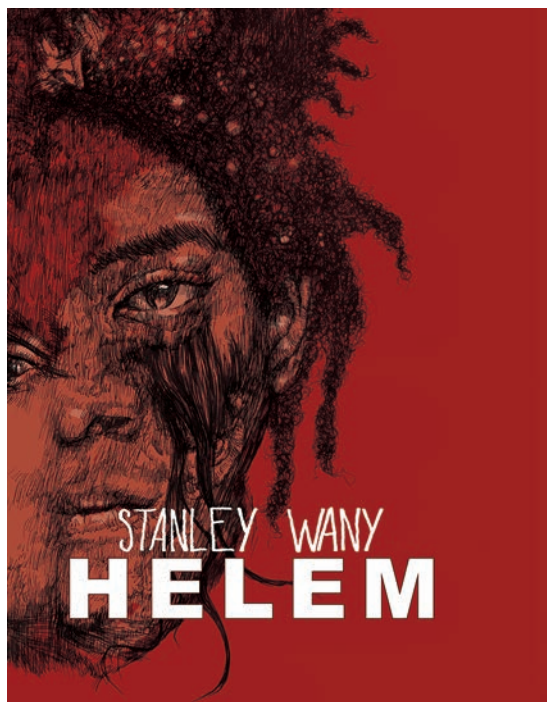

“I’m trying to create an experience”:

Stanley Wany on Representation, Surrealism, and Drawing *Helem*

An edited conversation with Candida Rifkind

About Stanley Wany

Stanley Wany is an Afro-Canadian artist based in Montreal as well as in Canada’s national capital region. His practice includes graphic novels, pen and ink drawings, and paintings. He is currently pursuing a Master of Fine Arts and Media at the Université du Québec à Montréal. Wany has founded two independent publication companies, Éditions Tripcomix, and recently Argle Bargle Books. The basis of his practice in comics and visual arts explores mainstream culture, the subconscious, and myths, specifically as these relate the experience of people of African descent in Western society.



Cover of *Helem* (Conundrum Press, 2021).

Helem was published by Conundrum Press in 2021. It combines Wany's *Agalma* (2015) and *Sequences* (2017), both published by Éditions Tripcomix, and adds new material. A largely wordless graphic narrative, *Helem* explores the lives of an unnamed woman who is dealing with losing "her sister to suicide," and a man who "has lost his way" having spent the last ten years "working in a call centre" (Oliver).

In his review for *Broken Frontier*, Andy Oliver writes,

Helem then is a graphic stream-of-consciousness as worlds merge in and out of each other, one surreal scenario evolving and emerging from another, the consciousnesses and thought processes of both characters communicated through a symbolism that is both oblique and yet, on a visceral level, strangely connective too. This is one of those narratives that asks us to bring something of ourselves to it; as such every reader will take something different from it, reacting and interacting with its pages in distinct and individual ways.

The following is an edited conversation with Stanley Wany that took place over Zoom on April 6, 2022.

Candida Rifkind: Instead of starting with how you started drawing comics, I want to ask about what kinds of comics you read as a kid?

Stanley Wany: I immigrated to Canada from Haiti at the age of six, and comics became a means through which I could interact with the new society. I have an interesting background because, although both my parents met in Haiti and I was born in Haiti, their parents are not really Haitian. We're really Caribbean on my mother's side because my grandfather is from Trinidad and my grandmother is from Cuba. And on my dad's side, I think my grandfather is Cuban and my mom told me my grandmother was a white Spanish woman. There's a lot of diversity in my background and that informs the way I perceive things and my work.

I started reading comics at a very young age, and the ones that I was really interested in were *Shang-Chi*, *Master of Kung Fu*, and *Warlock*, anything by Jim Starlin that was philosophical and dark. My family were intellectuals, we were upper middle class, and we read a lot, so my relationship to culture was very precise at a young age. I read Dante's *Inferno* at the age of eight or nine, and I had to sleep a whole week with the lights on!

I was never really interested in the French *bandes dessinées*. I remember reading *Tintin in the Congo* at a young age and finding it very problematic, so I left BDs behind because I thought comics offered storylines that were more interesting.

CR: Can you tell us about how you became a comics artist and your background as an artist?

SW: I remember one of my aunts who knew me when I was a baby said all you had to do was give me a pen and paper and you could leave me all day and I would just draw, I was one of those kids. My family was very close knit and most of my family live in the States. I had an uncle who lived in New York, so we would spend most of our summers in Queens in the 1970s and 1980s, when hip hop was taking hold, and that was a big influence on me. I had a cousin who was into comics, wrestling, horror movies, TV shows, and so on, and he got me into that stuff.

My parents were quite strict and wanted me to become an engineer or a doctor or something like that, and so when I went to CEGEP I was going to become an electrical engineer. But there are some people who are artists, whether they like it or not, and I think I am one of those people. But for several years I didn't make art at all. Then I left home early, at nineteen, and that's when I really immersed myself into art, music, and exploring and discovering new things. I was soaking everything up in the Montreal 1990s scene. I was aware of the Quebec comics scene in the 1990s, but I didn't have a direct relationship with those artists. I did spend a lot of time at Les Foufounes Électriques, and Henriette Valium had his studio on top of the club, so I was aware of the Quebec comics people, but they weren't that interesting to me at that time.¹

CR: You also have training in fine arts. How do you see the relationship between fine arts and comics or graphic narrative?

SW: I think the relationship is a slow progression. I'm interested in art that is saying the thing without saying the thing. The reason I was interested in Starlin and all those comic book guys is because they were addressing the big ideas, but their superheroes were always grey, not black and white. They didn't have the moral fortitude other superheroes had, it was always ambiguous. I have always explored ideas of, not so much superhero exploits, but what actions do to the person. For me, as a displaced person from one culture to another, there is always the question of, who am I and where am I? And slowly, as I got into the comics publishing business, I started to get into drawing and writing comics, and I got back into these questions. I was less interested in drawing a guy saving somebody than looking at the effects of their actions and decisions, in characterization, psychology, ethics, and morality. And this is combined with questions about representation.

The great works of comics can deal with all these aspects, and so I don't see comics and visual arts as separate things because they are both drawing. I mean, what would take me one hundred pages to say in a comic book would take me one installation piece to say in visual arts, but it's just the means through which I'm saying it that are different. And then there's also the public. A couple of years ago there was this discussion about the

difference between a comic and a graphic novel, and to me the difference is the public that receives them. It's the same for me between visual arts and comics, it's a question of who I'm trying to address. I really dislike the connotation that comics should only be for kids, or that comics should only be funny and not serious, or cartoonish. I should be able to talk to an audience at large doing both kinds of works.

CR: Has your style changed much over the years?

SW: I've always had a relationship with drawing and it's funny because as I evolved, it evolved. What I'm realizing now is that drawing is an act of remembering. The line work is like going through the layers of time trying to remember something. There's also the link to surrealist drawing and stream of consciousness that makes drawing a way to communicate something subconscious. I think it is more honest than if you try to consciously inject meaning into your drawings.

When I was starting out, I had a really classic way of working, pencilling, then inking, and I've always loved black-and-white because I'm a big fan of Kurosawa's films, so there's lots of cross-hatching. Then, after working in the comics industry for a while, I decided to go back to school and went to the UQO comics program.² This expanded the kind of work I was doing: I was using a lot of collage and integrating photography and exploring more.

One thing that annoys me is when the drawing is too perfect. I need to see those accidents, those imperfections in the scratching and the layering. When you draw you are solving a problem, and you solve that problem and then move on, and then there is another problem and you solve it, and so on.

CR: Can you describe your drawing process for *Helem*?

SW: The story behind these drawings is that after my first son, William, was born, he wouldn't sleep at night. I'm an insomniac and usually need to sleep in the early hours of the morning, but he wouldn't let me sleep, so instead I would go down into my basement and draw. At some point I was just so tired that my conscious mind was in a daze, and so I made these weird drawings. At the time, my co-publisher at Trip Comix,³ Marc Tessier, saw these drawings and said I should make them into a book. I said, "I don't know what these things are, there's no story," and he pointed out they were all drawn in the same frame of mind, so there's something there. I started thinking about that and putting a book together, even though it made no sense.

CR: Can you talk a little more about your relationship to the 1940s and 1950s Quebec Automatistes, and which of them in particular influence you?

SW: I was especially interested in the sound poetry of Claude Gauvreau, where you don't get attached to words but to the feeling. I think I draw my stories in the same kind of way because I'm not necessarily trying to tell you something or give you a story, I'm trying to create an experience. The way different people receive the word in Gauvreau's poetry is vastly different, and to me that's a good thing.

With *Helem* there is no wrong interpretation. When people see something in it, it's probably because it's there, and the reason why I say "probably" is because I didn't consciously put anything there, my drawing is an unconscious act in the sense it's meant to be a true act, an honest act, and if people see something in it, I'm not going to tell them they're wrong.

The Automatistes were so aesthetically radical, playing with language and elements of language, but they were also politically radical, rejecting religion and their parents' generation. Their politics and the Quiet Revolution were of their own generation, but it's still relevant because, unfortunately, as human beings we seem to keep making the same mistakes all over again.

Now, instead of being a group of white middle-class artists, it's the Black middle class and African descendants in North America who are questioning the very nature of the society in which they're living. We're questioning how we are represented in this society, what this society does for us, and what we do for it. These are questions about colonialism, too, and Indigenous people are asking them as well. And although they were a group of white middle-class artists, the Automatistes had an energy, they questioned things and went against the grain, and I think there's a link there.

CR: *Helem* is full of images of transformation and mythical creatures who are various kinds of shape-shifters or boundary crossers. What kinds of mythologies influence your visual storytelling? Why do you think mythology speaks to something in our psyches?

SW: The thing about *Helem* is these are not all huge events in the characters' lives, those typical comics action-adventure things, because what's important to me are really personal moments. That's what mythologies speak about, going inwards and facing these moments, because nobody can create a scarier monster than yourself. I think the internal landscape is the interesting one to explore. In *Helem*, the two characters, the man and the woman, are opposite each other. The woman goes inside her apartment and inside the subconscious, but the man goes outside his apartment to go drinking. They both arrive in the same landscape, but in a different way.

In a way, I'm very lucky, because at a young age I was exposed to

Caribbean and African myths, and I've also always been interested in European myths. Someone like Joseph Campbell, who went around the world classifying myths, is very influential to me because he shows there are similar myths and figures everywhere you go. To me, the interesting part about myth is that when you go inside, basically we're all the same. We all experience pain and suffering, or passion and hate, and, to me, myth is the precursor of psychology in mapping out the human psyche. The really important aspect of myth to me is the hero's journey quest, which is funny because my books are boring as hell! There's no quest in *Helem*, but actually there is an internal quest.

CR: There are some incredible shifts in layout in *Helem*, such as double-page spreads and split panels. Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between the panels and the visuals?

SW: The keyword for me in terms of the comics grid is pacing, because panels mark time. This is why I don't use an extravagant grid system, I just like four panels because they allow me to break up time in a way I can pace the story. You may notice that sometimes the grid will repeat an image, which is a way for me to isolate a moment through focusing on the eyes, the mouth, or whatever, and forcing the reader to stop on that detail. And this is when you know that reading the image becomes important.

When the grid is exploded, we're no longer in a confined moment. Now we're in the subconscious, or we're in a landscape, in which time and space no longer take precedent. The splash pages allow the image to transcend the grid, and I use that as a reading mechanism to suggest you are now in a space where things like gravity don't matter, and you need to watch out!

CR: In *Helem*, there is such attention to setting and the spaces in the real world the characters inhabit. The first part is very clearly Montreal, and I wonder if you could speak a little bit about how you see Montreal as a character in the book, or how it shapes your characters?

SW: For me, this is a timeless Montreal, or it is the Montreal from the time when I was younger and exploring. Montreal is the love of my life. It's like your first girlfriend or boyfriend, you always have a soft spot for that first love, and I fell in love with Montreal and the music scene (I'm a metal guy and the city is so great for that, very punk, very working class) because it was so vibrant in the 1990s.

Helem also has this duality between the constructed versus the natural, between Montreal and the forest, which is like the male-female duality in the story. But all these dichotomies are interacting and bouncing off each other. The woman stays in the structured environment in her apartment, and to me, having the female enclosed in that space speaks to the notion of confinement, of being stuck somewhere. And then the man is in the

forest and the natural landscape, although it would be more typical to put the female figure in nature. But I really wanted to put each of them in an environment to experience self-discovery at a deeper level in an environment which they don't control or is not natural to them.

CR: Another striking element of the book is the attention to faces and bodies, including nudity and sexuality. The book begins and ends with Black lovers in erotic embrace. We don't often see Black bodies in Canadian comics (Ho Che Anderson's work being the notable exception here), especially in such intimate scenes. Can you talk about why you wanted to draw Black characters so intimately, not just in terms of sexuality but in terms of the many close-ups on faces?

SW: I think it's so important for us to represent ourselves in a way that isn't the typical caricatures of those European comics I saw growing up. I need to show that Black characters are not just here for comedy, but that we are people who suffer and feel joy. We experience pleasure, we experience intimacy, but in our society it's like the Black body has been reduced to economics or entertainment.

It's so important for me to show a different side because there is not that history, and the representation of Black bodies is one of my frustrations with comics. I think there needs to be a conversation about what we're trying to do, how we address people, and the fact that we too often see Black people suffering. I mean, who else knows more about suffering than Black people in North America, but I wanted *Helem* to guide these characters through hard times and show that they're suffering, but they're also loving, and they're survivors.

CR: Finally, who or what is Helem? Does the title have a specific reference in the book?

SW: Helem has two meanings. In the Bible, Helem is a name that means *dreaming* and *healing*. But it also means *hammering* in Hebrew. So, both characters are healing through their dreams, but then there's a notion of hammering.

In terms of what Helem represents, there's an amazing story in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, where a person passes, but they don't realize they are dead. A great monster appears in front of them, and the monster actually turns into a guide that assists the newly departed through the netherworld. To me, that amazing image is what Helem represents.

Notes

1. Henriette Valium (1959-2021) was known as “the pope of Montreal’s underground” for his prolific output of hallucinogenic comix and paintings. See Marc Tessier’s tribute to Valium.
2. Université du Québec en Outaouais offers programs in comic strip design.
3. Éditions Trip is a Montreal alternative comics publisher.

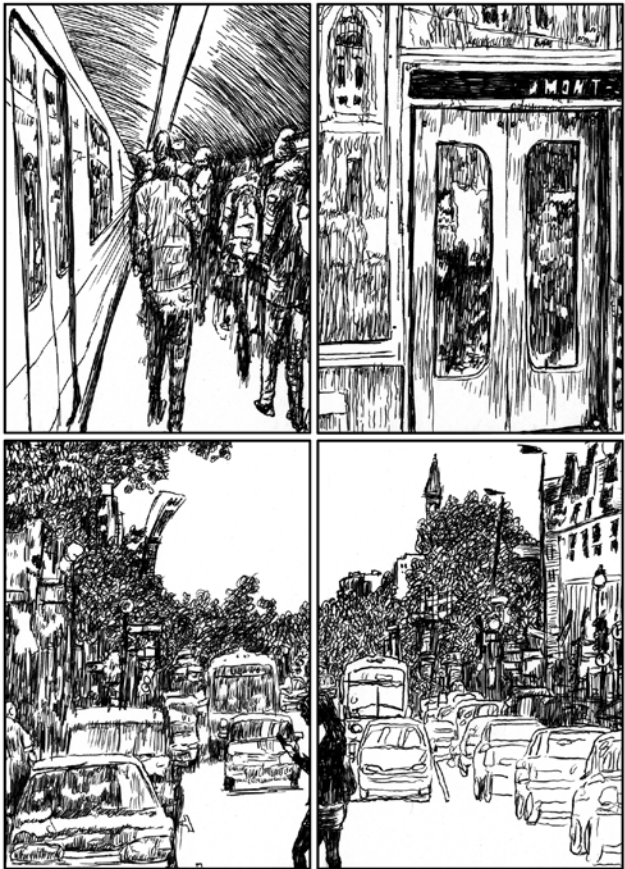
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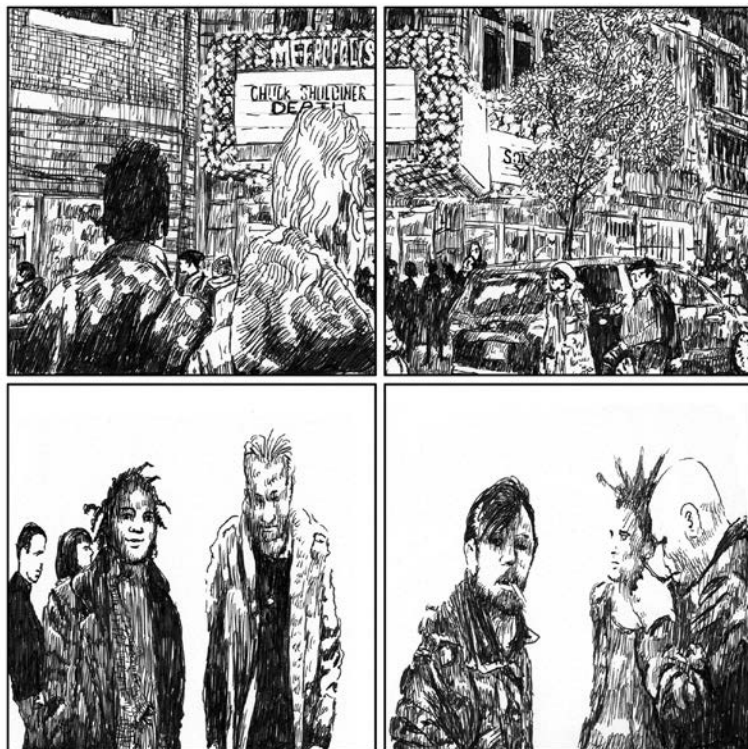
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Stanley Wany's work has been exhibited in Canada, the United States, France, Portugal, Finland, and Australia and is found in private and public collections. *Agalma*, his first graphic novel, was nominated in 2016 for a Doug Wright Award for the best experimental comics at the Toronto Comics and Arts Festival. As an author, Wany has participated as a guest and panelist in festivals in Canada, France, Finland, Portugal, and the United States. In 2018, he completed an artist residency at the Arteles Creative Center in Tampere, Finland, and over the years he has been the recipient of several travel and creation grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec.