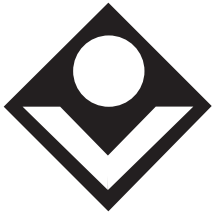
LITERATURE AND BELIEF

Guest Edited by Victoria Aarons



Literature and Belief
Volume 40.2 & 41.1

Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

LITERATURE AND BELIEF
A semiannual publication of the Center for the Study
of Christian Values in Literature
College of Humanities, Brigham Young University

Daniel K. Muhlestein, Director Edward Cutler, Associate Director

Subscription cost is $10.00; $14.00 outside the USA. Address all correspondence, submissions, and subscription inquiries to *Literature and Belief*,
3184 JFSB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602 (801) 422–3073
http://christianvalues.byu.edu/literature-and-belief/

Vol. 40.2 & 41.1 2020 & 2021
 ISBN 0-939555-33-6

Contents

BOOK REVIEW

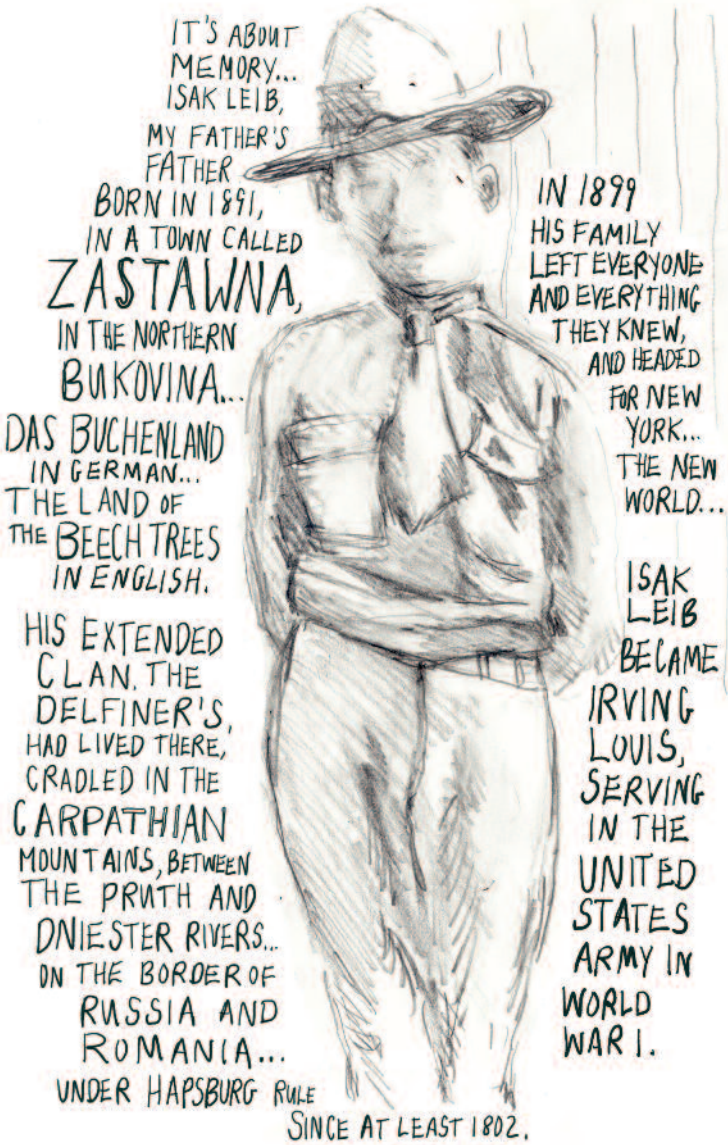
Guest Editor's Preface

The graphic novel is an elastic genre. The hybridity of the form—the juxtaposition of text and image and temporal and spatial intersections—opens itself up to a layering and merging of generic conventions: fiction, life writing, memoir, autobiography, biography, letters, testimonial writing, historical narratives. Thus, the medium lends itself to complex narration, perspectives, points of view, and modes of perception. Its polyphonic and multi-layered structures perform complex visual-verbal expressions of identity, memory, and the implied tensions produced by absence and presence in the overlapping of past, present, and future. The genre of comics narratives distills an immediacy and urgency that situate both reader and narrator/graphic artist in a dialogic and participatory experience of collective and personal witnessing.

"What is Jewish about Jewish comics and graphic novels?" Ken Koltun-Fromm asks in the opening essay for this collection. The pieces that follow, both the essays and the graphic narratives, respond to this question in provocative and multi-faceted ways. The contributions from scholars and graphic artists in this special issue reflect the range and fluidity of the genre as it responds to issues of memory, identity, and historical and individual consciousness.

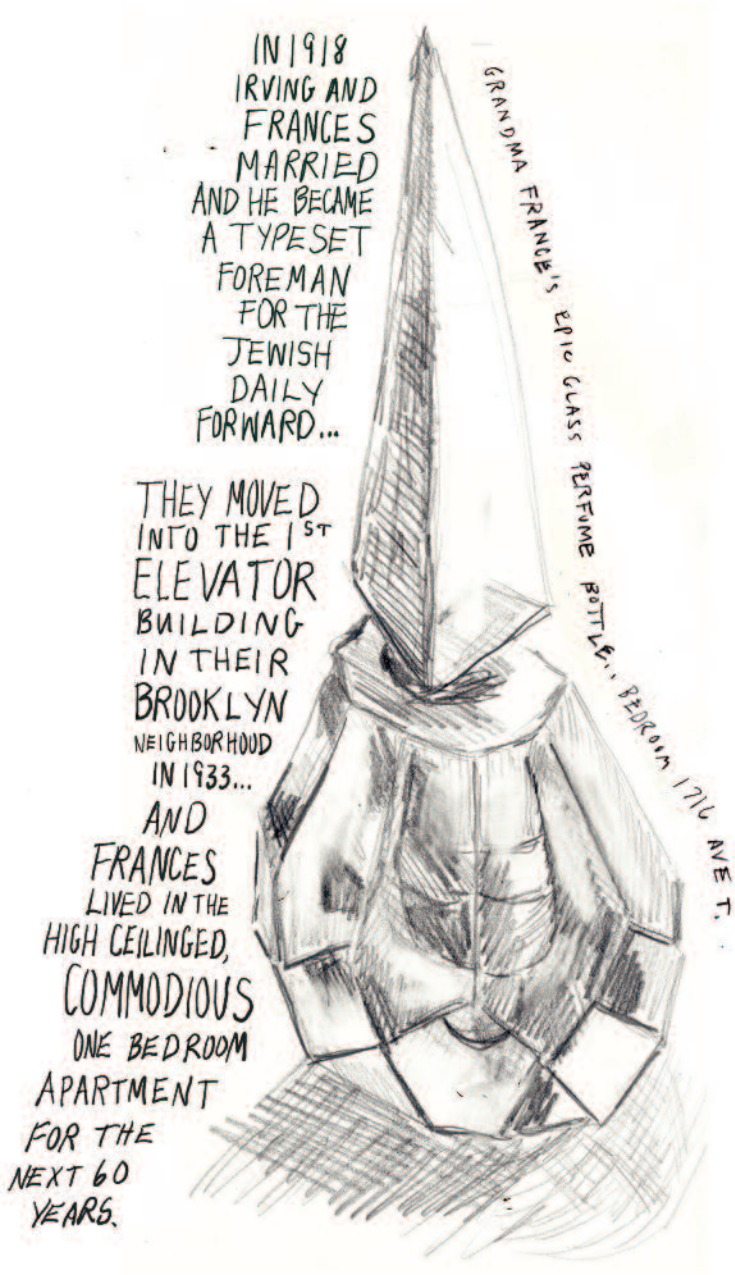
—Victoria Aarons
Guest Editor
Trinity University


IN THE LAND OF THE BEECH TREES
GROWING UP IN MY MID CENTURY, AMERICAN JEWISH FAMILY WAS A COZY WORLD UNTO ITSELF...
INFUSED WITH THE DISTINCT FLAVOR OF THE OLD WORLD, of MITTLE EVROPA ...
OF MISTY, BROWN EDGED IMAGES, INTELLECTUAL DISCOURSE AND STORY SNIPPETS, TOLD IN HEAVILY ACCENTED ENGLISH, WITH YIDDISH, OR JEWISH, AS MY GRANDMAS CALLED IT, SLIPPING IN AND OUT OF CONVER-SATIONS.
SELF PORTRAIT AT 56
E. STEINBERG 2020

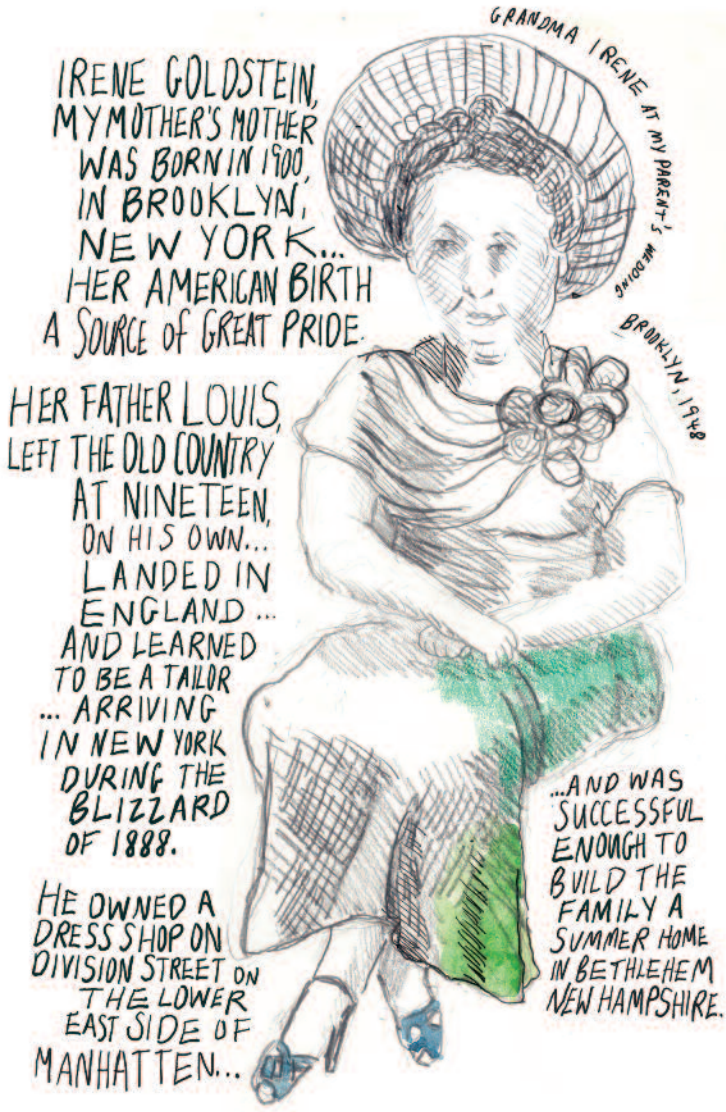

IT'S ABOUT MEMORY... ISAK LEIB, MY FATHER'S FATHER BORN IN 1891, IN A TOWN CALLED ZASTAWNA, IN THE NORTHERN BUKOVINA... DAS BUCHENLAND IN GERMAN... THE LAND OF THE BEECH TREES IN ENGLISH.
HIS EXTENDED CLAN, THE DELFINER'S, HAD LIVED THERE, CRADLED IN THE CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS, BETWEEN THE PRUTH AND DNIESTER RIVERS... ON THE BORDER OF RUSSIA AND ROMANIA... UNDER HAPSBURG RULE SINCE AT LEAST 1802.
IN 1899 HIS FAMILY LEFT EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING THEY KNEW, AND HEADED FOR NEW YORK... THE NEW WORLD...
ISAK LEIB BECAME IRVING LOUIS, SERVING IN THE UNITED STATES ARMY IN WORLD WAR I.

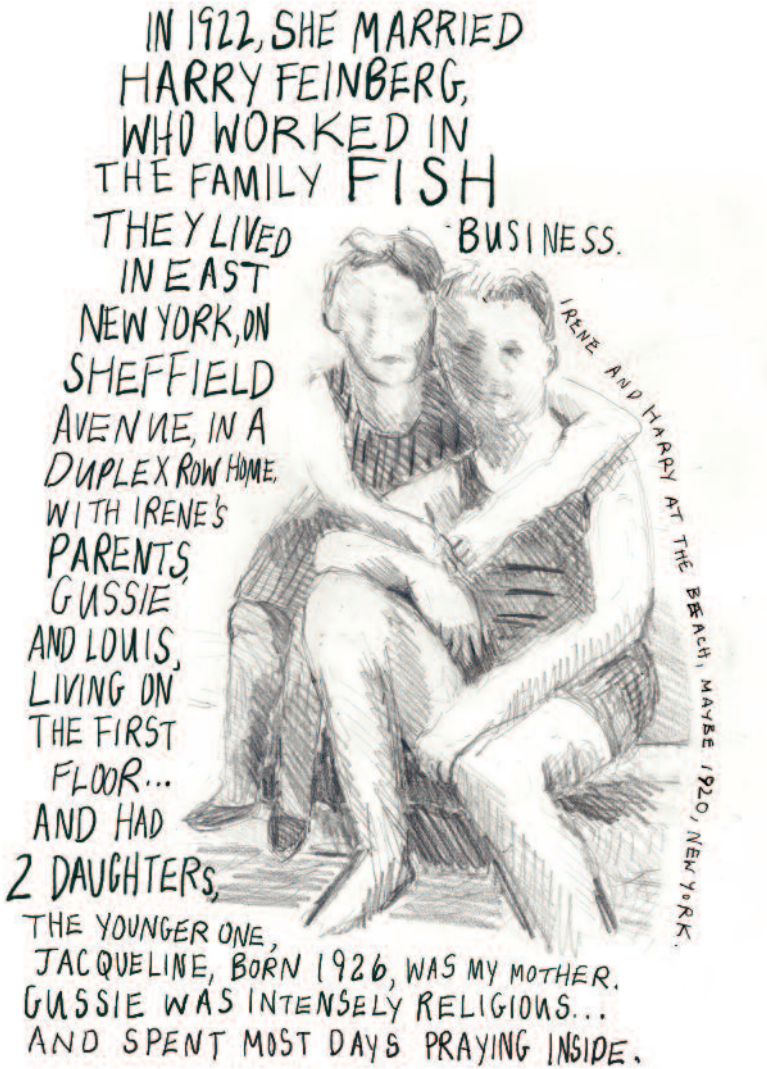

IT'S ABOUT FAMILY LORE... FRANCES FLAX MY FATHER'S MOTHER WAS WAS BORN IN 1895, IN VILNA LITHUANIA... THE JERUSALEM OF EUROPE... UNDER TSAR NICHOLAS II OF RUSSIA.
HER FATHER WAS A HANDSOME HEBREW SCHOLAR... VERY RELIGIOUS, WHO DIDN'T WORK MUCH.
HER MOTHER SOMETIMES SUPPORTED HER 5 GIRLS AND 2 BOYS BY SELLING VODKA TO THE GOYIM.
SHE REMEMBERS LIVING IN CONSTANT FEAR OF ANTI-SEMETIC VIOLENCE.
GRANDMA FRANCES AT MY PARENT'S WEDDING, BROOKLYN, 1948


ON THE BOAT TO PHILADELPHIA IN 1905... BY WAY OF HULL ENGLAND, FRANCES, AGE 10, SMALL, BLONDE, BLUE-EYED, STRONG WILLED AND INTREPID, STOLE LEFTOVERS FROM FIRST CLASS TABLES FOR HER FAMILY IN STEERAGE.
GRANDMA FRANCES, SOMETIME IN THE 30'S OR 40'S, BROOKLYN.


IN 1918
IRVING AND
FRANCES
MARRIED
AND HE BECAME
A TYPESET
FOREMAN
FOR THE
JEWISH
DAILY
FORWARD...
THEY MOVED
INTO THE 1ST
ELEVATOR
BUILDING
IN THEIR
BROOKLYN
NEIGHBORHOOD
IN 1933...
AND
FRANCES
LIVED IN THE
HIGH CEILINGED,
COMMODIOUS
ONE BEDROOM
APARTMENT
FOR THE
NEXT 60
YEARS.
GRANDMA FRANCE'S EPIC GLASS PERFUME BOTTLE... BEDROOM 1716 AVE T.


THE TRADITIONAL OBSERVANT, JEWISH WAY OF LIFE IN EUROPE OFTEN ABRUPTLY SHIFTED IN NEW YORK... SHED CASUALLY BY THE YOUNGER GENERATION... LIKE A PIECE OF OLD SKIN... UNWANTED... UNNEEDED...
IRVING WAS AN ARDENT SOCIALIST AND ZIONIST. HE HAD NO TIME, INTEREST OR USE FOR THE OLD WAYS... RELIGIOUS RITUAL... HE WAS A MODERN MAN.


GRANDMA IRENE AT MY PARENT'S WEDDING
BROOKLYN, 1948
IRENE GOLDSTEIN, MY MOTHER'S MOTHER WAS BORN IN 1900, IN BROOKLYN, NEW YORK... HER AMERICAN BIRTH A SOURCE OF GREAT PRIDE.
HER FATHER LOUIS, LEFT THE OLD COUNTRY AT NINETEEN, ON HIS OWN... LANDED IN ENGLAND... AND LEARNED TO BE A TAILOR ... ARRIVING IN NEW YORK DURING THE BLIZZARD OF 1888.
HE OWNED A DRESS SHOP ON DIVISION STREET ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE OF MANHATTEN...
...AND WAS SUCCESSFUL ENOUGH TO BUILD THE FAMILY A SUMMER HOME IN BETHLEHEM NEW HAMPSHIRE.

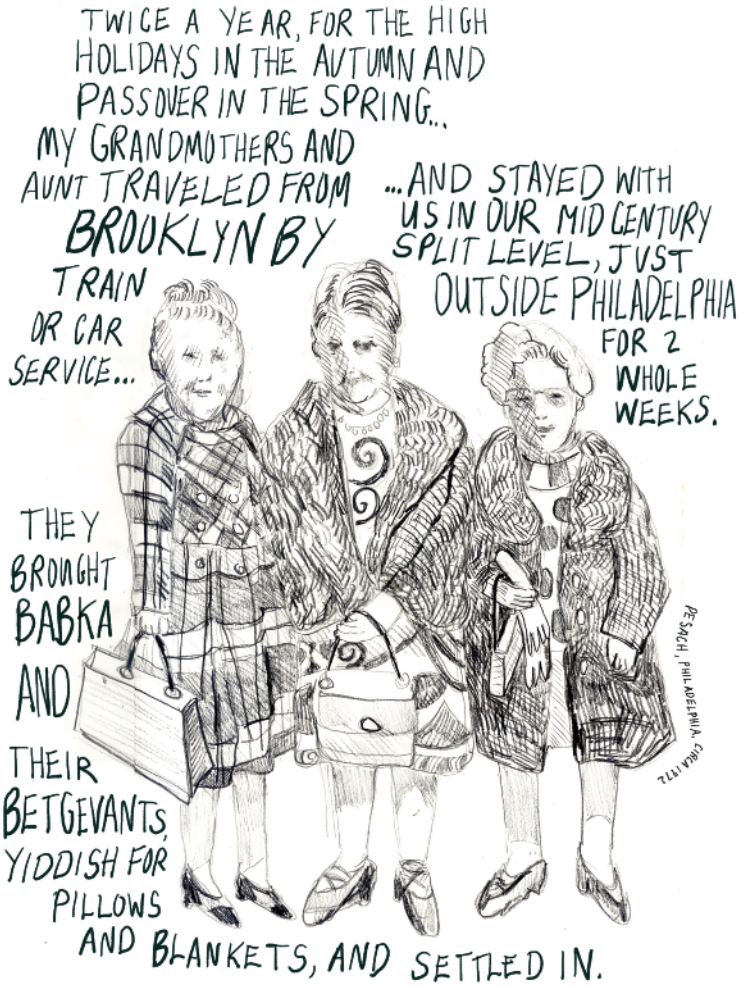

IN 1922, SHE MARRIED HARRY FEINBERG, WHO WORKED IN THE FAMILY FISH BUSINESS.
THEY LIVED IN EAST NEW YORK, ON SHEFFIELD AVENUE, IN A DUPLEX ROW HOME, WITH IRENE'S PARENTS, GUSSIE AND LOUIS, LIVING ON THE FIRST FLOOR... AND HAD 2 DAUGHTERS,
IRENE AND HARRY AT THE BEACH, MAYBE 1920, NEW YORK.
THE YOUNGER ONE, JACQUELINE, BORN 1926, WAS MY MOTHER.
GUSSIE WAS INTENSELY RELIGIOUS... AND SPENT MOST DAYS PRAYING INSIDE.


RIDING UP ON THE TRAIN FROM NEW YORK... TO ESCAPE THE HEAT, HAY FEVER'S AND BAD AIR OF THE CITY...
MY MOTHER SPENT ENTIRE SUMMERS IN BETHLEHEM, AT THE FOOT OF MT. AGASSIZ.
WHEN SHE WAS LITTLE... SHE REMEMBERED SEEING A SIGN IN THE WINDOW OF ONE OF THE POSH HOTELS IN TOWN, WHICH READ... NO DOGS OR JEWS.
IRENE, AUNT MURIEL AND MOM IN BETHLEHEM, NEW HAMPSHIRE, 1929


WHEN I WAS
A LITTLE GIRL...
THE HOLOCAUST
WAS STILL
INCREDIBLY
RECENT...
HAPPENING
LESS THAN
30 YEARS
BEFORE.
THE RED
DELFINER
BOOK OF NAMES
TRACES THE
FAMILY LINE IN
BUKOVINA
FROM 1802...
STARKLY
RECORDING
A FAMILY
CUT IN
HALF
BY THE
DISASTROUS EVENTS
OF THE 1930'S AND 40'S IN
EUROPE.


AS YOU PAGE THROUGH THE BOOK...
ENTIRE FAMILIES DISAPPEAR...
...ENDING IN 1942 IN TRANSINISTRIA,
AN AREA BEYOND THE BUG RIVER...
WHERE THE ROMANIAN FACISTS...
INSPIRED BY THE GERMAN NAZIS...
BANISHED THE JEWS OF BUKOVINA...
TO DIE... WITHOUT FOOD, WATER OR SHELTER.
THIS HAPPENED TO LUDWIG DELFINER, BORN IN ZASTAWNA, IN 1901.
LUDWIG, GRANDPA IRVING'S FIRST COUSIN... SON OF HIS MOTHER'S BABY BROTHER.
HIS WIFE AND 10 YEAR OLD DAUGHTER ERIKA WERE MURDERED THERE.
LUDWIG DELFINER, 1941


BUT ALL OF THIS WAS NOT TALKED ABOUT MUCH...
MY FATHER FOUND HIS WAY BACK TO TRADITION IN 1957, AFTER HIS FATHER DIED...
WE KEPT A KOSHER HOME...
HAD TWO SETS OF DISHES...
AND EVERY FRIDAY NIGHT WE HAD SHABBOS DINNER... IT WAS ALWAYS MORE CULTURALLY GROUNDED THAN RELIGIOUS.


TWICE A YEAR, FOR THE HIGH HOLIDAYS IN THE AUTUMN AND PASSOVER IN THE SPRING..
MY GRANDMOTHERS AND AUNT TRAVELED FROM BROOKLYN BY TRAIN OR CAR SERVICE...
...AND STAYED WITH US IN OUR MID CENTURY SPLIT LEVEL, JUST OUTSIDE PHILADELPHIA FOR 2 WHOLE WEEKS.
THEY BROUGHT BABKA AND THEIR BETGEVANTS, YIDDISH FOR PILLOWS AND BLANKETS, AND SETTLED IN.
RESEARCH, PHILADELPHIA, CIRCA 1972

AT PASSOVER, WE CHANGED
THE DISHES AND BROUGHT UP THE 1930's
DEPRESSION GLASS AND THE 1950's
STANGLWARE POTTERY WITH IT'S FLORAL
PATTERNS AND EARTHEN COLORS
FROM THE DOWNSTAIRS CLOSET.

GRANDMA
IRENE
MADE
KNAIDELS
IN A HUGH
SHISLE,
LADELING
THEM OUT
FOR US
TO TASTE,
BEFORE
THE
SEDER...

OIL PAINTING OF "GOLDEN HARVEST" STANGL POTTERY TEACUP AND SAUCER. 2004

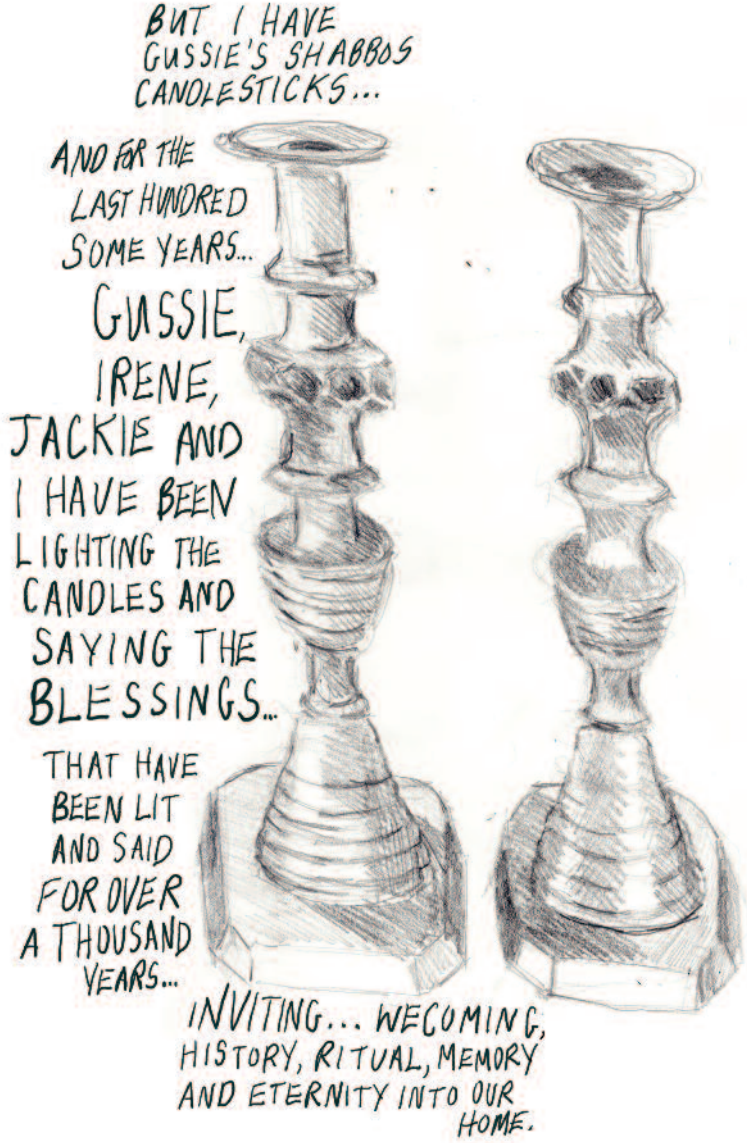
WHILE
CARRYING ON
A RUNNING DISCOURSE
WITH GRANDMA FRANCES
ON WHO MADE WHAT BETTER.


THE SEDERS OF MY CHILDHOOD, LARGE, BOISTEROUS AFFAIRS... THE YEARLY RETELLING OF THE ANCIENT STORY OF ISRAEL'S REDEMPTION FROM SLAVERY IN THE LAND OF EGYPT...
WERE A BRIDGE FROM THE OLD COUNTRY INTO THE SPARKLING NEW ATOMIC AGE OF THE 1960'S AND 70'S.
SEDER, PHILADELPHIA, CIRCA 1964


SOME TRADITIONS LINGERED... LIKE BOWLS of EGG WATER... LITERALLY, HARD BOILED EGGS, CUT UP IN WATER, WITH A LITTLE SALT TO SYMBOLIZE THE TEARS of ENSLAVEMENT. NOBODY REALLY LIKED IT... AND IT DIDN'T SURVIVE FOR VERY LONG.


MY COUSIN AND I...
THE TWO LITTLE GIRLS
AT THE TABLE...
DRANK SWEET KEDEM GRAPE JUICE, THE STAND-IN FOR WINE...
...FROM TWO TINY, BLUE GLASS CUPS...
THAT MY MOM, AND HER SISTER DRANK FROM AT SEDERS IN BROOKLYN, SOME 40 YEARS BEFORE.


BEING JEWISH FOR ME WAS AND IS ABOUT ALL OF THIS...
ABOUT TIME SPACE AND MEMORY...
...ABOUT PLACE AND HISTORY...
ABOUT AN ANCIENT TRIBE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST...
ABOUT THE OLD COUNTRY AND THE NEW COUNTRY...
ABOUT FAMILY AND STORIES AND THE OBJECTS LEFT BEHIND...
ABOUT PLAYING WITH MY DAD'S TALLIT FRINGES IN SERVICES TO KEEP FROM GETTING BORED...
AND ABOUT REALIZING, AT AN EARLY AGE, THAT IT HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH GOD.
GRANPA HARRY'S LUNCHPAIL


BUT I HAVE GUSSIE'S SHABBOS CANDLESTICKS...
AND FOR THE LAST HUNDRED SOME YEARS...
GUSSIE, IRENE, JACKIE AND I HAVE BEEN LIGHTING THE CANDLES AND SAYING THE BLESSINGS...
THAT HAVE BEEN LIT AND SAID FOR OVER A THOUSAND YEARS...
INVITING... WECOMING, HISTORY, RITUAL, MEMORY AND ETERNITY INTO OUR HOME.

How Jewish is a "Jewish" Comic?

Ken Koltun-Fromm
Haverford College

The title of this essay plays off of Kirin Narayan's influential essay, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" and I do so because claims to authenticity work much the same in supposedly "Jewish" comics as they do in ethnographic studies. Narayan exposes how anthropologists often assert insider status, or authentic sources, by appealing to problematic notions of the native, both as researcher and as informant. That sense of "native status" is rooted in thorny questions about the insider, about authenticity, and about stable, uniform identities. Too many of us, Narayan suggests, carry turbulent and unsettling "multiple identities" that defy and frustrate claims to authentic selfhood and the native informant (671–86ff).

So how do we locate or distinguish "Jewish" from non-Jewish comics, the native from the pretender? What criteria do we deploy, and in what sense do these evaluatory schemes appeal to some notion of nativity and authenticity? Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman offer one cogent model for approaching this dilemma. In their *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches* (2010), Baskind and Omer-Sherman recognize the descriptive quandary, but still try to offer a helpful guide: "Although our governing framework may prove too conservative for some, for the sake of coherence and

focus we consider the Jewish graphic novel to be an illustrated narrative produced by a Jew that addresses a Jewish subject or some aspect of the Jewish experience" (xvi). So a "Jewish" comic is one authored (does this mean written, illustrated, colored?) by a Jew about some recognizable Jewish subject or experience. Yet even Baskind and Omer-Sherman know that Jews rarely agree on these matters, much less the scholars who study them. Who, exactly, counts as a Jew, and what kind or amount of "production" actually matters? These questions only multiply when we try to pin down some notion of a Jewish subject or experience. Again, how "Jewish" does all this have to be in order for readers, or scholars, or even producers, to accept a comic as Jewish?

I want to argue that instead of answering that question we should recognize it as a perpetual anxiety facing Jewish identity in America, and a particular tension exposed by graphic narratives. The question is an anxious one, and to see this I want to take an approach similar to Laura Leibman's analysis of "Jewish" objects in her magisterial *The Art of the Jewish Family* (2020). Objects, argues Leibman, are "Jewish enough" according to "how they were used rather than in the genres themselves" (209). I take Baskind and Omer-Sherman's analysis to be a genre approach: a Jewish comic is Jewish when it fits within a type and/or class of subjects. But to focus on use, as Leibman does, is to consider how objects are handled, deployed, read, cultivated. In this essay, I want to focus on use in a very particular and somewhat rhetorical mode: how do comics present or enact themselves as "Jewish" comics? What rhetorical and pictorial strategies do they employ to be read as "Jewish"? In other words, how do the comics as graphic narratives, as objects, articulate themselves as Jewish comics?

I will look at three comics that do this kind of "Jewish" work in very different ways: Douglas Rushkoff and Liam Sharp's *Testament: Akedah* (2006), A. David Lewis and Marvin Perry Mann's *The Lone and Level Sands* (2005), and Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir* (2016). In *Testament: Akedah*, the very title stakes a claim to an insider, "Jewish" language by appealing to the traditional Hebrew term for the binding of Isaac story in The Book of Genesis. But even more, Jewish here means recognizing the foundational

"building blocks" of that story as a universal paradigm, and taking hold of the Jewish revolutionary desire to overthrow those blocks for new, more liberating narratives. *The Lone and Level Sands* is a story about the Jewish Exodus, but this time told from the Egyptian point of view. In my reading, this comic asks its readers to recognize this Egyptian perspective as a critical feature of the "Jewish" story, as a kind of counter-narrative that enables a fuller, more complex reading of the Exodus. Of course this comic is not just for Jews, but it makes the normative claim to be read, and thus be counted, as Jewish. Finally, Kurzweil presents Jewish in her *Flying Couch* as a form of neurosis, as inner turmoil, as psychological conflict. Yet Jewish is not only an anxious form of psychological obsession; it is also the very subject of this comic. The text itself raises the question, what counts as Jewish, or better, what kinds of stories enable and form a Jewish subject? All three comics offer distinctive rhetorical strategies for answering how Jewish is a "Jewish" comic, but their answers, we shall come to see, witness to the anxiety of Jewish identity as presented through word and image.

Testament: Akedah

Writer Douglas Rushkoff and artist Liam Sharp's *Testament: Akedah* is a story about idolatry and the Jewish propensity to rewrite foundational myths and codes.[1] *Akedah* is a self-proclaimed mythological account of foundational violence: a war between the gods who use humans to further their own ends. That battle between Moloch and the Hebrew God in Genesis recurs again and again, in every generation, and much of the imagery in this text makes this clear. Sharp will draw biblical scenes that mirror contemporary ones to ensure that readers recognize the parallel lives. Abraham and Isaac are types that resurface in every epoch. But we need not subsume our identities nor our lives to this divine narrative; Rushkoff suggests we can rewrite our stories, change the founding code, and

[1]I have appropriated and adapted this account of *Akedah* from my analysis in *Drawing on Religion: Reading and the Moral Imagination in Comics & Graphic Novels*.

so liberate ourselves to become who we seek to be. This is what Jewish means in this text: to take hold of this revolutionary fervor to question every foundational truth, and rewrite our narratives and so be liberated from debilitating forms of false worship. Human liberation is a Jewish act of religious destruction and rebirth.

The comic book *Akedah*—the biblical Hebrew term for "binding" that functions as the traditional, Jewish shorthand for Genesis 22—rewrites Abraham's sacrifice of his beloved son as a liberation story from false worship. Rushkoff is remarkably candid about this, and opens his introduction to *Akedah* with this revisionary pressure in view: "The Bible may have actually been better off as a comic book" (in *Akedah*, this is all in bold, all in capital letters). The suggestion is clear: the *Akedah* comic lying in the hands of the reader might actually liberate and transform the Bible into what it *should have always been*. In this way, the comic may transform the biblical account into a revolutionary text. Rushkoff understands the boldness of this claim. Perhaps few of his readers know of his professional life as Professor of Media Studies at City University of New York, Queens College. They probably do not know of his website (http://www.rushkoff.com/about/) or of his many books and articles on media and technology. So Rushkoff seeks to legitimize his credentials to his readers: "I'm saying this in my day-job persona as a halfway respectable media theorist—a guy who has written books and novels, taught university classes and made documentaries about the impact of new technology on the way we relate to stories" (Introduction). He has also written a book about Judaism—*Nothing Sacred: The Truth about Judaism* (2003). His *Nothing Sacred* book may have moved Rushkoff to do this comic series, for his reading of Judaism substantiates much that we see in the comic narrative.

Though Rushkoff's interpretation of Judaism reveals how media revolutionaries are working out of a foundational, "Jewish" framework, I want to point out the very title of this comic, *Akedah*, is itself a claim to Jewish roots and Rushkoff's own authority as textual interpreter. This is inside, Jewish language: most readers, perhaps even most Jewish readers, do not know Genesis 22 as the *Akedah*, but as the sacrifice of Isaac, or the binding of Isaac, or just as the

twenty-second chapter in Genesis. To call this story *Akedah* is to self-consciously appropriate an internal, religious, and Jewish story. It is a claim from the native to the native; that is what insider language does. I, for one, only use the term *Akedah* when speaking to insiders aware of this title, or to those I want to impress with my Jewish knowledge. This latter point is how I read Rushkoff—his authority lies not only in his university training, but also in his knowledge of *Jewish* texts. He is the native informant advising other natives about Jewish origins. And that claim to nativity is one of the ways Rushkoff positions *Akedah* the comic as a Jewish text.

"Jewish" is a positionality: it is to recognize narrative myths as false accounts of the self, and to create new, more truthful stories about human flourishing. Rushkoff writes as a native informant who sees through the false idols. He compares our relation to biblical texts to "watching TV or a movie and imagining ourselves as the characters on the screen." The scripts have been written for us, and we all just insert ourselves into these ready-made narratives (you should hear the media theorist behind this account). We all "get lost in the seamless reality and get taken along for a ride," and "we're either afraid or forbidden to inhabit the places where temporality, interpretation and sequence are up for grabs" (Rushkoff, *Testament* Introduction). Clearly Rushkoff is not a member of this "we" he describes here. He has already seen through the misty clouds of manipulation, prophetically calling to those of us who passively receive our media as pure entertainment. We do not read the binding of Isaac story as a call to arms, or as a fundamental choice between idol worship and liberatory self-empowerment. Rushkoff's authority as a prophetic truth-teller is important because his claim rests on the way media works. "We get a good night's sleep" because media dulls our critical capacities, and so appeals to our unconscious desire for order and security. This too is what idols do: they transform selves into passive worshipers of false narratives. But this is not our story, Rushkoff now tells us, and so we must rewrite the Bible as comic book to break the spell. And this is what Judaism tells us to do; it is the "truth about Judaism" because Jewish means destroying false myths and rewriting the foundational code.

Rushkoff appeals to something like Weber's notion of charismatic decline to describe how new media arises as the iconoclastic destroyer of older media idols. But soon this new media declines much like its predecessor, seeking only to defend its authoritative claim on our lives; iconoclasm devolves into idolatry. The printing press transformed a sacred document into a "mass-produced book," but now that book has become oppressive and authoritative as closed text. Rushkoff believes we are in a new era of the "open source tradition" that radically questions sacred truths (and so the title of his book on Judaism, *Nothing Sacred*). This iconoclastic tradition re-imagines that printed text as alive and forever open to interpretive creativity, and this is what makes a Jewish text Jewish. We, as those native informants, can change the code: "the emergence of interactive technologies like the computer has revived the open source tradition, providing the opportunity to again challenge unquestioned laws and beliefs and engage with our foundation myths as participatory narratives, as stories still in the making" (Rushkoff, *Testament* Introduction). Genesis 22 is not a settled text—it is one we can again return to and rewrite as our own *Akedah*. We can make the biblical text Jewish, as it were, by being media revolutionaries. In truth, this is what the comic *Akedah* performs as well: it transforms Genesis 22 into a Jewish comic.

But Rushkoff's comic is more radical still: the Bible was actually the first open source text, but readers have sought to protect its divine, fixed status:

> I've found some less than receptive audiences for these observations. When I wrote a book presenting the Bible as an "open source" collaboration [*Nothing Sacred*], I was blacklisted by fundamentalists of more than one religion. They just didn't want their story messed with—even though I had been able to prove it was written with that very intent! (Rushkoff, *Testament* Introduction)

In my reading of *Nothing Sacred*, Rushkoff does not prove so much as assert the "core beliefs" he discovers in the Bible: iconoclasm, abstract monotheism, and social justice. Above all, Judaism is a "breakthrough concept" that can awaken us from our slumbers. That

tradition "has been built to change and to cause change," and so what we require is less revolution than "renaissance—literally, the rebirth of old ideas in a new context." Open source Judaism *is* Judaism: "A Jewish renaissance, too, will demand that we dig deep into the very code of our religion, then reexperience it in the context of full modernity. It will require us to assume, at least temporarily, that nothing at all is too sacred to be questioned, reinterpreted, and modified. . . . And, perhaps ironically, we'll be engaging ourselves in Judaism's most time-honored tradition" (Rushkoff, *Nothing Sacred* 3, 36, 84, 111). Rushkoff's open-source developers are Jewish iconoclasts who return us to the core of Jewish practice and the original intent of Jewish texts. Modern code "hackers" are "today's equivalent of the Hebrews" (Rushkoff, *Testament* Introduction) and like their predecessors, must reject the idol worshippers who oppress them. This is what makes a Jewish text "Jewish." And this is what makes a Jewish comic "Jewish" as well. Judaism is iconoclastic, and Jewish comics reveal how foundational stories can be rewritten, codes can be hacked, how in truth nothing is sacred.

Reprinted with permission of the author.

These scenes occur throughout *Testament: Akedah*, but none more clearly than in Rushkoff and Liam's depiction of the Jewish Torah scrolls. In a two-page spread toward the end of this graphic narrative, Sharp depicts the Dutch industrialist Pierre Fallow (he is the modern idol worshiper who sacrifices to Moloch) on the *verso* (left) page, and the warring gods on the *recto* (right) side. As Fallow attempts his world takeover

through universal currency and technological tracking devices, Sharp depicts him as pulled by competing narrative threads. Each block is a narrative unit in both biblical and modern times, and when spliced together they create mythological, narrative unity. Fallow is just the plaything of the gods as they battle each other for possession and dominance. On the *recto* page, Sharp beautifully inscribes this warfare in the biblical scroll itself, as we literally see the Torah scroll become comic book creation. In these scenes, Lord Krishna plays the trickster who speaks truth to power: "In the thick of it, still, my Hebrew friends? Shaping human destiny to your will?" Melchizedek's response comes across as weak apologetic: "We do not fight for ourselves, dear Krishna, but in the name of the one true God" (103). If that is so, then they all seem unconcerned with human suffering and repetitive violence. This is really *their* narrative, not ours. The backdrop to this divine scene makes this clear: behind Krishna stands an endless bookshelf projected beyond the page, and on each shelf lies countless Torah scrolls. There are other stories, but this is the one the gods choose to inhabit. These narratives could be different, and they could have been chosen otherwise. The visual dynamics on the page suggest this is but one of many Torahs, but they all remain stories of violation by the gods. Even those other Torahs are not sacred and must be overthrown. Rushkoff and Liam show us how we have been written; it is time to become Jewish revolutionaries and write the Torahs for and by ourselves. This is the objective of the comic *Akedah*, and this is how it presents itself as a "Jewish" comic.

The Lone and Level Sands

Susannah Heschel has effectively deployed the notion of "counter-history," a term borrowed from such scholars as Amos Funkenstein and David Biale, to help explain how Jewish thinkers appropriate the sources of their antagonists in order to polemically offer an alternative narrative reading (Heschel, *Abraham Geiger* 14; Heschel, "Jewish Studies" 101–15). Something like this is going on in Lewis and Mann's rendition of the Exodus story, this time from the perspective of the Egyptian court. *The Lone and Level Sands* plays off

that well-known biblical account, and subverts it by allowing readers to linger in the minds of those who lost that battle.[2] It is a counter-history to Jewish history, and as such attempts to be part of that Jewish story. The normative claim in *The Lone and Level Sands* is that this Egyptian story of the Exodus is a Jewish narrative too. Egyptian tragedy is a Jewish one in talking back to the winners of this history.

The Lone and Level Sands retells the Hebrew God's battle with Pharaoh as a decidedly human, tragic story. It offers a deeper, exploratory account of human limits, obligations, and failures. Lewis and Mann present Ramses as villain to better assess the heroic, and by taking up the other side to the divine narrative, one that has proved so foundational to Western culture (see Walzer), Lewis and Mann present a more anxious, conflicted, heartening sense of liberation. And this is why it reads "Jewish": Lewis and Mann re-envision Exodus as a more complicated account of human and divine relations, suggesting this is just as much a Jewish story as it is a universal one. Indeed, this more textured, tragic narrative ought to be *the* Jewish Exodus story. *The Lone and Level Sands* reads Jewish because it is a critical awakening to what counts as Jewish.

The opening prologue establishes two important themes that run throughout the comic: familial ties and accepting one's place in the world. The Pharaoh Seti has just returned from battle, but on his own, familial terms. Three timelines confront the reader on the opening page, with dates for the Gregorian and Hebrew calendars, together with the year fourteen of the Nineteenth Dynasty in Seti's reign. Those calendar dates appear as backdrop to the larger panel depicting the fourteenth year, thereby returning the reader, like Pharaoh's army, to "an antique land." But it also indicates that Jewish time (the Hebrew calendar) is not divorced from other temporalities. Egyptian, Jewish, and Gregorian calendars traverse along the same page, along the same space and time of comic narrative, to

[2]I have appropriated and adapted this account of *The Lone and Level Sands* from my analysis in *Drawing on Religion: Reading and the Moral Imagination in Comics & Graphic Novels.*

suggest an interweaving, a braiding as Robert Orsi calls it, of narrative histories (9). Turning the page we see the first close-up of Seti as a kind, handsome, and regal Pharaoh. He is muscular and lean, and though he speaks the language of state and warfare, he yearns for the comforts of home. Young Ramses greets his father with stately grace, but Seti quickly dispenses with formalities, taking his son Ramses into his arms—a public sign of affection that seems immediately out-of-place in this courtly setting. Indeed, Ramses at first appears worried, if not threatened by how his father will react to his official welcome. But the gutter between that look of fear and the melting into his father's embrace suggests a quick jump toward his bosom and a more intimate, if shy love. There are more important things, Seti teaches his son here, than statecraft and warfare.

This regal, public affection contrasts sharply with Moses' agitated state on the very next page. He seems out-of-place too, but distracted and, when compared to both Seti and Ramses, thin, frail, and unsteady. Seti calls him quiet and awkward, and Ramses considers him "withdrawn and mild-tempered." We soon learn that Ramses and his confidant Ta have news for Seti about Moses, who has inexplicably killed a Hebrew slave master. But before hearing those rumors, Seti warns, "we follow what paths are written for us" (008). News, good or ill, reflect the roles we are destined to play out. If this is Moses' fate, then he too follows the only path open to him. *The Lone and Level Sands* is about finding, and so accepting, one's place in a world already designed and written. This is true for Seti, Ramses, and even Moses, and so is as much a Jewish story as it is an Egyptian one. Their histories, their place in time, are inexorably linked and braided.

Clifford Geertz once famously argued that studying culture is about symbolic action and according to that linguistic model ethnographers write down what "is getting said." We are meaning-making creatures, and so anthropologists like Geertz read cultures like a text, decoding "the said" for meaning rather than the embodied act of "the saying" (10). But in a world already written, "the saying" is an embodied placement within an established order. This is Seti's model too for his son: the "saying"—our embodied, often familial

acts in the world—does not signify ("the said") but instead locates our stories in an ordered, and so meaningful world. Moses will follow one path, and Ramses will follow another. But they are both connected by time and place, and this is how *The Lone and Level Sands* critically intervenes as Jewish comic. Egyptian tragedy is part of the Jewish Exodus story; it is Jewish in this way. Both Pharaoh and Moses find themselves here in their imbricated stories. Readers of the Exodus story know already that Moses' God will upset Egyptian time and purpose, and even Ramses will soon come to understand his role in a wider universe he barely understands. In fact, Ramses is alone in recognizing his place in this broader religious landscape, for his wife Nefertari and his advisor Ta do not accept fate in this way. But Ramses is wiser than his friend and spouse, for he has adopted his father's good counsel. He is more the inheritor of his father's world than a builder of new ones. His path too has been written for him, and it is written as a Jewish story.

The comic quickly moves from the young Ramses to his rise as Pharaoh, now with son and grandson, and Ta as his trusted advisor. There are signs—omens only Ramses appears to recognize—of a new, more powerful God than his Amon-Ra. When a guardsman repeats Moses' message to Ramses—a note concerning the intimate talk between Seti and his son—the guardsman who had been sturdy and upright on the previous page now seems bewildered and unsure of his surroundings. This foreshadows, as readers will soon discover, divine possession where the Hebrew God controls the words of others (the hardening of their hearts). Here again, Lewis and Mann interweave the Jewish narrative within the Egyptian one and present both as two sides of the same story. Moses' intimate message to Ramses is but one revelation of these interlocked histories. The quoted message from Moses—"Does your father still watch you sleep, little apricot?" (022)—could only be known by an intimate family member. Seti had called Ramses little apricot, just as Ramses and his son call their children by this affectionate nickname. Hearing these words repeated by an Israelite slave unwinds these inherited lines, displacing Ramses' sense of familial order. It is now unclear who this Israelite other really is, and where Ramses as Pharaoh stands in relation to

him. But the temporal displacement is just as disorienting. This message comes from Pharaoh's past and it upsets the intimacy of a father's love for his son. It pierces that soothing memory of a father's protective watch, but it also suggests that other eyes were watching too. Moses had always been there—glancing from the side, invading that private, familial space, perhaps experiencing the jealousy of a father's love. Moses exists within Ramses' familial space, and he lingers there too. In this way, Pharaoh cannot escape the Jewish story.

Lewis creates a double narrative in the following pages to confuse the temporal dimension of the narrative plot. In the wake of Moses' encounter with Ramses, Nefertari falls into a trance, and her confusion slowly infuses the reader's own. Envisioning battles and a female oracle, Nefertari soon dreams about her grandson Seti who rules over Egypt, but she fears he may be the last of the Pharaohs. Yet that dream effortlessly shifts to another vision in which Nefertari takes on the character of an oracle who witnesses the present unfolding before her eyes. This we trust as prophetic vision, not of the future but of the present, as Ramses confronts Moses and Aaron on the banks of the Nile. Lewis and Mann use Nefertari's dream as a gloss to that meeting, as a kind of interpretive overlay (in block panels) to this male scene of power. These dual registers, where female oracles revision and interpret male authority, displace present time and progressive, narrative structure. Ramses might appear alone, but there are other worlds, other visions impinging on his political realm. And this back-and-forth movement of time and prophecy is now part of the readers' awareness as they weave in-and-out of oracular visions and current events. Lewis and Mann have manipulated readers to experience both Jewish and Egyptian time as one kind of displaced time. It is a dreamscape, and it suggests how *The Lone and Level Sands* can be Jewish too. It is "counterhistory" as part of Jewish history.

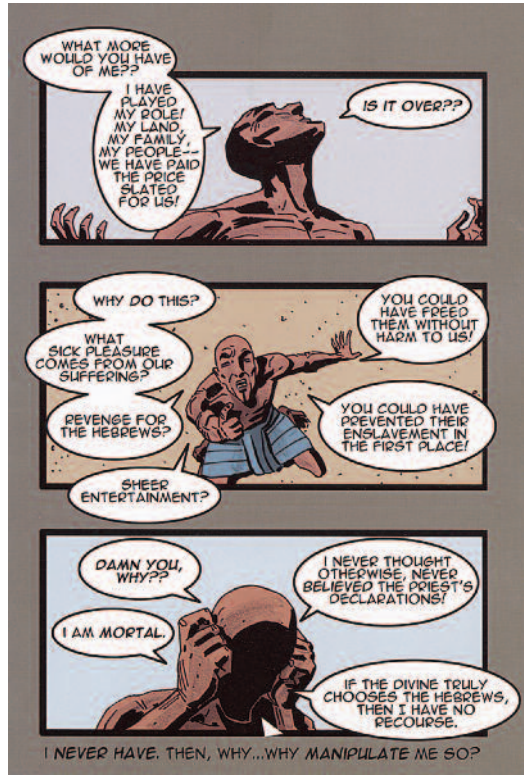
As plague after plague overwhelms Egypt and its people, Ramses stands in the middle of two competing narrative movements: the one traces his own indecision and growing recognition of powers larger than his own, while the other counsels him to remain strong and defiant before Moses' demands. His counselors, Ta and Nefertari, are possessed by a spirit that demands strong leadership from Ramses.

This is a clever counterhistory to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in the biblical Exodus story, and reveals what "Jewish" looks like to the Egyptian court. At first Ramses is unaware of these divine voices possessing his spouse and friend, but Mann employs possessed facial expressions, bent-over bodies, zagged font lines, and darker hues to indicate divine control. Nefertari challenges Ramses to defend his kingdom rather than attend to her sickness, and Ta mocks his weakness by appealing to kingly pride. Most readers of *The Lone and Level Sands* know how this story goes, and how it ends. Lewis and Mann know this too, and so emphasize not the freedom of a people but the way Ramses comes to accept the fate assigned to him and those he loves. I want to emphasize once again that only Ramses recognizes these forces controlling the destiny of both peoples; *only he recognizes Jewish*. He is the lone character who questions, lingers, and meditates on events beyond his own control: "Is this what is written? Am I . . . am I destined to lose you, my queen? Have I steered us wisely? Could only catastrophe for Egypt be what is written? And if so—what cruel author assigns us this fate?" (073–074). Ramses' other servants, including Ta and Bekenkhonsu, hold tenaciously to their impotent worldviews. Not even Moses questions or reflects on his role in this cosmic drama. A force beyond all their comprehension, one directed by that cruel author, now takes over Pharaoh's kingdom. Where Ta lashes out at the enslaved Israelites, Ramses questions his own leadership; where Bekenkhonsu appeals to the Egyptian gods, Ramses knows there are other "Jewish" forces at work that command his movements.

Haunted by nightmares, Ramses turns inwards to question his own place in a world not of his own making. Ramses' own sense of place is no longer stable, but he recognizes, even at this point, that something has dramatically altered his place in the world. He lashes out at the Jewish God: "I needed control restored. . . . Face me, Tyrant . . . stop hiding behind your emissaries . . . your plagues. Face me!" (086). This, of course, God will not do, in part because power lies in silence too. In this ultimate sign of rebellion, Ramses has finally capitulated to the Hebrew God. Even Bekenkhonsu recognizes Yahweh as the more powerful deity, and Ramses follows the only

path open to him: "Yahweh is mighty. I have led my people wrong. You are free to go . . . go and worship Yahweh" (090). Finally, Ramses understands this Jewish story as his own.

Confronting Moses' world, and his God, has uprooted Ramses' sense of place, but as readers we place Ramses squarely within the Jewish Exodus story. *The Lone and Level Sands* rhetorically presents itself as a counterhistory to that Exodus, but one from within rather than outside of that narrative. This is why the comic arrives as "Jewish": it shows the tragic underside of liberation from bondage. These two worlds Ramses holds together. It is particularly instructive, I think, that in the end Ramses accepts Yahweh's power and his own mortality. He has come to see the world through the eyes of a Hebrew slave, and his cry to Yahweh is from one who suffers inexplicably (145):



Reprinted with permission of the author.

This declaration of injustice, as I read it, is how this comic positions itself as "Jewish." Mann's images of Ramses highlight his solitude in the desert, yearning upwards to a God that, as we all know, confronts Pharaoh's rage with silence. Like Frimme Hersh in Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978), who also leans back to project his anger upward towards his God, Ramses must accept silence as God's final act of power. But in that raging silence, Ramses takes on the position of the destitute slave—who cannot understand one's place, but who also refuses to accept it. Pharaoh has come to recognize the limits of his power, the insecurity of control, and the inexplicable condition of human suffering. He has achieved these insights, and a new sense of what it means to be Pharaoh, by becoming "Jewish."

Flying Couch

Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir* falls squarely within Baskind and Omer-Sherman's definition of a Jewish comic: "an illustrated narrative produced by a Jew that addresses a Jewish subject or some aspect of the Jewish experience" (xvi). It is a brilliant memoir about a young Jewish woman discovering her own Jewish identity within a family of strong women. Though framed as a story about her grandmother's life as a Holocaust survivor, it really is a story about what counts as Jewish, and the existential and psychological burdens for American Jews. Kurzweil's grandmother, much like Spiegelman's father in *Maus*, is both lovable and cringe worthy. She forever embarrasses her children and grandchildren by being loud, ostentatious, and she consistently mispronounces English phrases. But she is also loving, kind, and strong. Amy's mother Sonya appears as the calm, somewhat distanced presence in the room. But she has depth that Kurzweil keeps somewhat muted: a psychotherapist and PhD who has "received her share of therapy" and who has suffered an identity crisis with real "fear and memories" (10–11). Readers are rarely granted full access to those anxieties, but we do see them in full force with Amy, who struggles to try on various Jewish identities, settling on the "Expert Educated Jew" (107). This claim to being a "Jew"

is far more fraught and difficult for Amy to bear, and in this comic it registers differently than being "Jewish." The grandmother is a Jew in the sense that her identity is not up for grabs; she is a Jew because those around her label her as such, and she never seriously questions that existential designation. It is a fact about her being, even if she does not look Jewish: "There was anti-Semitism, of course. They used to take snow and put a rock in it and throw it at the Jew. But I had the blonde hair and the blue eyes. I looked like a shiksa, a gentile" (61). These are set, racialized categories, Jew and shiksa. You are a Jew or just somebody else. But to be Jewish is to take on a particular feature, to be a kind of Jew. It is a becoming rather than a being, and we see this in Amy's anxious decisions about what kind of Jew she wishes to be. So even as *Flying Couch* is easily recognizable as a Jewish comic, it still moves us to ask, what kind of Jewish comic is it, and how does it perform that Jewishness?

Kurzweil initially presents Jewish as psychological neurosis, as a beleaguered condition and sickness. Freud had always been concerned that psychoanalysis would be considered only as a Jewish science (and therefore not fully a legitimate one), and in *Flying Couch* his fear is fully realized. On the very first pages of chapter one Kurzweil draws a map of her home, with her mother encircled on the *verso* side and Amy on the *recto* page. Her mother reads a book on psychotherapy, while Amy holds markers to draw; the one is intellectual and studious, the other is creative and insular. But even if her mother has survived trauma and plenty of therapy, it is Amy whose anxieties and fears "are mostly imaginary" and require her mother's professional touch: "Sometimes we create minor anxieties for ourselves . . . to distract us from what we're *really* anxious about" (15). This only confuses the young Amy as she searches for the source of her unease. But her paranoia goes deep: "The ordinariness of life was a ruse. Perilous dramas hid under the surface of everything" (21). Now it might not be altogether noteworthy that "a graphic memoir" opens with inner psychic turmoil. Comic narratives often center on inner trauma and anxiety, and there is nothing particularly Jewish about doing so. But Kurzweil registers this psychosis as Jewish. In a scene that many young Jewish adults might recognize, Amy stands before her congregation chanting

her bat mitzvah portion (one she does not understand), while her peers doze and gossip, even as her grandmother cheers her on. But later during her celebratory party she races to the bathroom and, believing she is dying, realizes she has just had her first period. This is how Kurzweil narrates this scene: "There it was, in my underwear: the reason for all the neuroses, the guilt, the pressure to succeed, the ever-present nag of responsibility not only to myself but to some amorphous and mystical force. There was no escaping it: I was a Jewish woman" (56). Even if the blood signifies womanhood, it is the neuroses, guilt, pressure, and burden of responsibility that are catalogued as Jewish. And like the grandmother's designation as Jew, Jewish here also appears as inevitable, if not inescapable. To be Jewish is to be neurotic; it too is like some mystical force carried in the blood. In *Flying Couch*, psychic neurosis performs a kind of Jewish identity in America.

But this is not the case with Amy's grandmother. Kurzweil follows Amy's story about her first period with her grandmother's own recollection: "You wanna hear about a period? I'll tell you about a period. We didn't have the Kotex in Warsaw. . . . I remember it so clearly, the first time, my mother, she slapped my face. To put some color in it, she said. That's what I did to my Sonya when she got it" (58). There is no guilt or neurosis here. It is a simple retelling: this is what my mother did to me, and so I did the same to my daughter. We do not hear Jewish anxieties about this transitional moment to adulthood. It happened, I got slapped in the face, and then we move on. And all of the grandmother's life appears like this: "Oh I could tell you so many stories, I have stories and stories. A thousand and one stories." Those narratives do not carry the existential concerns that they do for Amy in *Flying Couch*. Her grandmother retells her stories because they are hers; they present who she is. And this is what I mean by the way *Flying Couch* distinguishes Jew from Jewish: the grandmother is a Jew, while Amy is Jewish. The one is complete, secured in identity, rooted in stories and places, while the other is searching, relentlessly questioning and obsessing over who she has become and wishes to be. In *Flying Couch*, a Jew is a fixed identity; being Jewish is a problem. Perhaps the answer to the question, how Jewish is a "Jewish" comic?, comes down to how much anxiety Amy embodies in becoming Jewish.

Reprinted with permission of the author.

That anxiety manifests as a perceived choice in *Flying Couch*: there are a few options for American Jews to choose, and Kurzweil depicts this scene as a "University-wide Identity Fair." Amy arrives to see various "identities" lined up on each side of the walkway. You have your "Asian Techies" across from "Filipinos Who Dance Well," together with "Lesbian Activists" and "Politically Active Black People." All of these identity groups are singular, focused, and narrow. But not so the Jews, whose sign carries the parenthetical "various" to note that, unlike these other affinity groups, Jews are different in more than one way. As Amy approaches the table with the "Jews" flag, she is told to "go choose your Jewish identity." Now this makes perfect sense to Amy; it is what Jews like her struggle to do. I for one cannot imagine her grandmother understanding that demand. There is no identity for her to choose; she is who she is. But Amy is

not that kind of Jew; she is not settled in her identity. Now arrayed before her to try on for size, each Jewish identity comes with pros and cons. There is the "Ardent Pro-Israel Jew" who is passionate and attracts plenty of dates from admirers, but then is simply inoffensive to parents (this is actually both a pro and con in *Flying Couch*). Next up is the "Radical Anti-Zionist Jew" who is admirably rebellious and cool, but is lonely at Jewish holidays. There is the "Politically and Culturally Apathetic Jew" who has the great advantage of sleeping well at night, but at the cost of repressed guilt. Finally, we have the "Expert Educated Jew," the one Amy chooses in the end, who gains a wealth of knowledge but must suffer an "inevitable existential crisis." Indeed, knowledge is the only pro listed for this character (107), and the list of cons are far longer than the other three Jewish identities. Why would anyone choose this persona? If I read Kurzweil right here, it's not really a choice at all. It is a "perceived" choice, one apparently layed out to inhabit, but in reality the choice has already been made. Amy chooses the identity that fits her, not the one she wishes to be. Amy is already this kind of Jew, and her only choice is to accept what it means to become this Jewish person. Her grandmother does not face that existential crisis; she can be this and no other. But Amy faces the challenge, and the inevitable existential crisis, of taking hold of this Jewish identity as her own. Being Jewish is an anxious play of acceptance.

Reprinted with permission of the author.

Becoming an "Expert Educated Jew" is a tall order, and Kurzweil mischievously draws this challenge as a large stack of books, with the Bible at the very bottom, balancing a mound of "Jewish" texts that include the Talmud, Mai-

monides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, works from Kafka and Roth, and, of course, texts about the Holocaust. Amy carries them all home, surrounding her couch with her now daily reading, when she dreams of visitations from the patriarch Jacob, Sigmund Freud, and Theodor Herzl. Becoming a Jewish intellectual comes with some obligations, as Jacob tells her: "Just as I, Jacob, wrestled with a nefarious angel in order to prove myself as the father of a nation and earn the name of Israel, so, too, must you wrestle with the demons of the past in order to—in order to, well . . . " (111). Jacob never completes that thought, and so the existential crisis, why and how does one wrestle with those demons? Freud's demands are equally weighty as he requires Amy to analyze her familial life in order to cleanse "your unconscious of all looming symbols and repressed desires." Finally, Herzl arrives to ask what Amy is really doing to help save the Jews. It seems that the Jewish intellectual must still satisfy religious, scientific, and cultural desires represented by Jacob, Freud, and Herzl.

Reprinted with permission of the author.

Amy, however, wishes only "to draw pictures," and so vanquishes these patriarchs in favor of her own Jewish idols: Art Spiegelman, Will Eisner, and Harvey Pekar. But if these are her preferred angels, why is Amy running away from them? Why do these literary giants demand far too much from Amy? Kurzweil ends this scene, and this chapter in *Flying Couch*, by labeling all these Jewish men in her dreamscape as "monsters." What is going on here about choosing to accept one's identity as an "Expert Educated Jew"?

The problem is that all this knowledge, all these great men, are of no help to Amy. This is *her* crisis, not theirs. Take a close look at that towering stack of books. As the pile increases the books become smaller, teetering at the top as if they could topple in a heap at any moment. It might seem like the "5 Books of the TORAH" offers a solid foundation, but clearly this booklist will collapse. It appears to me that the student who has brought the books to Amy, apparently in two stacks, could just as well come back with more, and more again. The list is endless. But no amount of reading, and no amount of sage advice, can help Amy wrestle with her demons. Not just Jacob, Freud, or Pekar are monsters; they all weigh down heavily on Amy's fraught relation to being and becoming Jewish. Recall that the one pro for the Expert Educated Jew is "a wealth of knowledge," but that will never overcome the many cons, especially the "inevitable existential crisis." In fact, so much knowledge might exacerbate that crisis and the anxiety to respond adequately to father Jacob's demand. Indeed, the question, how Jewish is a "Jewish" comic?, manifests the crisis itself. We have no answers from our authorities, texts, or great figures of the past. The very fact that we have to ask the question suggests a felt unease with how to mark Jewishness, how to accept its demands, how to judge its modality, and how to know when enough is enough. As in Narayan's text on the native anthropologist, Jewishness is a claim to authenticity and nativity that is always receding. It really is never enough; the comic is never Jewish enough to prevent the anxious question from arising. We can define a Jewish comic, as Baskind and Omer-Sherman courageously do. But these definitional categories will not ease Amy's fears, nor should they. *Flying Couch* asks too, how Jewish is a

"Jewish" comic?, and the answer leads to the anxiety of becoming: "Mom I can't sleep! There's MONSTERS in the window!" (118). The anxieties come from without to enter into the deeper recesses of our minds. We cannot sleep because we do not know who we are or should become. How much Jewish is Jewish enough is the crisis of Jewish identity.

When I was in graduate school, I remember my mentor telling me something like this: the great thing about ritual is you know when you have done it right. I have always remembered this comment, in part because it took me years to reject it. Rituals do not work that way: there are always more stringent ways of doing it; there is always someone to your right or left who suggests you, in fact, are not doing it correctly, or according to this or that tradition or authority. And this is true for Jewish comics as well. How we judge "Jewish" is a fraught activity; there are simply no foundational or universally compelling models to go by. Like ritual, we tend to do the best we can. We have seen this anxious performance in three comics: Rushkoff's *Testament: Akedah*, Lewis' *The Lone and Level Sands*, and Kurzweil's *Flying Couch*. Jewish registers differently in each of these texts, and we should expect no less. What counts as Jewish is a contested matter, one that can be worked out only in the doing of it and, as Kurzweil movingly portrays, in the personal acceptance of becoming that kind of Jew. There are countless other "Jewish" comics that mark Jewishness in competing ways. For something like Stan Mack's *The Story of the Jews: A 4,000-Year Adventure* (2001), Jewish is a kind of sarcastic and intimate humor, an inside joke for Jews alone. With Art Spiegelman's *The Complete Maus* (2011), Jewish can sometimes mean a deeper ambivalence about family and commitment. But in these and other graphic narratives, Jewishness is a mode of living, becoming, and accepting one's place as Jewish. That is not an answer but a witness to the struggles of identity. How Jewish is a "Jewish" comic? That, indeed, is the question, and much beauty in life is a response to it.

Works Cited

Baskind, Samantha, and Ranen Omer-Sherman. *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. Rutgers UP, 2010.

Eisner, Will. *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*. Baronet P, 1978.

Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1973, pp. 3–30.

Heschel, Susannah. *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*. U of Chicago P, 1998.

———. "Jewish Studies as Counterhistory." *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, edited by David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel, U of California P, 1998, pp. 101–15.

Koltun-Fromm, Ken. *Drawing on Religion: Reading and the Moral Imagination in Comics and Graphic Novels*. Pennsylvania State UP, 2020.

Kurzweil, Amy. *Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir*. Black Balloon, 2016.

Leibman, Laura. *The Art of the Jewish Family: A History of Women in Early New York in Five Objects*. Bard Graduate Center, 2020.

Lewis, A. David, and Marvin Perry Mann. *The Lone and Level Sands*. ASP Comics LLC, 2005.

Mack, Stan. *The Story of the Jews: A 4,000-Year Adventure*. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001.

Narayan, Kirin. "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist*, vol. 95, no. 3, Sept. 1993, pp. 671–86.

Orsi, Robert. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton UP, 2005.

Rushkoff, Douglas. *Nothing Sacred: The Truth About Judaism*. Crown, 2003.

———. *Testament: Akedah*. DC Comics, 2006.

Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. Pantheon, 2011.

Walzer, Michael. *Exodus and Revolution*. Basic Books, 1985.

Analogies Drawn Online: Bidirectional Holocaust Memory in Trump-Era Web Comics

Golan Moskowitz
Department of Jewish Studies
Tulane University

The comics medium, drawing on an expansive history of broadcasting political satire and subversively embodied knowledge, offers a prime context for studying political feeling in relation to contemporary events and cultural disagreements, including those relating to memory of the Holocaust. Twenty-first-century disagreements about the meaning or insight of a post-Holocaust perspective characterize a divided cultural landscape at whose poles lie those who prioritize a militaristic defense of Jews and Israel, and those focused on eliminating state-sponsored violence for any marginalized minority in one's midst. The present work addresses this division by examining a sometimes contentious phenomenon of Holocaust and Nazi analogies posed during Donald Trump's presidential campaign and his tenure as U.S. President from 2017–2021, as specifically presented in the context of web comics by or about Jews. Creators of Holocaust-analogizing web comics pursue a range of different approaches to their work, from vilification of Trump's administration to reanimations of Holocaust-era dynamics and narratives in dialogue with contemporary realities. This article focuses specifically on those who make such analogies and asks on what grounds they do so and to what ends.

Arguments about the appropriateness of analogizing the Holocaust relate directly to the shifting cultural position occupied by Holocaust survivors in the United States. Scholars have traced the evolution of the "traumatized survivor" in America from an often discredited and shamed position in the immediate postwar years to one bearing special insight and affective power by the confessional era of the 1970s and beyond (Cvetkovich; Stein). Hagiography and nationalist ideologies, however, have coopted survivors' empowered voices in the service of chauvinist agendas, which focus on protecting a specific group at all costs, rather than addressing systemic violence universally to protect all marginalized groups threatened by the forces of populism or state. This occurs when the Holocaust becomes untouchably exceptional, almost "sacred" in its remove from the world of contemporary ideas and experiences, when it becomes a partisan cudgel, a wielded tool or weapon reserved for those who claim authority over it, rather than an embodied memory and ethical warning for postwar humanity as a whole. In the summer of 2019, for example, some community leaders attacked Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's use of the term "concentration camps" in her description of the Trump administration's migrant detention facilities at the southern border, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) voiced its disapproval of AOC's analogy (Steinbuch). In response, over four hundred academics, including prominent members of the museum's Academic Advisory Committee, defended Ocasio-Cortez's characterization in an open letter to the museum's director. The letter's subheading read: "The Museum's decision to completely reject drawing any possible analogies to the Holocaust, or to the events leading up to it, is fundamentally ahistorical. It makes learning from the past almost impossible" (Bartov). The notion that Holocaust memory might offer valuable insights beyond contexts of German Nazism itself is not a new or obscure one. Included even in the mission statement of the USHMM, for example, is the imperative of encouraging visitors "to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy." The mission statement also includes its goal to "enhance understanding of the Holocaust and related issues, including those of

contemporary significance." Nevertheless, post-Holocaust ethics are heavily policed in popular discourse. In December of 2020, for example, Rebecca Pierce discussed the backlash that faced the Holocaust Memorial and Education Resource Center of Florida for its exhibit *Uprooting Prejudice: Faces of Change*. This exhibit included John Noltner's photographs of mourners and protesters gathered at the site where police killed George Floyd that summer, in a brutal act that would catalyze renewed energies in the movement against systemic, state-enforced racism in America. Despite the fact that no claims were made to imply any direct equation between Floyd's death and those who died in the Holocaust, right-wing commentators and their followers saw the inclusion of this content as a trivialization and distortion of Holocaust memory, rather than a needed reminder of the historical connection between systemic prejudice and government-sanctioned violence against minorities (Pierce).

Considering this context of broader cultural disagreement, the comics analyzed below subvert restrictions placed on collective memory and its contemporary application to consider the Holocaust and Nazism in direct relation to Trump-era politics and culture. Taken together, they employ what I term "bidirectional memory," which both brings the past into the present and the present into the past in order to provoke, to testify and bear witness to injustice, and to raise more critical social consciousness. Bidirectional memory places the main emphasis not on Holocaust history itself but on the affective reverberations between its cultural or familial legacies and a contextualized, embodied "now." It is like Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" in its creative investment in a weighty past not directly experienced by the subject/creator, but it is different in its critical distance from the original trauma and in its goals of political commentary, witness, and satire rooted in perceived social dangers in the present. More prevalent in the generation of survivors' grandchildren and great-grandchildren (the "third" and "fourth" generations), bidirectional memory uses a "lighter touch" as far as memorialization is concerned, treating historical analogies and creative "time travel" as exercises through which to test hypotheses and provoke discussion on the most urgent social issues of the pre-

sent and future through re-embodied "memory" of the past. It does so in order to insist on the importance of maintaining currently meaningful and affective connections to the Holocaust and its historical warnings in ways that contribute to a more equitable future.

Web Comics and the Politics of Holocaust Memory

The historic intertwinement of comics and politics, as evinced especially by the longstanding form of the political cartoon, speaks to a formal commonality of comics and political discourse, which both balance representative and intentionally provocative systems of meaning. Political feelings, like comics, are neutralized by excesses of abstraction, as well as by excesses of realism. To internalize all extant historical frameworks, details, and angles of a complex social situation, were that ever possible, would lead to overwhelm, disorientation, and a loss of conviction; when facticity becomes unstable or mutable ("fake news"), apathy and disillusionment are likely to follow. On the other hand, it is dangerous to simplify or narrativize a situation to the point of abstraction, in which certain groups or "types" are denied humanity or nuance. Comics contains a legacy of holding complexity, of self-consciously calling out oversimplification even within its own visual logic of essentialized forms. Like political discourse, comics walks a tightrope between complicating and simplifying common perceptions. Comics, as a medium, is rooted in the impulse to comment playfully and critically through layered intersections and critical, if subjective, declarations. Creating microcosms of metaphorical icons, comics arranges complex realities into cognitive and emotional shorthand with a "punch." With its favoring of metonymic images and its tendency toward the satirical or the subversively extreme, comics asks its creators and viewers to flirt with the boundaries of oversimplification in the service of informed reflection: what do these simplifications obscure or distort? What aspects ring (surprisingly) true? What desires or anxieties are mobilized by such high-contrast handlings? Simplification, when executed well, is an aesthetic virtue in comics. As in political discourse, excessive details in a comic can risk rendering it ineffective, tedious, or simply

no longer what it is (this is how comics become drawings, or how they become illustrated literature). According to Scott McCloud's now-canonical writing on the comics language, readers most identify with characters and situations that hit a "sweet spot" between realism and abstraction. The "magic" of comics exists at the crossroads of reading and seeing, stillness and motion, stasis and flight. It happens when images are broken down to "read" as coherent language, when text is aestheticized for quick visual consumption. Too much realistic specificity can overwhelm or impose distance, turning an inviting avatar into a particular person, a "not me," an Other. Too much abstraction, by contrast, can make a character incomprehensible. What, then, must be considered with regard to contemporary comics' handling of politically charged and emotionally fraught memory, such as that of the Holocaust and its afterlife in the present? How do comics' gestures to the Holocaust avoid oversimplification and overdetailing in their pursuit of formal success and meaningful impact?

These questions require greater attention to the layered nature of the comics form. Comics integrates stylized drawing with diegetic and extradiegetic text, as well as metonymic icons and strategic organization through panels and borders. It sets otherwise disparate elements in dialogue with each other: visual with verbal, real with imagined, public with private, past with present, or concept with detail. Comics have accordingly offered some of the most accessible and powerful handlings of the relationship between history and contemporary life, considering connections and differences between past and present, political and personal. The form itself is designed for such juxtaposition, as McCloud has most directly demonstrated in a strip in which a character borrows money from himself "in the future," reaching visually into the final panel in the strip in order to pay his restaurant tab, which ultimately places the character in an endless time loop. The artists examined here do not manufacture time loops in this same manner, but their work builds on a formal comics tradition of allowing past and present to inform each other in surreal but direct, graphic respects, applying the relational and conglomerate nature of the comics form to present bidirectional

memory in ways that combat metanarratives policing how and when we relate to historical traumas that bear upon our present and future. More specifically, comics artists of the past several years have used their form to process and respond to the political shifts and ruptures that characterize recent American history, including a broad reckoning with systemic racism, the emboldening of alt-right and white supremacist voices, the deadliest antisemitic killings in American history, a President who repeatedly broadcasts falsities, a ban on immigration from Muslim-majority countries, the forced separation of refugee families and detaining of their children in cages, and a global heath pandemic that, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has killed over 560,000 Americans to date.

Web comics, which emerged at the end of the 1990s, have championed the form's democratic spirit by largely eliminating gatekeepers, making it possible for almost anyone to publish comics online through such user-friendly platforms as Wordpress, Tumblr, or Patreon, even without a publisher or editor. Web comics combine the ephemeral, fleeting quality of the comics form's early appearance in turn-of-the-century newspapers, as well as the literary weight and critical substance of the graphic novel. They are designed for casual scrolling but also tend to live indefinitely at a given URL for extended or permanent access. As comics artist Matt Lubchansky explains, they are a "hyper-fast communication tool" well suited "for talking about current events, because you can get so much information across so quickly." They are also "intensely shareable," given the ease with which they might be "copy/pasted" or "linked" (personal interview). Web comics tend to adhere to the norms of social media in their privileging of the visceral, single-panel or four-panel form, which can be consumed relatively quickly in passing. They often adhere to niche markets or "newsfeeds," appearing where one's virtual "friends" post them, or in the inboxes of those who subscribe to a given artist's page or a particular digital platform. In this regard and others they are a staple of what Adrienne Resha describes as the "Blue Age" of comics, which began in the 2010s, characterized by guided reading technologies and by self-selected subject matter, including content designed by and for marginalized identities, among

them women, immigrants, people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, and people with disabilities (66–67). The Blue Age has also welcomed what I call bidirectional memory, perspectives that revise their approaches to canonized histories, questioning how we relate to the past and urging us to do so in ways that promote progressive social ethics. More specifically, Blue Age comics artists tend to protest exceptionalist approaches to the Holocaust that foreclose the possibility of connection between Holocaust memory and contemporary warning signs of normalized discrimination, or that hoard Holocaust history as a sacred monopoly on an ultimate victimhood that discounts solidarity with "lesser" victims of state-enforced prejudice and violence. These comics creators, instead, apply political associations, family memory, and Holocaust history in the service of fighting systemic injustices in the present, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia.

One prominent platform for web comics is *The Nib*. Founded in 2013 and supported primarily by its own members and subscribers, *The Nib* is a left-leaning digital hub for political and non-fictional comics that use journalism, essay-writing, memoir, and satire to comment on contemporary life. In March of 2017, *The Nib* published a feature titled "Never Again?: Five Jewish Cartoonists on the Use of Holocaust Imagery in Trump's America," which included strips by Matt Lubchansky (who is also associate editor), Lisa Rosalie Eisenberg, Leela Corman, Eli Valley, and Sarah Glidden. These and other Jewish comics artists express their disdain for the Trump administration and the white supremacism emboldened by it. Whether themselves descended from family Holocaust experiences or only indirectly connected to that history through a collective identity shared with survivors, these and other web comics artists assert their right to claim, or at least consider, both similarities and differences between Trump's America and Hitler's Germany. In order to do so, they press for a shift in attitude toward Holocaust memory, critiquing those who position the Holocaust beyond human history and, thus, beyond critical or creative analysis or bearing on the present.

Reasonable Alarm: Lisa Rosalie Eisenberg's Visual Essays

About a month after Donald Trump's election in November 2016, Lisa Rosalie Eisenberg published a strip on *The Nib* called "Being Jewish in Trump's America," which considers the problems associated with prohibiting comparisons between Holocaust history and present-day political warning signs. She begins the strip with a scene from her own childhood in which she learns that to invoke Hitler is to halt reasonable conversation. Narrating from her adult perspective in the present, she reconsiders this well-established notion. Vertically juxtaposed with her scene of childhood memory are panels quoting Trump's expressed desire in December 2015 to ban all Muslim immigrants to the U.S., his conflation of all Muslims with "people that believe only in Jihad, and have no sense of reason or respect for human life." Eisenberg places her panel in visual dialogue with Trump's earlier statement that "If I win the election for President, we are going to Make America Great Again," as well as with a black-and-white rendering of an iconic photograph from the Warsaw Ghetto, in which a young Jewish boy raises his hands before a group of armed Nazi soldiers. Collectively, this intentional combination of images invites critical reader engagement and focalizes attention on the potential harm that might occur under the protective shield of memory-policing. Does relegating the invocation of Hitler to the culturally taboo, or even to the obscene, give license to undeterred Hitleresque behavior by politicians who, by the laws of this taboo, cannot be civilly criticized as such in public discourse? Does it thus enable the protection of such dangerous actors from socially-acceptable critique? At the time of the Jewish Warsaw boy's endangerment, was it not also taboo in the Third Reich to compare Hitler to other historical demagogues or tyrants, or to suspect his anti-Jewish policies of being anything other than protective measures for the good of the national majority? Eisenberg is not alone in making this connection. Comics artist Leela Corman, for example, has also noted the similarity between Trump's framing of Muslim refugees in 2015 and American characterizations of Jewish refugees escaping the Third Reich in the 1930s, recalling, "One of the arguments against allowing refugees from Syria and Iraq

into the U.S. is that, 'what if there are members of ISIS and Al-Qaeda among them?' And that's *exactly, exactly* the argument that was made against allowing Jews into the country in the 1930s ('what if there are *Nazis* among them, *hiding* among them?')" (personal interview). Complementing Corman's perspective, Eisenberg's visual juxtapositions elicit visceral responses connected to the widely-known images she renders, in order to challenge the reader to think twice about the limitations placed on Holocaust references in contemporary political commentary; such limitations, her work suggests, safeguard figures like Trump from criticisms rooted in appropriate historical perspective. For Eisenberg, as for other artists discussed below, the Holocaust may be an extreme and distinct history, but the logics that undergirded it are not immune from reappearing in new contexts, including contexts closer to home, and including in situations in which non-Jewish groups are victimized.

Eisenberg's Holocaust-analogizing comics emerge from a Jewish social conscience and sensitivity to the treatment of minorities in her midst. Explaining her concerns about Trump's administration, she cites her own Holocaust education, which began in Hebrew School and continued through personal research, reading Art Spiegelman's *Maus* at age ten and considering other books and films. A central takeaway for Eisenberg was the "incremental nature" of the Holocaust. "One by one the rights of Jewish people were taken away," she writes, "then there was more overt terrorizing, then the camps. So with the benefit of that hindsight, why wouldn't I want to call attention to the potential danger of Trump through my comics?" Eisenberg was immediately compelled to draw analogies between Trump and Hitler in her work when the former "announced his candidacy by calling Mexicans rapists and criminals," she writes. "For me," she shares, "my knowledge of the Holocaust is an omnipresent reminder to be vigilant for myself and for others—it's inexorably linked to my political outlook and therefore a central part of my comics work." Thus, Trump's framing of social reality "set off my alarm bells immediately. It made me think of the Holocaust in the sense of—here is a compelling (to some) political figure who is putting forth an argument that a group of non-white 'outsiders' are responsible for many

of the problems of 'rightful' Americans" ("Re: Interest in writing"). Corman had a similar reaction to Eisenberg's, articulating a physiological response to Trump's election: "I, like a lot of other people, Jews and others, had this really visceral fear reaction, like *terror* reaction when he was elected. It just flipped the epigenetic switch, like you have to figure out how to get . . . out of here quickly if you need to" (personal interview). As Eisenberg recalls, it was not a great leap to assert, or at least to muse about analogies between Trump and Hitler, considering earlier comics by *The Nib*'s creator, Matt Bors, who "very early on incorporated Nazi imagery into his comics," including "a post-apocalyptic Trump army, with red armbands that had a black 'T' in white on them—a reference to swastika armbands." Also credited for early inspiration was the popularity of iconic white supremacists like neo-Nazi Richard Spencer in the early Trump administration, Spencer offering an especially "easy target for cartoonists," given "his own ridiculous emulation of Hitler's haircut." According to Eisenberg, such comparisons were "pretty well accepted by the general public before too long" ("Re: Interest in writing").

Eisenberg's work does not lambast Trump as a comic villain. Rather, it functions as a sort of visual essay, carefully exploring the appropriateness of Trump-Hitler analogies and asking adjacent questions about representation, including questions about the role and function of humor in political critique. She offers an explicit rationale for her decision to scrutinize Trump. Her "Being Jewish in Trump's America" links data from the 2013 Pew Study ("42% of American Jews think having a good sense of humor is an essential part of being Jewish") with a mildly unflattering drawing of a pontificating Trump juxtaposed against a Hitler doppelganger drawn from Mel Brooks's film musical *The Producers* (1967). Trump, who sways crowds with his xenophobia and impassioned "might makes right" rhetoric, she suggests, must appear ridiculous in order to expose the dangerous self-interest and ethical callousness beneath his force and charisma. Interrupting a rhythm of evenly spaced panel gutters, Eisenberg merges the ridiculous Hitler imposter with an aggressive, perspiring Trump, the extradiegetic narration flowing across the panel border between them, further stitching them together as a thought exercise,

for our consideration. This conglomerate image is preceded by a drawn Brooks's declaring that when it comes to master orators, making them look ridiculous is the best way to win audience solidarity against them. While Eisenberg actively contemplates the logic behind mobilizing humor toward political subversion, her work itself is decidedly more contemplative than humorous or mocking. Her comics about Trump are measured, shining a light on the reasonable motivations and mechanisms by which critics respond to their concerns, rather than visually demonizing Trump herself. Despite Trump's vindictive facial expression, he appears in Eisenberg's strip as a rather balanced figure, a human being rendered not unlike the others in her comic, without exaggeration or demonization. Her rationale about using humor to undermine his rhetoric thus works most as a thought exercise, buttressing other artists' more overtly damning depictions of Trump.

Eisenberg also asks readers to think about themselves and their own potential complicity in the unfolding of contemporary social horrors. In her 2017 strip for *The Nib*'s "Never Again" feature, Trump again appears mundane and unremarkable, as do his supporters, but the latter are visually likened to a depicted crowd of 1930s German civilians in another panel. The artist draws the reader's attention to the dangers that may lurk in "business as usual," in the unnoticed workings of everyday politics and their insidious social ramifications. She makes this clear in her final panel, as a monochromatic crowd—which, stylized in the same line quality as her contemporary figures, could exist both in 1933 and 2016—is framed by the questions, "How are we similar to those who saw Hitler rise to power? How are we different?" In other words, the question of how Hitler and the Holocaust infiltrate comparisons to Trump in Jewish-created comics must also be extended to those who consume these comics. Eisenberg's work reminds us of Christopher Browning's "ordinary men," of Jan Gross's "neighbors," of the colloquial "Good German," and of any who are not held sufficiently accountable for their role within their own flawed system of government or cultural ecology.

Arts of Outrage: Matt Lubchansky and Eli Valley

Contrasting Eisenberg's studied contemplations, the comics of Matt Lubchansky and Eli Valley use markedly direct and purposefully inflammatory imagery in order to vilify Trump and his supporters. Valley's work also specifically condemns the hypocrisy he perceives in those who police the use of Holocaust analogies to the detriment of Jewish involvement in contemporary social ethics. Both artists see their sharp approaches as a fitting response to the extremism they critique. Lubchansky, for example, recounts how many describe Trump-era bigotry as "subtext made text," or as "masks off," a revived expression of policy from the era of Ronald Reagan but "expressed differently, more uncouth," with old prejudices "untethered," taboos eroded. Lubchansky espouses the view that "People who always felt this way have become completely emboldened to act, because of who's in power, and they feel there's no consequences for shooting up a synagogue or desecrating a cemetery" (personal interview). From this perspective, Lubchansky's satirical comics "de-mask" Trump, depicting him bragging about his "enormous Germanic brain" ("Trump Uses His Big-League Brain"), as a Ku Klux Klan member, and as a death-cult leader who insists that "dying is the tremendous new thing," mandating death for the masses during the rise of COVID19 in spring 2020 ("The GOP Death Cult"). In *The Nib*'s 2017 "Never Again?" feature, Lubchansky draws Trump condemning the press as "enemy of the people" in his sleep, beneath a swastika-patterned comforter and a headboard engraved with a Nazi eagle, his hand resting on a copy of Hitler's *My New Order* (see fig.). Beneath the satire of these exaggerated characterizations is palpable outrage behind Lubchansky's work,

which may induce readers' question-asking, critical thinking, and, hopefully, data collection. In order to know how to process these anger-fueled depictions, it becomes necessary for audience members to educate themselves on Trump's actual policies, statements, and track record of actions. For example, Lubchansky's tendency to depict cops with swastika and lightning-bolt tattoos, as in their "Stick to Your Guns" strip from August 2017 (see fig.), might prompt uninformed readers to research the problem of white supremacism in the American police force and its connection to a history of police brutality against Black Americans (Downs; Levin). Accordingly, though not particularly optimistic about comics' potential to change minds, Lubchanksy makes a conscious effort to feature lesser-known or insufficiently-reported details for politically uncertain readers to consider. This might be understood as a productive outcome of ideological comics that run on political outrage, beyond the entertainment value they offer to like-minded audiences.

If the lambasting tone of these comics have sometimes led to reactionist anger among those who do not share Lubchansky's understanding of political reality, Lubchansky is not particularly concerned. It would be counter-productive, they believe, for their comics to try to please all sides. Caveats and footnotes may prevent others from taking offense, but they also may dilute a comic's effectiveness. Overcomplication of a comic's reality can destroy its formal success and aesthetic impact. "You can't put in enough 'if-then' statements in your work to make it be read perfectly without completely destroying the flow of it or destroying a joke," Lubchansky states, "You hope people read what you make in good faith, and you can't affect how they're going to read it. [. . .] You can only put so many caveats in one

comic strip" (personal interview). Beyond the impossibility of controlling reader reception, to fret about "both sides" or "all sides" can sometimes itself become a harmful or politically dangerous act in contexts of systemic inequality and hate. Similar to the notion of those who would replace "Black Lives Matter" with "All Lives Matter," it becomes politically irresponsible to equate the validity of all perspectives when some of the most vocal of those perspectives are violent ones, espousing hate-based ideologies against minorities. Lubchansky makes this point clearly in "The Important Columnist Goes To a Nazi Rally," published on *The Nib* in August of 2017. In this strip, a reporter enters the scene of a protest clash between white supremacists carrying guns and Black Lives Matter activists. After collecting the perspectives of both sides (the former being that "nonwhites are genetically inferior" and should be "systematically rounded up and killed," the latter being a counteraction against Nazis marching in the streets undeterred by the police), the frazzled reporter throws pen and paper in the air and flees what he calls "the extremism on both sides, which are equally at fault!" The absurdity of this simplified interaction in comic relief gives the reader license to mock the reporter's deplorable equation between those set on enacting racist impulses that, for some, are nothing short of genocidal in intent, and those resisting American neo-fascism. Uncoincidentally, Lubchansky's comic appeared a day after the press conference in which Trump stated that there were "very fine people, on both sides" of the violent clashes that occurred at Charlottesville's "Unite the Right" rally days earlier. Context is key to appropriateness in this regard. As Eli Valley offers, "If you *always* draw Trump in a Nazi uniform, then it's going to lose its value. But if you draw him in a Nazi uniform immediately after he spews a version of the Great Replacement theory within days of the Tree of Life massacre, then I think it's legitimate . . . more than legitimate; it's necessary" (personal interview). Comics by Lubchansky and Valley are thus perhaps most successful among readers who follow the news and stay at least relatively up to date with American political developments in critical context.

Valley, who found himself creating more single-panel comics during the Trump era, has drawn similar comparisons to Lubchansky's,

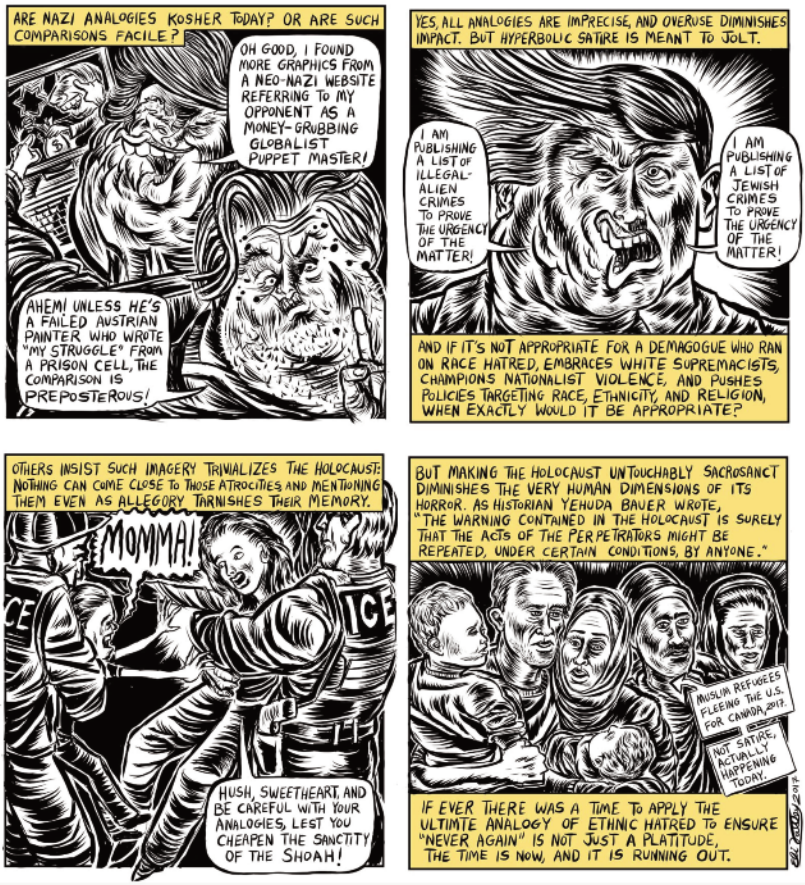
presenting Trump in Klan garb, Trump's face literally morphing into Hitler's (see fig). His decision to make work analogizing Trump and Hitler first began as a cautionary provocation but gradually, he felt, became more of an appropriate comparison. In his words:

> Early on it was sort of using the memory of demagoguery that was used to dehumanize Jews and others as a warning. But then as [Trump] started implementing policies that had direct echoes and sometimes direct ideological precursors of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century, then it became less of a fantastic reflection. . . . On the one hand, I was drawing Trump as more and more obscene and grotesque, and on the other hand I was drawing specific developments regarding border policy, for instance, or regarding his use of Jews as a scapegoat in his Great Replacement innuendos. (personal interview)

As Valley's depictions of Trump evolved throughout the latter's presidency, Trump's image became almost more of a texture or a landscape than that of a person. In Trump's continuous appearance in the comics featured on Valley's Patreon, Instagram, and Twitter accounts (all listed under the username "elivalley"), Trump's face has grown increasingly craggy and monstrous, Valley's stylus inventing intricate, irregular crevices that, more than skin, resemble a mountain of chewed gum. Reflecting on his evolving depictions of Trump, Valley comments on the duality of abstraction and realism:

> It was sort of a reaction to the fact that reality kept outpacing satire [. . .] It just became sort of metaphorical art for this total demolition of taste, humanity, norms, etcetera. And also because he kept creating his own realities [. . .] the growths of his face were sort of, for me, a mirror . . . [. . .] representing the multiple and almost infinite sort of darts of, you know, fake news, falsehoods that he was throwing [. . .] I was hoping that the visuals would sort of represent that aspect as well—the ever-metastasizing versions and lies and presentations of fake reality that he would insist are reality, and always with an undercurrent of violence, demagoguery,

hatred, race hatred, religion hatred, just an abomination. (personal interview).



Valley's images of Trump are both so abstracted as to become inhuman and so detailed in textured specificity as to feel imposing, demanding of visual study (see fig.). The effect of these renderings is to present Trump as a grotesquely unknowable, yet threatening Other whose actions recall specific abuses of history that sound the alarms of Valley's post-Holocaust conscience.

As an artist, Valley generally feels most confident in black-and-white, and his work takes inspiration from the monochromatic

works of Charles Burns, Robert Crumb, early twentieth-century Yiddish cartoonists like Leon Israel ("Lola"), pre-war German artists deemed by the Nazis as "degenerate" such as George Grosz and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and horror and science fiction comic art published prior to the self-censoring Comics Code of 1954. By presenting his political comics in a stylized, thick black line, and generally without color, Valley transports the reader from the complacency of mundane, contemporary life to enter the psychologically heightened space of newsprint journalism, as subjectively stylized via his expressionist drawing style. The effect is to both highlight and defamiliarize situations taken for granted as "normal" by cynical contemporaries, such as

the separation of refugee children from their parents by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and to place them in historical relief, as subjective "documents" of outrage in the face of a present reality that is unjustly neutralized by perspectives that only extend empathy to a Holocaust framework yet condemn any suggested similarity between the Holocaust and contemporary horrors. One of Valley's panels for his comic in *The Nib*'s March 2017 "Never Again" feature depicts ICE officials forcibly separating a crying child who screams "Momma!" from a mother who answers, "Hush, Sweetheart, and be careful with your analogies, lest you cheapen the sanctity of the Shoah!"

Valley does not see Jews as the primary victim of Trump's actions or the most at-risk group in Trump's America; rather, he believes it necessary for Jewish memory of occupying such a position in Nazi Europe to compel Jews and others to "serve as witness" to any vulnerable group's dehumanization, even in the early stages, "so that it doesn't happen again to anybody, to any group of people, to any marginalized community" (personal interview). Despite the harsh criticism he has faced, including outrageous comparisons between his work and the antisemitic drawings of *Der Stürmer* (Hoffman), Valley creates his Holocaust analogies with informed intentionality and conscious restraint. "Drawing an image of displacement," he argues, "is different than drawing a gas chamber" (personal interview). His "Doomed to Repeat It," published in *The Nib* June 27, 2019, directly critiques what he perceives to be a horrific misinterpretation of the "Never Again" injunction. His comic deliberately uses recognizable imagery from Jewish memory (a well-known photograph of a May 1944 transport of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz) but with a measure of distance that places it in a surreal register, the arrangement of subjects altered from the original composition. A stylized cluster of harried Jews marked with Star-of-David badges stand beside a cattle car and collectively proclaim, "Never again . . . will our ethnic cleansing nightmare . . . be invoked . . . to stop . . . an ethnic cleansing nightmare." The intended ridiculousness of the message is accomplished in part by the way the depicted transport thinks and speaks with a single mind, with speech bubbles emerging across the group, one by one, to com-

plete this shared sentence (see fig). The strangeness of this collective speech act supports Valley's reflection that these figures represent "memory itself." Given that "memory is not bound by strictures of individuals' speaking respective sentences," they speak in a singular, collective voice. If this image turns a scene of victimized individuals into an anachronistic automaton, a mouthpiece in the service of Valley's position, I argue it does so productively in order to criticize how the "Never Again" injunction is itself depersonalized and rendered meaningless when it turns too far inward, prioritizing the "sanctity" of Holocaust exceptionalism over attention to the humanity of the victims and the related need for solidarity with victims of contemporary atrocities (regardless of specific similarities or differences with the Holocaust itself). For Valley, Trump and right-wing Jewish organizations alike exceeded hypocrisy by espousing "Never Again" while remaining silent as the country enacted sadistic "ethnic-cleansing policies" toward asylum-seekers and refugees—policies, Valley insists, that were deliberately "designed to reduce the percentage of people of

color in our population." Reflecting on this issue, Valley asserts, "The abrogation of historical and moral responsibility by Jewish communal organizations was profound and disturbing. So in those cases, using images from Jewish trauma and memory were necessary as a sort of corrective to the deliberate obfuscation of our memory that was being perpetrated by our own organizations" (personal interview). Valley's work uses symbolic, stylized gestures to Holocaust displacement and loss in order to challenge audiences to consider "Never Again" in juxtaposition not only with contemporary antisemitism but also with Trump's "*torturing* [of] families [. . . ,] pulling children from their parents." From his perspective, "we must employ Jewish memory as witness and warning when the horrors of dehumanization begin to be perpetrated against other vulnerable populations, even if it's just at the earliest stages" ("RE: Interest in writing about your work").

If we are to understand Valley as somehow aligned with the Jewish Holocaust victims he depicts in his visually symbolic arguments (as his boldness in satirically depicting them would suggest), we are also likely to read a level of self-deprecation or even collective self-mockery expressed by Valley on behalf of American Jews who fall short of his standard of post-Holocaust ethics. From Valley's vantage point, it is worth mocking the chauvinism of those who claim a legacy of Holocaust survival and loss without also prioritizing sensitivity to state-sponsored violence against other minority groups within one's midst. In this respect, the Holocaust victims Valley depicts read less like historical appropriations and more like symbolic mirrors of their American descendants, arrested in the frame of sanctified memory yet willfully blind or mechanically unresponsive to the systemic oppression of others whose plight reads, to them, only as an intrusion on the right to Jewish Holocaust exceptionalism. Valley's expression of collective Jewish American self-mockery reflects what Louis Kaplan ponders about the place of self-deprecating Jewish jokes within contexts in which antisemitism has become more palpable. In his afterword to *At Wit's End: The Deadly Discourse on the Jewish Joke* (2020), Kaplan considers the Trump era and asks the reader, "Has the current toxic political environment brimming with racism and xenophobia moved the threshold of appropriateness [for Jewish self-depre-

cating jokes] in a way comparable to the rise of Hitler and the Nazis at the end of Weimar Germany? [. . .] Or has it made Jewish wits even bolder and more provocative in defending their freedom of comic speech?" (224). Both may well be true, with Lubchansky's and Valley's work speaking especially to Kaplan's latter formulation.

Flesh-and-Blood Solidarity: Leela Corman's Comics Activism

Like Valley, Leela Corman is outraged by those who do not extend the meaning of "Never Again" beyond their own in-group. "I feel pretty iron-clad," states Corman, "if I have to stand up for it, for using Holocaust language and analogies in this time period. I think it is a morally and ethically bankrupt argument [. . .] when anyone [tells] us not to do that" (personal interview). As she understands it, cultural trauma creates lasting insular responses but also speaks to the universal truth that "if you give too much power to people, they will do this to each other. And nobody is immune. So being Jewish doesn't confer some sort of moral authority on you. It confers a generational responsibility" (personal interview). Even preceding the Trump era, Corman recalls her outrage about the growing number of refugees in the world, with right-wing reactionary Jews focusing instead on the antisemitism they discerned "around every corner," and the phrase "Never Again" used only selectively and self-servingly by particular factions. "It's absolutely *bullshit*," she insisted, "that people say 'Never Again' and 'Never forget.' We have *forgotten*" ("Re: Inquiry about your work"). In answer to such forgetting, Corman's graphic narrative work is an incisive and compelling reminder of history's bearing on the present.

Corman has generally identified as a long-form comics artist but occasionally offers online excerpts and shorter web comics, once depicting historical trauma as a faceless figure who weighs on her shoulders, a burden carried into the present ("Drawing Strength"). One reason she prefers to create longer-form comics relates to perceived shortcomings of Internet culture in general, the ways in which online feedback lapses into anonymous aggression rooted in hierarchies of identity politics and the silencing-weapons of political correctness. "I don't like publicly engaging with strangers about the

semantics of atrocity," she states, "the semantics of genocide. And that's because Twitter and other social media are not the place to have these conversations, except as calls to action [. . .], especially if the opening gambit of the conversation is somebody yelling at you for something, rather than just asking a question or making a comment" (personal interview). Still, Corman has offered recent Internet comics, including a four-panel piece for The Nib's "Never Again" feature in 2017, longer pieces for *Tablet*, and online excerpts for *The Believer* from her graphic novel, *Victory Parade*, which takes place in wartime Brooklyn and the Buchenwald concentration camp ("Victory Gar-

den"). The Jewish corpses and survivors Corman depicts in *Victory Parade*, with chestnut-shaded locks, hairy legs, distinctive facial features, red polka-dot garments, and translucent, rosy skin that bruises in purple watercolor, are decidedly not idealized or saintly (see fig.). Rather, they are living, breathing parents, children, and siblings as they would appear on their way to work or school or the grocery store. Like Mati and Maya Kochavi's 2019 *Eva.Stories* project, which uses the format of an Instagram story to reimagine the experience of a Polish Jewish girl under Nazi occupation, Corman's work seems to proclaim, "This happened in 'real life!'" Unlike the Kochavis' project, however, "real life" here is not a filtered Instagram curation but an interiority that is equally gritty and poetic, in which dismembered human legs invade the imaginings of a factory worker's drab smoking break (see fig.). Looking at contemporary social injustices in America, Corman insists, "This stuff is happening right in our faces and so if

we're not looking at history, we will miss what is happening right in front of us [. . .] It feels ever more vital, but in a way that cannot be insular in our community. It has to be connected to broader human history and to the vast network of atrocities that people perpetrate on each other, and this is why I'm doing this work now. This is my activism now" (qtd. in Sahdev).

Corman's aesthetic is rooted in juxtapositions of history and presence, anger and awe. She takes inspiration both from punk artists of the late twentieth century and from Weimar-era German painters who explored human existence as simultaneously beautiful and grotesque and whose work was condemned as "degenerate" by the Nazis. She cites George Grosz, Otto Dix, other Neue Sachlichkeit artists of Weimar Germany as comprising a tradition in which her work is grounded. These painters critiqued German nationalism by painting the realities of wounded soldiers, urban sex workers, and corrupt politicians. "I think they're the progenitors of a lot of comics," asserts Corman, "and of the frame of thinking [of] not flinching from something very ugly, not trying to make something 'pretty,' of finding the meeting ground of beauty and brutality. I mean, that's my entire aesthetic" (personal interview). Contrasting Valley's stylized, expressionist usage of Holocaust imagery to comment on contemporary atrocities, however, Corman reanimates scenes of Holocaust events in the gradient and blended flesh-and-blood hues of watercolor, jolting readers awake into the tangibility of traumatic violence and its legacies, against what has become, for many, an unproductively fossilized and untouchable past. A descendant of Jews who survived the Shoah in hiding "on the run, in ghettos and in the woods" ("Interview by Stef Lenk"), she believes her family history made her instinctually aware "that mass traumas worldwide are connected" and that "there have been so many holocausts," with America itself being built on two of them (qtd. in Sahdev). Corman thus denaturalizes the perceived exceptionalism of the Holocaust, drawing connections to other episodes of genocide and systemic violence without conflating them. Despite the efforts of institutionalized history, which draw lines and create divisions, "History isn't neat," she insists, "History is chaos. We try to make order out of the chaos later on when we are safe but

that's just not how it actually happens" ("Picturing Victory").

Corman's work visually layers disparate spectacles of violence to express the constant "oppressive dread" she perceives within the daily life of Trump's America (personal interview). Immediately after the 2016 election, writes Corman, neo-Nazis began to harass her online. "I didn't know who in my town I could trust," she admits, "Who among them voted for him? I figured those people would be happy to dig whatever mass grave my daughter and I would end up in if this went as far as it could go, and I was sure they'd be rolling up on my Black neighbors first, obviously, given the racial hierarchy of America" ("Re: Inquiry about your work"). Corman's piece for *The Nib*'s "Never Again" feature in 2017 employs visual juxtaposition in ways that mirror her text's call for greater perspective and solidarity across disparate experiences of social violence. In one panel, a man's hand gropes a woman's body against a backdrop in which a lynched man, painted in brown, hangs from a tree whose olive-green leaves become the army uniform of a swastika-marked soldier stamping through piles of mangled bodies clad in concentration-camp uniforms (see fig.). The rusted reds of the tree trunk spill into the blood that frames these corpses. In the following panel, the gates of Auschwitz, marked

"ARBEIT MACHT FREI," seeps into a present-day landscape in which the artist and other Jews share a single thought bubble that links them with this ominous image in the midst of passing anonymously in the street. This urban scene includes individuals of different ages, genders, and skin colors (a brown-skinned woman wearing a hair wrap, a blonde-haired white man, a bald elderly man, and others). The effect of placing these panels beside each other is to make it impossible not to see even this dreary passing moment without also noticing the evident connections that exist between contemporary people and the racial-, ethnic-, and gender-based violations of recent history, even in the context of an anonymous twenty-first century crowd. "For 70 years now, we've said 'Never again,'" writes Corman, "as new atrocities have overtaken the old, and new bodies pile & rot on top of the old ones" ("Re: Inquiry about your work"). As stated in the text, her work envisions disparate instances of violence in holistic dialogue with each other, as parts of a problematic whole. Put another way, her work does not merely compare present dangers to past ones; it also asks contemporary Americans and bystanders to look at themselves more deeply, to think about the traumas and atrocities to which they are connected and in which they are implicated by virtue of their being part of the same flawed, traumatized, guilt-ridden, and divided social structure.

If Corman is angry about empty uses of "Never Again" and undue restrictions on historical analogies, she is also optimistic about recent cultural shifts she has observed. She recalls that the months leading up to Richard Spencer's November 2017 lecture at the University of Florida at Gainesville were:

> the most contentious I ever experienced in my nine years living there. We all argued with each other about it, the university tried to get out of renting him the theater but couldn't, and a friend of mine who served on the university Board of Governors told me that […] she was as angry as I was, and that her grandfather had been one of the Italian anti-fascists who carried Mussolini's corpse through the streets. At the time the only independent bookstore was downtown, and owned by a Black

> man, and I was terrified for his safety, and that of all my friends and colleagues and students. [. . .] But, what actually happened was kind of amazing: 1,000 people turned up to protest (a huge number in such a small town), my partner and many friends among them. The few white nationalists who tried to provoke violence were escorted out of the crowd by demonstrators. The theater was nearly empty, the only seats filled by more protesters [. . .] Eventually [Spencer] gave up on delivering his speech and slunk off stage, and he and his people silently drove out of town ("Re: Inquiry about your work").

More broadly, Corman also notes a decrease in pushback against Trump-era Nazi analogies that she traces to the public's reaction to learning about the conditions of U.S. ICE detention centers. She also attributes this shift to a deeper rooting in diaspora identity she has observed among American Jews, including the group Never Again Action, which formed in summer 2019 and proclaims itself a "movement of Jews and allies fighting to end America's cruel immigration policies," through civil disobedience and nonviolent protest against ICE practices. In the words of the organization's website, "We knew from our own history what happens when a government targets, dehumanizes and strips an entire group of people of all their civil and human rights. We recognized the signs, and we could feel it in our guts—the words that we learned in our communities and from our grandparents: 'Never Again'" (*Never Again Action*). Having grown up somewhat alienated in the Jewish world, Corman now aligns herself with Jews who have "found our voice in understanding the ways that the atrocities our ancestors experienced continue now and are often done in our name. And the responsibility that we have to fight them. That, for me, is the 'Holocaust analogy.'" I felt like a kind of lone voice in the wilderness for a long time with these thoughts," she shares, "but I don't anymore. Now I feel like there are thousands of us who are on this page" (personal interview).

From the Margins of Holocaust Memory: Dorian Alexander on a Queer "Never Again"

Questions about the appropriateness and moral authority of those who analogize the Holocaust are not solely Jewish questions, even if they are primarily so. Numerically speaking, the murder of six million Jews by Germans and their collaborators constitutes the most drastic decimation of any people targeted by the Third Reich, carried out with clear intentions of total annihilation. Nevertheless, millions of gentile Soviet citizens; over a million gentile Poles; hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Roma and Sinti people, and people with disabilities; as well as others were also subjected to Nazi terror, imprisonment, and systemic violence and killing; Holocaust memory and designations of authority over it are not often extended to the contemporary communities of these groups, some of which also remain subject to legalized discrimination, harassment, and violence in twenty-first century contexts. Especially as a majority of U.S. Jews accumulate benefits of white privilege and cultural enfranchisement in America, it is essential to maintain embodied and impassioned investments in remembering and meaningfully channeling the insights of those who were subjected to systemic, state-based violence and murder. Lubchansky, who expresses more fear as a trans person than as a white Jew in New York, might have had less reason to connect with Holocaust history had they not experienced firsthand the endangerment of existing as a queer subject in the present (personal interview). The biological and cultural descendants of all Third Reich victims and survivors, Jewish or not, are implicated in discussions about analogizing Trump with Hitler. Accordingly, Holocaust analogies in contemporary web comics have helped work against the historic erasures and marginalization of those victimized by Nazi Germany for reasons other than being Jewish. Considering this contextual framework, some Trump-era web comics have spoken from "alternative" post-Holocaust perspectives and have worked to compel the investment and concern of audiences less aware of a variety of victimized and resistant experiences under German fascism.

In "The Life of Gad Beck: Gay. Jewish. Nazi Fighter.," published on *The Nib* in January 2019, a contemporary interracial queer couple's experiences frame the story of Gad Beck. Beck is a historical figure and author of a memoir recounting his experience as a gay Jew in Nazi Germany for whom underground activism, queer solidarity, and same-sex partnerships helped fuel his resistance and survival of the Third Reich. Brought to life with art by Levi Hastings, the comic strip begins with the present-day couple's experience witnessing Berlin's Memorial to Homosexuals persecuted under Nazism, the famous video of two men kissing, visible through a small opening within a massive block of concrete, as designed by Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset (see fig). In December 2020, Dorian Alexander, who wrote the comic, recalled their own interaction with the Berlin memorial and the uncanny feeling experienced when stepping away from the video peephole and back into the "real world," in which anyone might have descended from perpetrators of Nazi violence. Alexander visited the memorial in 2017, in part to learn more about queer history and the late Jewish sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. "It's a very effective memorial," they recalled, as it draws one into an intimate queer moment in the context of a "very public" space. "I was unnerved by the people around," Alexander remembers from the moments of re-entering the public space surrounding the memorial's window, "because there was immediate suspicion, I suppose, of 'who could do this to me? is it you? is it you?,' which was irrational, of course, but that was just the emotional response after engaging with the memorial, I suppose" (personal interview).

Alexander's experience of the Berlin memorial is not unlike the experience of the comics reader, with comics visualizing subversive realities subsumed within structuring frames and boxes. The described power dynamic between encased queerness and external endangerment is reversed in one of the final panels of Alexander's comic, in which a queer domestic space is invaded by a television frame broadcasting a white supremacist counter-protest (see fig.). In this final scene, the contemporary characters watch footage of the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, the men onscreen bearing tiki torches. Alexander's accompanying narration offers, ". . . it can be hard not to tremble. Because we don't have to imagine what they will do to us, if they take enough power. We already know." Hastings depicts this moment of flatscreen footage of the Unite the Right protestors as it fractures the living space of the comic's contemporary protagonists. A somewhat chilling design places the Caucasian partner's face beside the row of shrieking white supremacist faces onscreen, as though to merge him visually with the white male privileges that his partner lacks, and thus to pose further threat to their unity as a couple; the racially ambiguous character departs from the couch and hunches over in solitary anguish against a jet-black background

that, in the subsequent panel, becomes a mammoth pile of shoes, like those of Auschwitz victims, a metonymic image for state-facilitated, hate-based atrocities in a broader sense (see fig.).

Alexander shares that the inspiration for this latter character was a "visualization of my own experience" of reading queer survivor memoirs, including Beck's, for a course in graduate school taught by a Jewish historian of fascism. "Reading about the experiences of these men in the past," shared Alexander, "made me feel like, 'if all the people I knew from my childhood, and their orientation toward queerness, if they got their way, this would be the end result [. . .] There was a deep connection to thinking, 'This could have been me if I lived during that point,' and once Trump starts getting into power and we see the rise of, you know . . . it's almost like, 'This could still happen'" (personal interview). Having grown up near Charlottesville, Virginia, the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally that took place there weighed heavily on Alexander's mind, and they wrote the Gad Beck piece shortly after the rally took place. Alexander approaches their comics work from the position of having personally survived an Evangelical Christian upbringing as a gay person, recalling, for example, their brother's Liberty University graduation in a stadium of about 10,000 people "who were all cheering the slander of marriage equality, essentially," and honoring speakers who used "crusading rhetoric" with "very explicit warlike imagery" of "Christian soldiers" to compel these students and their families to be "warriors in a culture war" against queer people and others envisioned as enemies. As an alienated family member in this crowd, Alexander internalized "how easy it is to whip these people up into a frenzy and how non-normative identities can be swept up into a logic of elimination" (personal interview).

Affective Implications of Bidirectional Memory

At the heart of the debate around the appropriateness of Trump-era analogies to Hitler and Nazism is a fundamental disagreement about the injunction of "Never Again." If one interprets this phrase universally, it stands as a prohibition against the committing of atrocities against any people. However, an alternative interpretation of

"never again, only to us" prohibits the extension of the Holocaust's warnings and Jewish ethical witnessing to any group beyond Jews themselves. It also participates in the erasure of other targeted communities' claim to Holocaust legacies, including LGBTQ people who were persecuted and sometimes imprisoned in the queerphobic postwar societies of their liberators. Similarly, though history supports the notion that Jews have been exceptionally or especially victimized, valuable solidarity between Jewish and other peoples is fostered when each group transcends myopic perspectives to recognize the violence suffered beyond one's own in-group. As Eisenberg writes, on the one hand, Trump-era Holocaust analogies might harmfully erase the nuance of the Third Reich as "its own unique horror," but, on the other hand, comparisons do not need to be *equations* in order to be appropriate or worthwhile as comics ("Never Again?"). They might also work as affective *reverberations*, promoting productive evaluations of how contemporary realities are both similar *and* different to those of historical horrors. From Valley's vantage point, Trump is certainly not Hitler, but he has been rightfully considered in relation to Hitler due to his border and immigration policies, his alignment with white supremacists, his broad discrediting of the press, and his blatant promotion of self-aggrandizing falsities. Discussing his use of the Nazi analogy, Valley states, "If they have Stephen Miller on staff and Steve Bannon, who are working with literal white supremacists to launder their views into the mainstream, whether on Breitbart or in the policies that Trump is putting forth in our immigration system, the Nazi analogy, even though it's dangerous because it can be glib or overused, is also worthwhile" (personal interview). Eisenberg offers similar reflections, noting a shift from an earlier need to "lay out exactly why I thought this was an appropriate comparison" to a growing public acceptance of this analogy at face value, which accompanied reactions to the rise of the alt-right ("Re: Interest in writing"). While Lubchansky satirizes the ethnic nationalism and bigotry that appears in the daily news, Corman depicts a logic of epigenetics and interconnection of experience to advocate for persecuted and oppressed bodies, rather than for identity-based hierarchies in the name of an exclusionary form of memorialization. All examined artists seem to agree that "Never

Again" loses its meaning when it cannot be invoked against state-supported violence against *any* marginalized population, Jewish or not. As Eli Valley writes, "making the Holocaust untouchably sacrosanct diminishes the very human dimensions of its horror" ("Never Again?").

The comics tenet of introducing complexity through simplification is not only a matter of the depicted subject but also a matter of audience reception and potential complicity. We, as readers, are not absolved from contemplating our own positionality within the inferred comparisons of Holocaust analogies. Valley quotes historian Yehuda Bauer: "the warning contained in the Holocaust is surely that the acts of the perpetrators might be repeated, under certain conditions, by anyone" ("Never Again?"). Including these words beside fact-based drawings of Muslim Americans fleeing the U.S. for Canada in 2017 and families forcibly separated by ICE, Valley provokes readers to question the dangers of discounting the significance of any government-enforced endangerment, even those that do not necessarily trigger immediate associations of European Jews of 1933–1945. Corman's piece for *The Nib*'s 2017 feature agrees with this stance, concluding, "If we can't look at this very worst turning point in our recent past for lessons, 'Never again' is worse than meaningless, it is a mockery of our grandparents' bones." Lubchansky offers a similar perspective in their contribution, which asserts, "When we say 'never again,' we should mean it." In this iteration, the dangerous phenomenon to which "never again" refers is neither Jewish genocide nor Hitler; rather, Hitler is invoked as visual shorthand for the empowerment of a demagogue who delegitimizes public reason and media, dehumanizing groups of people for his own political advantage—an unacceptable situation regardless of who the social targets are.

The artists examined in this article are under no delusion that Trump and Hitler are one and the same. Rather, their work uses bidirectional memory to assert the importance of considering and resisting the normalization of authoritarianism and hate-based violence. As Lubchansky muses,

> I don't think Trump is Hitler [. . .]; I don't think he has an exterminationist agenda for anybody necessarily. I think he's just

> not a very smart person, he's grasping for power, he's a conman . . . it's a completely different scenario. [. . .] American fascism's going to look completely different than Italian, German, Eastern European . . . so it's more complicated than 'Can you call them Nazis? (personal interview)

Similarly, for Alexander, the question of whether Trump is comparable to Hitler is somewhat impossible to answer substantively and is beside the point. Rather, what interests Alexander is that the "affective lens," that "people are *feeling* there's a connection there, and why is that? I'm not sure if it says as much about the actual Holocaust as much as those connections make a comment on the United States' relationship to the Holocaust." Rather than allow politicians to align Holocaust memory with an agenda that enacts state violence upon other groups of people, Alexander argues that Americans should connect Holocaust memory to the warning signs of fascism, whether or not fascism looks identical to that of the Third Reich:

> I think it is fair to say that Trump and a lot of his political followers, either unknowingly or quite intentionally, with a minor but vocal group of them, fully embrace fascist ideology. I think, then, the comparisons are quite fair [. . .] how it forms now is much different. I think there's a lot more 'wink-wink, nudge-nudge' sort of attitude, a system of plausible deniability that's built into fascism now that makes it a lot more insidious [. . .], and I think that people are right to be afraid of that, and they're right to look to the past, to historical trauma, as both informing their fear and as being something to point to – to say 'this is the reason we have to resist fascist ideology as it emerges today.' We can talk about it being neo-fascism all you want, but it's still grounded in historical corridors that we need to be reminded of. (personal interview)

Popular Trump-era web comics that analogize Hitler and the Holocaust tend to prioritize a set of cultural values shared by Jewish, feminist, and queer perspectives: values of questioning, learning,

and critical debate, as well as witnessing and empathy for the systemically oppressed, regardless of whether or not the oppressed share one's own identity categories. Valley insists on the "moral requirement" of Jews applying Jewish memory "to stand as witness and to oppose" atrocities of the Trump era (personal interview). None of the artists discussed here view these implied commitments as a rejection of Jewish loyalty or identity; instead, most describe them as central to Jewish, feminist, or queer ethics, as well as to the lessons derived from Holocaust memory, Hebrew Exodus narratives, and ongoing social liberation movements. A commitment to fighting all forms of social injustice, of course, does not preclude a commitment to fighting antisemitism. While Valley attributes his Nazi analogies to the need for alarming the public that Trump's administration might revive "the horrors of history" against refugees and people of color, among others, he also remains simultaneously committed to calling out what he perceives to be Trump's interconnected "antisemitism and the entire administration's antisemitism, the way that it led to both Pittsburgh and Poway massacres," even if Jews are not the primary victims of Trump-era bigotry (personal interview). Likewise, though Eisenberg's critiques of Trump focus on the danger he poses mainly to current refugees, Muslim immigrants, and people of color, she links her critique directly to her position as a Holocaust-conscious Jew, placing her depiction of the gates of Auschwitz directly above a tweeting Donald Trump and beside a panel that reads, "I felt safe in the same way, I imagine, that Jews in Squirrel Hill felt safe," in a comic published on *The Nib* just days after the Tree of Life shooting, in which a white nationalist man killed eleven Jewish congregants in a Pittsburgh synagogue ("It's All Happening Again"). According to the artists examined here, Jewish endangerment is always interconnected with other forms of endangerment and, if one loses historical perspective, it can become a weapon for victim-competition rather than a means of advancing ethics and solidarity across social groups. Trump's election was, for Corman, "the first time I really felt unsafe as a Jew," but also a time that made more palpable a pronounced "hierarchy of unsafety." In addition to recalling her feelings of fear as a Jew and a woman, she remembers realizing the

ways in which her own positions of potential vulnerability could also become obstacles rather than bridges to connecting with others facing renewed terror in American society: "I'm a Jew and I'm a woman, but my skin is white, I'm able-bodied, I'm straight . . . [. . .] I can use that privilege, but also it's really important to be aware of it and not let it get weaponized, and also to really recognize the parallel universe that other people around me are living in every day" (personal interview). Lubchansky similarly shares being targeted more as a trans person than as a Jew in Trump-era America, as well as balancing the memory of their grandparents' racialized Jewishness with Lubchansky's own present-day privilege as someone read by others as white, with all the relative privilege that designation entails (personal interview).

Conclusion

It remains important to preserve Holocaust memory and the distinctive aspects of Holocaust history, as well as to respect the particular experiences and perspectives of those communities most impacted by Nazi terror; that being said, exclusionary approaches to such remembrance imperils the possibility of embodied, twenty-first-century relevance, as well as ethical imperatives of what Valley calls "Jewish witnessing" to the plight of other (non-Jewish) targets of the public and of the state. The comics examined here use Nazi analogies to protest the reservation of Holocaust-related insights and ethical imperatives exclusively for descendants of survivors and victims, or the refusal to acknowledge connections between the Holocaust and contemporary systems of violence that "fall short" of a full-on, state-sponsored murder of millions. Would analogies between Trump and Hitler raise an eyebrow had Hitler stopped at discrediting the "Jewish press," rather than ultimately discrediting Jewish existence? Would it be less controversial to color ICE activity with Nazi connotations had the Germans and their collaborators stopped at separating Jewish families, without also murdering them? The comics discussed in this article sometimes provoke impassioned reactions but more importantly ask us to remember that history and

contemporary life are not neatly defined units that can be separated by clean borders; rather, as Art Spiegelman most famously articulated it, they "bleed" into each other, and it is up to all thinking minds to maintain perspective, remaining critical not only of the simplistic historical analogy but also of the dangerous, fear-based metanarrative, the sometimes-attractive invitation to see only the most convenient side of the story, to see the world as a battleground of "us" and "them," rather than as a set of multiple complex and intertwined realities that inform each other and offer human points of connection between elements and across peoples or panels. Provocatively stretching established usages of sanctified Holocaust history and memory, the use of bidirectional memory in these twenty-first-century web comics sometimes does risk simplification or trivialization of the Holocaust, but it does so from informed, contextualized positions, and in order to address urgent social issues relevant to Holocaust history. Calling out the myopia of ethnic nationalism and its violent social implications, they succeed in promoting critical thinking about current social climates, as well as relating to the Holocaust more as an affective legacy and ethical warning than as a badge of honor or a silencing monopoly on victimhood. Taken together, the separate projects of these comics artists challenge audiences to study history and contemporary life more closely, as well as to become sufficiently aware of the interconnectedness of past and present. Channeling anxiety, terror, and outrage into satire, visual essay, or social provocation, they envision present-day and historical concerns bidirectionally and with creative license, painting today's social atrocities in the appropriately grandiose, panicked tones of expressionist art, with the grotesque beauty of Weimar Germany's "degenerate" aesthetic, or in a measured manner that highlights the unsettlingly mundane nature of historical horror-in-the-making. They break pedestals of Holocaust history to expose its disturbingly human characteristics and, thus, to consider dangerous historical afterlives in the embodied present, beyond exclusionary approaches to memorialization that obscure physiological and ethical knowledge about social danger, approaches that pound such knowledge into ideological weapons and political "Trump cards."

Works Cited

Alexander, Dorian. Personal interview. 18 Dec. 2020.

Bartov, Omer et al. "An Open Letter to the Director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum." *The New York Review of Book*s. 1 Jul. 2019, https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/07/01/an-open-letter-to-the-director-of-the-holocaust-memorial-museum/

Browning, Christopher. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. Harper-Collins, 1993.

Corman, Leela. "Drawing Strength From My Grandfather, Who Carried His Losses From the Holocaust." *Tablet*, 29 Dec. 2013, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/grandfather-carried-losses.

———. "Re: Inquiry about your work." Received by Golan Moskowitz, 28 Dec. 2020.

———. Interview by Stef Lenk. "Picturing Victory from Brooklyn to Buchenwald." *Literaturwissenschaft in Berlin*, 26 Apr. 2019, literaturwissenschaft-berlin.de/leela-corman-picturing-victory/.

———. Personal interview. 22 Dec. 2020.

———. "Victory Garden." *Believer Magazine*, 14 July 2020, believermag.com/victory-garden/.

Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Duke UP, 2003.

Downs, Kenya. "FBI warned of white supremacists in law enforcement 10 years ago. Has anything changed?" *PBS New Hour*, 21 Oct. 2016, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/fbi-white-supremacists-in-law-enforcement.

Eisenberg, Lisa Rosalie. "Being Jewish in Trump's America." *The Nib*, 15 Dec. 2016, https://thenib.com/being-jewish-in-trump-s-america/

———. "It's All Happening Again." *The Nib*, 5 Nov. 2018, thenib.com/it-s-all-happening-again/.

———. "Re: Interest in writing about your work for journal article." Received by Golan Moskowitz, 21 Dec. 2020.

Gross, Jan T. *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. Princeton UP, 2001.

Hirsch, Marianne. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2008, pp. 103–28.

Hoffman, Ari. "Op-Ed: A disgrace in the Valley – Co-sponsoring anti-Semitism at Stanford." *The Stanford Daily*, 6 May 2019, https://www.stanforddaily.com/2019/05/06/op-ed-a-disgrace-in-the-valley-co-sponsoring-anti-semitism-at-stanford/

Kaplan, Louis. *At Wit's End: The Deadly Discourse on the Jewish Joke*. Fordham UP, 2020.

Levin, Sam. "White supremacists and militias have infiltrated police across US, report says." *The Guardian*, 27 Aug. 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/27/white-supremacists-militias-infiltrate-us-police-report.

Lubchansky, Matt. "The GOP Death Cult." *The Nib*, 8 Apr. 2020, https://thenib.com/the-gop-death-cult/.

———. "The Important Columnist Goes To a Nazi Rally." *The Nib*, 16 Aug. 2017, https://thenib.com/the-important-columnist-goes-to-a-nazi-rally/.

———. Personal interview. 21 Dec. 2020.

———. "Stick to Your Guns." *The Nib*, 30 Aug. 2017, https://thenib.com/stick-to-your-guns/.

———. "Trump Uses His Big-League Brain." *The Nib*, 1 Nov. 2017, https://thenib.com/trump-uses-his-big-league-brain/.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. HarperCollins, 1993.

"Mission and History," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/mission-and-history.

"Never Again?: Five Jewish Cartoonists on the Use of Holocaust Imagery in Trump's America." *The Nib*, 15 Mar. 2017, thenib.com/never-again/.

Never Again Action, www.neveragainaction.com/.

Pierce, Rebecca. "Selective Memory." *Jewish Currents*, 4 Dec. 2020, jewishcurrents.org/selective-memory/.

Resha, Adrienne. "The Blue Age of Comic Books." *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society*, vol. 4, no. 1, Spring 2020, pp. 66–81.

Sahdev, Sanvitti. "Cartoonist Leela Corman speaks on visual storytelling, activism." *The Rice Thresher*, 29 Oct. 2019, https://www.ricethresher.org/article/2019/10/cartoonist-leela-corman-speaks-on-visual-storytelling-activism.

Stein, Arlene. *Reluctant Witness: Survivors, Their Children, and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness*. Oxford UP, 2015.

Steinbuch, Yaron. "US Holocaust museum denounces AOC's 'concentration camp' remarks." *New York Post*, 24 Jun. 2019, https://nypost.com/2019/06/24/us-holocaust-museum-denounces-aocs-concentration-camp-remarks/?utm_medium=SocialFlow&utm_campaign=SocialFlow&utm_source=NYPTwitter

"United States COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by State," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Accessed 11 Mar. 2021, https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_casesper100klast7days

Valley, Eli. "A Springtime of Erasure." *Jewish Currents*, 25 Nov. 2019, https://jewishcurrents.org/a-springtime-of-erasure/

———. "Kapo, Kapow." *Jewish Currents*. 27 Jun. 2018, https://jewishcurrents.org/kapo-kapow/.

———. Personal interview. 21 Dec. 2020.

———. "Re: Interest in writing about your work." Received by Golan Moskowitz, 30. Dec. 2020.

@elivalley. "This is @benshapiro. Shabbat Shalom." *Twitter*, 21 Jun. 2019, 11:03 a.m., https://twitter.com/elivalley/status/1142100794017275905

Comics, Visibility, and Exposure in Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant*

Davida Pines
Boston University

In her comics memoir *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant* (2014), Roz Chast uses her wry and unthreatening cartooning style to show the decidedly unpleasant aspects of what she calls "this aging thing" (10). Her book documents her experiences as the primary caretaker of her elderly parents in the last years of their lives as they move from independence to "assisted living" to hospice and finally to death. Notwithstanding those "nice pinks, safe peaches, inoffensive blues, soft greens, and harmless neutrals" (127) characteristic of both Chast's comics as well as, yes, the décor of the assisted living establishment where Chast eventually moves her parents, the memoir exposes bracing realities. Rather than turning away from the unpleasantness associated with end of life, Chast uses the comics form to make what we as a culture prefer not to see starkly visible, putting unsuspecting readers in a position to witness painful, and painfully personal, moments.

As determined as her parents are to avoid talking about and facing death, Chast seems equally determined in her memoir to expose and explore old age with all of its attendant indignities. Fellow *New*

Yorker writer and physician Atul Gawande explains his own decision to write *Being Mortal* (2014), a book, like Chast's, on death and dying, as driven by a belief that "by pulling back the veil and peering in close, a person can make sense of what is most comforting or strange or disturbing [about death]" (9). Through careful, probing questions, Gawande encourages patients, family, and friends to imagine the unimaginable: a time when we are no longer able to care for ourselves. If we can permit ourselves to envision such a time, Gawande suggests, then we can have a hand in shaping what happens: we can prepare. Chast's comics memoir helps readers picture what most people prefer not to imagine. By juxtaposing different kinds of images, specifically, comics, photographs, and sketches, Chast experiments with what it means to make visible, using the multidimensionality of the comics form to pull back the veil and peer in close at death, dying, and loss. In particular, Chast brings together her signature pastel-colored comics, a selection of black-and-white family portrait photographs from her childhood, a cluster of informal digital snapshots, a few, devastating all-text panels, and finally twelve portrait sketches set one after the next in slow, silent progression. The multiple, intersecting visual modes testify not only to the expansiveness of the comics form but also to Chast's commitment to showing and exposing uncomfortable and at times unspeakable truths.

Comics and Visibility

The comics form lends itself to visuality, specifically, to making what is typically unseen seen. Most discussions of the rise of nonfiction and autobiographical comics point to Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972), an underground comics autobiography that permits readers to see and experience drawn representations of Green's own tormenting thoughts due to obsessive-compulsive disorder. Green's comics autobiography stands as one of the first to offer verbal and visual access to interior, painful, and otherwise unseen experiences. Art Spiegelman famously credits

Green with inspiring his own autobiographical work in *Maus*. Citing Spiegelman's remark that "'Justin turned comic book boxes into intimate secular confession booths,'" Jared Gardner notes that, following Green's lead, "[Spiegelman] and others began lining up to offer their own confessions to this new repository" (8). Indeed, the use of the comics form to broach taboo subjects and enable readers to enter intimate spaces continues strong today. As comics artist and editor MK Czerwiec observes in the introduction to *Menopause: A Comic Treatment* (2020), "Comics have a long history of taking on stigmatized topics" (3). The collection, featuring work by female comics artists including Lynda Barry and Ellen Forney, makes public and visible the physical and psychological experiences most commonly associated with menopause and yet so rarely seen or discussed in popular culture.

In particular, Hillary Chute's 2010 *Graphic Women*, a study of the use of comics by five female artists to represent deeply private and previously overlooked trauma, paved the way for this recent collection. The decision to depict painful experience in words and images, Chute argues, challenges accepted notions of trauma as being beyond visual and verbal representation: "The complex visualizing [that graphic narratives undertake] 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" (18). By drawing images of trauma onto the page, the artists give literal shape to emotionally overwhelming memories, making the experiences visible, legible, and ultimately thinkable to themselves and others. Readers gain empathy and understanding by being able to see and witness suffering. Through drawing, comics memoirists assert and inscribe a sense of themselves as whole and separate from their experiences: "Against a valorization of absence and aporia, graphic narrative asserts the value of presence, however complex and contingent" (17). The power and innovation of the comics form, Chute argues, is precisely this ability to show what has been deemed personally and culturally un-showable. The comics works refuse the crippling silence

and devastating invisibility imposed by traumatic events, risking the pain, shame, and social opprobrium of telling and showing.[1]

Roz Chast's memoir fits into this comics tradition of making private and painful experience visible. She includes multiple modes of representation in order to be true to the complexity of her own experience even as it intersects with that of her parents' traumatic history. As Chast notes about her parents, "Between their one-bad-thing-after-another lives and the Depression, World War II, and the Holocaust in which they'd both lost family—it is amazing that they weren't crazier than they were. Who could blame them for not wanting to talk about death?" (6). Scarred by losses connected to their terrifying past, Chast's parents worried constantly about possible, looming catastrophes even as they sought not to tempt fate by discussing or planning for the future. The stories of their past traumas defined Chast's own childhood, creating the "postmemory" that Marianne Hirsch defines as the "experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth" (*Family Frames* 22). Despite her parents' refusal to face the "unpleasant," Chast risks over-showing for the sake of not turning away from the emotional, physical, and material realities of aging and death. Pushing up against the boundaries of her parents' privacy, as well as her own public and private status as a "good" daughter, Chast calls the ethics of representation into question, preferring to err on the side of excess and openness rather than insufficiency and fear. She displays not only the realities of aging but also her family history, insisting,

[1]In addition to making unconventional, forbidden, or culturally unrecognized desires and conditions visible, comics permits the visual representation of imagined worlds—private, internal spaces. In *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi makes what is typically overlooked—a child's inner world—seeable. Satrapi draws, for example, the conversations that ten-year-old Marji has with God. Rather than an abstract concept, God appears as the physical being Marji imagines him to be. Drawing lets the reader participate in the child's subjective reality, showing the literal ways that she works to make sense of the violent political realities taking place around her. Comics in this case offer readers the chance to see how a child makes sense of words and experiences.

finally, on her own inextricable connection to her parents lives. Chast unexpectedly puts her readers in the uncomfortable position of entering spaces and witnessing situations that are surely not intended for public scrutiny. Very little appears to remain sacred.

In addition to following in the comics tradition of breaking representational taboos, Chast's memoir also intersects with the growing field of graphic medicine, in which comics artists seek to fill the gaps that exist, for example, between doctors and patients, medical educators and students, objective medical diagnoses and the subjective experiences of those diagnoses. In particular, Chast's work faces into old age, not, as she notes, "TV commercial old age," but instead "the part of old age that was scarier, harder to talk about, and not a part of this culture" (20). Using verbal and visual modes, Chast reveals the deep unpleasantness of aging, documenting the falls, hospital stays, memory issues, financial strains, loss of bowel control, and the general unpredictability of death. Though published shortly before Gawande's book, Chast's memoir reckons with the problem that Gawande explores—namely, "a society that faces the final phase of the human life cycle by trying not to think about it" (76). What is clear is that Chast's decision to witness, talk about, and make visible the disturbing realities of dying is the guiding principle of the book.

In the way that she brings together different kinds of images, Chast works as much by what she shows as by what she withholds, as well as by the contrast between one form of visual representation and another. By juxtaposing photographs, hand-drawn cartoons, all-text panels, and pencil sketches, Chast offers multiple visual representations of "the truth." As Nancy Pedri observes, by using a "plurality of visual modes in the communication of a narrative," the artist creates a "dynamic interplay of semiotic resources," thus contributing to the complexity of a narrative ("Mixing Visual Media in Comics"). In Chast's memoir, the layering of different visual modes calls meaning and memory into question, ultimately refusing a single way of seeing and making sense of the past.

Family Portraits

The opening two pages of Chast's memoir present the reader with two contrasting visual modes: black and white photography on the left page and comics on the right. Whereas a single image appears on the left-hand page, eight comics images appear on the right. The family shot on the left presents one well-arranged, sepia-colored moment, frozen in time and space. By contrast, the comics sequence on the right reenacts the painful, drawn-out moments of an awkward conversation. Whereas the photograph presents a carefully-positioned family of three, with each member of the trio staring placidly, pleasantly at the photographer and now the reader, the members of the family on the right appear silly, ruffled, and uneasy. The opening pages thus underscore the gap between the acceptable and desired image that the family sought to capture and project of itself—what Marianne Hirsch called the "familial gaze"—and the uncurated one that Chast enacts and reenacts with each drawn panel. From the start, Chast seems to establish comics as the visual mode closest to the messy truths of daily life.

Examining the family photograph more closely, one notices that it floats on the page without any identifying information. What was the occasion? Is this an extended family gathering? A wedding? If so, who else was at the party? Is it possible that the picture was taken at a studio, for the sake of creating a family portrait? Despite

the age of the image—given how young Roz looks, the photo must be more than fifty years old—any cracks that might have appeared on the face of the original have been smoothed over. The photograph, like the impeccably dressed, coiffed, and smiling figures, has been rendered spotless.

The image itself features the Chast family, with Mr. and Mrs. Chast seated on either side of a settee and angled slightly towards each other, their knees not quite touching. With one parent on each side, a bright-eyed and eager Roz, about two or three years old, sits off-center, propped closer to her mother than her father, her ear grazing her mother's chest and her small shoulder tucked under Mrs. Chast's encompassing bosom. The family has been artfully, decorously arranged. Sitting on his own on the other side of the settee, Mr. Chast gamely holds his side of an open children's book—*Babar*—while Mrs. Chast holds the other, mother and father forming a parental circle around Roz.

The photograph thus offers the polite and upstanding image that the family apparently sought to project. The image is in keeping with Hirsch's observation that, "As photography immobilizes the flow of family life into a series of snapshots, it perpetuates familial myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history" (*Family Frames* 7). The smiling threesome, and perhaps most of all Mrs. Chast, who appears strong, sturdy, upright, and immovable, as opposed to Mr. Chast who appears relaxed despite his formal attire, present a kind of fortress, daring anyone to see behind this curtain of pleasant and tidy family life. In Hirsch's introduction to "The Familial Gaze," she observes that "The rigid conventions [governing families and family pictures] seem to shore up dominant familial myths and ideologies, supporting a circumscribed and static self-representation of the family and closing it off from scrutiny and critique" (xvi). It is the comics images that invite the reader into the unscripted flow of the everyday. On the left, what is preserved and projected is a family narrative that underscores decorum. Here is a calm and careful family, preserved for the ages.

In contrast to the sepia tones of the photo, the eight panels on the right-hand page are awash in Chast's familiar, seemingly light-hearted

pastels. The cartoons feature animated figures, speech bubbles, emanata, a narrator. While the figures on the left appear placid, the figures on the right are flailing. Whereas Chast and her mother form a winsome pair in the photograph, in the comics sequence Roz's parents sit together and Roz makes her appeal from the opposite side of the couch. As Chast comments on the last page of her memoir, "for as far back as I can remember, I felt outside my parents' duo" (228). Despite the visual contrast between the flat, floating, and wordless photo and the embodied speech- and gesture-filled comics sequence, both the photograph and the comics panels underscore the drive to obscure or evade the truth. Roz has gathered her parents to talk about what she calls with meaningful inflection "THINGS"—specifically, their end-of-life wishes. She makes several valiant if veiled attempts to broach the topic of "PLANS" (3), but each time her parents play dumb. One panel after the next show her parents mostly in mimed conversation with each other, forming their own family circle. In answer to Roz's query, "So . . . do you guys ever think about THINGS?" two sets of hands fly up in the air, two question marks float over each head. Like children, George and Elizabeth eye each other, giggling, first a little, then wildly. Exasperated, seemingly the only grown-up in the room, Roz lets the conversation drop. It's only in the last panel, a split screen showing Roz back in her own house and George and Elizabeth alone again in theirs, when what Gawande refers to as the "treacherous subject" of mortality (9) has been safely dropped, that Roz's own reluctance to talk about death is revealed.

One photograph in particular illustrates Chast's deliberate use of comics as a way of breaking the silence. This photo appears towards the end of the memoir and merges photography and comics, as Chast draws her inner thoughts (as a 12-year-old) onto the black-and-white image. About ten years have passed between this photo and the first. Sepia-toned, the image shows the threesome standing rather than sitting, arranged in a triangle rather than in linear formation. Mr. Chast, the tallest, presides over the photo, his genial grin and relaxed countenance appearing at the top. One arm wraps around Mrs. Chast, who stands next to him on his right; the other arm wraps around Roz, who stands in front. With a hand resting on his wife's and daughter's shoulder, respectively, Mr. Chast appears content. Mrs. Chast, fully presentable in blouse, pleated skirt, and white cardigan sweater, leans just slightly towards her husband. Rather than holding or enfolding either her husband or daughter, her hands are locked in a prim clasp in front of her, and she offers a thin, close-lipped smile. She is the image of self-containment: proper, in charge, all-knowing, inscrutable. Determinedly outward-facing, she engages fully in perpetuating the image of "an ideal family and of acceptable family relations" (Hirsch 11). As for Roz, she stands up straight (one wonders: has she internalized this maternal directive?) and pins her arms, soldier-like, to her sides. Though her shoulder grazes her mother's arm, Roz stands determinedly separate from the group. Staring out from behind dark-rimmed glasses, Roz seems at first to glower at the viewer, though further inspection reveals a forlorn quality to her steady gaze. Refusing to smile for the camera, Roz ruptures the "familial gaze." Captioned "Me at 12," the cartoon includes a speech bubble that breaks

the frame, as well as her own stony silence: "Just a few more years, and I am outta here." As a child trapped within the strictures of family life, Roz found space in comics.

Despite establishing comics as the visual and verbal mode that will offer readers full access to the messy truth (what Chast refers to as "The Big Book of What I Really Think" [179]), one photograph in the family portrait collection permits visual access to Chast's own memories and heart. In comics, Chast represents her father as persistently addled by nerves and fears. A number of panels show his close-up face ringed with sweat droplets and etched with worry lines, eyes bugged out, mouth open and frowning: "My mother was sick, and my father was losing it" (56); "'Mom's in Maimonides Hospital.' 'W-WHAT??!??'" (64). He fears germs, gadgets, accidents, insults. The prospect of putting toast into a toaster paralyzes him, and senile dementia leaves him confused, fearful, and doomed to ask the same questions repeatedly (72, 74, 75). And yet, after his death, Chast observes the shifts and reversals of her own memories. "I noticed that all the things that had driven me bats about him . . . now seemed trivial. The only emotion that remained was one of deep affection and gratitude that he was my dad" (167).

In this case, the photograph enacts and preserves that predominant, overriding, and enduring feeling. The photograph's frozen moment appears not to hide the truth but rather to reveal it, making visible George Chast's love and ability to see and to cherish Roz. Whereas the first family photograph offers a wall of propriety, this picture captures Chast's father gazing at his young daughter in unending delight, holding her with exquisite tenderness. It

is this image that serves in the memoir as a visual epitaph, a headstone marking and honoring her father: "George Chast March 23, 1912–October 17, 2007" (159).

The family photographs thus play different roles in Chast's memoir, with some photos standing in direct contrast to what the comics reveal and others capturing an essential feeling or understanding about the past. Whereas in photographs Mrs. Chast appears imperious and imposing, in comics she is witty and sharp ("I gave him a Blast from Chast!" [34]), frugal to a hilarious extreme ("Waste not, want not," the comics Elizabeth sings, as she heads to a department store register with deeply discounted stockings of the utterly wrong size and color [47]), and bossy right to the end: "We're going to 100!" she tells George crossly, forbidding either of them to think about dying any time before then (10). As in the family photographs, the cartoon Mrs. Chast always looks presentable in her blouse and skirt, coat and hat, delivering insults with cheerful abandon: "That Harry Bendlestein. What a Cluck!" (34).

The incorrigible Mrs. Chast is indeed a character—so much so, that when the exaggerated comics image of Mrs. Chast's giant-sized head and wide-open mouth ["I'm going to Blow My Top!!!" (35)] looms threateningly over the tiny and cowering figures of George and Roz, it takes a moment to register anything other than humor.

The silliness of the image belies the seriousness of the text: upsetting Mrs. Chast could lead to "a terrifying volcano-like explosion of rage" (35). As lighthearted as the comics purport to be, what underlies them is often deadly serious.

The final comics-photograph juxtaposition comes near the end of the memoir. At this point in the narrative, the comics panels have wedged open the closed surface of the photographs. The cartoon sequence that precedes the final photograph is anything but comic. The nine-panel sequence documents Roz's attempt to have a death-bed reconciliation with her mother, offering her mother a last chance to talk about, if not make amends for, a life-long, distanced, and disconnected relationship with her daughter. "I wish we could have

been better friends when I was growing up," Roz makes the opening volley. "Does it worry you?" her mother returns. "No. . . ," Roz says, and then, trying again, she asks, "Does it worry YOU?" The conversation recalls the opening one about "*Things*." Weak and exhausted, her mother simply replies, "No." Mother and daughter sit together in silence. Offering her mother one last chance to let down her guard, Roz asks: "Do you want me to stay or should I go?" The devastating reply: "It doesn't matter." The last panel on the page, in the bottom right hand corner, shows Chast's mother alone in the room with her eyes closed. The chair Roz had been sitting in is empty. The caption—"It was time to go"—applies, it would seem, to both Roz and Elizabeth. Turning the page, the strained economy of the deathbed scene gives way to a wash of unleashed, narrated emotion. Walking through "the tasteful lobby of the Place," Roz leaves decorum behind. Alone in her car, she cries bitterly: "The bellowing quality of the sobbing and the depth of the sadness I felt surprised me. I was angry, too. Why hadn't she tried harder to know me?" (202). Deprived of an end of life reconciliation, Roz permits her reader to peer into the emptiness at the center of her relationship with her mother. Still, she admits the difficulty of confronting and changing deeply engrained patterns in the final months of life: "if there had ever been a time in my relationship with my mother for us to get to know one another—and that's a very big 'if'—that time had long since passed" (202).

The family photograph that ends this chapter freezes for posterity a moment when Roz's relationship with her mother seemingly had the potential to blossom into something warmer and more open. In this family shot—the last one in the memoir—Roz and her mother appear together in the shade of a tree in a park presumably in Brooklyn. The precision, stiffness, and deference of the pose notwithstanding, Roz, eight or nine years old, is shown embracing her mother. Her body faces and presses into her mother's body; her arms make a circle around her mother, her clasped fingers coming to rest on her mother's shoulder. The image projects grace, if not unbridled love. Roz wears a white sleeveless party dress, the skirt of which lifts elegantly behind her. Her hair is pulled neatly into a ballerina bun; her bangs are combed smoothly down her forehead. She turns her head towards the

camera and smiles the same close-lipped smile that her mother does. For her part, Mrs. Chast, facing forward with her arm seemingly wrapped around her daughter's waist, wears a festive, polka-dotted dress, a dark overcoat, and a jaunty hat. A large pocketbook sits like a barricade on her lap. True to form, she sits upright, presenting a dignified front to the public. Despite the curated nature of the pose—a projected idea of Mother and Doting Daughter—the photograph captures the potential for a closer relationship.

While Chast never refers specifically to it, the four Chast family portraits showcase physical connection. Rather than traditional family portraits that gather relatives into a standing group, offering a visual family roll call, the shots that Chast includes in the memoir tell a different story. These images focus on arms and hands, on holding and on being held. In the first portrait, Roz's parents each hold one side of a children's book. Their arms along with the book effectively encircle Roz, whose own hands lay in her lap. This is a careful portrait that shows restraint. In the photo of Roz and her father dancing, perhaps at a family party, the center point of the photo are father and daughter's clasped hands. The image is one of adoration—Mr. Chast gazes lovingly at his daughter, holding her with his other hand as though she might break. He encircles her. The third photo captures and upholds the separateness of mother and daughter. As in the other photos, arms and hands make up the interest of the photos—these are the telling details. Roz holds herself straight and aloof, her arms energetically pinned to her sides. Tellingly, the photo cuts off Roz's hands at the wrists. By contrast, Roz's mother's clasped hands appear prominently in the photo, as do

her father's, as he reaches his arms around his wife and daughter, pulling them into a circle with a hand on each of their shoulders. Finally, the last photo shows Roz's bare arms encircling her mother's neck; her own hands clasped on her mother's shoulder. None of the pictures show mother and daughter turning towards each other. None of the pictures show Roz's mother holding, cradling, reaching toward her daughter. This is the visual legacy of the family photographs.

Snapshots

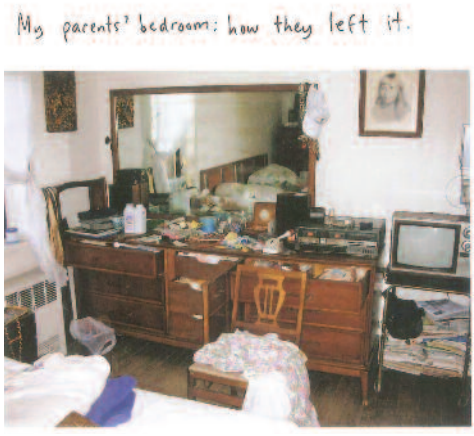
Whereas the black-and-white family photographs that Chast includes at key moments in her comics memoir reveal subtle as well as obvious cracks in the smooth surface of the happy family mythology, the color snapshots, clustered in the center of the memoir appear to cross an ethical line. The images of the interior of her parents' apartment, including the insides of their kitchen drawers, hallway closet, refrigerator, and medicine cabinet, position her parents' right to privacy against Chast's right to show what would otherwise never have been viewed publicly. The images, indeed, the spectacle, of the Chasts' apartment, as it appeared on the day they left it, testify both to their inability to maintain order over the encroaching chaos and to Chast's determination to hold nothing back.

Indeed, the snapshots stand in direct opposition to the portrait photography. Whereas the family pictures project decorum, the snapshots reveal an utter loss of control. By including the latter, Chast offers unsparing visual evidence of her parents' decaying minds and bodies. For the sake of not turning away from the truth, she pushes the bounds of decency, taking the reader behind doors that Mrs. Chast would certainly have kept firmly closed. Unlike the selected and somewhat ghostly black-and-white family portraits which float, like memories, against the white pages of the memoir, grounded in neither captions nor context, the color photos appear, one after the next, with short, orienting explanations. As unfamiliar, if not shocking, as the gallery of images might be to the reader, this is, one remembers, nonetheless deeply familiar territory to Chast. This is the apartment where she grew up; these are the lives, and a way of life,

to which she remains inextricably linked. The past that she exposes is also her own.

The reader comes upon the images casually. Faced with the task of "the massive, deeply weird, and heartbreaking job of going through my parents' possessions, almost fifty years' worth, crammed into four rooms," Chast explains that she "took some photos" (108). The visual tour begins innocently enough with a few "mementos": images of objects once used by her parents. Chast arranges eyeglasses, a stapler, shavers, art supplies, colored pencils. She has assembled, it seems, a collection of amusing oddities. Nothing untoward.

Then, without preparation, the reader turns the page to find herself standing in Roz's parents' bedroom. Here is the messy dresser—not a cartoon version but the real thing—strewn with everything from bottles of talcum powder to a pile of books to note pads. In the dresser mirror we see the reflection of the bed: tussled pillows with flowered patterned sheets. One shrinks from the image. We should not be in here. We have breached a private space and the instinct is to avert our eyes—from the night gown draped across the chair to the under garments that peak out from the open drawers. One thinks with pain of the image that Mrs. Chast sought to project of herself and the family in public. What does it mean for the reader to enter into such an abject, and abjectly private, space? Is this breech of privacy truly necessary in order not to be accused of averting one's eyes in the face of the realities of aging? Are these images of lives no longer held in check less personal because aging is a universal condition, or are we witnessing a deliberate act of betrayal? Where is the line between showing and exposing, testifying to what was and committing a profound act of disloyalty? Whose side, Chast seems to ask us, are we on?



The photos that follow offer close-up shots of what Roz found in the apartment: upwards of 50 handbags, desk surfaces ("work stations") overwhelmed with tall stacks of books and binders. "My old bed," Chast labels one picture in which there is no bed in sight, only stockpiles of toilet paper, a metal filing cabinet on top of which sits a dish drying rack filled with odds and ends, including a wooden sign announcing "The Chasts." From the bedroom, we move to the kitchen and find ourselves peering into the refrigerator. In the hallway, on a "random shelf," we happen upon Roz's worn baby shoes (117). In what stands in for an attic, Mrs. Chast's "Crazy Closet" (117), we note the wardrobe crammed with old tweed jackets and discarded but not yet given-away coats and bathrobes. Finally, we peak into the bathroom medicine cabinet. As in Roland Barthes' discussion in *Camera Lucida* in which he explains how the details of a photograph can unexpectedly wound ("Certain details may prick me" [47]), each of these photos contains a punctum, for Chast, surely, as well as, if differently, for the reader or, in Barthes' terms, the spectator. Whether it is the open container of milk or the Telfa Band-Aids, we are stung by the exquisitely specific evidence of lives that were once in full motion. The photos sting on several levels, attesting to the passage of time as well as to our mortality, our inability,

This used to be my bedroom. Same horrible linoleum of my childhood, same nice view of the brick-walled side of a neighboring church

One of my dad's "work stations."

at the end of our lives, to care for ourselves. This is Roz's story, her parents' story, and, finally, her readers'. Needless to say, the reader feels a surge of relief upon re-entering the softer, buffering zone of comics. Chast's familiar cartoons offer a comfortable distance between the reader and the reality. We can breathe again.

In her discussion of Spiegelman's juxtaposition of comics and photographs, as well as the inclusion of comics from an entirely different time and place in *Maus*, Hirsch considers the impact of "breaking the frame." In particular, she asks, "How are we to read the radical breaks in the representational continuity of Maus?" (*Family Frames* 31). Ultimately, she argues that the abrupt shifts in representation add to the complexity as well as the uncertainty of the narrative. Commenting specifically on the three "sparsely distributed" family photographs that appear over the course of the two volumes, Hirsch observes that "these three pictures tell their own narrative of loss, mourning and desire, one that inflects obliquely, that both supports and undercuts the story of Maus" (*Family Frames* 31). "The power of the photographs," Hirsch asserts, exists "in their status as fragments of a history that we cannot assimilate" (*Family Frames* 40). The gap between the reality that we come to know through comics and the one seemingly represented in the photos preserves the unknowability of the history. Despite a seeming excess of representation of the individual and collective trauma of the Holocaust, Hirsch reads the breaks in the frame as safeguarding against the suggestion that the events, after all, are graspable. The photographs operate differently in Chast's memoir. Rather than defamiliarizing the world that we have come to know in comics, the images lift the veil further. In fact, the photographs confront the viewer with what it means, and what it feels like, to look, and not to look away.

Beyond Images

For all the visuality of her memoir, the worst moments are offered without images. The first is the night of the day that Roz's father dies. "My father, who had been alive that morning, was now not alive" (162). Chast brings her mother home to her own house. The

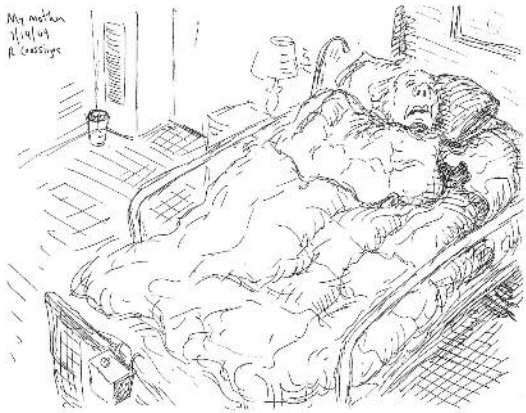
story she tells about what happened is offered in text only: no comics panels, no images. The facts are painful, embarrassing, and sad. Chast's determination to relate what happens speaks to her continued commitment to face into what is deeply unpleasant. As with the images of her apartment, one can only imagine her mother's pain had she known that her private horror would be made public. Chast writes with clarity: "My mother had suffered one of the worst, if not the worst, indignities of old age: loss of bowel control. The walls, the floors, the rugs were covered with excrement. Her clothing, her hands, and the sofa were caked with it." She notes paradoxically, "It was beyond imagining" (163). What to say about the decision to offer these details? What to make of giving her readers permission to imagine the unimaginable? This, Chast suggests, this loss of control of the body, is the image of heartbreak.

Three days before her mother dies, diverticulosis leads to a skin abrasion: "my mother developed a hole which came through the skin on the surface of her abdomen" (209). Her mother's nurse covers the wound, but Chast asks to see the opening. She explains, "I did not want to turn away from what was happening" (209). Here is the logic behind Chast's willingness to show. Here is her commitment to witnessing, exposing, and seeing.

Deathbed Sketches

As committed as Chast is throughout her memoir to offering her readers access to what is often deemed unspeakable, she remains unable, finally, to heal the gap in her connection with her mother. No matter how determined Chast might be to look at and to show what is underneath the surface, a fundamental emptiness, or inaccessibility, remains at the center of the text. What Chast documents, ultimately, amidst the plethora of images, funny and not funny, pleasant and unpleasant, is the absence of connection with her mother. In his essay "Drawing Desire," W.J.T. Mitchell explains that the title phrase "is meant not just to suggest the depiction of a scene or figure that stands for desire, but also to indicate the way that drawing itself, the dragging or pulling of the drawing instrument, is the performance of desire.

Drawing draws us on. Desire just is, quite literally, drawing, or a drawing—a pulling or attracting force, and the trace of this force in a picture" (59). It is perhaps Chast's desire to know and to be known by her mother that is reflected, etched, into the final drawings in the memoir.



At the conclusion of the book, Chast offers her readers one last visual mode; she draws her mother "from life," offering twelve pages of portrait sketches, each one made as Chast sat with her mother in the months and days before, and even after, she dies. Neither cartoons nor photographs, the sketches appear one after the other in silent, steady progression.

Once again, the reader finds herself in a space where she does not belong. Surely dying should not be an event open to a viewing public. And yet, after the first few pages, the succession of images creates a respectful and meditative quiet. We are there with Chast, studying the close-ups of her mother's face, noticing the slight changes in expression, wondering at the mysterious process of dying. Chast brings the intensity of her artist's eye to the work. Drawing her mother means looking at

her for long periods of time, noticing her eyebrows, her forehead, the lines around her mouth. Like Chast, the reader looks carefully at the surface in an effort to understand the depth.

"I had been drawing her all summer," Chast explains, "since the conversations had been reduced to almost nothing" (210). Drawing has served as a way of being with her mother, of continuing to try to know her. While the decision to draw her mother sounds offhand, Chast's inclusion of these portraits of her mother dying feels deeply generous. She seeks, all the way to the end, a way of knowing her mother. She shares intensely private, even sacred, moments with the reader, documenting what it means to look and to witness; to see; and in this way, finally, to be seen.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1981.

Chast, Roz. *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant: A Memoir*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

Chute, Hillary L. *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Harvard UP, 2016.

———. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. Columbia UP, 2010.

Czerwiec, MK, et al. *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*. Pennsylvania State UP, 2015.

Czerwiec, MK. *Menopause: A Comic Treatment*. Pennsylvania State UP, 2020.

Gardner, Jared. "Autography's Biography: 1972–2007." *Biography*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1-26. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23540919.

Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. Picador, 2014.

Hirsch, Marianne, ed. *The Familial Gaze*. Dartmouth College P, 1999.

———. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Harvard UP, 1997.

Pedri, Nancy. "Mixing Visual Media in Comics." *ImageText*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2017, n.p.

———. "Photography and the Layering of Perspective in Graphic Memoir." *ImageText*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2017, n.p.

Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. Pantheon, 2007.

The Germanness and Jewishness of *Belonging*

Kevin Haworth
Carnegie Mellon University

> When I meet people from Germany, my kind of people, you know, artists, educated people, we have more or less the same story. We have an agreement about who is the victim, who is the oppressor, who is the bad guy, who is the good guy. There is a general agreement that we have even before we speak about the narrative, about the story, we have the same narrative more or less. (Rutu Modan)

This statement from Rutu Modan, Israel's best-known graphic novelist, suggests that discourse about the Holocaust has reached an important place of mutual understanding. Stubborn elements of Holocaust denial aside, the facts have long been understood. Six million Jews and millions of others were murdered. The Nazi project intended to rid Europe of all its Jews as a core element to establishing a German empire over all of the continent. The Jewish refugees created by the war, bearing with them their witness testimony, speaks both to the ultimate failure of that project and the horrifying extent to which it succeeded.

But Modan is speaking to something different than facts. She is referring to sensemaking, the process by which individuals or groups

give meaning to events. As introduced by organizational theorist Karl E. Weick in the 1970s, sensemaking attempts to understand how individuals might ascribe different meanings to the same event, and how those meanings might evolve over time. Sensemaking is most acute in the face of traumatic events or ongoing ambiguity and is often an ongoing process which can shift in response to additional trauma, uncertainty, or new understandings (Mills et al. 183). Understanding the sensemaking practiced by survivors of trauma and their descendants, such as in the case of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, offers insight into not just how these survivors tell their stories but also how that telling shapes their present lives (Sekalala 2).

In that context, Modan's statement offers the opportunity to explore how comics—Modan's chosen medium—participate in sensemaking around the Holocaust. Since the publication of Art Spiegelman's two volume *Maus*, comics have served as a rich and much-studied medium for Holocaust narratives. Many of the best-known ones tell Jewish stories, in diverse ways. There are survivor memoirs, such as Miriam Katin's *We Are on Our Own* (2006); second generation memoirs such as Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986 and 1991) and Michel Kichka's *Second Generation: The Things I Didn't Tell My Father* (2012); and third generation memoirs such as Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch* (2016). There are also numerous graphic novels, such as (to name just a few) Will Eisner's *A Life Force* (2003), Joe Kubert's *Yossel: April 19, 1943: A Story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (2011), and Modan's *The Property* (2013). This list is far from fully representative, and is not intended to be. Rather, it nods to the remarkable output from Jewish comics artists on this subject. For all their diversity and complexity, however, these and other books like them affirm what we understand Modan to mean by 'the same story': the fundamental notion that the Holocaust was an oppressive and genocidal campaign against Jews ('the good guys'), waged by Nazi Germany and their allies ('the bad guys').

Against this background, Nora Krug's *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (2018) offers the opportunity to explore Modan's statement in the context of a recent graphic memoir, this time from a German perspective. Krug was born in Germany in

1977, emigrated to the United States in her twenties, married into a Jewish family, and currently teaches at the Parsons School of Design in New York City. *Belonging* is a visually and narratively complex investigation of Krug's family history, particularly those who served in the German armed forces in World War II, as well as of Krug's own relationship to German culture, language, and identity. *Belonging* has quickly become one of the most celebrated recent graphic memoirs, winning the National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography, and being named on books of the year lists by the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, National Public Radio, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and many others.

It is worth noting for our purposes that the book has also been warmly welcomed into Jewish spaces. *Belonging* has been shortlisted for a National Jewish Book Award, and Krug has discussed her work at Jewish museums, synagogues, and other Jewish communal spaces. For Jewish audiences, Matt Reingold has argued, books like *Belonging* can "lead to a more thoughtful and nuanced dialogue about the ways that non-Jews should engage with Holocaust commemoration" (1). This essay seeks to take Reingold's statement a step further and explore the idea that in *Belonging*, Krug acts as a crucial interlocutor between Jewish and non-Jewish experiences of the Holocaust narrative. In doing so, *Belonging* serves to explore contemporary sensemaking around the Holocaust in a way that, as Modan suggests, reaches something akin to a 'same story' without erasing individual layers of identity construction.

Krug's personal history positions her firmly as one of Modan's 'kind of people.' Like Modan, Krug is one of the 'artists, educated people' of which Modan speaks, and a member of what Holocaust scholars call the third generation, those whose grandparents experienced the war. It might seem problematic, even sacrilegious, to include Krug—who is a descendent of German soldiers, not Holocaust survivors—in this generational category, but the similarities are important: Krug's understanding of her family's history as a third generation German follows quite closely the paradigm seen in many third generation Jews. It is limited and elliptical, and yet suffused by an overwhelming sense that knowing is important—exactly what sets

her on the journey that *Belonging* enacts. In Chapter 1, Krug writes:

> I don't remember when I first heard the word *Konzentrationslager*, but I became aware of it long before I learned about the Holocaust. I sense that concentration camps were sinister places, and I imagined that the people who lived there were forced to concentrate to the point of physical anguish. But I was too afraid to ask, feeling that this was something embarrassing to talk about, something that grown-ups discussed in whispers, something revoking the same unsettling feeling as the man who sometimes gave candy and balloons to my brother and me when we were playing alone in the front yard.[1]

Krug sets these words within an image of a balloon, both a play on the standard comics word balloon and a visual transition into her personal memory of the man whose attention she sensed was improper. Behind the balloon—in an image that takes up the entire page—the man's face is partially obscured, further linking her knowledge of the war with mystery, uncertainty, and a looming menace. In their study of third generation Jewish writers, Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger write that their "attempts at knowledge-making are patchwork, weaving together the strands of stories . . . in order to create a unified narrative out of fragments" (5). *Belonging*, which takes collage, mixed media, and varied illustration styles as its aesthetic, does so to demonstrate how her own process of discovery, like her third-generation Jewish counterparts, must necessarily "draw upon a collage of sensations, affects, competing and broken memories, implied and circuitous hints, sideways references, and whispered asides" (5). Krug's aesthetic is complemented by her narrative, which is investigative and inconclusive, yet motivated by a deep sense of obligation.

[1] *Belonging* has no page numbers. All references are indicated by chapter.

Before we delve deeper into what similarities might exist between Krug and third generation Jewish narratives, it is important to recognize that it is largely only in this generation, as Modan's statement implies, that these narrative understandings begin to converge. For decades after the war, German historiography largely ignored the Holocaust and downplayed the specific suffering of Jews or other groups. Jewish narratives, such as in the form of survivor testimonies, were not solicited or welcomed at the trials of war criminals. Overall,

Germans attributed the atrocities of the war (and the war itself) to a relatively small group of Nazis, ignoring the roles of most of the German armed forces, the police, or citizen-collaborators (Black 155–58).

As extensively documented by Zohar Shavit in *A Past Without Shadow* (2005), children's literature in Germany after the war—exactly the kinds of books that would inform postwar German youth—often went even further, placing everyday Germans as the main victims of the Nazis. According to many children's and young adult narratives, a select group of Nazis led ordinary Germans into a destructive and exploitative war that left their country in ruins. These narratives present typical Germans as ignorant of Nazi genocide against Jews while simultaneously highlighting narratives in which Germans attempt to help their Jewish neighbors in the face of antisemitic legislation and violence. In these books, Germans who were conscripted into the war suffered for their service, often with their lives, and their obligation to follow military orders meant that they should not be held individually accountable for their actions. This view was largely supported by the United States, which in the Nuremberg trials and its subsequent strong military presence in West Germany (a feature of Krug's childhood) accepted the idea of a relatively small group of criminal actors exploiting their fellow German citizens. This allowed postwar Germans to "distinguish the criminal guilt of the few from the political guilt binding all members of the national collective" (Diner and Golb 303). Under this framework, Germany had done terrible things, but there was no need or motivation to investigate what typical individual Germans had done.

Germans of Krug's generation, however, inherited a different, if still limited, understanding of the Holocaust. The 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem exposed the death camp apparatus and featured survivor testimony prominently for the first time. This was followed by a trial in Frankfurt of twenty-three men connected to Auschwitz, including the camp's two deputy commanders. German audiences had followed the Eichmann proceedings, but the Frankfurt trial, as Jeremy Black writes, "brought the Holocaust to the forefront of public knowledge. Witness statements left no doubt of what had occurred and also provided an opportunity for public

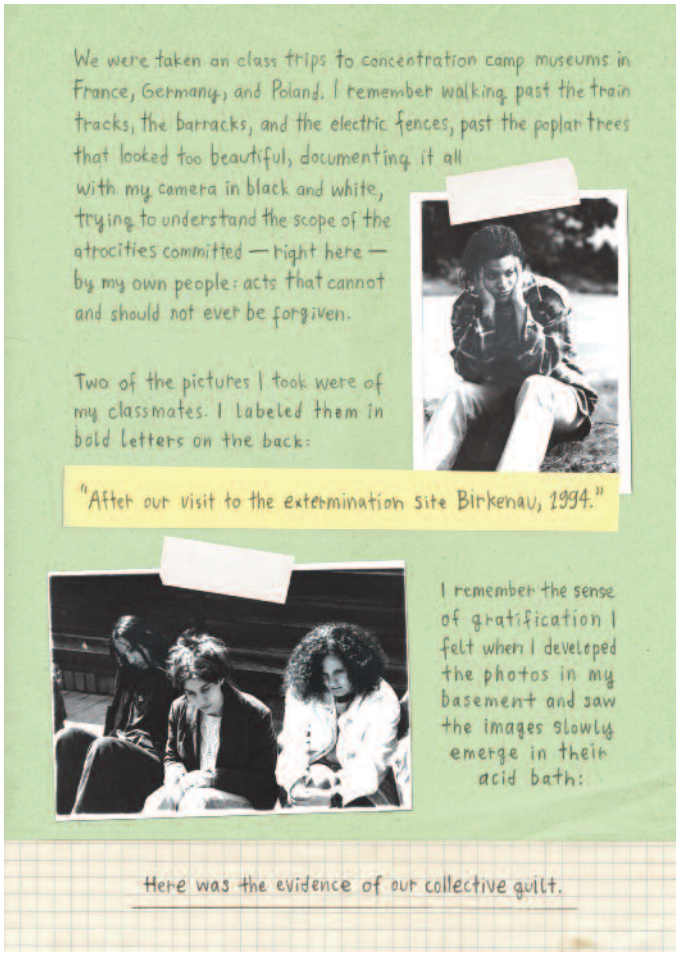
testimony by survivors. A wall of silence was broken" (158). By 1967, Holocaust education had become part of school curricula, though public commemoration or maintenance of sites such as Dachau still did not occur until years later.

For our purposes, this points to how Germans of Krug's generation shaped a narrative about the Holocaust similar to that understood by Jews—especially Israeli Jews. Holocaust education in Germany was second only to that of Israel, exceeding that all other European countries and even the United States in many ways. Through the Eichmann and Frankfurt trials, Israel and Germany foregrounded narratives constructed from a combination of documentation and firsthand testimony—the same combination used in many Holocaust graphic narratives, including both *Maus* and *Belonging*.

Holocaust education for Krug's generation also used some of the same tactics practiced by Jewish educators. Krug writes of her class trips to concentration camp sites. in France, Germany, and Poland. She recalls:

> I remember walking past the train tracks, the barracks, and the electric fences, past the poplar trees that looked too beautiful, documenting it all with camera in black and white, trying to understand the scope of the atrocities committed—right here—by my own people: acts that cannot and should not be forgiven. . . . Here was evidence of our collective guilt. (Chapter 1)

Krug's photographs from a trip to Birkenau in 1994 accompany these words. The photographs document not the sites themselves, but rather the devastated and horrified looks on the faces of her classmates. Thus what the reader sees is not the documentation of atrocities (those are long established), but rather Krug documenting the narrative—the shift from Germans as Nazi victims to Germans as victimizers of Jews.



This same educational practice of visiting concentration camp sites is a staple of Jewish groups in the United States and a near-ubiquitous event in Israeli high schools. One such "March of the Living" trip is featured in Modan's own third generation graphic narrative *The Property* (2013). While *The Property* critiques the way that these trips can become a rote itinerary, at the end of *The Property* we see the high school students, post-visit, in states of shock and dismay that closely resemble Krug's photographs. This is not to say the experiences are the same; one group is feeling the collective guilt Krug describes, while the other experiences the collective trauma of seeing their people's

murder sites. But in each case, the group is asked to imagine firsthand the bodily experience of being victimized in this space, which reifies the narrative of German oppressors and Jewish victims. For both groups the result tends to be powerful and formative.

The goal of these trips, and of Holocaust education practiced by both groups more generally, is not just to forge a similar narrative about the past. It is to develop the same narrative of the future, one in which another Jewish genocide is not possible. The language of 'never again' is a prominent part of not just trips to death camp sites but of much Jewish education around the Holocaust. For their part, German intellectuals came to see "collective guilt as a way of ensuring that Germans would not repeat the atrocities committed by the Nazis" (Clewell 469). The collective guilt seems to serve its intended purpose—Krug tells us that she and her classmates learned to reject Germany as a heroic, powerful country—but it also alienates Krug from her own history. For third generation Jews, narratives from their grandparents' generation are a critical link to both the history of the Holocaust and their family's individual history. As Eva Fogelman writes of third generation Israeli Jews:

> Youngsters saw survivors on the screen being interviewed about their lives in concentration camps, in ghettos, in hiding, and escaping by disguising themselves as non-Jews. The Third-Generation was learning history, and imbibing a language in which to talk to their grandparents. At home these high-school students found their parents to be almost useless when it came to answering questions about family history during the Shoah. However, this did not deter these teen-agers from approaching their grandparents. This phenomenon of intergenerational dialogue became a national sensation and was recorded in documentaries and television discussion programs.

For Krug, the experience of seeing and hearing survivor testimony has its intended effect of reifying the crimes of the Nazis, and it aligns her viewpoint with that of her Jewish counterparts. It causes her to regard German culture with suspicion, not just in the

Nazi era but overall, because it is the culture that the Nazis embraced. But this comes at a personal cost. Krug writes that she and her classmates "prepared questions for the old women who traveled from America to tell us about the camps, but we never thought to ask about one another's grandparents" (Chapter 1). Her troubled connection to her own family history and to German culture is a lingering place of anxiety and shame. *Belonging*, in large measure, is an attempt to address that anxiety within the larger context of the narrative she shares with her Jewish counterparts.

But Krug's personal history allows her to explore her birth culture and birth family from a place that is more multifaceted than if she had spent her entire life in Germany. Krug's childhood, as represented in *Belonging*, shows how many Germans of her generation developed a narrative of the Holocaust that reflects a clear understanding of perpetrator and victim. But when Krug writes *Belonging*, she has not lived in Germany for many years. In fact, Krug enacts her journey from an intersectional identity that reflects multiple strands: her German childhood, her immigration to the United States, and her marriage into a Jewish family.

Krug dedicates *Belonging* "to my old family and to my new family" (Front Matter). Her old family is, of course, her German family. Her new family is the Jewish family into which she has married. By placing herself at the fulcrum of those two families, Krug does not lessen her Germanness but does complicate the binary of German and Jew. It reminds that this binary of language is itself is a product of historical antisemitism, solidified and made murderous by the Nazi era. The German/Jew binary erases the history and experiences of German Jews, who were firmly separated from their Germanness by the "abyss formed by the Holocaust," as Marija Grujić and Ina Schaum put it (197). In practice, this binary serves as shorthand for perpetrators and victims, even when the individuals (such as Krug) are not themselves perpetrators or (like Krug's husband) themselves victims. Krug's relationship to her Jewish family reminds us that the shared Holocaust narrative does not just code the past into perpetrators and victims—it obliges people in the present day to represent those roles emotionally.

Krug characterizes her interactions with her husband's family as positive and welcoming, but the mutually understood roles of perpetrator and victim provide the common ground for their interactions. One of Krug's mother's friends tells her, "I always wished I had a Jewish boyfriend so I could make up for the horrible things our parents did" (Chapter 2). On the facing page, her mother-in-law's elderly Jewish boyfriend tells Krug, "I don't care if you are German. . . . When I went to Israel for the first time and saw all the Mercedes on the street, and people told me what the reparations payments had done for them, I stopped resenting the Germans" (Chapter 2). These exchanges are kind and forgiving, but they also show how the interlocutors are interacting with narrative roles as much as they are interacting with fellow humans. Krug's mother's friend wanted a Jewish boyfriend—an archetype, not an actual person—in order to assuage her perpetrator's sense of guilt. Krug's mother-in-law's boyfriend must address Krug's Germanness, and deem it okay, before he can grant her passage into the family. He says he does not care that she is German, but he clearly does care, or else he would not feel the need to address it. Because he sees Germany as having held itself accountable, as made manifest by economic reparations, he is content with how the roles have played out.

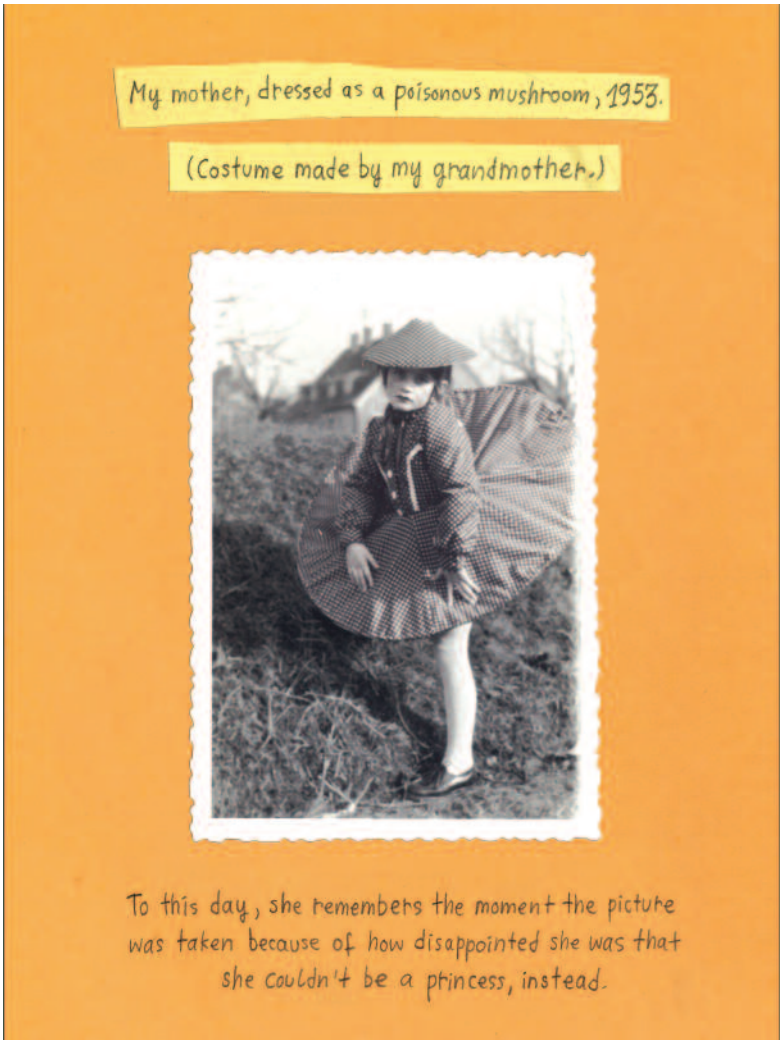
The limitations of the narrative, however, can be seen through Krug's mother-in-law, who comes from a family of German Jews. Krug is grateful that, for her mother-in-law, "the fact that [Krug is] German was never an issue for her" (Chapter 2). This statement, however, makes clear that the mother-in-law sees German as something that Krug is, and she herself is not. The mother-in-law's family has firmly rejected German material culture—Krug mentions that they specifically refused to buy a German car—as being permanently tainted by the Nazi era. This rejection is in contrast to Krug's own experience of German material culture, which in *Belonging*'s 'notebook of a homesick emigre' pages, with their depictions of German bandages, German binders, and other everyday objects, is shown to be where Krug has the most positive emotional interaction with her birthplace. Krug's mother-in-law has to overcome this alienation from Germany in order to attend Krug's wedding to her son, which,

happily for Krug, she does. But it is not just Krug's homeland—it is the homeland of her mother-in-law's grandparents, as Krug points out. Later, as dementia sets in, the mother-in-law cannot imagine why she would go there. Krug is German; her husband's family is Jewish. The reconciliation offered by the shared narrative allows Krug's new family to welcome her Germanness, but it does not allow them to welcome their own.

Much of *Belonging*, of course, is focused on Krug's engagement with her family's history and her non-Jewish encounter with German culture. But as we see here, much of her account is informed by—even inextricable from—her encounter with Jews. Growing up, she did not know any Jews personally, and her understanding of Jewish people swung from the lingering antisemitism of the church, where she was told that Jews killed Jesus, to a clumsy overidentification with Jews in which she sews a yellow Star of David onto her clothes (an act which her mother quickly shuts down). At these moments it is easy to see why German Jews might feel uncomfortable with Germanness, when they may be known in Germany only through books, and even then in roles in which they either commit deicide or have their suffering appropriated by overeager children.

But elsewhere in *Belonging* Krug shows how difficult it is to separate German culture and history from its Jewish presence. In Chapter 3, titled "Poisonous Mushrooms," Krug confronts her uncle's antisemitic education. She shares his 1939 school essay titled "The Jew, a Poisonous Mushroom," which likens the Jewish people to a toxic species of mushroom that grows in Germany's forests. The essay, Krug believes, is inspired by a popular antisemitic children's book of the same name distributed by the Nazi party. But in the same chapter, Krug shows how that same species of red, white-polka-dotted mushroom has a positive role in German culture. It is a symbol of good luck on New Year's Day, she tells us, and sweets are made in its shape. She includes a photograph of her mother costumed as this poisonous mushroom in 1953—just fourteen years after her uncle likened the mushroom to a Jewish people bent on eradicating Germans. And Krug ties herself to this image as well. On *Belonging*'s cover, we see Krug standing on a hilltop, the beautiful German countryside laid

out before her. On one hand, she is visually quoting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, an 1818 painting by Casper David Friedrich that is considered an exemplar of German Romanticism (slightly modified versions of the image occur several times in the book). On the cover, Krug wears a red coat with white polka dots and gazes to the side enigmatically—at the reader, at the landscape, or perhaps neither. But the color scheme of her jacket, the center of the image, is unmistakably that of the mushroom.



It is not Krug's job to reconcile this seemingly irreconcilable imagery. Is the poisonous mushroom a cherished part of the German landscape? Or a metaphor for the alien Jew infiltrating the otherwise strong German people? Culture is not perfectly consistent, and the Nazis coopted many aspects of German culture for their propaganda. But this feels like a step further than acknowledging, for example, that Krug's homeland is also her Jewish husband's homeland. Krug sewing a yellow Star of David onto her coat was a well-meaning, if problematic, attempt to feel what it was like to be a Jew. With the cover image, however, she doing something more complex than performing the role of Jewish victim. She is embodying the contradictions in German culture, the ones that layer both Germanness and Jewishness onto the German landscape, and collapsing, if briefly, the distinction between German and Jew.

This embodiment is possible because, despite Krug's deep sense of guilt and her ambivalence toward German culture, she can still access it in a way that many Jews, even descendants of German Jews, cannot. For Jewish readers of Krug's work, Krug serves as an emissary into the land and culture of the perpetrators. She does so not as a Jew but as someone with a deep respect for Jews and Jewish culture that informs her work. Aside from *Belonging*, we see this in a one-panel comic Krug drew for the *New York Times*, published in September of 2019 and titled "A German Finally Picks Up *Mein Kampf*." Krug writes that "As a German, I was appalled by the idea of reading it, even touching it," a sentiment undoubtedly shared by many, especially Jews. But, spurred by the resurgence of far-right activity in Germany, she feels motivated—or better yet, perhaps, obliged—to have a first-hand encounter with the book. She shares the book's post-war publication history: its long-time ban in Germany and 2016 re-issue with proceeds benefiting victims of the Nazis. She obtains a copy via her "trusted" bookseller, who would not think ill of her for purchasing it. Her encounter with the book melds German and Jewish cultural perspectives. She describes the current edition as being inspired by the Talmud, with annotations surrounding the main text and critiquing it. As a native German speaker, though, she is able to read Hitler's writing in its original, which she characterizes as "badly writ-

ten and full of grammatical mistakes." The accompanying image shows her curled sheepishly in the bath (to where she has retreated so no one will see her reading it), a caricature of Hitler's face superimposed on the giant tome and replacing/obscuring her own face. This image reinforces Krug's precarious position in her chosen work. Despite her sensitivity to Jewish culture and her shame of being associated with *Mein Kampf*, her shared cultural heritage with its author means that, when she reads the book, the two of them occupy a type of same space, even if she rejects everything he says.

In *Belonging*, Krug's exploration allows Jews and Germans to contemplate their own shared space within the war, some of it just by implication and without overreducing the individual experience. Readers of *Maus* are familiar with the story of Richieu, the brother lost to the Holocaust that Art Spiegelman never knew. Spiegelman describes Richieu as his "ghost-brother" whose photograph, hanging in his parents' bedroom, haunted him as an image of a child who could do no wrong. "It's spooky having sibling rivalry with a snapshot," Spiegelman says (15). The dedication page of *Maus II* reads "For Richieu and For Nadja," with Richieu's photograph in between the two names. Much like Krug's dedication, this is a nod to Spiegelman's old family (albeit one he never knew), and his new one—his daughter.

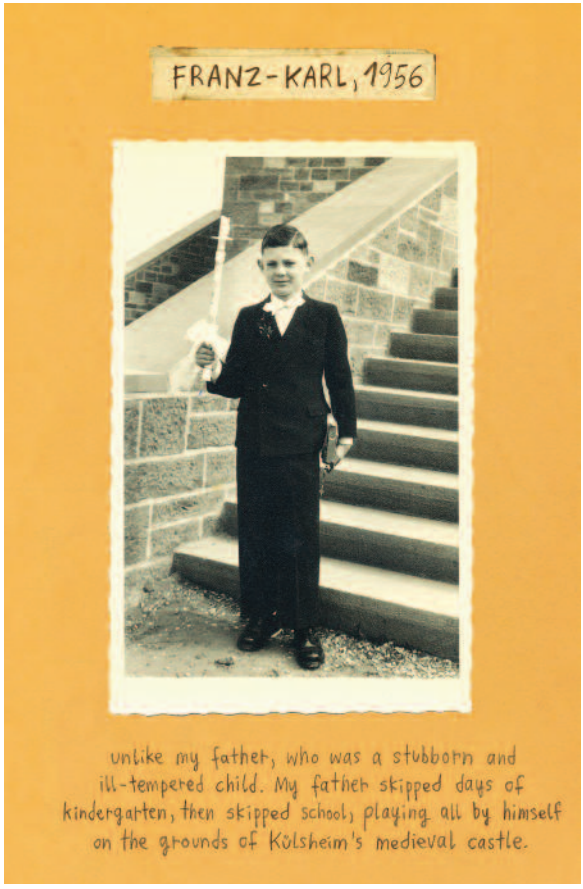
Richieu's presence makes clear that Art Spiegelman is a replacement child, a child born after the traumatic loss of another child during a war or other event. Gabrielle Schwab, a literary scholar who is a replacement child herself, writes that "Children born after such wars may feel the burden of having to replace even more than merely the child or children whom their parents lost during the war; they grow up with the sense that their generation must replace the entire generation that was meant to be exterminated" (280). In *Maus*, Schwab finds, rather than ameliorating the loss, Art the replacement child serves as a way for his parents' trauma to be transmitted to him and other members of his generation.

Krug is not a replacement child, but her father is, and as it does for Spiegelman, being a replacement child defines her father's relationship to his family. In Chapter 3 of *Belonging* we learn that Krug's

paternal uncle, Franz Karl, was a German infantryman killed in Italy when he was eighteen years old. Krug's father, born just after the war ended, is named Franz Karl after his deceased brother. Similar to how Spiegelman employs photographs in *Maus*, Krug uses photographs to document her uncle's short life, along with photographs of her father, which reinforce his role as a replacement child. In Chapter 3, a side-by-side spread shows each of the Franz Karl boys in nearly identical photographs, each one dressed for church and holding a First Communion candle in their right hand, the first brother on the left facing page, the brother who never knew him on the right. Their (identical) names are at the top of each page, with only the dates of the photos, twenty years apart, being different.

Marianne Hirsch writes that "Like all pictures, the photos in *Maus* represent what no longer is. But they also represent what has been and what has been violently destroyed. And they represent the life that was no longer to be and that, against all odds, nevertheless continues to be" (9). The photos of the brothers in *Belonging* evoke much of this same sorrow and trauma: the uncle's life that no longer was, the father's life that continues to be both as himself and as an avatar of his dead brother.

Like Spiegelman, Krug's father remains haunted and traumatized by his role as a replacement child. Schwab writes that "tacit comparison with a dead sibling is a classical syndrome of replacement children" (281). For Krug's father, the comparison is not even tacit.



Beneath the photographs of her uncle and her father, Krug writes, "All throughout my father's childhood, his mother told him that his brother had been a sweet and well-behaved boy, unlike my father, who was a stubborn and ill-tempered child" (Chapter 3). As with Richieu in *Maus*, the memory of Krug's uncle created comparisons that are impossible for the replacement child to meet, either in temperament or in achievement. Krug's father had been expected to replace his brother in maintaining the family farm, a preservation of the connection between family and land that he failed to perform. As an adult, Krug's father still suffers from the effects of being a replacement child. He is alienated from his sister, who still mourns her lost brother and resents Krug's father for reminding her of the loss. He tells Krug that he does not feel a sense of *Heimat*, or belonging, to his home, and unlike Krug, he does not seem motivated to reforge it. The trauma of his childhood is too great.

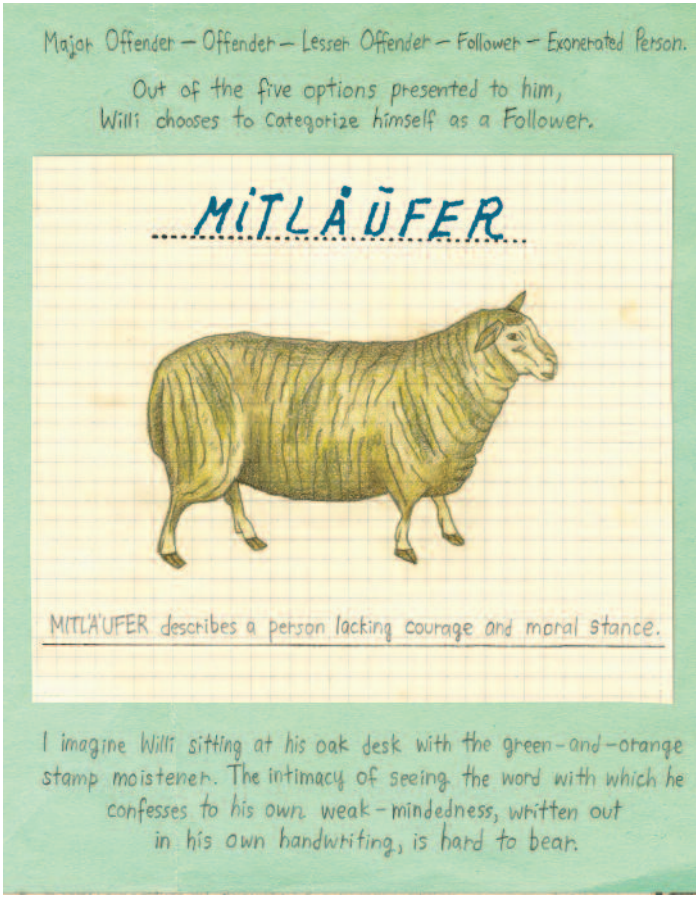
Nonetheless, Krug persists in learning about her uncle's short life, and here the story of the lost child diverges from that of *Maus* in important ways. Richieu was a child victim of the Holocaust, poisoned by his aunt in desperation when they are in danger of being captured by the Nazis. The first Franz Karl, on the other hand, is the author of the antisemitic school essay about the poisonous mushroom, and a boy who idly drew swastikas in the margins of his schoolwork. He is also the same young man, described by his loving sister as cheerful, diligent, and humane, who was killed in southern Italy in 1944 and buried there. Grujić and Schaum write that Krug is part of a German generation whose "national, ritualized culture of remembrance is full of contradictions" (198). Krug's relationship to 'big Franz Karl,' as the family calls him, is likewise full of contradictions. Growing up, she knew little about her uncle, whose role as a soldier made it easier to ignore him rather than talk about what it meant to serve in the German army. But this lacuna of silence around the war and trauma is emotionally destabilizing, a phenomenon that is true for Germans as it has shown to be for Holocaust survivors and their descendants. Krug's persistence in learning about her uncle shows us that one can accept the narrative of Germans—even average soldiers—as perpetrators and a core part of the war

machine that made the Holocaust possible, while still recognizing their lives as human.

For Krug, recovering her uncle's humanity requires holding him accountable for his actions even as she tries to understand his life more deeply. In *Belonging*, holding her relatives accountable often means acknowledging the Jewish lives around them. Of her uncle, she writes, "Kolsheim is a small town. Jews and Christians lived side by side. . . . My uncle probably knew the Jewish boys and girls who lived in town." She adds that as a schoolboy he was "too young to understand the power of Nazi propaganda. But old enough to understand that Jews are not like poisonous mushrooms" (Chapter 3). Krug will only grant her family (and by extension, herself) freedom from guilt and shame if she sees evidence that they were not complicit, that they acted positively to protect their Jewish neighbors. As Krug explains in Chapter 12, the denazification hearings in postwar West Germany delineated five categories of German behavior during the war: major offenders, offenders, lesser offenders, follower, and exonerated persons. Speaking of another relative, who placed himself in the category of follower, or *Mitlaüfer*, Krug writes, "The intimacy of seeing the word with which he confesses to his own weak-mindedness, written out in his own handwriting, is hard to bear" (Chapter 12). In postwar Germany, classifying oneself as a *Mitlaüfer* typically allowed one to escape legal or practical repercussions for wartime actions. But it is not enough for Krug.

We see here how far the narrative has evolved for Germans of Krug's generation compared to first or even second generation Germans. Postwar Germany punished only the most overt actors in the Nazi regime and allowed the vast majority of Germans to feel only a collective sense of guilt. In many cases the narrative Germans told themselves went a step further, foregrounding the suffering of Germans and ignoring the presence of Jews in their towns and in their lives. That is not an option for Krug.

But her willingness to hold her relatives accountable is what allows her to see them as individuals and explore their lives in depth, rather than obscuring them behind a wall of silence. Krug recalls a family trip to Italy that takes them to a military cemetery, a "vast



labyrinth" with the remains of 30,683 German soldiers. An inscription at the entrance reads "Blessed Are They Who Are Suffering, For They Shall Be Comforted" (Chapter 3). She finds that her father has led them to the place where her uncle is buried. As the inscription suggests, it is possible to recognize that these soldiers suffered and died, and that those left behind suffered too. "This is the closest I've ever been to my brother," Krug's father says while standing at the grave (Chapter 3). But Krug needs more than brief physical proximity; she needs to understand her uncle's role in her personal narrative, not just the larger narrative of the Holocaust. Toward the end of *Belonging*, she meets with her father's estranged sister, who has firsthand memories of Krug's uncle and remains devastated by his death seven

decades later. Rather than releasing her from her sense of guilt and shame, Krug says that "each step that leads me closer to my uncle . . . entangles me, that I am irrevocably intertwined with people and with places, with stories and histories." Echoing her father's words, but in the place that he lived rather than where he died, she says, "This is the closest I have ever been to my uncle. And this is the closest I will ever get" (Chapter 13).

These are the last words in *Belonging*, save for the epilogue, and they demonstrate how the shared narrative of the Holocaust is a starting point for Germans and Jews, not a mutually agreed and closed discussion. For people like Rutu Modan, it is a way to connect with like-minded artists who are German and find ways to pursue their mutual creative interests.[2] For Krug's new Jewish relatives, it allows them to build an intimate relationship with a German woman and form a family that embraces both Germanness and Jewishness. For Krug, it forms the moral center from which she can engage in the complex exploration of her family that *Belonging* entails—an exploration that incorporates both her old family and her new one, with Krug at their intersection.

Works Cited

Aarons, Victoria, and Alan L. Berger. *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory*. Northwestern UP, 2017.

Black, Jeremy. *The Holocaust: History and Memory*. Indiana UP, 2017.

Clewell, Tammy. "Beyond Graphic Memoir: Visualizing Third-Generation German Cultural Identity in Nora Krug's *Belonging*." *American Imago*, vol. 77, no. 3, 2020, pp. 459–96.

Diner, Dan, and Joel Golb. "On Guilt Discourse and Other Narratives: Epistemological Observations Regarding the Holocaust." *History and Memory*, vol. 9, no. ½, 1997, pp. 301–20.

[2]For examples of collaborations between Israeli comics artists (including Modan) and German comics artists, see *Happy End* (written by Modan et al. in 2002), Tim Dinter's *Cargo: Comics Journalism Israel-Germany* (2005), and *Tel Aviv Berlin: Ein Reisebuch* (written by Moden et al. in 2010).

Dinter, Tim. *Cargo: Comics Journalism Israel-Germany*. Avant-Verlag, 2005.

Fogelman, Eva. "Psychological Dynamics in the Lives of Third Generation Holocaust Survivors." *evafogelman*, www.evafogelman.com/_psychological_dynamics_in_the_lives_of_third_generation_holocaust_survivors__94110.htm. Accessed 21 Dec. 2020.

Grujić, Marija, and Ina Schaum. "German Postmemory and Ambivalent Home Desires: A Critical Reading of Nora Krug's (2018) Graphic Novel *Heimat: A German Family Album*." *Ethnoscripts*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2019, pp. 196-212.

Krug, Nora. *Belonging: a German Reckons with History and Home*. Scribner, 2018.

———. "A German Finally Picks Up 'Mein Kampf.'" *New York Times,* 13 Sept. 2019. www.nytimes.com/2019/09/13/books/a-german-finally-picks-up-mein-kampf.html.

Mills, Jean Helms, et al. "Making Sense of Sensemaking: The Critical Sensemaking Approach." *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2010, pp. 182–195.

Modan, Rutu, et al. *Happy End*. Actus Independent Comics, 2002.

Modan, Rutu. Interview with Molly Johanson. "One Big Cemetery: Jewish History and Memory in the Comics of Rutu Modan." BA thesis, Whitman College, 2014.

Modan, Rutu, et al. *Tel Aviv Berlin: Ein Reisebuch*. Avant-Verlag, 2010.

Reingold, Matt. "Bridging the Divide through Graphic Novels: Teaching Non-Jews' Holocaust Narratives to Jewish Students." *SANE Journal*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2019, n.p. Web.

Schwab, Gabriele. "Replacement Children: The Transgenerational Transmission of Traumatic Loss." *American Imago*, vol. 66, no. 3, 2009, pp. 277–310.

Sekalala, Seif. "The Dynamics of Deliberate and Unintentional Amnesia in Narrative Sensemaking and Enaction of Resilience: A Case Study of Four Rwandan Narratives of Genocide Survival." *Cogent Social Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016, n.p. Web.

Shavit, Zohar. *A Past Without Shadow Constructing the Past in German Books for Children*. Routledge, 2005.

Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*. Pantheon Books, 1991.

"We Carry that History": an Interview with Nora Krug

Tahneer Oksman
Marymount Manhattan College

The cover of Nora Krug's *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (2018) features an illustrated young woman dressed casually in jeans and high boots, superimposed over a photograph of a lush, green countryside. She looks contemplatively at the landscape ahead of her, legs planted on a small boulder, hands gently resting on her thighs. This is one of just a few images readers see of our narrator/author, in a book that is as much about looking outward—carefully investigating one's history and circumstances, as well as the history and circumstances of one's upbringing and family—as it is about the subjectivity and reflection inevitably tied to any such exploration.

As hinted on the cover, the book is a visual experiment of sorts, combining photography, clean and careful prose narration, short comics, and an archive of various objects presented through photographs and illustrations. It is also a book very much tied to what it means, two generations after World War II, to be German. (The cover image, which appears in a related form in the second chapter of the book, is an adaptation of German Romantic landscape artist Caspar David Friedrich's famous 1818 painting, *Wanderer above the sea of Fog.*)

Born in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 1977, Krug's visual memoir was written after she had moved to New York City and, as she explains in this interview, started to experience, in a more pronounced way, a deep cultural connection to her home country and also a continued sense of confusion and discomfort in relation to its past. Though at school she had been taught the perils and effects of Germany's fascistic, genocidal history—one powerful page in *Belonging* shows an excerpted speech by Adolf Hitler, which she had to carefully annotate and interpret for an eleventh grade assignment—she had never learned much by way of her own family's history. In the book, comprised of fifteen expansive chapters plus an introduction and epilogue, Krug returns to explore her own hometown and her father's hometown, to dig deep into her family's past. Of course, as in any such investigation, many aspects of her family's and her country's history remain mysteries. But the experience of the search, as any reader of the book will quickly see, is one of intensive, thoughtful investigation.

I interviewed Krug over a video chat call on an afternoon in early August of 2020. We were both at home, in our respective Brooklyn apartments, less than a mile from one another. As the grandchild of a Jewish Holocaust survivor, I was surprised at how deeply attached I felt to Krug's narrator from the very opening of her book. In fact, what struck me in reading the visual memoir, as well as over the course of our conversation, were the parallels in the frameworks surrounding our family histories, though we were coming to the story from different "sides." For both of us, a silence, like Friedrich's thick fog, surrounds our family's pasts. Each of us was raised with a domestic taboo against speaking of, or asking about, our family's histories—though for very different reasons—even as we were both deeply embedded in learning about the subject at school and via other, unfamiliar people's narratives.

Talking to Krug, who was born just two years before I was, made me realize how much a book like this one would have been a salve for me in my youth, when I was first learning the history of the Holocaust and reading one personal story after another. To know that the aftermath of the Holocaust haunts not just its victims, and

their descendants, but also perpetrators as well as those more indirectly involved—including "followers," and *their* descendants—was something of a belated revelation, and an oddly comforting one, at that.[1] As cartoonist Amy Kurzweil—also the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor—wrote, in an illustrated review of Krug's book, "Reading *Belonging* was like reading my own history's shadow."

As Krug pointed out in the interview, many books have been written and published, especially in Germany, by and about children and grandchildren of Nazi perpetrators. What makes hers stand out—besides its brilliant design—is that she was looking to uncover the history of family members whose involvement was, like so many, less clear or traceable. The careful manner with which Krug engages with the many layers of historiography and autobiographical representation is one reason that the visual, collage-like format of the book is eminently suitable to the subject at hand. Krug mentioned, toward the end of our interview, that, since the publication of her book, many German readers have come to her for advice in researching their own family histories. In *Belonging*, and in Krug, they have found a skilled and sensitive guide.

Tahneer Oksman (TO): Your memoir begins with an image and description of the *Hansaplast*, a German bandage brand that you describe in the book as "the safest thing in the world" besides your mother. This is followed by a powerful scene in which you are on a New York City rooftop, and you encounter a Jewish Holocaust survivor. She recognizes your German accent and asks you where you are from. You ask if she has been to Germany, and she tells you her story of survival. The scene ends when, sensing your discomfort, she tells you, "That was a long time ago," and "You seem like someone who was raised by loving parents."

[1]Of course, a number of relevant books and films on the subject have long been in circulation, including, for example, the 1990 West Germany film *The Nasty Girl* and Gerald L. Posner's 1991 book, *Hitler's Children*, or, more recently, Katrin Himmler's 2007 *The Himmler Brothers*, Tania Crasnianski's 2018 *Children of Nazis*, and Angelika Bammer's 2019 *Born After*.

Could you talk about why you chose to pair this object with this scene, as a way of opening your memoir?

Nora Krug (NK): Like most of the objects I feature on the pages in the book that I entitle "Things German," it's an object that I associate with a sense of security. The experience of falling, and your wound being tended to by a parent, is a common childhood experience. It's essential for any child to experience this feeling of being anchored and sheltered.

The book also addresses the conflict of growing up in a sheltered way in your family, while also feeling deeply culturally disoriented and confused as a German. How do you negotiate that contrast between wanting to love where you came from—because it represents your family, your home, your friends, the food you grew up eating, and so forth—while at the same time deeply questioning it? It's a very painful thing to do.

One of the main things I learned from writing and illustrating the book is that it's important to look at the scars; it's important to uncover the wounds. The goal should not be to make them invisible. The scars left by wounds will always be there, although that's not necessarily a bad thing.

TO: In chapter 1, "Early Dawning," you describe a number of childhood experiences in which you learned bits and pieces about what happened during the war in Karlsruhe, the city in the south of Germany where you grew up, and about the Holocaust more generally. These experiences are all in some ways linked through strong visual elements.

So, for example, you include a copy of a school exercise that you did in eleventh grade, carefully analyzing and annotating a speech that Hitler once gave. Another page includes photographs of your classmates after a class visit to the concentration camp Birkenau. Could you talk about these early, formative experiences, and why you chose to include them in the book? In what ways did they lead to your wanting, years later, to go back and research your family history?

NK: Often you make sense of things in retrospect, as you grow older, and you see connections that you didn't see before. As a teenager, the whole process of learning about this history was a difficult one. It coincided with a feeling of insecurity about what kind of girl I wanted to be, who I wanted to be as a person. As a teenager, you already have to deal with going through an identity crisis of sorts, and for Germans of my generation, it meant having to deal with a cultural crisis on top of that. It was a challenging thing to experience. Our education about the Nazi period was very intense and thorough, but at the same time, we weren't particularly encouraged to engage with the subject on a personal level. I knew nothing about what happened in my hometown, on the streets familiar to me, and I had no idea who my hometown's prominent Nazis had been.

It was very moving for me when, as an adult, I went to the library here in New York City, and, for the first time, and in a foreign country, sought out and found books on the wartime history of my own hometown. One of the books, which I found at the New York Public Library, was about the bombing of my hometown, and it was written by my former physics teacher. There I was, twenty-five years after being in his class, finding my physics teacher's book. I remembered then how he had occasionally talked in class about how he had experienced the war as a child. He had described the impact that the bombs left on him emotionally, but also their physical impact on the cityscape. The way he talked about the moment when a bomb was dropped, the way he imitated the sounds of the bombs, made it feel almost humorous, and caused us students to chuckle in response. But when I read his book at the Public Library, I suddenly understood why and how deeply he had been impacted by the subject. This personal narrative of the wartime experience was exactly what's missing in our regular curriculum. It would have made our understanding of the war more tangible.

TO: I find it compelling how you say that as teenagers you all found it humorous, almost surreal, to hear of these things that had happened in your town before you were born. Throughout the memoir, what I kept sensing was that, on the one hand, nobody in your family was

actively talking about your history before you started asking questions, nobody around where you grew up seemed to be willingly talking about the past. But at the same time, it almost felt like, underneath, everyone—or, at least, the older generation, like your physics teacher—was always wanting to talk about it, trying to open up. Like in a way, they were all deeply mired in the past, even as it seemed to the contrary.

I was thinking about this especially with regards to a later scene, in Chapter 15, "Shaking Hands," when you meet your aunt Annemarie for the first time. She seems, oddly, to be both eager and hesitant, all at once, in terms of discussing the past with you.

NK: I think there were many reasons for different people not to talk about the past. For instance, my parents didn't talk about it not because they didn't want to but because their parents hadn't talked about it. It had been a taboo subject in their homes, so my parents just didn't have any information they could share with me. And when I started digging, my parents were as interested and excited to find out about our family's past as I was.

In the case of my aunt Annemarie—my father's sister—I think the memory of the Nazi era was painful because she had experienced firsthand the loss of her brother, my uncle Franz-Karl, and she had felt a sense of not being allowed to mourn that loss. At the same time, she witnessed her own mother mourning his loss all her life.

I think for my aunt, it probably took a stranger—me—to come by and ask those questions that would otherwise have been difficult to answer. I don't think she would have been as open, or would have taken all of my uncle's photographs and mementos out of her cabinet, if it had been her own children addressing the subject. Sometimes it takes a complete stranger to come by to allow for a deeper access.

TO: In Chapter Two, "Forgotten Songs," which is another sort of introductory chapter, you write about how one of the events that compelled you to make this book was your move to the United States. There's something of a familiar narrative there—of the immigrant moving to a new country and suddenly discovering her differences from

people around her, suddenly realizing her connection to her native country. Could you talk about the factors that led you to this book?

NK: It was not one key moment but several that drove me to write the book. One of them was the encounter with the elderly Jewish woman on the rooftop in New York City not long after I had moved to New York City to study. I had met survivors before, back in Germany, survivors who had come to my school to talk to students about their experiences. But this encounter with the woman on a rooftop of a friend's apartment was unexpected. It was an emotional encounter because it was so intimate, and she was so frank about her experiences without being reproachful towards me as a representative of Germany. I felt a sense of inherited guilt while listening to her story, but she didn't mean to make me feel guilty, and that freed something up in me.

That encounter was very instrumental. At the same time, I often felt myself being confronted with negative stereotypes about Germans and Germany while living in the US—some of them justified, others ill-informed and therefore hurtful. I wanted to write a book exploring the gray zones a bit more, a book that would not stereotype either the victims or the perpetrators, because I felt that that perspective was often lacking in people's understanding of WWII.

As Hannah Arendt once wrote, "Where all are guilty, no one is" (65). The experience of being a German amongst non-Germans allowed me for the first time to confront my sense of guilt on a personal, rather than a collective, level.

TO: Throughout the book, in addition to the "Things German" that pop up in various places, you include different series of objects that you find in thrift shops, in Germany and elsewhere. You also include "field notes," as well as objects—photographs, documents, and other things—that you find in personal, familial, and more public archives. What roles do you think objects play in your book?

NK: Objects are carriers of history and histories. They can convey stories and emotions in a different way than a textbook does, for instance. When you go to flea markets in Germany or other countries—

in Italy you can find a lot of WW2 era items, too—and you see, for instance, a cigarette box made by a German prisoner-of-war made out of the scrap metal of a crashed airplane, it gives you a different insight and access into that period because it's so personal, so intimate. A person carried this object around in their pocket and now you're carrying it in yours, and you're bringing it into your home. It establishes a strange connection that is also often uncomfortable, because you don't want to be associated emotionally with this stranger whose involvement in the war might have been morally fraught.

The flea market objects reflect both a personal and collective narrative. Even though they are personal items once owned by somebody I don't know, they say something collectively about the war experience. I interspersed the pages featuring these objects into the main narrative of the book because I wanted the reader to occasionally step back from my family story and look at it from a different perspective, a more collective perspective. I also wanted to convey that this is not only a book about my own family or my own personal experience. It's not even just a book about Germany or the Germans, but about anybody's responsibility in facing one's country's past.

I hoped that those less personal pages—including the ones entitled "Things German" that feature objects that represent a sense of German cultural identity to me—would remove the reader from the narrative for a short period of time, and then allow them to reenter it in a different way.

I wanted to free myself from the more traditional graphic novel style, i.e. panels and speech bubbles. I wanted the book to feel more like a scrapbook or a diary. I also wanted to reflect on the idea of memory as something fragmentary that we make sense of in retrospect, and acknowledge that history cannot be neatly summarized from A–Z, or chronologically retold from 1933–1945. History can also be understood as a series of chaotic incidences or personal experiences and memories that evolve over decades and generations. Memory isn't as reliable as we want it to be.

Of course, I'm not debating historical facts—there is no alternative reality or truth. But I think there are many different entry points into what we think of as history. And we have to be able to reflect on it

not only as historians but also as writers and artists, not only as scholars but also simply as humans. We should learn about history not merely through numbers and facts.

TO: Could you say more about the comics you include throughout the book, and how you decided when to tell parts of the story in that way?

NK: I chose the comic format when I told a narrative that took place in the past and was able to stand on its own—uninterrupted by a verbal reflection of my own feelings or thoughts. I chose the format to illustrate the realities of my grandfather's life under the Nazi regime, for instance.

Because I was working in a multitude of visual styles, I wanted to make it easier for the viewer to recognize those moments in the narrative that talk about my family's life in the past. I thought that if I always return to this specific format whenever I talk about my grandparents' or uncle's lives, then people would immediately recognize where they are temporally and spatially. I used different visual formats for different categories of narratives throughout the book.

The word *illustration* literally means to shed light on something, to enlighten, to manifest. Illustrating means clarifying things, allowing for a new perspective. That's what I was trying to do. To me, drawing is also an exercise in empathy because it forced me to confront my family members' lives and the decisions they made in a more tangible way. It was a way, not necessarily of understanding, but of trying to figure out how they felt as they found themselves in these difficult situations.

TO: As someone who reads and writes a lot about memoir, I'd be curious to know whether you think of your book more as memoir or more as biography?

NK: The book is a book about my family, but of course their lives and experiences are all filtered through me and my own reflection. The book isn't only about the past and about what my family did, but

also about what this particular past means to me as a German. How has it impacted my cultural identity, my human identity? Would I be a different person if my family had made different decisions?

In a way, the book is a physical manifestation of me. It carries my family's narratives.

TO: You end up writing about both sides of your family—your mother's side and your father's side—by switching back and forth in different chapters. Could you say more about why you chose this structure?

NK: Initially I thought about making two books and then selling them as a set. But then I thought it would be more interesting to intertwine the two narratives. Because all of these stories and all of the people that we grow up with or encounter in our lives are intertwined within us, too. Even though the two family histories are separate, what we consequentially learn from them is connected within us.

I wrote the stories separately and then divided them into chapters. I thought about which moments would make for good chapter endings and allow the reader to reenter the other family narrative from a different perspective. I assigned a different color range to each of the two family narratives. For my father's story, I used mostly warm colors, and for my mother's story mostly cool colors. This was not for an emotional reason but just to make it more recognizable which family I was talking about at a given point.

TO: Did putting these stories side by side help you see or understand something about the different family histories that you hadn't thought of before?

NK: What was interesting to me was the juxtaposition between city versus countryside. The war was perceived differently in the city than it was in the countryside. The countryside wasn't bombed. Usually people were better off there because many were farmers, so there were fewer food shortages.

Changes happen much more slowly in villages. People don't come and go as much as they do in cities. Memory is preserved in a different way. Everybody in the village of Külsheim, where my father is from, still knows exactly whose father or grandfather was a Nazi, or which houses belonged to Jewish people. These memories don't go away.

TO: You tell two very different stories of familial loss—of death during the war—in your book. The first is of your uncle, Franz-Karl, whom your father was named for. He died in Italy, as an SS infantryman, before your father was born. The second, on your mother's side of the family, was your grandfather's brother, Edwin. He also died in wartime, on the frontline at the Sworbe peninsula.

Could you address these two narratives of loss, and whether grief played a role in telling these stories about relatives who had died in the war?

NK: As a German, you grow up feeling like you're not supposed to grieve German loss. There's obviously a good reason for that because many Germans were involved in atrocities.

With Franz-Karl, I'm not sure if I ever actually allowed myself to grieve because I couldn't get a full sense of the person he really was. I don't know if he believed in the Nazis' ideology, because I don't have any proof that he did or didn't. But I don't think I could grieve for someone who was a supporter of the Nazi ideology.

With Edwin, the brother of my grandfather, Willy, who wrote those heartbreaking love letters to his wife in Switzerland that I included in the book, it was different. He didn't want to be a soldier. He wanted to become a Swiss citizen and live in Switzerland with his family. His letters are warm and there is no single mention of the Nazi ideology or acts of atrocity. When I read his letters, for the first time, I actually allowed myself to feel sadness over his death. Here's a man who did not want to experience any of this, and he was forced into a situation that was inhumane, and that he himself referred to as inhumane in his letters.

Obviously, that can't be said for every German soldier. That's why it's so important to look at each individual case.

TO: The book opens and ends with mentions of your present life: how you are married to a Jewish man; interactions you have had with his family. You also close the book by mentioning yourself as pregnant with your daughter. I wonder if you could talk a bit about how these present-day roles and relationships shaped your explorations of your family's story.

NK: I wanted to bring my daughter into the book because children always represent the possibility of a new beginning, the possibility of a clean slate. This book addresses the question of whether guilt can really be measured, whether innocence can ever be proven, or if it is just a utopian idea. Growing up as a German, I experienced a sense of taintedness, even though I myself hadn't lived through the Nazi period.

My sense is that in the U.S. it's the other way around. Here, you grow up with a strong and positive origin story, a story that is easy to accept as your own. It's a story that lacks a crucial and critical in-depth confrontation of America's past failures, and it doesn't confront appropriately and in depth the history of slavery and the mistreatment of Native Americans.

In Germany, on the other hand, you grow up with a negative narrative and there's no state of innocence or accomplishment that marks its beginning. The question becomes whether there is actually such a thing as innocence? Because we are all deeply impacted by our country's pasts, not only collectively, but also as individuals. We carry that history in us, and we have a responsibility to keep it alive. We can't separate ourselves from it, nor should we.

I include some visual motifs in the book to reflect on this problem. For instance, I feature an image of a glass of milk where I talk about the dispossession of my grandmother's milk business by the Nazis. I put the drawing in the chapter that talks about Willy's postwar attempt at defending his actions under the Nazi regime in front of the U.S. military government.

And towards the end of the book, I feature a photograph of him standing in a snowy landscape. I used these images as a way of reflecting on the concept of innocence. Can guilt ever be measured?

Can innocence ever be proven? Should we strive for it, or just accept it as a utopian concept? And what does all this mean for my daughter? She's obviously not guilty of anything but she carries that history within her. And now, as an American, she also carries the history of slavery within her. She, too, will have to take responsibility and defend our democracy and human rights when she gets older. I think that was the reason for why I decided to bring her into the book. I wanted to look both into the past and into the future.

TO: There's a moment early in the book when you mention getting your first period and learning about the Holocaust in school at around the same time. I thought a lot about gender as I read through the memoir. So many of your investigations into your family's pasts had to go through men because they were the ones connected to the military and to various establishments. With the women in your family, it's much harder to discover their feelings about anything.

Could you say something about the role of gender in this story?

MK: I worried that people would ask me where the women are in the book. But the truth is that it used to be mostly men that held key positions in the war. Of course, there were women who committed atrocities under the Nazi regime, women who chose to do terrible things. But they did not in my family—at least based on the information I was able to find.

My aunt Karin—Willy's other daughter—my mother's sister, who recently passed away, was the person in that family who actually remembered details about my grandparents' lives under the regime. She was deeply tied to that history, maybe because she herself experienced the bombings as a child, which my mother did not because she grew up after the war.

Maybe that's the role that women play in my book—women as the carriers of our family's histories. Perhaps men of that generation were less apt to open up about those narratives.

TO: When you were writing the book, did you have a particular audience in mind? Were you thinking that you were writing for other

Germans like yourself, or were you writing for Jews, like the woman from the rooftop?

NK: Because the book came out of my experiences living in America, I had an American audience in mind first. I wanted to write a book that presented less of a stereotypical view on the war, to move away from the narrative of losers versus winners, culprits versus victims. I felt that a more subtle perspective is often overlooked in the America media and entertainment industry. And that bothered me because it's dangerous to only learn about history from such a black-and-white perspective. If we don't try to look under the surface and understand what drove people to make wrong decisions then we're much more likely to make them again.

I worried very much that the book could be read as a justification of why Germans acted the way they did, or as a story of self-victimization, or as an apology. You can't and shouldn't apologize for atrocities like the ones Germans committed, because they are unforgivable, and we shouldn't expect atonement.

The book was never meant as an attempt of overcoming my feelings of guilt. I was worried that people might think that, especially Holocaust survivors and their descendants. But when I've given talks at Jewish institutions, I've only been met with openness and curiosity. I'm thankful that the book was not misunderstood in that way. I also had a group of sensitive and reasonable people looking over the text to make sure that the way I wrote—about German loss, for instance—couldn't be misunderstood in that way.

I was also careful about how I weighed the images with the text. When I wrote about loss in my family, I tried to write about it in a very stripped-down way. I was worried about creating a sense of sentimentality. A book about WWII written by a sentimental German would be the worst kind of book on the subject. It was very difficult at times to balance those narratives with the right image because images can convey an idea of sentimentality, too. I had to find the right images in order not to allow for ambivalent interpretations of what it was that I wanted to say.

TO: I think you succeeded.

NK: Thank you.

When the book was sold to Germany, I became very nervous. I somehow hadn't thought about writing it for a German audience because I thought, "Why would they find this interesting? They already know all about this." And I also thought, "Nobody in my family was a major Nazi. Who cares about a story of a 'follower'?"

But Germany was the country where the most publishers made offers, where there was the strongest interest in the book. I think that's because, first of all, it's a visual book. There are so many books in Germany on the subject, but not many graphic memoirs or graphic novels. Also, I think this idea that we actually have to look more critically at our family members who were "only" followers is also important and often overlooked, even in Germany. It's easy to fall into the trap of saying: "My grandfather was a follower, just like everybody else." There were different ways of being a follower. There were Nazi party members who hid Jews. There were people who did terrible things who refused to join the party. You have to look at every individual person, and I, personally, think this level of introspection should happen in every German family.

What has been satisfying to me is that when I do events in Germany, people often come up to me and ask my advice as to how they can embark on their own family research. In a way, at least in Germany, I feel like the book has fulfilled its purpose.

TO: There are obviously many graphic narratives about the Holocaust, most famously Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Were you influenced by the graphic novel, or the graphic novel memoir? Do you see yourself in this vein?

NK: There's not really a term for the type of book this is, though it is in the graphic non-fiction realm. Graphic memoir, visual memoir, perhaps.

The book is obviously visual, but it's also more text-heavy than most graphic novels. When I pitched it, I hoped that it would be

primarily understood as a memoir rather than a graphic novel. Because my previous audience had been mostly visually oriented—illustrators, designers, fine artists, comics readers—I wanted to broaden the audience a bit, to move beyond the graphic novel world. The book has a variety of audiences. Historians read it. Graphic novel and memoir enthusiasts read it. Holocaust scholars read it. It fits into many different categories.

In terms of influences, there are graphic novelists whom I greatly admire. Chris Ware is a wonderful storyteller. I also like Belgian graphic novelist Olivier Schrauwen. But when I worked on the book, I wasn't really paying too much attention to graphic novels. I was focusing more on reading non-fiction and memoir books of prose. For example, Alexandra Fuller—I'm a big fan of her work. I also watched a lot of documentaries, but documentaries with an essayistic point of view. Those are the two mediums I was most engaged in looking at when working on my book.

TO: Are there any particular documentaries that stand out, in terms of influence?

NK: I love Joshua Oppenheimer's related films *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, about the genocide in Indonesia. The way he uses images is powerful but never sentimental. When I watch documentaries I always think about how they use words in relation to images. I also like the films of Werner Herzog, the German filmmaker. They are always as much about him as they are about his subjects. That's in part because of his personal, essayistic voice and the way he looks at the subjects.

TO: It sounds like at some point you were planning to be a documentary filmmaker?

NK: Yeah. And I have to say, I really felt like I found myself with this project *because* I have a history in documentary. I abandoned that professional pathway because I felt like I had to focus on just one thing. As an illustrator, you don't depend on grants, you don't

depend on equipment or on other people to help you. You have everything under control, and you don't need a lot of money. So I pursued that as a profession but realized later that I was missing a lot of aspects of documentary filmmaking: interviewing people, getting to the bottom of things, reporting what's happening in the world and learning from what's happened previously. I realized with this book that visual narrative is my preferred format, and it allowed me to combine my interest in documentary film and illustration.

TO: How do you feel now about the book's afterlife—the audiences it has been reaching?

NK: What's really wonderful is to see that the book is still being translated into other languages. It just came out in Korea; it will come out in China. We just signed with Russia. Eastern Europe is going to be another important audience for me because they were so deeply affected by Germany's actions. It's satisfying to see that many different countries feel that it's important to look at this subject from a different angle and to engage in a dialogue. You have to be able to talk about the subject in order to break down cultural barriers.

TO: The book concludes with a recognition about a German word you introduce early on, which is *Heimat*. Roughly translated as "home" or "homeland," you note by the end of the book that this sense—of familiarity, of identity—that you have been searching for "begins to exist once you've lost it." What are your thoughts now on *Heimat*, with the book's publication now two years behind you? Do you feel like you've been able to move on from this past history, in a way? Does it still haunt you?

NK: In terms of *Heimat*, I've come to recognize that, like "identity," "culture," and "belonging," it's not a static term. It's something that evolves over time. It would be unnatural if our idea of culture and belonging remained static even though we, as humans, evolve.

The extreme right—its recent development is as concerning in Germany as it is here in the US —claims that there's only one way

of looking at the concept of *Heimat*, or only one way of being a German, or an American. That's a very dangerous position to take, but also very unrealistic. I think *Heimat* should be allowed to mean anything to anybody. Anybody has the right to interpret it in a different way.

For me, *Heimat* is as much an attempt of embracing what I love about it, but also a continued effort of looking at it from a critical angle. Both should be possible together.

I think that most Germans either have a hard time embracing their cultural heritage or they feel like they want to "move on" and shy away from looking critically at its past. I think Germans need to learn how to confront their country's past while at the same time feeling like they're allowed to articulate their positive feelings towards their cultural identity. If we leave the latter only to the extreme right, we have a problem.

A lot of people in the U.S., too, are afraid of talking about America's own troubled past. I think there's a worry that you won't be able to love your country as much if you look at it from a critical angle.

During this current Covid-19 crisis, I've come to realize how much I miss Europe. It's the first year that I haven't been back at all ever since I moved here in 2002. This crisis has caused me to rethink my idea of *Heimat* yet again, and I think it will continue to change going forward as well.

Works Cited

Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. Harcourt, 1970.

Bammer, Angelika. *Born After: Reckoning with the German Past*. Bloomsbury, 2019.

Crasnianski, Tania. *Children of Nazis: The Sons and Daughters of Himmler, Göring, Höss, Mengele, and Others—Living with a Father's Monstrous Legacy*. Translated by Molly Grogan, Arcade, 2018.

Himmler, Katrin. *The Himmler Brothers*. Pan Macmillan, 2007.

Kurzweil, Amy. "Illustrated Book Review. Belonging by Nora Krug." *Moment*, 13 Nov. 2018. https://momentmag.com/illustrated-book-review-belonging-by-nora-krug/

Krug, Nora. *Belonging: a German Reckons with History and Home*. Scribner, 2018.

Posner, Gerald L. *Hitler's Children: Sons and Daughters of Leaders of the Third Reich Talk About Their Fathers and Themselves*. Random House, 1991.

The Nasty Girl. Directed by Michael Verhoeven, Filmverlag der Autoren, 1990.

Additional Reading

Aarons, Victoria. *Holocaust Graphic Narratives: Generation, Trauma, and Memory*. Rutgers UP, 2019.

Grujić, Marija, and Ina Schaum. "German Postmemory and Ambivalent Home Desires: A Critical Reading of Nora Krug's (2018) Graphic Novel *Heimat: A German Family Album*." *Ethnoscripts*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2019, pp. 196–212.

———. "Bridging the Divide through Graphic Novels: Teaching non-Jews' Holocaust Narratives to Jewish Students." *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*, vol. 2, no .4, Sept 2019, Article 3.

Reingold, Matt. "*Heimat* Across Space and Time in Nora Krug's *Belonging*." *Monatshefte*, vol. 11, no. 4, Winter 2019, pp. 551–69.