

# Production vs. Reproduction

## *This Woman's Work*

By Julie Delporte

Translated from the French by Helge Dascher and Aleshia Jensen

Montreal, Quebec; Drawn & Quarterly, 2019, 256 pp., \$24.95, paperback

## *Kid Gloves:*

## *Nine Months of Careful Chaos*

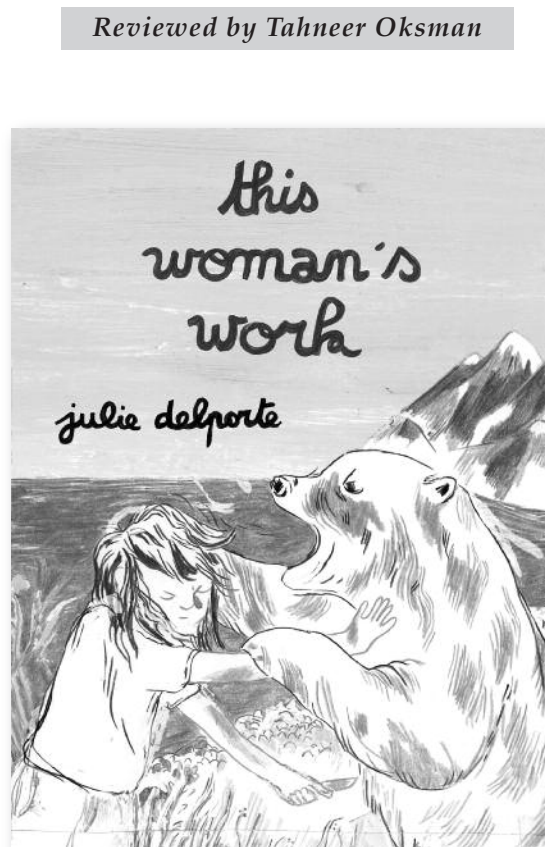
By Lucy Knisley

New York, NY; First Second, 2019, 256 pp., \$19.99, paperback

In my mid-twenties, I shared an apartment in Brooklyn with a close friend from college, another aspiring writer. I remember one evening getting into a heated argument—one of those unexpected emotional collisions that emerges from what seems like a harmless hypothetical question. “If you could choose only one, would you rather have a child or publish a book?” I can’t recall who posed the question, or why, but suddenly we found ourselves at opposite poles in relation to this circumscribed dichotomous plotline one of us had devised; the distance felt insurmountable. “How could you rather have a child than publish a book?” I pleaded, knowing how steadfast and ambitious she was with her work. “How is that even a question?” She was just as confused and distressed by my assured declaration that even though I supposed I might, eventually, want to become a mother, I did not believe I could ever want a child as much as I wanted to fulfill my own writerly aspirations.

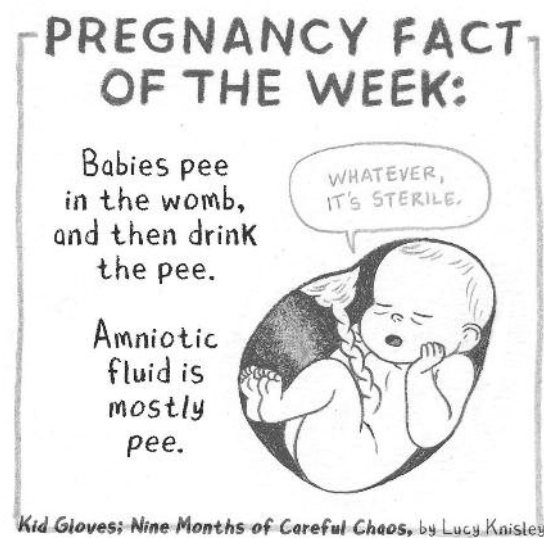
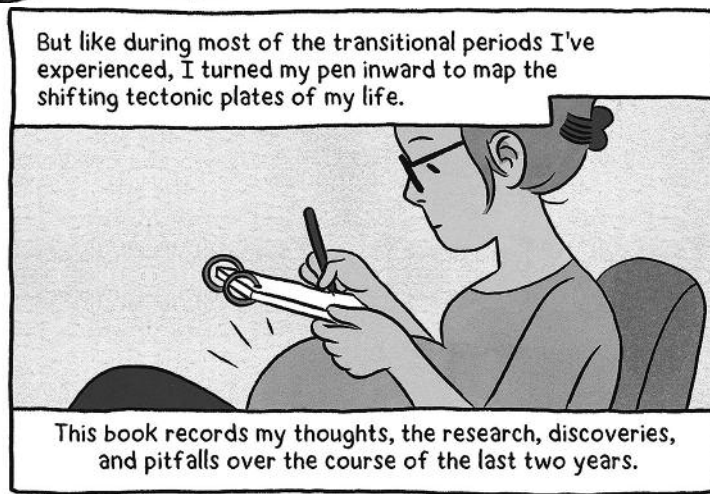
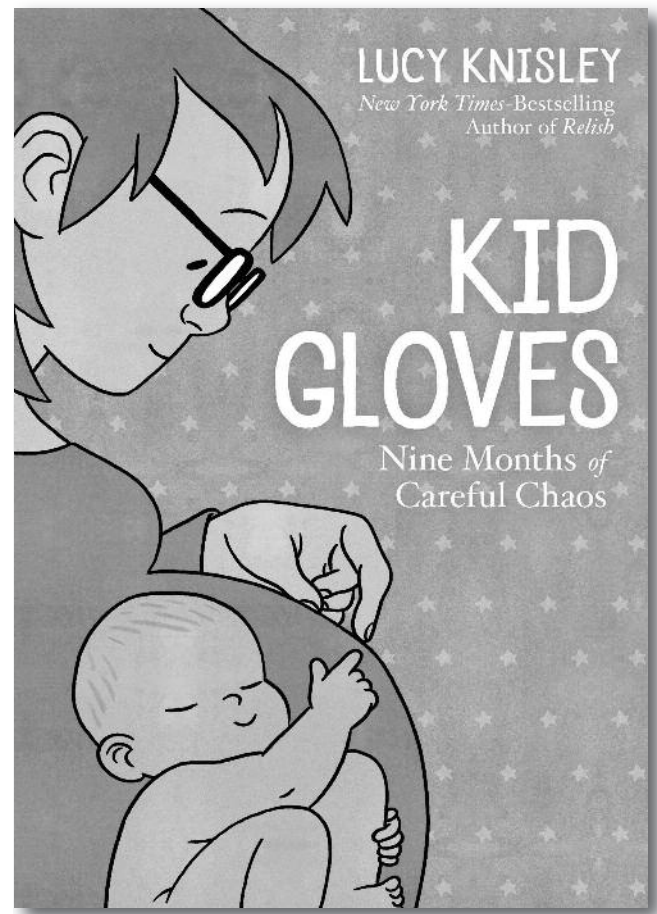
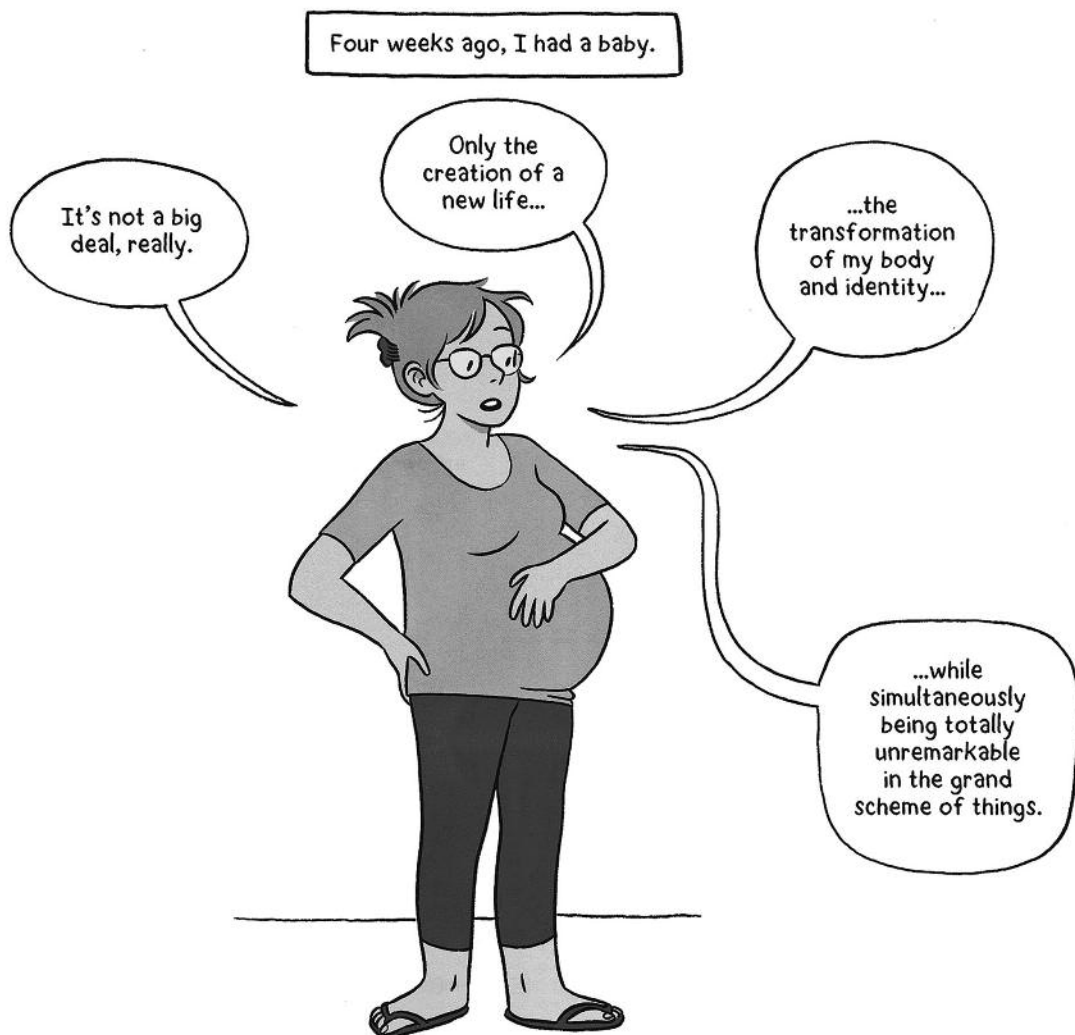
Looking back, the argument seems ridiculous for any number of reasons, but I couldn’t help thinking about it as I read through cartoonist Julie Delporte’s stunning graphic memoir, *This Woman's Work*. Born in France and now residing in Montreal, Canada, this is Delporte’s third full-length book translated into English, and her second one of non-fiction (*Journal*, a compilation of diary comics, was published in English in 2013 by Koyama Press). Like her first two books, the work is structured elliptically, with soft, colored-pencil illustrations drawn in a range of hues and accompanied by potent narrative figments conveyed in beautifully imperfect cursive handwriting. The central dilemma captured throughout this memoir echoes, though in a much more circumspect, measured way, the hypothetical question that my roommate and I posed to each other more than ten years ago. Composing from the perspective of a woman in her early thirties living and working abroad (in Brussels and also Helsinki, and later returning to Montreal), Delporte probes what it means to be a woman who wants, particularly when the having, at least in theory, seems at odds with the wanting.

The first third of the book focuses on our narrator, who tracks the opening to her story via snapshot sketches of the apartment “where I tried to get pregnant one summer.” Following a few explicit images of the couple lounging naked together, is a long series of ruminations with accompanying illustrations, as our narrator feels first panicked, then betrayed. Who will care for the child? When will she have time to draw? What of those “men who leave women on their own to tend to the bodies of their children?” In addition to affording snapshots of her own early history,



including an experience of sexual assault, Delporte’s narrator sorts through (often melancholy, sometimes downright painful) representations of parenting and womanhood in

film, literature, and painting, as part of this process of thinking through the unknown future: there is the illustrated still of Barbara Loden in her 1970 film, *Wanda*; there is mention of Pierre Bonnard’s



niece, the subject of his 1916 portrait of her (if our narrator has a girl, she thinks she might name her Vivette); there is a drawing of Jo March, hiding her ink-stained fingers. The personal and public images come together on the page, all marked in Delporte's characteristic, wispy line.

"This book, the one in your hands," our narrator suddenly interrupts, "was supposed to be about Tove Jansson." Born in Helsinki, Finland in 1914, Jansson was an illustrator, cartoonist, writer, and painter best known for her Moomin children's series. The child of artists, Jansson deliberately chose not to have children at a time when it was clearly expected of women, and she lived with her longtime female lover in Finland when homosexuality was still against the law (in addition to being classified as an illness). The narrator's sudden admission—that what we are reading is something of a "failed" biography—comes as a surprise. Though there are hints of Jansson's presence throughout, primarily in the form of Moomin books dotting the narrator's domestic landscape at important moments, until this point the book seems to be an autobiography, not a biography. We have been following the story of a living, breathing female artist working through what it means to think about choosing, or

not choosing motherhood, and what sacrifices are contained, not only in the aftermath to either choice but in the time and energy spent in contemplation.

Of course, as this dualistic structure of the book reveals, the questions addressed throughout—can I be a mother/not a mother and the kind of artist/kind of person I want to be?; Has anyone before me succeeded at this?—cannot be separated. How can one begin to figure out what one wants, when there are no apparent role models for the kind of life you might be after—when that life's potential seems, if not impossible, at least very narrowly construed. As Delporte tells it, the story of this individual life is always already tied to broader histories, to the often unknowable backstories of countless women who came before. The possibilities, as my roommate and I also once experienced them, still feel too limited. Delporte's memoir seems to argue that they will continue to feel this way until we tell more stories of the choices women are able (or not able) to make, and how. In pulling together these unexpected threads to weave together her own narrative, Delporte's *This Woman's Work* is a call: to seeing, writing, illustrating, and reading—to witnessing all kinds of women's stories.

*Kid Gloves: Nine Months of Careful Chaos*, by Lucy Knisley

In contrast to Delporte's still-deciding narrator, the narrator of Lucy Knisley's autobiographical *Kid Gloves: Nine Months of Careful Chaos*, is a woman who has definitively made her choice. "Four weeks ago, I had a baby," she tells us on the opening page of her introduction, her alter-ego depicted alone and pregnant beneath the announcement. Where *This Woman's Work* is an open-ended, encompassing meditation, *Kid Gloves* can better be described as an orderly, chronological account focusing, for the most part, on the two years before the "present" of the text's opening.

But the storyline presented is no less urgent for its more conventional, linear style. Indeed, where *This Woman's Work* is a book of fragments, a puzzle that the reader herself is meant to piece together, *Kid Gloves* is something of a tell-all. But the story that Knisley is telling is one that is not told frequently enough. Knisley walks the reader through her decision, along with her partner, John, to remove her birth control implant and "not try but not try not to" get pregnant. Following her quick, euphoric first pregnancy, she experiences a first, then a second miscarriage, each followed by

grief-filled aftermaths. Eventually, the narrator visits a reproductive endocrinologist and is diagnosed with a heart-shaped uterus, which had been affecting her pregnancies and is easily modified with a successful laparoscopic procedure. Her third pregnancy—the one that ended in the tiny, four-week-old baby depicted at various points in the book, including its post-acknowledgements, final page—is tracked for the majority of the memoir. It is not an easy pregnancy, not only because pregnancy, in inducing “the transformation of my body and identity,” should never really be called *easy*, but more so because Knisley’s birth is affected by a dangerous condition called preeclampsia, which her doctor had not diagnosed. Though the story ends with the birth of a healthy, over nine-pound baby boy, delivered via emergency C-section, what *Kid Gloves* emphatically tracks is how this happy end point (which is really just another beginning) was brought about by a series of life-threatening mishaps and oversights that could have potentially been mitigated.


Knisley is a serial graphic memoirist, with previous books including a six-week travelogue of a trip she took to Paris with her mother, titled *French Milk* (2008), another travelogue documenting a cruise in which she accompanied her grandparents, *Displacement* (2015), and, most recently, a memoir detailing her recent courtship and marriage, *Something New: Tales From a Makeshift Bride* (2016). Knisley’s books are all drawn in an earnest cartoony style, with backdrops often



Lucy Knisley

colored in a range of bright pastels and her bespectacled alter-ego showing off various exaggerated facial expressions and hand gestures. In *Kid Gloves*, the story is similarly rendered, with sobering black-and-white photographs interrupting the narrative at choice moments. Most affecting is a photograph of Lucy on a hospital bed, seemingly unconscious, with countless tubes running over her face and arms. She is alone, as though to emphasize that every birth story is also a birthing story; for every baby born there is a parent, or parents, who have gone through their own epic transformations.

Knisley’s work is most powerful when she breaks out of the boundaries of her straightforward, often predictable storytelling style. In one memorable set of pages, for example, she has lost “clear memory” for two days shortly after signing a release to get a C-section. The pages are composed in a heavy swirling of purple and black chalky marks. In a much earlier section, depicting her grief following miscarriage, she renders her narrative self strewn across the bed, a pair of glasses settled off her fingertips. Her body is depicted as literally on fire, and wild curlicues of smoke roll off the bed. These commanding, unexpected illustrations remind us of the loneliness and desperation that accompanies loss, and in this case losses, as they co-exist with misinformation, ignorance, and silence.

“It’s reading that saves me,” writes Delporte halfway through her personal narrative. The hope, in each of these books, is that reading will, at the very least, make space for new kinds of potentially saving, or at the very least palliating, forms of knowledge. 

**Tahneer Oksman** is an assistant professor at Marymount Manhattan College, the author of *How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?: Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs* (Columbia University Press, 2016), and the co-editor of the anthology, *The Comics of Julie Doucet and Gabrielle Bell: A Place Inside Yourself* (University Press of Mississippi, 2019). She often reviews graphic novels and illustrated works for the *Women’s Review of Books*.

# White Tears

*White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*

By Robin DiAngelo

Boston, MA; Beacon Press, 2018,

192 pp, \$16.00, paperback

*Reviewed by Haley Riemer*

In 2005, the novelist David Foster Wallace delivered a commencement speech in which he described an old fish who swims by two younger fish and greets them with, “Morning, boys, how’s the water?” The two younger fish swim along, and then one young fish turns to the other and asks, “What the hell is water?”

According to Wallace, the distilled point of this story is about the difficulty of consciousness and that “the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about.” Wallace’s fish came to mind as I was reading *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. In the book, sociologist and educator Robin DiAngelo argues that our inability to see and understand systemic racism is often what allows us to perpetuate it. We



(white people) are much like these young, naive fish, only the water we are surrounded by and so often oblivious to is whiteness.

DiAngelo actually uses water as a recurring metaphor for socialization. Early on in the book, DiAngelo, who is white, marvels at how, though “we are literally swimming in racist water,” white people continue to struggle to accept the reality that we all carry internalized racist ideas, biases, and patterns. She recognizes that the racist “water” surrounding us is not only invisible but has shaped our attitudes in ways we do not immediately recognize. Like Wallace’s fish whose everyday experience is water, white people are soaking in racism. How, then, could we expect to

escape free from its influence? She calls us to realize that we have always existed in a hierarchical system of race and that we are all influenced by this, even (and perhaps especially) those who profess to be non-racists. Once this basic premise of the overwhelming and quotidian nature of white supremacy is accepted, says DiAngelo, we can move past the defensive personal responses to the subject of racism and find affirmative ways to contribute to racial equality.

DiAngelo coined the term “white fragility” in 2011 to describe the recurring and extreme emotional responses white people often have to observations of racism. These responses, she claims, inhibit any honest and progressive

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