SELF-REFLEXIVE ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN CECE BELL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMICS: A STUDY OF THE TRANSGRESSIONS OF NARRATIVE LEVELS

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Abstract

Cece Bell released her autobiographical comic *El Deafo* (2014) in print and digital versions, transposing herself into the anthropomorphic rabbit Cece, who speaks of her hearing loss experience at four after having contracted meningitis. Young Cece wears a hearing aid on her long rabbit ears, showing her animal, human, and technological hybrid body to others. Nevertheless, she assumes the identity of the superhero "El Deafo," her alter-ego, to cope with her daily challenges in a community composed mostly of hearing individuals, first as an escape to her imaginary world and later for accepting her identity as deaf. This paper aims to analyse *El Deafo* as an autobiographical comic, considering the representation of deafness through an unstable hybrid body and a transgression of the narrative levels based on the notion of metalepsis, drawn by Genette, Kukkonen, and Ryan in various media.

Keywords: autobiographical comics; anthropomorphism; El Deafo; metalepsis; digital comics.

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Introduction

Cece Bell narrates her life story in the autobiographical comic entitled *El Deafo,* released in 2014 in print and digital versions. Bell conveys her experiences of becoming deaf at four after contracting meningitis to young readers by combining images and texts in a multilayered narrative. The depicted world of the story is inhabited by anthropomorphic rabbits drawn in a plain cartoonish style. As an anthropomorphised rabbit, Cece must wear a hearing aid on her long ears on top of her head, drawing attention to the technological device and deafness (Chern and Denham 2022).

Bell also contrasts Cece's hearing aid with Batman's utility belt. By adding a reference from the real world to the story, Bell connects the depicted world with reality, layering narrative and distinct worlds. Young Cece first becomes the introverted superhero with unrevealed desires and thoughts and then the extroverted superhero who actively interacts with peers. The superhero in *El Deafo* destigmatises the use of a hearing aid, naturalising its use, and conveys the message that "disabled bodies can still embody strength," thus contributing to a positive representation of deafness (Chern and Denham 20).

Bell's work has been studied by focusing on the disabled body's posthuman ideal, centred on the figure of the cyborg, a hybrid resulting from the combination of a human and a machine as well as a human and an animal (Haraway 1987). For Poharec (2019), Bell disrupts the able- and disabled-body dichotomy by incorporating technology to enhance the body's capacity, allowing a more fluid identity, which transgresses the human-machine and human-animal dichotomies (188). For Cece, who experiences the world and interacts with "objects" such as the TV and radio through a technological device attached to her body, *El Deafo* allows grasping posthumanism as an ideal, extending it to the deaf individual (Poharec 199).

According to Smith-D'Arezzo and Holc (2016), Bell centres her narrative around the representation of "girlhood," considering age, gender, and disability as intersecting aspects, resulting in her acceptance of new corporeality (73). Bell depicts her urge as a deaf girl to make friends and confront any girl's difficulties in a realistic setting, even though class and race have not been fully explored (72).

The discussions around El Deafo have centred the scrutiny of a posthuman body as an ideal for the disabled body, considering Cece's anthropomorphic representation of deafness and disabled body; and the study of girlhood based on the intersection of class, gender, and disability. However, the several narrative layers constructed in Bell's work have not been exhaustively studied. The notion of autobiographic comics as a hybrid subgenre of autobiography can help analyse how Bell's subjectivities of the past and present become imbricated in the narrative. Concepts from other fields, such as narratology and game studies as *metalepsis,* might help grasp the disruption of narrative layers in *El Deafo*.

This study aims to analyse the autobiographical comic *El Deafo*, the digital version, to scrutinise the multilayered narrative and dialogic relation between the representation of past and present realities. The study departs from the discussion

performed by comic scholars (Gardner 2008; 2012; McCloud 1993; Whitlock 2006; Whitlock and Poletti 2008; Chute 2010; Refaie 2012) to grasp the complexity of the autobiographical genre. In addition, the notion of metalepsis from fields such as narratology and game studies contributes to mapping the transgressions of the narrative levels (Genette 1980; Kukkonen 2011; Ryan 2004). The discussions on disabilities (Couser 1997; Campbell 2009; Garland-Thomson 2002) help deepen our understanding of the character's experiences of being a deaf girl in a neighbourhood comprising hearing individuals, her anxiety to attend a regular school, and her worries about showing/concealing her hearing-aid device.

Autobiographical comics

Bell's *El Deafo* results from her choice of writing/designing comics to narrate her life story. This tradition is considered to have started in the underground movement of the 1970s when authors shared their personal experiences with an adult audience (Gardner 2008). Currently, it is possible to mention some of the most remarkable biographies narrated through comic in *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. The study of a hybrid genre that combines autobiography and comic was conducted under distinguished nomenclatures such as "autographs" (Gardner 2008; 2012), "graphic memoir," autographics (Whitlock 2006; Whitlock and Poletti 2008), or simply autobiographical comics (Refaie 2012). Nevertheless, no consensus has been reached regarding the nomenclature of the narrative subgenre, and some terms are even used interchangeably.

Autographs can be explained as "graphic memoirs [which] provide a space to theorise and practice new ethical and effective relationships and responses" ("Autography"; Gardner 1). The term autographics was coined by Whitlock to refer to the "graphic memoir" or a graphic autobiography to "draw attention to the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text in [the] genre of autobiography, and also to the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through comics" (966). Autobiographical comics are considered "a loose category of life writing through the use of sequential image and (usually) words." (Refaie 48).

In this article, *El Deafo* is referred to as an autobiographical comic and a graphic memoir for alluding to the hybrid genre resulting from the author's choice of comic to narrate her life story. The narrative levels in *El Deafo* are complex as it involves a deaf subject/author intertwined with the reality where she lives and the depiction of her lived experience in graphic form. Young Cece becomes Bell's "autobiographical avatar" through which her childhood memories are (re-)enacted (Whitlock 971). The depiction of the author's self-image in a cartoonish style enables a process of estrangement, distancing Bell from her past self and allowing a degree of objectiveness. Bell can access her past experiences critically through self-representation as an object/avatar. In this context, the author becomes both the observer and the observed, layering temporality, subjectivities, and world views. Chute (2010) states that female authors do not simply narrate their lives through graphic narratives; they convey "narratives of development,

that present and underscore hybrid subjectivities" by combining past and present subject positions (5).

The life writing of deaf experiences may vary radically with the degree and period of hearing loss. People with post-lingual hearing loss may tend to maintain oral communication, while those with prelingual hearing loss may have difficulty producing speech sounds. Deaf identities are diverse and multifaceted; while some aim to restore hearing capacity through surgical cochlear implants, others might altogether reject the view of disability as a *lack* or *loss*. The term "Deaf (with capital d)" refers to those who communicate using American Sign Language and view themselves as a separated community, standing as any minority group in society (Couser 1997, 223).

There is a crucial distinction between deaf autobiography and Deaf autobiography, which refers to the life story of the Deaf, who views deafness as a distinct culture rather than a disability (Couser 269). Bell's narrative centres on her severe postlingual hearing loss experience; Cece can maintain oral communication and amplify residual hearing capacity with the help of a hearing aid. Cece refuses to learn sign language, relying on speech reading and oral communication. Her work conveys her personal and subjective experiences of hearing loss as she gradually assumes her identity as deaf.

Nevertheless, Bell avoids the medicalised view of disability once young Cece embraces her deafness by agreeing to wear the hearing aid, thus assuming her "posthuman" status (Poharec 199) and her "corporeal variation" (Smith -D'Arezzo and Holc 77).

Anthropomorphism: A disruption of animal and human limits

The transposition of the narrator's world to the depicted world of *El Deafo* involves the phenomenon of anthropomorphism, with Bell's depiction of a world inhabited by human-like rabbits. Anthropomorphism is understood as animals or objects with humanlike features, which has been recurrent in children's literature (Markowsky 1975; Derby 1970).

A cognitive view of anthropomorphism explains it as "the tendency to imbue the real or imagined behaviour of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions" in daily interactions (Epley et al. 2007, 864).

The study of anthropomorphism does not reach a consensus, and it is considered a strategy for authors to evoke empathy (Keen 2011). For Herman (2011), there might be a distinction between animal allegory and anthropomorphic projection, because the former is based on animal depiction to explore human motivations, institutions, and so on, and the latter relies on "human motivation and practices" to deepen the understanding of "animal behaviour" (167) Thus, according for Herman, Spiegelman uses an animal allegory instead of anthropomorphic projection, as he focuses on human relations structured on animal relations for depicting critically "human institutions, practices and experiences" (169). *Maus*

leads to the apprehension of the inevitable tragic historical account from which there is no escape.

For Willmott (2012), modern society has channelled desire through two paths: "representing a threatening, unresolved problem in modern life or venturing towards a utopian alternative," inevitably being confronted with the human-animal iconic creature. The representation of the utopian ideal thus in modern society has relied on the image of the human, animal, and technology hybrid, highlighting the question of need and desire, scarcity, and abundance (Willmott). Anthropomorphism becomes strongly rooted in the reification of desire through the production of a "cyborg," which challenges the stability of the body, conceiving an impure body composed of human, animal, and machine hybrid, yet with the creative potential for comic writers (Haraway 1).

The cartoonish style in comics calls attention to "specific details," especially on the face, triggering the identification of human features in nonhuman agents through the process of "amplification through simplification" (McCloud 1993, 30).

In *Maus* (two volumes: volume 1 in 1986 and 2 in 1991), Art Spiegelman depicts his father's experience as a Jew in the context of World War II through anthropomorphic animals by representing the Jews as mice as opposed to German gentiles, depicted as cats. The human-like aspects are imbued in the postures and behaviours of anthropomorphic animals, as they wear costumes, form family bonds, and live socially, allowing the prediction of their human-like future behaviours as the events are unleashed. Such a view highlights the human aspect of anthropomorphised animals, and the idea of (human) perversity inevitably arises from such identification; consequently, readers are confronted with questioning the notion of humanity. For Hatfield, the inadequacies of the graphic representation in *Maus* may provoke discomfort, and hunter-and-prey relations may be brought to light, thus challenging the human and animal dichotomy and provoking a deep questioning of the human condition.

Bell explains her choice for anthropomorphised rabbits in *El Deafo* in an interview for the Guardian: "Rabbits were the perfect visual metaphor for my experience. Rabbits have big ears and amazing hearing. As the only kid in my school who was deaf, I felt like the one rabbit whose big ears didn't work…." (Bell 2015). Human-like features in Bell's self-representation as an anthropomorphic rabbit with long dysfunctional ears highlight her notably human behaviour, affection, and emotions, thus proving the experience of deafness, particularly Bell's experiences as deaf (Kersten 2017).

The anthropomorphic rabbit, Cece, narrates her life story, allowing readers to gradually observe her interactions through human-like behaviours as the narrative unravels a deaf experience in a hearing society. In this context, anthropomorphism is represented by a posthuman body that intertwines the dichotomy of disabled and able bodies with animal, human and machine hybrid body problematics.

In sum, Spiegelman's "self-reflexiveness" results from the impossibility of thoroughly accessing his father's experience, the choice of representing Jews as anthropomorphic mice, and the reliance on the construction of a coherent graphic

representation of historical accounts (Hartfield 2005, 141). On the contrary, in Bell's work, self-reflexiveness stems from the projection of the author as an anthropomorphic rabbit, the selection of interactions with hearing individuals in her path to making friends, and the evocation of reflections on "difference" (Papazian 2017, 19).

Nevertheless, future studies must deepen the discussion on anthropomorphic entities in autobiographical comics/graphic memoirs. The following section presents the study of the transgression of the narrative level crucial for deepening the discussion of Bell's autobiographical comic.

Metalepsis as a transgression of narrative levels

The study of a graphic memoir narrative is revisited through Genette's transgression of narrative levels. Genette (1980) posited three narrative levels in the literature that can help us grasp the complex narrative in *El Deafo*. The events lived by young Cece in the autobiographical comic are presented on the *diegetic* or story level, or the story world. The narration in the caption box is conveyed by a grown-up Cece, who has already experienced the events in the past. In this sense, she is placed outside the story or the diegesis, thus being on the *extradiegetic* level. Unable to express her true feelings to the other characters in the story world/diegesis, young Cece creates an imaginary universe in which she can give voice to her demands and live freely. Thus, she becomes the narrator in an *intradiegetic* space, or within a diegesis, identified as the *metadiegetic* level.

For Genette, initially, these limits of the narrative levels – diegetic, extradiegetic, and metadiegetic levels – are distinct; however, their boundaries can be disrupted or transgressed through *metalepsis*, or the crossing of the "sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells" (236).

Cece assumes the function of three distinct types of narrators across the narrative levels, disrupting the narrative levels and provoking depicted reality and reality friction. Metalepsis, as Genette further explains, is "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse" in literature (234-35). According to Ryan (2004), Genette's studies were restricted to rhetorical metalepsis and referred to those cases in which the intrusions between the narrative levels were considered momentary, with order re-established soon after the disruption. Ryan expands the notion of metalepsis in game studies, which can be applied to the study of digital comics.

The object of this study, the digital comics *El Deafo*, radically changes the production, circulation, and consumption of the product in contrast with the print version, becoming more sustainable in terms of reducing paper usage (Wershler et al. 2020). The digital version is more intuitive and even interactive, involving human and machine interactions, as it can be read on several physical displays, such as mobile phones, tablets, and notebooks, compared to the print

version. In this sense, this study can profit from Ryan's discussion of metalepsis applied to interactive games.

An example of momentary rhetorical metalepsis occurs as Bell speaks about her autobiographical comic characters during her interviews for magazines or testimonies posted on the YouTube channel "Cece Bell" (see Fig. 1). By doing so, she/the author disrupts the extradiegetic and diegetic levels by bringing the characters from the depicted world to reality.
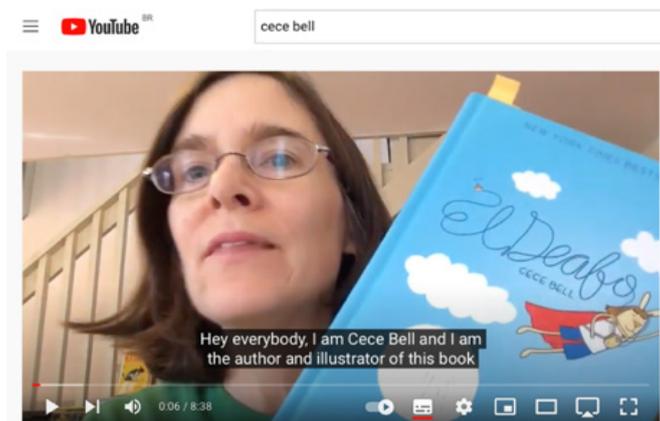

Fig. 1. Rhetorical metalepsis (Bell 2020)

Ryan mentions McHale (1987), who indicates the recurrence of a distinct type of metalepsis, named ontological metalepsis, in which the transgression of narrative levels is manifested in an embedded manner, such as through dreams and hallucinations typical to postmodern productions. Ryan contrasts Genette's rhetorical metalepsis and McHale's ontological metalepsis, considering the level of the narrative levels' imbrication and the nature of the boundaries that distinguish them:

> Whereas rhetorical metalepsis maintains the stack levels distinct from each other, ontological metalepsis opens a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration or mutual contamination. These levels, needless to say, must be separated by the type of boundary that I call ontological: a switch between two radically distinct worlds, such as "the real" and "the imaginary," or the world of "normal" (or lucid) mental activity from the worlds of dream of hallucination. (442)

For Ryan, ontological metalepsis implies a more imbricated and profound relationship between the narrative levels than does rhetorical metalepsis. Kukkonen (2011) develops her studies of metalepsis in comics by focusing on the boundaries of the depicted world as the space within the panels that compose the sequence of images on the pages, with the real world as the space left blank between the panels, known as the gutter. The process of understanding comics by a reader, situated in the real world, occurs through a gaze at the panel frames limited by the blank spaces or gutter.

As comics are represented in verbal and visual modes, the images and texts cannot be apprehended separately. Nevertheless, the way theoreticians envision these two modes may differ substantially. For Eisner (2008), images and texts are intertwined, with the meaning of a text necessarily provided or "accelerated" by the image (xvii). Conversely, McCloud draws attention to the disconnection between the text and image in comics: "Our need for a unified language of comics sends us toward the centre where words and pictures are like two sides of one coin. But our need for sophistication in comics seems to lead us outward, where words and pictures are most separate" (49). In this context, images play a crucial role and can restrict, limit, amplify, and maximise the meaning conveyed through texts, thus widening the possibilities for interpretations. Additionally, spaces filled with images and texts are as crucial as those left blank, for it is "the place left for the reader's minds to connect the events in the panels" ("Metalepsis in Comics and Graphic Novels"; Kukkonen 217). The readers thus undergo a cognitive process while reading comics, producing a sequence of the narrative in their minds.

According to Kukkonen, occurrences of metalepsis in comics are based on a combination of self-reflexiveness, transgression of the real world (the gutter and blank spaces of the page) into the story world (panels), and a shift in the background representation evidencing the character in the "foreground" (214). Metalepsis in comics for Kukkonen thus occurs through the process named foregrounding, which is "a cognitive process in which one element is perceived against the context of its background," "achieved through both verbal and visual means," leading to the readers' awareness of the narrative construction process (217).

According to Kukkonen, metalepsis in comics is further classified into rhetorical and ontological metalepsis. In rhetorical metalepsis, characters (textual or fictional entities) provoke the transgression, for instance by addressing the readers directly, either visually or textually, breaking the fourth wall, or by characters of other books or entities connected to the represented reality entering the depicted world, both resulting in the momentary disruption of narrative levels. For instance, while learning to perform speechreading, Cece presents the clues to readers and breaks the fourth wall, and simultaneously makes references to Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (from reality) by wearing costumes and making use of props such as the magnifying glass (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Rhetorical metalepsis (Bell 2020, 30)

In an ontological metalepsis, transgression of ontological categories occurs, for example, through characters manipulating the media language, such as the crossing of the panels not respecting the limits of the gutter, revisiting panels and the title, or entities connected to reality (authors, readers) entering the fictional world. In both cases, they result in embedded narrative levels. In *El Deafo*, these disruptions of the blank spaces are discrete and expressive. The doctor tests Cece's hearing capacity, by manipulating a bell, which breaks the border of the panel, occupying the page's blank space. In this sense, the break of the fourth wall occurs graphically through the positioning of the bell. The speech balloon is depicted as blank, showing that Cece cannot hear the doctor's voice, and the lack of sound effects suggests that she cannot hear the bell (Fig. 3).
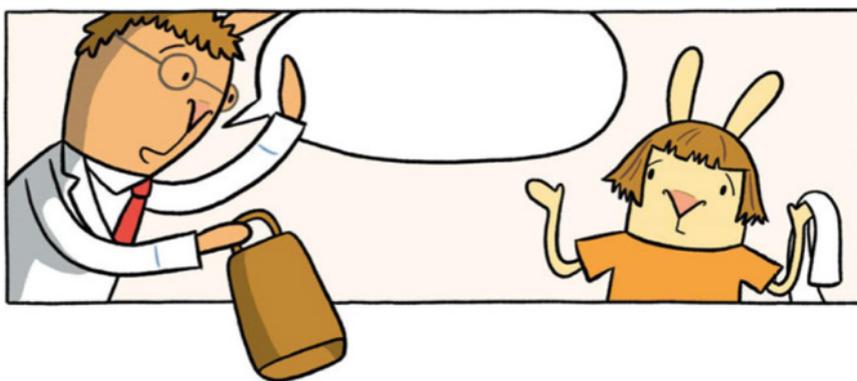

Fig. 3. Ontological metalepsis (Bell 15)

For Kukkonen, in terms of direction, metalepsis can be ascending or descending, with the real world on the top and the depicted world at the bottom as the orientational axis. In the ascending metalepsis, the movement comes from the depicted/story worlds to the real world, such as when characters address the readers. In contrast, in the descending metalepsis, the movement is from the real world to the story world or to a deeper level in the narrative, such as when an author addresses a character or enters a fictional world.

Thus, ascending ontological metalepsis occurs when a character crosses the panels not respecting the limits of the gutter occupying a real space (or a representation of a real world), as seen in the doctor's testing bell above; descending ontological metalepsis occurs when an author or reader addresses a character or becomes one, which appears especially in autobiographical comics such as Cece Bell in *El Deafo*. Ascending rhetorical metalepsis occurs when the character speaks directly to the reader or breaks the fourth wall either visually or verbally, as observed in Cece's attitude in presenting the visual clue for speechreading, while descending rhetorical metalepsis occurs when a character from a book, in reality, enters another story world and is perceived as the connection to the real world, observed in *El Deafo* as the reference to Sherlock Holmes.

The self-reflexiveness in *El Deafo* is manifested throughout its pages as the author transposes herself as young Cece, the anthropomorphic rabbit, who enacts

her personal experiences within the limits of well-defined rectangular panels at the diegetic level. As she recounts her imaginary adventures as a superhero, she becomes a narrator at the metadiegetic level. Such a shift of narrative levels from diegetic to metadiegetic is visually marked by the aesthetic change from well-defined panels to cloud-shaped panels. Eventually, this imaginary Superhero leaves the metadiegetic level to become Cece's identity in the diegetic level, embedding both narrative levels, signalled by the Superhero being placed within the limits of the well-defined rectangular panels. These creative disruptions in the narrative level help grasp the depicted reality and reality friction of the work

Ontological metalepsis in *El Deafo*

Bell transfigures herself into an anthropomorphic rabbit with long ears by making use of a visual metaphor to indicate the centrality of the experience of becoming deaf. *El Deafo* addresses urgent matters in the field of women and disability studies, such as the question of representation and identity, drawn by Garland-Thomson (2002). The cover of the autobiographical comic highlights the heroine's peculiar features as she wears a hearing aid (see Fig. 4). The wire connected to the box strapped to her body gives shape to both the title and heroine's name: "El Deafo."

Fig. 4. Front cover

The author reveals that this choice was crucial to emphasise that Cece's ears do not work "properly" and need to be assisted by the hearing aid device. Moreover, rabbits are silent animals, as shown by Cece's introspective condition partially motivated by the process of constructing her identity as a deaf girl. Nevertheless, deaf individuals are diverse, as they face distinct relations towards the use of a hearing aid and sign language. Bell's work conveys her inner experience, by being transposed from the real world into the fictional world, resulting in a transgression defined as descending ontological metalepsis, as explained by the crossing of the ontological limits established between reality and depicted world. The embeddedness of these two levels in *El Deafo* may be noted in the simultaneous construction of the narrative in two ways: through a homodiegetic

extradiegetic narrator, a grown-up Cece, who has experienced the events in the past and tells her story in the caption boxes, and through young Cece's narration of the events. This homodiegetic narration appears textually inside an orange box, placed close to the panel's top. Although the limits of the panel represent the space of the story world, these boxes do not interfere with the diegesis but remain a mere narrative device typical of comics.

A fully grown-up Cece provides voice and perspective to the sequence of events by starting her narrative: "I was a regular little kid. I played with my mom's stuff. I watched TV with my big brother, Ashley, and my big sister, Sarah. I rode on the back of my father's bicycle. I found caterpillars with my friend Emma. And I sang" (1). The narrator, who is not a child, reports the events experienced in the past. In the background, a friendly neighbourhood and happy family are depicted, while Cece is depicted in the foreground, re-enacting the events. However, the once-happy rabbit girl becomes sick on the following page: "But then everything changed. My parents rushed me to the hospital." Little Cece then assumes the role of the homodiegetic narrator and tells her story in the present tense, while simultaneously enacting the actions and interacting with other characters within the panels. A grown-up Cece narrates the events in the depicted world through caption boxes, highlighting her present subjectivity and reasoning about the events enacted by little Cece and young Cece's childish subjectivities concerning the events. Thus, present and past subjectivities are intertwined to build a complex narrative.

As Cece loses her hearing, her perception of reality changes. Blank balloons coming from the characters' mouths visually signal Cece's inability to hear the surrounding people's voices and her own voice. She thus must wear the "phonic ear," a pair of wired earphones connected to a box strapped onto her body, to help her communicate with people and interact with the environment. From this moment, Cece becomes a cyborg, or a human, animal, machine hybrid (see Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Bell wearing a hearing aid (Bell 20)

She is constantly concerned about how others would view her for wearing a mechanical device on both ears because a hearing aid is seen as a "sign of disability" through which someone is identified with the signifier of lack and loss (Chern and Denham 18). While the non-disabled woman is susceptible to becoming the object of someone's gaze, the disabled woman is constantly haunted by the threat of becoming someone's object of "stare" (Garland-Thomson 21). At a very early age, Cece is aware of the risks of becoming stigmatised by those around her. Cece's questioning about whether somebody will stare at her "hearing aid" is justified as staring at her begets a negative view of the fact that she has a hearing impairment. The cyborg body in Bell's autobiographical comic incorporates, in addition to the human, animal, and machine problematics, the able and disabled bodies dichotomies, challenging comprehension. For some, deafness is considered an impairment defined as an individual's "lack of audiologically normal hearing," while for others, it is a disability related to social institution's "lack of assistive devices and service public places," or even to a group's identity viewed as a "cultural minority analogous to other ethnic and linguistic minorities" (Couser 222). Cece has a hearing impairment and the assistance of technological devices integrates her into the hearing community as a cyborg, a being distinct from the other peers.

Fig. 6. Waiting for the school bus (Bell 47).

While waiting for the school bus, Cece is depicted inside a transparent bubble, which shows her sense of isolation, her need for protection, and her fear of becoming the object of people's stares (see Fig. 6). Only she can visualise the bubble in the story. Her innermost feelings are depicted through the image of the bubble within the panel and extradiegetic and homodiegetic narrator who reveals her anxiety in the caption box: "Is everyone staring at my hearing aid? At me?" showing Cece's subjectivity.

Cece faces difficulties while attending sign language classes as she is the sole deaf attendee with whom the others practice sign language communication, thus making her the target of their stares. Young Cece feels even more isolated when she is referred to as "special," because underlying this term, there is a strong message that she is not like the others. This inevitably leads to inequality and

negative visibility or stigmatisation. Nevertheless, being different in this context implies being alone, apart from others. Cece struggles to become like the others, being emotionally sustained by her family; she approaches fellow schoolmates and tries to interact with people in the neighbourhood.

She then realises that her hearing device amplifies her ability to hear, if the other person wears a proper microphone; thus, she identifies the enhanced capacity that accompanies the posthuman body. One day, Mike Miller, a boy who has newly arrived in the neighbourhood, becomes interested in Cece's hearing aid and proposes to walk with the microphone to check the distance covered by the device. While the boy goes downtown, Cece remains in the neighbourhood identifying the sounds received through Mike's microphone. This amazes the other children in the neighbourhood, as they are told that it is a form of technological magic.

At school, because the teacher keeps wearing the microphone during the interval, Cece identifies the teacher's movements or warns her classmates when the teacher is approaching the classroom. Her classmates recognise her superpower, and soon she becomes the Superhero with many friends at school and does not feel lonely or isolated. Nevertheless, superheroes are beings "different from anybody else," entities who struggle with their condition, limitations, or flaws (Wolk 2007, 72). Cece does not embody the classical superhero who fights against the villains; on the contrary, she struggles to find a true friendship based on respect for differences.

While the descending ontological metalepsis explains the autobiographical comic as a result of the transgression of the reality and depicted world, ascending ontological metalepsis occurs whenever a depicted image transcends the limits of the panel entering the gutter and expresses that the depicted reality transgresses towards reality. In autobiographical comics, it can also signal the overlay between past and present. Such resource recurs in Bell's work discretely, such as the bell used by the doctor to test Cece's hearing capacity breaks the border of the panel (see Fig. 3), or when Cece explains how to interact with a deaf person who performs speechreading by spreading the hands, thus breaking the border of the panel (see Fig. 9). Cece's arms break into the gutter, blurring depicted reality and reality, intertwining graphically past and present subjectivities.

El Deafo presents complex narrative levels. Cece also performs specific actions in the author's domain, such as addressing the audience directly, an aspect developed in the next section.

Rhetorical metalepsis in *El Deafo*

Cece shares an episode that occurred while attending a school for deaf children, where she feels included for being exactly like the other children who share and face the same experiences and difficulties, respectively, of living in a hearing society. The pedagogy directed towards deaf children presented in Bell's work is primarily based on a necessity of learning to understand oral interactions through reading

lips and communicating with hearing individuals by producing speech (see Fig. 7). Such a view, according to Stewart and Clark, focuses either on the teaching of "speechreading" or the use of hearing aid "as a means for facilitating the acquisition of spoken language" to be integrated into society (2003, 9).
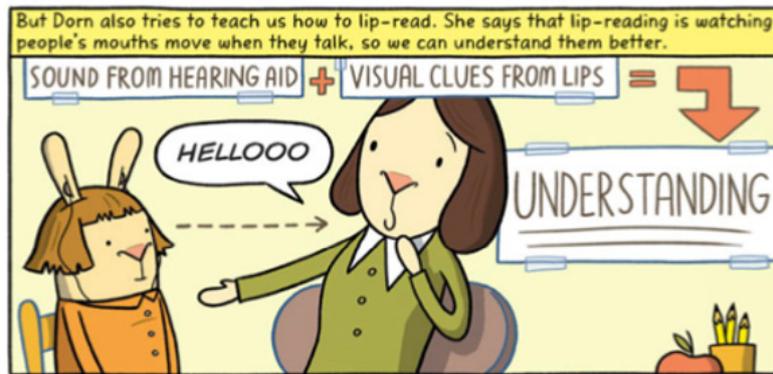

Fig. 7. Speechreading (Bell 29).

Cece conveys the difficulties faced in her attempts to perform speechreading, and she realises that the technique is lacking as it does not help her understand a conversation. Dressed to resemble Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle's most famous character, Cece then presents to the reader other strategies involved in the speechreading learned from the instructor, Dorn. The reference to Sherlock Homes leads readers to address speechreading as a problem of the real world, leaving the diegetic level of the story to the extradiegetic level of reality. According to Eisner, this identification of cultural references in comics relies "on the reader's stored memory of experience to visualise an idea or process quickly" (11).

The techniques are presented in a sequence of panels that comprises an entire page: "Visual clues: What do you see when a person talks to you" (see Fig. 8); "Context clues: Where are you while a person talks to you? What's going on around you during the conversation?"; and finally, "Gestural clues: What does the person do with her hands and body while she talks to you? What kind of face does she make?" (Bell 30).

Little Cece appropriates the box that contains the homodiegetic, extradiegetic narration to reinforce her attitude. It shifts place to the bottom of the panels, becoming an artefact to be manipulated by her. By using the pronoun "you," little Cece addresses the readers directly, inviting them to follow the strategies adopted by her to perform speechreading to understand the meaning. In the following page, Cece reveals the frustrating result of using such techniques to the reader: "But… sometimes what a person is doing doesn't match up with what it looks like they're saying. It's easy to make mistakes!" The difficulty faced by Cece is observed in identifying the words "pear" and "bear," as they are spoken in the context of statements such as "I see a pear/I see a bear" (see Fig. 9). Although she uses strategies such as visual, context, and gestural

clues that may aid her in the process of speechreading, she is unsuccessful in grasping the meaning of such oral statements.

Fig 8. Holmes (Bell 30)   Fig. 9. Speechreading technique (Bell 31)

The speechreading presented by little Cece in the depicted world immediately leads the reader to address the issue as a problematic of reality, resulting in a momentary transgression of narrative levels, as ascending rhetorical metalepsis. In contrast, the insertion of a literary reference as Sherlock Holmes to the fictive world in *El Deafo* is considered a descending rhetorical metalepsis because the book exists in reality. The rhetorical metalepsis in *El Deafo* reveals the complex narrative device employed by the author.

Concerning disabilities, Garland-Thomson posits the necessity to raise awareness of "human interdependence and the universal need for assistance" which needs to be considered in the process of construction of identities (1). *El Deafo* calls attention to a deaf child's experiences in schools and neighbourhoods, as well as to their specific subjectivities. In a sequence of panels, Cece conveys her experiences of speechreading to the readers, warning them by showing signs: "1 Must see person's face at all times!" (see Fig. 10) and "2 Exaggerated mouth movements are confusing!" The narrator then warns the readers through a sign in the shape of an arrow containing the statement, "But wait! There's more!" guiding them to the following page.

The narrator assumes a distinct role by guiding the reader to swap the pages approaching the author's domain, placing herself in the extradiegetic level. In the following pages, Cece continues to address the readers by holding placards with messages that may help spread the difficulties confronted by deaf people in performing the speechreading technique: "3 Shouting is not good!"; "4 Mustaches and beards are bad news! (sorry, dad)"; "5 Hands in front of the mouth are also bad news!"; "6 When it gets dark, give up!"; and "7 Group discussion is impossible to understand!" (Bell 32) Finally, the narration box, placed close to the top of the panel, conveys the extradiegetic narrator's voice: "But I can't really make signs like these – I can't even read yet! It's hard to explain all this to anybody – except at school" (see Fig. 11). Cece holds a blank placard, indicating that she was unable to make such demands for the hearing community in the past. In *El Deafo*, Bell inserts her present subjectivity by recounting her past experiences.

Fig. 10. Showing signs (Bell 31)   Fig. 11. Extradiegetic narrator (Bell 32).

The narrator speaks in the caption box with the consciousness of an adult person, indicating Bell's subject position and present time. Simultaneously, Little Cece's unfamiliarity with writing and reading and the other characters' unawareness of those placards implicate her impossibility of expressing such demands. Past and present subjectivities are intertwined in the graphic representation of the scene, reinforcing the addressees of these signs as the readers with full access to the narrator's voice and little Cece's thoughts. The other characters comprise the background or context that helps highlight the content of the signs. As Cece communicates with the readers, breaking the fourth wall, the sequence of panels represents rhetoric metalepsis, the transgression of the limits of the depicted world and reality, and the intertwining of the past and present subjectivities.

Hybrid metalepsis

Soon after recovering from meningitis, Cece and her family moves to a more comfortable house in a smaller town with no school for deaf children. Consequently, she has to attend regular school as the sole deaf student. By discretely handling a device that functions as a microphone for teachers to wear during classes, Cece can hear the teachers' voices amplified through the hearing aid. One day, she realises that her favourite teacher continues to wear the microphone even during her break in the teacher's room and while she uses the restroom. Cece immediately understands that the hearing aid functions like Batman's utility belt, conferring her superpowers. The Superhero in Cece's imaginary world is depicted in a cloudlike balloon - a representation of a narrative within the diegesis on the metadiegetic level (see Fig. 12). However, the reference to Batman calls the reader to associate the imaginary world placed on the metadiegetic level with the real world on the extradiegetic level, resulting in a transgression or descending rhetorical metalepsis. The construction of the hero El Deafo is a collage of references from reality because the red cape resembles the cape worn by Supergirl.

Cece then assumes the identity of a superhero wearing a red cape at the diegetic level, transgressing the limits of the metadiegetic level towards the diegetic level, resulting in ascending rhetorical metalepsis (Bell 45).

Nevertheless, considering her to be deaf, a boy asks her about the hearing aid worn by her, and the heroine vanishes. Cece then assumes her identity as an ordinary rabbit girl in the diegesis or story (see Figure 13). Cece seems to fight invisible wars, not knowing exactly why words and attitudes affect her. A notion of disablism can help deepen this discussion because it refers to a "set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities" (Campbell 2009, 4). In the episode depicted in Fig. 13, Cece is daydreaming of being the superhero inside a cloudy bubble; when she is called "deaf," the bubble bursts, and the superhero vanishes. The boy is unable to see Cece as a superhero; he can see the hearing aid as a "sign of disability," implying that he treats her unequally in comparison to his hearing peers (Chern and Denham 18).

Fig. 12. Batman (Bell 44)   Fig. 13. Are you deaf? (Bell 45)

The Superhero does not have a name until Cece watches a TV programme with her brother and sister, who narrate the events by speaking close to her hearing aid. Cece realises that the girl shown on TV is someone *like* her, who wears the same hearing aid strapped to her body. Suddenly, on the TV program, a rude lady calls that girl "Deafo," an offensive term. Her siblings have to explain the terrible scene to Cece, with whom they are watching the programme. Cece understands that the term "deafo" is offensive to that poor girl. However, contrary to the expected reaction, Cece starts laughing and leaves the living room to visit the restroom. She then looks at herself in the mirror and questions whether she is also a "deafo," similar to the girl she has just watched on TV. Her reflected image on the mirror then answers, "You wanna call me 'deafo'? Go ahead!" "Yeah! That's right!" **JUST CALL ME …"** Cece then completes "**EL DEAFO**," rendering a positive meaning to the term. Finally, the nameless Superhero has a name: "El Deafo" (see Fig. 14).

Fig. 14. El Deafo (Bell 84)

The events surrounding the watching of the TV programme and learning about the offensive term "deafo" occur on the diegetic or story level. As Cece's reflected image in the mirror starts to speak, the event occurs as an intradiegetic narration or "metadiegesis," implying a story within a story.

Fig. 14 depicts the moment when Cece confronts her reflection in the mirror as a superhero. The limits of metadiegesis and diegesis are transgressed, resulting in ascending rhetorical metalepsis. At that moment, Cece assumes, on the diegetic level, her identity as a superhero named El Deafo, who once inhabited the metadiegesis. Cece re-signifies her body and experiences. By seeing the other (on TV) as deaf, Cece has an opportunity to reason her body and experiences.

Nevertheless, it is not possible to think about "difference" without relying on ableism (Campbell 6). For Campbell, while the able and disabled divide is established, it is not possible to attribute positive markers to a disabled body, which is seen as "anomalous," in contrast with "able-bodied" and "able mentality," as observed in the scene in which the lady calls the young girl as "deafo" on the TV program (8). The disabled body becomes a threat since it does not share the stability of the able and healthy body. Cece needs to wear a hearing aid continuously, changing her body using technology, becoming a cyborg, and assuming her "posthuman ideal" (Poharec 187) and her "corporeal variation" (Smith -D'Arezzo and Holc 77). Cece recognises herself before the mirror, first through the other people's gaze/stare, as anomalous, unlike hearing individuals, and then as *different,* resulting from the development of her self-awareness.

For Cece, the imaginary world is where she, as a superhero, can ponder friendship. She approaches her schoolmate, Genni. As their bonds deepen, Genni's attitude towards Cece also becomes subject to scrutiny. The Superhero with the red cape scrutinises Genni's way of dealing with her hearing impairment and realises that Genni misunderstands her identity. The strategy of speaking loudly and slowly adopted by Genni makes communication even more difficult for Cece, who is unable to understand what her friend wants to say. Eventually, Cece decides to explain the misconceptions about communicating with a deaf person to Genni. Unfortunately, as a child, Genni does not understand Cece's legitimate demand and starts crying. Thus, Cece ends up being alone again.

Genni attempts to be Cece's good friend, including her in the gatherings with other friends; however, she cannot overcome her presumed ideas about disability and deafness when confronted by Cece. Consequently, she cannot establish a friendship based on the respect for differences aspired by Cece.

Later, Cece meets a younger girl, Martha, and develops a close friendship with her. They form a strong bond comparable to the relationship between Batman and Robin. Their friendship seems to go reasonably well until Cece gets hurt while playing. Martha starts blaming herself for Cece's eye injury and is unable to cope with her guilt. Cece approaches Martha again to reconnect their bond, but Martha refuses to accept it. Cece then projects herself as a superhero to deal with the painful break. As Martha leaves, El Deafo feels lonely again, depicted inside a bubble (Bell 149).

Gradually, Cece is able to finally approach Martha again and start a renewed relationship. El Deafo then has a partner, just as Batman has Robin. In the end, Cece reveals her identity as El Deafo to Martha, and Martha assumes her identity as Cece's partner. They are depicted within the panel as a superhero El Deafo and her great partner, dressed in Robin's costumes. Cece finally finds a friend who can respect their differences. Martha's fear of hurting a deaf friend and the idea that Cece's body may not be considered as stable as an able body have been overcome by Martha. She then learns how to cope with differences, embracing a friendship based on mutual respect and understanding.

The final scene conveys the interconnectedness of depicted/story worlds and reality through the descending ontological metalepsis that occurs in the transposition of Bell and Martha into the depicted world and through the ascending rhetorical metalepsis found in the references to Batman's partner Robin, as observed in Martha's costumes. This guides the reader back from the depicted world to the real world (see Fig. 15).

Fig. 15. El Deafo and Martha (Bell 233)

The last scene also transcends from the depicted world to reality as the ontological ascending metalepsis for breaking the panel borders. Bell thus constructs complex narrative levels which are transgressed, shaping her memories in a colourful, cartoonish style.

Final words

Bell transposes her memories in *El Deafo* to a world inhabited by anthropomorphic rabbits, and her avatar, little Cece, (re) enacts the past events within the panels, showing her experience of hearing loss and becoming a deaf person. Bell assumes the narration as a homodiegetic, extradiegetic voice that intertwines with little Cece's voice, overlaying subjectivities. This recurring movement characterises the blurring of the limits of reality and the depicted world or descending ontological metalepsis. Reality continues to intrude on the depicted reality because references in the narrative to Sherlock Holmes and Batman and Robin (descending rhetorical metalepsis) reinforce the fact that deaf narrative is concerned with real-world problematics.

The movement from fiction to reality involves a frequent ascending rhetorical metalepsis, as little Cece repeatedly breaks the fourth wall to communicate with the readers directly, instructing them about the speechreading technique and its difficulties by highlighting the clues involved in the process of apprehension of meanings. At this point, little Cece and the extradiegetic homodiegetic narrator overlap, embedding the two narrative levels (diegetic and extradiegetic levels) as well as past and present subjectivities. At times, Cece stretches her arms beyond the limits of the panel border, invading the gutter, and the bell used to measure her hearing capacity surpasses the border limits. Bell thus graphically depicts the break of the fourth fall resulting in ascending ontological metalepsis. The transgression of narrative levels can be observed both as a tool for grasping the narrative dynamics and as a creative resource for writers to convey their life story. The final panel of *El Deafo* can be grasped as the result of the condensation of three processes: the reference to Robin through descending rhetorical metalepsis, Bell and Martha's transposition to the page as anthropomorphic rabbits through descending ontological metalepsis, and the transgression of the panel border, leading to the ascending ontological metalepsis. The choice of adopting the transgression of narrative levels helped grasp the dynamics included in the construction of the narrative in Bell's autobiographical comic.

El Deafo refers not only to Bell's alter-ego that overlaps with Cece but also transcends the limits of the diegesis and story world to name an artefact that can be grasped in reality as a physical book and a digital media to be carried in any mobile phone, overcoming geographical distances and possibly surpassing time limits. The superhero's name thus refers to the title of the autobiographical comic and to the book, revealing a new ascending ontological transgression intertwining the depicted world and reality.

Bell's autobiographical comic addresses what Garland-Thomson indicates as an urgent issue concerning the representation and identity of disabled women. Bell's depiction of little Cece as a cyborg and as a posthuman body expands the possibilities of representing and emphasising the disabled body. However, more research including other corpora is necessary to deepen the understanding of autobiographic comics, the anthropomorphic representation of the disabled body, and the complex narrative dynamics.

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