in the fourth panel, where Skim is writing down a date for her homework, is in fact a reproduction of Édouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863), "a work that has generated numerous readings addressing female sexuality, the female gaze, the lesbian gaze, and the reclining figure's white body in relation to the painting's darker ones" (39). In the painting, a white nude woman is reclined, her gaze fixed on the reader, a hand placed on her genitals as her black maiden looks at her. The painting displays overt female sexuality, with no man present in the scene, which enraged the public of the time (Chiu 39). Chiu remarks the comparison between the panel and Skim's rendition of it, as there are clear differences: Skim's body is completely covered, and her eyes do not meet the reader, which suggests timidity (40). I propose that the placement of these two panels reinforces the idea of Skim's sexuality—that she is unable to verbalize it, and that the lesbian desire she feels cannot be expressed; while the contrary happens in *Olympia*. In this manner, *Skim's* silence on sexuality and desire is similar to its silence on race issues.

Additionally, Skim reveals the turmoil of the teenager's relationship with her teacher, which is manifested in scenes such as the one that takes place when Skim goes to Ms. Archer's house for the second time (see figure 9). This scene, divided in five panels and surrounded in black gutter, focuses on emotional distance and visual constraints and it is seen from the girl's point of view. The first panel shows Ms. Archer, seen from the neck below, as Skim would see her. In the previous page, Skim had asked her whether she was



Fig. 8: "A broken machine inside my chest" From *Skim*, p. 44. By Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, House of Anansi Press, 2008.

coming back to school (Tamaki and Tamaki 56), to which she replies, “Next week.” Then, the next panel offers a close-up of tea being poured into a cup, while Skim asks, “Oh. Are you sick?” Ms. Archer replies “No. No, I’m fine” while picking up her cat from the couch, her head not visible. The last two panels are almost identical: Skim, on the right, looking down and sitting on the couch with a cup of tea on her hands, and Ms. Archer on the left, her back turned to the reader, holding her cup in the fourth panel and drinking from it in the fifth. The repetition in panels four and five denotes stillness and awkwardness, and the intermittent dialogue suggests Skim’s inability to look at her teacher’s face.

Ms. Archer, who is in a power position in relation to Skim, being her teacher and older than the teenager, acts cold and distant and offers no explanation to Skim when she finally leaves the school. After the kiss they share on schoolgrounds (Tamaki and Tamaki 40-41) Ms. Archer ignores Skim and stops teaching her classes, perhaps with the intention of avoiding a possible scandal for engaging with a student. The reader never knows Ms. Archer’s side of the story, nor her intentions towards Skim. However, the story shows the aftermath of Skim’s unverbilized relationship and how it fuels her depression, leaving her



Fig. 9: Skim in Ms. Archer’s house. From *Skim*, p. 57. By Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, House of Anansi Press, 2008.

damaged and vulnerable. This idea is presented in the three panels from figure 10, which take place after Skim notices that Ms. Archer has left the school and that she has lost the chance to say goodbye. In the figure from the previous example Ms. Archer’s face was obscured, but in this scene Skim’s face is hidden, and her body looks tiny against her house and the snow in the first panel. She sits down on the bus and at her desk as if she were trying to hide herself from the world. She pours her feelings into her diary: “Dear Diary, All day today I was rubber. My eyes feel like bathtub plugs” (Tamaki and Tamaki 105). In the third panel she writes that she tries “to take up as little space as possible” (105). The lack of a proper realization or a proper closure for her lesbian desire towards Ms. Archer drives Skim to further isolation and to ignore the world around her, while her mental strain worsens.

The visual depictions of Skim’s depression that have been explored in this section serve to highlight the impact that this mental illness exerts in the protagonist’s life, showing thus a hidden condition that social norms tend to silence and repress with the need to be always happy and positive. Furthermore, while surveillance works on everyone, it is especially intense on the individuals that do not fit into the model of normalcy, like Skim



Fig. 10: Skim’s mental state after Ms. Archer leaves. From *Skim*, p. 105. By Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, House of Anansi Press, 2008.

and Katie. The institution, in one way or another, focuses on them and preys on their vulnerability—Skim is separated from her peers and closely examined because her teachers consider her “kind” (a goth teenager with unusual interests) to be prone to depression and suicidal thoughts, while Katie is closely observed by the GCL club because of the anguish and despair she experiences after her ex-boyfriend’s suicide.

#### IV. Written Wounds: The (Un)sayable Subjects

Language has power to repeat trauma and mark people, and words can hurt as much as physical wounds. This idea is explored in *Skim* through the character of John, who, despite having a different status in the novel to that of Skim—being a “dead boy” with no voice of his own, who only exists in Skim’s recollections and the rumours generated by other characters—marks the pages of the novel with his invisibility and his presence through his absence.

Butler’s conception of linguistic injury serves to engage with this discussion, since it will prove to be central to the analysis of hateful language in *Skim*. In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), she considers linguistic injury as something that goes beyond uttered, explicit language, as it includes not only the words “by which one is addressed but the mode of address itself, a mode—a disposition or conventional bearing—that interpellates and constitutes a subject” (*Excitable Speech* 2). When injurious names are uttered, their hateful content is reconsolidated. This repetition is connected to the traumatic experiences that are relived when the injury is uttered (*Excitable Speech* 36).

The second part of *Skim* engages with the linguistic substitution of a traumatic event. The scene in figure 11 depicts Skim’s tiny figure, located on the right side of the page, is outside in the woods, surrounded by the whiteness of the snow. The space of the page is mostly blank, as the forest Skim walks through is covered in snow. The scene begins with the accustomed “Dear Diary,” and continues with Skim writing in the snow with her feet: “I HATE ~~YOU~~ EVERYTHING.” The girl has erased the word “you” and replaced it with “everything.” As Chiu notes, this scene collects “the anger and frustration that this tentative, unassuming Japanese Canadian teenager will not express to her friends, parents or teachers” (27). Skim’s true feelings are manifested visually, while her diary entry only includes a short sentence describing the weather: “it’s snowing” (89). However, I consider that the most interesting aspect of this scene lies at the bottom of the page: A photograph of John with the word “fag” written on his forehead. This is one of the three instances in which the reader sees John’s face in the book, the first one being the same newspaper photograph shown in this example featured on the GCL club’s hallway bulletin board, next to the words

“teen taken: too soon” (Tamaki and Tamaki 52), and the third one being a photograph of his smiling face that his mother holds during his memorial ceremony (95).

The word “fag,” written with the intention to hurt, follows and marks John even after his death, as his truth is never known in the novel. Butler questions the injury that language itself performs, drawing on Toni Morrison’s conceptualization of oppressive language as violence: “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence” (*Excitable Speech* 16). In the memorial ceremony scene, Skim releases a balloon into the open air with the words “Dear John~ Think of three things that make you happy~” (Tamaki and Tamaki 94). This act is meant to be a ritual, mimicking the activity that the girls had to do in

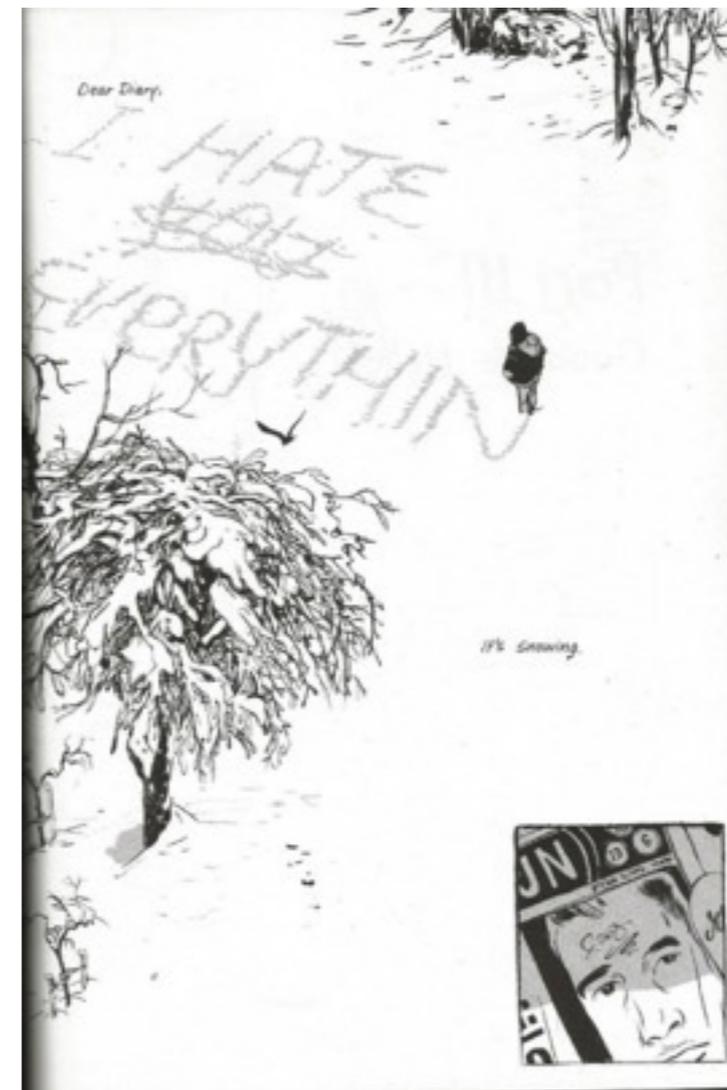


Fig. 11: Skim writes on the snow. From *Skim*, p. 89. By Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, House of Anansi Press, 2008.

class where they wrote three things that made them happy. Instead, *Skim* includes three things that she has heard about John since he died:

1) That he was happy, outgoing and athletic, and he liked volleyball and music. 2) That he was secretly suffering from depression. 3) That he was MAYBE a star volleyball player and depressed person who was ALSO in love with a boy who was on the St. Michael's second-string volleyball team. (Tamaki and Tamaki 94)

Even though *Skim* mentions that John may have been in love with another boy, it is not clear that this was the reason of his suicide. Still, the narrative invites to question this possibility. What remains is the violence exerted by that word written on the boy's GCL club memorial—this violence being a homosexual desire that cannot be named, that is invisible in the story, and yet when it is named, it intends to hurt, damage and ridicule.

Censorship is another lingering theme in *Skim*. Butler understands censorship as a “productive form of power” that “seeks to produce subjects according to explicit and implicit norms” (*Excitable Speech* 133), thus linking the power of language to the power of creating and producing subjects. What needs to be considered is the “domain of the sayable” where the subject is allowed to begin their speech (133). The scene from figure 11 shows that what *Skim* feels cannot be contained in this domain of the sayable and escapes inclusion in prose, only to find release in the visual. Moreover, in *Skim*, it is not so much the protagonist's omission of the events that took place before and after John's suicide as the fact that no one in the story talks openly about his sexuality and the possible reasons of his suicide: “No one talked about John being gay at the ceremony. Surprise, surprise. Although Julie Peters practically ripped Anna Canard's tongue out when she brought it up afterwards. P.S. No one knows if the boy from the volleyball team loved John back...” (Tamaki and Tamaki 95). John's identity cannot fit inside the domain of the sayable, as he remains a dead boy, nothing more than the gossip of *Skim*'s high school.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have attempted to prove the validity of the graphic novel to express the vulnerability of the non-normative subject and propose and acknowledge other ways of being that do not fit into conventional discourse, and to manifest certain forms of subjectivity that are outside of the normative frameworks. The vulnerable characters in *Skim* are affected by the hegemonic control and surveillance that is exerted on them. Showing *Skim*'s traumatic experience as an isolated teenage girl that suffers from depres-

sion serves to reject the normative claims on mental health and break the control imposed on subjects to be docile and “normal.”

*Skim* does not offer a clear, definite answer to the questions it raises. In fact, Hughes and King indicate that *Skim* does not offer a definitive ending, “only a hint (Katie in her white tam sitting in the ravine) that Katie and *Skim* will become even closer and that they find support through each other's friendship” (78). The visual suggests that there is a future for vulnerable characters like *Skim* and Katie—maybe as friends, maybe as lovers—as the openness of the story allows to read an ending where both girls are together. Tamaki and Tamaki invite the reader to see and wonder about the situation and the possible future of *Skim* and Katie, of Japanese Canadians, of women who desire women, of people with mental illnesses, of people that experience vulnerability that is created, perpetuated and exploited by the institutions that enforce control. Ultimately, *Skim* works as an example of how the visual allows for the existence of everything that cannot be said, of the unspeakable and unsayable, of these beings that cannot exist within hegemonic discourse. It demands the reader to visually acknowledge race, homosexuality, mental illness—other ways of being that cannot be contained within the hegemonic normativity.

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