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The Graphic Memoir and the Cartoonist's Memory

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by

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Graphic memoirs embrace the vibrancy and rich social and artistic history of comics, and the intimacy and imagination of autobiographies. Spanning from Justin Green's 1972 *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* to Riad Sattouf's 2014 *The Arab of the Future*, autobiographical comics capture the fragmented, subjective, and visual nature of memory. Reacting against the Comics Code, underground comics introduced the concept of portraying oneself in comics, a practice that achieved mainstream validation in 1992 when Art Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize for *Maus*. Drawing from classic comic strips like Richard Outcault's *The Yellow Kid* and comic books like the salacious EC Comics, cartoonists integrate and reimagine comics techniques, evoking nostalgia but also disrupting expectations. The potential for image and text to be both collaborative and conflicting is conducive to narratives of trauma, illness, and isolation because there is an expanded opportunity for representation. Marianne Hirsch and Gillian Whitlock both argue that there is an ethical imperative for verbal-visual storytelling, especially in light of contemporary censorship, war, and family trauma. My dissertation explores the ways in which graphic memoirs have been utilized to tell significant and overlooked stories,

and ways in which the reader is responsible for engaging with the cartoonist and protagonist through the graphic memoir. Specifically, I examine the ways in which the self-portrait, utilization of panels and gutters, depiction of silence, and inclusion of photographs communicate the personal narrative, and consider how these elements have evolved over the history of Western comics. Stories of personal trauma depicted through comics allow for a particular subjectivity and engagement, inspired by a contemporary medium that promises to challenge the limits of storytelling and autobiography.

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Introduction

An evolving aesthetic has emerged around self-representation: the graphic memoir. Reimagining comics techniques, like the panel, speech balloon, and gutter, for the purpose of autobiographical storytelling creates an openness and engagement with readers that allows for narratives of trauma, illness, and isolation to emerge amidst the idiosyncrasies of memory. I am particularly interested in the depiction of personal trauma in comics, those narratives that rely almost completely on memory, oral storytelling, and family histories. Boldly pushing the boundaries of this relatively new medium, autobiographical cartoonists have and continue to repurpose innovations from fiction and film and literary autobiographies, and manipulate them into something new entirely within the comics frame. The cartoonist captures the fragmented, nonlinear, and unreliable nature of memory within the familiar structures of comics, a medium that evokes nostalgia and a passionate fandom amongst many readers and artists.

My comics origin story began in 1990, and I remember it as a quest for knowledge. West Germany was playing France in the World Cup, and my parents were discussing how Germany was rebuilding national identity and patriotism with trepidation after World War II. In response to my inquiries, they shared just enough information for me to say, "I hope Germany loses!" Realizing that children often seek to identify the hero and the villain, they backtracked, assuring me that these young men on the pitch were not responsible for the Holocaust. With all the confidence in ethical objectivity, I said to myself, "I hope Germany loses!" I knew there was more to understand, so I set out to the source of all information: the public library. However, in a tiny library, in a tiny strip mall, in Texas in the 90s, the selection of Holocaust books was slim,

and that for children was non-existent. Luckily, the librarian shelved anything with illustrations in the children's section, so between *Asterix* and *Calvin and Hobbes*, I found Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Through this treasure trove, I learned about the Holocaust in a way that I now know is profound, and discovered a source of taboo topics. In a home with strict television censorship, but no reading restrictions, comics were my gateway to real knowledge. Whether it be drug culture from the *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, sexual attraction from R. Crumb, the adult brain from *RAW*, or the teenage brain from *MAD*, this was my first introduction to seemingly unfiltered culture, and this irrevocably complicated my simple understanding of heroes and villains.

A common misconception about comics is that they are based on a binary dynamic, due to the juxtaposition of image and text.¹ However, this approach is aesthetically and ethically limiting because not only does it ignore the result that comes from the symbiotic relationship of pictures and language, but it also denies non-normative or marginalized narratives the room to be expressed outside of predetermined categories. Whether Will Eisner's *To The Heart of the Storm*, Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant*, or Riad Sattouf's *The Arab of the Future*, comics as a beloved medium also become the means to share stories that can expand understanding of the human experience. Graphic memoirs have the potential to broaden readers' understandings of the creative and autobiographical potential in comics and to convey the imperative of storytelling in the comics medium. The familiar conventions of the comics genre create a productive and provocative space for autobiographies.

¹ In *Alternative Comics*, Charles Hatfield finds that cartoonist Scott McCloud's definition prioritizes text, as McCloud says that images are received information and text is perceived information. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2005). Similarly, in *Comics Versus Art*, Bart Beaty claims that Will Eisner and Robert C. Harvey both use definitions that privilege text. *Comics Versus Art*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

I use both of the terms “autobiography” and “memoir,” but acknowledge that these graphic memoirs are introducing new elements to these terms, and their distinct qualities utilized by the cartoonist are representative of what makes comics a medium to relate forgotten, repressed, or overlooked stories.² Although in comics the visual properties are static, motion is an essential component. Repetitious and sequential images serve to dislodge fixed figures and expectations, complicating both spatial and temporal spaces. The protagonist in a graphic memoir is more than the subject of a self-portrait; he or she is also a narrator and a character. The cartoonist chooses this particularly complex and intimate stance from which to portray the autobiography. Ultimately, it is not *what* comics are capable of, but *how* they engage the reader with the twists and turns of memory through the gutter, margin, and in-between spaces. Coupled with the impact of being a popular culture medium, mass-produced and quickly evolving with society, autobiographical comics are still rich for excavation.³

Autobiographical comics within the contemporary comics market are abundant, and I cannot capture all the significant works published from the 70s to the present day in Western culture.⁴ However, there are seminal texts that capture specific social and artistic moments in

² I use this term “cartoonist” to refer to the author-artist of the graphic memoir. By using this moniker, I indicate that this individual produces comics as a profession and that this work is an integral aspect of his or her identity. I may use other terms in other specific situations, such as illustrator, author, or artist. However, these other terms indicate an involvement in only one aspect of the graphic memoir and are not as encompassing as “cartoonist.”

³ There are several studies that delve specifically into autobiographical comics, and I hope to build upon that initial scholarship as the field evolves and more autobiographical comics are published, introducing new narratives and techniques to the genre. Hilary Chute. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Michael A. Chaney. *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011). Elizabeth El Refaie. *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014).

⁴ In this project I only write about Western cartoonists and comics, primarily in France and North America. While graphic memoirs are more popular in these countries and markets, there are examples of autobiographical comics throughout the world, including the Japanese manga tradition. A few examples include German cartoonist Flix’ *Held* (2003); Israeli Asaf Hanuka’s *The Realist* (2010); and New Zealander Jem Yoshioka’s *Folding Kimono* (2015).

comics history. One of the earliest American autobiographical cartoonists, Justin Green embraced the irreverent and confessional tone of underground comics in his 1972 graphic memoir *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, and in 1976 Harvey Pekar began publishing *American Splendor* based on his tortuously mundane and dissatisfying life. R. Crumb's work grew increasingly autobiographical in the 1980s in the comics anthology *Weirdo*. In 1986, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* brought autobiographical comics out from the New York and San Francisco underground scenes, and popular and critical audiences have gradually accepted comics portraying serious content. Since *Maus*, Joe Sacco introduced comics journalism with his 1996 *Palestine*, and the same year Fabrice Neaud published the first volume of *Journal*.⁵ Julie Doucet's *My New York Diary* came out in 1999 and Ariel Schrag's first work, *Definition*, came out in 1997, and neither shied away from frank discussions of adolescence, sex, and drug use. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* was published in 1999 to critical acclaim and was made into an animated feature film in 2007. Allison Bechdel's 1996 memoir *Fun Home* was a resounding success, followed by a Broadway staging of the story in 2013. Spanish author Antonio Altarriba collaborated with illustrator Kim to create the 2009 *El Arte de Volar*, translated into English in 2015, which has been compared to Spiegelman's *Maus*. *The New Yorker* cartoonists Marisa Acocella Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen* (2009), and Roz Chast, *Can We Talk About Something More Pleasant* (2014), both brought their signature senses of humor to the topics of illness and death. Riad Sattouf's 2014 *L'Arabe du futur* was a bestseller in France before being translated into English in 2015. Released in early 2016, Tom Hart's *Rosalie Lightning* reveals Hart's crushing

⁵ Hillary Chute writes, "Comics journalism is a genre both old and new, a practice in which we recognize the forceful reemergence of long traditions of 'drawing to tell' alongside newer features that reflect the conventions of modern comics and an engagement with what Mary Layoun calls 'transnational circuits of seeing.'" *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press). 197.

grief after the death of his two-year old daughter. In each of these texts, and the many I don't list, the cartoonist's memory and imagination is splayed out on the page, and they are sharing their love of and dependence on the art form they have chosen to communicate in: comics.

The personal nature of a graphic memoir introduces a subjectivity that is impossible to quantify but imperative to discuss. While there are several approaches to this genre, one productive route is to read these texts formally. The intersection of images and text create a malleable dynamic conducive to the memoir, and seemingly unavoidable. It makes sense to portray a subjective and messy narrative by means of an adaptable medium – one capable of handling both chaos and order, both logic and fantasy. In the introduction to Sacco's *Palestine*, Edward Said says that comics, “seemed to say what couldn't otherwise be said, perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined, defying the ordinary processes of thought, which are policed, shaped and re-shaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures[...]I felt that comics freed me to think and imagine and see differently.”⁶ Gillian Whitlock describes reading comics as an “active process of imaginative production whereby the reader shuttles between words and images, and navigates across the gutters and frames, being moved to see, feel, or think differently.”⁷ Both of these scholars are describing an active process of imagination and thinking facilitated by comics, as well as a freedom of interpretation made available by cartoonists. The potential to think differently means binaries can be overturned, rather than endured.

⁶ Edward Said. “Homage to Joe Sacco.” *Palestine*. (Seattle: Fantagraphics), 2005. i.

⁷ Gillian Whitlock. “Autographics: The Seeing ‘I’ of the Comics.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (Winter 2006): 965-78. 978.

By debunking the reliance on pairing concepts, I identify marginalized subjects, narratives, and perspectives within graphic memoirs that utilize fragmented time and space. The foundations of imagination and memory are decidedly subjective and defy conventional linear structure.⁸ While a literary memoir generally demands a left-to-right, front-to-back recounting, the graphic memoir allows for the narrative flow to reflect the non-linear nature of memory.⁹ As Said posits, the graphic memoir provides the opportunity for “what couldn’t otherwise be said.” The verb “said” is laden with meaning because it might be articulated through language or it may consist of icons and images. The formulas of language and storytelling can be rearranged to generate surprising impressions.

Determining why comic books were so captivating to him as an adolescent, Said wrote, “Comics played havoc with a+b+c+d and they certainly encouraged one not to think in terms of what the teacher expected or what a subject like history demanded.”¹⁰ Contemporary cartoonists have captured the destabilization of expectations for personal narratives, through taboo topics and irreverent experimentation with form. Spatial and narrative pliability is apropos for the memoir because memories rely on subjectivity, rather than being made to fit a conventional storytelling medium. Graphic memoirs free both the reader and the cartoonist to read a new story outside of “the ordinary processes of thought.”

⁸ In his article discussing Jean-Paul Sartre and Proust, Shawn Gorman says, “The essence extracts itself from temporal continuity by rescuing the subjective past and preserving it in the mode of the eternal.” Continuity is purposefully interrupted. Gorman. “Sartre on Proust: Involuntary Memoirs.” *L’Esprit Créateur* 46.4 (2006): 56-68. Sartre. *The Imagination*. 1936. (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁹ Obviously, this is a generalization. There are many nonlinear novels, including William S. Burroughs’ 1959 *Naked Lunch*, but Claude Lanzmann’s 2012 memoir *The Patagonian Hare* is more indicative of the potential and pitfalls of an autobiography recounted in fragments. Few people want their lives to be misunderstood through misreading, so might avoid the nonlinear or experimental literary autobiography.

¹⁰ Said, i.

In 1991, Sacco is sent as a journalist to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to report on the Palestinian situation within the Occupied Territories. Sacco frames the First Intifada against the Israeli occupation within his own uncomfortable position of being a Westerner in a foreign land, allowing the comics medium to carry the chaos, bias, and personal perspective that better illustrate his own experience rather than impose an authoritative narrative over the experience of others. He visually and textually records his interactions and interviews with Palestinians, and *Palestine* is thus a complicated perspective on the Occupied Territories, as he allows biased testimony only partially balanced by his cynicism. In reference to media coverage of Palestine, Sacco says to the reader, “Unfair? You bet, but I couldn’t get the taste out of my mouth, terrorism is the bread Palestinians get buttered on, I’d swallowed that ever since the airliners went sky high in the desert, do you remember that, do you remember Munich and the blown up athletes, the bus and airport massacres?”¹¹ He continues, saying, “I do, my mind gurgles over with televised pools of blood...I mean sure I had sympathy for a homeland lost, but what were the problems of Palestinians to me next to Klinghoffer, who ate Brand X corn flakes and probably borrowed my ladder...”¹² Sacco’s discursive and linguistic predispositions are entangled with what he observes, resulting in a dark, exaggerated visual representation. The depiction of people, including himself, teeters between comic and grotesque, avoiding romance and the homogenization of subjects. Sacco becomes a reluctant protagonist, and the reader is freed to view the Palestinian experience through Sacco’s imagination. In her study of trauma in comics, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*, comics scholar

¹¹ Sacco, 7.

¹² He is referring to Leon Klinghoffer, an American Jew killed on a hijacked pleasure cruise by Palestinian terrorists. The murder is attributed to the Palestine Liberation Front. Sacco, 8.

Hillary Chute says, “Comics has the ability to show the powerful interpenetration of private and public histories through the spatial juxtaposition of the frames on which its grammar is built.”¹³

The resulting graphic memoir is built upon intersections of fact and rumor, subjective and objective, and visual and verbal. The intersection is the Third Space created by existing categories and, as developed by Homi Bhabha, this space disrupts hierarchies and cultural limitations.¹⁴ Bhabha says, “It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.”¹⁵ Sacco employs this Third Space both to broaden the scope of the medium and his storytelling, and also to complicate expectations of Palestinians and the culture of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The reader moves back and forth between image and text and is allowed flexibility to explore the narrative, as the cartoonist’s memories gradually form into a composite picture. Further, the reader has the opportunity to transcend chronology, without breaking out of the narrative. The process of the fragments becoming a whole mirrors the process of remembering, and this is seen most clearly for those cartoonists with the largest bodies of work, as we can consider those elements that remain consistent and those that evolve.

In his 2008 graphic memoir, *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&#!*, Spiegelman takes advantage of his current critical and commercial success to reprint earlier work

¹³ Chute. *Disaster Drawn*, 213.

¹⁴ Homi Bhabha. *Location of Culture*. 1994. (New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁵ Bhabha, 55.

that was unpopular in 1977. These reissues are his opportunity to chronicle his life as a cartoonist. Combining the original *Breakdowns* comics with contemporary strips, Spiegelman creates a self-portrait as an artist.¹⁶ In this full-page strip, wryly entitled “Synopsis,” Spiegelman moves through six panels from a baby, to a young child, to a teenager reading a comic book, to an adult smoking a cigarette, to an old man, to a corpse. The panels are tracked by the rising and setting sun, but also as the figure moves closer to a banana peel. In the end, he is killed by the slapstick gag, as he slips on a banana peel. A dark humor and self-deprecation dominates the Spiegelman self-portraits. He writes about the contemporary *Breakdowns*, “There was no demand for a deluxe large-format album that collected the scattered handful of short autobiographical and structurally ‘experimental’ comics I’d made between 1972 and 1977 – except by me.”¹⁷ *Breakdowns* is not a memoir conveyed through comics, and a memoir about comics. It is an autobiographical map, from Spiegelman’s first encounter with comic books, through the tumultuous and drug-addled underground comix movement, to contemporary musings on his creative life.¹⁸ His chosen medium, comics, is integrally intertwined with his personal memoir, bringing together the verbal and visual narratives of his life. This is a story that could only be told through comics, and through Spiegelman’s love of the often-maligned and dismissed art form.

In *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, G.E. Lessing writes, “paint for us, you poets, the pleasure, the affection, the love and delight which beauty brings, and you

¹⁶ Figure i.1. Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*, 7.

¹⁷ Art Spiegelman. *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!*. (New York: Pantheon, 2008). 1.

¹⁸ Spiegelman, last page. The term “comix” was used to differentiate the underground movement from kid-centric comic books and comic strips. The “x” also referred to the rating of the content. Roger Sabin. “Going Underground.” *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*. (London: Phaidon Press, 2001).

have painted beauty itself.”¹⁹ In this essay, Lessing identifies the overlap between the visual and verbal arts, as the poet paints with verbal imagery, and he also expresses the power that art has to enamor the artist. Lessing writes, “Whether it be fact or fiction that Love inspired the first artistic effort in the fine arts, this much is certain: she never tires of guiding the hands of the old masters.”²⁰ Over two hundred years later, Spiegelman echoes this passion for art within the context of comics, explaining that *Breakdowns* is “a manifesto, a diary, a crumpled suicide note, and a still-relevant love letter to the medium I adore.”²¹ Spiegelman is both the painter and the poet, a lover of the medium and also the text’s subject. He describes the first time he saw *Mad Magazine* in 1955, writing, “she smelled of the illicit, I couldn’t keep my hands off her.”²² Spiegelman exposes his dependence on comics like an intimate and forbidden love affair, trusting and even depending on the reader to make this love come to fruition. There is a lurid tone to the relationship between this cartoonist and his comics, and his readers become a complicit party.

There is a productive tension between compartmentalizing memories and concurrently breaking through units of time and episodes in one’s own life. How does the cartoonist simultaneously separate memories into frames and create a cohesive narrative? Sacco’s interviews with Palestinian subjects defy accepted frames, so he turns to the visual chaos of

¹⁹ G.E. Lessing. *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. 1766. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984). 570.

²⁰ Lessing, 556.

²¹ Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*, Afterword.

²² Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*, Afterword.

overlapping panels, words, and experiences. Readers must reconstruct this dynamic into an actual lived experience, including the contradictions. In *Palestine*, Sacco is en route to an appointment in Jenin, depicted through a splash page with the phrase “Roadblock” in block letters dividing the page in half. As he sits in a car with a screaming baby, Sacco is sweating and feeling claustrophobic, and the narrative comes out in staccato text boxes, “a dozen feet...stop! ten feet...stop! four feet...stop!”²³ Sacco imbues the large images with abrupt motion through disconnected text and the absence of speech balloons. He has connected several discrete moments into one experience. The reader enters into the autobiographical pact, connecting overlapping and sequential panels until a Third Space emerges, between image and text, between cartoonist and protagonist, and between the anticipated narrative and what actually emerges from the comics.

In *Disaster Drawn*, Chute says, “It seems as though, in the present moment, images have never been more important, or more under siege. There exists a tension between the revelatory strength of the image that operates with evidentiary force, on the one hand, and its potency to trigger an affective response, on the other.”²⁴ Chute’s emphasis on the timely and imperative role of comics in contemporary visual witness is crucial to understanding what comics offer autobiography, and explicating the role of the reader. While Chute applies her scholarship to narratives of war, I focus on memories of personal trauma and how comics both reveal an experience to the reader and engage a reader with the experience, and how comics can capture the unstable, unreliable, and nonlinear nature of memory.

²³ Sacco, 273.

²⁴ Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 255.

Chapter 1, “The Intersection of Comics and Autobiography,” is an introduction to comics history and autobiographical theory, as is relevant to the graphic memoir. In Chapter 2, “In the Cracked Looking Glass,” I examine the cartoonist’s self-portrait. Identity is constructed in and through the stories they tell, the people surrounding them, and the specific stylistic choices the cartoonist makes. The cartoonist confronts and coexists with their protagonist, who is both a stranger, and representation of self. In Chapter 3, “Panels, Frames, Windows,” I return to Anne Friedberg’s queries, and I consider how the panel works in multiple planes, manipulating spatial and temporal movement. Do readers look *at* or *through* the surface of the panel? In Chapter 4, “The Desperate Artist: Narrative Devices,” I examine the role of silence in graphic memoirs. In these works language is visual, silence is visible, and common rhetorical devices are reinvented to engage the reader. Finally, in Chapter 5, “Photographs in Graphic Memoirs: Intertextuality of Media,” I study specific texts in which photographs are used, and consider how the inserted photograph complicates subjectivity and objectivity of a memoir. Many cartoonists draw on the myth of authenticity, but it is all part of a self-conscious performance. To elucidate these creative and theoretical possibilities, I share exemplary examples of autobiographical comics. Through graphic memoirs, the reader engages with personal narratives of trauma, illness, and isolation, and discovers the provocative storytelling possible with comics. These chapters and explorations will culminate in my final consideration of the role of the scholar in the comics community, and how our work impacts ethical publication, representation, and creation.



Figure i.1. Art Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*, 7.

Chapter 1: Intersection of Comics and Autobiography

The graphic memoir is an autobiography that proves to be exceptional in its ability to capture the intricacies of memory. In *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*, Chute says,

graphic narrative, invested in the ethics of testimony, assumes what I think of as the *risk of representation*. The complex visualizing it undertakes suggests that we need to rethink the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility that have tended to characterize trauma theory as well as our current censorship-driven culture in general.²⁵

In other words, comics may circumvent the aspects of trauma that are often seen as impossible to portray, or otherwise censored. In Riad Sattouf's *The Arab of the Future*, the young protagonist is a witness to his Syrian father's dreams for the Arab people in Libya in Syria, juxtaposed with his French mother's homesickness. While Riad does not grasp the political complexities of their nomadic lives, dreams and reality are interwoven to capture a confusion that he cannot yet articulate.²⁶ The confusion around nationalism is acute for the child, as he watches both his parents struggle and fail to transcend deep-rooted insecurity and international unrest.

The graphic memoirs that I have selected to discuss are self-contained stories, and published as a whole as opposed to installments, zines, or strips.²⁷ I have limited my study to

²⁵ Chute. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). 3.

²⁶ Figure 1.1. Riad Sattouf. *The Arab of the Future*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2015). 11.

²⁷ I make an exception for French graphic memoirs, such as *Du Haut Mal*, which are published as a short series of "albums," and are collected and reprinted as a single text for the American market. As a single text, there is an overarching narrative, and a cohesive style throughout.

those works acknowledged by the artist to be memoirs, to maintain a consistent theme of reflexivity, rather than use graphic novels inspired by the artist's life.²⁸ I also only analyze works that use the first person voice, as emphasized by Lejeune. The use of the "I" is imperative for both the autobiographical aspect as well as for the invaluable relationship with comics. Finally, the graphic memoirs in my study all in part discuss the impact of comics on the protagonist, as well as the ramifications of being a professional cartoonist.

My approach to graphic memoirs recognizes an origin and trajectory of comics, which involves three factors: an evolving portrayal of time and space, as reflective of the tension between memory and lived experience; the sociocultural role of comics, especially as related to trauma witness; and the emergence of the cartoonist as a professional identity. In examining these factors, the inadequacy of a dual model becomes clear and the graphic memoir is distinguished as a singular object of study, bearing the burden of new narratives and the intricacies of memory. However, before examining any of these factors, I need to introduce the autobiographical pact. This foundation of autobiographical scholarship translates very well to comics. In the introduction to the reissued edition of Justin Green's artfully sacrilegious 1972 *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, Spiegelman writes, "Justin turned comic book boxes into intimate, secular confession booths and thereby profoundly changed the history of

²⁸ Howard Cruse's 1995 *Stuck Rubber Baby* is a good example of a fictionalized graphic memoir. Cruse does not claim that it is a memoir, and based on my classification, this would rule out *Stuck Rubber Baby* as a strict memoir. This is also the case with Jonathon Ames' *The Alcoholic*. This self-identification will be an imperative aspect of defining the autobiography, as employed by Lejeune. Cruse. *Stuck Rubber Baby*. (New York: DC Comics, 2000). Ames. *The Alcoholic*. Illustrated by Dean Haspiel. (New York: Vertigo, 2009).

comics.”²⁹ The reciprocity of the confession booth only works if there is someone on the other side of the screen to listen: the reader who wants to understand the cartoonist through comics.

Bridging the Gutter Between Frames: The Autobiographical Pact

In literary autobiographies, the author allows the reader to imagine the protagonist’s point of view, which results in a cooperation between the author’s and the reader’s imaginations but also with a limitation of exposure, permitting the author a level of privacy. In a graphic memoir, the reader sees the artist’s self-portrait, and the artist’s perspective of his or her surrounding world. In this relationship, the reader’s responsibility is not to conjure images, but to reconstruct chronology and the correlation between words and images. What does the cartoonist get from the reader? Just as Spiegelman writes that a work of comics is not finished until published, an autobiography is not finished until read. The symbiotic relationship between the reader and the cartoonist is then triangulated into a contractual agreement, creating a dependent relationship between protagonist, author, and reader. This mutual trust is the basis for autobiography scholar Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact. Lejeune says, “It is at this global level that autobiography is defined: it is a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing; it is a historically variable *contractual effect*.”³⁰ Truly, the impact here is to involve the reader in

²⁹ Spiegelman, “Introduction.” *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. (San Francisco: McSweeney’s Books, 2009).

³⁰ This work was translated into English in 1989 as *On Autobiography*. Philippe Lejeune. *Le Pacte Autobiographique*. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975). 30.

validating the author and protagonist and, in the case of comics, to capture the vital role an audience plays in consuming mass and popular media.³¹

As Lejeune emphasizes, “An author is not a person. (S)he is a person who writes and publishes. Galloping over the text and outside the text, (s)he is the line of contact between the two.”³² There is a world in and out of the text, and the autobiography must account for the reader, sacrificing personal singularity. In graphic memoirs, the author is the artist, as well as the protagonist, bridging the space between these three entities. The autobiographical cartoonist depends on the anonymous reader, sharing the common experience of comics.³³ One of the essential aspects of comics, one that differentiates it from literature, is the visual representation of time and space inextricably linked to the time and space of memory.

Time and Space: Trajectories of Representation

I envision time and space in autobiographical comics as two separate trajectories on a graph, based on Lessing’s description of artistic elements. Lessing wrote, “If we wish to compare the painter and the poet in particular instances, we must first know whether they both enjoyed complete freedom; whether, that is to say, they could work toward producing the greatest

³¹ No conversation about the consumption of media would be complete without giving credit to Marshall McLuhan, especially recognizing his assertion that the medium imbeds itself in the message, which is certainly true with autobiographical comics. *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. 1960. (London: Penguin Classics, 2008).

³² Lejeune, 23.

³³ While this relationship between the cartoonist and the reader is important to comics, it is certainly not exclusive to comics. It is relevant to any art, but especially reproduced art. Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” 1936. *Illuminations*. (London: NLB, 1973). 217-242.

possible effect in their respective arts without any external constraint.”³⁴ Thus meaning is derived from comics when we graph these two essential elements in the panel, as they operate both independently and collectively. The potential collision results in ongoing tensions. By imbuing these properties with inertia, the explosive potential of graphic narratives makes sense. While this may sound abstract, it can be understood with a simple example from Aneurin Wright’s *Things to do in a Retirement Home Trailer Park...When You’re 29 and Unemployed*. Wright draws himself, the protagonist, as a dark blue, imposing minotaur. On many of the pages, he’s in the foreground, overwhelming the page and panels. Yet, despite the amount of space he fills, time slowly passes as he makes a phone call, falls back asleep, and waits while his father is dying in hospice. The incongruence between the space occupied and the time lapsed results in a heavy tone, filled alternately with rage, sadness, and impotence. However, Wright does not have to consistently articulate these emotions as they are communicated through the comics, and he says his graphic memoir is, “being a lesson in several parts put forth in the form of the comic (a unique combination of words & pictures) so as to expedite communication, education, & dramatic catharsis...”³⁵

In essence, graphic narratives challenge the classic debate of a language and image hierarchy, as the two work in tandem as well as in competition. Lessing’s essay on the Laocoön serves as a useful point of departure in considering how these media operate separately, and I extend that relationship within the same page and panel. The debate between visual and verbal art is familiar yet dated, and while Lessing privileges poetry and Homer’s description of

³⁴ Lessing, 560.

³⁵ Aneurin Wright. *Things to do in a Retirement Home Trailer park...When You’re 29 and Unemployed*. (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015).

Achilles' shield, Leon Battista Alberti privileges visual art.³⁶ Alberti writes, "yet who will deny that painting has assumed the most honoured part in all things both public and private, profane and religious, to such an extent that no art, I find, has been so highly valued among men."³⁷

Alberti's praise is based on social esteem towards painting, and the genius necessary to become an accomplished painter.³⁸ However, mass and popular culture have proven that quality and accomplishment are not dependent on each other. These tendencies to privilege one mode of storytelling over another is often applied to comics, but in the cases of cartoonists who are both author and illustrator or author-illustrator teams who work cooperatively, the privilege is more difficult to identify.

Lessing suggested that an explosive relationship results if image and text encroach on each others' territory, moving through both time and space. He writes,

as two equitable and friendly neighbors do not permit the one to take unbecoming liberties in the heart of the other's domain, yet on their extreme frontiers practice a mutual forbearance by which both sides make peaceful compensation for those slight aggressions which, in haste and from force of circumstance, the one finds himself compelled to make on the other's privilege: so also with painting and poetry.³⁹

There is an impulse for the two modes to overlap, but Lessing sees these aggressions as rare. However, in comics images and text do take liberties in each other's domain but can also be collaborative. Text becomes visual and the images tell a narrative. As words move through time,

³⁶ Leon Battista Alberti. *On Painting*. 1435. Tr. Cecil Grayson. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

³⁷ Alberti, 62.

³⁸ Longinus also advocates an author-centered perspective, saying that the source of sublimity is "natural greatness." Longinus. "On Sublimity." *Ancient Literary Criticism: Principal Texts & New Translations*. Edited by D.A. Russell and M. Winterbottom. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). 9.1.

³⁹ Lessing, 567.

and images move through space, the collision of the two results in something entirely new, the possibilities of which cartoonists explore in the recent emergence of graphic memoirs.

Techniques of Motion and Time

The dynamic elements of motion and time are crucial to portraying memory because they dictate subjective perception, with no allegiance to reality. Memory moves through time and space, but not consistently. A day may be remembered with the same detail as one remembers a year. Just as with the panel, autobiographical cartoonists look to classic comics techniques to move their characters throughout space and across time. Although the familiar pairing of panel and gutter hearkens back to early cartoonist Rodolphe Töpffer, the techniques used to portray movement have evolved from the earliest syndicated strips, such as in Rudolph Dirks' 1897 *The Katzenjammer Kids*.⁴⁰ Movement in the autobiographical comics is interesting because it is not always forward and often multiple techniques are employed. There are three dominant methods of creating motion in comics. First, what is termed the affine shear affect simply has the character leaning in the direction they are moving, suggesting motion in the future.⁴¹ In this image from *Epileptic*, David's movement across the panel is stylized and controlled, which reflects David B.'s tone throughout. Second, action lines indicate motion that has already occurred, with variations on the lines changing the perception of speed, such as a straight line versus a wavy line.⁴² This technique is common in comic books and comic strips, and in this

⁴⁰ *The Katzenjammer Kids* first ran in the *New York Journal* in 1897 and, as of 2016, is the longest running newspaper comic strip as the reprints are currently syndicated.

⁴¹ Figure 1.2. David B. *Epileptic*, 121.

⁴² Figure 1.3. Antonio Altarriba, *The Art of Flying*, 20.

scene from Antonio Altarriba's *The Art of Flying*, there is a reckless and slapstick nature to contrast with the despondence of the protagonist. Finally, early nineteenth-century Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai portrayed his figures in unstable positions, creating the impression that they are moving.⁴³ Working in the manga tradition, cartoonist Yoshiro Tatsumi's *A Drifting Life* suspends the protagonist in a moment of physical and psychological pressure as Hiroshi races against the clock and away from a bully. In precarious moments defying gravity and balance, the reader easily imagines the ensuing kinesis. The techniques the cartoonist chooses, and it is often a combination of the three, is more than a functional choice. This is significant because comics harness the capability of visual art to portray invisible qualities such as motion and silence, and move in succession. As the figures moves through space, time is integrally involved.

The element of time can be easily manipulated because time elapses while the character is moving, and the reader is engaged in a narrative that promises future movement or is recorded past movement. Further, time lapse occurs as the characters age, although not necessarily. Craig Thompson's *Blankets* chronicles the author from child to adult, necessitating visual cues of time lapsed within his self-portrait. In contrast, in Belle Yang's *Forget Sorrow*, the protagonist recounts her entire story as a young adult, so time lapsed is demonstrated outside the self-portrait. Only in the exceptional case will the temporal flexibility, or multi-temporality, of an individual panel demand the reader's explicit attention. In the collision of these elements, most importantly, the reader sees movement in the immediate moment. The ability to be reflective of the proximate context is an integral aspect of the graphic memoir, and another reason comics are

⁴³ Figure 1.4. Yoshiro Tatsumi, 102. Naoyuki Osaka; Daisuke Matsuyoshi; Takashi Ikeda; Mariko Osaka. "Implied motion because of instability in Hokusai Manga activates the human motion-sensitive extrastriate visual cortex: an fMRI study of the impact of visual art." *Neuroreport*: 10 March 2010 - Volume 21 - Issue 4. 264-267.

so apt to portray memories because they carry an inherent cultural context which is inevitably part of the cartoonist's own story.

Comics in culture

Comics criticism based on the opposition of image and text creates artificial binaries that undermine the potential for self-representation, or establish artificial hierarchies. The conventions of the medium are entangled with its history, reflecting complex social and cultural movements, all of which depend on a complexity of image and text.⁴⁴ The impact and scope of comics is deepened by their social, cultural, and historical context and the role they have played in popular culture. The fan culture surrounding comics is endearingly personal, and the autobiographical cartoonist would certainly include this appreciation in their life story. Especially in the context of the graphic memoir, where a love of the comics medium is extolled, an appreciation for the history and development of comics further engages the reader with the cartoonist and protagonist. Autobiographical cartoonists have a personal narrative that includes a wide range of classic and influential comics, from Jack Kirby and Stan Lee's *Fantastic Four*, to Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, to Bill Gaines' EC Comics, and the oft-cited *MAD Magazine* and *RAW*, and these influences amongst others emerge in personal narratives.

While the comics panel has been in existence since at least 1837, with the publication of Rodolphe Töpffer's *Histoire de M. Vieux Bois*, there are subsequent trends within comics culture

⁴⁴ Jean-Paul Gabilliet. *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*. Translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2009).

leading to the autobiographical comics.⁴⁵ The first move in the direction of allowing for marginalized voices was the early inclusion of immigrant and Jewish artists and subjects. Richard Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* introduced American newspaper audiences to the syndicated comic strip in 1895, soon to be followed by Dirks' *The Katzenjammer Kids*, Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo*, and George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*. *Hogan's Alley* featured the Yellow Kid and other working-class children in urban New York City in a humorous and accessible medium for all consumers, including illiterate or non-English speaking audiences. *Little Nemo* depicts the protagonist's fantastic dreams, a theme that is prevalent in contemporary graphic memoirs. *Krazy Kat* was created by Herriman, who hid his African-American heritage, while weaving issues of identity, race, and shame into his heady and intellectual comic strips. Following the popularity of the "Funnies" in newspapers, the Golden Age of comics came to fruition in 1938 with the first issue of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Superman* and ended approximately in 1945, as America adjusted to the end of World War II. Siegel and Shuster were Jewish cartoonists working in the American Midwest, who created perhaps the most popular metaphor for assimilation and the American Dream.⁴⁶

In post-war America, comics publishers now had an audience that had grown up on *Superman*, *Batman*, and *Captain Marvel*, but were returning from combat as young adults. The next wave of subversive and underground comics heavily influenced the autobiographical cartoonists, both in style and with an irreverent and honest tone. Gaines published *Tales from the Crypt*, *Crime SuspensStories*, *Weird Science*, and other sensational topics through EC Comics

⁴⁵ Rodolphe Töpffer's *Histoire de M. Vieux Bois* was published in America in 1842 as *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*. One his notable supporters was Johann Wolfgang Goethe. David Kunzle. *Father of the Comic Strip: Rodolphe Töpffer*. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007).

⁴⁶ Tom Andrae and Mel Gordon. *Siegel and Shuster's Funnyman: The First Jewish Superhero, from the Creators of Superman*. Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2010.

during the 1950s, with the assistance of his editors Albert Feldstein and Harvey Kurtzman.

Kurtzman went on to start the influential *MAD Magazine* in 1952, which was later taken over by Al Feldstein. In 1954, sociologist Fredric Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*, which garnered public support for censoring comics through the Comics Code. The Comics Code put many publishers out of business, irrevocably altering the comics landscape. However, out of the depressed industry, *Mad Magazine* sparked a movement of self-published, political, and provocative comics. These comics were often more crudely drawn and paid homage to, as well as mocked, traditional comics. It was out of the underground comics movement that the graphic memoir truly developed.

Underground comics were first published as strips in the underground press in the mid-1960s, notably in such collections as R. Crumb's *Zap Comix* and the collective *The East Village Other*.⁴⁷ In San Francisco, Crumb collaborated with other influential cartoonists Kim Deitch, Spain Rodriguez, Gilbert Shelton, and S. Clay Wilson. Simultaneously, female cartoonists were significantly altering the demographics and content of American comics with publications such as *Wimmen's Comix* and *It Ain't Me Babe*, featuring the work of cartoonists such as Lynda Barry, Trina Robbins, and Carol Tyler. Chute says, "The growth of the underground comix movement was connected to second-wave feminism, which enabled a body of work that was explicitly political to sprout: if female activists complained of the misogyny of the New Left, this was mirrored in underground comics, prompting women cartoonists to establish a space specifically for women's work."⁴⁸ As an alternative medium providing a vehicle for artistic and journalistic freedom not possible in the mainstream press, the underground press advocated

⁴⁷ Arie Kaplan. *Masters of the Comic Book Universe Revealed!* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2006).

⁴⁸ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 20.

opposition to the war in Vietnam and the capitalist economy supporting it, sexual freedom, drug use, support for oppressed subjects, and distrust of established political institutions. The themes were distinctly personal and autobiographical, and one of the most apparent results of the evolving art form has been the recognition of the cartoonist as professional artist.

The Professional Cartoonist

In academia, graphic novels have been integrated into a variety of curricula, but now courses focused exclusively on comics are offered, such as the Stanford Graphic Novel Project, in which the students collaborate to create and publish a full-length graphic novel. Major universities in the U.S. hold comics conferences, such as the 13th University of Florida Conference on Comics and Graphic Novels, "Transnational Comics: Crossing Gutters, Transcending Boundaries." In 2015, the University of London in Paris hosted the ninth annual International Bande Dessinée Society Conference and sixth annual International Graphic Novel and Comics Conference. The Kubert School in Dover, New Jersey is the school Joe Kubert founded exclusively for cartoon and graphic art.⁴⁹ Kubert envisioned the school as an opportunity to lead students to a career in the art form that they loved, and the school continues to be successful in that mission, encouraging comics innovation.

In *Reading Bande Dessinée*, Ann Miller describes early nineteenth-century Swiss cartoonist Töpffer's artistic innovations, saying "rather than representing his hero's progress as a series of separate tableaux, he decomposed movements, allowing the reader to reconstruct a

⁴⁹ Cartoonist Joe Kubert had a long career with DC Comics. Dana Jennings. "Paper, Pencil and a Dream." *New York Times*. December 14, 2003. Kubert created a fictionalized autobiography, imagining if his family had not immigrated to the United States prior to the Holocaust. *Yossel*. (New York: Vertigo, 2011).

continuous narrative across the frame boundaries.”⁵⁰ Töpffer introduced the possibility of the frame as both boundary and linking device, by lining up subsequent panels. He also introduced the possibility of selling comics, as opposed to it just drawing as a hobby. Chris Ware, author and artist of *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, writes, “It’s clear that not only did Töpffer invent the modern comic strip, he also invented the modern cartoonist.”⁵¹ Töpffer familiarized the comics format in the Western world, with conventions still relied on today. The professional cartoonist simultaneously innovates and emulates, often connecting to the history of comics by the very act of reinventing.

Two other cartoonists who helped define the contemporary comics profession are Eisner and Scott McCloud. Eisner has been instrumental in the genre of graphic memoirs, writing his own autobiographical *Life in Pictures* and being the namesake of the prestigious Eisner Awards.⁵² Eisner embodies the early cartoonist with his collaborative work in comic books, moving on to create his own characters with *The Spirit* in 1940, and being one of the first cartoonists to create long form comics, later recognized as “graphic novels.” While Eisner’s career spans the formative years of comics, Scott McCloud introduces a critical and formal approach to comics. Both Eisner and McCloud contributed guidelines to the formation and understanding of graphic narrative and comics in their respective books, *Comics and Sequential*

⁵⁰ Ann Miller. *Reading Bande-Dessinées: Critical Approaches to French-Language Comic Strips*. (Bristol: Intellect Ltd., 2008). 15.

⁵¹ Chris Ware. “Töpffer in English.” *The Best American Comics Criticism*. (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2010). 226.

⁵² The Eisner Awards are presented annually at the San Diego Comic-Con International. Work published in the U.S. is eligible for nomination in at least twenty categories, including “Best Reality-Based Work,” for which Roz Chast was nominated in 2015 for her graphic memoir. Will Eisner. *Life in Pictures*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

Art and Understanding Comics.⁵³ Eisner’s definition of comics is simply “sequential art,” excluding discussion of medium and narrative conditions.⁵⁴ McCloud’s definition for comics is: “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”⁵⁵ The vital part of this quotation is the emphasis on the juxtaposed media in order to produce a “response in the viewer.” McCloud identifies two major components integral to my work with autobiographical comics: the intersection of textual and visual media, and the involvement of the reader in making the genre complete.⁵⁶ Recognizing a genre establishes expectations and engagement, crucial elements to the success of a graphic narrative as the professional cartoonist determines which expectations to meet, and which to overturn.

Graphic Memoirs: A Genre

A crucial step towards recognizing the graphic memoir as a genre is identifying what cultural and social contributions it makes, as well as mapping its evolution. If Green’s *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* was indeed the first English-language graphic memoir, then with it Green created a genre. Spiegelman writes, “What the Brontë sisters did for Gothic

⁵³ Will Eisner. *Comics and Sequential Art*. (Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1985). Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. (New York: Harper, 1994).

⁵⁴ Eisner, 5.

⁵⁵ McCloud, 9.

⁵⁶ “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives a final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists.” Marcel Duchamp. “The Creative Act,” in *Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Robert Lebel. (New York: Penguin Books, 1967).

romance and what Tolkien did for *Sword-and-Sorcery*, Justin did for confessional autobiographical comics.”⁵⁷ Spiegelman aligns Green with writers paramount in their genre, suggesting that Green initiated a creative movement, and contributed the foundational text. While Green’s phallus-laden narrative seems crude and self-centered, in an Afterword to the reprinted edition, Green writes, “I have to give myself the one accolade I truly deserve: that *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* anticipated the groundswell in literature about obsessive compulsive disorder by almost two decades.... Later medical findings reveal that roughly 1% of the population has severely debilitating symptoms.”⁵⁸ *Binky Brown* is more than a masturbatory work, literally and metaphorically. Green’s work provided an opportunity for a stigmatized condition (obsessive-compulsive disorder, in this case) to be publicly explored. The graphic memoir conveys both personal and collective trauma, and in the juxtaposition of words and images, reflects the way in which modern society perceives suffering. Although *Binky Brown* is an irreverent representation of mental health, it is not any less authentic than other portrayals of illness and demonstrates what can be at stake in the graphic memoir.

The graphic memoir is a variation of the graphic novel, a term which has been scoffed at as a marketing distinction, rather than a legitimate artist-initiated format.⁵⁹ While the term itself is often inaccurate since many long-form comics are not novels by the literary definition, the long form affects the content by allowing more space for temporality, color, and content to be explored, beyond merely creating a shelf in the bookstore. This term is used as a synonym for

⁵⁷ Spiegelman. “Introduction.” *Binky Brown*.

⁵⁸ Green, 62.

⁵⁹ Chris Ware has described the graphic novel as originally being aimed at “a less-educated and/or intellectually blunted segment of the consumer pool.” Rick Moody. “*Epileptic: Disorder in the House.*” *The Best American Comics Criticism*. (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2010). 231.

long comic books, such as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' collected *Watchmen* series, as well as to indicate a form that is "more than" a comic book in the scope of its ambition. The parameters of this emerging literature include a respect for the authorial voice, the desire to establish a permanent bookshelf of great works in a popular art previously never more than disposable, and a deeper sense of the medium's history. Regardless of the term used, graphic novels and autobiographical comics are a significant medium in which words and pictures interact meaningfully, especially in modern life.

The publishing industry has been an integral factor in determining what is available to the public and for its role as instigator of creative movements. The reflection of social history in the comics publishing trends is fascinating, from the New York City comic book factories of the 1940s, to the San Francisco underground publishers of the 1970s, to the art book publishers such as Pantheon today. Just as Wertham and the Comics Code Authority crippled the comic book industry, these anti-comic sentiments were also catalysts for the prolific underground comix movement that inspired the alternative industry, and eventually graphic memoir, of today.⁶⁰

Whether published with a major comics publisher like DC or Marvel, or an imprint such as DC's All Star, or the independent publishers Dark Horse, Drawn & Quarterly, or Fantagraphics Books, the format, creative scope, and audience access to content is predetermined. Changes to these parameters have occurred over time, through events such as Spiegelman winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Comics are rarely sold on newsstands anymore, but rather in bookstores or

⁶⁰ Although the methodology was already suspect, Carol L. Tilley discovered verifiable proof that Wertham's research was falsified and altered. Fredric Wertham. *Seduction of the Innocent*. 1954. (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press), 1972. Dave Izkoff. "Scholar Finds Flaws in Work by Archenemy of Comics." *New York Times*. February 20, 2013. C1.

specialty comic book stores, which limits the potential customer base while placing the cartoonist and her work in a more specialized space.⁶¹

Along these lines, the struggle for legitimization also plays a part in the development of the graphic memoir when, for instance, from 1964 through 1967, the eminent French organization *Club des Bandes Dessinées* deemed comics the “ninth art,” based on Maurice De Bevere’s series of articles in *Spirou*.⁶² Thus added to Europe’s list of the plastic arts, comics were given the distinction of being the newest member, thereby bestowing a level of pedigree. Graphic memoirs are an outstanding example of being simultaneous high and low culture, especially within the U.S., Franco-Belgian, and Japanese markets.⁶³ The overlap and constructive tensions between American comics and Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* render these art movements congruent, and the two often respond directly to each other. Cartoonists from these schools cite common influences, such as Hergé and R. Crumb, very different artists that have earned critical and popular success. Hergé, despite being accused of Nazi collaboration, continued to publish *Tintin* magazine and was awarded the Jack Kirby Hall of Fame in 1999, and received the Eisner Award Hall of Fame in 2003. R. Crumb received the Harvey Special Award

⁶¹ In 2015, Diamond Comics Distributors comics periodical sales were up 16.5%, and graphic novel sales increased 5.9%. Diamond’s customer count rose 3.7%, indicating a small growth in the number of individual comics stores. Rich Shivener. “Comic-Con: Sales and Number of Stores Up, Diamond Reports.” *Publishers Weekly*. (July 14, 2015). While Diamond Comics Distributors will not capture all data because they do not distribute all comics and have a controversial history with censorship, they are the largest comics distributor in the United States and their sales can be seen as indicative of trends.

⁶² Film critic and historian Claude Beylie extended Ricciotto Canudo’s distinction of the seven arts: architecture, sculpture, music poetry, and dance. Canudo later considered cinema as the seventh art, and Beylie gave television the eighth position. Miller, 23. Maurice De Bevere wrote and created the popular comic series *Lucky Luke* under the professional name Morris.

⁶³ I will not consider manga as a primary text because the evolution and formal techniques of Japanese comics demand a separate study. There has been influence between Western comics and Japanese comics, especially in the portrayal of movement, which I will cite when appropriate.

for Humor in 1990, and the Angoulême Grand Prix in 1999.⁶⁴ The influence of these controversial yet talented cartoonists, amongst others, has been enduring as they find increasing commercial success.

Memoirs have always been a commercially successful genre, and this trend does not seem to be waning.⁶⁵ Graphic memoirs have grown as a major subgenre since Green's *Binky Brown*, continuing in the Franco-Belgian market with Edmond Baudoin's 1982 *Passe le temps*, but recently have reached the potential to become New York Times bestsellers with works such as Chast's darkly funny *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*⁶⁶ The graphic memoir introduces a new way to portray trauma through the autobiography genre, and a new way for the reader to view trauma. Graphic memoirs are subject to both visual and textual criticism and theory, including autobiography theory.

In contemporary society, especially in light of media's recent war coverage, Marianne Hirsch argues for a continued discussion of visual-verbal conjunctions.⁶⁷ In an Editor's Column for the 2004 *PMLA*, Hirsch writes, "A sustained discussion of words and images, of reading and looking, seems especially urgent at a moment when trauma is instrumentalized as an alibi for censorship."⁶⁸ As photographic images of war injuries and trauma are censored in newspapers

⁶⁴ David Armstrong. "Neo-nazis Miss The Point In Robert Crumb's Cartoons." *Chicago Tribune*. October 09, 1994.

⁶⁵ According to Nielsen BookScan, memoir sales increased more than 400 percent between 2004 and 2008. Ben Yagoda. *Memoir: A History*. (New York: Riverhead Hardcover, 2009). According to *Publisher's Weekly*, sales in the Biography/Autobiography/Memoir category were up 12% from 2013, to 22,803,000 units. Coincidentally, sales in the Graphic Novel category were up 13% from 2013, to 8,669 units. Jim Milliot. "The Hottest (and Coldest) Book Categories of 2014." *Publisher's Weekly*. January 23, 2015.

⁶⁶ Edmond Baudoin. *Passe le temps*. 1982. (Paris: Futuropolis, 1991).

⁶⁷ Marianne Hirsch. "Editor's Column: Collateral Damage." *PMLA* 119 (2004): 1209-15.

⁶⁸ Hirsch, 1211.

and mainstream media, comics may be able to portray those repressed realities of war with similar visceral responses as photography and video elicit. Hirsch advocates for the relevance of words and images together because this may be the ethical answer to marginalized, repressed, and censored stories. Through the interchangeable reading and looking, the memory of trauma can be excavated.

Hirsch's scholarship is focused primarily on memory and images with an emphasis on the Holocaust, which led to her scholastic interest in Spiegelman's *Maus*. Hirsch wrote, "We appreciate Art's self-consciousness, his questions about the validity of his enterprise and his capacity to carry it out, and we sympathize with his discomfort at the success of *Maus*."⁶⁹ It is significant that *Maus* is based on oral history, because it further emphasizes the simultaneous subjectivity and transparency of graphic memoirs. In response to an interview questions about historical accuracy, Spiegelman said,

Although I set about in doing *Maus* to do a history of sorts I'm all too aware that ultimately what I'm creating is a realistic fiction. The experiences my father actually went through, there's what he's able to remember and what he's able to articulate of these experiences. Then there's what I'm able to understand of what he articulated, and what I'm able to put down on paper. And then of course there's what the reader can make of that. *Maus* is so many steps removed from the actual experience, they're so distant from each other that all I can do is hint at, intimate, and try for something that feels real to me.⁷⁰

This process of translating history is imperative to Hirsch's work because it makes history personal. Postmemory is Hirsch's term that describes the relationship of the second generation to experiences that precede them, but that are transmitted so deeply as to seem to constitute

⁶⁹ Marianne Hirsch. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). 29.

⁷⁰ Graham Smith. "From Mickey to Maus: Recalling the Genocide through Cartoon." *Oral History*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring, 1987), 26-34.

memories in their own right. Hirsch's essay elucidates the generation of postmemory and its reliance on photography as a primary medium of transmission of trauma across generations. Hirsch examines the role of the family as a space of transmission, and this process of feeling the memories of others is potent in *Maus*. Spiegelman says, "The subject of *Maus* is the retrieval of memory and ultimately, the creation of memory."⁷¹ Although incorporated into other genres and disciplines, Hirsch's rigorous approach to comics is committed to the sentiment of nonfiction graphic narratives. Hirsch and subsequent writers have developed vocabulary particular to authors who cope with memories through comics.

In her article "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of the Comics," Gillian Whitlock writes, "it is Hirsch who identifies the particular importance of the comics in mediating on the conjunction of visual and verbal texts now, and she adopts the term "binocularity" to grasp the distinctive verbal-visual conjunctions that occur in comics."⁷² While I appreciate the functionality of the term "binocularity," I especially value the overall contribution of applying precise terms to comics critical rhetoric. Whitlock uses the term "autographics" to emphasize the co-existent verbal and visual art, picking up where Hirsch leaves off.⁷³ "Autographics" is acutely relevant to my project, highlighting crucial tensions. In "Self Regarding Art," Whitlock writes, "'Autographics': a neologism that demands to be represented phonetically in this introductory discussion, indicating from the first its attention to the multiple modes and media of

⁷¹ Art Spiegelman. *MetaMaus*. (New York: Pantheon, 2011), 73.

⁷² "Binocularity" is the ability to use both eyes to focus on an object, and create a stereoscopic image. Gillian Whitlock. "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of the Comics." *Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 52, number 4, Winter 2006: 965-979.

⁷³ While I appreciate Whitlock's term, I will continue to use "graphic memoir" because I think the qualification of a literary genre is important to my understanding of the genre.

autobiographical texts, and to the tensions between ‘auto’ and ‘graph’ in the rapidly changing visual and textual cultures of autobiography.”⁷⁴ Hirsch and Whitlock are invaluable resources that have demonstrated the capacity of cartoonists to portray national trauma intermingled with the personal, and it is the understanding of personal trauma that drives my work.

Hirsch and Whitlock both suggest that a verbal-visual medium allows for more explicit exposure and storytelling, especially expressive when the story is based in reality because of the tension that arises between the actual events and the artistic translation. For example, in *Palestine*, Joe Sacco talks to a lawyer who recounts the violent injustices his clients endure from the police. While the lawyer is portrayed sitting at his desk in the foreground, speaking through speech balloons, the background is a large depiction of a man’s head being pushed towards a hot plate, without an explicit explanation. Thus the frame represents the juxtaposition of the impassive lawyer who is defeated by rampant abuse, and the fervor of an attack in progress. Within one frame there are contradictory tones, emphasizing the urgency Sacco senses and the tensions between auto and graph that Whitlock anticipates.

Palestine is comics journalism, and it is the manifestation as Hirsch and Whitlock spoke of it, as Sacco both shows and tells a story that should not be overlooked. He makes a statement by choosing comics to humanize a foreign war, a task usually done with photographs, if at all. Further, by placing himself in the middle of the story, the personal and subjective nature of the experience is magnified. Sacco began his career with tradition journalism, moved into strictly comics with Fantagraphics’ *The Comics Journal*, and eventually brought his two areas of interest

⁷⁴ Gillian Whitlock. and Anna Poletti. "Self-Regarding Art." *Biography* 31.1 (2008): v-xxiii. *Project MUSE*. 6 Nov. 2012.

together with himself as the protagonist and catalyst for not only *Palestine*, but also *Safe Area Goražde* and *Footnotes in Gaza*.

Autobiography as Genre: *textes référentiels*

Autobiographical comics are particularly apt at conveying memory because they can capture the instability, unreliability, and non-linear nature of memory. In his survey of autobiographies in Western culture, *Memoir*, Ben Yagoda quotes from memoir publishing contracts, saying, “Memoirists, of course, *remember*; no one truly expects them to engage in ‘careful investigation and research.’”⁷⁵ The graphic memoir avoids the pressures of authenticity and in doing so, allows the cartoonist a larger scope in which to explore self-identity. The content of graphic memoirs ranges from day to day mundane, such as Harvey Pekar’s grocery shopping, to epic pursuits such as Miriam Katin’s *We Are On Our Own*, wherein she recounts escaping the Holocaust as a small child.⁷⁶ However, it is the capacity for making the mundane notable, such as the surviving letters in *We Are On Our Own*, which allows the epic to be profound. It is with my focus on memory and subjectivity, trauma, and self-examination that the graphic memoir benefits from autobiography theory and criticism.

Speaking of autobiographical *bande dessinée*, Miller explains, “The fascination with daily life that had been a strong current in the 1980s tended in the 1990s to take a more

⁷⁵ Yagoda, 245. However, this does not preclude memoirists from engaging and including extensive research, such as Spiegelman did through trips to Poland, film, survivor drawing, books, and any other resources available about the Holocaust.

⁷⁶ Miriam Katin. *We Are On Our Own*. (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly), 2006. Katin’s second memoir is *Letting it Go*. (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2013).

subjective turn. Autobiography was a major focus for the independent publishers L'Association and Ego comme X.⁷⁷ For example, L'Association notably published Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* in 2000, David B.'s *Epileptic* (originally *L'Ascension du Haut Mal*) from 1996 to 2003, and influential and prolific cartoonist Joann Sfar's experimental autobiographical sketchbooks named for musical instruments and household items, such as *Harmonica*, *Piano*, *Parapluie*, and *Caravan*, between 2002 and 2005. Ego comme X focuses on autobiography, although not exclusively, starting with co-founder Fabrice Neaud's *Journal* in 1994. Daily life has often been a popular topic in autobiographies, especially during tumultuous times, but this consistent publishing opened the door to cover any storytelling that might be found in the pages of a literary autobiography.

Lejeune's 1975 *Le Pacte Autobiographique* is a seminal text for autobiographical studies due to Lejeune's formal and categorical breakdown of the text, allowing for a systematic qualification of a work as an autobiography. While this is a rigid approach to a literary genre formation, it allows for transparent methodology. The general definition of autobiography is accepted as writing about oneself, and Lejeune develops specific criteria that can be applied to the graphic memoir. In *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, he defines the autobiography as "a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality."⁷⁸ There are four specific parameters in this definition on which I will elaborate in reference to graphic memoirs.

First, Lejeune specifies that the autobiography must be written in retrospect, allowing for thorough self-analysis. This point seems to avoid the unavoidable influence of art on life as cited

⁷⁷ Miller, 61.

⁷⁸ Lejeune, 14.

by Paul de Man in “Autobiography as De-facement.”⁷⁹ De Man argues that autobiography creates a distorted view of oneself, and the only true topic in an autobiography is the making of the autobiography, which is actually appropriate for many graphic memoirs that turn the story towards the comics medium. Schrag’s *High School Chronicles* are created almost simultaneously with the events they portray, resulting in an immediate, raw perspective devoid of rational assessment. The final product is certainly a manifestation of Schrag’s adolescent self, without the distancing of time. Similarly, Sylvie Rancourt started her comic *Melody* while working as a nude dancer in the mid-80s, making photocopied zines to sell at the strip club.⁸⁰ William Wordsworth started writing his memoir when he was twenty-nine, because he “had the idea that a good time to write about youth *was* youth.”⁸¹ Second, Lejeune determines that autobiography must be prose. This is more relevant to the specific time period on which he focuses, from 1770 through 1970, specifically in Europe. While prose is generally the mode of discourse for autobiographers, it is not a restrictive condition. Third, Lejeune determines that the autobiography must be written by a “real person.” While this may seem self-evident, it would rule out texts penned by fictional characters or even those under a pseudonym, which hides the identity marker. This is important because it holds the author responsible for a certain level of intimacy and exposure, particularly when the self-portrait is a crucial element of the memoir. Finally, the narrative must be about the author’s life, preferably about the development of her or his personality. This is a valuable

⁷⁹ Paul De Man. “Autobiography as De-facement.” *MLN*, Vol. 94, No. 5, *Comparative Literature*. (Dec., 1979), 919-930.

⁸⁰ “She recognized comics as a form of expression but had no knowledge of tools, technique, or history. And that is part of the charm of the pages in this book, its author’s ingenuous approach.” Bernard Joubert. “Afterword.” Sylvie Rancourt. *Melody: Story of a Nude Dancer*. (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2015).

⁸¹ Yagoda, 64.

distinction because it legitimizes an inherently narcissistic topic, and allows for significant subjective analysis, especially if considering the physical text a manifestation of personality.

An initial aspect of the graphic memoir to consider is not the subject matter, but the mode in which the autobiography is conveyed. In “Narrative and Chronology as Structures of Reference and the New Model Autobiographer,” John Paul Eakin writes, “the form of an autobiography is increasingly understood as a manifestation of the autobiographer’s concept of self.”⁸² He suggests that not merely the narrative, but the style is reflective of the author’s self-perception. Beyond simply mirroring a life, the format used by the autobiographer is a “manifestation,” which suggests an embodiment of oneself through the text. Eakin writes that, “the deconstructive challenge to reference in autobiography turns, then, on the relation between the experience of the individual (‘the thing itself’) and its representation in language (‘the picture’).”⁸³ This observation is pertinent for graphic memoirs, because the representation is in language and pictures, and these combinations reveal what the cartoonist is thinking, and who they think they are. In graphic memoirs the cartoonist herself stands out as a visible part of the process and finished product. Through both Eakin and Lejeune, I situate the autobiography within a genre, while considering the reader who completes the autobiographical pact.

The autobiographical pact as introduced by Lejeune firmly defines the relationship between protagonist, author, and reader. He describes the “implicit or explicit contract proposed by the *author* to the *reader*, a contract which determines the mode of reading of the text and

⁸²John Paul Eakin. *Studies in Autobiography*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). 34.

⁸³ Eakin, 32.

engenders the effects which, attributed to the text, seem to us to define it as autobiography.”⁸⁴

This arrangement states that the author and the reader understand that the work will be, to the best of the abilities of the writer, an attempt to truthfully convey an understanding of his own life. With this understanding fulfilled by the author, the reader will accept the text as an earnest attempt at self-representation. In the graphic memoir I look at the autobiographical pact as part of a triangular relationship between the reader, artist, and protagonist as the artist’s depiction of her or himself. The autobiographical pact is compelling because it presents a preexisting structure into which the author and artist enter. By defining the role of each participant prior to engagement, the processes of writing and reading a memoir are interdependent.

One of the most important genre markers is the use of “I” in reference to the protagonist. According to Lejeune, “what defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name.”⁸⁵ The reader trusts that when the author uses “I,” it is in an earnest attempt to portray oneself, even if the pronoun itself bears no verifiable burden of authenticity. The proper name becomes the most basic marker of an autobiography, as Lejeune writes, “The entire existence of the person we call the *author* is summed up by this name: the only mark in the text of an unquestionable world-beyond-the-text, referring to a real person, which requires that we thus attribute to him, in the final analysis, the responsibility for the production of the whole written text.”⁸⁶ The autobiographical pact works because the reader trusts the name as a person outside of the text, and therefore the autobiographical narrative as an actual, lived experience. Further, only the author can be held

⁸⁴ Lejeune, 44.

⁸⁵ Lejeune, 33.

⁸⁶ Lejeune, 23.

accountable for her or his text, which excludes ghostwriters, editors, and in the case of graphic memoirs, artist-author teams.⁸⁷ However, understanding the author as a real person responsible for the resulting narrative creates an appreciation for the intimacy between reader and author, excluding external influences. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume says of a reader encountering a “romance” as opposed to “a true history,”

The latter has a more lively conception of all the incidents. He enters deeper into the concerns of the persons: represents to himself their actions, and characters, and friendships, and enmities: he even goes so far as to form a notion of their features, and air, and person. While the former, who gives no credit to the testimony of the author, has a more faint and languid conception of all these particulars; and except on account of the style and ingenuity of the composition, can receive little entertainment from it.⁸⁸

Hume suggests that the “true history,” in this case an autobiography, creates fuller portraits of people, their motivations, and their environments. Although Green published *Binky Brown* a full seventy-six years later, Hume’s words read true for the graphic memoir as the cartoonist visually represents their “notion of their features, and air, and person,” as they reside in his memory and imagination.

Throughout *Breakdowns*, Spiegelman speaks to the reader, explaining how childhood incidents influenced him as cartoonist. In the strip “Short Circuit,” Spiegelman starts to explain the role of juxtaposed memories, but interrupts himself, exclaiming, “Stop explaining, Spiegelman...and stop complaining! Just shut up and divert us, damn it!”⁸⁹ He intentionally makes the process of storytelling visible, and aligns himself with the reader in this instance. He

⁸⁷ The circumstances of artist-author teams are more complicated, and may sometimes meet the criteria of the autobiographical pact, an issue which I take up in Chapter 2 in regards to the self-portrait.

⁸⁸ David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. 1739. Ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896). 57.

⁸⁹ Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*.

follows the exclamation with a strip titled “Form and Content,” in which a larger boy bullies Art and spits on his mother, a shameful episode for Art that cannot be separated from his artistic narrative because content informs the form, and visa versa. The “diversion” is his memory, and comics allows for these fragments of memory and anecdotes, which may be non-sequiturs, but create meaning when adjacent.

Another tension present in the graphic memoir lies between the attempt at factual recounting, and the acceptance of subjectivity and forgetfulness. Eakin describes Lejeune’s autobiographical pact as a “form of contract between author and the reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself or herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life.”⁹⁰ The contract is not based on reality because the author’s actual life is not relevant to the reader, but rather just the resulting autobiography, as well as the process. Historical exactitude is, perhaps dismissively, deemed “impossible.” This allows the author freedom to explore her own experience, within the structure of history as she understands it. Lejeune allows the autobiographer to focus solely on his own story, freed from the expectations of fact checking, allowing for more immediacy. Graphic memoirs rely on the illusion of intimacy and urgency in storytelling, and the reader understands the cartoonist and protagonist through these two qualities, agreeing to conditions implicit to the autobiography. Lejeune refers to autobiographies as “*textes référentiels*,” in which “Their aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Eakin writes the introduction to the English translation of Lejeune’s work, *On Autobiography*. ix.

⁹¹ Lejeune, 36.

Lejeune places high importance on the recording of one's own personality, rather than history. However, when entwined, historical events can expose a subject even further. In his memoir focused on 9/11, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Spiegelman illustrates and narrates the historical events of the Twin Towers attack from his personal stance, considering how the event has affected him, New York City, and American culture.⁹² In his memoir focusing on his creative life, *Breakdowns*, he writes that he juxtaposes memories, beliefs, and history in order "to echo the way the mind works."⁹³ This echo is the finished text, but how does the reader verify the mind, imagination, and memories of a cartoonist? The triangular nature of the autobiographical pact does not depend on the reader verifying facts, but on accepting the relationship between cartoonist and protagonist.

While defining and defending the genre of autobiography, Lejeune identifies how problematic it is to determine whether a text is autobiographic solely based on the text, since many fictional novels use the first person mode. Lejeune decided that external factors, such as a subject's biography, were necessary. However, these modes of verification are limiting because the autobiographical pact cannot be established without research, a disengagement that diminishes the immediate experience with the author. Later in his career, Lejeune argued that the artifact of the book itself could be used, including the back cover, endnotes, and title page. This is a more practical and holistic approach to familiarizing oneself with the author. He wrote that it is easy to confuse the autobiography and autobiographical novel:

This is accurate if we limit ourselves to the text minus the title page; as soon as we include the latter in the text, with the name of the author, we make use of a general

⁹² Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*. (New York: Pantheon, 2004)

⁹³ Spiegelman. *Breakdowns*.

textual criterion, the identity (“identicalness”) of the *name* (author-narrator-protagonist). The autobiographical pact is the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the *name* of the author on the cover.⁹⁴

Through this complete approach to the autobiography, a connection bridges the physical artifact of the book and the narrative within. In the graphic memoir, the brief author description and book summary on the cover and flap are often part of the artistic endeavor.

In David Heatley’s *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down*, his biographical blurb on the back cover flap is written in the same childish handwriting as is consistent in the book, as well as assuming the same irreverent tone.⁹⁵ This composite view of the narrative establishes Heatley as the author, artist, and protagonist, and integrates the cover as part of the memoir, as Heatley’s earlier works are listed there. Heatley saturates this book with the scrawl and tiny panels with crude sketches, many pages filled with forty-eight individual panels. Beyond offering information to the point of exhaustion, *My Brain* is an oversized book, increasing its imposing nature. The reader might feel hesitant to carry this book onto a crowded subway, as if to bring the actual protagonist, a teenager compulsively masturbating. This physical format of the book adds meaning, helping to determine how the reader consumes the narrative. The range of formats the graphic memoir may be published in allows for these variations that affect the experience of reading the book. In comparison, Craig Thompson’s *Blankets* feels like a heavy literary novel in your hands, reflecting the earnestness and intensity the protagonist experiences in his adolescent emotions.

Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* demonstrates how significantly the format determines the intended audience, narrative tone, and distribution. Initially Spiegelman was

⁹⁴ Lejeune, 26.

⁹⁵ Figure 1.5. David Heatley. *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down*. (New York: Pantheon, 2008). Cover.

unable to find a publisher for the controversial text. The polemic content as well as the expensive thick cardboard pages, oversized dimensions, and color panels delayed publishing. The text would not carry the physical gravitas without its intended heft, as well as emulating the size and scope of a Sunday funnies page in the newspaper.⁹⁶ The experience of reading the Sunday comics encompasses more than the content, it also entails the layout, folding the unwieldy newsprint, and inevitable ink on the fingers, an experience increasingly nostalgic for modern readers. Spiegelman taps into this communal experience of reading a newspaper, a facet of *In the Shadow of No Towers* that would be lost if the physical artifact was not considered.⁹⁷ The autobiographical pact works as a contract because the reader fulfills her side of the bargain if she considers all aspects of the graphic memoir.

Comics Scholarship: Theorizing the Ninth Art

Independent comics publishers Gary Groth and Michael Catron started *The Comics Journal* in 1976, joined soon after by the incredibly talented polyglot Kim Thompson. *The Comics Journal* is an excellent example of early comics criticism and journalism, as the dedicated writers and artists published lengthy interviews, original art, and extensive reviews. However, *The Comics Journal* is also an example of the need for evolving scholarship, criticism,

⁹⁶ Spiegelman was only able to publish individual pages in the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, in which they would give him a full page to fill. David Hajdu. "In the Shadow of No Towers: Homeland Security." *The New York Times*. 12 Sept. 2004. New York.

⁹⁷ I do not specifically address digital comics, although there are innovative and incredible comics published on the internet and available for digital devices. My impression of this style of comics is that if they are made for the internet, they utilize the digital medium, including interactivity, and that is part of the embodiment. Thierry Groensteen says that for "the informed reader attached to the linguistic and aesthetic properties of comics, a sense of depletion and deterioration must logically be uppermost." However, he follows this resignation with an examination of comics intended for the screen, saying, "Comics is thereby redefined as an interaction hypermedium, orchestrating heterogeneous elements (text, still image, moving image, sound) and transforming the reader into an active user." Groensteen. *Comics and Narration*. (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2011). 67.

and journalism that is not so entrenched in fandom. While the editorial team consistently championed deserving talent and gave exposure to independent artists, exclusion of material became personal and the viewpoint singular. This rhetoric is valuable and entertaining for fans, but lacks in perspective to identify how comics are significant outside of the comics community. As more graphic memoirs are published on a variety of topics, the languages of autobiographies and comics merge, creating a new dialect. Critical work surrounding graphic narratives is currently developing a specific language to approach the medium, and the contemporary scholarship should be actively deployed. Comics scholar Bart Beaty writes, “By outlining the particular language used by cinema, scholars were able to move past the naïve claim that the form could be understood analytically through the parallel use of terms and techniques developed for the study of literature, theater, or art history.”⁹⁸ Comics studies is navigating through established theory, while developing a new language. Drawing from film studies, literary theory, and cultural studies, this is the opportune time for scholars to determine if a unique etymological corpus is necessary. Beaty writes, “For Comics Studies to reach parity with Film Studies, it would have to move beyond the narrowly thematic readings of key works and begin to offer critical insights into comics as a social and aesthetic system that has broader transmedia and intermedia implications.”⁹⁹ Beaty recognizes implications that extend beyond comics as a popular cultural phenomenon, but he also specifically charges the field with indulging in fandom and a myopic focus on seminal texts.¹⁰⁰ However, there have been strides

⁹⁸ Bart Beaty. “In Focus: Comics Studies, Fifty Years After Film Studies.” *SCMS Cinema Journal*. 50, No. 3, Spring 2011. 106.

⁹⁹ Beaty, 108.

¹⁰⁰ The ethical reality is that by relying solely on prominent artists like Spiegelman, Bechdel, and R. Crumb, the potential for diversity of cartoonists and topics is unintentionally stunted as published works follow the trends of

towards critical insights, and the three dominant approaches to comics are semiotic and theoretical, formalist, and meta-critical, emanating from the artists themselves.

In 1999 Thierry Groensteen, considered one of the founding scholars of the Franco-Belgian semiotic approach to comics, wrote *A System of Comics*.¹⁰¹ In this work he developed a system for analyzing the word and image paradigms in comics. He uses the term “arthrology” to encompass iconic solidarity, relying on Gilles Deleuze’s discussion of film in *The Movement-Image* to explain Groensteen’s application of the relationship between panels.¹⁰² Groensteen writes, “The image, seen by itself, outside of all context, is, as Deleuze rightly suggests, an utterable.”¹⁰³ Deleuze observed that,

The language system takes utterances of language, with signifying units and operations from it, but the utterable itself, its images and signs, are of another nature. . . . Of course, when language takes over the content of the utterable it makes from them properly linguistic utterances which are no longer expressed in images and signs. But even the utterances are in turn reinvested in images signs, and provide the utterable afresh.¹⁰⁴

Articulation becomes increasingly complicated within comics. Groensteen also bases the inherence of language in his system on Roland Barthes’ *The Responsibility of Forms*.¹⁰⁵ As

what has proven to be successful. Expanding the system to include a spectrum of cartoonists and topics is the responsibility of the scholar.

¹⁰¹ The translators of *A System of Comics*, Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, say this work, “contains a ground-breaking analysis of the operation of the language of comics, offering the most important semiotic analysis of the medium published to date.” Forward, vii.

¹⁰² Thierry Groensteen. *The System of Comics*. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009). 21. Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

¹⁰³ Groensteen, 111.

¹⁰⁴ Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema II*. 1983. (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2005). 251.

¹⁰⁵ Roland Barthes. *The Responsibility of Forms*. Trans. by Richard Howard. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

Barthes argues, society's preoccupation with signs results in language emerging from a variety of structures. Groensteen's semiotic system promises more developments in comics for the future, saying,

The narrative themes par excellence (the voyage, the pursuit, the investigation, the disguise, the metamorphosis), which traditional comics have used and abused, if they are not abandoned, have been at least relativized by the conquests of new story spaces; increasingly literary, increasingly immobile, increasingly poetic, increasingly sensual, and increasingly introspective. The comics system has definitely made a demonstration of its plasticity.¹⁰⁶

The phrase "new story spaces," situates literary plots within spatial dimensions. Rather than a rigid set of codes, this system is capable of evolving along with popular culture, its plasticity extending to the growing number of graphic memoirs created by cartoonists. Groensteen's strict privileging of images over text rankles, but as a starting point his work is invaluable.

In *Reading Bande Dessinée's*, Miller adds to Groensteen's work, seeking to introduce *bandes dessinées* to an English-speaking audience, as well applying Groensteen's system to more specific works. Miller dedicates two chapters to autobiographical comics and graphic memoirs, and writes, "In the case of autobiography, the *énoncé* consists of the textual self, and the fictional illusion gives way to a referential illusion, even if this does not preclude some degree of fictionalization. The relationship between narration and diegesis may be recast, then, as that between representing and representing self."¹⁰⁷ Miller is interested in the cartoonist's use of codes to construct and represent the self, whether as a unified or fragmented subject.

Groensteen's European approach is more semiotic and theoretically based than Miller's American formalistic approach, both of which are productive.

¹⁰⁶ Groensteen, 164.

¹⁰⁷ Miller, 218.

In stark contrast to Groensteen, the American approach is typified by McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, one of the first published works on the analysis of comics.¹⁰⁸ As an artist himself, McCloud shows how to understand comics from the point of the formal art techniques, especially with the use of the image as an icon. Preceding McCloud is the grandfather of the graphic novel, Eisner. Eisner's books *Comics and Sequential Art* and the 1996 *Graphic Narrative and Visual Narrative* are not theoretically rigorous, but set a precedent for American comic studies and practice. These are texts meant to introduce comics as an art form, as well as instruct aspiring cartoonists.

Finally, much of the most interesting writing on comics today is by the artists themselves, either to accompany specific works, or in interviews. Hence my emphasis on cartoonists who discuss the medium as a critical theme throughout their autobiographies. In "Critic"/"Reader" George Steiner wrote, "The critic argues his distance from and towards the text," which is an uncanny reflection of Lejeune's movement towards and away from a framed portrait in the museum.¹⁰⁹ The relationship between the critic and the art fluctuates and is never stagnant, especially if the critic is writing about her or his own work. In the introduction to his book *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*, Steiner discusses the role of the critic and writes, "By virtue of style, criticism itself can become literature. But usually this occurs only when the writer is acting as critic of his own work or as outrider to his own

¹⁰⁸ McCloud's text is accessible for a wide audience, but under scholastic scrutiny, there are significant problems. McCloud often speaks in sweeping terms, especially when talking about historical context and art movements. He also simplifies the relationship between word and image, overlooking the inherent complexity of language.

¹⁰⁹ George Steiner. "Critic"/"Reader." *New Literary History*, Vol. 10, No. 3, Anniversary Issue: I (Spring, 1979), 423-452.

poetics.”¹¹⁰ There are two opportunities for cartoonists to create literature through criticism: when writing about comics as a medium, and when including the creative process within the graphic memoir itself.

Spiegelman dedicates time and energy to the furthering of his adored medium. In *Breakdowns*, he quotes Victor Shklovsky’s “Art as Technique,” saying, “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.”¹¹¹ Through *Breakdowns: Portrait of an Artist as a Young %@&*!*, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, *MetaMaus*, and *Maus*, Spiegelman shares his perception of the Holocaust, terrorism, and his family, and his perception of comics. Comics expand the potential of portraying the cartoonist’s point of view, so that not everything has to be verbally articulated. Continuing his rumination on the influence comics had on his imagination and perspective, Said wrote,

I don’t remember when exactly I read my first comic book, but I do remember exactly how liberated and subversive I felt as a result. Everything about the enticing book of colored pictures, but specially its untidy, sprawling format, the colorful, riotous extravagance of its pictures, the unrestrained passage between what the characters thought and said, the exotic creatures and adventures reported and depicted: all this made up for a hugely wonderful thrill, entirely unlike anything I had hitherto known or experienced.¹¹²

It is this possibility of a thrilling experience through the cartoonist’s metaphoric confessional booth that makes this an exposing genre for both reader and cartoonist.

¹¹⁰ This echoes Oscar Wilde’s essay, “The Critic as Artist.” George Steiner. *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*. 1967. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970). 3. Wilde. *The Critic as Artist: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

¹¹¹ Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*. Victor Shklovsky. “Art as Technique.” 1917. Ed. David Lodge. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. (London: Longmans, 1988). 16-30.

¹¹² Edward Said. Introduction. Joe Sacco, *Palestine*. (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001) i.

The Self-Reflexive Identity of the Cartoonist.

Each cartoonist that I work with has his or her own version of Spiegelman’s “love letter to the medium I adore.” Each artist explains why they cannot tell their own story without talking about comics, or why they can only tell their story through comics. It’s a love, a nostalgia, and a livelihood, and the comics medium is also part of their self-portrait. These cartoonists are telling their story, and the story of comics.

David Heatley writes, “See, what I really want to do is comic book paintings! Like where each canvas is a panel and the wall is the page.”¹¹³

In *Blankets*, Craig Thompson tells his Sunday School teacher that he would like to spend eternity drawing. When the teacher laughs at this idea, Craig writes, “But I don’t like to sing. Couldn’t I just praise God with my drawings?”¹¹⁴ As a young man, Craig walks through the snow, and thinks to himself, “How satisfying it is to leave a mark on a blank surface. To make a map of my movement.”¹¹⁵

The other cartoonists included in this project demonstrate their identity as “cartoonist.” Belle Yang calls her work in the comics format a “renaissance,” and considers it a liberation parallel to escaping violence in her personal life. She writes, “Some years after the publication of my first illustrated adult book and more than a decade into my creative life, I awoke one morning to find my soul somersaulting.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Heatley, *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down*.

¹¹⁴ Craig Thompson. *Blankets*. (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2007). 137.

¹¹⁵ Thompson, 581.

¹¹⁶ Belle Yang. *Forget Sorrow: An Ancestral Tale*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010).

Green talks about how he strayed from comics, enticed by fine arts: “In rare stoned moments, though, I would revisit the lowly medium, which needed only ink and that deceptively simple tool, the dip pen.” After discovering the work of Crumb, Green writes, “I had no idea that this naïve return to my early roots would gradually become an illicit passion which would realign my artistic goals and life destiny.”¹¹⁷

In an interview with fellow cartoonist Trina Robbins, Allison Bechdel writes, “Autobiographical comics, I love them. I love them. Watching everyone root through their psyche, it just delights me. Especially R. Crumb’s stuff.”¹¹⁸

In *Likewise*, Schrag defends comics, saying, “um hello? *Maus!* Have you read *Maus!* It’s ridiculous, there’s nothing inherently wrong with pictures and text who knows why they got to be all superheroes and crappy strips I don’t know where that started, just not enough people have done them right, I’m going to! I’ll change it! I am going to change comics they will see.”¹¹⁹

Martin Lemelman finds art supplies hidden in his parents’ candy store shelves, and writes, “The moment I pressed brush to paper...Time slowed down. Minutes turned into hours. As if by magic – a face appeared on my paper, a tree, a house, a bird, a Pepsi bottle, hands...I drew and painted in a frenzy.”¹²⁰

It is their self-identification as cartoonists, their knowledge of the medium, and the desire to promote comics, that makes these artists’ insights invaluable. I am enticed by their creative

¹¹⁷ Green, 52.

¹¹⁸ Allison Bechdel. Interview by Trina Robbins. “Watch out for Allison Bechdel (She has the secret to superhuman strength.” *The Comics Journal*. 237. September 2001: 80. Print.

¹¹⁹ Ariel Schrag. *Likewise*. (New York: Touchstone, 1998). 271.

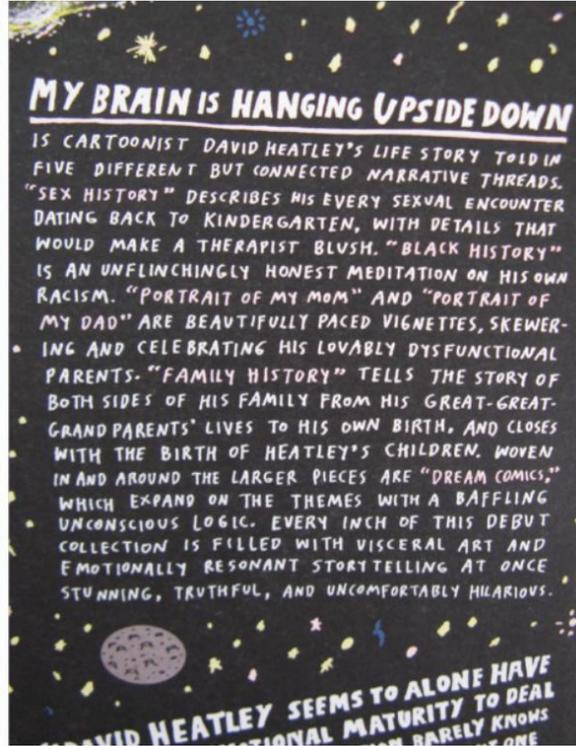
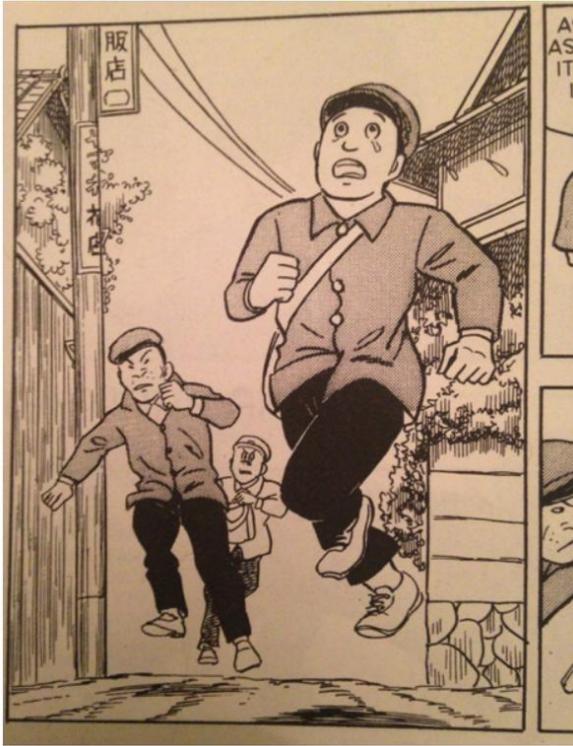
¹²⁰ Martin Lemelman. *Two Cents Plain*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010). 189.

vulnerability, and simultaneous adherence and challenge to their beloved medium. These memoirs resonate with the autobiographical pact and imbue comics with personal stakes. Graphic memoirs are in many ways the culmination of media and cultural trends, and those who speak best for the medium might show us how the genre has expressed an amalgam of such influences. The artists most directly address the creative process to making graphic memoirs, and the sociocultural context due to the inevitable love for comics. Cartoonists seek out comics as their medium because the medium allows for the chaos, repetition, and inaccuracy of memory.



Top row (L to R):
 Figure 1.1. Riad Sattouf, *The Arab of the Future*, 11.

Bottom row (L to R):
 Figure 1.2. David B. *Epileptic*, 121.
 Figure 1.3. Antonio Altarriba, *The Art of Flying*, 20.



Top row (L to R):

Figure 1.4. Yoshiro Tatsumi, *A Drifting Life*, 102.

Figure 1.5. David Heatley, *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down*, cover.

Chapter 2

In the Cracked Looking Glass: The Cartoonist's Self Portrait

The artist's self-portrait is necessarily subjective, and the cartoonist's self-portrait is notoriously skewed. Cartoonist Aline Kominsky Crumb exaggerates and emphasizes all those physical features that draw cultural, misogynist, and ethnic criticism: her ample thighs, distinct nose, and curly hair. Sometimes these characteristics take on a grotesque quality, as a commentary on society's judgment, while highlighting her own self-critique. Whether cynicism is the cause or the effect of being a professional cartoonist, there are key qualities that inspire critical inquiry into the comics self-portrait. Self-portraiture in graphic memoirs contains a narrative, although ways of embodiment and subjectivity emerge in strikingly different terms than in written narratives because there is the demand to depict oneself with recognizable characteristics, and to simultaneously depict oneself in a way that reflects the tone of the story. There is a doubling of the self through a literary and visual self-portrait, and the comics medium complicates this mirroring even further due to the repetition of self-portraits. The visual warping of the self-perspective is the product of three conditions integral to graphic memoirs: cynicism, repetition, and interaction with language.

First, the nature of comics, besides most superhero comics or mainstream newspaper strips, tends to filter stories through a cynical lens. Graphic memoirs generally eschew the patriotism of Superman or heteronormativity of *Family Circle*, and result in the surreal narratives of David B., the historical nonfiction of Antonio Altarriba, or the autobiographical fetishes of R.

Crumb.¹²¹ Skepticism extends to the self-portrait, perhaps even more so, and the cartoonist seems to wrestle with the protagonist to find a balance between narcissism and shame, heroics and tedium, and reality and self-perspective.

Second, the repetition of the self-portrait alters the image each time, even slightly, resulting in a composite that incorporates all the tics and variances of the cartoonist as a protagonist. Different behavior and characteristics change over time, including an emphasis on those characteristics that the cartoonist is proud or ashamed. For example, when Nina Bunjevac interviews her mother in *Fatherland*, trying to understand the death of her father and accept a complicated portrait of his Serbian nationalism, she appears alternately inquisitive and exhausted.¹²² The repeated self-portrait allows Bunjevac to subtly capture her conflicted memories and impression of her father.

Finally, the self-portrait interacts with language, both visually and narratively. The attempt to reconcile protagonist, cartoonist, and narrator with a cohesive narrative arc results in inconsistencies and contradictions, which is crucial to a subjective and fallible protagonist. Further, drawing a self-portrait alongside externalized thoughts renders the protagonist even more exposed, more raw. Sattouf opens his book with a page describing how beloved he is,

¹²¹ David B. is well-known for his graphic memoir *Epileptic*, but explores dreams and fantasies further in other works, including *Babel*, *Les Incidents de la nuit*, and *La Lecture des ruines*. *Babel*. (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2005). *Les incidents de la nuits*. (Paris: L'Association, 1999-2002). *Les Lecture des ruines*. (Marcinelle, Belgium: Dupuis, 2001).

Antonio Altarriba writes about his father and the Spanish Civil War, leading into World War II. *El arte de volar*. (Alicante, Spain: Edicions De Ponent, 2009).

While R. Crumb has many topics that reveals his cynicism, including but not limited to women, religion, and America, his greatest topic is himself. In a collaborative graphic memoir he created with Aline Kominsky Crumb, he says to Aline, "This is supposed to be a comic about self-loathing, so how come you're always selling yourself??" Aline Kominsky Crumb and R. Crumb. *Drawn Together*. (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2012). 210.

¹²² Nina Bunjevac. *Fatherland*. New York: (Liverwright Publishing Corporations, 2015).

saying, “My name is Riad. In 1980, I was two years old and I was perfect.”¹²³ After describing his blond hair and people fawning over his every utterance, he says, “I was awake for only a few hours a day, but it was enough: when it came to living, I was a natural.” I presume that Sattouf does not actual remember these experiences or thoughts from when he was two years old, but rather has pieced together stories, and a general sense of being admired to create this visual of his childhood.

These components of the graphic memoir’s self-portrait are readily apparent in Schrag’s *High School Chronicles*. Schrag chronicles her four high school years through the graphic memoirs *Awkward*, *Definition*, *Potential*, and *Likewise*, developing an evolving self-portrait through the respective texts.¹²⁴ Each text is an increasingly multifaceted self-portrait, visually and thematically resisting a singular depiction. *Definition*’s first panel depicts a classmate, pointing at Ariel and yelling, “You’re a dyke!!!”¹²⁵ Schrag’s reaction, in much smaller type, is a timid, “no I’m not!”¹²⁶ The aggressive classmate announces that she herself is a dyke, theoretically allowing Ariel to agree with this accusation, but Ariel feels bullied into sexual and gender classification. Employing the visual possibilities of comics, Schrag copes with this process of circumscription in order to create a visual self-portrait, with both word and image. Next to the grotesquely drawn, dominant accuser, Ariel is large-eyed and meek. In the first panel, Ariel’s face sags with humiliation, and in the second panel her expression is captures more confusion and hesitation. Schrag’s narratives are not limited to being defined as a lesbian

¹²³ Figure 2.1. Sattouf, 1.

¹²⁴ Schrag. *Potential. Likewise*. (New York: Touchstone, 2008).

¹²⁵ Figure 2.2. Schrag, *Definition*. 1.

¹²⁶ Schrag. *Awkward and Definition: The High School Chronicles of Ariel Schrag*. (New York: Touchstone, 2008). 1.

teenager, but explore her self-portrayal through comics, the medium as integral to the self-portrait. As her graphic memoir follows Ariel through adolescence, her relationship to her chosen medium matures alongside her body.

The self-portrait in a graphic memoir is an embodiment of the cartoonist's imagination, engaging a visible physicality. The physical body as portrayed occupies space on the page, and the narrative with the subjective depiction moves through time. These opposing trajectories result in a creative tension deemed incompatible by Lessing, a tension that conveys the vulnerability of the human body. Further, by making his or her self-portrait synonymous with the protagonist, the cartoonists adopt and resist existing assumptions. Visual self-portraits highlight the relationship with the reader and the autobiographical pact, the cartoonist's varying and evolving of self, and how the artistic style is a manifestation of the cartoonist.¹²⁷

In this chapter I examine techniques of self-portraiture that become manifestations of the cartoonist's self, and determine the place of the self-portrait within the autobiographical pact. The graphic memoir captures how the cartoonist sees himself and would like others to see him, and how he remembers himself, which is highly subjective. Yagoda emphasizes the author's truth over verifiable history, saying, "Human memory is flawed, and everybody knows it. And memoir, as a genre, is universally understood to offer subjective, impressionistic testimony. It doesn't pretend to offer *the* truth, just the *author's* truth."¹²⁸ It is the author's truth that is the most interesting, especially the truth about himself, and his memory about how his body, the surrounding space, and history changes with time.

¹²⁷ I discuss Lejeune's autobiographical pact in my first chapter. Essentially, this is a contract between the author, reader, and protagonist, depending mutual engagement between the three for the autobiography to become complete.

¹²⁸ Yagoda, 265.

The changing body has the space to visually evolve, and situations that affect the body such as trauma, illness, and isolation are acutely apparent. To investigate how the self-portrait in comics is unique, I identify established comics techniques that are used to create the self-portrait. Next, I establish how the self-portrait is affected by the graphic memoir's unique linear and spatial plasticity. In his literary autobiography, *Backing Into Forward* satirical cartoonist Jules Feiffer writes, "Now the great thing about being a cartoonist—is that you can draw yourself as anyone you like."¹²⁹ The cartoonist's self-perception is embodied in the self-portrait, turning her imagination out onto the page, translating it into comics.

Schrag reconciles restrictive classifications through her self-portrait, in response to the desire for self-definition and imposition of definition by others. The word "definition" is used as an adjective throughout her second autobiographical chronicle, as the dominant impulse is to label, delineate, and distinguish one entity from another. Simultaneously, the individual self-portraits employ recognizable teenage icons and features, like band t-shirts, spiky hair, and exaggerated round eyes reminiscent of manga, to take advantage of familiar visual points of reference and the context of established communities. Schrag experiments visually with representations of adolescence, popular culture, and androgyny by acknowledging familiar adolescent clichés.

She wrangles with herself about sexual identity, while concurrently developing her identity as a cartoonist. Schrag's *High School Chronicles* are done only in black and white ink, with crude lines and heavy shading. Schrag drew the individual installments during each respective high school year, photocopying and selling the works to her peers at the conclusion of

¹²⁹ Jules Feiffer. *Backing Into Forward*. (New York: Doubleday, 2010). 444.

the spring semester.¹³⁰ The immediacy of the portrayal is effective in capturing the perception of a teenager, a stance that is often filtered through the logic of hindsight. Without the distance and perspective of life experience, Schrag's self-portrait is wonderfully self-involved, self-conscious, and inconsistent, poignantly capturing adolescence in the most awkward and unbiased sense. Through *Awkward*, *Definition*, *Potential*, and *Likewise*, Schrag captures both being an outsider and portraying herself as part of defined high school, lesbian, and cartoonist communities.

In *Reading Bande-Dessinées*, Miller has remarked that, "In any *bande dessinée* autobiographical account, the narrating self must necessarily confront the question of embodiment, but[...]the medium allows for a range of ways in which the author/narrator can coexist with her/his drawn self."¹³¹ She identifies two courses of action: confronting and coexisting, both in which the narrator and their represented self are two separate entities. As a manifestation of self, the comics medium is fitting for one vacillating between the mainstream and the societal margins, both as cartoonist and protagonist. The style of the self-portrait, as well as the artifact itself, reflect the character and the context of the material. However, Miller suggests not merely an externalization of oneself with the self-portrait, but rather a creation of another entity that the cartoonist must accept. The cartoonist must first confront, then live with her comics self-portrait, which Schrag does in the most immediate sense, through a range of self-portraits.

The Style of a Self-Portrait: Manifestation of Self

¹³⁰ "But the comics also feel unfiltered, sometimes repetitive, almost scary in their willingness to say exactly what the fifteen- or eighteen-year-old Schrag was feeling. She cares whether her friends like the comic but she's making it for herself: she draws and writes what she wants to see and read." Stephen Burt. "Trans Literature for the Masses." *The New Yorker*. (July 16, 2014).

¹³¹ Miller, 233.

The self-identified protagonist is integral to using the pronoun “I” and the graphic novel becoming a memoir, based on the parameters of the autobiography genre. As another identifier, the cartoonist drawing herself marks the text as autobiographical. The protagonist is bound with the cartoonist, through the tacit autobiographical pact, as a contractual agreement. What formal elements does the cartoonist use to signify a contractual relationship with the reader, and does consistency undermine or strengthen the pact? Further, what is the cartoonist “representing”? Considering “non-representational art,” Miller writes, “since the late nineteenth century the legitimizing principle has become the affirmation of the primacy of form over function, of the mode of representation over the object of representation.”¹³² However, is the term “non-representational art” relevant to an art form where the very goal is to represent? Unique to the graphic memoir, there is a parallel narrative to situate the objects as represented. The “mode” of the comics is as important as the content in the comics, imbuing the self-portrait with meaning associated with the medium. A legitimate self-portrait is not necessarily an attempt at a recognizable individual, but rather a “mode of representation” that reflects the individual, and also a commentary on the medium itself. Schrag’s choice of comics conveys connotations that differ from an oil painting, a documentary, or a literary autobiography. Her choice of medium legitimizes her self-portrait because the confidence of choosing comics exposes a relationship with the mode of representation.

The self-portrait within the graphic memoir is less static than a traditional self-portrait because the repetition of a static series of images suggests movement through time, as well as variances and evolutions as significant time lapses. Marisa Acocella Marchetto’s

¹³² Miller is speaking of the abstract art produced by the Western art world at the end of the nineteenth century. This is relevant to graphic narratives because often the comics medium overshadows the content. 44.

autobiographical *Cancer Vixen* follows the protagonist through chemotherapy treatments, and each iteration of her self-portrait reflects the mood, whether it be fear, exhaustion, or elation.¹³³ Fashion is central to the narrative, so Marisa's clothes and shoes also change in every scene, and are generally remarked upon. Marchetto's signature artistic style imbues her protagonist with unspoken characteristics, to be translated by the reader. I interpret Marchetto's slashes of colors and cluttered pages as a combination of confidence and feeling overwhelmed. The history of formal techniques within the comics medium can be excavated for cultural and meaningful connotations, including the techniques of *ligne claire* and *ligne crade*.

Hergé epitomized the *ligne claire* style as the comics standard, starting in 1929 with his *Tintin* series in a Brussels newspaper, *Le Petit Vingtième*. *Ligne claire* is characterized by solid lines, resulting in a more cartoonish appearance, rather than a realistic one.¹³⁴ When an artist adopts *ligne claire* for her own self-depiction, she suggests that life is comprehensible, and the narrative clear and decipherable. Hergé defines the process of *ligne claire* as, "you try to eliminate everything that is graphically incidental, to stylize as much as possible [...] In fact, the *ligne claire* is not just a matter of drawing, it also refers to the script and the narrative technique."¹³⁵ While *ligne claire* appears to be a basic technique, it conveys a level of confidence on the part of the cartoonist to definitively express her identity, without obfuscation. Bechdel

¹³³ Marisa Acocella Marchetto. *Cancer Vixen: A True Story*. (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2006).

¹³⁴ The black outlines and lack of shading suited Tintin and Snowy's adventures meant for a young and general audience, and were aesthetically pleasing, especially once reprinted in color. Also, this clear and accessible style captured a nation's desire to feel order in Europe's upheaval between the two world wars. Hergé is considered representative of the Belgian ethos, and his style suggests that national pride and identity are well defined, although history repeatedly proves otherwise. Pierre Assouline. *Hergé: The Man Who Created Tintin*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹³⁵ Miller, 18.

identifies herself as specifically influenced by Hergé, although she also lists cartoonist R. Crumb as her other stylistic influence, and both styles are present in her memoir, *Fun Home*.¹³⁶ By combining these two approaches her work symbolizes both controlled self-definition, and social turmoil.

While *ligne claire* translates as “clear line,” *ligne crade* translates as “filthy line,” which establishes an aesthetic and ideological dichotomy. During the Franco-Belgian underground comics movement in the late 70s, French cartoonist Philippe Vuillemin broke with the classic *ligne claire* tradition and used *ligne crade* to depict darker, more graphic, adult themes.¹³⁷ He worked in magazines such as *L’Echo des Savanes* and *Hara-Kiri*, both publications instrumental in expanding the style of comics, and *Hara-Kiri* specifically targeted “classic Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* in the person of Tintin, shown in a variety of compromising postures by [Georges] Wolinski in 1962 in a strip called ‘Tintin pour les dames.’”¹³⁸ Therefore, the style of Tintin epitomized a comics tradition that underground cartoonists explicitly reacted against. *Ligne crade* is comprised of more cross-hatching, distortion, and exaggeration, and while the style appears more crude, it is not unskilled.¹³⁹ Further, the content associated with *ligne crade* is provocative. While the *ligne claire* can be historically situated to convey a desire for national themes and order, the *ligne crade* can be understood to capture the sense of chaos and upheaval.

¹³⁶ In *Dykes to Watch Out For*, the character Lois bears an uncanny resemblance to Hergé boyish hero, Tintin. Dykestowatchoutfor.com. Allison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. (New York: Mariner Books, 2007).

¹³⁷ Figure 2.3. Philippe Vuillemin, *l’Echo des Savanes*. Cover.

¹³⁸ While Hergé’s Tintin is clean-cut and a consummate do-gooder, in “Tintin pour les dames,” the protagonist is smoking a cigarette and at a debaucherous party with Captain Haddock. Miller, 22.

¹³⁹ Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*.

The *ligne crade* was used abundantly during the underground comix movement.¹⁴⁰ As Hergé points out, with these two styles or a combination of, the script and narrative are also integral to the overall aesthetic, which includes the self-portrait.

In *Moi aussi*, Lejeune addresses the textual self-portrait, and how the verbal becomes visual. He takes the point of view of the audience, instead of the artist, and he poses two questions: “What is it that makes a self-portrait recognizable as such? What special interest can there be in looking at a self-portrait?”¹⁴¹ As a viewer, I can ask what features the artist chooses to emphasize, what context does the artist put himself into, and what audience the artist seeks. In examining another’s self-portrait, our own perception is called into question. For a person looking at their own self-portrait, there is the detachment of not recognizing oneself as he confronts the image, but simultaneously being unable to disengage as he coexists. These are the complexities that distinguish the portrait from the self-portrait, but they also complicate the difference between artist and subject.

The act of looking is an active process. How does the viewer engage with someone else’s self-portrait? Leon Battista Alberti’s theory of the translucent painting and the focus on spectatorship can be complicated by juxtaposing it with Lejeune’s trip to the museum, and his experience of looking at a portrait.¹⁴² Although originating from two different cultural traditions and time periods, Alberti and Lejeune identify the same general façade attributes: a canvas is not a static or neutral surface. While Alberti sees beyond the surface of the painting, Lejeune sees the

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Inge, 1990. *Comics as Culture*. (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1990).

¹⁴¹ Philippe Lejeune. *Moi aussi*. (Paris: Editions du Seuil. 1986). 73.

¹⁴² Alberti, *On Painting*.

surface moving towards him. As Lejeune approaches the work of art, “I see coming toward me in the reflection of the pane of glass another unknown figure that I did not recognize at first—me.”¹⁴³ He superimposes himself on the self-portrait, thereby making the viewing experience subjective, and complicating the process of identity formation and recognition. An aspect of the graphic memoir is the artist both recognizing her or himself, and simultaneously portraying herself as a “stranger,” as well as the protagonist of the work. How does one remain intimate and honest, while still embracing the potential of alienation? Despite this relationship between the cartoonist and his protagonist, the work is not complete as an autobiography until the role of the reader is considered. The reader observes this process of balances confronting with coexisting, and therefore becomes part of the finished autobiography.

Lejeune emphasizes the importance of, “choosing the perspective of the reader in defining autobiography,” for “a text in the autobiographical style, which is claimed by no one, and a work of fiction are as much alike as two drops of water.”¹⁴⁴ The author must allow personal association with the narrative, or it is no different than a novel because there is no priority placed on intimacy or vulnerability. It is not enough that the text is based on true events, but rather that the final product gives the reader the necessary tools to recognize it as an autobiography. This reflects Spiegelman’s idea that a comic is not finished until it is published, and has an audience. Through installation at a museum, a painting is labeled as a self-portrait and the painting’s title gives the work a unique significance.¹⁴⁵ Through publication, the literary

¹⁴³ Lejeune, *Moi aussi*, 73.

¹⁴⁴ Lejeune, 19.

¹⁴⁵ Christina Kreps. *Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation*. (New York: Routledge, 2003).

work is categorized as an autobiography, preparing the reader for the intimate experience of reading an author's self-analysis. One reader's expectations coincide with another's, and a spontaneous community is formed.

The shared experience of comics has been integral to the popularity of the art form, and this community can be seen across the graphic memoirs, from Marchetto's *New Yorker* cartoonist lunches, to Schrag's comics conferences, to Aline Kominsky Crumb's creative collaborations. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson discusses the formation of fraternity between readers, saying, "print-capitalism, [...] made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways."¹⁴⁶ One of the ways they related to each other was through the funny pages, with the daily or weekly comic strips. Publishers such as William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer supported the creative scope of comics through their respective objectives to sell more papers, putting a premium on popular strips because these appealed to such a broad audience. When the first book of Spiegelman's *Maus* was published in 1986, it was considered a significant long-form comic alongside *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns*, books much more aligned with traditional comic book content.¹⁴⁷ Sold in bookstores instead of only comic book stores, *Maus* became available to those outside of the comic book store crowd, eventually being published in thirty languages. The combination of the memoir as a bestselling genre and comics as a mass medium leads to many opportunities for readers to create new personal associations. For

¹⁴⁶ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 1983. (London: Verso, 1991). 36.

¹⁴⁷ Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling. *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture, and Sequence*. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group. 2010).

example, Schrag enters a community of cartoonists once *Awkward* is read by people at the comics convention, and the memoir then functions as a complete work. She is recognized as being both the author and the protagonist, which assimilates Schrag into the autobiographical pact with the reader.

Leaving the position of scholar and assuming the role of a reader, Lejeune wrote, “By taking as the starting point the position of the reader... I have the chance to understand more clearly how the texts function (the differences in how they function) since they were written for us, readers, and in reading them, it is we who make them function.”¹⁴⁸ This engages the reader in a privileged and responsible position, as the personal recipient of the author’s story. The cartoonists draw themselves knowing that a stranger will interpret them based on this representation. The stylistic choices made by the cartoonist convey essential characteristics of the protagonist as well as the narrative overall, as she confronts and coexists with the manifestation of herself. To illustrate these points, I include analysis of self-portraits in Schrag’s *High School Comic Chronicles*, Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Spiegelman’s *Breakdowns*, and David B.’s *Epileptic*. Each of these cartoonists is recognized as instrumental to the evolution of the graphic novel form, and an outspoken champion of the art form. While these graphic memoirs vary on subject matter, they overlap in three key areas: autobiographical pact, independent influence but major distribution, and recognizable and consistent style.

First, Lejeune’s autobiographical pact is applicable in all three texts. The protagonist is identified by “I,” verifying the author’s identity. The constellation of the author, artist, and protagonist is possible once the relationship between entities is understood. In keeping with Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, readers are involved because they tacitly agree to accept the

¹⁴⁸ Lejeune, *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, 14.

protagonist, the “I,” as the same as the cartoonist. The focus of each text is an exploration of the protagonist’s character, and the ways in which the body is remembered and perceived across time and space.

Second, while these are artists influenced by the underground comix movement and countercultural movements, the books are released by imprints of major publishing houses: Pantheon, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and Simon and Schuster.¹⁴⁹ The graphic memoirs are not self-published, or considered zines.¹⁵⁰ Thus the readerships are not only fellow cartoonists, or even specifically comic fans. A wide readership and mainstream acknowledgement alters the content and reception, and I interpret this as the cartoonist’s implicit recognition of an audience.

Finally, Schrag, Bechdel, Spiegelman, and David B. have recognizable styles that facilitate contextualizing their autobiographical texts within a full body of work. There is continuity to their visual and thematic content, supplementing the self-portrait through the chosen mode of expression. A dedicated readership follows these cartoonists’ creative evolution, which itself has an autobiographical tone. While I focus on one particular text for each artist, I will reference other works in their oeuvre to explain formal stylistic decisions.

The meta-discourse regarding the medium of comics is a consistent theme through graphic memoirs, and my understanding of the cartoonists and their represented protagonists. Schrag, Bechdel, Spiegelman, and David B. are all prominent figures in the comics community, and discuss their personal relationship to comics both within the memoirs and in other venues.

¹⁴⁹ While Schrag’s *High School Comic Chronicles* were originally self-published, they were reprinted by Touchstone, an imprint of Simon and Schuster.

¹⁵⁰ Zines are “cheaply made printed forms of expression on any subject. They are like mini-magazines or home-made comic books.” Watson, Esther and Mark Todd. *Watcha Mean, What’s a Zine?* (Boston, MA: Graphia, 2006). 12.

They allow their self-portrait to be molded by the often fragmented and non-linear nature of comics, which in turn molds their autobiography.

Fun Home: Interrupting the Time-Space Continuum

Bechdel's early work was not all autobiographical, but she has since explained how entangled her life is with her characters, and her readers. Her collected strips, *Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, opens with an autobiographical account of Bechdel becoming a cartoonist, which also introduces the subsequent fictional strips.¹⁵¹ She couches her cast of imaginary characters within autobiographical retrospect. *Dykes* is a culmination of Bechdel's history as a cartoonist, melding autobiography and fiction. At one point she holds up a rejection letter from Adrienne Rich, and exclaims, "They were right. I wasn't a writer **or** an artist."¹⁵² She concludes that she is both. This conflation of identity will emerge in *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*, through the narrative and the tension between images and text.¹⁵³

Literary autobiography occupies two diegetic locations, the space in which the existing self speaks and the space in which the former self experiences the details that constitute the lived tale. In graphic memoirs, the third diegetic level is the visual. The narrator and author are connected by the self-portrait, and Bechdel's consistent mirroring throughout the narrative emphasizes the multiplicity of identity in the genre as a whole. Parallel and mirrored scenes offer

¹⁵¹ *Dykes to Watch Out For* was first published in 1983 and ran in syndication until May 10, 2008. The collection is described as, "The lives, loves, and politics of cult-fav characters Mo, Louis, Sydney, Sparrow, Ginger, Stuart, Clarice, and others." This emphasizes the communal significance of Bechdel's work, as the alternative soap opera-style narrative gained a cult following.

¹⁵² Bechdel, *Dykes*, xiii. (Bechdel's emphasis)

¹⁵³ Bechdel wrote a second memoir, this time focusing on the relationship with her mother. *Are You My Mother?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

a revelation about subjects, how they come to be a subject in relation to other characters, the readers, and the tools by which we measure such relations. These relationships dramatize the subject's discordance between an acceptance of self and a conflicted one. It is not merely an external and internal opposition of self, but a continuum.

Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* presents a reliable depiction of the protagonist; she consistently writes in the first person, never leaving this perspective or assuming insight other than her own. Using clean lines, and a green-gray wash for shadows, the young Allison grows into the familiar young adult Allison.¹⁵⁴ The focus of *Fun Home* is Bechdel's childhood, especially the relationship with her father. In the narrative, Bechdel gathers clues about her father, trying to understand his sudden death. She recounts memories of her father, including his increasingly exposed sexuality. Bruce has secret affairs with men, but will not acknowledge the complicated effect his closeted sexuality has on his own life and family. After he dies, Allison returns to her childhood home for the funeral. It is unresolved whether Bruce's death is a suicide or an accident, as he steps into the street in front of a truck while doing yard work. Details of her father's secret life are revealed through photographs, anecdotes, and memories. By this point, Allison has come out as a lesbian, and tries to reconcile the bond she has with her father, as well their respective concealed and revealed sexualities.

The graphic memoir opens and closes with parallel scenes of a young Allison falling into her father's arms, in the child's game of airplane at the opening and then jumping off a diving board in the closing. In both panels she is approximately the same age, and hovers expectantly

¹⁵⁴ For all of the texts, I use the last name when directly referring to the author-artist, and will use the first name or familiar name when referring to the protagonist. While this may be a confusing overlap, I want to emphasize that the protagonist is in many ways a character that the author-artist has created.

above her father's arms.¹⁵⁵ The graphic memoir allows Bechdel to recount memories as she remembers them, and as they relate to each other. The mirrored panels draw the reader into the circular and inexorable nature of Allison's story with her father. The self-portrait both moves towards and away from Bechdel, creating a self-reflexive closed circuit that reflects Bechdel as the cartoonist, and Allison as the protagonist. While the metaphor of falling is clear, these reflecting panels are also open-ended, allowing for the reader's analysis and speculation. While there is motion, there is also a sense of time lapsed, since Allison looks the same at the beginning and end of the graphic memoir.

Fun Home contains obvious dualities, but Bechdel leaves it up to the reader to decipher the experiences that complicate categorization. It is insufficient to label Bruce Bechdel as either heterosexual or homosexual, as this is not the conclusion Bechdel is seeking. Bechdel wants to learn about her father's sexual affairs with young men to more fully understand her father, which will lead to better understanding of herself.

Bechdel's father, Bruce, is a foil for Allison, as illustrated through the first and last panel mirroring. Their relationship is fraught, and we are left to wonder, is her father catching her, or letting her fall? Bechdel wrote in the last panel, "But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt."¹⁵⁶ The "reverse narration" is characteristic of comics, as the reader can follow the panels in any order. Is Bechdel's story moving backwards or forwards? Like Lejeune moving towards the stranger reflected in the self-portrait's glass, Bechdel has complicated her self-portrait as a retreat or advance. Bechdel is

¹⁵⁵ Figure 2.4, 2.5. Bechdel, *Fun Home*. 3, 232.

¹⁵⁶ Bechdel, 232.

compensating for her father's lies by exposing herself, and understanding her life as a series of foils and dualities, complicated by the Third Space that emerges in between, as defined by Bhabha. The self-portrait must capture not only the external appearance of the young girl, her façade, but also the inner turmoil and how she imagines herself, as a tomboy. The tension between the two spaces and dynamics is reflected in the relationship between images and text, both in the medium and in her father's life.

Bechdel engages the reader in the autobiographical pact by exploring her own personality, and acknowledging the protagonist as herself. She analyzes her memory, with the reader as her private audience, to create intimacy. Speaking of her father, Bechdel writes, "We had had our Ithaca moment. In our case, of course, substitute the alternately stimulating and obtunding influence of homosexual magnetism[...] This might have been our Circe chapter, like when Stephen and Bloom drink at the brothel in Nighttown."¹⁵⁷ Just as her father does, Bechdel colors in her self-portrait with literary allusions, reveling in the lesbian literature she finds in college, such as Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness*.¹⁵⁸ She writes, "My realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing."¹⁵⁹ Her literary background informs her storytelling, and the way in which she forms identities. The characters that she conjures from experience are informed by the library, but embodied by the attention to detail insisted on by Bruce. The showcase of the family home is the basis for the title *Fun Home*, linking the autobiography to a physical place with an emphasis on the appearance.

¹⁵⁷ Bechdel is referring to the scene in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, when Stephen and Bloom are drinking in the Dublin redlight district that Joyce calls Nighttown, and he models this after Homer's *Odyssey*. Bechdel, 223.

¹⁵⁸ Radclyffe Hall. *Well of Loneliness*. 1928. (London: Virago Press, 2008).

¹⁵⁹ Bechdel, 74.

Bruce treats the family home as if it is a museum. The art museum provides an artificial space of clarity, where spatial and temporal representations are framed, positioned, and displayed. The museum condones the façade not as false or superficial, but rather as a distinction of culture. The individual or group determining what makes it to the museum wall holds the power to pronounce authenticity. Why does Bruce have this preoccupation with the spatial control of the singular and the authentic, and why is it generally linked to questions of sovereignty and power? The obvious argument might be that one selects what people see, but the real power lies in selecting how people see. This is a power Bruce Bechdel so desperately desires, to control how people see him and his family, and to create authenticity. He attempts to make his house his self-portrait, which may explain Bechdel's own thoughtful self-portrait. Bruce carefully maintains his own appearance, and the appearance of his daughter, seeking to impose masculinity on himself and femininity on her. The first chapter's title page reads, "Old Father, Old Artificer." The Bechdel patriarch is conflicted by gender expectations, vacillating between being a harsh authoritarian and a sensitive master of decoration and façade. Bruce is portrayed as a handsome man, but his face is always lined with anxiety, trapped by his constructed life. Bruce's home is part of his self-portrait, a presence that imposes itself on Allison's self.

The Bechdel family home also functions as a funeral home, thereby playing on the word "fun," as the decorating of death is pervasive, and perversely entertaining. As well as running the family business, Bechdel's father shops for antiques, makes home improvements, and strictly instructs his three children on the art of appearance. Allison resents his authoritarian parenting, and she believes the upkeep of the home overshadows the children. Bruce Bechdel was "an

alchemist of appearance, a savant of surface, a Daedalus of décor.”¹⁶⁰ Just as with Allison and her college reading lists, Bruce seeks understanding of himself in external sources, so that his actual perception of himself is skewed.

Corresponding with de Man’s objections to the truth of an autobiography in his article “Autobiography as De-facement,” Bruce’s self-perception integrates so much literary fiction, that the slippage between subjective and objective is transformative.¹⁶¹ De Man wrote,

It appears, then, that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable. But is it possible to remain, as Genette would have it, within an undecidable situation? As anyone who has even been caught in a revolving door or on a revolving wheel can testify, it is certainly most uncomfortable, and all the more so in this case since this whirligig is capable of infinite acceleration and is, in fact, not successive but simultaneous.¹⁶²

This is not an opposition between fiction and autobiography, rather it is the slippage between genres that exposes characters. Bruce gets caught in this revolving door between fiction and autobiography, ending in tragedy. Bechdel is aware of the potential for the simultaneous acceleration of fiction and autobiography, as witnessed through her father, and avoids this confusion in her memoir through meta-discourse. The process of creating a self-portrait precludes the “whirligig” from losing control because it demands a commitment beyond the “undecidable.” Bruce’s failure to create an honest self-portrait places him in a condition impossible to maintain.

Bruce dedicates his imagination to creating a self-portrait that never comes to fruition. Bechdel observes her father living as if performing for a biographer or a portrait artist, as he

¹⁶⁰ Bechdel, 6.

¹⁶¹ de Man, “Autobiography as De-facement.”

¹⁶² de Man, 921.

conscientiously constructs a tableau that includes him. Bruce sets his stage the same way Bechdel arranges a comics panel. Bechdel becomes the documenter, and takes ownership over the narrative, stopping the whirligig, and deciphering between autobiography and fiction as best she can. Bruce is not liberated by the freedom of language or creative expression, but rather limited by the tangible nature of these means of expression.¹⁶³ He is caught in the revolving door of others' personal histories. Bruce imbeds himself into fictional narratives, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, but these narratives cannot absorb his imagined self-portrait.¹⁶⁴

Therefore, in response to this upbringing of visual and identity artifice, Bechdel always portrays herself as a tomboy within the comics. It is irrelevant whether or not Bechdel in life resembles her self-portrait, because the important consideration is that the portrait conveys Bechdel's imagination and memory of being a child. The fact that she currently does look like her protagonist suggests an adherence to documentable fact, an efficacy which may be an illusion. Through the autobiographical pact, we believe that the self-portrait captures the sentiment of her perspective, and completes the triangulation of the autobiography. Bechdel's simple self-portrayal instills trust in the reader without justification or explanation. The self-portrait depicts who she wanted to be, and remembers herself to be, rather than who she was expected to be by her father.

Bechdel simplified her style in the period between *Dykes to Watch Out For* to *Fun Home*, abandoning the cross-hatching and sometimes crude lines she used in *Dykes*. The lines in *Fun Home* are clean, especially along the faces. Her portrayal is consistent, maintaining similar

¹⁶³ Serge Doubrovsky developed the term "autofiction" when he realized that his own writing was autobiographical, but did not conform to Philippe Lejeune's criteria in *Le Pacte Autobiographique. Fils*. (Paris: Galilée, 1977).

¹⁶⁴ Bruce Bechdel also models himself after Fitzgerald, based on the biography by Arthur Mizener. *The Far Side of Paradise* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986).

features and style throughout. Early in her life, she sports a close-cropped haircut, jeans, and a striped T-shirt. Until young adulthood, she always looks the same, only less gangly than when she was a child. As with Hergé, this simple style conveys a desire to have an accessible story and clear history, despite secrets, silence, and confusion. Where memories and the details of her life become complicated, the visual depiction is clear through such details as clothes.

The only exception in this otherwise consistent self-portrait is Bechdel's sketch of a school portrait of herself.¹⁶⁵ The school portrait is in a different style, and seems external to Bechdel's imagination. There is more shading, the facial expression conveys a disaffected attitude, and it is offset from the rest of the panels. Bechdel compares her first-grade picture to *The Addams Family*, noting that "wearing a black velvet dress my father had wrestled me into, I appear to be in mourning."¹⁶⁶ Like Lejeune's response to a self-portrait in the museum, juxtaposed with his own reflection, Bechdel's school portrait is positioned as a stranger to the protagonist she has sketched. Variations in style, including the feminine dresses, are subject to her father's whims. Of course her identification with mourning is foreshadowing, but she does not have to mourn for her own loss of identity. By portraying an almost unrecognizable character, she has intentionally alienated the reader along with herself from this girl in the school portrait, challenging the pact.

Bechdel acknowledges that she is part of the autobiographical pact with a public readership. In *Dykes to Watch Out For* Bechdel writes, "I forgot to account for the observer

¹⁶⁵ Figure 2.6. Bechdel, *Fun Home*. 34.

¹⁶⁶ *The Addams Family* was created by Charles Addams in 1939, as a satire of the ideal American family. This in many ways could be seen to reflect the eccentricities of Bechdel's own family. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 34.

effect! I've disrupted the space-time continuum."¹⁶⁷ Bechdel believed her early comics were a project of personal interest, and did not account for the influence she was exerting in the lesbian, comics, and independent media communities. She realizes that her work extends beyond the panel on the page. She then worries that her work has become "conventional," because it is palatable for public consumption. Is this the case that by "speaking the unspeakable," a cartoonist undermines the uniqueness inherent in their narrative?¹⁶⁸ Bechdel has exposed what was previously intimate, secret, and "unspeakable," and allowed it to belong to her readers. Has she also exposed the "unshowable"? Her remark may be mistaken in its assumption that this accessibility undermines the validity of her work as it is the readership that completes the work, according to Duchamp, de Man, and Lejeune.

While de Man disagrees with Lejeune on several key points regarding the autobiography, namely labeling it as a genre, they do align in regards to the reader. De Man writes, "The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution."¹⁶⁹ The author is aware of the potential reader, the reader aware of the author. They recognize each other through the engagement with the protagonist, as Bechdel becomes aware of her readers and her readers recognize her through Allison the protagonist. Influence on an audience is integral to comics, but has also been the crux of opponents' allegations. Connecting with an audience was the approach of the underground cartoonists after the 1954 Comics Code and Wertham blocked

¹⁶⁷ Bechdel, *Dykes*, xvii.

¹⁶⁸ Bechdel, *Dykes*, xviii.

¹⁶⁹ de Man, 921.

“objectionable” comics from being published.¹⁷⁰ Underground cartoonists such as Spain Rodriguez, Clay Wilson, and Bill Griffith rejected the homogeneity and patriotism of Comics Code-approved comics. It was from this initial ban and subsequent radical creative movement that Spiegelman emerged, offering a multitude of self-portraits.

Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!

In contrast to Bechdel’s recognizable and consistent self-portrait, Spiegelman shows himself in a variety of forms and stylistic techniques in *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!*. Despite the range of Arts the reader is introduced to, it is part of a cohesive Spiegelman narrative, especially post-*Maus*. This multiplicity of identities is indicative of his exploration of the medium, his long history with comics, and the significant influence of other cartoonists, from Eisner to R. Crumb, and a host of anonymous comic book artists working in New York City. Spiegelman fragments his own identity to reflect the multivalent potential of comics, as well as reveal the state of his imagination. He demonstrates the complexity of identity and memory, especially when so closely linked with an external medium.

The most infamous identity is the guilt-ridden author of *Maus*, and this anthropomorphized mouse is seen throughout Spiegelman’s published works. *In the Shadows of No Towers* includes Spiegelman as a mouse, as well as wearing a mouse mask; Spiegelman masks his identity with his work and his history. In regards to his self-portrait wearing the mask, he says, “I had to put on a mouse head to enter into my father’s story. It was only over time that I

¹⁷⁰ David Hajdu. *The Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

discovered the implications of that.”¹⁷¹ In *Breakdowns*, by contrast, Spiegelman draws himself as a human in a concentration camp uniform, sketching at his drafting table.¹⁷² In this self-portrait, Art is tormented and surreal, not unlike Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. Sweat drips down his forehead, he is wearing a prison uniform, and everything is black and white. The style, with use of negative space and blocks of black, is reminiscent of woodcuts. Spiegelman’s tortured identity brought the short “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” strip into being. The first image in this black and white strip is a photograph of Art and his mother, but by the next panel, the reader is informed that Art’s mother killed herself and the strip concludes with casket options and the Insurance Company of America’s logo and slogan “Protect What You Have.” Wearing the uniform throughout, Art comforts his father while struggling under his own guilt of surviving. Not simply overwhelmed by the past, but subsumed by the history of his father Vladek and his own compulsive work on *Maus*, in these panels Spiegelman becomes a hybrid of characters: artist, survivor, son, husband, and character. Spiegelman’s own individualism is as complicated to him as to the reader, as he jumps from one identity to another, without an identifiable timeline. Resemblance is secondary to capturing the narrative tone. The self-portrait, and the process of the self-portrait, is the catalyst for the narrative.

Spiegelman’s self-portraits are the visual equivalent of the narrated “I” in written autobiography, congruent with Lejeune’s theories. Spiegelman’s narration is the first-person caption that often creates a retrospective temporality, as he provides commentary from the assumed present about the remembered and visualized past. The self-portrait achieves greater complexity when tethered to writing, signifying beyond the spatio-temporality of illustration.

¹⁷¹ Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*, 148.

¹⁷² Figure 2.7. Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*.

Due to the complications of word-picture relationship, autobiographical graphic novels lay claim to a cartoonist's role as the represented protagonist. And yet, how do we understand the multiplicity of protagonists signifying the same person? A betrayal of unison is what the moment engenders, or seems to want to engender, if not in the reader then in the protagonist. The authorial voice of the captions, a presence not necessarily attached to every pictorial reference to the protagonist, juxtaposes one figure against another. This fragmented portrait identifies Spiegelman more with the grotesque than the real.

I identify authorial presence with a deliberately distorted embodiment, as the cartoonist has made a choice to skew his or her own self-depiction. However, this distortion is one choice among many other misrepresentations within the graphic memoir, among other memories and relationships. However, consistency is not Spiegelman's ultimate aim. The surge of autobiographical comics of trauma narratives, stories of survivorship, and attempts at self-definition attests to this other kind of desire that resists authorial continuity in favor of a selfhood grounded in caricature and the grotesque. These many iterations of self provide a multiplicity of identity, rather than a seamless autobiography. Spiegelman focuses on the caricatures that are most stubbornly lingering in his consciousness.

Another inescapable self for Spiegelman, besides the author of and the son in *Maus*, is the cartoonist as a young boy, consuming the cheap comic books his father Vladek purchases at the flea market. Young Art is a mischievous scamp, maneuvering throughout Spiegelman's present memories, signaling a consistent presence. He is often drawn in the style of classic comic strips, from the Golden Age of Comics.¹⁷³ In the short strip "Memory Hole," Spiegelman

¹⁷³ Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, editors. *The TOON Treasury of Classic Children's Comics*. (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2009).

regresses in age, the panels narrated by a trench-coated gumshoe, saying, “I tailed the little squirt as he got lost in the squalid labyrinths of his past. He kept ducking from one memory to another trying to locate the moments that shaped and misshaped him.”¹⁷⁴ In this strip, he starts out as a child, but then appears as a grown man, crawling and holding onto a woman’s hand. The moment of self-definition is likened to a sculpture, in which memories, an intangible force, create a physical self. However, this is not a blanket acceptance of the past, as Spiegelman suggests that moments and memories occasionally erred, leaving a “misshapen” Art. Spiegelman identifies his process of selecting memories, and avoids others, choosing what G.E. Lessing might call the “pregnant moment.” Lessing wrote, “this single moment, if it is to receive immutable permanence from art, must express nothing transitory.”¹⁷⁵ He explains that this is not the most intense moment, but the moment that holds the most potential for the viewer’s imagination.

Art is often dressed as his identified idol of the day, whether James Dean or Davy Crockett. He wants to be the rebellious hero of 1950s popular culture, the lone frontiersman, or the rebel without a cause.¹⁷⁶ These are self-portraits superimposed with the popular culture that is influencing Art’s ideal, imbuing Art with either desired qualities, or the irony of unattainable characteristics. Spiegelman is providing historical context for his autobiography, through what might otherwise be a series of unrelated memories.

¹⁷⁴ Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*.

¹⁷⁵ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. 1766. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984). 559.

¹⁷⁶ Disney’s “Ballad of Davy Crockett” was a Billboard best seller in 1955, and Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause* was a definitive role for James Dean, also in 1955.

We also see the drug-addled underground cartoonist Art in a photograph, opening his trench coat to reveal comics as if making a lewd gesture, and this impersonation is how Spiegelman describes his attempt to emulate R. Crumb and other prominent underground cartoonists.¹⁷⁷ He writes, “As I crash-landed back on Earth over the next couple of years, I tried to absorb what Crumb and other underground cartoonists I admired were up to by badly imitating them all. It made for some very embarrassing work.”¹⁷⁸ Perhaps he meant embarrassing because his creative process is transparent, and his imitative attempts were too blatant. At the beginning of Spiegelman’s career, his self-portrait was incomplete, like Lejeune walking towards the portrait at the museum; Spiegelman saw himself in the reflection, superimposed over another’s face.

Spiegelman did not achieve his commercial success until, inspired by Ken Jacobs, he embraced his personal experience as material, and created something new out of the existing material.¹⁷⁹ Spiegelman writes that Jacobs, “taught me how to look at art...and to see myself as some sort of an artist!”¹⁸⁰ Jacobs enables Spiegelman to “see himself” well enough to then portray himself, and this was the absent quality in Spiegelman’s early work. The avant-garde filmmaker encouraged Spiegelman to draw from his imagination and reminiscences to create a

¹⁷⁷ Figure 2.8. Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*.

¹⁷⁸ Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*, Afterword.

¹⁷⁹ In an interview with Harry Kreisler, Jacobs said, “Film is, and you're really studying existence, film is mysterious as much as anything else is. Break away from being an expert in your life. Forget about being an expert. Forage. Struggle to go with it. And don't have a premature idea of who you are. You are in a state of becoming. You don't know what your actual potentials are. Don't buy a personality off the rack. Don't be allured by the latest fashion in interesting celebrities. Take your time, don't define yourself too early.” This is the attitude Spiegelman brings to his graphic memoirs, as he does not seek “expertise” of himself, but rather conveys the struggle. *Conversation with Ken Jacobs*. “Conversations with History.” (Institute of International Studies: UC Berkeley, 1999).

¹⁸⁰ Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*.

poignant comic, which eventually became *Maus*. Spiegelman came to see himself as an artist, and as a cartoonist. This acceptance of his identity as a cartoonist allows Spiegelman to translate his life into comics.

Finally, Art is the familiar chain-smoker in 2001, living in Manhattan with his wife, Françoise Mouly, and daughter, Nadja.¹⁸¹ These self-portraits are done in color, including in the strip “Look Day: Midtown Manhattan, one day later.” Art’s present day character is attempting to navigate his earlier identities, both in real life and within the context of his comics. His present day self-portrait is also featured in *MetaMaus*, in the strip “Looking Up To Dad,” where the reader is given a detailed process of both the creation of *Maus* and the creation of Spiegelman as a cartoonist.¹⁸²

Breakdowns becomes a manifestation of Spiegelman’s self-perception, fragmented and non-chronological, like memory. Afraid of repeating the failure of the original *Breakdowns*, Spiegelman writes, “I applied the lessons I’d learned while thwarting narrative, spinning them in reverse to make a flowing story, since I dreamed of a comic book that was long enough to need a bookmark.”¹⁸³ Like Bechdel, Spiegelman identifies the ability of comics to reverse time. By referring to *Breakdowns* as a “comic book,” Spiegelman is simultaneously contextualizing his personality and validating the comics format. No longer preoccupied with “thwarting narrative,” he is able to represent himself. *Breakdowns*’ unique format can also be linked to the memoir’s narrative, because the physical artifact is related to the content. As Eakin has written in reference

¹⁸¹ Figure 2.9. Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*.

¹⁸² Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*.

¹⁸³ Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*, Afterword.

to the autobiography, to consider this oversized, bright, and heavy cardboard work to be a “manifestation of the autobiographer’s concept of self” conveys much about Spiegelman’s relationship to the comic industry. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@ &#!* evokes the obvious literary allusion to James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, but the graphics clearly mark this as an irreverent exploration of Spiegelman as a cartoonist and artist himself, as well as an uncompromising figure.¹⁸⁴ By referencing Joyce, Spiegelman aligns his work with high literary writers, but with the inclusion of the expletive he also excludes himself. The exclusion is an act of performativity, as he is by this point a successful artist and public figure, well positioned in the art and literary community.

De Man asks, “does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction.”¹⁸⁵ Do the autobiographical cartoonists live their lives with the self-portrait in mind, as Spiegelman possibly does during his underground trench coat phase? For Spiegelman, the process is reciprocal: he writes about his life, and comics have also determined his reality. This does not discount Spiegelman as a legitimate referent, but rather irrevocably links his character to comics culture, just as his character is bound with his family’s history.

At the end of *Breakdowns*, Spiegelman writes, “In the claustrophobic confines of my immigrant parents’ home, comics were my picture window onto American culture.”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ James Joyce. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. 1917. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993).

¹⁸⁵ de Man, 920.

¹⁸⁶ This reiterates further my exploration of the window as a frame and panel, with comics as both the vehicle and the aspiration. Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*, Afterword.

Spiegelman looked through the window to escape what he perceived as “old world” mentality, but also looked at the window “onto” culture that he could claim as his own. I would add that the picture window also served as a mirror reflecting a self-portrait juxtaposed over immigrant and American culture. If comics are the window, as Spiegelman posits, then his understanding of American culture, old world culture, and his reflection are all filtered through the medium and his love for it. A successful self-portrait in the graphic memoir demands a self-reflexive impulse beyond memory, which Spiegelman and Bechdel both exhibit.

In examining the self-portraits of Bechdel and Spiegelman, the most relevant divergence is that Bechdel works with a singular self-representation, while Spiegelman with one that is fragmented. This creates significant differences in the impression of their self-portraits, both in the cartoonists’ relative point of views, and also in the ultimate objectives. Spiegelman speaks of himself in the third person, saying, “Looking through the work in this skinny book now, it’s hard to reconstruct the context—or, maybe, lack of context—in which he first explored the possibilities he saw in the medium he loved.”¹⁸⁷ *Breakdowns* is a continuation of this exploration, and the self-portraits reflect it as well. Besides the autobiographical element of these cartoonists’ work, *Fun Home* and *Breakdowns* demonstrate the process of becoming a cartoonist as intertwined with the rest of their lives. In choosing to expose painful, personal memories, the death of Bruce Bechdel and suicide of Anja Spiegelman, these two author-artists entrust their memoirs to readers and also entrust the comics medium to bear the weight of these narratives to answer the unanswerable questions. Using the tension found when meaningful topics are

¹⁸⁷ Spiegelman, Afterword.

conveyed through a traditionally ephemeral medium, they expose the complexity of understanding one's own personality through storytelling, both visual and verbal.

In terms of Lessing's writing on painting and poetry, these cartoonists move through time and space simultaneously, often along multiple trajectories. Lessing wrote, "It remains true that succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter."¹⁸⁸ A figure is captured at a precise moment, with the capability of evolving through the panels. The cartoonists can manipulate chronology by drawing the reader backwards and forwards throughout the page, complicating space through the adherence and violation of panels. Regarding Spiegelman's choice of comics, he says, "What is most interesting about comics for me has to do with the abstraction and structurings that come with the comics page, the fact that moments in time are juxtaposed."¹⁸⁹ David B., an artist trained in Paris at Duperré School of Applied Arts, is adept at manipulating time and space as he explores through comics the complexities of a family impacted by epilepsy and scarred by the attempted cures in *Epileptic*, and searches for his place within their world.¹⁹⁰

Epileptic: Bodies in Trauma, Illness, and Isolation

In the autobiographical *Epileptic*, David B. captures the insecurity of a man negotiating adolescent emotions, as well as navigating the boundaries between internal and external,

¹⁸⁸ Lessing, 567.

¹⁸⁹ Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*, 165.

¹⁹⁰ *L'ascension du haut mal* was originally published in six albums in France by L'Association in Paris, 1996-2004. These were compiled and translated for the English market, and retitled *Epileptic*. The physical English-language text is also smaller than the French editions. David B. *Epileptic*. Translated by Kim Thompson. (New York: Pantheon, 2005).

personal and social lives. The entire text is black and white, with dark shadows and no shading. While evoking surrealist painter Max Ernst's work, especially the collages found in Ernst's graphic novel *Une semaine de bonté*, David B.'s autobiographical text resembles comics produced with woodcuts.¹⁹¹ This aesthetic quality harkens to the early wordless graphic novels of Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward.¹⁹² The significance of these texts is both artistic and political, because it reveals aspects of David B.'s artistic training, education, and approach, as well as his current creative approach. *Epileptic* demonstrates how the graphic memoir can portray narratives of trauma, illness, and isolation in words, and with the physical body. The multiplicity of self-portraits and portraits show how the changing body alters the course of history, the memory, and the surrounding space.

Epileptic opens in 1994, with the author in his parents' bathroom in Olivet, France. He sees his older brother, Jean-Christophe, and each subsequent panel describes the grotesque nature of his brother's physique, including scars and obesity, due to frequent seizures and medication side effects.¹⁹³ I find myself uncomfortable, just as David is uncomfortable, and guilty for being repulsed by the man ravaged by epileptic seizures and medication side effects. His physical appearance is imposing, and he doesn't understand basic social cues, even with his own brother in the family home. The next page flashes back to 1964, the author now going by his given

¹⁹¹ Ernst created the graphic novel *Une semaine de bonté* with collage in 1933, while staying in Italy. It was in response to the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany, as well as the Nazi condemnation of Ernst's work. *Une semaine de bonté*. 1934. (New York: Dover, 1976).

¹⁹² These artists created wordless graphic novels that were social critiques, and often Socialist in nature. Frans Masereel. *Mon Livre d'Heures*. 1926. (Grenoble, France: Cent Pages, 2002). Lynd Ward. *God's Man*. 1929. (New York: Eric S. Rosen Publishing, 1998).

¹⁹³ Figure 2.10. David B., *Epileptic*. 1.

name, Pierre-François, in a portrait with Jean-Christophe and younger sister, Florence.¹⁹⁴ While the artistic style is the same, there are fewer shadows and a more welcoming portrait of the siblings. Reflecting the young Pierre-François's lack of self-consciousness, the depiction of him is simple.

Pierre-François is a small child, with an oversized round head and skinny body, drawn in a thick *ligne claire*; in retrospect, this will become a depiction of innocence. The three siblings are lined up posing for a family snapshot.¹⁹⁵ The narrative jumps to 1968, and Pierre-François looks relatively the same, but with a new haircut and a more mature clothing ensemble. Jean-Christophe has begun having seizures, but the author still believes in the possibility of a normal childhood. David's imagination is dominated by the detailed battle scenes he sketches, and he escapes into these scenarios. As the book is written in retrospect, David B. understands how he existed in these battles with his brother, and wrote to his brother at the end of the book, "Your drawings were beautiful. Ever since, I'm never more alone than when I'm making a book."¹⁹⁶ Like most of the autobiographical cartoonists here, David B.'s self-portrait is entangled with both the comics medium and his family. Much of the English-titled *Epileptic* is David B. attempting to create a self-portrait outside of Jean-Christophe's epilepsy and Jean-Christophe's portrait.

Soon after Jean-Christophe's disease begins escalating, the parents seek extreme cures for their son, including macrobiotic communes, massage and acupuncture, and Symbolism. Often

¹⁹⁴ Within the narrative of *L'ascension du haut mal*, David B. explains how he has changed his name from Pierre-François to David, choosing an Old Testament name in response to his brother's anti-Semitism. David B.'s awareness of the importance of a name mirrors Lejeune's emphasis on the protagonist's name.

¹⁹⁵ Figure 2.11. David B., *Epileptic*. 2.

¹⁹⁶ David B., 360.

these “cures” are the parents’ own remedies for adult anxiety, as demonstrated by the mother’s séances. The family begins existing in an esoteric, desperate world, depicted through David B.’s flights of fantasy to escape his life. He tells stories about his family’s history, creating a mythology in his own family’s rootless existence. David B. later explains why he includes stories of the family’s ancestors, saying, “They’re important! Our ancestors were locked in a constant struggle to escape their misery.”¹⁹⁷ This family exploration gives further depth to David’s self-portrait because his misery is not just his own, but an inherited trait. The family is an integral aspect of the self-portrait, but his imagination is still the fundamental framework for David’s narrative.

Pierre-François’s imagination is no longer restricted to his intricate sketches, and he now filters life through surreal daydreams, which is possible through comics.¹⁹⁸ These scenes are barely more bizarre than the commune the family lives in, and are the only private space for the protagonist. Skeletons, humans with animal heads, and other monstrosities lure Pierre-François into his daydreams, so that his own self-depiction seems more surreal. He becomes the human counterpart to the inhuman ghouls.¹⁹⁹ In these instances we see the reciprocity that De Man discusses, as David B.’s sketches affect his dreams and his dreams affect his graphic memoir. The figures are portrayed at precise moments in time, and it is only Pierre-François who moves through time, returning to the monsters. In one of the infrequent flash-forwards, Pierre-François

¹⁹⁷ David B., 96.

¹⁹⁸ David B.’s early work consisted of mainly dream narratives. *Les incidents de la nuits*. (Paris: L’Association, 1999-2002).

¹⁹⁹ There is a history of epilepsy in literature, often interpreted and misinterpreted as a variety of diseases, afflictions, and demonic possessions. Jeannette Stirling. *Representing Epilepsy: Myth and Matter*. (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2010).

talks with his mother about writing *Epileptic*, as she asks him to omit the more sensitive anecdotes. She says, “Your drawings are terrible, you know – they frighten me.”²⁰⁰ She is voicing the denial and fear of a mother who could not cure her son, but she is also voicing the rational response of a reader who does not feel an innate brotherly love for Jean-Christophe. It is difficult to develop empathy for Jean-Christophe, who embraces Nazism, misunderstands boundaries with younger playmates, and relies on cruelty and selfishness to protect himself. Further, David B. does not cultivate a response of pity, except when Jean-Christophe is in the midst of a seizure and truly helpless. My response to Jean-Christophe reflects David B.’s complex portrait, and allows David B. an intimate relationship that is easy for a reader to empathize with, but almost impossible to inhabit. As Pierre-François speaks with his mother, he looks the same as when he was a child, only taller, significant because at the peak of Jean-Christophe’s illness Pierre-François’s own depiction is dissimilar to the child self. One harsh line cuts across each side of David’s face, suggesting he is gaunt and severe, without the smooth bodylines of his child and adulthood.²⁰¹ Depending on the angle, sometimes the lines of the cheekbone appear as dark circles under his eyes. David B.’s self-awareness manifests itself as acutely physical.

Research into self-awareness inevitably leads David to texts on Eastern philosophy, a direction congruent with the family’s hopeful research into holistic cures. However, despite a faith in the metaphysical, *Epileptic* demonstrates the tangible side of introspection, which counterbalances the subjective memories. Graphic memoirs make the process of embodiment

²⁰⁰ David B., 96.

²⁰¹ Figure 2.12. David B., *Epileptic*. 121.

and self-awareness visible. To bare this narrative of illness, family strife, and guilt gives David B. ownership over a “dysfunctional” narrative. His vulnerability is increased through an increased attention to his own skin and skeleton. While studying art in Paris, Pierre-François explores his own appearance, from the inside out.²⁰² Pressing his hands into his face, he writes,

Often, I feel the bones in my head through my skin.

I’m trying to determine the shape of my skull.

The eye sockets...

The cheekbones...

The jaw...

I want those bones to pierce through the skin of my face, to break into daylight and for it to be over.²⁰³

David B. shows this exploration throughout several panels, the shadows growing thicker like deep gashes across his face. Conscious of the bones and lines of his face and body, he no longer exists in a world that is external. His attention has turned to the inside, and therefore his drawings do as well. The self-portrait has become increasingly subjective, as it relies on David B.’s intuition, rather than a mirror or photograph.

In the final panels, Pierre-François has returned with the round face, and the slight lines of cheekbones. He is not content with his brother’s disintegration, but he has accepted his own identity. He has regained clarity of individuality, as reflected through a clear self-portrait. In the final panels, David B. draws his brother with a variety of faces, as Jean-Christophe assumes a

²⁰² Figure 2.13. David B., *Epileptic*. 289.

²⁰³ David B., 289.

different death mask in each panel.²⁰⁴ David B. concludes by saying, “I figured that at some point...My face would be yours.”²⁰⁵ In this panel, the two men have identical facial features, David B’s face small, and Jean-Christophe’s round and moon-like. His self-portrait, while distinct, is simultaneously inseparable from Jean-Christophe’s. In his evolution, visual variations, and imaginative nightmare and battle scenes, there is a unity to David B.’s depiction of himself, the protagonist, Pierre-François. However, what if there is no self-portrait, only the linguistic “I”? Illustrated memoirs do not adhere to Lejeune’s autobiographical pact or capture the crucial tension between image and word as described by Lessing, however there are influential works within this canon that demand attention, in which the portraits are integral to the autobiographical narrative.

American Splendor: The Illustrated Memoir

The portraits in *American Splendor* are manifestations of the eccentric author Harvey Pekar. Based in Cleveland, with no previous publications, Pekar persuaded friend and fellow jazz record enthusiast Robert Crumb to illustrate his autobiographical anecdotes. Pekar rants about topics such as working as a file clerk, his three marriages, and standing in line at the grocery store. Following Crumb, Pekar’s stories would soon be illustrated by a long list of notable cartoonists.²⁰⁶ Pekar’s portrait depends entirely on the artist, based on his own style, but

²⁰⁴ Figure 2.14. David B., *Epileptic*. 362.

²⁰⁵ David B., 362.

²⁰⁶ Artists who illustrated *American Splendor* include: Ho Che Anderson, Alison Bechdel, Brian Bram, Chester Brown, Greg Budgett, Eddie Campbell, David Collier, Richard Corben, Gary Dumm, Hunt Emerson, Drew Friedman, Rick Geary, Dean Haspiel, Gilbert Hernandez, Val Mayerik, Alan Moore, Josh Neufeld, Ed Piskor, Spain Rodriguez, Joe Sacco, Gerry Shamray, Frank Stack, Ty Templeton, Jim Woodring, and Joe Zabel.

reflecting Pekar's perspective.²⁰⁷ Therefore, the portrait in each *American Splendor* issue differs from that by another artist, and still are manifestations of Pekar because they are based on the personality Pekar has publicly cultivated. In contrast, in *Fun Home*, *Breakdowns*, *Epileptic*, and Shrag's *High School Chronicles*, the cartoonist is artist and author, bearing responsibility for both trajectories and finding narrative harmony more directly. The illustrated memoir complicates the concept of a self-portrait, because there is now a visual portrait and a textual self-portrait. The sources of portraiture affect the validity of the three conditions I presented at the outset of this chapter: cynicism, repetition, and the interaction with language.

An artist-author team undermines the intimacy of the self-portrait, although the portrayal can still be idiosyncratic. Is it possible for an artist to convey the imagination of the author, creating that unity between the author and the protagonist? For the graphic memoir, does the reader enter into the autobiographical pact with the author or with the artist? In some instances, the artists themselves arrange the collaborations, based on personal or professional relationships. Bruce Paley authored and his partner Carol Swain illustrated his memoir of the tumultuous 60s in *Giraffes in My Hair*.²⁰⁸ Artist Youme Landowne met Anthony Horton on a New York City subway platform, and their conversation turned into *Pitch Black*, as told by Horton.²⁰⁹ The relationship between the author and the illustrating artist determines the nature of the final product. In contrast, Sungyoon Choi illustrated Alissa Torres' *American Widow*, and while Torres' story is poignant and Choi a talented artist, the lack of relationship between the two

²⁰⁷ Pekar, *The New American Splendor* Anthology. Figure 2.15, "Pa-ayper-reggs!!" (Ill. R. Crumb). 2.16, "The Grand Finale." (Ill. William Fogg). 2.17, "How This Forward Got Written." (Ill. Chester Brown). 2.18, "Toby Saves the Day." (Ill. Ed Wesolowski).

²⁰⁸ Bruce Paley and Carol Swain. *Giraffes In My Hair: A Rock 'N Roll Life*. (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books. 2009).

²⁰⁹ Youme Landowne and Anthony Horton. *Pitch Black*. (El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 2008).

resulted in the absence of crucial tension.²¹⁰ The fundamental issues with the artist-author created work addresses Lejeune's concern that the author share a name with the protagonist. If the illustrating artist is not the "I," are the recounted memories excluded from the autobiographical pact?

Pekar's autobiographical comics are especially intriguing as an example of the artist-author team because he worked with so many outstanding artists, and produced comics that were successful despite not being mainstream material. The viability of *American Splendor* can be attributed to Pekar's firm belief in comics to convey anything. Pekar is the author if we privilege the linguistic, but the degree to which he controls the visual aspects of his comics suggests the possibility of slippage, or uncertainty, in our identifying Pekar with the unique author of the images. Is Pekar the primary creative source, with the cartoonist serving only as illustrator?

Pekar penned his autobiographical stories and sanctimonious rants from 1976 until his death in 2010 at the age of seventy. *American Splendor* exhibits coherence between Pekar's verbal self-portrait and the visual self-portrait, and this unanimity is due to the candid nature of Pekar's narrative, the popular familiarity with Pekar, and the talent of his accomplished artists. To put the issue of a singular author in slightly different terms, when Pekar's "voice" is literally absent from the panel, because no text is present, Crumb's recognizable visual style dominates the panel's effect. Pekar's "voice" and Crumb's visual style each constitute a distinct and separate "stylistic coherence" in such a fashion that both figures must be identified as participating in the work's author function. Considering that these two distinct types of stylistic coherence operate simultaneously, we conclude that the work has two authors. However, Crumb

²¹⁰ Alissa Torres and Sungyoon Choi. *American Widow*. (New York: Villard, 2008).

is not the only artist who shares the author function with Pekar, which even further complicates the possibility of fragmented authorship, and therefore protagonist identity. Amongst many others, influential underground cartoonist Frank Stack also collaborated with Pekar, including illustrating *Our Cancer Year*. These renowned cartoonists brought a sense of legitimacy to Pekar's storytelling.

Significantly, the effect of Pekar's more general use of multiple artists serves to foreground the importance of stylistic coherence as a marker of authorship for readers, precisely because the various artists' styles lack coherence with one another, though each is internally coherent within each strip and issue of *American Splendor*. In effect, the use of multiple artists undermines or negates Pekar's position as singular author of the whole body of *American Splendor* comics. What we have instead are dual or multiplied author functions, a situation that is especially clear in the case of artists like Crumb, whose visual style is consistent between his *American Splendor* stories and his own fully self-authored works. The author function is split for readers of such a text, because Crumb's visual style is so distinctly and recognizably his own. To describe Pekar's works as autobiographical clearly oversimplifies and misrepresents the complex forms of collaborative authorship they involve. To see Crumb, a celebrated cartoonist in his own right, illustrating someone else's project provides a sense of trust for the reader, which is one of Lejeune's stipulations for the autobiographical pact. Trusting the portrait as an exploration of one's character development demands artistic intimacy. How can the illustrating artist create an embodiment that is a manifestation of another's imagination? While there is obvious mediation, an approximation of authenticity can be met if the tension between self-portrait and narration is maintained.

In an introduction to *American Splendor*, Crumb talks about the difficulty of illustrating Pekar's stories: "illustrating his stories is not easy. There's so little real comic-book-style action for an artist to sink his teeth into.... You have to really share his vision."²¹¹ The artist cannot simply illustrate actions. Crumb believes in Pekar's self-driven project, as well as the impossibility of saying no to Pekar, saying Pekar is, "constantly brow-beating artists to illustrate his stories; handling the distribution himself...only an ego-maniac would persist in the face of such odds."²¹² The egomaniacal self-portrait overwhelms any portrait that would otherwise dominate. The artists recognize Pekar as an icon of anxiety, thereby conveying this alongside the narrative. Pekar's thinning hair, grimacing facial expressions, and drab wardrobe all reference the author, but in different pen strokes. Capturing the tone is not simple, as Crumb writes, "many of the artists who have worked for Pekar over the years (Harvey has been writing comic stories since 1975) have pushed their abilities to higher levels of subtlety and realism in the struggle to convey Pekar's ideas, or maybe just to get Harvey off their backs—me included!"²¹³ The artist is reacting directly to Pekar with the portrait. Since an artist does the portrait rather than Pekar, visually portraying his "I," the reader must look elsewhere to verify that this is an autobiography, certainly beyond the use of the first person. While the protagonist and the author are the same, a third party has entered to create the manifestation. The reader may trust that through the years of *American Splendor*, an honest depiction of author-protagonist has emerged. Pekar's graphic memoirs suggest, then, that for texts where writer and artist are not one and the same, there

²¹¹ R. Crumb. "Introduction." *American Splendor: The Life and Times of Harvey Pekar*. (New York: Doubleday/Dolphin, 1986).

²¹² Pekar, *American Splendor*.

²¹³ Crumb, *American Splendor*, Introduction.

necessarily exists a spectrum of possible authorial positions for the artist, not excluding an authorial positioning of equal importance to that of the cartoonist. This understanding has important implications for thinking about authorship in comics in general.

The goal of the graphic memoir, if we apply Lejeune's theories of literary autobiography to comics, is that the cartoonist seeks to portray an earnest understanding of their own personality, and the shaping of such. The dualities and tensions between words and images are only the commencement of a process towards this one-dimensional embodiment. The self-portrait becomes the crucial "I," no matter how many variations. However, a body does not exist in a vacuum. A successful protagonist is created through positioning the protagonist in space while simultaneously moving her or him through time, according to the parameters articulated by Lessing.

The Time and Space of Self-Portraits

Memory, imagination, and dreams warp time and space, and comics have the capacity to capture this within the abilities of artistic representation, from Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* to David B.'s work. Lessing has provided clear boundaries for space and time, and the respective visual and verbal arts, saying,

as two equitable and friendly neighbors do not permit the one to take unbecoming liberties in the heart of the other's domain, yet on their extreme frontiers practice a mutual forbearance by which both sides make peaceful compensation for those slight

aggressions which, in haste and from force of circumstance, the one finds himself compelled to make on the other's privilege; so also with painting and poetry.²¹⁴

In comics, flashbacks are inserted into the present, panels present several moments in a single unit, and the protagonist is not a static subject. Likewise, the self-portrait in a graphic memoir is not bound by traditional limitations of storytelling.

One of the unique features of the graphic memoir is how the cartoonist might manipulate chronology and space as related to their memory and self-perception, and this is the crux, that comics are particularly suited to reflect memory. The reader can then move through the page, and therefore the cartoonist's life, non-linearly.²¹⁵ How does this aspect of the graphic memoir affect the protagonist? The protagonist can age, recall, and move along disjointed trajectories of memory. This flexibility affects the self-portrait, as the portrait is not limited by chronology or uniform units of time. Lessing writes that "bodies do not exist in space only, but also in time. They persist in time, and in each moment of their duration they may assume a different appearance or stand in a different combination."²¹⁶ Graphic memoirs can portray the entire body with space and time, and allow for a multitude of appearances and combinations through visual representation.

The process of aging forms the most discernible visual change in the graphic memoir. The reader sees the protagonist aging if the span of the memoir is long enough, such as Bechdel growing from a child to a young woman. Conversely, a character may not age at all through the

²¹⁴ Lessing, 567.

²¹⁵ A nonlinear narrative is possible with language only, demonstrated through the novels of authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Eimear McBride, Haruki Murakami, and W.G. Sebald. The difference is that in a work of predominantly language, the author more explicitly directs the reader.

²¹⁶ Lessing, 566.

course of the book. This represented time lapse may not be accurate or trustworthy, but it is significant based on the cartoonist's perception of herself. Through the process of aging, chronology is confirmed or challenged. Spiegelman vacillates between showing himself as an adult and a child. This portrayal need not result from flashbacks or forwards, and is indicative of how memory and time intermingle inside his mind. He can portray himself as a child while talking as an adult, looking back at himself, or while trying to convey regression. This duality of portrayal is unique to the graphic memoir because both self-portraits are present in the same space. The cartoonist can move to multiple times and places within one page, and as readers we can move about these spaces with free agency. The visual representation impacts the space-time continuum, and provides context as well as destabilizes an expected narrative arc.

On the penultimate page of *Awkward and Definition* Schrag writes, “the definition usual,” as her academic year comes to an end.²¹⁷ This word does not suggest evolution, progression, or even regression. However, we know that as an adolescent, her “usual” does not suggest the consistency and predictability possible with an adult. Her use of the adjective “usual” in *Potential* is inconsistent and suggests constant change, as the reader sees in her self-portrait. The tensions between the reader's expectation and Schrag's understanding of herself, and between her words and the visual representation are indicative of the surprising ways comics allow readers to create their own meaning. The crudely-drawn tomboy has gained no more visual definition, no *ligne claire*, but I trust Schrag's self-portrait as a manifestation because of the inconsistencies, as it changes with her mood and evolving skill.²¹⁸ Schrag does not try to make

²¹⁷ Schrag, *Definition*, 84.

²¹⁸ Figure 2.19, 2.20. Schrag, *Likewise*. 6, 82.

herself more accessible and, more like the underground cartoonists and Wimmin's Comix, is brash in not refining her self-portrait. In conjunction with language, the self-portrait exudes a sense of unfiltered adolescence. As the chronicles proceed, Schrag's style and techniques evolve, delving into dreams, more realistic portraits, and experimental methods of portraying motion and lapsed time. Most crucial for this discussion, Schrag's self-portrait transforms with her aging within the memoir, and her adoption of new techniques which reflects Ariel's evolution as an artist, and her broadening of perspective.

Cartoonists are adept at revealing the ugly aspects of their own life, but Lessing wrote, "It is enough that truth and expression transform the ugliest aspects of nature into artistic beauty."²¹⁹ The truth in these graphic memoirs exists in the artists exposing their imagination, and turning many "ugly" narratives into engaging works of art.²²⁰ However, these cartoonists have done more than turn their lives into art. They have challenged our imagination and expectations, by engaging the reader into personal territory. The graphic memoir becomes a genre of significance in these shared stories, beyond artistic, theoretical, and narrative innovations. Graphic narratives help present stories in a way that cannot be ignored.

The distinction between passively seeing and actively looking is crucial for narratives with something at stake. In her *PMLA* Editor's Column, Hirsch writes, "Words, images, and word-images work together to enact the impossibility of seeing and the impossibility of not looking."²²¹ Hirsch establishes what is at stake in wartime photographs and images, but also

²¹⁹ Lessing, 558.

²²⁰ Graphic memoirs have proven to be fertile ground for the exploration of male masturbation. From Justin Green's *Binky Brown* to Joe Matt's *Spent*, cartoonists have translated their sexual shame, pleasure, and neuroses into art.

²²¹ Hirsch, "Editor's Column: Collateral Damage," 1213.

reveals the stakes in graphic memoirs as a genre and medium. The cartoonist challenges the reader to see something unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable, knowing that it is impossible to not look. David B. was honest about the impact epilepsy has on the entire family, and the ensuing resentment and anger. Spiegelman made so many people look at the Holocaust at a time when it was still considered a social faux pas to discuss such horror. Bechdel brought the personal story of family and sexuality into a form that has been taught in classrooms and acted on a Broadway stage. Schrag laid out the awkward and myopic vision of adolescence, a topic often dismissed as narcissistic. Lessing wrote, “Homer treats of two kinds of beings and actions, visible and invisible. This distinction cannot be made in painting, where everything is visible and visible in but one way.”²²² The inclusion of text in the graphic memoir allows for the portrayal of the invisible, and people and stories which have been hidden from view. In the graphic memoir, the cartoonist has complicated the differentiation between subjective and objective storytelling, self-portrait and protagonist, and word and image. The reader assumes an integral role in the autobiographical pact, because he or she moves within these dichotomies to create something new between looking and not seeing. Graphic memoirs go beyond the familiar “one way” of visibility.

The self-portrait allows the cartoonist to assume multiple roles within the text: author, artist, and protagonist. This multiplicity is significant as it enacts Lejeune’s autobiographical pact in a new way, as there are multiple points for the reader to connect with the author. The style of the cartoonist’s self-portrait is a manifestation of herself, not merely a reflection, and

²²² Lessing, 562.

transmittance of self. As readers, we are allowed to view the authors as they view themselves, an intimate perspective. As the narrative restraints of time and space are bent, the cartoonist can manipulate their protagonist's age, appearance, and movement, but they cannot regain anonymity. Autobiography is a form of narrative characterized by a desire both to reveal and to conceal, an attempt at reconciling a life with a self.



Figure 2.1. Sattouf, 1.



Top row (L to R):

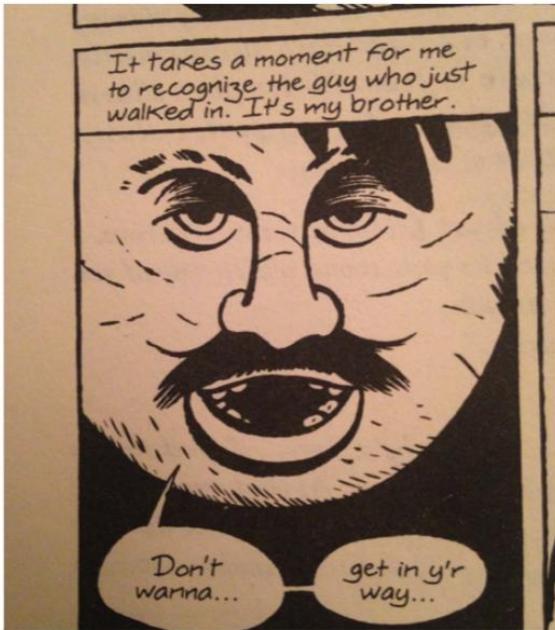
Figure 2.6. Bechdel, 34.

Figure 2.7. Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*.

Bottom row (L to R):

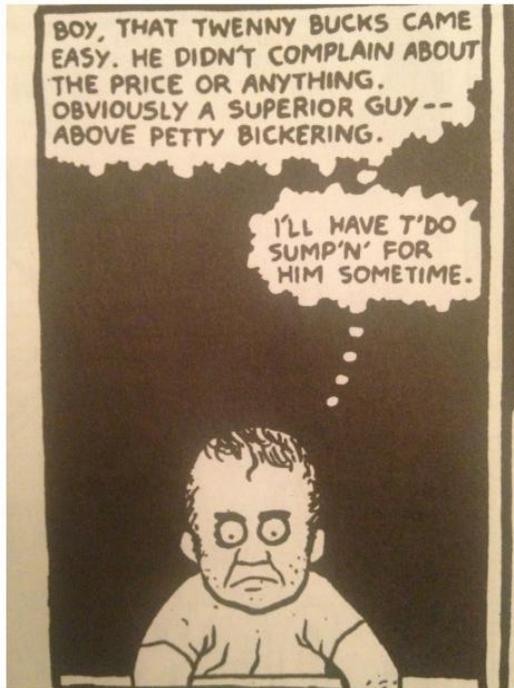
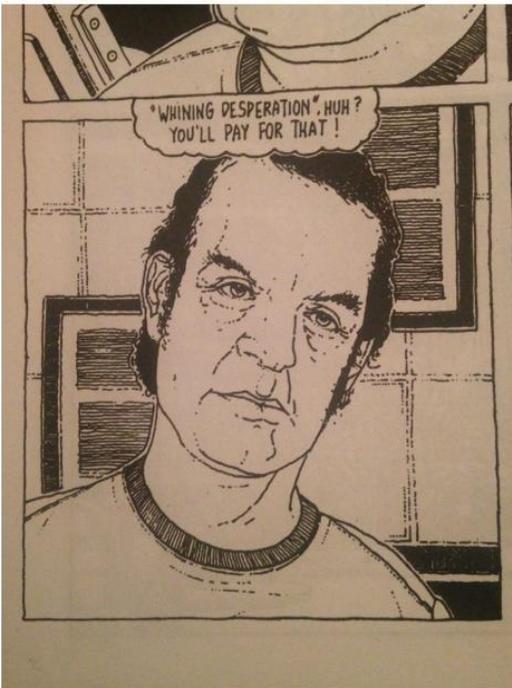
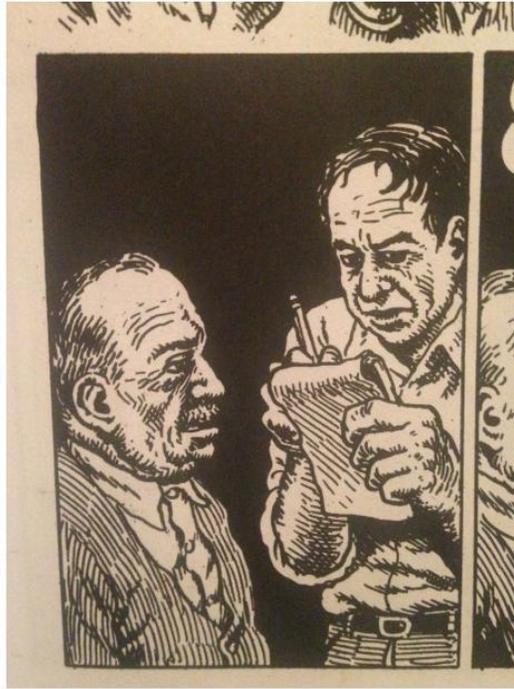
Figure 2.8. Spiegelman.

Figure 2.9. Spiegelman.



Top row (L to R):
 Figure 2.10. David B., *Epileptic*, 1.
 Figure 2.11. David B., 2.

Bottom row (L to R):
 Figure 2.12. David B., 121.
 Figure 2.13. David B., 289.



Top row (L to R):

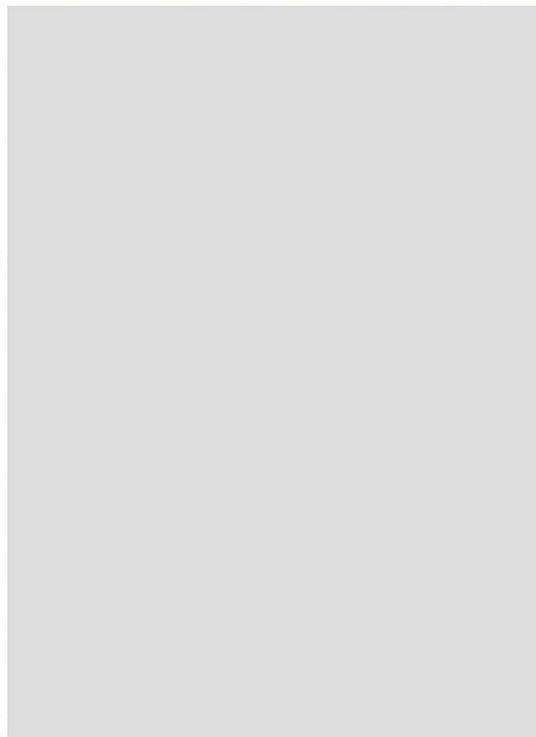
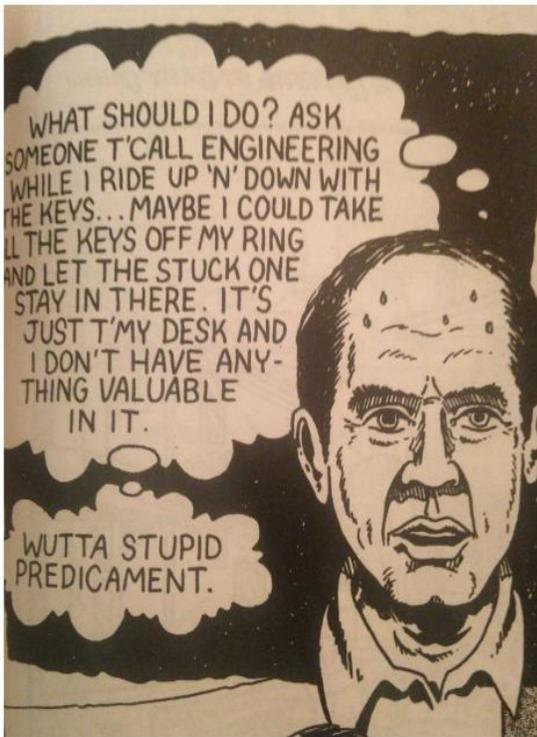
Figure 2.14. David B., 362.

Figure 2.15. Harvey Pekar, "Pa-ayper-reggs." Ill. R. Crumb.

Bottom row (L to R):

Figure 2.16. Pekar, "The Grand Finale." Ill. William Fogg.

Figure 2.17. Pekar, "How This Foreword Got Written." Ill. Chester Brown.



Top row (L to R):

Figure 2.18. Pekar, "Toby Saves the Day." Ill. Ed Wesolowski.

Figure 2.19. Schrag, *Definition*, 6.

Bottom row (L to R):

Figure 2.20. Schrag, *Likewise*, 82.

Chapter 3

Panels, Frames, Windows

Graphic memoirs capture the unreliable, non-linear, and fragmented nature of memory through common comics conventions and techniques. The culturally driven expectations for the panel and gutter develop, disrupt, and guide the reader's approach to the graphic memoir. The simple elements prove to be multivalent techniques that lead to discussion about comics history, art history, and the evolving potential of comics. Graphic memoirs show us new ways comics can be used for storytelling, and provide the opportunity to reconsider the ways we look at, read, and understand all comics.

While the precise definition of comics may be contested, the panel and gutter are necessary components of the graphic memoir because this is what makes it recognizably comics. The panel may be reinterpreted, broken, or overlapped with another, and this adaptable nature extends to the gutters in graphic memoirs. Panels and gutters help maintain the symbiotic relationship between image and text, as well as aid the author in dividing his or her life into scenes and measured time. The panels and gutters can be conducive to creating a self-manifestation, based on Eakin's investigation into narrative self.²²³ If the graphic memoir is indeed a manifestation of the cartoonist's self, the different elements of the medium are reflective of the person and experience: the panel as a multivalent element, which allows varying

²²³ John Paul Eakin writes, "the form of an autobiography is increasingly understood as a manifestation of the autobiographer's concept of self." Starting from the position of the autobiography as a manifestation of the cartoonist, I then identify the relationship between the experience and the depiction, as Eakin says, "the deconstructive challenge to reference in autobiography turns, then, on the relation between the experience of the individual ('the thing itself') and its representation in language ('the picture')." *Studies in Autobiography*, 32.

levels of intimacy into the cartoonist's life; reclaiming the gutter, which is a crucial step to reclaiming voice and marginalized narratives; and the potential for openness, which gives the cartoonist the freedom to determine how definitively she will define her experiences. Although these areas are not discrete, each line of inquiry exposes further potential for the medium.

First, considering the panel as a multivalent element owes much to Anne Friedberg's work in *The Virtual Window*.²²⁴ The panel serves several functions, and I explicate both its functional and theoretical possibilities. Second, the gutter works to direct and pace the narrative, group and separate characters and space, and to engage the reader in the empty space. It is this last action that is the most intangible, and the greatest opportunity to occupy marginalized space and stories. Finally, bell hooks' "radical openness" involves the reader's potential for novel ways of thinking and reading. As panels and gutters are formed and manipulated, the reader can explore the flexible boundaries of the graphic memoir. "Radical openness" in comics suggests that content and style may be productively contentious as the cartoonist rejects limiting aesthetics.

In Heatley's college art class, his beloved teacher Jacques tells him, "Don't use black! Don't make it 'comic book'!"²²⁵ This is advice Heatley, conscious of the forms, clichés, and expectations of comics, ultimately disregards. Comics become an integral aspect of Heatley's identity so that translating himself into an illustrated protagonist reflects his character; the medium is a manifestation of his personality. Jacques knows this possibility, and has warned David against becoming a cartoonist, rather than a painter. Jacques tries to prevent David from

²²⁴ Anne Friedberg. *Virtual Window*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

²²⁵ Heatley, 2: "Jacques."

becoming consumed by his “lowly and disrespected” medium. Despite Jacques’ best efforts, however, David resists and applies his art school training to comics, including the panels and gutters, and moreover applies comics to his life story.

Signs of selfhood often lay outside the dominant space of representation, such as in comics. In his introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha writes, “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”²²⁶ As Bhabha indicates, the in-between space is open enough to define and redefine society, as the cartoonist is able to do with comics, using panels and gutters as narrative and artistic tools. In the graphic memoir, we do not have to identify the presence of panels and gutters, as this is generally self-evident, but rather we identify the unexpected and innovative.

Heatley employs numerous small panels in an obvious derivation of the classic comics style, manipulating the comic book into an oversized, crude yet fastidious autobiography. A typical page might include forty-eight individual panels, although the quantity varies, dividing a large page into very small scenes.²²⁷ One page in particular covers David’s life from 1974—the year of his birth—through 2001, his wedding year.²²⁸ While the images and text are crudely sketched, the panels are carefully, almost self-consciously, drawn. One can see small marks where the pen has followed a ruler to the end. The sheer number of panels indicates a fractured

²²⁶ Bhabha, 1.

²²⁷ Heatley, 5.

²²⁸ Figure 3.1. David Heatley, *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down*, “Kin.”

self-consciousness, but the even panel borders suggest a careful attempt to define. Here, Heatley abuts the panels to avoid gutters. While he uses gutters elsewhere, here their absence implies an uninterrupted chronological narrative, void of Heatley's self-interpretation.

Panels are simultaneously intuitive, packaging the narrative into accessible moments, and counterintuitive, since memories are never complete entities. This paradox creates tension even in the most straightforward narratives as the reader both understands scenes independently and connects them. Film director Federico Fellini said, "Comics, more than film, benefits from the collaboration of the readers: one tells them a story that they tell to themselves; with their particular rhythm and imagination, in moving forward and backward."²²⁹ For the graphic memoir, the cartoonist manipulates familiar elements of comics, and redirects reader expectations and attention. In a special section of *Cinema Journal* dedicated to Comics Studies, Bart Beaty says, "While both comics and cinema are most commonly used as forms for visual storytelling, the key distinction between them pertains to the arrangement of images."²³⁰ Beaty's emphasis on comics as "visual storytelling," further elevates the importance of their visual formal elements. The sequential order of film's *mise en scène* is not identical to comic's sequence of panels because in comics the reader can see multiple panels at once. The order in which film's cells are viewed is predetermined, while the order in which comics' panels are read can only be suggested.

The Frame as a Basic Unit of Thought

²²⁹ Federico Fellini. "Federico Fellini sage comme la lune." Interview in *Le Soir*. Bruxelles, 1 August 1990. Page 3 of *MAD* supplement.

²³⁰ Beaty, "In Focus: Comics Studies, Fifty Years After Film Studies," 108.

In the case of the graphic memoir, the panel serves as a picture window into personal narratives of trauma, illness, and isolation, and the gutter holds the secrets. The panel as a basic construction is unambiguous: a box grouping images and text, as exemplified by Rodolphe Töpffer. Less obvious is the quality of the panel surface, and whether the artist has created it to be transparent, opaque, or reflective. Is the reader meant to look through the panel, as if a window; at the surface, like a canvas; or back at themselves, like a mirror? Most likely, it will be a combination of the three qualities. Opacity operates as a veil, like a curtain over a window. The veil is visible, yet allows one to partially see underneath. Finally, the reflective surface is integral to the autobiographical aspect of the graphic memoir and to Lejeune's focus on the reader because it plays the role of a mirror. In *Memoir*, Yagoda says, "The development of glass mirrors at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries has been cited as a key factor in the Renaissance emphasis on the self."²³¹ Realizing one's autonomy is connected to a physical self will result in the potential to project that image on a surface. These surface qualities affect the temporal and spatial implications, through the narrative's dynamics.

The familiarity of a comics panel can be subverted to destabilize meaning for the reader and open new spaces for the cartoonist. The panel evokes memories of newspaper comic strips and superhero comic books, both of which are familiar and communal media. Underground comix are intriguing because they run counter to immediate expectations but still employ expected techniques, such as the panel, gutter, and speech balloon, even if they use these elements in unexpected ways. Subversion by innovative cartoonists succeeds because the comics

²³¹ Yagoda, 36.

panel is a standard mode of demarcation, and because the frame is ubiquitous in visual culture.²³² Whether at a television, a computer screen, or a Renaissance painting, spectators look at a framed surface. Within the window, frame, and panel of the graphic memoir, the reader is given entrance into the cartoonist's imagination. In her 2006 book, *The Virtual Window*, Anne Friedberg points out that the window can also be a frame, and writes, "how the world is framed may be as important as what is contained within that frame."²³³ Friedberg's work is invaluable to the awareness of constructions that present content, and I extend this multivalent view to the comics panel. The reader may interpret the panel as an entity to look at or look through, or as a device to contain that which is inside. Friedberg is inspired by Italian Renaissance artist Leon Battista Alberti's instruction for painters to treat "painting as an open window."²³⁴ Alberti wrote that the artist should act as if "this surface which they colour were so transparent and like glass, that the visual pyramid passed right through it."²³⁵ Friedberg utilizes Alberti's idea that the window is translucent, rather than transparent, so the viewer sees the surface of the window rather than through a frame with no panes. Likewise, the reader looks into the window of the cartoonist's imagination while still seeing the panel as a formal construction of the comic. Friedberg chose Alberti because "of his striking use of the architectural figure of the window,"

²³² In *The Truth in Painting*, Jacques Derrida refers to the term "parergon" to emphasize that which frames the work of art, and conditions the interpretation of the work. *The Truth in Painting*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

²³³ Friedberg builds upon a foundation of thinkers too extensive to list here. However, she particularly looks to Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*, which is in turn indebted to Plato, Hegel, Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger. Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 1, 14.

²³⁴ Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) was an Italian artist, considered by his generation to be "a heroic figure in the 'rebirth' of literature and visual arts." Alberti, *On Painting*.

²³⁵ Alberti, 48.

and “Alberti’s Renaissance metaphor of the window has haunted centuries of a subsequent thinking about the humanist subject of perspective, and has remained a defining concept for theories of painting, architecture, and moving-image media.”²³⁶ The Renaissance movement cultivated an appreciation for perspective, which is pivotal to Friedberg’s argument. Since the window is an interactive entity, the role of the viewer is imperative to understanding the comics panel.

In the last strip before the reprinted *Breakdowns*, Spiegelman ruminates on the purpose of art, saying, “In comics the page is the basic unit of thought...it makes comics difficult to edit once they’re drawn.”²³⁷ Each “basic” unit of thought is actually quite complex and yet, according to Spiegelman, irreducible. Cartoonists translate their imagination and memories into unique “units of thought.” Each thought can be both looked *through* as if transparent, and looked *at* as if translucent. While thought and imagination are intangible, the completed comic panel and page can be treated as discrete objects.

I extend the possibilities for the frame in graphic memoirs, inspired by the methodology with which Friedberg examined the ubiquitous screen in contemporary society, and I build an approach that acknowledges the formal techniques of comics as potentially translucent, rather than transparent. I see the speech balloons, panels, and lines, and I consider them as both independent and interrelated objects, rather than gazing through them. Following Friedberg, I consider how the “movement of objects within the frame, to its edges, and off-frame, suggests

²³⁶ Friedberg, 1.

²³⁷ Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*.

[a] radical contradiction.”²³⁸ By acknowledging the translucent surface, I recognize the relationship between formal elements and content, as the interaction between the two is not hierarchical. The “radical contradiction” of breaching the frame violates the perception of a border or enclosure, and it makes the frame integral to understanding the narrative.

Moving Between Panels

In the context of graphic memoirs how does the cartoonist reconcile the subjective nature of autobiography and memory with the fixed nature of panels? This perception of stability can be utilized productively, as it gives direction and aids significantly in storytelling. The cartoonist might use panels to evenly distribute time and space, to jump from scene to scene, or to add pacing to dialogue. Most importantly is to consider how the panels work together, because there is movement within the panels, but there is also movement between panels.

Movement between panels is not uniform, and is utilized and interpreted in several ways. McCloud identifies four types of panel-to-panel transitions: 1) moment-to-moment, 2) action-to-action, 3) subject-to-subject, and 4) scene-to-scene.²³⁹ Later in *Understanding Comics*, he adds aspect-to-aspect and non-sequitur. McCloud emphasizes the movement across panels, rather than their separate appearances as an integral part of the narrative. According to these distinctions, panels become devices that depict progress in the action, and they are as subjective as the process of memory, and are more related to the narrative than McCloud implies.

²³⁸ Friedberg, 83.

²³⁹ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 71.

Moment-to-moment transitions include the same character and scene, and therefore are narratively traditional. These transitions are most akin to the *mise-en-scène* in narrative film, as opposed to montage. In *Blankets*, Craig Thompson often uses moment-to-moment, and he will spend time in one place, such as washing dishes with his mother, while the scene unfolds.²⁴⁰ In these sequences, the focus is on the plot.

Action-to-action transitions use the same subject, portraying different movements in each consecutive panel, but not necessarily in the same place or time, more similar to montage in film. Heatley, with a consistent focus on himself, uses many action-to-action transitions. He may jump from the playground, to his friend's bedroom, to his college classroom, but his protagonist is the focus of all.²⁴¹ This style can result in a faster, more disjointed narrative, but also a singular emphasis on the protagonist.

In contrast, subject-to-subject transitions portray the same scene, but switch focus between subjects. This type of transition can slow down the narrative pace, provide different point of views, and would thus be less common in a graphic memoir as the perspective it provides is more similar to an omniscient narrator than to first person narration.²⁴² In *Fatherland*, Nina Bunjevac uses this technique for a conversation between her parents, Peter and Sally. The alternating points of view balances a narrative heavily in favor of Bunjevac's mother.

Scene-to-scene transitions portray different characters and scenes, which either move the narrative along quickly or create a fragmented narrative. This can be used to introduce a cast of

²⁴⁰ Figure 3.2. Craig Thompson, *Blankets*, 167.

²⁴¹ Figure 3.3. Heatley, "Sex History."

²⁴² Figure 3.4. Nina Bunjevac, *Fatherland*, "Plan B."

characters, or to complicate one moment. Marisa Acocella Marchetto will portray her friends' and family members' simultaneous reactions to her cancer, while all in separate locations. This can create a sense of the community the protagonist lives in, physically and socially, as is the case with Marchetto.

Utilizing the omniscient perspective, aspect-to-aspect transitions might portray different facets of a subject or idea, and, like subject-to-subject, is used less often in graphic memoirs. Crucial to the graphic memoir is the unique understanding of the cartoonist and protagonist, not a factual omniscient reality. However, this technique is used in Spiegelman's *Maus*, and Bunjevac's *Fatherland*, as they provide history and context for their respective fathers' experiences.²⁴³ Finally, non-sequitur transitions have no relationship whatsoever to surrounding panels, or at least the connection is not immediately apparent.

While these categories can be helpful, they fall short in understanding panels not laid out in chronological order, or even those read left to right.²⁴⁴ How do we identify transitions in comics that allow for multiple ways of arranging the panels when reading? What if panels are absent or overlap? Graphic memoirs may not always maintain consistent panels, as they twist and turn with the cartoonist's memory.

It is negligent to assume we proceed only from one panel to the next, ignoring the composite product of the panels. Miller further theorizes the importance of the panels, saying, "The *bande dessinée* panel does not occur in isolation. Meaning is produced out of the

²⁴³ Figure 3.5. Bunjevac, "Childhood."

²⁴⁴ An example would be the work of Chris Ware, although not autobiographical. Ware consistently draws intricate panels that might transition in any direction. Chris Ware, *Building Stories* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

relationships, both linear and non-linear, between panels.”²⁴⁵ Meaning is not limited to elements within the panel borders, nor does each panel serve merely as a self-encompassing tableau. Thus a relationship between all the panels on the page occurs, despite and because of the spatial arrangement. While the cartoonist can manipulate the formal elements to direct my attention, once the book is in my hands, I control the sequence in which I read the panels.

The Panel as a Multivalent Frame

An integral step to rethinking content in graphic memoirs is to reconsider their surface in terms of appearance and function. Alberti asserts that painting can be conceived as a translucent window, and Friedberg built extensively upon this theory and situated her ideas within contemporary culture. In discussing the artist’s need to understand the intersection of multiple surfaces, Alberti observes, “he must understand that he will become an excellent artist only if he knows well the borderlines of surfaces and their proportions... They should understand that, when they draw lines around a surface, and fill the parts they have drawn with colours, the sole object is the representation on this one surface of many different forms of surfaces.”²⁴⁶ The surface is an integral aspect of the painting, alongside the paint and brushstrokes. Alberti encourages artists to be aware of the complexity of the surface, just as the cartoonist can be aware of the complexity of the panel. In considering graphic memoirs, I read Alberti’s words less as a directive for artists, and more as a schema of understanding for the reader. In comics, an awareness of the surface will allow the reader to see more than they might initially.

²⁴⁵ Miller, 82.

²⁴⁶ Alberti, 48.

While the panel is an irrefutable presence in comics, its inherent properties are not objective. Groensteen argues that, “the comics panel is fragmentary and caught in a system of proliferation; it never makes up the totality of the utterance but can and must be understood as a component in a larger apparatus.”²⁴⁷ The panel acts not as insulation around a complete scene, but as the vehicle in which to convey a moment. However, Groensteen’s statement is incomplete, because the panel can be both a fragment and a complete entity. Evaluating a graphic memoir demands this dual reading. Information might be read in different ways, depending on how we perceive the panel. Is the panel isolating the scene, or inherently linking it with others? Are we meant to see through the scene, or to end our gaze there? Friedberg’s work on the virtual window is invaluable here because she contends with the omnipresent panel, and the fact that they do not operate uniformly. The panel serves a spatial and temporal function, as well as the practical purpose of dividing action in the narrative.

The narrative frame is applicable to literature, but the concept is directly applicable when speaking of comics. The central cause for the multiplicity of definitions is the quantity of concepts and ideas to which this singular term “frame” refers: internal narration, space around the text, or the space around the page, for example. Miller notes that, “The relationship between panels on the page is a function of their size, shape, and position.... The position of a panel relative to other panels allow for links over and above the linear narrative.” Miller adds that, “Certain positions on the page will tend to have more intrinsic narrative significance than others, most notably the bottom right-hand panel, which affords possibilities for suspense.”²⁴⁸ The

²⁴⁷ Groensteen, 5.

²⁴⁸ Miller, 83.

panels do not work in isolation, but rather depend on a system of panels to deliver the intended narrative. However, the meaning can only be suggested, not defined.

Reflecting on the work of Friedberg, I consider the ramifications of boundaries that do not restrict meaning, as she wrote, “movement of objects within the frame, to its edges, and off-frame, suggests [a] radical contradiction.”²⁴⁹ The “radical contradiction” of breaching the frame violates the perception of a border or enclosure, and makes the frame integral to understanding the narrative. The title of Thompson’s memoir, *Blankets*, is taken from a quilt that his girlfriend, Raina, makes for him. As Craig opens the homemade patchwork quilt, Thompson’s illustration takes up an entire page, with only Craig’s hands moving into the same space. Raina says, “They’re all patterns that remind me of you.... This patch is from my spit-stained baby blanket.”²⁵⁰ Later, Craig likens the quilt to a comic, saying, “And read in sequence, like a comic strip, they told a story. Because they were arranged in a pattern, repeating themselves, their story was cyclical.”²⁵¹ This sentimental use of the panel might be equated with Friedberg’s complex theorization of the technological window. The multivalent window is not limited to the virtual world. With this gift from Raina to Craig, the blanket becomes the page, the panel, and each square of fabric a window into Raina’s past. The quilt is as fragmented as it is representative of the whole.

Thus each panel works independently, and simultaneously in conjunction with the other panels. In his article “Plaisir de la bande dessinée,” Groensteen writes:

²⁴⁹ Friedberg, 83.

²⁵⁰ Thompson, 183.

²⁵¹ Thompson, 566.

The panels return nothing but the fragments of the implied world in which the story unfolds, but this world is supposed to be continuous and homogenous, everything transpiring as if the reader, having entered into the world, will never again leave the image to which he has been offered access. The crossing of frames becomes a largely unconscious and mechanical operation, masked by an investment (absorption) in the virtual world postulated by the story. The diegesis, this fantastic virtual image, which comprises all of the panels, transcends them, and is where the reader can reside. If, according to Pierre Sterckx's term, I can build a nest [*nidifier*] in a panel, it is because, in returning, each image comes to represent metonymically the totality of this world... the multiplicity and spread of these images, the ubiquity of the characters, makes comics truly open to a consistent world, as I persuade myself all the more easily that I can live there that... I do not cease, in reading, to enter within and to exit.²⁵²

The reader may not be conscious of the profound affect of the panel or gutter, but she is interpolated into the narrative by these devices nonetheless. While the experienced comics reader identifies the use of formal techniques she will transcend the linear narrative, enabled by the panel and gutter. In all these articulations of the panels, there is inevitable space: the gutter.

The gutter is the space between panels, as well as the space formed by the outer frames of all the panels. In graphic memoirs, the gutter is interrupted by figures and speech balloons, abolished by pushing the edges of panels together, or filled with a background image. While the gutter in a newspaper comics strip is white, the graphic memoirist has freedom to reinvent this space. McCloud writes, "the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics! Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea."²⁵³ The gutter, perhaps more than any other element of the graphic narrative, helps to facilitate the autobiographical pact, as the reader

²⁵² Thierry Groensteen. "Plaisir de la bande dessinée." *9e Art*, no. 2, Angoulême: CNBDI, January 1997, 14-21. Quote translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. 20.

²⁵³ McCloud, 66.

completes the narrative through interpretation. When I read, the mystery is the ambiguous space that causes me to reread panels, flip back in the book, and collect all clues to fill this space, to create my own understanding of someone else's personal story. Information from the panel does not jump the gutter, but flows through it. Formal conventions of comics become equated with shards of memory, which cannot be measurable units.

Reclaiming the Gutter: A Space in Limbo

The gutter is the space between panels, and this is not empty space but a technique that can be used to a narrative end. Although development and meaning are articulated within the panel through a variety of techniques, frequently action is evoked in the space between frames; the gutter is where the reader must fill in movement and meaning. Comics are full of holes that readers fill in, led to do so by the ways in which the artist juxtaposes panels. The spacing that constitutes an insular frame around the art object displaces other images and text, creating the crucial friction between independent frames and sequential narrative.

The gutter is a culturally laden device, whether in comics, as the depression in the street to catch discarded material, or the empty space next to a book's binding. Cartoonists have reclaimed the gutter as a location open for interpretation, in a way similar to Bhabha's advocacy for the potential of in-between space. The gutter is a space where the cartoonist might do what he or she wants, a path to follow for the comics novice, and a knowing reference for the comics connoisseur. While the gutter is recognized in comics studies as a noteworthy space, it holds a particular significance for the autobiography because of how it characterizes the storyteller.

Javier Hernandez, one of Los Bros Hernandez, authors of *Love and Rockets*, referred to his use of the gutter:

In these new comics, it's just a sharp line that divides one panel from the other; I think this style crept over from Japanese manga. For me and my aesthetic, the gutter stays, damn it! It's my job as a storyteller to play with the layout and rules. I'll give you all the information in each panel, but in that little gutter between the panels, you're doing the work. Or bringing some of yourself into the story. That's the magic only a comic book can claim.²⁵⁴

Hernandez identifies the reader as his reason for using traditional gutters, and the reader becomes an unwitting accomplice. Jonathan Luna, co-creator of the two series *Ultra* and *Girls*, reflects this sentiment, saying, "I think the gutter is the magic in sequential art. It's the one thing no other medium has. In that space between two panels, whether the readers are aware of it or not, they are in control. They are using their imaginations, filling in their own blanks between a transition of cause and effect. And by doing this, they become engaged participants in the story."²⁵⁵

Cartoonists lay claim on the gutter, but the substantive claim is to demand a reader's participation in its success as a storytelling element.

Theresa Tensuan has noted McCloud's reading of one of the functions or by-products of the gutter: "Indeed, the comic artist and theorist Scott McCloud observes that one of the great achievements of the form is that it keeps readers' minds in the gutter: McCloud sees the gutter as a 'limbo' in which a reader has to insert herself in order to transform the separate frames into a coherent narrative framework..."²⁵⁶ The reader becomes integrally involved in the formation of a full narrative, and in the graphic memoir this completes the autobiographical pact. McCloud

²⁵⁴ Aldama, 198. Cartoonist Laura Molina, author of *Cihualyaomiquiz, the Jaguar*, agrees that the end of the standard gutter is indebted to Japanese cartoonists. 215.

²⁵⁵ Aldama, 206. Luna's claim for comics' singular ownership over the gutter is not entirely correct, as the term "gutter" is used in bookmaking to refer to the marginal space formed by the two inner or back margins of facing pages of a book. The most productive way to interpret Luna's misperception is to consider both the emphasis on the visual in comics, and to examine the desire to set comics apart as a unique medium.

²⁵⁶ Theresa Tensuan. "Comic Visions and Revisions in the Work of Lynda Barry and Marjane Satrapi." *Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 52, Number 4, Winter 2006, 947-964. 950.

identifies the reader as a “silent accomplice.... An equal partner in crime.... Closure in comics fosters an intimacy surpassed only by the written word, a silent, secret contract between creator and audience. How the creator honors that contract is a matter of both art and craft.”²⁵⁷ While McCloud is not directly referencing Lejeune’s theories on autobiography, in the graphic memoir this contract takes on the literary weight of the autobiographical pact.

Within the autobiographical pact, an in-between space bridges the triangular relationship between author, protagonist, and reader. Just as the author creates a protagonist, the reader verifies the connection between these two figures, and must believe the pronoun “I.” Heatley’s graphic memoir extends anecdotes and memories that hang in the air, waiting for reception. This creative act reflects his self-conscious and hesitant personality, and he waits for the reader to grab onto the other end of the story, completing the autobiographical pact. In the first chapter of *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down*, Heatley portrays his “Sex History,” and he explores taboo topics such as childhood sexuality, including homosexuality. Heatley grapples with guilt, shame, and confusion as he wants to kiss girls, but also enjoys touching other boys’ genitalia. Instead of exhaustedly apologizing for or justifying these impulses, Heatley portrays them visually, censoring where he deems appropriate or ironic. The gutter provides an opportunity for Heatley to claim ownership over his uncertainty, as he completes these ideas within the panel and gives the reader the opportunity to fill in the narrative in the gutter. In between queer and heterosexual, childishness and maturity, exposed and concealed, Heatley defines himself through unarticulated language. The visible space outside the panels is imperative for creating the complexity of narrative.

²⁵⁷ McCloud, 69.

Beyond the distinction of internal and external space lie other spatial sites, which Griselda Pollock has defined in her book *Vision and Difference*: first, the public and private locations represented by the work; second, the spatial order within the work itself including framing devices; and finally, the space from which the representation is made and, more generally, the sociocultural context within which her authorial self is located, and within which her work is received. Pollock speaks specifically of impact of these spaces on women, saying, “The public and private division functioned on many levels. As a metaphorical map in ideology, it structured the very meaning of the terms masculine and feminine within its mythic boundaries.”²⁵⁸ The public/private and external/internal spaces are relevant to the graphic memoir, but the spatial order within the text is especially pertinent as the order in comics is guided by framing. Miller writes that the gutter, “refers to the space visible outside the *hypercadre* (‘hyperframe’), Peeter’s term for the (usually) discontinuous frame formed by the outer frames of all the panels and between the frames.”²⁵⁹ The discontinuous nature of the frame both interrupts time and connects it, separating moments in time and bridging content in the panels.

The Third Space and Radical Openness

Chute says of the gutter,

This blank space, which translates as *blanc* in its French usage, is constitutive of comics logic and grammar. It is where a reader, conventionally, projects causality, and where the division of time in comics is marked, providing a constant source of tension, a constant

²⁵⁸ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, femininity and histories of art*. (London: Routledge, 2003). 69.

²⁵⁹ Miller, 86.

proffering of the unmarked in spaces that are carefully bounded and marked out. At the heart of the attention to the gutter is the fact of its *constitutive* absence.²⁶⁰

In discussing the graphic memoir as a text where repressed space and narratives are exposed I draw on bell hooks' provocative theories as I investigate how the space, gutters, and margins are reclaimed. For this use of the term "marginality," I refer to hooks' article "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness." Hooks says, "As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, 'the politics of location' necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision."²⁶¹ Hooks suggests a positive and proactive approach to the margin, denying an imposition of dominant narratives onto the space, and she says, "For me this space of radical openness is a margin – a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary."²⁶² Hooks writes explicitly about marginality in the context of the subjugation of women of color, and my application of the concept should not diminish her original aim. Rather, through radical openness, new and crucial stories can be told through graphic memoirs.

First, hooks identifies the margin with certain sites of material oppression, then argues that through choice and vigilance the margin can become a chaotic space of creativity and power, and she says, "It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds."²⁶³ The dynamic possibilities she identifies in the margin are contrasted with the definition, limitation, and oppression of the center. The margin can be

²⁶⁰ Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 35.

²⁶¹ bell hooks. "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness." *Gender Space Architecture*. Volume 1, Part 5, September 1999. 203-209.

²⁶² hooks, 206.

²⁶³ hooks, 207.

empowering through resistance, allowing for the formation of personal identity. Hooks presents the margin as a space of action beyond the theoretical, and Bhabha's work also contains directions for practical understanding.

Bhabha believes in the broad and literal applicability of his work, writing, "What is crucial to such a vision of the future is the belief that we must not merely change the *narratives* of our histories, but transform our sense of what it means to live, to be, in other times and different spaces, both human and historical."²⁶⁴ Bhabha attacks racism and the "myth of progressivism," and hooks attacks oppression through binaries, categorization, and definitions. Bhabha looks to the future impact of his work, saying, "I have attempted to constitute a postcolonial, critical discourse that contests modernity through the establishment of other historical sites, other forms of enunciation."²⁶⁵ Bhabha disputes the prevalence of a hierarchical culture, and since graphic memoirs are often a site of liberated narratives Bhabha's work is imperative to understanding the space in which these voices operate. While comics as a medium are not inherently set against oppressive narratives, they are new and provocative enough to have the potential to be a new form enunciation. They may open the possibility for articulation that an author did not see in another mode of expression.

The term "hybridity," as Bhabha uses it in *Location of Culture*, is relevant to comics because the words and image overlap and coexist, and new meaning emerges. Bhabha describes "hybridity" as the space where, "cultural differences 'contingently' and conflictually touch."²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Bhabha, 256.

²⁶⁵ Bhabha, 254.

²⁶⁶ Bhabha, 207.

Hybridity is not necessarily a fluid and organic process, but rather can contain conflict and antagonism. Therefore, if applied to the comics gutter, hybridity can be a space for incongruent narratives to merge. Where cultural hybridity “entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy,” hybridity in comics blends the difference between visual and verbal art, and melds dominant narratives with marginal narratives.²⁶⁷ Yang’s *Forget Sorrow* blends the familial narrative with that of being a first generation American and that of being a woman escaping abuse. As one might expect, this moment of blending is not a painless process.

Marginalization cannot be overcome without resistant communication. Yang says, “In the process of writing this ancestral tale, I have tried to write sorrow out of Baba’s life.”²⁶⁸ Still, the sorrow must first be remembered and recounted to reclaim the experience. Bhabha describes the margin of hybridity as a space also fixed in time and profoundly affecting the sentiments as it is, “the moment of panic which reveals the borderline experience.”²⁶⁹ However, through the fear the hybrid culture is revealed in the in-between space. Perhaps, as Bhabha suggests, through hybridity, the Third Space is created within the margins that allows for emerging narratives. The Third Space, Bhabha wrote, “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.”²⁷⁰ The hierarchy of cultural markers is subverted by both authors and readers. Comics appropriate the icons, symbols, and

²⁶⁷ Bhabha, 5.

²⁶⁸ Yang, 246.

²⁶⁹ Bhabha, 207.

²⁷⁰ Bhabha, 37.

narrative themes from culture and rehistoricize them, and the final part of the Third Space, to “read anew,” is the responsibility of the reader.

To read temporal and spatial dimensions into Bhabha’s work allows us to look back to Lessing’s observation that visual and verbal art never move into each other’s realms. Instead of suggesting an undefined, borderless canvas, the intersection of poetry and painting, space and time creates a useable Third Space. In Thompson’s *Blankets*, his dreams are the alternative space he inhabits, and art is the alternative space he creates. Considering reality to be too miserable to endure, and heaven unachievable yet desired, dreams and drawing are the spaces he reclaims as his own. After a Sunday school class in which Thompson realizes that his goal is to go to heaven, a page of three panels follows. The panels are placed over a background of clouds, and Craig falls through the three panels, saying, “And I grew up STRIVING for that world...an eternal world...that would wash away my TEMPORARY misery.”²⁷¹ Thus Thompson as a cartoonist creates a Third Space with his art, in order to articulate his dreams. His Third Space lies in between temporariness and permanence, and the transience of dreams can be interwoven with waking moments.

In discussing the role of temporality, Bhabha writes, “Where these temporalities touch contingently, their spatial boundaries metonymically overlapping, at that moment their margins are lagged, sutured, by the indeterminate articulation of the ‘disjunctive’ present.”²⁷² The present does not allow for absolute values, and the juxtaposition of the present with memories, results in a struggle. Thompson convinces himself that drawing is distracting him from God, and he says,

²⁷¹ Figure 3.7. Thompson, 52.

²⁷² Bhabha, 254.

“I’ve wasted my God-given time on ESCAPISM! Dreaming and drawing . . . the most secular and selfish of WORLDLY pursuits.”²⁷³ He escapes to the space between the real world and the spiritual world, depicting his spiritual thoughts in physical terms. Thompson also escapes to the gutters, and the figures in *Blankets* often cross over the boundaries of the panels, invading the space of the gutter, leaving behind the constraints of the narrative. Craig’s panic is captured in the gutter, which enables the narratives to break open and create a new terrain. As hooks proposes, the margin becomes a space of chaos that might turn to panic if not reclaimed.

I have discussed instances in the graphic memoirs in which the gutter forms an empty space, as an available space for author, protagonist, and reader collaboration. However, in some instances the gutter is occupied with elements to be contended with. The reader’s interpretation might be displaced by emerging ideas, rather than allowing the reader to interpret the space in between panels herself as Luna suggests. A disruptive moment occurs when a character’s arm or a speech balloon edges out of the panel. Thompson demonstrates this in *Blankets* with two pages depicting Craig waking up in a new place. He says, “I couldn’t trace the transitions—from day to night to wake to sleep to dream to wake again—.”²⁷⁴ Black gutters separate the small panels forms the background, all of which are bordered with a white gutter, making the lower panels the substance of the ellipses. In the foreground, Craig sits amidst disheveled bed sheets, trying to remember where he is. By obscuring panel borders and the gutter, as well as extending into the page’s framing gutter, the foreground interrupts any logic in the panels behind. This reflects Craig’s disorientation upon waking. Miller says, “The space of the gutter may be invaded by an

²⁷³ Thompson, 58.

²⁷⁴ Figure 3.8. Thompson, 228.

image which bleeds into it... The gutter may be invaded by speech balloons, which will tend to break up the impression of geometrical regularity and introduce an element of disharmony.”²⁷⁵

This invasion of the gutter, not often seen in newspaper comic strips, shows how the gutter is not an impenetrable vacuum. Miller’s key word here, “disharmony” signifies how graphic memoirs often approach topics that exist outside of hegemonic norms. The successful graphic memoir allows a narrative to emerge out of the disharmony.

Thompson also creates a new space in *Blankets*, outside of panels and gutters, in which he is free to draw on and capture his imagination. He says, “An ENTIRE DAY would be consumed by drawing, interspersed with fits of running around outside expending our energy. These were the only WAKEFUL moments of my childhood that I can recall feeling life was sacred or worthwhile.”²⁷⁶ Just as running outside with his brother Phil is an action to claim open space, drawing also claims open space, redefining an imposed narrative through imagination. It is not the majority of Thompson’s life that he recalls being sacred or worthwhile, but rather the marginal or infrequent experiences. Those chaotic moments of creativity and power have opened up space.

Thompson does not express this move towards radical openness until the end, when Craig returns home for Christmas. Surrounded by religious and holiday iconography, Craig says, “For a while, you feel like a ghost - - Not fully materialized, and unable to manipulate your surroundings. Or else, it is the dream that haunts you. You wait with the promise of the next

²⁷⁵ Miller, 86.

²⁷⁶ Thompson, 44.

dream. But the act of waking is dependent on remembering.”²⁷⁷ Craig does not recognize his personal agency, but through creating a protagonist out of himself, Thompson alters his surroundings.

The crucial point here is that the gutters allow for a key aspect of memory, subjective temporality, to be woven through the dominant narrative. Chute writes, “Comics traffic in time and duration, creating temporalities, and often smashing or imbricating temporalities on the page, but it is not a time-based medium, on that has duration as a fixed dimension.”²⁷⁸ McCloud says, “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm to unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality.”²⁷⁹ Memory can move to a jagged, staccato rhythm, and the unconnected moments come together to make a life in retrospect. I would alter McCloud’s statement to say a “perception of reality.” Through the openness, a singular reality evades us.

Bhabha looks to Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* to incorporate the margin into his postcolonial theories.²⁸⁰ Drawing upon Derrida’s discussion of the structure of language, Bhabha’s project is an effort to de-center the origin of identity, through an interpretation of time that makes temporality a series of contingencies, rather than a linear sequence of causal relations. He presents an interpretation of identity outside the static or fixed, as a relationship of

²⁷⁷ Thompson, 573-574.

²⁷⁸ Chute, 21.

²⁷⁹ McCloud, 67.

²⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida says, “We say ‘writing’ for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural ‘writing.’ [...] All this to describe not only the system of notation secondarily connected with these activities but the essence and the content of these activities themselves.” *Of Grammatology*. G.C. Spivak (trans.) (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). 9.

differences, that can be read as an expression of Derridean *différance*. Bhabha opens his chapter, “DissemiNation,” discussing the gathering of people: “Gathering of exiles and *émigrés* and refugees; gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gathering in the ghettos or cafés of city centres...”²⁸¹ While the importance of gathering can be applied in a literal sense to the discussion of imagined communities through newspapers, funny pages, and comic books, here its theoretical sense might fruitfully be foregrounded when considering what happens at the edge of the majority. Echoing the title of his book, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha emphasizes the importance of “locality.” This coincides poignantly with my perception of the gutter as a location and further, as Bhabha rejects hierarchical or binary distinctions. Yang best illustrates hybridity in *Forget Sorrow* as she moves the narrative between America and China, and in between the present and ancestral time.

Yang uses gutters throughout much of *Forget Sorrow*; a notable exception occurs at the beginning, when she gives a summary of her personal and cultural history. These pages are constructed more like a collage, with facts and memories blending together into a composite history. Rather than a defined timeline, the events overlap. The June 3-4, 1989 People’s Liberation Army soldiers firing on the citizens of Beijing is portrayed through a collage of victims, speech balloons, and military.²⁸² The gutter on these pages is only a gutter on the perimeter, framing all the images and speech balloons together. In the course of the narrative this is the time when Yang herself is in limbo, seeking to reclaim the space she occupies, whether within the comics panel or cloistered within the protective walls of her parents’ home.

²⁸¹ Bhabha, 139.

²⁸² Figure 3.9. Yang, 14.

The majority of Yang's gutters are empty, and the rigidly straight and rectilinear boundaries reflect Yang's desire for order and also her father's approval. She shows him her rewritten manuscript and his response is, "Much better. Now logical."²⁸³ Yang's work reflects this equation of logic with quality; the space in between panels is visible only because as a reader I expect it and use it to navigate the page of panels. The location of the gutter falls between the previously identified binaries, and therefore allows for a new hybrid space. By invading, opening, or even eliminating the gutter, the disharmony of these topics can be conveyed visually and textually.

The space of radical openness embodies what is at stake for the cartoonist, as she has agency to portray her own protagonist in the gutter, margin, and periphery. Three unique characteristics of the graphic memoir imbue the medium with non-hegemonic potential. First, the gutter denies a restricting binary of what is included and what is excluded. Second, although rapidly becoming more mainstream, comics as an "alternative" medium displays more radical openness as an expressive form. Finally, the medium's capacity to convey marginal narratives results from the recognizable structural elements and broad audience accessibility. Thus, hooks' call to choose the margin becomes literal and appropriate for the graphic memoir.

Edward W. Soja has commented on the restricting binary, saying, "I find hooks' radical openness and chosen marginality a powerful antidote to the narrowed and aggressive centrism and essentialisms that have deflected most modernist movements based on gender, race, and class into hostile and competitive binary battlegrounds of woman versus man, black versus

²⁸³ Yang, 40.

white, labor versus capital.”²⁸⁴ Not limited by narrow and harmful boundaries in comics, the reader moves in between and outside the constructed cultural categories and can explore the unexpected turns of memory. Yang can explore her identity as both Chinese and American, as a child returning to her parents’ home as an adult, and as a victim and a survivor. She is marginalized by her partner “Rotten Egg,” and her experience echoes hooks’ words, “Everywhere we go there is pressure to silence our voices, to co-opt and undermine them.”²⁸⁵ Through comics, Yang transforms her voice to a moment of conscious reclaiming of the marginal space. As she literally travels to China to visit family, and vicariously travels through her father’s tales, Yang also transforms her voice into something new, born out of opposing forces. Creatively, this literary and artistic interchange between the dominant and marginalized ideologies shows the potential that the graphic memoir possesses in evolving as a medium. Narratively, radical openness expands the limits on stories that can be told, and the gutter can be a liberating and empowering space.

It is perhaps ironic that the conventional techniques of borders and limitation could facilitate “radical openness.” This contradiction is consistent with the nature of comics, as alternative comics have taken the familiar comic strip and comic book, and reinterpreted subversive material, such as sexuality, politics, and religion. Perception of this space is integral to the graphic memoir. Alain Rey has remarked that the essential nature of comics is, “the organized space that cheats between the two dimensions of the format and the perceptive

²⁸⁴ Edward W. Soja. *Thirdspace: journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996). 13.

²⁸⁵ hooks, 148.

suggestion of the world.”²⁸⁶ His pairing of the verbs “organize” and “cheat,” also suggests an intentional recklessness. The perceived organizing nature of the panels is undermined by unexpected iterations. Friedberg has demonstrated how the window, virtual or otherwise, exists in contemporary culture as a multifaceted element, and “allows us [...]to inhabit, in a virtual sense, two or more spaces at once, and equally, two or more times.”²⁸⁷

Edward Said expressed that the freedom to think differently in comics is reflected in this radical openness.²⁸⁸ Said’s introduction to Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* attests to more than a cultural history of comics, or a space to intellectualize a personal medium, but rather the potential for personal transformation both for the cartoonist and the reader. In the graphic memoirs I examine, political, religious, and sexual narratives thrive in the openness, and can be considered anew. However, to grasp the implications of these narratives, we also must consider how we are reading and seeing the surface of comics.

I opened the chapter with Heatley’s *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down* and in this chapter I also incorporate Belle Yang’s *Forget Sorrow: An Ancestral Tale* and Thompson’s *Blankets*. While any graphic memoir could be included for its interpretation of the comics style, these three texts demonstrate the cartoonists’ use of both traditional panels and their manipulation of panels results in a varied presence of the gutter. Each of these works achieves a very different tone through the subject matter, and through the arrangement and interaction of elements on the page.

²⁸⁶ Alain Rey. *Les Spectres de la bande, essai sur la BD*. (Paris: Minuit,1978). 102.

²⁸⁷ Friedberg, 146.

²⁸⁸ “I felt that comics freed me to think and imagine and see differently.” Edward Said. “Homage to Joe Sacco.” *Palestine*. (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2005). i.

Heatley's text is a self-examination into the following areas of his life, divided into chapters: Sex History, Black History, Portrait of My Mom, Portrait of My Dad, and Family History. His self-deprecating analysis makes Heatley seem simultaneously despicable and earnest, all the tiny panels and illustrations coming together to make a composite picture of the artist. Heatley's coming-of-age story never resolves, as the adult Heatley still seems to be grappling with these personal issues. His use of panels reflects the tight, introspective nature of his memories, and action-to-action transitions keep the focus on Heatley as the protagonist.

In comparison, Yang's *Forget Sorrow* uses conventional panels for the most far-reaching story of the three, as she looks to incorporate history, nationality, and tradition into her own autobiography. Yang blends traditional folklore with a popular modern medium. As she shows the graphic memoir to her father, who relates the ancestral stories, Belle says "I love the comics format."²⁸⁹ Speaking of her ancestors, she says, "I want to be able to give voice to people who were forgotten."²⁹⁰ Yang offers more than a "voice," because with images she creates an entire world for people who have been forgotten. Her choice of comics is a testament to her trust in the honesty and uniqueness of the medium, both for herself and others. The structure and dependability of the comics panel returns order to Yang's life as she struggles to escape an abusive boyfriend who has begun stalking her. Documenting her father's family in Manchuria during World War II next to her own life provides context and an element of postmemory, as she

²⁸⁹ Belle Yang. *Forget Sorrow: An Ancestral Tale*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010). 156.

²⁹⁰ Belle, 40.

acutely feels the pain, shame, and regret of situations she has never actually experienced, but relates to her own identity as a victim of abuse.²⁹¹

Finally, Thompson's *Blankets*, a coming-of-age story for the morally tormented Craig, begins with the sexual abuse of the protagonist by a male babysitter and the subsequent guilt Craig feels for not protecting his younger brother from the man. After other shaming experiences with his father and his teacher, Craig says, "As a child, I thought that life was the most horrible world anyone could ever live in, and that there HAD to be something better."²⁹² Thompson then spends his adolescence trying to be a "good Christian," suffering through remorse. After juggling an obsession with God and one with love, as a young adult he can no longer believe in religion, saying, "My faith came crumbling down so easily."²⁹³ His faith is redirected and invested in comics, and *Blankets* earned Thompson the Harvey, Eisner, and Ignatz awards, as well as the Prix de la critique from the Association des Critiques et des journalistes de Bande Dessinée. These awards are significant accolades for an American cartoonist, but also affirmation of autobiographical comics. Thompson's personal experiences may not be remarkable, but it is his storytelling and artwork that are unique, and he was one of the early American cartoonists to produce such a long graphic memoir at 582 pages. Thompson captures an essential theme of the *Bildungsroman*: that the pain of the adolescent may be only consequential to the individual, but it does not make it any less real. Thompson's sweeping illustrations of falling in love may be hyperbolic, but they capture what he believed to be true.

²⁹¹ Hirsch defines postmemory as, "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection." Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22.

²⁹² Thompson, *Blankets*, 38.

²⁹³ Thompson, 550.

In contrast to Heatley's precise style and diminutive figures, Thompson's *Blankets* uses traditional panels, but also has full and partial pages where sweeping illustrations are not contained by borders. Such as the page with Craig in the upper left hand corner and Raina in the lower left hand corner.²⁹⁴ Although they are talking to each other, neither looks at the other, giving the impression they are talking to themselves—even as they share the same space, they seem to be isolated from each other. In between the two figures is a small panel with a hand, and external speech balloons saying, "It feels...lustful."²⁹⁵ The right side of the page contains a long, vertical panel in which a nightmarish figure descends onto Thompson, symbolizing the perceived sinful nature of lust. This combination of panels and the open page creates two different realms, without explanation of where they overlap. The reader is responsible for negotiating the multiple spaces of this page, and for determining the significance of this experience.

Like Heatley's memoir, Thompson's *Blankets* recounts his life from childhood to young adulthood; an arching *Bildungsroman*. However, the tone and characterization of the protagonist diverge between the two cartoonists. While part of dissimilarity concerns their artistic style and individual personalities, much of it is owed to their use of panels. Thompson's open panels, containing sweeping images and shadows that reflect Craig's creative, spiritual, and personal confusion. The panels are open-ended and ambiguous, leaving more to interpretation.

Most illustrations in *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down* are contained within the panels, but asterisks lead to supplementary footnotes at the bottom of the page, subverting the conclusive nature of the panel. Through footnotes, Heatley gives the impression of amending his memories. Although much revision and editing occurs with comics, these afterthoughts and visible revisions

²⁹⁴ Figure 3.6. Thompson, 392.

²⁹⁵ Thompson, 392.

give the impression that Heatley was reckless and hurried with his work. The boundaries of the panels are simultaneously respected and ignored. The function of the footnotes is not solely based on the information conveyed; it also reflects Heatley's personality and mode of thinking as he spends energy over clarifying so as to not be misunderstood.

Compared to Heatley's varying and inconsistent panels, Thompson's text more closely resembles Eisner's *To The Heart of The Storm*, where the panel is often presented and subsequently permeated.²⁹⁶ Eisner constructs his graphic novels with broad illustrations and erratic pacing, in contrast to the uniform panels of comic strips or superhero comics. Eisner used panels in many capacities, as an active element of the narrative rather than merely a scaffold. While Heatley arranges rows and columns of panels, Eisner often arranged rows and columns of grouped images, relying on the reader's familiarity with a panel structure. Panels and gutters become a manifestation of the cartoonist, whether reflecting Heatley's neuroses, Eisner's creative innovative, or Thompson's more vague sense of self-identity. The reader might look to the panel to establish the narrative's tone, or to reveal the cartoonist's creative process. These texts express individuality in the stories told and in the cartoonists' awareness of their relationship with the medium.

Groensteen has argued that, "Entering inside the frame, in order to dissect the image by counting the iconic or plastic elements that compose the image, then studying the methods of articulation for these elements, supposes a profusion of concepts but does not lead to any significantly advanced theory.... On the contrary, we need to approach from on high, from the

²⁹⁶ Eisner. *To The Heart of The Storm*.

level of grand articulation.”²⁹⁷ Hence, analysis should occur from the outside in, when studying the implications of the panels and gutters. The panel not only contains the narrative, it is part of the narrative. Cartoonist Wilfred Santiago says, “Things like panels, gutters, etc. to me are like nouns, verbs, adjectives, or whatever composes a sentence, and a sentence itself can be put together in a variety of way to articulate the same idea.”²⁹⁸ For autobiographical cartoonists, the panels and gutters constitute the language that defines their lives.

In contemporary society, the ubiquitous screen allows the comics panel to assume complex significance. The panel contains figures, forming a window into a world, a wall onto a page, and altogether signifies an icon that can represent something more. Friedberg permits us to see how the presence and function of the panel transcends its medium, and this pliability extends to the gutter. The gutter bears part of the story that requires a reader to complete the autobiographical pact. This space is where the untold parts of the story takes form and draws the reader into complicity. For the graphic memoir, the gutter represents the space that empowers the cartoonist through the act of storytelling, because this is the space that she can inhabit outside of explicit definition and articulation. In its use of the panel and gutter, the graphic memoir might more completely tell narratives that would otherwise be neglected. As hooks suggests, the margin is reclaimed, providing the opportunity for the conscientious reinvention and ownership. Bhabha’s Third Space emerges as a new terrain, bridging cultures, mediums, and narratives.

The panels and gutters differentiate them from illustrated stories in their evocation of nostalgia for daily comic strips, creating expectations for pacing, and in the upset of time and

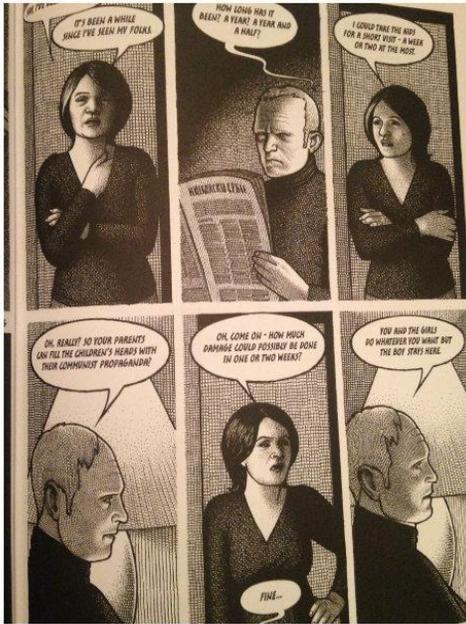
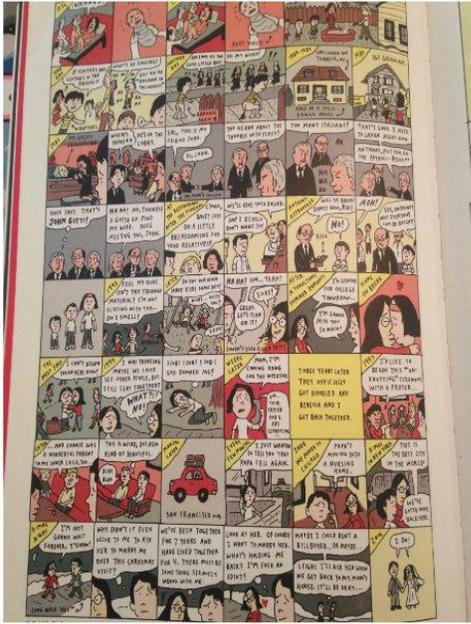
²⁹⁷ Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 4.

²⁹⁸ Frederick Luis Aldama. *Your Brain on Latino Comics*. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2009). 275.

space constraints. Panels and gutters are the common elements between the global versions of the graphic novel. In the graphic memoir, these formal constructions artificially divide a cartoonist's life into individual units, demanding more imagination from the cartoonist. Vacillating between history and memory, as Yang does so beautifully, these cartoonists translate their imagination into comics. The discrepancies between perceived fact and fiction are an inherent part of the story. Speaking of tension within the margins, Bhabha says, "Minority discourse sets the act of emergence in the antagonistic *in-between* of image and sign, the accumulative and the adjunct, presence and proxy."²⁹⁹ The discourse of graphic memoirs has the potential to emerge in between established rhetoric, as it does in comics.

The graphic narrative is an ever-changing medium, reflective of popular culture, elemental characteristics of the comics medium remain crucial. The panel and gutter make graphic memoirs recognizable as comics, an important cultural distinction. Further, the dynamics created by the panel and gutter, not limited by binaries, allow repressed, marginal, and complex narratives to emerge by capturing the complex way in which we store and envision memories.

²⁹⁹ Bhabha, 157.



Top row (L to R):
 Figure 3.1. David Heatley, *My Brain is Hanging Upside Down*, “Kin.”
 Figure 3.2. Craig Thompson, *Blankets*, 167.

Bottom row (L to R):
 Figure 3.3. Heatley, “Sex History.”
 Figure 3.4. Nina Bunjevac, *Fatherland*, “Plan B.”



Top row (L to R):

Figure 3.5. Bunjevac, "Childhood."

Figure 3.6. Thompson, 392.

Bottom row (L to R):

Figure 3.7. Thompson, 52.

Figure 3.8. Thompson, 228.



Figure 3.9. Belle Yang, *Forget Sorrow*, 14.

Chapter 4

The Desperate Artist: Narrative Devices and Silence

“I stopped writing over a month ago: that’s when I left for New York City the first time. So many things happened! I’ve been back to Montreal for ten days now; I am packing up. That’s because I am moving away...”³⁰⁰

In Julie Doucet’s 1999 graphic memoir *My New York Diary*, Doucet intimately tells her story of epilepsy, miscarriage, and professional development as diary entries. As she records events, the narration and dates are contained in text boxes at the top of the panels, and dialogue is enclosed in speech balloons, as one might expect from comics. Doucet, a Québécoise cartoonist, documents her move from Montreal to New York City, and attempts to draw her comics while living in a cluttered apartment with her drug-addled boyfriend. Within black and white, hectic, drawings, the text becomes part of the busy landscape. There are very few panels without any text, and even dialogue-free panels include worded posters on the wall and onomatopoeias amidst the figures. In *My New York Diary*, the chatter never stops; Doucet’s tone is addictive, as she wallows in her Washington Heights apartment in the gritty city. She creates a familiarity that is at once alienating and intimate, cerebral and embodying. As a reader, I am an active participant in this visceral tension. However, I am made anxious by the overwhelming nature of the crowded panels, often unable to differentiate between a dirty apartment and a voice-filled room. My instinctive responses to Julie’s narrative are direct reactions to the manner in which she uses language visually.

³⁰⁰ Julie Doucet. *My New York Diary*. (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 1999). 1.

The speech balloons wrap around characters, echoing the claustrophobic nature of Julie's living situation and the omnipresent fear that she will have an epileptic seizure.³⁰¹ The speech balloons squeeze in between the characters, interrupting the very conversations they are conveying. Characters are rarely unaccompanied by speech balloons, so that the visual representation of language becomes part of each character's portrait. There is no silence in Doucet's life, and as she leaves New York City on Good Friday in 1992, she is unofficially ushered out in the rain by a Catholic marching band, with the sound "POMPOPOPOMPOPOPOMM" filling the panel's space. Alongside her cat's "MEEOW," this is the graphic memoir's last word.³⁰² While the speech balloons are an imposed formal technique by the cartoonist, heavily employed by Doucet they also become an integral aspect of the narrative and therefore part of the cartoonist's personal manifestation. This clamor is what we have come to expect from comics, from the pervasive speech balloon to the superhero's "POW!" The words tell the story, and show the story. Whether typed or hand lettered, contained in balloons or freestanding, or dialogue or sound effects, the text are part of the recognizable comics landscape. However, there is an option to omit the text altogether, since pictures can convey the story alone.

I refer to the absence of words and letters as "silence," although the artifact of the graphic memoir is literally silent, this is the silence in our reading consciousness. This is the silence that allows the blank space and images to convey the full story. While entire graphic memoirs may be silent, with no written language outside of the cover and title page, even a single page or panel

³⁰¹ Figure 4.1. Doucet, *My New York Diary*. 54.

³⁰² Figure 4.2. Doucet, 23.

without text contains the space for the image to take over. As readers, we are not directed by words, and have to adjust for this new way of reading.

I identify silence as a significant presence within graphic memoirs, and examine how silence elucidates memory through the following questions. First, how is silence conveyed visually? To answer this question I look at the formal techniques used in specific texts to indicate lapses in conversation, as well as an absence of all noise, including atmospheric sound. I specifically identify panels with no language present whatsoever. Second, how does this silence operate within a framework of language? If the silence is relaying a story, just as language does, there must be recognizable codes and patterns. Silence is an active part of the verbal matrix, rather than a departure from it. Finally, what does silence transmit from memory that is unique to graphic memoirs? For all these points I address, silence in the graphic memoir is something the cartoonist portrays, and therefore the reader can see.

George Steiner's comparative approach in *Language and Silence* provides a focus on language, with its breadth to consider both the artistic and literary aspects of graphic memoirs. Steiner's cultural history of silence offers possibilities for comics within greater traditions, and identifies silence as a purposeful technique. He has argued that, "until the seventeenth century, the sphere of language encompassed nearly the whole of experience and reality; today, it comprises a narrower domain. It no longer articulates, or is relevant to, all major modes of action, thought, and sensibility."³⁰³ Language's "narrow domain" may constitute a statement itself, within its frame, and its irrelevancy offers an opportunity for amplified silence. Silence in the graphic memoir is not a void or vacuum, but something created by the cartoonist for a

³⁰³ Steiner, 24.

narrative purpose that speaks relevantly to actual experience. Silence is significant in a graphic memoir, as opposed to a novel, because the narrative continues in comics with the pictures.

Steiner says,

We live inside the act of discourse. But we should not assume that a verbal matrix is the only one in which the articulations and conduct of the mind are conceivable. There are modes of intellectual and sensuous reality founded not on language, but on other communicative energies such as the icon or the musical note. And there are actions of the spirit rooted in silence.³⁰⁴

Silence is not generally recognized as a “communicative energy.” Graphic memoirs demonstrate how memory and autobiography remain outside the bounds of the verbal matrix. Silence in graphic memoirs becomes part of the discourse, outside verbal articulations. However, the absence of language techniques depends on a recognition that those things are missing. The text becomes part of the visual landscape, as well as the structural elements used to contain the text. This opens the opportunity for a cartoonist to create something new with language. Green recalls copying the stories from DC’s *Funny Animals* comic books, saying, “the DC comics were more approachable for my imitative plan: to relentlessly copy words and letters from the balloons until pure shape recognition yielded meaning.”³⁰⁵ Green learns the communicative significance of words through the mere shape and presence of the letters, before learning to read the actual language. While reading comics, we see letters and word balloons, and know they are carrying a message before we even read the language. Similarly, when we see a page with no letters or word balloons, there is also a message being conveyed.

Formal Techniques of Silence

³⁰⁴ Steiner, 12.

³⁰⁵ Green, 51.

The speech balloon may be the most familiar structural technique found in comics, and in *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner refers to speech balloons as “desperation devices.”³⁰⁶ The device is referred to as “desperate” because of its contrived nature, although it is often necessary to convey conversation and to offset dialogue within the sometimes frantic and busy space of the comics. Speech balloons allow for spatial localization and temporal ordering, and Thierry Groensteen says, “Everyone lives in time with their speech balloon.”³⁰⁷ The speech balloon situates a character, and anchors her to an ordered sequence within the panel. In the most basic sense, they serve as divisive structures, separating text and image. However, this is only the immediate result, as the speech balloons account for only one instance of sound in the graphic memoir.

Miller identifies five types of text in comics: “the peritext, to be found on the covers and fly leaves, the narrative voice-over or *récitatif*, the dialogue, the sound effects or *onomatopées*, and any texts which exist within the fictional world.”³⁰⁸ The peritext helps define the text as an autobiography, as explained by Lejeune, without seeking external sources.³⁰⁹ The dialogue, especially when signified with speech balloons, is the dominant mode of storytelling in comics. As in other language-based arts such as theatre and fiction, dialogue occurs between characters, or may break the fourth wall by addressing the reader. Onomatopoeia create the illusion of actual noise emitting from the page, and take up significant space within the panel. The “POW” of

³⁰⁶ Will Eisner. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles & Practices of the World’s Most Popular Art Form*. 1985. (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1994).

³⁰⁷ Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 125.

³⁰⁸ Miller, 97. These discourse classifications, specifically peritext, can be traced back to Gérard Genette. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. (University of Cornell Press, 1983).

³⁰⁹ Lejeune. *Le Pacte Autobiographique*. 26.

Superman's punch carries emphasis, not unlike the unexpected and jarring "RING! RING!" of Doucet's telephone. The sound effects also attribute to the fantastic nature of graphic narratives, even if the setting is a dingy urban apartment and the sounds are commonplace.

Texts within the fictional world include book titles, such as the father's library in Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and the posters on the wall of Doucet's sculpture class. Texts within the fictional world are especially interesting where they serve to contextualize culture based on existing artifacts, or they can be imaginary details making the world more eccentric, even in an autobiographical account. These details create a multi-layered world. The voice-over narration, *recitative*, is often found in a text box; it is prevalent and notable in the graphic memoir because it is the most direct access to the cartoonist's imagination.

While the early graphic memoirs, such as Green's *Binky Brown* and Pekar's *American Splendor*, relied heavily on text and dialogue, more recent graphic memoirs have undertaken the sophisticated use of silence. The underground cartoonists were responding to the "silencing" of comics by the Comics Code and Wertham by being irreverently loud.³¹⁰ *MAD Magazine* and *Wimmin's Comix* were visually experimental and narratively provocative, providing a foundation for a medium with few taboos. Through independently published texts, or comics formatted like magazines instead of comic books, these cartoonists were able to circumvent restrictions on sexuality, graphic language, and political propaganda. However, as the censorship of comics wanes, cartoonists have voluntarily created "quiet" in their comics, instead of reacting to censorship. These graphic memoirs weave silence and language to expose new narratives and better communicate memories that are difficult to articulate, and experiences that leave the cartoonist feeling isolated or censored.

³¹⁰ Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 2004.

Rather than consider this the absence of sound, I want to think about it as the presence of silence. This is important in the graphic memoir because it allows the cartoonist to portray those moments he or she may not be able to explain, or to accurately depict moments that were literally void of sound. Given the freedom of not articulating everything in words, the cartoonist can share the confusion or ambivalence they may be feeling about a specific experience. As is the case for many of the artists I discuss here, silence becomes a device to emphasize the isolation they experience through illness and trauma. Silence is not merely the absence of words and letters, but it is also the inclusion of intentional space.

In their respective works, McCloud, Groensteen, and Miller focus on the icons, semiotics, or symbiotic relationship between media. While they mention the absence of sound, this has not been a distinctive focus. In her book, *Graphic Japan: from woodblock and zen to manga and kawaii*, Natalie Avella writes of literature, “Silence is used in the same way that blank space is used in Japanese art or pauses in traditional Japanese music.”³¹¹ Avella suggests that silence is fundamental to all Japanese art, hence only logical that it would appear in comics. Stuart Levy, the founder of TokyoPop, has remarked that, “The Japanese have a different perspective on silence, whether it’s in music, in speech or even in a meeting. Silence can be just as important and can say as much as sound.” He notes that in manga films translated for English-speaking audiences, background sound is often added to an otherwise silent section in a process called “sweetening.”³¹²

³¹¹ Natalie Avella, *Graphic Japan: from woodblock and zen to manga and kawaii*. (East Sussex, England: Rotovision, 2004). 112.

³¹² Avella, *Graphic Japan*.

I focus on the representation of silence in Western graphic memoirs because silence has a stigma in the US and Western Europe, and so is intentionally burdensome in graphic memoirs. The awkward silence, long pause, and empty speech balloon have the potential to involve the reader, because they make the reader uncomfortable. However, sometimes silence conveys a message better than words. Steiner observes that, “As Western consciousness has become less dependent on the resources of language to order experience and conduct the business of the mind, the words themselves seem to have lost some of their precision and vitality. This is, I know, a controversial notion. It assumes that language has a ‘life’ of its own in a sense that goes beyond metaphor.”³¹³ That Steiner focuses on consciousness, rather than action, encompasses the experience of translating memory. Memory is not always articulated in language.

It would be presumptuous to assume that all life experiences can be translated into language. Silence at least conveys this complexity, and the possibility of untranslatable facets. This is a sophisticated mode of communication: the admission of the impossibility of communication. The cartoonist conveys literal silence, or pregnant moments in time, and the possibility that the story cannot be told with existing language.³¹⁴ Lessing discusses how visual art is limited, and “if the artist can never make use of more than a single moment in everchanging nature [...] then it is evident that this single moment and the point from which it is

³¹³ Steiner, 25.

³¹⁴ “Visual art, in order to achieve maximum dynamism, has to choose the ‘pregnant moment,’ the moment most suggestive of the entire situation. The word ‘pregnant’ has come to have a life of its own in Lessing criticism in English; it was used by many translators...to render the German *fruchtbar* and *pregnant*... This phantom pregnancy is a good symbol of what Lessing is describing: the moment most likely to contain forces that can be continued in the imagination of the spectator. In visual art, therefore, a covert narrative force is always present.” G. E. Lessing. “Laocoön,” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001). 553.

viewed cannot be chosen with too great a regard for its effect.”³¹⁵ Lessing’s fascinating consideration allows us to consider how the cartoonist specifically chooses silent pregnant moments. The images of Bechdel hovering above her father’s arms are examples of this pregnant moment. A beautiful moment, heavy with meaning, but before she falls or disappears into the surface of the water. Each of these images is accompanied by a textbox.³¹⁶

Green discusses his use of the textbox, or what Miller calls the *récitatif*, in *Binky Brown*:

My appropriation of the comics form relied heavily on taking the textbox, usually placed at the top of each panel (for brief directives such as “Later,” or perhaps, “After the serum took effect”), and making it into the omniscient author’s bully pulpit. This convention set apart a voice of continuity and alleged sanity, creating a double vision that mirrored the duality which most sufferers of obsessive compulsive disorder actually experience as they secretly patrol, clean, count, twirl, twist, pray, chant and conduct secret rites of expiation while in public. This double vision is shared by the cartoon medium, which combines words and graven images. Sometimes the narrative box contradicts the action below, and other times it clarifies it. Below the narrative box, characters strut and pace in apposition with each other, just as the writers deals with them.³¹⁷

Whether to clarify or obscure the action within, the presence of the textbox is as familiar as the caption on a photograph. The caption and the textbox both provide the assurance of an authoritative voice, and supplemental information. However, within comics, the textbox pulls the reader outside of the narrative, as an authoritative interruption. As Green suggests, it creates the illusion of an external objective voice explaining the subjective memories contained within the box. Doucet uses the textbox throughout, mostly as a factual point of reference, like headings in a diary reading, “Saturday, April 21st 1991. Maybe once a week, we go out, down in the Lower

³¹⁵ Lessing, 558.

³¹⁶ See Figures 2.3 and 2.4. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 3 and 232.

³¹⁷ Green, 54.

East Side, or around there...tonight, 'Karen Black' is playing."³¹⁸ However, when Doucet depicts herself alone the story cannot progress with the usual dialogue, such as when she moves away from her boyfriend and rents a room with strangers, Doucet uses textboxes to directly address the reader.³¹⁹ Rather than undermine Doucet's authority, this inconsistent use of textboxes creates an air of unmediated chaos, and a tension arises between the dialogue and the voice-over narration. Speaking of the depiction of trauma in comics, Chute says, "In comics, absence and excess brush up against each other."³²⁰ Expectations regarding reliability are challenged and the reader is surprised, despite being familiar with comics conventions.

Green is significant in comics history because he surprised audiences with his autobiographical irreverence and led audiences to expect unreliable protagonists in comics through exaggeration and acknowledged mismemory. Green openly expresses his observations about religion and sex, and he is prolific with the speech balloon, which aligns him with traditional comics. There are only three panels without any language in his entire graphic memoir, found at the beginning under the heading "Once upon a time."³²¹ Green implies that these three panels—of Binky bouncing a ball with a stick, before breaking a statue of the Virgin Mary—represent the only times of innocence. Once Green breaks the statue of the Virgin Mary, he is damned. Once he is damned, the stream of dialogue and analysis is unrelenting. The presence of language sets the tone both visually and narratively throughout *Binky Brown*. Green's term "double vision," reflects how text works throughout graphic memoirs as it tells a

³¹⁸ Doucet, 10.

³¹⁹ Doucet, 52.

³²⁰ Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 223.

³²¹ Green, 1.

story, and shows a story.³²² The text describes and narrates the illustration, and is itself an illustration.

In contrast to Doucet and Green's respective text-heavy works, David Small's 2009 graphic memoir *Stitches* includes many full pages and individual panels throughout without text.³²³ *Stitches* is an example of how poignant graphic memoirs can be when portraying illness, as they capture the insecurity, isolation, and fear. Just as the presence and presentation of language is a manifestation of Doucet's epilepsy and Green's obsessive-compulsive disorder, silence in *Stitches* is a manifestation of Small's throat cancer and repressive family. While the text's voices grow quiet, the visual imagery resonates. The nonverbal language becomes part of the visual landscape, and therefore silence also becomes visual. The silence is simultaneously visual and a literal absence of language. The absence of language makes the reader more aware of the role of language in the story.

In his collection *Language and Silence*, Steiner writes that it is, "For the silence, which at every point surrounds the naked discourse, seems, by virtue of Wittgenstein's force of insight, less a wall than a window."³²⁴ Steiner refers to Ludwig Wittgenstein's challenge proposed in Wittgenstein's first work, *Tractatus* to the idea that a relationship must exist between the word and the fact.³²⁵ Steiner wrote, "Wittgenstein compels us to wonder whether reality can be *spoken*

³²² "Double vision" also could be a reference to the self-portrait, seeing both oneself and the protagonist, who are the same person.

³²³ David Small. *Stitches: A Memoir* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).

³²⁴ Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 21.

³²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. 1921. (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010).

of, when speech is merely a kind of infinite regression, words being spoken of other words.”³²⁶

Wittgenstein grows less rigid in his approach to language in later works, suggesting that the meaning of language is found in its usage, as proposed in *Philosophical Investigations*.³²⁷

Whether language is insufficient for a narrative, or if the usage bears the meaning, Steiner’s reading of Wittgenstein is relevant for graphic memoirs because the conventions of comics often work as windows, facilitating further insight, although as a visible entity. This metaphor echoes Leon Battista Alberti’s insistence that painters treat a wall as a window.³²⁸ Through the absence of written language, the tensions between text and image become more apparent. Words take on a visual aspect in the graphic memoir, so in their absence, the images assume the storytelling role.

To contextualize the idea of silence in graphic memoirs within the greater comics tradition, it might be mapped to the earliest American comic strips. The use of silence is reminiscent of comic strips such as George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*, which began running in the *New York Evening Journal* in 1913.³²⁹ Herriman created surreal landscapes that capture the imagination, often with wordless scenes stretching across desert horizons. Richard F. Outcault introduced the Yellow Kid with the popular *Hogan’s Alley* strip in 1894, in *New York World*. The Yellow Kid communicates only through slang printed on his shirt, thereby appearing as a

³²⁶ Steiner, 21.

³²⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*. 1953. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

³²⁸ Alberti, *On Painting*.

³²⁹ Patrick McDonnell. *Krazy Kat: The Comic Art of George Herriman*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999).

mute and, suggested, illiterate immigrant.³³⁰ While *Hogan's Alley* is not entirely silent, the creative use of language introduced possibilities for later comics. The success of modern visual storytelling could be attributed to silent film, with early comic strips, such as Frederick Burr Hopper's 1900 series *Happy Hooligan*, reflecting the physical gags and exaggerated body movements of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. This development in graphic memoirs also indicates the evolving comics medium as cartoonists build upon and look back to early graphic artists.

Another incarnation of the silent graphic novel are texts consisting entirely of woodcuts. The most prominent of artists working in this medium include Laurence Hyde, Frans Masereel, Giacomo Patri, and Lynn Ward.³³¹ The respective American, Belgian, Italian, and Canadian artists created these socially conscious works, often with overt Communist or labor movement agendas. For example, Hyde's 1951 *Southern Cross* specifically criticized the U.S. for H-bomb testing in the South Pacific.³³² These works were almost completely silent, the impact coming from dramatic and sparse images. The influence of the black and white inking, the heavy shadows, and the sharp angles can be seen in the work of cartoonists such as Doucet and David B., the latter of which, "the absence of perspective in [...] graphic style recalls medieval imagery, and the black backgrounds and intricate symbols arising out of his intense reading of *fantastique* and occult texts give it an esoteric feel."³³³ This spectacular imagery with no language conveys

³³⁰ Robert C. Harvey. *Children of The Yellow Kid: Evolution of the American Comic Strip*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

³³¹ George A. Walker, editor. *Graphic Witness: Four Wordless Graphic Novels by Frans Masereel, Lynd Ward, Giacomo Patri and Laurence Hyde*. (Ontario: Firefly Books, 2007).

³³² Laurence Hyde. *Southern Cross: A Novel of the South Seas*. 1951. (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2007).

³³³ Miller, 62.

gravity, and the style has been adopted with pen and ink rather than woodcuts by contemporary cartoonists.

In 1930, Milt Gross wrote *He Done Her Wrong: The Great American Novel (with no words)*,³³⁴ a work that moved away from the European artistic aesthetic of Hergé and towards the New York-centric comics industry that would soon be inhabited by Eisner, and eventually by Spiegelman. Gross plays on the expectation that a “novel” is literary, and is joking about the possibility that the great American novel could possibly include, or consist entirely of, comics. Gross was very aware of language, as he often used Yiddish and New York dialect in his comics.³³⁵ He was influenced by the integral relationship between comics and literacy, as comics often were marketed to immigrant or illiterate populations in urban areas. Ernst is an undeniable influence for cartoonists using graphic storytelling for their autobiographies, and his is an example of art that directly influenced cartoonists besides newspaper comic strips and superhero comic books. Cartoonists working after World War II pulled their inspiration from a variety of artists, and media.

Ernst’s *Une semaine de bonté (A Week of Kindness)* was inspired by wood engravings, published in illustrated novels, science journals or nineteenth-century catalogues. The only text present in *Une semaine de bonté* is that of the titles at the beginning of each section. To connect the days of the week, Ernst used a subtitle to associate each one with an “element,” a shared symbol with the images to follow, and an “example,” a figure or theme repeated in subsequent

³³⁴ Milt Gross. *He Done Her Wrong: The Great American Novel (with no words)*. 1930. (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2005).

³³⁵ Ari Kelman, editor. *Is Diss a System? A Milt Gross Comic Reader*. (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

pages. In the last book the days are accompanied by selected quotations from Marcel Schwob, Jean Arp, André Breton, Paul Eluard and other Surrealist writers. *Une semaine de bonté* is a grotesque convergence of Victorian sensibilities and nightmares, reflecting the building tensions in Europe and the promise of a nightmarish future. It is a manifestation of Ernst's imagination and fears of European dictatorships. Without language, the juxtaposition of images is open to interpretation. While the visual style is influential, the absence of language is self-conscious and used as a part of the work's discourse. *Une semaine de bonté* asks the reader to determine what meanings silence and, subsequently, language denote in a global, multilingual world faced with the trauma of war. By appropriating disparate material, Ernst radically changed the original message of these images, and in doing so increased their impact. The quotations at the end bring the reader back to consciousness, from the preceding nightmarish scenes.

In *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, Marianne Hirsch writes, "The challenge for the postmemorial artist is precisely to find the balance that allows the spectator to enter the image and to imagine the disaster, but that simultaneously disallows an overly appropriative identification that would make the distances disappear and thus create too available, too easy an access to this particular past."³³⁶ This balance is what makes *Une semaine de bonté* so successful as a wartime narrative, as it conveys the horror but does not allow the fantasy of identifying with a protagonist. The absence of language is integral to this postmemorial dynamic, because it demands the reader engage with the silence of illness, trauma, or isolation.

³³⁶ Marianne Hirsch. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

In 2006 Shaun Tan created the beautiful graphic narrative *The Arrival*, which follows an immigrant from the character's make-believe homeland to a new country.³³⁷ While one might assume the destination to be New York City, the elements of fantasy make this story more universal, and reflect Tan's experience with heterogeneous ethnic and national identities. However, this book is only autobiographical through interpretation of Tan's biography, and is not articulated within the work. The ambiguity allows the narrative to be more collectively inspired. In the Artist's Note at the end of *The Arrival*, Tan writes, "Much of this book was inspired by anecdotal stories told by migrants of many different countries and historical periods, including my father who came to Western Australia from Malaysia in 1960."³³⁸ However, the author does not want the narrative tied to any particular anecdote. There is an imaginary language in *The Arrival* that resembles hieroglyphics, but no legible text within it. The resulting silence allows for a broader scope of interpretation.

Groensteen provides a substantial list of what he calls "mute comics" in the Western tradition, and writes,

The permanence—and the present vitality—of this tradition does not prevent some researchers from asserting that 'what distinguishes a comic from a cycle of frescoes is the fact that the written words are essential to the understanding of the story.' An amusing detail—and indicative of his blindness—the author next produced, in support of this observation, a *Krazy Kat* page in which the texts were masked, without seeming to notice that, unfortunately for him, the narration, developed in eleven images, remained perfectly intelligible despite the verbal amputation!³³⁹

³³⁷ Shaun Tan. *The Arrival*. (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2006).

³³⁸ Tan, *The Arrival*, "Artist's Note."

³³⁹ Groensteen, 15.

The distinction of “mute” is misleading, because it suggests something cannot be communicated, or language has otherwise been disabled. In Groensteen’s observation of its use, the adjective removes the communicative power of silence because he is suggesting that in mute comics, the images are the only communicative element on the page. While definitions of comics commonly demand both images and text, and I would argue a synoptic relationship lies between image and text, the written word can be an “amusing detail” within comics. Fundamentally, the medium does not demand verbal language, but rather is a discourse integrated with the visuals.

Steiner has pointed to the importance of cultural perceptions of silence. For Buddhism and Taoism he says, “The highest, purest reach of the contemplative act is that which has learned to leave language behind it,” and, “It is only by breaking through the walls of language that visionary observance can enter the world of total and immediate understanding.”³⁴⁰ While Small is forced into silence in his graphic memoir, David B. chooses the moments to leave language behind, selecting times when he is alone and focuses on his own understanding, as opposed to attempting to define or analogize. In these instances, the silence is a calm and positive space, but compared to Jean-Christophe’s unspoken torment of seizures, the tension lies within the inconsistency of silence. This raises the question of whether the silence is imposed or chosen, a distinction made clear by the tone of the panel. Is there anything that cannot be communicated without language?

In the sixteenth century, before the age of Milton, scholars held on to “the belief that all truth and realness—with the exception of a small, queer margin at the very top—can be housed

³⁴⁰ Again, the term “wall” arises in reference to language. The walls and windows of language manifest themselves visually in comics, making comics an interesting case study for the tangible expressions of language. Steiner, 12.

inside the walls of language.”³⁴¹ This belief in language is comforting, but what about this “small, queer margin”? Graphic memoirs allow for this margin to be revealed, outside of the walls of language; that which cannot be translated into verbal language, or is otherwise unacceptable in hegemonic discourse, finds a means by which to be communicated.

Comics have the potential to capture the isolation, uncertainty, and sometimes-literal silence of illness, such as in Nina Bunjevac’s 2014 *Fatherland*, David B.’s 2002 *Epileptic*, and Small’s 2009 *Stitches*.³⁴² While there are commonalities across these texts, the nature, cause, and visual representation of the silence are different in each, which indicates that “silence” is not a uniform technique, but malleable just as language and visual representation. The progression through these works move from the vacuum of despair and grief in *Fatherland*, to the selectively quiet *Epileptic*, and concluding with the deafeningly silent *Stitches*.

Bunjevac’s *Fatherland* opens with Nina persuading her mother, Sally, to talk about her father, Peter, and this storytelling becomes the frame for the family story. The flashbacks then transport the reader between Yugoslavia and Canada in 1975, as a familial cycle of abuse and alcoholism estranges Peter from his wife and daughters, and pushes Nina’s father to extreme and violent patriotism. The tragic conclusion is Peter’s accidental death, while constructing a terrorist bomb, but it is the hopelessness that leads to such events that is devastating. Silence is the response when characters experience deep grief, and Bunjevac pulls the reader into the empty and heavy space.

³⁴¹ Steiner, 14.

³⁴² Nina Bunjevac. *Fatherland*. (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2014). David B., *L’Ascension du haut mal*. (Paris: L’Association. 2002). David B., *Epileptic*. Translated by Kim Thompson. (New York: Pantheon, 2006).

In *Epileptic*, French cartoonist David B. copes with his brother's severe epilepsy and his family's obsessive search for a cure.³⁴³ *Epileptic* follows David B. into adulthood as he seeks autonomy, rather than be defined by his brother's illness. The two sources of silence I have identified are David's when the narration and dialogue ceases, and that of his older brother, Jean-Christophe. For David the silence is internal; for Jean-Christophe it is external. David B. is clearly influenced by Ernst, and employs the surreal technique of juxtaposed images as well as dreams and nightmares.

Finally, in a skillful display of silence in comics, *Stitches* chronicles Small's childhood in Detroit, his cancer diagnosis, and the subsequent surgery that leaves him mute. He also copes with the dysfunction in his family, including how his mother's closeted sexuality affects their relationship. This sparsely articulated story often employs reflecting and parallel impulses as Small examines his own illness as part of a larger familial pathology. The lack of language in his home is the internal silence, and Small's inability to speak the external silence. The conflict lies in the incongruence between the two spheres of language, where nothing is communicated between characters.

In all of these graphic memoirs, the protagonist finds herself alienated from others, and specifically from family. Silence is most deliberately conveyed through the absence of text on the page or in the panel, and the glaring lack of speech balloons, text boxes, and linguistic narrative. However, there are other formal techniques that demonstrate a profound silence, including black backgrounds, repeating panels, and extreme close-ups. Formally, these

³⁴³ "In short, 'Epileptic' constitutes something new: a graphic intellectual history. A design-oriented history of ideas." Rick Moody. "*Epileptic*: Disorder in the House." *The New York Times*. January 23, 2005.

techniques reflect how silence is perceived by contemporary society. Does the audience consider silence morbid, ineffective, oppressive, or peaceful?

Fatherland

Bunjevac finds the silence in *Fatherland* in the secrets her father keeps, the history she doesn't know, and the grief and isolation that runs throughout her family. She tracks the history of alcoholism and abuse through her family, as it becomes cyclical through war and poverty. Bunjevac's father is a complex character, and she develops both sympathy and judgment for the man who never speaks about his own pain, and she leaves this aspect of the story in pictures.³⁴⁴ Following his mother's death, Peter has just overheard the ladies in the town expressing disgust towards his behavior, and suggest that his cruelty is the result of an abusive father who was killed in a Serbian concentration camp during World War II and his mother dying of tuberculosis. As Peter stands alone against the wall, the reader senses his extreme loneliness, isolation, and alienation. I am appalled by the act of putting the cat's paws to the fire and, without language, the lack of affect is conveyed. This extreme behavior by a child is disconcerting, and a foreshadowing of the future sadness and tragedy.

Throughout *Fatherland*, Bunjevac uses silence in this way when people are hopeless and overwhelmed by pain, whether it is loneliness, heartbreak, or physical trauma. Reiterating Bal's assertion that some memories are too traumatic in the retelling, through silence Bunjevac does not have to articulate the memory, and she does not have to limit the experience. Without language, I am left to cultivate the emotions absent in the frames with Peter burning the cat,

³⁴⁴ Figure 4.3. Bunjevac, *Fatherland*. "Childhood."

which engages me personally with this very sad child and, subsequently, with Nina. Similar silent panels are used before Nina's mother Sally received the telegram informing her of Peter's death, and outside of the shed where the men are building the deadly bomb. There is enough language preceding these pages to provide context, but without reducing these moments to a cliché or over-analyzed moment.

The overarching narrative in *Fatherland* is that of home, and the pervasive history that bleeds through a family, similar to Spiegelman's recognition that "My Father Bleeds History." However, despite a transnational narrative across Canada and 1975 Yugoslavia, there is little discussion of language, and instead a brief history of conflict in Yugoslavia.³⁴⁵ Nina's childish perspective and the movement between the two countries give the illusion of proximity that doesn't exist. Moments or that might not be translatable in the other language are left silent, and this reflects Nina's experience across cultures.

The most poignant use of silence is at the end, when Peter's sister Mara is told that her younger brother has died while building a bomb with other Serbian nationalists. Instead of language, Mara leans over, in a position of recognizable grief. Her image is then translated to a silhouette, and in silent panel after silent panel, she ascends to a hole in the sky, met by the silhouette of a small child that one can assume is a young Peter.³⁴⁶ The repetitive silent panels convey the message in the absence of language, and the reader sees that the resolution of *Fatherland* is only silence without the hope of happiness because there is no way to reclaim the family tradition of death, and Bunjevac creates a tragic sense of finality.

³⁴⁵ Similar to what Antonio Altarriba's *The Art of Flying* does for Spain, *Fatherland* provides often-neglected history for the Balkan region throughout and after World War II.

³⁴⁶ Figure 4.4-4.7. Bunjevac, *Fatherland*. "Exile."

Epileptic

David B.'s life is shaped by his brother's epilepsy, and his parents' desperate attempts to heal Jean-Christophe. During the family's stint living in the macrobiotic commune, David says, "Soon, the entire commune is running entirely on guilt. The society we left behind has recreated itself. We have a macrobiotic book, macrobiotic judges, macrobiotic cops..." The commune reacts to Jean-Christophe's seizures with repulsion, and David proclaims, "All this hypocrisy comes as an enormous shock to me. I want to murder them all!"³⁴⁷ He assumes language to be truthful and transparent, but experience reveals that language can be misleading. Through his disillusionment, David makes judgments, scrutinizes, and provides a mythology for the situations of his life. The moments of silence in the narrative feel like a rest, a break from the intensity of the rhetoric of illness and survival.

The matrix of communication and cures that surround the family is both physical, with acupuncture and attempts to control the body through macrobiotics, and spiritual, as David's mother takes this opportunity to reach out to her deceased father and to find out what Jean-Christophe did in a past life to deserve his current life. However, despite these lifestyles and situations outside of the mainstream, Jean-Christophe's verbal matrix alienates him from society, as he openly fantasizes about Hitler and Nazism. While the two brothers draw battle scenes together, their discourses soon diverge so that the boys only converge again in David's dreams.

Silence in the graphic memoir allows for the space of ambiguity, even when the story is contextualized by factual details. David opens his autobiography by saying, "The Algerian War

³⁴⁷ David B., 107.

ended two years ago, but I'm not even aware of its occurrence yet. I do know that De Gaulle is the President of the Republic."³⁴⁸ David B. juxtaposes historical context with the reality of his awareness: there was a war, but he is only a child. A tension lies between what he knew then and what he knows now, and the ignorance and naivety is the most telling. While David B. uses dates, locations, and names to provide authenticity, he slips in between the worlds of dreams and wakefulness. In dreams is where he faces the experiences that can only be authenticated by memory, and where silence can take the place of facts.

The use of text in *Epileptic* indicates David's need to entertain and tell stories. His sister Florence calls him a "professor of stories."³⁴⁹ The constant noise is the protagonist's effort to escape the toll of his brother's illness. The narration also imposes order on chaotic memories, trying to create meaning between panels when the story is not as coherent. David B. attempts to "house" his life within language, but he cannot find the language to understand epilepsy or the impact it has on his family.

Just as the linguistic narrative in graphic memoirs can be internal or external, so can silence. David tries to imagine Jean-Christophe's thoughts and imagination during a seizure, and pictures chaos. Externally, however, the disease silences Jean-Christophe: he cannot speak, and everyone around him stares, speculates, and expresses disgust. Jean-Christophe reveals a quiet that is not calm. David says, "I'm going to go to sleep, but where is he gone to? Death? Unconsciousness? Is he dreaming? Is he in another dimension?"³⁵⁰ David tries to relate Jean-

³⁴⁸ David B., 3.

³⁴⁹ David B., 1.

³⁵⁰ David B., 179.

Christophe's experience to something he knows, something he can articulate: dreams. The lived experience of epilepsy is untranslatable for David B., for language does not suffice.

A common device in graphic memoirs involves the cartoonist sharing her or his dreams to expand upon the depiction of their own psyche, relying on the absurdity or insight of dreams when daily explanations fall short. David B., Bunjevac, and David Small all incorporate their dreams as part of the narrative. The reader understands that these dreams occur when the protagonist was asleep, and presumably quiet. Thus, the graphic memoir becomes an opportunity for the cartoonist to translate an internal memory into an external one, unbound by verisimilitude.

David has a dream about his brother's face, the episode that he entitles, "the Face," dated March 25, 1998.³⁵¹ The dream's start is indicated with this title and text boxes, but as Jean-Christophe's face morphs, language disappears. In a series of three text boxes, David says, "I see my brother's face turn misshapen," then, "As if an invisible adversary were crushing it under his blows," and finally, "Each blow produces a horrific sound."³⁵² No sound is made in the remaining six panels, although Jean-Christophe's head and face grow increasingly misshapen. The ravages of the disease have overwhelmed any ability to explain. The silence is emphasized with the repetition of panels, as well as the grotesque nature of the nightmare.

Graphic memoirs can show the absence of language, rather than describe it, which achieves an entirely different tone. David has also lost language in this scene, emphasizing the impact Jean-Christophe's epilepsy has on the family because the visual impact overwhelms, and

³⁵¹ David B., 343.

³⁵² David B., 343. Figure 4.8. *Epileptic*. 278.

repulses attempts of verbal definition. The visual, the silent external, is all David has to understand epilepsy. In these repetitive panels, time seems to be lapsing, but the space is the same. The panels also grow increasingly dark, as Jean-Christophe descends further in David's dream. Most importantly, Jean-Christophe never says anything, and stares straight ahead. Just as David is silenced by horror, Jean-Christophe's mouth is physically covered over, violently denying him speech.

For David, daydreams, dreams, and nightmares spring from the strange dynamic of David's family, and he says, "Unbeknownst to me, this flood of absurdities takes root in my brain. Images are born."³⁵³ All attempts at curing Jean-Christophe's epilepsy manifest as absurd dreams. These dreams are the mental and artistic escapes for David B., and reflect Ernst's creative and graphic techniques. With visual references to the surrealist artist, David's psyche is rooted firmly in the conflicted European consciousness of the twentieth century. Dreams in the graphic memoir reflect a conflation of experiences, and allow the protagonist to technically remain silent as he sleeps, relieving him of linguistic responsibility. David can dream disturbing dreams about his brother, without actually saying that he wants his brother silenced. Miller has noted that, in David B.'s work, "Subjectivity breaks through into representations of external reality as the narrator's turmoil is figured by nightmares in which typhoons or demons invade his bedroom, or by the biblical or historical battle scenes which he draws obsessively."³⁵⁴ Likewise, reality has become perverse for David B.; without a definitive reason for the epilepsy, absurdity

³⁵³ David B., 117.

³⁵⁴ Miller, 61.

is the only option. David escapes to an imaginative world, and without the incessant dialogue he is more apt to pause his voice-over narration.

Stepping into his surreal world, whether sleeping or daydreaming, David B. includes a silent panel that is predominantly black.³⁵⁵ At the back left corner are the three anthropomorphized animals, standing in a clearing in the woods, gathered around a fire. They stare after David, who is in the bottom right corner, facing the reader. While he gives an excuse for not joining them in the preceding panel, “I need to be alone,” he does not talk or look at them in the last panel. Without language, the black background seems to stretch endlessly, while simultaneously indicating no lapsed time. Although the captions throughout *Epileptic* maintain a pace, in this panel the time is elastic and undefined. There is simultaneous movement and stillness. As Lessing wrote, “Objects or parts of objects which exist in space are called bodies. Accordingly, bodies with their visible properties are the true subjects of painting. Objects or parts of objects, which follow one another, are called actions. Accordingly, actions are the true subjects of poetry.”³⁵⁶ This panel captures the potential of both painting and poetry, as the bodies move through space.

The tension between image and text is David B.’s understanding of the silence in epilepsy, and the revelation of the complicated space between illness and health. The languages of medicine and cures fail, so David B. creates his own narrative often through dreams, nightmares, and elaborate fantasy scenes. Indicating the enduring influence of the times shared with Jean-Christophe drawing and imagining battles and new worlds, David B.’s oeuvre of work

³⁵⁵ Figure 4.9. David B., 276.

³⁵⁶ Lessing, 565.

bears a sense of escape through surrealism. In contrast, in Small's *Stitches*, the language of medicine and illness is the only rhetoric the author possesses in order to communicate.

Stitches

The discourse in *Stitches* is predominantly non-verbal, and language transports the reader to scenes outside of the immediate visual narrative. David uses language to provide background for the silence we see on the page. When David is in the hospital for throat surgery, his mother asks if he would like anything. David says, "Well then, there is something you can get. I forgot to bring along the book I was reading. But oh, wait. I forgot. You stole that from my room and you burned it up."³⁵⁷ He is speaking of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, a verbose story of torrid secrets. David seeks the language denied him, which manifests in several ways. A full page of silent panels follows this conversation. The discourse in *Stitches* is hostile, fragmented, and sparse; the silence stretches the language.

The silence in *Stitches* is more obvious than in *Fatherland* or *Epileptic*, because it represents a physiological symptom when David loses the ability to speak. Small's appearance in a panel without language signifies literal memory, as well as employing comics to portray silence, illness, and trauma. Small utilizes a number of devices to portray silence, including blank space on the page, repetitive images, and extreme close-ups. The absence of sound alters temporality, which further affects the narrative. David the protagonist seems almost ageless, without the cadence of childish banter. The muteness also seems to stop time, as if David is experiencing arrested development. The first page of the graphic memoir is black, with the white

³⁵⁷ Small, 173.

words, “I was six.” The next page, also appears in all black, with the one word, “Detroit.”³⁵⁸

These staccato-like markers are used throughout the book, when David is eleven, fourteen, and fifteen. On the last black title page at the end of the book, David recounts a dream when he is again six years old. These title pages force the passage of time, as opposed to the series of silent panels that render time undefined.

The silent panels move from inside David’s throat to a close up of his face.³⁵⁹ David goes under general anesthesia for his throat surgery, and then wakes up with no voice. This representation of silence is external as it is outside of his body. Although no sounds of speech or movement appear, neither is there peace in this scene. David does not know the truth about his surgery, nor is he informed that he will lose his voice. These panels serve as a fractured revelation and physical trauma.

The vocal reticence due to David’s inability to speak is compounded because he is enveloped by three major secrets being acted out by his family. His memory and understanding of his life operates within the structure of these secrets. First, the most pervasive secret is his mother’s sexuality and her affair with Mrs. Dillon.³⁶⁰ Second, he discovers it was the repeated radiation treatments given to him as a young child by his father that likely caused David’s cancer. Finally, his mother hides David’s cancer diagnosis from him, and he discovers it only through a letter he finds in his mother’s desk. Repressed language is both a cause and an effect of the secrets, and David is rendered physiologically incapable of counteracting. The secrets are not

³⁵⁸ Small, 9-10.

³⁵⁹ Figure 4.10. Small, 180.

³⁶⁰ This echoes Bechdel’s process of presenting herself as a foil for Bruce. In contrast, David is physically forced by his illness into complicity with his mother’s silence.

articulated even when discovered, but the silence bears a story itself. The large, wordless panels that fill *Stitches* evoke questions for which Small is seeking the answers.

The splash page after David's surgery is comprised of only one panel and is dominated by the grotesque nature of his scar, setting the tone.³⁶¹ The stitches take the place of language; rather than seeing the cancer inside, we see the scars outside. The stitches are reminiscent of Frankenstein, rendering David as a scientific experiment and monster. With such an exaggerated image, language would seem hyperbolic. Only silence bears the gravity, and because the silence is partially physical, the images of the body convey the pain, trauma, and isolation.

Despite the fact that the loss of his voice surprises David, this silence has been foreshadowed in the scant amount of language spoken in David's home, although non-verbal noise occurs. While his father punches a punching bag, with the sound "pocketa pocketa," Small's brother Ted beats on a drum, "bum bum bum." Small describes his mother's mode of communicating: "Mama had her little cough...once or twice. Some quiet sobbing, out of sight...or the slamming of kitchen cupboard doors. (Whap! Whap! Whap!)" Surrounded by this nonverbal noise, Small says, "And I, too, had learned a way of expressing myself wordlessly...getting sick. That was my language."³⁶² There is the sense that even before David lost his voice, he could not tell his story. His complete muteness seems to be a natural progression, rather than the abrupt bodily trauma it was. David lives in a home with a variety of divergent, non-verbal languages, making his house a Detroit Tower of Babel. The comics medium allows this to be portrayed without extensive explanation.

³⁶¹ Figure 4.11. Small, 190.

³⁶² Small, 15-19.

Stitches opens as the point of view moves from the outside of the house to the inside. In one panel, the door is open, as if inviting us in, but this gesture emphasizes the internal aspect of the familial silence. We are inside the home, a space perceived as communal; however, with each member of the family speaking their own “language,” the house is an echo chamber. On this page, the tone is reminiscent of a horror film scene, from the subjective point of view of the killer, as the reader moves into this silent, imposing space with the intruder. We do not need verbal directives to enter the home, as each panel leads the reader into the thick tension.

The stillness here is vacant, while the silence that surrounds David is represented as more laden with contradiction. David’s silence is juxtaposed with the thoughts in his head, while the quiet house emphasizes the lack of communication and understanding between the family members. Small describes his mother’s anger, saying, “Her silent fury was like a black tidal wave. Either you get out of the way, or...”³⁶³ The next page is predominantly white, with two maelstroms in the center, threatening to suck two boyish figures in.³⁶⁴ However, as they hover above the whirlpools, it is not clear if they are going in or being spit back out. Without text to regulate time, the home seems to be a static space, but always on the edge of devastation. David does not know, therefore neither does the reader, how close the danger is.

Small uses the repetition of panels without any language, the images exactly the same or only slightly altered in order to either create a sense of hypnotic tedium, or put the reader on edge, wondering what each tic means. Every image in the sequence functions as an exclamation point, ellipsis, or period. The absence of sound is not a break in discourse; the formal techniques of comics form a unique language and David is recreating the maelstrom of illness and

³⁶³ Small, 46.

³⁶⁴ Figure 4.12

repression in his childhood memory of trauma. Because *Stitches* has multiple silent panels, time is divided into regular intervals, but the reader determines the length of each interval. Is David languishing in loneliness, or is he racing through a painful childhood? David goes to a counselor, where regulated time conditions him to communicate. He says, “And so, we talked. After life in a house where silence reigned and free speech was forbidden. That office, three times a week, became a haven for me. There, things began to make sense...”³⁶⁵ David begins speaking through written notes, and this evolves into spoken language. As temporality becomes conventional, David finds meaning in language though confronting and coexisting with his silent protagonist, and he then constructs a discourse that is unique to him.

At the end of *Stitches*, Small returns home to see his mother before she dies. He says, “Alone in the car, I screamed all the way back to Michigan.” However, after regaining his voice, the rejection of silence is tangible, and he says, “I wasn’t screaming in anger or rage or at the thought of an impending loss. I had learned that screaming thickens up the vocal cords. Already this had given me back something of a voice.”³⁶⁶ Small regaining his voice is metaphorical, as well as a literal, physical event. Steiner confronts the complexity and contradictions in silence and language, saying, “But this breaking free, the human voice harvesting echo where there was silence before, is both miracle and outrage, sacrament and blasphemy. It is a sharp severance from the world of the animal.”³⁶⁷ Through the primitive act of screaming, David leaves behind the silent “world of the animal,” and the maelstrom of his family.

³⁶⁵ Small, 268.

³⁶⁶ Small, 303.

³⁶⁷ Steiner, 36.

Ultimately, *Epileptic* and *Stitches* both end in the recovery of language, while *Fatherland* ends in silence. *Stitches* concludes with three captioned photographs, of Small's mother, father, and himself. The photographs provide an objective context, and the captions are a gesture of articulated forgiveness and empathy. Small articulates understanding that is achieved through time and retrospect, which is one of the central functions of the autobiography. After moving into his own one-room apartment, Small says, "Art became my home. Not only did it give me back my voice, but art has given me everything I have wanted or needed since."³⁶⁸ Voice and language are equated with a full life because of the extreme negative connotations Small attaches to silence. Similarly, David B. creates a tableau with bannered textboxes strung over a page with Jean-Christophe and David sleeping and sitting on a giant horse, respectively. The quote at the very end is not David's, but from F. Pessoa, reading, "Sit under the sun, abdicate, and be your own king."³⁶⁹

By contrast, *Fatherland* ends with the silent panels, as Mara and Peter ascend away from a life that has been unfairly harsh and unforgiving. However, even before this series of silhouettes, Nina's voice is lost as the comics depict what her brother Petey is doing as their father dies and the news is delivered. Her brother is living in Canada while Nina is in Yugoslavia, and this perspective emphasizes how far away and detached Nina is, and how there is no final communication between Nina and her father.

For each of these cartoonists, silence is used as language, to tell a story of illness, isolation, and recovery or acceptance of the untreatable. Silence serves as a useful tool to convey

³⁶⁸ Small, 302.

³⁶⁹ David B., 362.

the memory of coping with trauma, as well as recording the actual lived experience. By not using language, the cartoonist does not limit the experience, but gives the reader partial responsibility to complete the story.

Speaking of Trauma with Silence

These graphic memoirs demonstrate the complexity of translating trauma into a wide range of discourses, and the ethical necessity of the storytelling as emphasized by Hirsch.

Speaking of shared memories and the importance of embracing these cultural experiences, Ernst van Alphen says,

Experiences are not only collectively shared because they are grounded on cultural discourses; this shared background also makes experiences and memories ‘sharable.’ The discourse that made them possible is also the discourse in which we can convey them to other humans. Our experiences and memories are therefore not isolating us from others; they enable interrelatedness – culture.³⁷⁰

While the dreams and particular circumstances may be personal, the discourse of seeking understanding of self, the basis of the autobiography, is a shared cultural experience. However, while language may not always translate to another’s experience, silence very often will.

Bunjevac’s split life as a Serbian living and growing up in both Canada and Yugoslavia is the unique story that brings the reader to this graphic memoir, but it is the silence of loss and grief that resonates most loudly for most readers.

In the introduction to *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, Bal discusses types of memory, one of which, “A third type of memory entails a more problematic relationship to

³⁷⁰ Ernst van Alphen. “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma.” *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999). 37.

narrative: traumatic recall, the painful resurfacing of events of a traumatic nature.”³⁷¹ All of these cartoonists have brought trauma to the surface, for the retelling and to visually portray it.

Bunjevac chooses to mar what would be an otherwise pleasant childhood understanding of Yugoslavia with superimposed history and learned history about her father, as she says “the truth is, we had it pretty good until then.”³⁷² “Then” being the year Tito died, or “The year everything went downhill.” This deeper history brings painful memories to the surface, which results in a reliving of trauma. Recalled memories are visual, and these images that take root and evolve in the imagination are shared with the reader.

Silent comics panels are particularly appropriate for portraying personal trauma due to the lack of finality in trauma. The silence allows for open-ended questions, circling back with more information, and translation and interpretation on the part of the reader. Further, the cartoonist is portraying his or her own experience, *as imagined*, reflecting the potentially solitary nature of trauma, as Bal writes,

Traumatic reenactment is tragically solitary [...] In contrast, ordinary narrative memory fundamentally serves a social function: it comes about in a cultural context whose frame evokes and enables the memory. It is a context in which, precisely, the past makes sense in the present, to others who can understand it, sympathize with it, or respond with astonishment, surprise, even horror; narrative memory offers some form of feedback that ratifies the memory.³⁷³

Bal’s work on memories suggests that traumatic memory is more solitary than van Alphen posits. Bal identifies the empathy and understanding that the author is seeking from the autobiographical pact, but that they may not receive from sharing traumatic memory, hence the

³⁷¹ Mieke Bal. “Introduction.” *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999). viii.

³⁷² Bunjevac, “Dissident Years.”

³⁷³ Bal, x.

emphasize on isolation. However, as with Bunjevac and all these cartoonists, there will be points of commonality, even if it is just the moment of silence.

Interrupting the verbal narrative may be the opportunity for the reader to engage, interpret, and gather a holistic understanding. Miller says, “The temporality of silent panels is more indeterminate, particularly if they represent décor only, or characters who are immobile. A silent panel in the midst of panels containing dialogue can mark a significant pause in the action.”³⁷⁴ There are moments when Small seems to be an accessory to his parents’ life, and frozen in time. This indeterminacy and the pauses in time are conducive to portraying memories because traumatic experience is magnified by unpredictability. Miller underestimates the affect of the silent panel; not only does it make characters immobile, it also abruptly interrupts characters in motion or in conversation, and disrupts the temporal pacing. A silent panel in the midst of noise can mark a pause, but it can also mark an unrestrained passage of time. The translation of trauma into the language of comics, in which the overlap is often silence, brings the reader into the autobiographical pact. Bal says, “The incapacitation of the subject—whose trauma or wound precludes memory as a healing integration—can be overcome only in an interaction with others.”³⁷⁵ The autobiographical pact is an enduring interaction, although not immediate, which enables the cartoonist to heal through memory.

Doucet’s overarching physical and psychological trauma is her epilepsy; however, she also vividly describes the personal trauma of returning from the abortion clinic and the subsequent miscarriage. Doucet’s rhetoric surrounding the events is preoccupied with proving

³⁷⁴ Miller, 101.

³⁷⁵ Bal, x.

her boyfriend wrong, as she says, “So I ended up taking one of those three-minute tests you buy at the drugstore, only to satisfy monsieur. And of course, I was right: I had lost the baby. Life goes on, we keep ourselves busy...tonight we play ‘Candyland’ on acid.”³⁷⁶ In this very laden paragraph, Doucet draws the audience in with the pronoun “you,” addressing the reader directly. This is a one-sided conversation, assuming the reader knows “those three-minutes tests you buy at the drugstore.” Her casual tone contrasts with the visual representation. Miller says, “not only does Doucet embrace embodiment, but ... she defies normative modes of representation of the female body.”³⁷⁷ This ability to show the female body twisted by an epileptic seizure, weakened by drugs and alcohol, and engaged in reluctant sexual encounters demonstrates Doucet’s ability to convey a narrative wordlessly, through the body. After the miscarriage scene, Julie tries to convince her boyfriend to go to a party for *Raw* magazine. The subsequent panels contain many more people, and more conversation than before. Through the physical trauma, the verbal noise has increased. The dynamic of the visual language changes in direct reaction to the trauma.

As an adult, David B. returns home for Christmas. Jean-Christophe gets agitated and has a massive seizure, and David and his sister Florence have to leave. David says, “I feel like I’ve been chased off by his illness. I’m very bitter as I return to Paris.”³⁷⁸ This is said in a textbox at the top of the panel, but the rest of the panel is a close-up of Jean-Christophe’s bloated and scarred face. The latter says nothing, also denying David an articulated voice. The physical trauma has superseded David’s desires, and Jean-Christophe’s silent face overwhelms the

³⁷⁶ Doucet, 20.

³⁷⁷ Miller, 231.

³⁷⁸ David B., 353.

narrative. However, Jean-Christophe also is denied a voice, and the physical ramifications of epilepsy are the dominant message.

For these cartoonists, the trauma is to the physical body. David Small's throat is cut open to simultaneously heal and destroy his voice. Julie Doucet's body is racked by seizures, as well as drugs, alcohol, and an abortion. David B. observes his brother's body not only in the midst of epileptic seizures, but also afterwards, with the gradual destruction of Jean-Christophe's body, including scars and side affects of the medication. Nina Bunjevac's father is killed by his own bomb, and she is left to negotiate the relationship with her homeland, and what "fatherland" really means for her. These traumas cause a silence that the cartoonist must determine how to portray visually. While the silence could be described with words, the unique nature of the graphic memoir allows the cartoonist to create silence in visual or temporal ways.

The complexity of these narratives indicates that silence does not equal a peaceful or a calm tone of voice or atmosphere. The silent and cacophonous impulses exist together, often on the same page, an inherent ability of comics to combine conflicting tones. Opposing trajectories are the result of the openness, which allows for expanses of silence to take hold. Steiner says that, "Language can only deal meaningfully with a special, restricted segment of reality. The rest, and it is presumably the larger part, is silence."³⁷⁹ Silence in graphic memoirs deals meaningfully with the part of reality that Chute says is unspeakable, invisible, and inaudible, and that which may only reside in the cartoonist's memory. The reader holds the responsibility of translating silence and language into a coherent story, thereby fulfilling Lejeune's autobiographical pact.

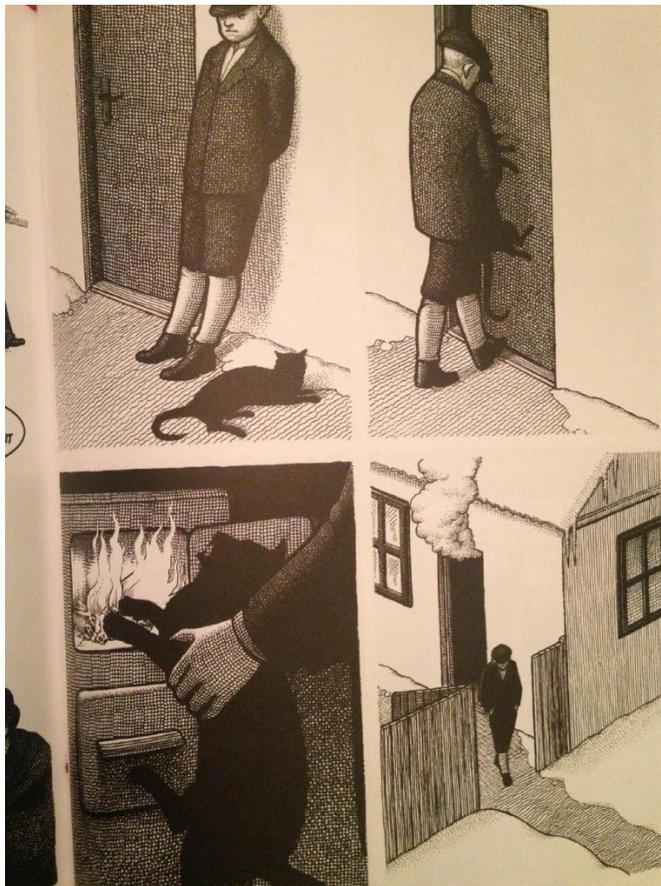
³⁷⁹ Steiner, 21.



Top row (L to R):

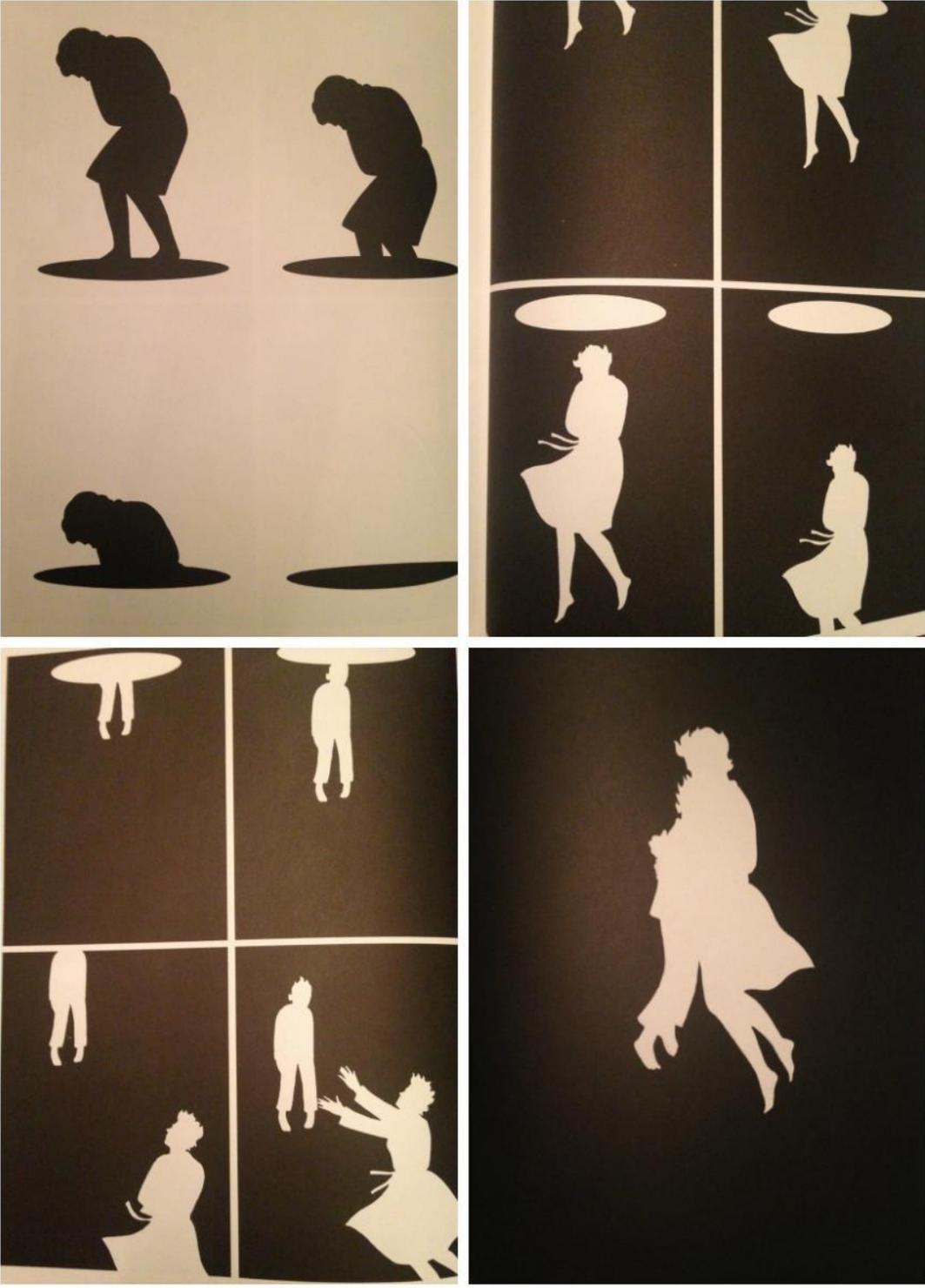
Figure 4.1. Julie Doucet, *My New York Diary*, 54.

Figure 4.2. Doucet, 23.

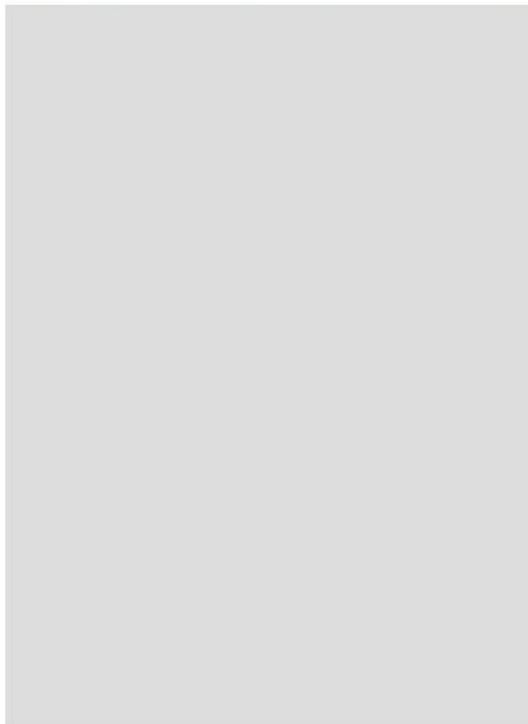
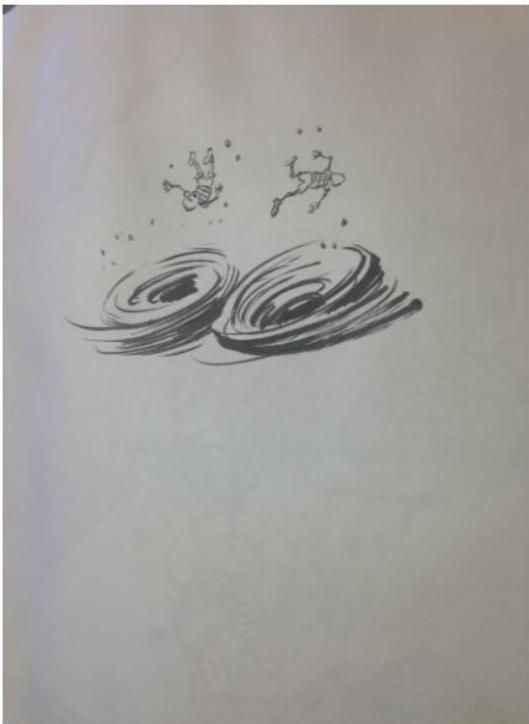


Bottom row:

Figure 4.3. Nina Bunjavec, *Fatherland*, "Childhood."



Figures 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7. Bunjevac, "Exile."



Top row (L to R):
Figure 4.8. David B., *Epileptic*, 343.
Figure 4.9. David B., 276



Top row:

Figure 4.10. David Small, *Stitches*, 180.

Figure 4.11. Small, 190.

Bottom row:

Figure 4.12. Small, 47.

Chapter 5

Captioned Caricature: Photographs in Comics

The impulse to claim veracity in both autobiographies and photography is pervasive, but the unreliability and instability of memory disallows this finality. While there are numerous ways to pursue these claims, they are fundamentally misguided because the subjectivity of memory and perspective itself is part of the creative process and product. However, it is the impossibility of “truth” that makes photographs and comics an ideal coupling, as the former medium is bound by the impression of fact, the latter bound by the expectation of fantasy. Together, they reveal the slippage between fact and fiction, a slippage well suited for the process of recounting memory. In such texts, the reader views the photograph as another panel, and considers the context in which the photograph was taken outside of the comics.

Photography within written narratives operates on a different plane from other forms of narration, so a consideration of photography within autobiography values the referential dilemma from another point of view. Analytical theorists of photography, painting, and semiotics have repeatedly demonstrated, in a history remarkably similar to that of autobiography, that photography is equally problematic in terms of referentiality. The notions that photographs present unfiltered history or that photography is an objective process of reproducing reality have been replaced with understandings of such works as much more complicated than they might first appear. This complex understanding of photographic images is conducive for the structure of memories and a personal narrative, especially when imbedded in the subjective medium of comics.

The comics medium exhibits the photograph in a new way, as another component of memory. The photograph plays an active role in recollection, whether it captures a memory or it is the artifact being remembered. Juxtaposing an obviously subjective medium with a supposedly objective medium provokes conversation about storytelling, visual perception, and memory. A photograph is a record of what the photographer sees at that moment and the camera becomes an extension of the visual perception, and the photograph then serves as an artifact to support or challenge the cartoonist's memory. Placing a photograph within comics creates a productive tension that makes the reader question the objectivity in both media, as well as the intentions of choosing select photographs.

The graphic memoir's intimacy as it reveals the artist's self-perception illuminates his imagination, and the awareness of a physical self. To include a photograph complicates the revelation, because now the reader sees the ideological construction of the cartoonist's family, friends, and surroundings. The cartoonist portrays her- or himself through a collection of images and anecdotes, and a single photograph can become the metonym for an entire album. Autobiographical narratives manifest in a number of ways. Speaking of the plasticity of comics, Groensteen says, "We can also add that the proliferation of autobiographical comics is a remarkable phenomenon of recent years, stemming from America, where the works of Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar, notably, have opened the door."³⁸⁰ These cartoonists, as well as subsequent contemporary artists, have experimented with styles and techniques. One of these specific techniques is the inclusion of photographs within the graphic narrative. A distinct visual space lies between the two media. What does the cartoonist intend through both

³⁸⁰ Groensteen, 19.

integrating and offsetting these two media, and emphasizing the distance between the photograph and the comic panel? Besides the author and photograph, there is also the subject to consider.

Le Photographe: Documenting Trauma

In a Karachi hotel, French photographer Didier Lefèvre stands in front of a mirror, and takes two self-portraits.³⁸¹ The camera obscures his face, and the black-and-white photographs are almost identical except for a slight tilt of the head. He is in a Pakistani hotel, waiting for a plane to Peshawar. These self-portraits are his first shots of the trip, as specifically noted by Lefèvre, and introduce the reader to the subject of *Le Photographe*, and set the tone for the graphic memoir. This is the photographer before the journey, without the beard that he allows to grow throughout his trip. This photograph is the standard by which to compare time and experience elapsed throughout the book. The photograph also encapsulates the triangle of the graphic memoir: author, artist, and protagonist. Lefèvre faces the reader, thereby including the audience, and completing his responsibility within the autobiographical pact.

From 2003 to 2006, cartoonists Lefèvre, Emmanuel Guibert, and graphic designer Frédéric Lemerrier collaborated on three albums of *Le Photographe*, a graphic and photojournalist exploration of war-torn Afghanistan.³⁸² Color panels are juxtaposed with black-and-white photographs, developing a personal story between Lefèvre's narrated memories and

³⁸¹ Figure 5.1. Didier Lefèvre, *The Photographer*, 4.

³⁸² These three albums were combined into one English-language book, *The Photographer*. Translated by Alexis Siegel. (New York: First Second, 2009).

the historical past.³⁸³ The book is based on Lefèvre's documentation of a 1986 Doctors Without Borders mission during the war between the Soviet Union and the Afghan Mujahideen.

Le Photographe follows Lefèvre as he attempts to navigate an unfamiliar culture while simultaneously depicting a violent war. The book integrates Lefèvre's photographs with Guibert's illustrations, complete with captions and word balloons. *Le Photographe* is part *fumetti* and part graphic novel.³⁸⁴ The photographs are often in sequential order, so that the images reveal an immediate passage of time, merely suggested within the comic panels. These sequential photographs are reminiscent of film frames and early photography experiments by Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, and bear the illusion of an unedited string of shots, although each image was certainly chosen with intention.

Most of the photographs in this graphic memoir are of Afghans, including guides and translators, groups of armed youth, or refugees. Explicit images—such as that of a youth hit in the face by shrapnel, followed by a full page depicting the surgery without captions—silently illustrate the photographer's loss for words. By capturing it on film, Lefèvre's photography makes the tragedy notable. There are also landscape shots, reflecting Lefèvre's mood of abandonment or despair as he makes his way across the hostile desert environment. These are not solely wartime photographs, but rather images that comprise an ethos of the time and location. There are moments when the photographs take the story away from Lefèvre, functioning instead as an attempt to tell a story for the Pakistani people. However, this work is no selfless endeavor;

³⁸³ While this graphic narrative is not the first instance of comics journalism (Joe Sacco's *Palestine* being an outstanding example), it is unique in the use of mixed medium. Comics journalism lends a personal, yet irreverent, tone. The author includes fact and personal perspective, and cannot hide behind objectivity or facts.

³⁸⁴ While in Italy *fumetti* refers to all comics, in the United States the term refers to photo novels. This is a genre popular in Latin American, and gaining popularity in France. Roberto Aparici. *El Cómic y la fotonovela en el aula*. (Madrid: Ediciones de la Torre, 1992).

the title *Le Photographe* indicates a compilation of images and anecdotes meant to portray an individual: Lefèvre.

Preceding his self-portrait, Lefèvre includes photos of his mother and grandmother.³⁸⁵ In his account of the war in Afghanistan, Lefèvre has framed the story with two women in France, unrelated to the war but integral to his own self-understanding. At the book's opening, the sequential shots are kept in the film negative order—his mother sitting at her desk and his grandmother sitting by the window. Neither woman looks directly at the camera, creating the illusion of candidness. These images are Lefèvre's farewell to Paris, and suggest that this domestic peace will not be reclaimed. He says, "I say good-bye to everyone [...] to my mom, who is moving into a new home in Blonville, Normandy. To my grandmother, and to her dog, Bienchen. In the Paris apartment that my mom has just moved out of, I take pictures of the hi-fi system left all alone. And that's it. Farewell, Paris."³⁸⁶ While melancholic, these pages are not overtly sentimental or emotional and rather celebrate the normalcy Lefèvre leaves behind.

Lefèvre identifies home and self-identity with these two women. The book ends with eighteen sequential photographs of his mother, walking the dog Bienchen next to the water.³⁸⁷ We learn in the portraits at the end that Mrs. Lefèvre did not know anything about the harsh reality of the Afghanistan trip until the book was published twenty years later.³⁸⁸ Lefèvre's family is presented as the framework for his understanding of Afghanistan, and an understanding

³⁸⁵ Figure 5.2, 5.3. Lefèvre, 3.

³⁸⁶ Lefèvre, 3.

³⁸⁷ Figure 5.4. Lefèvre, 260.

³⁸⁸ We also learn that Lefèvre died of heart failure in January 2007, at the age of 49. *Le Photographe* was published posthumously.

of himself as a photographer. While this is an honest and earnest organization of memories, it is also consciously constructed to reflect Lefèvre's experience. *Le Photographe* exemplifies photographs and comics conjoining to convey a narrative.

In considering the photograph, we might usefully remember that the subject is often aware of the camera, which makes her complicit in the production of the image. The subject is posing and presenting herself with the audience in mind. This consciousness is part of the context for the photograph, as are situations where the photograph is candid. In his article, "Autobiography as De-facement," Paul De Man wrote,

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?³⁸⁹

De Man challenges the idea that autobiographies are unfiltered verbal translations of life. He suggests that the very existence of the medium dictates the author's life, which contradicts Lejeune's parameters of an honest autobiography. A balance may exist between these two, however, where the cartoonist's life is indeed shaped by the medium, but the memoir is still an earnest recollection of memories.

In the introduction to Bechdel's comic strip compilation *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, she writes, "it was so comforting to see my queer life reflected back at me, I would have kept drawing these dykes to watch out just for myself."³⁹⁰ *Dykes to Watch Out For* is not autobiographical, and yet Bechdel sees herself in these fictional portraits. This observation

³⁸⁹ Paul De Man. "Autobiography as De-facement." *MLN*, Vol. 94. Pp. 919-930. (1979). 920.

³⁹⁰ Bechdel, *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*.

recalls Lejeune's notion of his reflection on someone else's self-portrait as reciprocity between viewer and portrait. Thus a direct exchange takes place between Bechdel and her portrait, each influencing the other. Chute says of Bechdel's work that,

Both *Dykes* and *Fun Home* turn on a characteristically feminist stress on the division between the private and the public [...] One may understand both works as feminist not only in how they claim a space for openly sexual female bodies – especially queer bodies that have been marginalized and pathologized – but also specifically in how they explore subject constitution in mutually inflected private and public spheres.³⁹¹

Bechdel is influenced both by the knowledge of her autobiographical process and the medium of comics, just as the subject is influenced by the knowledge of the camera and impending photograph.

While photographs in graphic memoirs are common, photographs are used in different ways in *Le Photographe*, Spiegelman's 1986 and 1991 *Maus*, Alissa Torres' 2008 *American Widow*, and Martin Lemelman's 2010 *Two Cent Plain*. While *Le Photographe* is dominated by photographs, with a few illustrations, the majority of graphic memoirs will feature a few strategically placed photographs. For their sketched variations of actual photographs, I also examine Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Tom Hart's *Rosalie Lightning*.

The individual photograph is significant, and I also consider photographs as a group, including their context, arrangement, and grouping. Whether a photo album, framed pictures on the wall, or a shoebox of snapshots, photographs in proximity possess a story. In *Family Frames: photography, narrative, and postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch says as readers we become privy to the constructed family photo album. She writes, "photography's social functions are integrally tied to the ideology of the modern family.... As photography immobilizes the flow of family life

³⁹¹ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 177.

into a series of snapshots, it perpetuates familial myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history.”³⁹² Photographs perpetuate family histories, while affixing the past. The ideology is established by the cartoonist with her choice and placement of a photograph, and the reader of the graphic memoir is involved in the mythologizing process. This cooperative process reiterates how the nonlinear process of temporality in memory involves the reader, especially within the creation of a personal history. She directs her gaze back and forth, up and down, on the page, and as flipping throughout the book.

In regards to visual ideology, Hirsch writes. “Eye and screen are the very elements of ideology: our expectations circumscribe and determine what we show and what we see.”³⁹³ Specific expectations from one’s own family photographs, and those of others, reflect familial ideology. Vision is not a pure conduit for information. Hirsch’s goal is to “loosen the family’s own structures of hierarchy and power,” and I examine photographs inserted within graphic memoirs to determine such structures, and excavate what lies within these intersections.³⁹⁴ I distinguish dominant ideology in these connections that constructs the family photograph, the illusion of reality, and the exchange between photography and comics within the graphic memoir.

The Photograph and Value

From the selective daguerreotypes of the nineteenth century to today’s ubiquitous camera phones, technology and cultural expectations influence the images taken. Roland Barthes wrote,

³⁹² Hirsch. *Family Frames*, 7.

³⁹³ Hirsch, 7.

³⁹⁴ Hirsch, 15.

“in an initial period, Photography, in order to surprise, photographs the notable; but soon, by a familiar reversal, it decrees notable whatever it photographs. The ‘anything whatever’ then becomes the sophisticated acme of value.”³⁹⁵ By inserting a photograph into a graphic memoir or graphic novel, the cartoonist designates its image as notable. The viewer has the understanding that someone took the time to photograph this particular subject, which imbues value. Many potential subjects reside in *Le Photographe*, such as the children wounded and killed by a bomb in Pustuk.³⁹⁶ Within the overall scope of the war in Afghanistan, the detail of the young boy hit by shrapnel would perhaps be forgotten outside of the photograph, but Lefèvre foregrounds him simply by the process of taking and including the photograph. The theoretical implications of the intertextuality of an embedded photograph are more profound, however, than merely a mark of significance. The photograph contains recognizable signs that suggest where the reader should direct their gaze.

Between the photograph and the comics, the reader decodes correlations, whether intentionally suggested by the cartoonist or imposed by the reader’s ideology. Susan Sontag says, “In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe.”³⁹⁷ By suggesting that this code is “new,” Sontag points out that within another text, the photographic code may be different than the textual code. Therefore, within the graphic text, the reader must decipher at least one, but up to three, codes at a time: written language, visual images, and photographs. The photograph often trumps these

³⁹⁵ Roland Barthes. *La Chambre claire*. (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma), 1980. 60. All English translations of Barthes are by Richard Howard, unless otherwise noted. English edition: *Camera Lucida*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981). 34.

³⁹⁶ Figure 5.5. Lefèvre 131.

³⁹⁷ Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. 1977. (New York: Picador, 2001). 3.

other mediums, commanding attention. If, as both Barthes and Sontag suggest, the photograph is notable and worth looking at merely because it was taken, then the viewer should ask what is novel about what they are seeing.

Graphic memoirs allow the reader a privileged place within the cartoonist's imagination, and the photograph either grants further entrance, or creates distance. If one recognizes the photographed subject as notable, hence the photograph itself as notable, how does this valuation affect reading of the graphic text? Further, how does the photograph theoretically complicate the graphic memoir? If, as Sontag suggests, photographs teach one a new visual code, then it would be possible for the photographs to be decoded. This potential for decoding is suggested by comics scholars, such as Groensteen and particularly by Miller, when she looks to semiotics to determine the language of comics.³⁹⁸

By considering systems and codes for both photography and comics, we see whether intertextuality collaborates to create a new language. As Barthes wrote,

To call photography a language is both true and false. It's false, in the literal sense, because the photographic image is an analogical reproduction of reality, and as such it includes no discontinuous element that could be called *sign*: there is literally no equivalent of a word or letter in a photograph. But the statement is true insofar as the composition and style of a photo function as a secondary message that tells us about the reality depicted and the photographer himself: this is *connotation*, which is language. Photographs always connote something different from what they show on the plane of *denotation*.³⁹⁹

Barthes asserts that the language of photography is more complicated than sign recognition.

There are recognizable structures, he says, but also personal elements within that cannot be defined by denotation. McCloud says, "Common wisdom holds that the *photograph* and the

³⁹⁸ Miller. *Reading Bande Dessinee*.

³⁹⁹ Roland Barthes. *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*. Translated by Linda Coverdale. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985).

realistic picture are the icons that most resemble their real-life counterparts.”⁴⁰⁰ While this is a broad claim, McCloud goes on to demonstrate how the reader will accept a dramatically simplified face, or a smiley face, to represent the human face. So the photograph may just be one icon among many throughout the graphic memoir, or it might link the icon and the referent. The presence of the photograph can convey a secondary message, especially when juxtaposed with the message already conveyed by the cartoonist through the graphic memoir’s textual narrative.

The photograph is not an unmediated image, as both the photographer and the cartoonist must decide what stylistic choices are made, and how much or how little is revealed. This is not an image independent of artistic rendering. Lemelman creates a collage of his mother’s photographs, including those of her childhood, and arranges them in a heart, with a textbox explaining, “From then on, Deh Mameh kept all her photographs in my present, that chocolate box.”⁴⁰¹ The individual images are absorbed into the meaning of the whole. Even if someone else takes the photograph, the cartoonist still makes the choice to use it, appropriating the artifact. The cartoonist also decides how much to explain, and how much to leave to the reader to determine.

These objectives could be extended to documents, letters, and other media reproduced in the graphic memoir. However, there are specific theoretical and technical aspects to consider with a photograph because it is so personal. Within the graphic memoir, the cartoonist creates a family album, with the freedom to choose and situate the photographs as they remember or choose to remember. In reference to photographs as personal archives, Hirsch wrote,

⁴⁰⁰ McCloud. *Understanding Comics*, 28.

⁴⁰¹ Martin Lemelman. *Ten Cents Plain*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010). 229.

“Photographs, ghostly revenants, are very particular instruments of remembrance, since they are perched at the edge between memory and postmemory, and also, though differently, between memory and forgetting.”⁴⁰² This emphasis on the “edge between” is important in the graphic narrative and memoir process because the cartoonist relies on memory, but must account for forgetting. The photographs highlight the instability and unreliability of memory. Lejeune writes that the memoir’s “... aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth.”⁴⁰³ In establishing the parameters for a literary autobiography, Lejeune allows for the inevitable lapse of “truth” because it is this subjective understanding of the past that distinguishes the memoir from history. However, Hirsch does not stop at memory, but looks to a process crucial to the memoir: postmemory. Hirsch coins the term “postmemory,” which she defines as, “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection.”⁴⁰⁴ Postmemory shows the connection to the object not through recollection, but through imagination and creation. This imagined extension of personal memory complicates the memoir, but cannot be excluded, as it is integral to the cartoonist’s understanding of her own history. In the absence of personal recollection and a fully elaborated, historical master narrative, the narrator engages the materials of history and the retrospect of a previous generation’s fears and desires. The strategy of engaging that past continues to haunt the experience of individuals and that of entire cultures, especially by providing the narrative of the photograph.

⁴⁰² Hirsch, 22.

⁴⁰³ Lejeune, 36.

⁴⁰⁴ Hirsch, 22.

Barthes' and Sontag's respective works on photography reveal additional layers of meaning when applied to the integrated photograph. Their personal approaches to photography, and this subjective understanding of the photographic image, are both productive interpreting of the functions photos play in a graphic memoir. Hirsch's ideas on photographs and family ideology serve as a framework for the images these cartoonists have chosen, as well as her resisting the temptation to analyze the photo as a singular object.

The Photograph as a Medium

André Bazin wrote that with the advent of the camera, "The artist was now in a position to create the illusion of three-dimensional space within which things appeared to exist as our eyes in reality see them."⁴⁰⁵ This is the illusion: that the photograph can reproduce what we would see with our eyes. The photograph places the viewer in the privileged position of the photographer, and also present with the subject. This mimicking of human vision is intriguing, and comics take up this device and create the illusion that things appear as the mind sees them, as I discuss earlier regarding the self-portrait in comics. A process of translation occurs as the image takes on meaning between the reader and the page. As Hirsch says, our eyes and the screen are actively creating ideology, rather than serving as an objective projector.

A photograph within the panels of a graphic memoir challenges the notions of subjective and objective representation. Is it possible to view a photograph objectively? If we view a photograph without questioning, it is because we are participating in the illusion, either actively or passively. However, even if a viewer accepts a photo as a reflection of reality, he or she imposes personal experience onto the interpretation, so that no photo is pure representation. The

⁴⁰⁵ André Bazin. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4. (Summer, 1960). 4-9.

reader is drawn between the past and present, just as the cartoonist is sometimes in the act of establishing postmemory. Therefore, in the graphic memoir photographs challenge objectivity, and the reader complicates temporality.

When viewed as a single image, rather than in among an entire photo collection, how does the photograph's impact differ? The single photograph has already been imbued with a specific narrative at its removal from the album or collection. So this new mythology must be constructed around the now orphaned image. Spiegelman and Bechdel picked their photos from a shoebox, while Miriam Katin pulled hers from photo albums.⁴⁰⁶ The cartoonists have chosen to isolate these subjects, emphasizing their personal significance. In *Rosalie Lightning*, Hart carries Rosalie's preschool picture with him everywhere, and sleeps with it under his pillow. He draws this single photograph several times throughout the story of his life after his daughter dies suddenly, and each time it appears I find myself more aware that this is the last school photograph she would ever take, and there are no subsequent school portraits. Certainly Hart and his wife Leela have many photographs of their daughter, but this one is the enduring image, held between Tom's fingertips and poking out from a notebook.

The recognition of a referent occurs more readily with photographs than with comics, which creates tension, and the reader looks to one to supplement and explain the other. Hidden at the back of the *Rosalie Lightning* are two photographs of Tom and Rosalie, the last photographs they took together. These pictures are tucked in at the bottom of the page, after two completely blank pages, and could be overlooked. These are very happy pictures, but I know the tragedy that will occur only hours later. These happy photographs are incomplete without the heartbreak of the comics. I move back and forth between representations to try and understand this

⁴⁰⁶ Figure 5.6. Miriam Katin, *We are on Our Own*, Afterword.

incomprehensible trauma Hart is sharing. The photograph suggests that we have been given a privileged view beyond the comics, and that we are allowed to know Rosalie through her sketched school portrait and the actual photograph of her laughing with her father.

In *On Photography*, Barthes says, “The age of mechanical reproduction begins with photography” and the photograph, “seeks its connection with a subject in terms of an imaginary resemblance, the photograph functions like a metonym, which draws its figurative expression directly from the object, usually from some part of its physical characteristics.”⁴⁰⁷ One portrait serves as a representation for a whole person, imbuing the sense of familiarity with this person through a photograph. This single moment in time stands for a person’s lifetime.⁴⁰⁸ What happens when this single moment is reproduced for a mass market? While it remains a single moment in time, it recurs in space. The image is reproduced not only in each copy of the book, but each time my eyes return to that image.

Walter Benjamin says of the advent of technological reproduction, “For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens.”⁴⁰⁹ Reproducing photographs, as well as comics, in newspapers and books greatly increases the available audience, opening up not only the potential readers but also the potential stories to tell. One assumes the place of the photographer taking the portrait, engaging in a privileged position with the person posing. This point of view becomes more complicated in graphic memoirs as

⁴⁰⁷ Roland Barthes. *On Photography*. (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997). xi.

⁴⁰⁸ Perhaps this is what Torres was avoiding in *American Widow* with her collage of photographs.

⁴⁰⁹ Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” 1936. *Illuminations*. (London: NLB, 1973). 217-242.

photographs were often taken by someone other than the cartoonist. Thus the photograph is reproduced twice.

One difference between comics and photographs depends on the origin of the visual recognition for the viewer. Does it originate in the eye or in the imagination? Groensteen quotes Fellini: “Comics, more than film, benefits from the collaboration of the readers: one tells them a story that they tell to themselves; with their particular rhythm and imagination, in moving forward and backward.”⁴¹⁰ The format of comics allows, and even demands, that the reader move throughout the page, violating a linear flow in order to piece together a whole story. In *Le Photographe*, I understand the pictures of Lefèvre’s mother and grandmother by looking forward to Lefèvre’s wartime photos. By moving throughout the book nonlinearly, I see the difference in style and context, and form a fuller impression of the photographer as both a journalist and a person. The learned method of reading left to right is supplanted with a more intuitive gathering of information. However, the reader’s impression begins with the illusion that the photograph is presenting what the eye would see, a conclusion that may be challenged within the narrative.

The cartoonist-rendered portrait or self-portrait may seek something other than a visual remembrance. Perhaps the photograph brings the representation back to the eyes, and in doing so creates a relationship between the visual and the imaginative. In *Le Photographe*, one can only imagine Lefèvre’s fear, but can visualize the physical damage done by the war. This experiential intersection for the reader leaves the experience unarticulated by the book’s authors. Groensteen says, “Comics is a genre founded on reticence. Not only do the silent and immobile images lack the illusionist power of the filmic image, but their connections, far from producing a continuity

⁴¹⁰ Groensteen, 11.

that mimics reality, offer the reader a story that is full of holes, which appear as gaps in the meaning.”⁴¹¹ Reticence increases when switching between media and different ways of reading are negotiated. The reader must fill in these holes and gaps, and create a singular continuity, even without firsthand knowledge of the referent.

According to Barthes in *La Chambre claire*, a photograph carries an immediate relationship with the referent. He writes, “A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not immediately or generally distinguished from its referent.”⁴¹² When viewing a photograph, one acknowledges that the subject was, for that moment, in front of the camera. Hirsch refers to the indexical nature of the photograph, harking back to Charles Peirce.⁴¹³ While the photograph is mediated, a trace of the subject remains. While Kominsky Crumb’s photograph captioned “Robert and a heavily pregnant me” has no physical connection to Aline, the viewer knows that Aline was present at the time the photograph was taken.⁴¹⁴ By seeing each medium as a system, the critical opportunities are increased and overlapping theories of the referent may be developed. However, Barthes cannot separate himself personally from the medium of photography the way Groensteen seems able to do with comics. It may not be possible to systemize memory, imagination, and

⁴¹¹ Groensteen, 10.

⁴¹² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 5.

⁴¹³ "Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs [indices], those by physical connection." Charles S. Peirce. *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Edited by Justus Buchler. (New York: Dover Publications, 1955). 106.

⁴¹⁴ Figure 5.7. Aline Kominsky Crumb. *Need More Love: A Graphic Memoir*. (New York: MQ Publications, 2007). 199.

experience as manifested through photographs. Thus a personal recognition within a memoir is dependent on the reader, and reliant on the cartoonist's divulgence.

This direct recognition of the subject is not immediately apparent with the comic medium; the recognition is couched in the narrative rather than in a caption.⁴¹⁵ While the reader might recognize a caricature of R. Crumb in *Need More Love*, he or she would be less likely to recognize daughter Sophie Crumb just by sight. The narrative is necessary for this recognition, if the cartoonist deems it important to the understanding of the protagonist. Further, if, as Barthes says, a photograph turns the subject into an object, perhaps the cartoonist's portrait does the opposite, and allows the audience to translate the object into the subject. The vacillating process of the individual transformed into an object, then subject, allows for the active and engaged process of reading the graphic memoir. This vacillation is created not only by a well-worded narrative, but also by the frame.

The Photograph's Frame

The gutter and panel, or frame, affect the photo's presentation, and hence its meaning. Anne Friedberg introduces the photograph as a crucial step in the development of the early frame, referencing Nicéphore Niépce's view from his window, in 1826 Paris, as captured on a pewter plate. Her "early" distinction refers to the now ubiquitous frame in contemporary culture, from the television to the computer. She discusses the picture frame, saying, "the frame became a component element of the painting when the painting became independent from the wall."⁴¹⁶ The

⁴¹⁵ As I pointed out in the first chapter, self-portraits of cartoonists within the text may have many variations and evolutions. The graphic portrait is identified with the first person "I."

⁴¹⁶ Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 78.

photograph is not a mural, nor does it become part of the wall like wallpaper. Therefore, the physical limit of the photograph, a frame, proceeds to memorialize the photograph even further with an external frame. The picture frame differentiates the photograph from the wall behind it, making it both part of, and separate from, the surface on which it is displayed. Just as the panel within the graphic memoir is integral to the narrative, the frame, or lack of, also informs the narrative.

The panel within comics is derived from the painting frame and the subsequent photograph frame, and sets something off from the page, and groups images together away from others. When placed within a graphic memoir, the cartoonist chooses several methods of showing that the photograph is not part of the page, just as the painting is not part of the wall. Some cartoonists create a one-dimensional picture frame, with familiar decorative detailing and gilding. Some merely give the photograph its own panel borders, often set askew. Spiegelman sketches a photograph of Anja, and arranges it in a tilted panel in *Maus*, which he explains by saying, “It makes sense to place that photo on a separate plane from the other pen-and-ink drawing around it, and that visual device lets it happen.”⁴¹⁷ While the photographs in *Le Photographe* are all lined up as traditional comic panels, the photographs of Eddie Campbell’s daughter Hayley in *The Fate of the Artist* are scattered throughout, outlined in a thin, wavering pen line.⁴¹⁸ The photograph then becomes part of the page, but simultaneously offset, with an implication that the subject is integrated into the narrative, but simultaneously separate.

⁴¹⁷ Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*, 182.

⁴¹⁸ Eddie Campbell is a noted cartoonist who worked with Alan Moore on *From Hell*, and his own autobiographical comic *Alec. The Fate of the Artist*. (New York: First Second, 2006).

In the graphic memoir, the family album may be emphasized as much if not more than the self-portrait. Hirsch says, “The conventions of family photography, with its mutuality of confirming looks that construct a set of familial roles and hierarchies, reinforce the power of the notion of ‘family.’”⁴¹⁹ The photograph in graphic memoirs reinforces the notion of family, while challenging it. The cartoonist has recast the photograph so that, for example, Kominsky Crumb undermines the patriarchal power of her father. She has taken the family photo album, and shuffled history to reconcile with her memory.

Barthes says, “I am a primitive, a child—or a maniac; I dismiss all knowledge, all culture, I refuse to inherit anything from another eye than my own.”⁴²⁰ Barthes eloquently, yet crudely, describes his stubborn stance to acquainting oneself with a photograph. With this statement, he refuses to distance himself from the photograph with theory, technical knowledge, or captions. When Bechdel draws photographs such as her self-portrait, rather than include the original, it results in her taking ownership over the image. She chooses particularly troubling or emotional photographs, and she makes the photograph her own. While this stubbornness makes precise definition impossible, it offers the potential to release photos from Hirsch’s familial roles and hierarchies because there are other stories surrounding the context and physical artifact of this photograph. Barthes’ dismissal of culture allows the viewer to approach Hirsch’s goal of overturning hierarchies. Barthes’ introduction of *studium* and *punctum* for photographic analysis provides inroads to help navigate the impact of a photograph.

⁴¹⁹ Hirsch, 47.

⁴²⁰ Barthes, 51.

Studium and Punctum: The Personal Variables

Lefèvre can determine what pictures to take, how to frame the subject, and how candid the image will be. He cannot, however, control the viewer's personal response to the photograph. On his journey through Afghanistan to the Yaftali Sufla District, Lefèvre meets a strikingly tall man, who he refers to as an "ogre." Lefèvre's picture is taken by an unnamed photographer, and then Lefèvre takes a picture of the imposing man who runs a *chayrana*.⁴²¹ In placing these pictures side by side, Lefèvre intends to compare the size of the men. However, the perspective of the photographs is not identical, so it is difficult to truly gauge the difference. In the ogre's portrait, the man stands alone, and reaches for his eye, or hair, a gesture suggesting shyness. Through language, Lefèvre overtly expresses fear at the presence of this man, but the photograph conveys something entirely different to me, the viewer. The situation appears to be only an amiable, if awkward, posed picture between strangers. There is no inherent danger visible in the photograph, and I believe Lefèvre chose these images to highlight his own unsubstantiated fears and preconceived notions.

While coping with the grief following his mother's death, photographs signal for Barthes a past that exists among the living, just as Hirsch identifies with portraits of Holocaust victims before Auschwitz. Barthes introduces the *studium* and the *punctum* as two key components for the evaluation of photographs, although not as quantifiable symbols. He says, "It is not possible to posit a rule of connection between the *studium* and the *punctum* (when it happens to be there). It is a matter of a co-presence, that is all one can say."⁴²² So we can discuss the two existing

⁴²¹ The *chayrana* is described as a teahouse. Lefèvre, 235.

⁴²² Barthes, 42.

together, but not as reliant on each other. This provides two distinct yet simultaneous approaches.

Barthes defines the *studium* as an "application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity." Through *studium*, Barthes writes that, "It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in *studium*) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions."⁴²³ *Studium* allows for specific interests, categorizations, and study to be developed, and can be agreed upon by multiple individuals, even accepted as a fact. It provides a context, especially important for the viewers unfamiliar with the subject. As related to the textbox in comics, the caption is significant for establishing and recognizing the *studium*. However, engagement with a photograph is not complete without the *punctum*.

Barthes defines the *punctum* as "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."⁴²⁴ *Punctum* indicates a detail that is also a, "sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice."⁴²⁵ This is a detail that cannot be shared with another because it must be personally experienced. The *punctum* can be communicated, but is an intangible and often reflexive response. As opposed to the *studium*, the *punctum* is not part of the caption. This is why Barthes excludes the picture of his mother as a young girl in *La Chambre claire*; he does not want to share this intimate experience with the reader. Barthes' knowledge of the photo's

⁴²³Barthes, 26.

⁴²⁴ Barthes, 49.

⁴²⁵ Barthes, 27.

context, *studium*, along with his personal response, *punctum*, creates postmemory. The *studium* along with the *punctum* allows for a full understanding of the photograph.

These two concepts are active within the graphic memoir's photograph; while relying on personal historical context to create a memoir, cartoonists also trust personal experience to evoke emotion. Photographs offer multivalent interpretations, creating intersections, tensions, and contradictory conclusions. The gaps between the *studium* and the *punctum* are echoed in the comic medium, and the reader must establish the platform for analysis. One basis for analysis may be considering the photograph in its original context, as compared to the context of the graphic memoir.

The *studium* may differ between the photograph and the artifact and the graphic text, creating a tension. For example, in *Maus II*, Spiegelman reproduces a portrait of his father Vladek Spiegelman taken after WWII. There are two contexts to consider here: details of the original photograph, and then the details of how it came to be in the book. This distinction leaves the reader to contemplate the two historical contexts, and to decide if one is more valid than the other. Considering two different *studiums* might create a tension, a fracture, or a productive relationship between the two contexts. As a reader, comparing the *studiums*, I think about the role the subject plays in the process of being photographed: Vladek chooses to be photographed. Then I consider the role of the subject in the photo being reproduced: Vladek gives the photograph to Art. These actions were intentional and crucial to the photograph becoming part of *Maus*, but also a key moment in Vladek's, and subsequently Art's, history. While the cartoonist includes the photo as part of his creative product, the image is not completely under his control.

Spiegelman includes the photograph of Vladek in his staged portrait, which contrasts with the mouse representation throughout. Vladek says "I passed once a photo place what had a

camp uniform—a new and clean one—to make souvenir photos...” Art responds “I need that photo in my book!”⁴²⁶ A few pages previous, Vladek shows Art a box full of old snapshots, which Spiegelman has sketched, mice filling the places of family members.⁴²⁷ If the purpose was to give a human representation alongside the mouse representations, why does Spiegelman choose this single, heavily mediated, image? The socio-historical context for the portrait does not convey history as the reader might originally conceive, and is discomfiting as the reader and Art contemplate the ethics of such a staged photo opportunity existing and Vladek taking part in this role playing. Unlike images of concentration camp survivors that serve as proof of suffering and persecution, this photograph only complicates Vladek’s narrative.⁴²⁸ How do we reconcile that Vladek again dons the uniform again alongside the harrowing tales of Auschwitz told by Spiegelman? Without the graphic narrative this would be a static image in ambiguous historical context. Within the comics, Spiegelman allows this grotesque absurdity to be part of the larger narrative.

The *studium* for the photograph is a photography studio in Germany after the war. Vladek sends this photograph of himself to Anja as proof that he is still alive. Anja says, “And here’s a picture of him! My god—Vladek is really alive!”⁴²⁹ Anja immediately recognizes the relationship of the photograph to the referent, and, according to the narrative, does not question the motivation, context, or validity behind the photograph. For Anja, these details are not as

⁴²⁶ Spiegelman, 134.

⁴²⁷ Spiegelman, 114-116.

⁴²⁸ Barbie Zelizer. *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera’s Eye*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁴²⁹ Spiegelman, 114-116.

important as survival, and she is not as distracted by the odd staging as the contemporary reader or Art. The historical context is not of Vladek as a current prisoner in Auschwitz, it merely represents photographic evidence. Anja's response exemplifies the faith we place in photographs as fact, but also the importance of *punctum*.

In contrast to the original photo booth, or Anja receiving the photograph in the mail, the *studium* for *Maus* is much different. *Maus* is not only the story of Vladek surviving Auschwitz, but also of Art trying to get the story from Vladek. This two-part graphic memoir is also the story of Art coping with history, as he titles the first book, *My Father Bleeds History*. The photo booth image no longer belongs to the moment with Vladek, Anja, and the photo booth; it now also belongs to Art (the protagonist) and history. The *studium* in this sense is Art finding the photograph, and utilizing it to tell a story.

In a 1994 interview with *Writing on the Edge*, Spiegelman told interviewer Susan Jacobowitz that he used the photograph to “pull you away from the Vladek screened through Art, and the photo offered that.” He calls this photo a “wonderfully baffling bit of almost surreality in the book.”⁴³⁰ To pull the reader away demonstrates the ability of the graphic memoir to direct the reader through fragmented memories. Through redirection, the bewilderment reflects Art's own frustration with Vladek. Spiegelman has engaged the reader in the tension between the Vladek of the photo, and the mouse-rendered Vladek, and set it apart in a frame to draw attention to this image and moment captured on film.

While Spiegelman occasionally transgresses the standard panels with his drawings, this photograph is intentionally askew, as if it has slipped out of the panel's frame, like a snapshot

⁴³⁰ Susan Jacobowitz. “Words and Pictures Together’: An Interview with Art Spiegelman.” *Writing on the Edge*. (University of California, Fall 1994). 49-58.

slipping out of a photo album.⁴³¹ The ineffective frame suggests a recovered memory, rather than a fixed moment in history. The memory is in between being lost and recovered, and it is unclear where in the family album this belongs. An apparently healthy and clean-cut young man poses, staring seriously at the camera. His clean camp uniform is buttoned to the neck, the background stripes of a wider girth than his uniform. It resembles a school portrait more than Nazi archival or the Allies' camp liberation photographs. As I view the photograph, the *punctum* is not the uniform, as this is too obvious. The *punctum* for me is the photograph's background, a benign curtain that seems to mock the stripes of the uniform. It is the familiar curtain in front of which strangers pose with a variety of costumes and stories and poses, a tool of the photographer's trade, and yet the framing element in Vladek's portrait.⁴³² It is a commercial photographer's backdrop, proving that Vladek did not die in Auschwitz and is outside the camp.

In its most basic function, the photograph reminds the reader that *Maus* is not a universal story, but a personal story, hence the subtitle, *My Father Bleeds History*. And it is a personal history that Spiegelman does not seem to completely understand, hence his designation of the surreality. Sontag says, "A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture."⁴³³ Vladek was alive, he did sit in front of this camera, and he did put on this uniform, even if we do not understand why. The potential

⁴³¹ Figure 5.8. Art Spiegelman, *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*, 134.

⁴³² In his graphic memoir *Two Cents Plain*, Martin Lemelman includes photo booth portraits of himself. In every photo, he poses in front of a curtain similar to the one in Vladek's portrait. In several, he is wearing a vertically striped shirt. These pictures were taken before the publication of *Maus*, but certainly bear an uncanny resemblance, which undermines the uniqueness of Vladek's portrait. *Two Cents Plain*. (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2010).

⁴³³ Sontag, 6.

assumption that this may be a camp portrait is made on the part of the viewer, and Spiegelman counts on this assumption. The portrait of Vladek captures Art's attempt to define his past, while defining himself.

In *La Chambre claire*, Barthes finds only one photograph that he believes reveals his mother's true self, and he says that all other photographs only reveal fragmented aspects. This single photograph is of his mother at the age of five, standing in the family's winter garden. To Barthes, the fact that it is of his mother (before she was his mother) informs the photograph, even long before he exists. In an act of postmemory, he claims this image as a memory, although impossible. What does Barthes' claim say about the narrative in *Maus*, that the staged concentration camp photograph is the photo that Art chooses to characterize Vladek? In *Family Frames*, Hirsch focuses "on the family's construction in culture and society in the visual field—on the ways in which the family is inscribed within a heterogeneous system of representation."⁴³⁴ The "visual field" is complex because although presented as irrefutable proof, there are gaps, and Groensteen's idea of reticence. Postmemory fills in these gaps. Just as Barthes inscribes his mother with her childhood photo, Spiegelman inscribes his father into visual representation with both the anthropomorphized mice and the photograph.

Hirsch identifies *Maus* as a postmemory work because Spiegelman's memory is "delayed, indirect, secondary," and his inclusion of family photographs into the graphic text "offer him a representational structure adequate to the task of postmemory."⁴³⁵ Spiegelman has no direct access to the memories of the Holocaust or Auschwitz; he can only imagine these

⁴³⁴ Hirsch, 12.

⁴³⁵ Hirsch, 13.

events through anecdotes and those images existing in photographs. The trauma of the memory exists partially in the absence of actual experience. Hirsch specifically discusses Holocaust photographs in reference to part of her personal understanding of photographs making absent parties immortal.⁴³⁶ The memory, and experience of postmemory after a trauma, becomes entangled with the photograph. Therefore, the experience as recounted is not “pure” memory, but rather a conglomeration of lived and imagined experience, formed by the scarring presence of trauma.

In Martin Lemelman’s *Two Cents Plain*, the protagonist grows up in Brooklyn as the son of Holocaust survivors from Poland.⁴³⁷ He focuses on his frugal, abrasive, and distant father. For each of the main characters in his memoir, Lemelman draws a series of three overlapping portraits, illustrating the time lapsed from childhood to adulthood.⁴³⁸ Below this progressive portrait is a quote unique to each person. Tovia’s portrait is captioned by the Yiddish saying “*Dos gantseh leben iz ah milchomeh.*” (“All life is a war.”)⁴³⁹ Tovia changes his name to Teddy once in America, and when Martin asks him about life in Europe, he tells his son war stories instead of about life before the war. Lemelman attempts to complicate Teddy’s portrait with a variety of perspectives, to fill in Teddy’s own mythology.

⁴³⁶ Upon emigrating from Romania, Hirsch’s family moved in with a couple who survived the Holocaust. After marrying, she discovered her husband had aunts who also survived labor and concentration camps. Both of these memories were marked for Hirsch by photographs of the dead and survivors. Hirsch, 18.

⁴³⁷ Lemelman tells his mother’s story of survival in an earlier graphic novel, *Mendel’s Daughter—A Memoir*. (New York: Free Press, 2006).

⁴³⁸ Figure 5.9. Lemelman, 21.

⁴³⁹ Lemelman, 21.

Alongside the drawn portraits, Lemelman also includes photographs.⁴⁴⁰ The photographs of for his mother Gusta are pictures of her family members that were killed during World War II. The photographs of Teddy all place him in a context relevant to Martin's life, such as in the candy shop or posed next to Gusta. Lemelman's trauma is learning to live with his father in the present, while he seeks to reconstruct his mother's history. Goldie Lemelman's past trauma is Lemelman's postmemory, but in her desire to be American, many of the memories before reaching America are lost. This is what necessitates the reliving of history through images for Martin. Likewise, Alissa Torres looks to understand her grief through learning more about her husband through a lifetime of photographs.

Torres' graphic memoir, *American Widow*, is about meeting her husband Eddie, his death in the World Trade Center attacks, and her subsequent struggles with grief, a newborn baby, and government bureaucracy.⁴⁴¹ This story of the World Trade Center attacks from the perspective of someone not present at the Towers reveals the extent of Torres' postmemory. While the majority of the book is drawn by illustrator Sungyoon Choi, photographs appear throughout, with one page filled with a collage.

The photomontage page most poignantly reflects Torres' memory and narrative, as she tells it. The page is filled with identification cards, childhood snapshots, and shots of work badges, from Eddie's childhood in Columbia to his job at the World Trade Center. These are mostly images taken in Columbia, and before Alissa knew Eddie. The page is simultaneously

⁴⁴⁰ Figure 5.10. Lemelman, 10.

⁴⁴¹ Alissa Torres. *American Widow*. Art by Sungyoon Choi. (New York: Villard, 2008).

silent and cacophonous. What meaning emerges from between these opposing trajectories?⁴⁴²

The photos are prefaced with a small figure falling from the Towers, and Torres asking, “They said you fell for 18 seconds. What did you think about?”⁴⁴³ For Torres, the trauma in this question lies in not knowing. As postmemory, the photomontage illustrates the impossibility of a definitive answer. These are not Torres’ memories, but rather exist in between her memories with her husband, and her fear of forgetting who he is. There is trauma both in the present and in the disappearing past.

For me, the *punctum* on this page is represented in the black photo corners of a black and white childhood snapshot, and I am struck by the simplicity and traditional tone.⁴⁴⁴ These are the photo corners of a bygone era, used without irony or nostalgia. In the photographs of a snapshot in a photo album you can see the slight glare off the protective plastic. The corners indicate that someone carefully affixed the snapshot. Alone, this photograph fixes a moment in history, a young boy with shaggy black hair looking intently at the camera. As part of the montage it resonates with emotion as Alissa recounts. The photo corners intrigue because they are not actually part of the photograph, and they are as much historical artifact as an aspect of memory. In fact, an external medium has been photographed as part of the original photograph it affixes. The photo corners here become notable. The photograph is not of a young boy but of an image that has been saved in a photo album. This is the original *studium*, which changes when Torres

⁴⁴² This theme of opposing forces can be seen throughout graphic memoirs, and I refer to it in Chapter 1 in regards to Lessing’s essay about the Laocoon.

⁴⁴³ Torres, 196.

⁴⁴⁴ Figure 5.11. Alissa Torres, *American Widow*, 197.

uses this image as part of a montage commemorating a life lost. This photo represents postmemory for Torres, as she is creating memories of her husband before she knew him.

Although I have focused on a single image, in fact forty-four pictures of Eddie appear on this page. In the context of the graphic narrative the page is overwhelming and jarring, just as Torres' process of creating memory. Choi's artistic style in *American Widow* is clean and simple, using only black, white, and blue shading. In contrast, the photomontage is in color, overlapping, and without discernible patterns or chronology. The only words appear in the text of the ID cards, and I read through these clues trying to piece together a life before the Twin Towers. However, the language snippets are only fragments in a full life. In their silence, photos can distort, mislead, and obscure reality. Between the text of the graphic narrative and the photographic images, the confusion Torres experiences emerges, more so than in the comic panels. The gaps and gutters Groensteen describes in comics also occur on this page, which allows the reader to consider connections between his official roles. This montage bestows a multiplicity of identities on Eddie: immigrant, soldier, Columbian. I find myself scanning the photographs in a variety of ways, to piece together a chronology. However, while the pictures are of Eddie, the story is reflective of Alissa's experience and the way she wants Eddie remembered.

The symbiotic nature between text and images in comics is not lost with the photograph, because the narrative is crucial to the photograph, so that the image does not become read as definitive history. Likewise, the photograph within the graphic memoir adds a level of objective and subjective tension absent in a cartoonist rendition. The photograph complicates the process of creation and representation, because it suggests factual history but belongs to the cartoonist. Is the cartoonist copying or creating representation, and what does the photograph add to this? This

question, in the context of the graphic memoir harkens back to Plato's classic debate between *mimesis* and *poiesis*.

***Mimesis* versus *Poiesis*: Photographic and comic portrait**

Mimesis is the mimicry or imitation of an existing entity, while *poiesis* is making or creating something new. However, in autobiographical art especially, the act of creating is done precisely through reimagining mimicry. To consider *mimesis* as a paradox accommodates the inherent complexity I see in comics, specifically the graphic memoir. Paul Ricoeur says,

... the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* involves already all the paradoxes of reference. On the other hand, it expresses a world of human action which is already there; tragedy is bound to express human reality, the tragedy of life. But, on the other hand, *mimesis* does not mean duplication of reality; *mimesis* is *poiesis*, that is, fabrication, construction, creation.⁴⁴⁵

The cartoonist mimics life, but in doing so creates something entirely new. A reproduced photograph, especially in a new context, is a new creation. The cartoonist makes the photograph interesting through the act of imagination and creation that is also involved in the photograph's placement within the graphic memoir, thereby engaging *poiesis*. This original creation takes on several forms. The first, as I have already presented, is when a cartoonist uses a photograph, and reinvents it within a new context, or new *studium*. The second process of imagination occurs when the artist draws a photograph, intending to represent a photograph.

In a variation of the photograph, in a sketched photograph in *Fun Home*, Bechdel reproduces a photographic image of Roy, her father's secret lover.⁴⁴⁶ Roy is stretched out on the

⁴⁴⁵ Paul Ricoeur. "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics" *New Literary History*, Vol. 6, No. 1, On Metaphor (Autumn, 1974), 95-110. 109.

⁴⁴⁶ Figure 5.12. Allison Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 100.

bed, partially obscured by shadows. Bechdel remarks that photographs can conceal as much as they reveal, evoking Sontag, who says, “a photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” and “the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses.”⁴⁴⁷ Hirsch echoes this sentiment, saying that photographs “reveal even as they conceal. They are as opaque as they are transparent.”⁴⁴⁸ The repetition of these ideas indicates the dual role that photographs play, and perhaps how the cartoonist is cognizant of this. Likewise, the image in a graphic memoir illustrates and wordlessly narrates, as well as telling more about a person and simultaneously obscuring, such as Spiegelman does with Vladek’s staged photograph.

Bechdel’s sketched photograph operates on several levels: as a literal representation of Roy, a symbolic representation of her father’s sexuality, and as a metaphoric representation of public appearance and private reality. This serves as postmemory for Bechdel, as an experience and knowledge not belonging to her, but a part of her. Like Torres, she explores the trauma and grief she is experiencing due to her father’s death, but also delves into the trauma of the fleeting past. Just as the portrait of Vladek added a surrealistic touch to *Maus*, this portrait of Roy adds surrealism to *Fun Home* in that it brings a moment of the past to the present. Bechdel writes that: “the blurriness of the photo gives it an ethereal quality. Roy is gilded with morning seaside light. His hair is an aureole.”⁴⁴⁹ She describes the picture as “beautiful.” The sketched photograph is done in a crosshatch rather than Bechdel’s signature black-outlined style, which sets the snapshot apart even further. Boxes of Bechdel’s narration obscure portions of the photograph, and the

⁴⁴⁷ Sontag, 16, 23.

⁴⁴⁸ Hirsch, 2.

⁴⁴⁹ Bechdel, 100.

snapshot is unflatteringly sliced in half by the book's binding. Roy is an interrupted centerfold, or perhaps an interrupting centerfold. In this instance, the physical gutter of the book literally interrupts Bechdel's memory. Through this presentation, the medium of the graphic narrative obscures the medium of the photograph.

Sontag discusses the relationship between the photograph and the text, saying, "no caption can permanently restrict or secure a picture's meaning."⁴⁵⁰ Likewise, images do not restrict text; the two supplement each other in undefined ways. Sontag's use of the verbs "restrict" and "secure," suggests the assumption that pictures are vague until defined by language. However, even with language, the meaning of a photograph can fluctuate with the *punctum*. Bechdel sketches her hand holding the snapshot, thereby intruding in the shot. The date of the rendezvous is inadequately blotted out, allowing one to read it, but with the knowledge that someone tried to hide it. The past was documented with the knowledge of a future audience, who then adopts the past through images and postmemory. Although Roy is the referent, Bruce Bechdel seems to be the subject, as this image reveals his life, not Roy's. The reader learns nothing about Roy, and instead is exposed to Bechdel's postmemory.

Roy as a subject has been translated into an object first through the camera's lens, then through Bechdel's interpretation. In this sense, perhaps the reproduced image loses its ability to touch us as only a photograph can, through the accidental detail. By including the redrawn photograph of Roy, Bechdel has amended the family album. Roy has been added to the archive, his image discovered in a box of family photos. Rather than Hirsch's "familial gaze," the intimate photograph of Roy only brings alienation and otherness, a theme throughout Allison's

⁴⁵⁰ Sontag, 109.

childhood. To take up the centerfold in the family “tragicomic,” Roy serves as a crux for the binary between the façade and the internal dynamic that the family relies upon to survive. As documenter of the family history, Bechdel has reframed her family’s history to include the Other, thus reclaimed the gaps and spaces in her autobiography.

Reclaiming the Gutter: Between Photo and Caption

Hirsch’s work helps identify another iteration of the gutter in comics as she says, “photographs locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life.”⁴⁵¹ Bechdel unearths precisely this point as she breaks down the façade Bruce has constructed, as she contemplates family photographs and what was happening off-camera. Hirsch identifies another intersection as between public and private history, where the moment may be reinterpreted by a new audience.⁴⁵² We are newly acquainted with Lemelman’s life in an intimate manner true to the autobiography, but it is in the public space. The “space of the contradiction” is not a lost space, indeterminate and vague; rather, it is an unarticulated experience, which the photograph captures. In the graphic memoir, the photograph can locate itself somewhere between the imagined experience and the ideal experience, challenging both the myth of the family and the imagined experience of it.

Kominsky Crumb exposes her life readily and joyously in *Need More Love*, and with a mixed-media confluence of text between photographs, her own drawings (and those of other cartoonists), and full pages of text, Aline relinquishes her privacy. She addresses the

⁴⁵¹ Hirsch, 8.

⁴⁵² Hirsch, 13.

contradictions of the ideal family myths, proffering her own cruel Long Island Jewish family as evidence of problematic heteronormativity within family structures and redefining what may be appropriate. How does Kominsky Crumb's chaotic pastiche of images and stories affect the overall tone of Aline's story? The stories, complete with acne, insecurities, and exaggerated facial expressions, are transparent in her movement towards self-understanding. There is a space between the actual image, and the referred-to subject in the text. What meaning emerges about Aline in this space? As discussed, hooks and Bhabha's respective work shows how reclaiming space occurs through in-between texts and images, in-between panels, and in-between photographic and comic rendering. Kominsky Crumb reclaims the space, rather than allow her to be marginalized or stereotypes. The experience of the photograph is personal, and in finding the *punctum*, Barthes says "absolute subjectivity is achieved only in a state, an effort, of silence...the photograph touches me if I withdraw it from its usual blah-blah."⁴⁵³ With the presence of a photograph, the audience is taken out of the world of comics, and into the momentarily silent space of the photograph. However, the respite is not extended because the photograph's frame is only one of many panels the reader negotiates.

The intertextuality of these media introduces new meaning in the margins and gutters if one allows the symbiotic relationship, and understands the significance of placement. In *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*, Spiegelman places a photograph of his younger brother (Richieu) at the beginning. The young boy died during WWII, poisoned by his guardian to avoid being taken away to the concentration camps. The use of the photograph differs from the embedded picture later in the same text of Vladek. This picture stands alone and Barthes might identify this placement as History. The memorial provides a singular portrait of the young boy, who always

⁴⁵³ Barthes, 55.

remains this boy. In contrast, Vladek's embedded portrait is fraught with contradictory meaning. Spiegelman's memories of Auschwitz, Richieu, and a young Vladek are products of his imagination, yet lodged in his psyche. His dual dedication to Richieu and his daughter, Nadja, accompanied by the picture situates the dedication both in history and in the present. The portrait stands alone, so it is identified as notable, and the entire dedication reads as a caption to the photograph. Lejeune emphasizes that the entire text is part of an autobiography, and imperative to verifying the identity of the author. The dedication serves multiple functions, even as a visual cue to return to the time when Richieu was alive.

Miriam Katin's *We Are On Our Own* follows young Miriam and her mother Esther as they escape the Nazis in Budapest and hide in the Hungarian countryside.⁴⁵⁴ While the entire book is done in pencil, the very last page contains a photograph of Miriam and her mother, in 1946. Like the picture of Torres' young husband, this snapshot still bears the marks of the yellow tape that held it in place, probably in a family photo album. All photographs before the war were destroyed as Esther sought to hide their Jewish past and to assume new identities, so this photograph is the beginning of a family history, now foregrounded by Katin's graphic memoir. This photograph of young Miriam in a short dress, bows in her hair, is a striking reflection of the book's protagonist, and the self-portrait and photograph validate each other. I find myself pausing on this single photograph at the end, pushed so far past the narrative that I might have missed it altogether. With this snapshot, I place Miriam and her mother in the place and time they were photographed, and perceive of this photograph as representing the entire family album.

⁴⁵⁴ Miriam Katin. *We Are On Our Own*. (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006).

The imbedded photograph is not memorialized history, or an illustration for the text. Conversely, the text does not serve as a caption for the photograph; rather, the photograph allows for new meanings to emerge between graphic images and the photograph. This is another way that gutters and margins are imbued with unarticulated stories. In reading across media, and throughout the graphic memoir in multiple directions, temporality and narrative flow is reinvented. In the process of reading the graphic memoir intertextually, the reader might understand the photograph as an integral part of the graphic narrative. *Le Photographe* is not about photography, nor the photographs, but about Didier Lefèvre and what he wants to say about Afghanistan. The photographs provide insight into how Lefèvre negotiates life through images.

Spiegelman addresses the indelible power of images, and how the images of comics last precisely through their ephemeral nature:

The only cultural artifacts that could get past my defenses to flood my eyes and brain with something other than images of burning towers were old comic strips; vital, unpretentious ephemera from the optimistic dawn of the twentieth century. That they were made with so much skill and verve but never intended to last past the day they appeared in the newspaper gave them poignancy; they were just right for an end-of-the-world moment⁴⁵⁵

The juxtaposition of photographs (which represent captured time) and comics (which mark the passing of time) indicates how the image can be simultaneously permanent and fleeting.

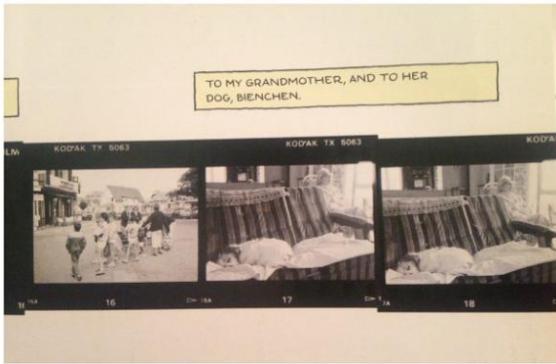
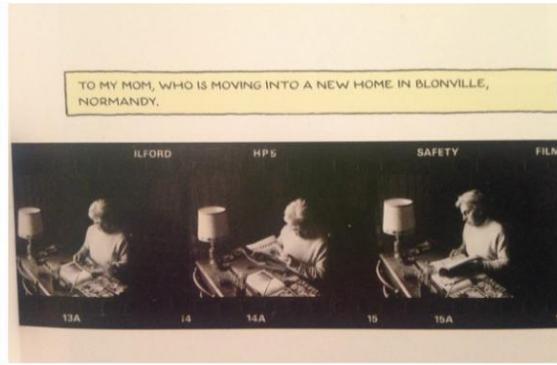
Likewise, memory may be permanently influential, but fleeting in its substance, which is why the cartoonist seeks to reconstruct her memoir as best as she can, not limited by historical fact. In this genre, memory is the source.

⁴⁵⁵ Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 11.

At the end of *La Chambre claire*, Barthes says, “Such are the two ways of the Photograph. The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality.”⁴⁵⁶ If photography possesses a madness that we seek to tame through either art or generalizations, then the cartoonist has found a restrained madness in the photographic image; it serves as an unsettling silence in the chaotic art of the graphic memoir. As readers the choice is ours to submit to the simultaneous silence and cacophony.

Just as the graphic memoir is unique in its ability to manipulate time through nonlinear reading, photographs pull the reader back and forth between the present and the past, between subject and object. As Hirsch explains, postmemory is between memory and forgetting, so that the reader vacillates with the cartoonist in a subjective history. When Lefèvre died in 2007, his photographs took on another level of memorial and postmemory. The collected pictures of Lefèvre, his mother, and his grandmother comprise a family album which bookends the war in Afghanistan and complicates his work of comics journalism, as well as his memories of personal and national trauma.

⁴⁵⁶ Barthes, 184.



Top row (L to R):

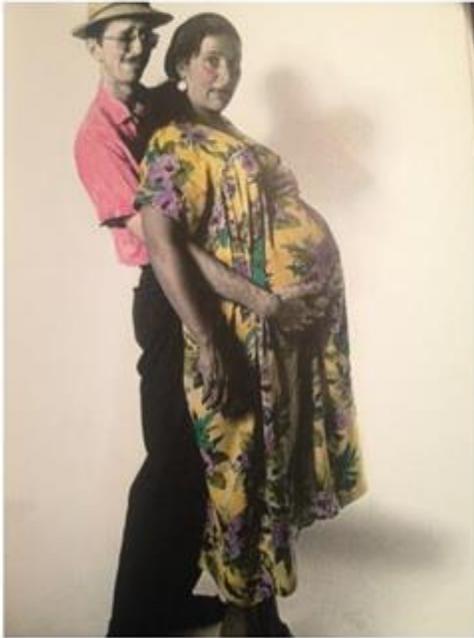
Figure 5.1. Didier Lefèvre, *The Photographer*, 4.

Figure 5.2. Lefèvre, 3.

Bottom row (L to R):

Figure 5.3. Lefèvre, 3.

Figure 5.4. Lefèvre, 260.



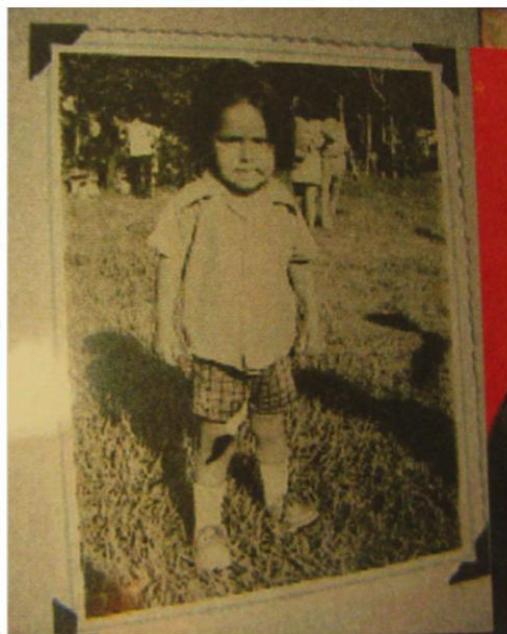
Top row (L to R):

Figure 5.5. Lefèvre, 131.

Figure 5.6. Miriam Katin, *We Are on Our Own*, Afterword.

Bottom row (L to R):

Figure 5.7. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love*, 199.



Top row (L to R):

Figure 5.8. Art Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 134.

Figure 5.9. Martin Lemelman, *Two Cents Plain*, 21.

Bottom row (L to R):

Figure 5.10. Lemelman, 10.

Figure 5.11. Alissa Torres, *American Widow*, 197.

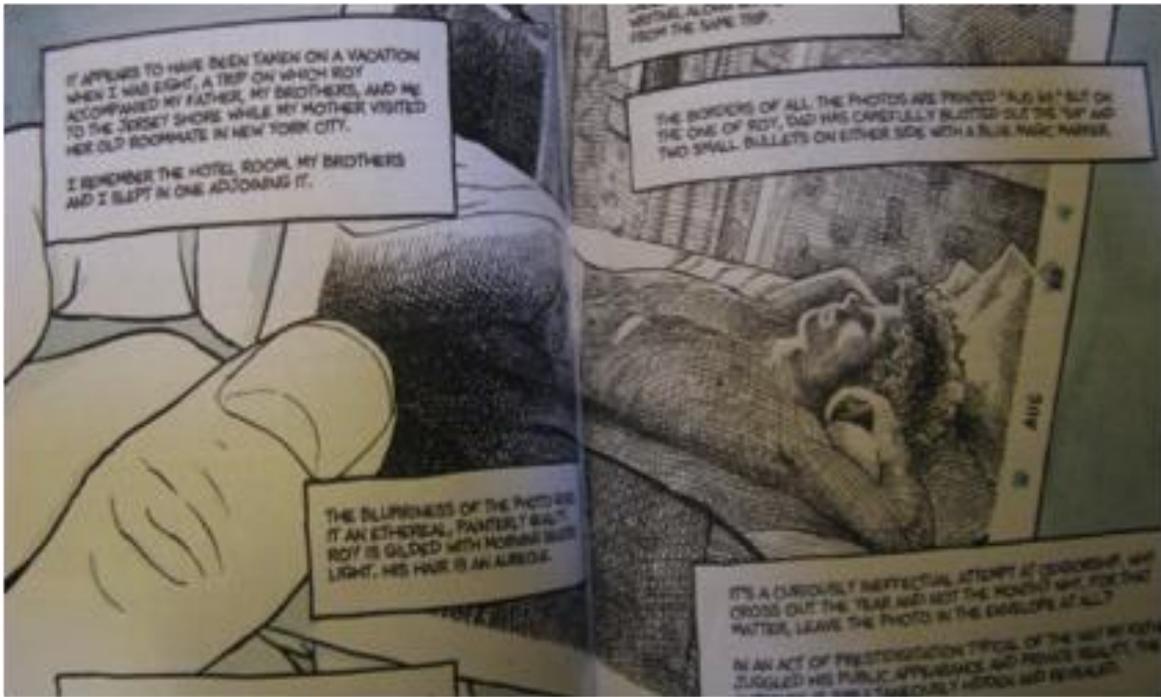


Figure 5.12. Allison Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 100.

Conclusion:

What Comics Cannot Say

Comics can bear the weight of any trauma narrative, from war and genocide to domestic abuse and depression, as the cartoonist turns her memory out onto the page. The explication of personal trauma may be done with humor, historical facts, or admittedly subjective recollection, as Chute says, “Comics narrative, however – which calls overt attention to the crafting of histories and historiographies – suggests that accuracy is not the opposite of creative invention.”⁴⁵⁷ This incredible potential to bend narratives into new formats with “creative invention” is also the potential that creates space for new stories to be told, and for these stories of trauma to be witnessed in a new way. In a statement about Sacco that could be extended across cartoonists who portray trauma, Chute says, “The most powerful suggestion that Sacco’s texts make is that witnessing and memory can be treated as a creative interlocutory process, rather than something anchored in the unfaceable.”⁴⁵⁸ However, if comics do serve this crucial role in contemporary reporting and storytelling, as Hirsch and Whitlock posit with an emphasis on the ethical responsibility, why are comics not the dominant mode of print communication? If comics are so perfect at reflecting memory, why choose another, imperfect, medium? The limitations of comics are not what they can say, but whose voice is represented, and heard by whom. The resistance to comics as a mode of communication endures outside of the academy, and this enduring marginality allows for the unreliable, unstable, and unverifiable nature of memory to be fully explored. My goal is not to push comics to the center, to displace literary autobiographies, documentaries, or photography, but rather to see the radical and fertile potential existing at the margin come to fruition.

⁴⁵⁷ Chute, *Disaster Drawn*. 2.

⁴⁵⁸ Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 254.

During an ill-fated interview to secure a Fulbright Grant to study Canadian comics and cartoonists, a stern professor asked, “Can you prove that comics are more important than physics?” Taken aback because this seems like the sort of question scholars no longer indulge in, I believe I just said, “No.” However, through reading the increasing number of graphic memoirs, and seeking evidence of the influence of comics on cartoonists’ lives, I can now say with confidence that the graphic memoir is part of a larger system of stories that need to be told, and need to be read. The “more important” hierarchy is absurd, but the “as important” argument is that in our increasingly global world, an understanding of each other achieved through the humanities is imperative. Comics will be the medium to carry stories that may not be in film, literature, or traditional journalism, and to carry them in a new way allowing for new understanding. Comics were a crucial step in starting a conversation about the Holocaust in the United States, which was the catalyst for comics depictions of mental illness, grief, and other trauma that are difficult to fully express in another medium. These forays into difficult topics continue to remove stigmas through a medium that has its own stigmas. Ensuring that a forum for these stories to be written and read is what is at stake with comics scholarship and with this focus on the graphic memoir.

The audience for comics will ebb and flow as visual and popular culture evolves, from television to Snapchat and beyond, and independent and mainstream publishers will continue to find paying customers. However, the truly ethical concern about the limitation of comics is the availability of comics as a profession. In an interview with Chute, black cartoonist Keith Knight says, “As far as diversity – it’s happening. I’ve watched a huge change in the audience attending Comic Con over the years (been going since 1993) and the diversity of creators. I’m hoping the content will eventually catch up.”⁴⁵⁹ As a medium that has the power to reflect marginalized subjects and stories in a profound way, there is a great way to go to diversify the field of professional cartoonists. Returning to Beaty’s call to expand the subjects of study, one crucial approach is to not limit scholarship and discussion to the same cartoonists

⁴⁵⁹ Chute, *Outside the Box*. 11.

and same topics. This is the responsibility of the scholar, to assign new and overlooked comics in her classes, to seek alternate venues of distribution for study, and to discuss less prominent artists alongside Spiegelman and Bechdel. Senator John Lewis is a lifelong civil rights activist and documents his life in *March*, a graphic memoir trilogy, with author Andrew Ayden and illustrator Nick Powell. At the 2015 Comic-Con in San Diego, Lewis observed the cosplay culture, and then dressed in his own “costume”: a trench coat and backpack holding the same contents he had in Selma fifty years ago.⁴⁶⁰ Lewis agreed to tell his story with comics because of the young audience he could reach, as he says, “As you know, the civil-rights movement was often led by the children, and the young people.” Lewis himself was inspired by a 1957 comic book: *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*.

Cartoonists have been strong advocates for change, as demonstrated with the boycott of the 2016 Grand Prix d’Angoulême.⁴⁶¹ Critically acclaimed cartoonists, including Americans Daniel Clowes and Charles Burns, withdrew their names from consideration for the highest prize in comics in protest over the complete absence of women on the ballot. Cartoonists spoke loudly and personally against the January 7, 2015 attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, responding with comics and emphasizing the need for uncensored content in comics.⁴⁶² This is an active and engaged community, intent on protecting the integrity of their art form. Even those of us who will never publish a sketched panel or speech balloon

⁴⁶⁰ Michael Cavanaugh. “The real origin story behind how Rep. John Lewis became THE hit of Comic-Con.” *The Washington Post*. (July 13, 2015). The final installment of Lewis’ graphic memoir, *March: Book Three*, will be released in August of 2016.

⁴⁶¹ “It is no longer tolerable that renowned female creators, known by one and all, are absent from the nominations of this Grand Prix. If comics professionals are expected to select three names from a list decided by the FIBD, this list must be truly representative of comics today. Female comics creators are also significant players in this literary field. For all of these reasons, the Women in Comics Collective Against Sexism calls for a boycott of the Grand Prix 2016.” Collectif des créatrices de bande dessinée contre le sexisme. “FIBD : Femmes Interdites de Bande Dessinée.” Tr. Jessica Abel. (January 5, 2016).

⁴⁶² “As vigils of mourners holding pens gather around Paris, famous cartoonists are also taking to Twitter with their own creations to show solidarity for the 12 tragically slain in Wednesday morning terror attacks at the satirical French magazine.” Jennifer Champagne. “Cartoonists React to *Charlie Hebdo* Shooting.” *Paste Magazine*. (January 7, 2015).

have the responsibility to ensure that this activism and loyalty to comics is inclusive, and not exclusive. Comics have always been a populist art form, and therein exists the power of the medium.

Cartoonist and Infantry Marine Maximilian Uriarte began writing his strip *Terminal Lance* while still on active duty. *Terminal Lance* is now published by the *Marine Corps Times* and online, and has a large following of readers. Uriarte published a full collection in April of 2016, entitled *The White Donkey: Terminal Lance*. While he qualifies the work as fiction, in a review by *The Wall Street Journal*, he says, “I see it as a war drama, an Iraq war drama. The whole frame of the story is based on my own deployment.”⁴⁶³ This comic strip, and now the book, is telling a story crucial to understanding contemporary American culture and yet these experiences of active and returning soldiers are overlooked or never articulated. These are the specific experiences as lived by a relatively small population, and are often overshadowed by narratives of heroism or censored journalism. *The White Donkey* confronts soldiers’ struggles with mental health, loneliness, and suicide. In a *Washington Post* review of *The White Donkey*, staff writer and former Marine infantryman Thomas Gibbons-Neff says, “Every veteran of the forever war, the long war, the Global War on Terror or Whatever You Want to Call It, has a day (or many days) they’d rather not remember. Days they’d like to keep in the back of their mind, under lock and key and submerged in a handle of whiskey.”⁴⁶⁴ Memory, as portrayed here and like many personal traumas, is a burden and confuses the rest of life. Because it is comics, Uriarte must excavate this memory, in both language and images. After a friend dies in an I.E.D. blast, a grieving Marine says, “He was just...Dead...All I see when I close my eyes is his mangled body...”⁴⁶⁵ Uriarte follows his recollections from enlistment, to Iraq, and back to civilian life, allowing for the comics medium to carry the confusion of trauma and instability of memory. This is a story that must be dredged through Uriarte’s memory to

⁴⁶³ Ben Kesling. “A Graphic Novel Looks at War in Iraq.” *The Wall Street Journal*. (February 17, 2016).

⁴⁶⁴ Thomas Gibbons-Neff. “‘The White Donkey,’ a graphic novel of the Iraq War by a Marine who fought in it.” *The Washington Post*. (December 14, 2015).

⁴⁶⁵ Maximilian Uriarte. *The White Donkey: Terminal Lance*. (New York: Little Brown, 2016).

bring the trauma to surface. The power of *The White Donkey* is because of the story that is being told, and because of who is telling the story and who is reading it.

These autobiographical cartoonists are riveting because they are translating memory in dynamic, vulnerable, and provocative words and images. From overarching narratives that break through gutters to fragments contained within panels, graphic memoirs take advantage of the conventions and expectations of both autobiographies and comics. While the underground comix of R. Crumb and Green represented a high point of comics, it was just the start of autobiographical comics and should not be lauded as the apex of the comics medium. Now is the time to celebrate the creative innovations and sacrilege of those subversive cartoonists that influenced current and future autobiographical cartoonists. As evidenced by Sattouf's *The Arab of the Future 2* and Civil Rights' activist and Congressman Lewis' *March: Book 3*, both published in 2016, provocative, political, and personally traumatic topics continue to be broached. In the context of reading about personal trauma through memories, there are different traumas to be exposed and, more importantly, different ways in which they will be explored. If memory is as unreliable, unstable, and fragmentary as autobiographical comics suggest, then the way in which memory pours out on the page will be markedly different. We should be looking for new ways of understanding human experiences, through self-portraits positioned in and through the comics panel, through silence that speaks through an empty speech balloon, and through embedded photographs that simultaneously conceal and reveal.

Ann Miller explains that the autobiographical cartoonist must both confront and coexist with their self-portrait, the constructed representation that is both an autonomous character and inextricably linked reflection of the cartoonist. This tension can also be applied to the comics fan and scholar. We coexist with our love for comics, born out of nostalgia, refuge, rebellion, and inclusion in a comics community. However, ethically we must also confront this community and our own allegiance to our favorite cartoonists and graphic memoirs. Are we allowing this unique medium to tell all the stories it is capable of telling, and are we allowing comics to bring a greater awareness of the world as Hirsch and Whitlock

argue? I opened this project with a series of quotes from the cartoonists themselves, extolling their love for comics. However, the strongest cartoonists have also confronted comics, and asked, “why”? I asked why I weave Spiegelman throughout this project, despite my own instructions to not lean on the small group of canonical cartoonists, instead of opening up the floor more to marginal artists. This is one of my few chances to coexist and confront *Maus* and Spiegelman’s following works, to say “I love this work, but what is the future for comics after *Maus*?” Based on the depth of material being published, and the emergence of completely new artists, the future of comics will continue to be challenge narratives and cartoonists will be dedicated to remaining a prominent voice for marginalized narratives. Cartoonists themselves remain the most influenced by and enamored with their medium, and it is this personal engagement that makes graphic memoirs so impactful, and autobiographical cartoonists consider this responsibility part of their profession.

Sattouf says, “When I was a teenager I decided to choose for myself another people. I refused France, and Syria. I chose cartoonists. When I meet cartoonists from Japan or Russia we have the same problems, the same ideas. This is true, and I feel it very deeply.”⁴⁶⁶

In conversation with Chute, Sacco said, “You worry because you realize it’s a responsibility. You’re trying to convey something that you weren’t there for, and other people’s emotions. [...] Well, that’s the advantage of comics. When does journalism start, and when does art start? There’s a blending.”⁴⁶⁷

We see that nothing is off limits for the graphic memoir, including the facts, misperceptions, and dreams lodged within cartoonist’s memory. The cartoonist condenses, enlarges, and alters various recognizable comics elements in order to engage our cognitive faculties, and to convey history as they envision it. In doing so, she expands the range of our

⁴⁶⁶ Rachel Cooke. “Riad Sattouf: not French, not Syrian... I’m a cartoonist.” *The Guardian*. (March 27, 2016).

⁴⁶⁷ Chute. *Outside the Box: Interviews with Contemporary Cartoonists*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). 152.

experience and understanding. Graphic memoirs bring the reader closer to a different kind of person, in a way that shows their vulnerability and transformational stories in a highly emotional, visual and textual style. Stories of trauma are conveyed and understood in a variety of modes, but comics allow for a particular subjectivity and engagement, inspired by a contemporary medium that promises to challenge the limits of autobiography.

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