

**“HOW COME BOYS GET TO KEEP THEIR NOSES?”:
WOMEN AND JEWISH AMERICAN IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY GRAPHIC
MEMOIRS**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
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Abstract

***“How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?”:
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This dissertation is devoted to a cohesive, theoretical exploration of Jewish American women and comics in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. Specifically, it argues that the autobiographical works of many Jewish American women cartoonists dynamically and productively encapsulate a new metaphor of Jewish identity as dis-affiliation through the complex and unique language of comics. Contemporary cartoonists who find themselves uncomfortable with conventional notions of what it means to claim and depict Jewishness are reconceptualizing Jewish difference by rebelling against dominant narratives and modes of Jewish representation. At the root of their graphic articulations, the women under examination in this study – including Aline Kominsky Crumb, Vanessa Davis, Miss Lasko-Gross, Lauren Weinstein, Sarah Glidden, and Miriam Libicki – reveal self-identification and self-representation as potentially transgressive acts that both bind people to and disconnect them from real and imagined communities, even as they allow for individualism in the forms of creative agency and choice.

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Introduction

To Unaffiliate Jewishly

In her 1989 comic, “Nose Job,” Aline Kominsky Crumb writes about a “disturbing epidemic” that took place in 1962 in the mostly Jewish Long Island community of her youth. Through her alter-ego, The Bunch, she recounts the experience she had of watching all of her female peers as they showed up to high school with “new noses.” Despite pressure from family and friends, The Bunch refuses this rite of passage and finds herself, years later, recounting rather proudly, “So I managed to make it thru high school with my nose!” (*Need More Love* 87). The Bunch’s reluctance to conform within her assimilating Jewish community paradoxically sets her apart; she becomes an outsider because of her refusal to erase the bodily traces of that identity.

Kominsky Crumb’s comics depict a politics of rebelliousness in relation to modes of communal belonging that has come to characterize the works of many Jewish American women cartoonists. In her book on contemporary Jewish American literature and identity, Helene Meyers asserts that “if one can choose Jewish affiliation... then it becomes possible to unaffiliate Jewishly, either actively or through benign neglect” (*Identity Papers* 3). The cartoonists explored in this project, including Aline Kominsky Crumb, Vanessa Davis, Miss Lasko-Gross, Lauren Weinstein, Sarah Glidden, and Miriam Libicki, are all interested in unaffiliating Jewishly, or in what I call dis-affiliations. For them, actively identifying as a secular Jewish woman in America begins with a disidentification from particular aspects of Jewish identity. Their autobiographical comics attest to the agency of the self-defining contemporary female cartoonist, who ultimately reclaims her identities, Jewish and otherwise, by dissenting from conventional notions of storytelling and self-representation and asserting new ways of seeing and being.

In twenty-first century America, the configuration of who and what is considered Jewish has become difficult to grasp, as neither religious participation nor communal cultural experiences, like immigration or institutionalized anti-Semitism, collectively mark the Jewish American experience or characterize its literature. As Jonathan Freedman argues, the equivocal communal conceptualization of Jewishness has allowed it to “serve as a powerful but ambiguous signifier” of identity and difference in America (*Klezmer America* 12). These artists co-opt notions of Jewish difference in order to compose an encompassing metaphor for Jewish American women’s doubly marginalized status within an already tenuously self-defined and situated community. As David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel point out in the introduction to their edited anthology, *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* (1998), in the case of North American culture “Jews constitute a liminal border case, neither insider nor outside – or, better, both inside and outside” (8). Jewish women constitute a doubly “liminal border case,” as scholars including Karen Brodtkin have pointed out. They are situated not only inside/outside North American culture, but also inside/outside Jewish culture, which, in many of its religious and cultural iterations, is premised on a patriarchal model of obligation and piety.

In their autobiographical comics, by creating visual maps of their autobiographical selves, these artists manipulate the signifier of Jewish difference, through dis-affiliations, to form their own images and associations: not just of what they can look like (in costume, body, or posture), but also of who, in a broader, even phenomenological sense, they can claim to be. And although most women cartoonists have moved on from a fixation with the Jewish nose as a symbol for the marginalized female Jewish self, all of them continue, in their own ways, to reject conventional notions of what it means to claim and depict Jewish difference. Instead, they

reconceptualize Jewish identity not only by rebelling against dominant modes of Jewish representation, but also by creating new ways of asserting Jewish presence, inventive and provocative drawings of Jewish women's self in space and time.

Like other second-wave feminists with Jewish ties, Carolyn Heilbrun thoughtfully conveys secular Jewish American women's complicated relationships to their Jewish identities in her autobiographical ruminations at the beginning of *Reinventing Womanhood* (1979).¹ She describes her mother's ambivalent relationship to her Jewish identity, how she would refer to "everything tasteless, in the sense of without savor" as "goyish," even as she carried a "horror of everything Jewish," working at a place that did not hire Jews and trying to persuade her husband (unsuccessfully) to change his Jewish-sounding name (61, 58). Heilbrun links that rejection of Jewish identification with her mother's sense of the traditional Jewish woman as passive and imprisoned, one meant to serve others. These kinds of negative associations – often based in traditional notions of religious Judaism – persist in some way for all secular American Jews, although perhaps especially for women. While it has become increasingly clear that one's Jewishness is not directly correlated with a particular place, belief system, language, or set of practices, the questions remain: If you claim your secular Jewish identity, do you align yourself with or against a particular ideology or belief system? Are you connecting yourself with a larger Jewish body, composed, presumably, of others who act or think in some way like you? Are you automatically affiliating yourself with a legacy of Jewish American identity-making and its

¹ Another famous second-wave feminist who somewhat belatedly ruminated on her Jewish roots was Betty Friedan in her memoir *Life So Far* (2000). For more on the feminist ambivalence towards Jewishness and Judaism, see several essays on the topic in the edited collection, *People of the Book: Thirty Scholars Reflect on their Jewish Identity* (1996), edited by Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. These include Susan Gubar's "Eating the Bread of Affliction: Judaism and Feminist Criticism," Nancy K. Miller's "Hadassah Arms," and Riv-Ellen Prell's "Terrifying Tales of Jewish Womanhood." Additional texts that address these issues are Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (1990), Laura Levitt's *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home* (1997), and Dina Pinsky's recent *Jewish Feminists: Complex Identities and Activist Lives* (2010).

representation in literature and the arts? For the contemporary cartoonists explored here, the answer to these questions is a resounding *no*. For them, Jewish identification begins with intra-ethnic difference, the very detail or details that separate one self-proclaimed Jew from another – not, as has been the norm in canonized Jewish American literary culture, with the differences based in the oversimplified binary of Jew versus non-Jew.²

The partial and intra-ethnic dis-affiliations exemplified in Kominsky Crumb's comic, as well as in the works of the other cartoonists examined here, are intimately tied up with the ways Jewish American women experience and perceive themselves visually, a practice that is ultimately connected to how others have portrayed them over time. In addition to seeing themselves through representations of the Jewish woman's body, so often distorted and manipulated by others, Jewish American women's visual identities have been mapped out in relation to particular places and spaces, and perhaps most notably the kitchen and the home.³ As Joyce Antler notes of male writers idealizing their mothers in the early 20th century, "[t]he centrality of the kitchen to sons' remembrances of immigrant mothers was common" (*You Never*

² Traditional historians of Jewish American culture and identity, in contrast, have often mapped out narratives that virtually ignore Jews' relationships to non-Jews or to other minority groups. Consider, for example, Howe's famous *World of Our Fathers* (1976), a text focused on Jews as a veritable independent entity. Recently, historians like Matthew Frye Jacobson and Karen Brodtkin have attempted to view constructions of Jewish American identities as always inevitably intertwined with constructions of other (particularly racial and ethnic) identities. They argue that being Jewish in the early part of the twentieth century meant something very different from what it has been since the Second World War and the passing of the G.I. Bill in 1944, which essentially converted Jews' statuses in America to privileged and "white" – or at least able to pass. See Brodtkin's *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America* (2000) and Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1999), as well as Chapter Seven of Sander Gilman's *The Jew's Body* (1991), "The Jewish Nose: Are Jews White? Or, The History of the Nose," pp. 169-193. Gilman argues that, beginning at the end of the 19th century, the nose came to signify the Western Jew's difference from the Other – especially in light of the shifting categorization of Jews from "non-white" to "white."

³ For more on representations of Jewish women's bodies, consult Norman L. Kleeblat's edited collection, *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities* (1996), and especially Riv-ElLEN Prell's "Why Jewish Princesses Don't Sweat: Desire and Consumption in Postwar American Jewish Culture" and Rhonda Lieberman's "Jewish Barbie." See also Roberta Mock's *Jewish women on stage, film, and television* (2007). A forthcoming special issue of the journal *Nashim* (Spring 2013), edited by Rachel S. Harris, will also be devoted to questions of "The Jewish Woman and her Body." Finally, in *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (2006), Lisa E. Bloom addresses these questions from the standpoint of the ways that Jewish feminist artists from the 1970s on have or (perhaps even more often) have not responded to visual representations of the Jewish American woman.

Call! 26). Consider, for example, the depiction of the mother in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), a book that Alfred Kazin refers to as "the most profound novel of Jewish life that I have ever read by an American" (Introduction, *Call It Sleep* ix). Roth's prototypical *yiddishe-mama* is most recognizable laboring at home and especially in the kitchen, much like the mother-monster created by his literary progeny, the other Roth.⁴ As the novel opens, the protagonist, young David Schearl, stands at the kitchen sink, thirsting for a cup of water, and his mother's presence is relayed through her invisibility, or, more accurately, her interchangeability with a household cleaning object. Her introduction into the text is as follows: "The unseen broom stopped to listen" (17). Schearl's childlike rendering of his mother as household object reflects the ways that many Jewish American male writers and cultural makers of the 20th century have collectively represented the Jewish mother. The kitchen is the space where she has been objectified and molded into a stereotype that, as Joyce Antler notes, has subsequently allowed her to "serve[] as a convenient scapegoat for postwar Jewish ambivalence toward acculturation" (*You Never Call!* 8).⁵

Even for the generation of postwar Jewish women artists and writers who rebelled and "talked back" in response to this patriarchal positioning of the Jewish woman in her tiny domestic space, the kitchen continued to be tied to the *other* Jewish women in their lives, the

⁴ Philip Roth's treatment of women in his literature – his tendency to stereotype his female characters – is a problematic element of many of the male writers who compose the so-called Jewish American literary canon, including Herman Wouk, Bernard Malamud, and Saul Bellow. For more on Wouk and Roth, see Chapters Four and Five of Joyce Antler's *You Never Call! You Never Write!* (2007), pps. 101-48. Over the past several years, claims have been made that Roth's literature in particular has "evolved" away from its misogynistic tilt – or that his works have been misconstrued to begin with as anti-women. This argument is at the premise of the recently published special issue of *Philip Roth Studies*, "Roth and Women," edited by David Gooblar (2012).

⁵ In addition to Antler's *You Never Call! You Never Write!*, other books that address stereotypes of Jewish American women include her edited collection, *Talking Back* (1998), and Riv-Ellen Prell's *Fighting to Become Americans* (1999). In her introduction to her edited collection, Antler describes how postwar Jewish American women finally started to "talk back" in response to these stereotypes through representations of Jewish women in literature and the arts. I return to Antler's argument in my discussion of Vanessa Davis's depiction of *Portnoy's Complaint* in Chapter Two.

ones they were trying to define themselves against.⁶ Consider Vivian Gornick's memoir of a woman's battle for independence from her domineering Jewish mother, a text in which she too recognizes her mother as inseparable from the living spaces that she perpetually dominates: "The kitchen, the window, the alley. It was the atmosphere in which she was rooted, the background against which she stood outlined" (*Fierce Attachments* 15). For those writers who identified as feminists above all else, freedom and flight from the world of their mothers often meant resigning those mothers (and sisters and aunts and grandmothers) to the world of Jewish stereotype. Erica Jong's famous feminist novel of independence, *Fear of Flying* (1973), for instance, includes a sister character, Randy, who represents everything that the protagonist, Isadora Wing, most fears in life. She is a caricature of the domestic woman, a woman who, though she married "outside the faith," has paradoxically *not* rebelled against the world of their mothers. Randy is characterized by her extreme mothering (she has nine children and is pregnant again at the time of the novel), and her inability to see the value in Isadora's desire to build a life outside of the domestic sphere – a writer's life. She is everything Isadora fears most: a woman defined by "*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*" (57). Indeed, despite Randy's conversion to Catholicism, she continues to epitomize the Jewish woman that Isadora wants so much to move away from not only because of Randy's interest in the domestic, in motherhood, in organized religion, but also because of her ignorance, her desire to claim her Jewish ties against all else. "I just get sick and tired of everyone bleeding about the poor Palestinians. Why don't you worry about us instead?" she snaps at Isadora after they pass a refugee camp in Beirut (321).

⁶ This also holds true for turn-of-the-century Jewish American writers like Anzia Yezierska, whose mother figures can also often be found in the kitchen, although there is something vaguely un-domestic – and perhaps even artistic – about some of these characters. See, for example, Yezierska's compelling short story, "The Lost 'Beautifulness,'" which can be found in *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska*, pps. 30-42.

Erica Jong's depiction of Isadora's sister as the Palestinian-hating, overly-domesticated Jewish woman – even in the face of this sister's conversion to Catholicism – mirrors one of the dis-affiliations that are central to contemporary secular American Jews, including many of the cartoonists discussed in this project. Jong's caricature is an extreme response to the assumption that identifying as Jewish in contemporary North America is tantamount to being a Zionist and either supporting or ignoring/denying Palestinian oppression. In their introduction to *Wrestling with Zion*, Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon address this assumption, which they recognize as founded, in part, by the “conflation of Judaism and Jewish identity with Israel and Israeli nationalist identity” (8). This misleading connection has been especially difficult for Jewish feminists – or, more precisely, women who self-identify as feminists and as Jews, and who therefore find themselves at the margins of both communities. In her long essay, “Hard Ground: Jewish Identity, Racism, and Anti-Semitism” (1984), Elly Bulkin includes a chapter on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the perceptions and expectations directed at her, a self-proclaimed feminist Jew, in light of Israel's existence. She writes, “I am affected by some people's assumptions that, because I am a Jew, I support not only Israel's existence but the policies of its government and have only minor, if any, criticisms of Israel's role – and that of pre-statehood Zionists – in creating the current impasse. I am affected too by assumptions that, because I am a radical, I not only reject Israel's right to exist but back, without significant reservations, the actions of Palestinian nationalists” (155).⁷ Bulkin's struggles with what it means to be a secular American Jew stem in part from the influence of those who seek to define Jewish existence in America, to set up clear and rigid boundaries separating “us” from “them,” Jews from non-Jews. For example, Irving Howe, an influential and self-pronounced secular Jew (or, as he called

⁷ A (decidedly one-sided) account of a panel presentation held at the *Feminist Studies: Reconstituting Knowledge* conference in Milwaukee in 1985, which describes the outpouring of many of these political tensions between conference participants, can be found in Evelyn Torton Beck's “The Politics of Jewish Invisibility” (1988).

himself, a “partial” Jew), nevertheless argued that one of the ways secular Jewish identity should be kept alive was through the support of the state of Israel, “as it provides focus within history for Jewish life” (Libo 23).

In an effort to maintain the possibility of a communal secular Jewish American identity, many, like Howe, have turned to notions of collective ownership: of place, tradition, language, ideology, culture, and even sensibility – like humor. But conflating Jewishness with Zionism, much like conflating Jewish motherhood with the domestic, is an assumption that confines the Jewish body to particular spheres where it can then be “discovered.” The Jewish woman’s body in particular has often been restricted through suppositions of such national and domestic affiliations. She is presumed to feel most at home and in charge in local spaces: her connection with others is limited to those she recognizes and encounters in her everyday life, or to those that, even though they are far away, are presumed to be most like her. Over the past decade or so, a number of scholarly works have attempted to respond to such essentialist understandings of Jewish identity by turning to more inclusive models that engage, instead, in pluralistic “Jewish identities.” Laurence J. Silberstein’s anthology, *Mapping Jewish Identities* (2000) provides various readings of “new, non-essentialist definitions of Jewish identity,” ones that recognize identity as “inherently unstable” (Introduction 12, 3).⁸ These revisionary configurations base contemporary understandings of Jewishness – and of identities more generally – in the postmodern project of recognizing the limitations of master narratives and categories. In other words, they acknowledge the vast discrepancies and contradictions contained in such categories

⁸ Some recent texts have employed such postmodern redefinitions of Jewish identities through readings of contemporary Jewish literature, as well as engagements with contemporary Jewish culture. In addition to Meyers’s *Identity Papers* (2011), these include Alan Berger and Gloria Cronin’s *Jewish American and Holocaust Literature: Representation in the Postmodern World* (2004), Vincent Brook’s *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture* (2006), Julian Levinson’s *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (2008), Jonathan Freedman’s *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (2008), and Hana Wirth-Nesher’s *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (2008).

as “Jewish” or “woman,” and in the language and significations used to create such classifications. Anti-essentialist models of Jewish identity are based, instead, in conceptions of Jewishness that recognize it as a process or, as Laurence Silberstein puts it, “a matter of ‘becoming’ rather than being” (3). Without neglecting the possibility of Jewish difference, these writers and thinkers appreciate that, as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman so astutely puts it, “‘identity’ is revealed to us only as something to be invented rather than discovered” (15).

Stuart Charmé, a scholar with an interest in the psychology of religion, has written an anti-essentialist treatise on the importance of recognizing the various dimensions of Jewish identities, which help mark them as fluid and which vary for each individual over time. In his section of the multiply authored essay, “Jewish identities in Action,” Charmé writes about two dimensions of identity – the “diachronic” and the “synchronic” – that have been largely ignored in conventional models of Jewish identity, which are often based in the assumption that there is a shared and identifiable essential “core” among Jews. Charmé refers to these traditional approaches towards understanding Jewish identity as, collectively, the “drink-your-milk” model, one that “suggests that a healthy identity, like a healthy body, depends on what one ‘consumes’ during the period of maximum growth in childhood and adolescence” (117). Unlike this static or crystallized notion of Jewish identity, Charmé’s own paradigm, which he describes as the “spiral” model, recognizes identity to be a process that continually changes over time. In this model, one’s sense of being Jewish is affected by various, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory conceptions, which are often present in the same instance. As he explains, “‘Synchronic diversity’ refers to the multiple forms of Jewish *identities* that comprise ‘the Jewish community (or communities)’ at any particular moment in time. By ‘diachronic diversity,’ I mean the phenomenon of Jewish identity as a ‘journey’ over time, as a process that

changes and unfolds in a variety of directions over the course of an individual lifetime, not to mention over the course of history in a broader sense” (119, italics in original).

Charmé’s attention to direction, space, perspective, and place connects his and other anti-essentialist models of Jewish identities with issues that have loomed large in feminist notions of gender identities, beginning, perhaps, with Virginia Woolf’s assertion in *Three Guineas*, her treatise against war, that “as a woman I have no country.” Woolf’s anti-patriotic directive assumes a transnational connection among all women, who, in her view, at the very least have the common experience of being oppressed by men. Almost half a century after those words were first published in 1938, American-born poet and philosopher Adrienne Rich responded to Woolf in her now famous talk, “Notes Towards a Politics of Location,” by asserting, “I am to speak these words in Europe, but I have been searching for them in the United States of America.” Although Rich can trace her lines of ancestry down through European roots, she is, in fact, “a North American Jew born and raised three thousand miles from the war in Europe” (216). By claiming her place of origin and admitting how strongly it influences her perspective on the rest of the world, Rich recognizes the way that her particular relationship to space and place has led her to the present moment and to her particular point of view. This acknowledgment challenges Woolf’s notion of a kind of universal womanhood, a communal identity that is somehow meant to encompass the point of view of women everywhere. Instead, Rich’s essay reflects what Mary Eagelton has noted to be some of the primary issues preoccupying feminist thought over the last few decades: “the impossibility of location, of ever adequately encompassing the human subject; [and] the danger of privileging certain locations” (302-3). As Rich forms this feminist stance, a point of view that, as the title of the essay attests, is always changing, she attends to the materiality of the world around her, as well as the

inextricable connection between her inner and outer worlds. The ways she sees herself, the identities that she assumes, are inseparably tied to the experiences that she has had as a North American Jew raised in the south.⁹ She advances the connection between space/place and identity, as she explains, “a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create” (212). Like Charmé’s spiraling model of Jewish being, Rich recognizes how intricately and indivisibly related are past and present notions of self, continually interacting in the textured space of the present.

Rich is but one of a lineage of women who have explored the importance of recognizing and claiming space and place as the key to identification and articulation, to what French writer and poet Hélène Cixous calls “coming to writing” in a 1977 essay by that same name. As the daughter of a single mother due to her Algerian father’s premature death, Cixous feels herself an outsider, a wanderer with “false” identification papers. Labeling herself a “Jewoman” in part to indicate her sense of alienation based in not being tied to any particular place, she speculates, “Sometimes I think I began writing in order to make room for the wandering question that haunts my soul and hacks and saws my body; to give it a place and time” (7). Writing, then, is Cixous’s way of crafting an imaginary space from which she feels legitimated to write. Like Rich, she recognizes how her relationships to the spaces around her – in her case, her estrangements from places that have formed her narrative of citizenship and alienation – have shaped who she can imagine herself to be. And, for Cixous, as for Rich, this simultaneous sense of dislocation and possibility is tied to her Jewish senses of self.

Despite their differing perceptions of the ways that their particular senses of “home” have molded their subjectivities, Woolf, Cixous, and Rich all recognize and claim real and/or

⁹ For more on Rich’s Jewish background, consult her essay, “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” (1982) in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose*, pps. 100-23.

imagined, communal and/or individual spaces as the keys to women's self-articulations. As editors Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner acknowledge in the introduction to their recent anthology on transnational feminisms, *The Global and the Intimate* (2012), "[o]ur pairing in this volume of the intimate and the global extends a longstanding feminist tradition of challenging gender-based oppositions by upending hierarchies of space and scale" (1). Women writers have often located themselves through writing, visually mapping their "politics of location," a politics that undoubtedly calcifies through an image-ing of those real and made-up spaces. Woolf famously peppers *Three Guineas* with a series of photographs, inviting her (male) reader to "see then whether when we look at the same photographs we feel the same things" (10). Photographs become a common space for Woolf and her readers, a visual place that she hopes will evoke a sense of collectivity, empathy, and perhaps even a call to action. Cixous imagines that through writing she is similarly working "[a]gainst the decree of blindness" (3). Like Woolf, visual imagining is a form of rebelling against the institutions that have oppressed her and others: "I will never finish fashioning the graven image for myself," she asserts (3). Rich, too, recognizes the "spiritual power" of symbols and images, how they can link together our histories alongside our everyday realities and experiences: "The Jewish star on my neck must serve me both for reminder and as a goad to continuing and changing responsibility" (227). The symbol, the icon, the graven image – these notions appear frequently in contemporary feminist women's literature, a literature engaged in a politics that forefronts a visualized relationality as the key to thinking through identities and difference. As Susan Stanford Friedman argues in *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (1998), "feminism has moved to a concern with location – the geopolitics of identity within differing communal spaces of being and becoming" (3). Such a "locational feminism" is founded on what Friedman calls a "new geographics," one

that “figures identity as a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges” (19).

Paradoxically, Donna Haraway explains, “[t]he only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” (196). That particularly – one’s present “location” – is paradoxically built out of numerous synchronic and diachronic realities, out of a continual winding of many disconnected and sometimes contradictory notions of self. Like Charmé’s “spiral” model of contemporary Jewish identity, this feminist geographics recognizes that in order to fully locate the self, one must be willing to relinquish notions of self based in the chronological, the hierarchical, and the durational – that “drink your milk” model – in favor of those founded on the recursive, the episodic, and the elliptical.

The desire to locate oneself in a way that captures that recursive nature of identity – identity as process – is the basis of the works of the contemporary graphic memoirists discussed here. Through their graphic narratives, these cartoonists have joined a collective of women attending to space as a way of understanding the world and their relationships to it. These cartoonists recognize that notions of space are inextricably tied to notions of time – that one’s location is a matter not just of perspective in relation to others, but also in terms of the changing self over time. A “sequential art” that maps time *as* space, the graphic memoir emphasizes the importance of both time and location as the keys to its unique brand of autobiographical storytelling. As Hillary Chute asserts in the introduction to her groundbreaking work on women and comics, *Graphic Women* (2010), “Against a valorization of absence and aporia, graphic narrative asserts the value of presence” (2). The autobiographical cartoonists that I explore in this project are always focused on “finding” themselves – on affirming their presences – by drawing themselves and their worlds, both in the present and over time. As Elisabeth El Refaie argues in

Autobiographical Comics (2012), “the spatial organization of images” – as found in comics – “may lend itself more readily to the representation of relationships” (36). These creators use comics to reimagine their relationships to space, time, and identity as their geographics both respond to and reinvent the ways that Jewish American identities have been constructed.

In a recent interview, the cartoonist Lauren Weinstein illuminated this connection between sequential narrative and the potential for new ways of thinking through identity as an act of mapping. Describing the process of shifting gears from working as a painter to becoming a cartoonist, she explained, “I could paint anything but I just wasn’t satisfied with any theme because it didn’t get to the meat of anything for me.”¹⁰ Weinstein then described a moment that, looking back, revealed to her a cartooning impulse that had not yet been realized: “I remember distinctly, at one point, making this one painting. I didn’t know what it was, and then I divided it up into squares, and then I cut up those squares into smaller squares, and then I cut everything up into smaller and smaller squares, and then just threw it all away. I feel like that’s [a sign of] somebody who’s a cartoonist, who just hasn’t figured it out yet.” Weinstein’s early act of artistic rebellion points to the formal potential of graphic narratives to confound the basic assumptions that we make about our relationships to space, a possibility that binds all of these cartoonists’ works together. Their graphic narratives make possible a kind of opening up of perspectives, like that described in Weinstein’s breakdown of her painting into smaller and smaller pieces.¹¹ As a single perspective gets fragmented and consequently amplified, as in Antonioni’s famous film, *Blow-Up*, the artist encounters new and unanticipated information in her work. For these autobiographical cartoonists, that information is primarily self-knowledge: of who she is and

¹⁰ The interview with Tahneer Oksman, “Thinking Panoramically: An Interview with Lauren Weinstein,” is forthcoming in the anthology, *Graphic Details: Jewish Women and Comics*, edited by Sarah Lightman and Michael Kaminer and to be published by McFarland Publishers in 2013.

¹¹ This is also, in some ways, the subject of the republished version of Art Spiegelman’s *Breakdowns* (2008), which includes comics that he made prior to the publication of the *Maus* series.

how she sees herself in relation to other people and the world around her, and of how those suppositions unravel once that perspective is shifted, once the scale system delineating her point of view changes.

One relatively unknown work by Weinstein powerfully illustrates the potential, in comics, of mapping out various planes of individual identities within the same potentially expansive space. In this full page map (Figure 1), the reader is witness as various narratives “unfold” for different characters in this scene in the park.¹² A long gray walkway outlines the space in a kind of misshapen circle, with additional pathways connecting this central domain to other places off the page, places that the reader can then imagine on her own. Various comics scholars, including perhaps most famously Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (1993), have written about the unique properties of sequential comics in terms of the reader’s relationship to the text.¹³ They argue that, among other formal elements, the space between panels, also known as the gutter, invites the reader to participate in the making of the text. Although Weinstein’s map is a single panel, also known as a cartoon (as opposed to how McCloud characterizes comics, “a sequential art”), the architecture of this image prompts a similar kind of work on the part of the reader, who must use her imagination to fill out the rest of the pathway as it extends off the page.¹⁴ In addition to envisioning spaces off the page, the

¹² *The Ganzfeld* was an art magazine founded by Dan Nadel, Patrick Smith, and Tim Hodler, which published seven issues. The magazine contained art and art criticism, most of it related to cartooning and comics. Weinstein’s map, which was left untitled, was published on pps. 8-9 of the last issue of the publication (2008). A poster-sized version of the map was also included, folded up, in each copy of the magazine.

¹³ Thierry Groensteen’s *The System of Comics* (2007) is another well-known formalist exploration of the comics medium. For a comprehensive overview of comics theory, see Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester’s edited anthology, *A Comics Studies Reader* (2008), as well as Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan’s more recent edited anthology, *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Practices* (2011).

¹⁴ Cartoons generally refer to single panel drawn images, which often include captions instead of thought bubbles, and they were the primary format of early political satire as epitomized in the infamous British magazine, *Punch*. Scott McCloud more generally differentiates between cartoons and comics by emphasizing that one, cartooning, “is an approach to picture-making – a style if you like – while the other [comics] is a medium which often employs that approach” (21). Some theorists have taken issue with this distinction. Robert C. Harvey, for example, finds that “the essential characteristic of ‘comics’... is the incorporation of verbal content” (25), which makes McCloud’s

reader must also fill in the gaps of time missing from this layered image: the past and future events not visible but alluded to in the picture itself. In this as well as other ways, the map invites innumerable interpretations, visually emphasizing the fact that no individual perspective can ever be contained or fully reflected in any kind of artwork. No world will ever fit on the page.

It is possible to distinguish several central figures on the map, although their paths do not unfold in any symmetrical or predictable way and at times it is difficult to trace whether their figures are coming or going in the direction that they seem to have been moving towards all along. A woman in a yellow top, for example, “enters” the park from the top left corner of the panel. Her otherwise easy locatedness – she is a figure who is clearly walking *into* the park – is immediately thrown into question by her thought bubble. In it, an old woman is pictured (herself, perhaps, in forty years?) with large glasses and arms folded, sulking in a bright pink bubble of space, a curiously cheerful background for such a melancholy image. Immediately, it becomes difficult to connect or trace the journey of this character, to match up how her mental and physical worlds intersect, as well as the ways that her life before and after the events pictured in this image have unfolded or will unfold. The reader might nevertheless try to follow this dynamic, thinking character, who soon finds herself a companion and frolics with him in the grass mere inches from where they initially met – perhaps even for the first time, though that question, too, remains unresolved. Soon, he is pulling her up out of the bushes, another curious

differentiation moot. For Art Spiegelman, the essential difference between the two is that a cartoon is meant to “emblemize” or to “find[] a representation for many moments in one image,” whereas a comic is about “creating individual moments that add up to having some overarching meaning beyond the individual moments” (*MetaMaus* 185). The widespread use of the term “cartoonist” to talk about practitioners of the art form reveals how murky the division between the two can be. For more on the history of cartooning, comics, and political satire, see Harvey’s informative essay, “How Comics Came to Be” (1009). Harvey traces the roots of the modern cartoon to London in the 1840s.



Figure 1. Lauren Weinstein, *The Ganzfeld*, Issue 7 (Berkeley, CA: Ginkgo Press, 2008) 8-9.

gesture, and they can be traced crossing over a set of swings, rolling down a slide together, and engaging in a series of joint acts. These come to the fore as the woman, alone once again, somersaults on the grass, emerges with a swollen, pregnant belly, labors with a crowd gathered around her, and finally releases a baby, dressed in red, who then rolls off on his own across the grass, his path crossing over her earlier somersaulting one.

The power of this image stems from its resistance to relaying a cohesive narrative, both as a single narrative “map” and also as a series of smaller narratives within that encompassing framework. A map highlights the relationship between different elements in space. This map breaks down that possibility, discarding any expected sense of proportion as Frisbees fly into the air to take up an inordinate amount of space on the page and lovers lounge high up in trees. It collapses reader expectations about what it is supposed to represent, as the anticipated distance between symbol and real object extends well beyond any readable system of configuration. In other words, this is a map without a set system of correspondence between its elements, a map without a legend.

In place of narrative coherence, the map offers a potentially empowering way of understanding the act of looking, of seeing and being seen, as something that is tied, above all else, to one’s place of perspective, the space that one occupies in relation to others, as well as in relation to past and future versions of herself. In the image of the couple sitting in the tree in the middle of the right part of the panel, for instance, the woman’s face is turned down towards the park, and in her disproportionately large size (in comparison to other people on the map), we recognize that her vantage point has changed the look of this scene for her. Viewing it from this decidedly unconventional standpoint, she will inevitably “see” something that others are not necessarily seeing down below. In turn, we can speculate that even those individuals drawn to

scale in relationship to one another experience this world differently based on their particular points on the map, their points in time and space. Location is the key to this complex and textured articulation of the relationship between subjectivity, time, and space.

This visualization of the “politics of location,” so connected to contemporary feminist theory, is the subject of all of the cartoonists explored here, who visually convey this politics through a juxtaposition of images and text. Their works build on a literary genealogy that emphasizes the ways that women’s viewpoints can offer new understandings of subjectivity as it relates to the vantage points they inhabit and traverse, whether by necessity or choice. As Teresa De Lauretis writes of woman’s subjectivity: “[it is] an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one interacts with the world” (159).¹⁵ Consider this excerpt from Grace Paley’s “Faith in a Tree,” a passage that echoes verbally the consideration of outlook and subjectivity built into Weinstein’s map. In the short story, Paley’s recurrent protagonist, Faith Darwin, is forced to immerse herself in domestic life, watching children play in the park instead of engaging in what she calls “important conversation.” Yet, she transforms the scene by shifting her perspective:

But me, the creation of His soft second thought, I am sitting on the twelve-foot high, strong, long arm of a sycamore, my feet swinging, and I can only see Kitty, a co-worker in the mother trade – a topnotch craftsman. She is below, leaning on my tree, rumped in a black cotton skirt made of shroud remnants at about fourteen cents a yard. Another colleague, Anne Kraat, is close by on a hard park bench, gloomy, beautiful, waiting for her luck to change. 175-76

¹⁵ De Lauretis’s notion of female subjectivity emerges from a reading of Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, and particularly the passage in which Woolf writes of being chased off the pathway while wandering around the fictional “Oxbridge.” As Woolf writes, “This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me” (6).

By hoisting herself up in a tree, Paley's Faith sees not the everyday scene that has, by virtue of its redundancy, undoubtedly worn itself down in her mind to its most basic components – children, parents (mostly mothers), toys, swings, grass. Instead, she sees Kitty as a “topnotch craftsman” and Anne as a woman with more on her mind than whether her child has skinned his knee. In other words, by looking at a familiar scene from a fresh point of view, the scale has shifted, and what Faith sees is almost-new; the park and its occupants have gained a sense of significance in her eyes, of relevance. The figures in Weinstein's map have a similar effect on the reader; an everyday scene becomes a meta-narrative about life, time, space, and change – or more accurately the complex relationship between all of those elements as they converge in a single image. What matters are not so much the storylines threaded before the reader's eyes (though they are certainly attention-grabbing), but rather the vantage points inhabited, the relationships of parts to the whole.

Weinstein's map stands as a representative example of the potential for graphic narratives to relay how bound up individual experiences are to the individual's perspective, and to her situatedness in relation to the self and others over time. The map communicates, too, the impossibility of tracing any single life path – of coming to terms with the various features and foundations of how we see ourselves and others, of the relationships that help define who we think we are. The reader might try to trace the woman in yellow, her journey from a lone figure entering the park to an old woman with white hair sitting on a bench, playing with a dog, or waving at her son, now high up in his own tree. But in the end, any attempt to piece together the fragments of this life into a single, evolving, and coherent narrative will be frustrated.

This map similarly evidences the way that women cartoonists, Weinstein included, have come to experiment with how stories are told, bringing new viewpoints to a world of comics that

has for so long been dominated by masculine perspectives. They offer new ways of seeing not just in the stories that they tell, but in the ways that they tell these stories. As Alison Bechdel noted recently in her introduction to *The Best American Comics 2011*: “Art and language are always in flux, of course, but the somewhat younger mode of comics seems to be in a particularly molten state. Close readers may observe rivulets of lava cooling into new conventions right before their eyes” (xv). As the graphic narratives of the cartoonists that I examine reflect, the innovative reworkings of various genres – including visual memoirs, journals, travel narratives, and childhood and adolescent literatures – deliberately violate long-held assumptions about what it means to tell a recognizable or traceable story. Through their formal interventions, these texts attempt to break out of what Nancy K. Miller has termed “genre bondage.”¹⁶ Integrating diverse and experimental genres into a single narrative is by now an all-too-familiar strategy in modern and postmodern literatures.¹⁷ But because of the common association of this so-called younger mode of comics as a kind of “outsider art,” and because of the women’s status as outsiders in relation to this already outsider art, these cartoonists seem to be especially free to experiment with form, perspective, and scale in order to disrupt narrative norms and reader expectations.¹⁸ Their “hybrid” genres reflect anti-essentialist notions of the

¹⁶ In her essay, “The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir” (2007), Miller argues that “autobiographical writing in the early part of the twenty-first century is posing sticky problems of reception” (539), and she cites the pervasive misuse of the term “graphic novel” to refer to memoirs written in the comics medium as an example. I would add that beyond the fiction/non-fiction divide, comics are also still bonded to the category of adolescent literature. This misbelief persists despite the often explicit sexual content of underground comics: the frequent categorization of such works as “pornographic” – and their consequent censorship – also points to this easy association between comics and adolescent literature.

¹⁷ See “Rhetorical Hybrids: Fusions of Generic Elements” (1982), by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, as well as John A. Bateman’s more recent text on how “multimodal” texts have shifted our understandings of genres, *Multimodality and Genre: A Foundation for a Systemic Analysis of Multimodal Documents* (2008).

¹⁸ American comics has an important history of censorship related to this assumption that comics are meant for children, which has been one of the crucial reasons it is still taken as a kind of “outsider art.” The publication of Dr. Frederic Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, which claimed that comics were contributing to juvenile delinquency, led to the infamous congressional hearings on the topic and the resultant Comics Code Authority. For a history of the comic book industry, especially mainstream and superhero comics, see Bradford W. Wright’s *Comic*

self as construed through a continual process that often involves rebelling against tradition and canon. But their experimental works are perhaps even more crucially focused on imagining new modes of self-representation and expression, on creating new non-traditional ways of sharing stories and depicting diverse perspectives.

For Jewish American women engaged in comics, this sense of being an outsider is amplified by the ways that the story of American comics has, for the past decade or so, been told as a story closely entwined with Jewish American acculturation – a narrative that has been dominated by male figures. Scholars have argued that Jews established the superhero genre in order to craft a space in which assimilation was not only possible, but could turn an “ordinary guy” into a superhero.¹⁹ These discussions have virtually ignored women, most likely because of their limited involvement in earlier implementations of the medium. Yet, from the 1970s on, women cartoonists exerted a tremendous influence on contemporary American so-called

Book Nation (2001), as well as Jean-Paul Gabilliet’s *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (2010). It should be noted that comics are perceived very differently internationally. For example, Franco-Belgian comics, often known as *bande dessinée*, do not have the same association with “lowbrow” literature and are not generally presumed to be an art form meant primarily for children.

¹⁹ The recent increased interest in Jews and comics is very likely at least in part related to the publication of Michael Chabon’s Pulitzer prize-winning book, *The Amazing Adventure of Kavalier and Clay* (2000), a novel that conveys the interwoven history of Jews and comics. Books about Jews and comics (and specifically, Jews and superhero comics) include several written for mainstream audiences: Simcha Weinstein’s *Up, Up, and Oy Vey* (2009) and Danny Fingeroth’s *Disguised as Clark Kent* (2008). These texts explore how Jews have influenced the superhero comic book industry. Additionally, the non-academic *Jews and American Comics* (2008), edited by Paul Buhle, provides a short but lively history of the influence of Jews in American comics, and the anthology, *The Jewish Graphic Novel* (2010), edited by Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman, includes several essays recounting and examining this history. The recently published *Yiddishkeit* (2011), edited by Harvey Pekar and Paul Buhle, also calls attention to the link between comics and the vernacular (in this case, the link between comics and Yiddish language and culture). Within these studies, the role of women is virtually ignored, and none of these books does more than nod at the influence that women cartoonists have had on the creation and implementation of the art form. One exception to this trend is the more recently published non-academic *Jewish Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (2012), by Fredrik Strömberg, which includes a number of the Jewish American women discussed in this project. It must also be noted that, prior to the rise of the superhero genre, comics were often associated with immigrant and non-Christian communities. As Jared Gardner explains of newspaper comics published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, “Early critics often pointed to the repetition and predictability of comics supplements as a sign of degenerating times. And that degeneration was often associated with the racial and ethnic others who often served both as creators and as subject matter for these early comics, as well as with the new immigrant reader often assumed to be the primary audience of this lowly literature” (*Projections* 17). This link between early newspaper comics and immigrant communities warrants further research, especially in the context of the link between Jews and American comics.

independent or underground comics (“comix”), a connection that has often been downplayed. Jewish women cartoonists embrace an autobiographical and experimental form of the medium partly in order, I argue, to project their own fantasies and anxieties about what it means to be an outsider within one’s assigned community, or in relation to communal identities that the cartoonists (and contemporary secular Jewish women more generally) often reject. In addition, because American comics have often been reserved for representations of the fantastic and imaginary, as most easily recognized in the superhero comic, Jewish American women cartoonists are especially sensitive to this profound misrecognition. Their visages and characters remain woefully absent or misrepresented in the history of the superhero genre, not to mention other modes of Jewish American representation. In a sense, their autobiographical comics, highlighting their presences, can be seen as a kind of antidote to that superheroic tradition, which presumes that only the all-powerful, assimilated male superhero and his counterparts deserve to be seen and heard.²⁰

Ultimately, this project has implications beyond the scope of Jewish American literature and identity. In a recent article for *PMLA*, Leslie Morris argues the potential of Jewish studies to help literary and cultural critics rethink some of the central concerns of the humanities, including “nationhood, identity, mediality, textuality” (765). Morris bases that claim on the recognition that the significance of what it means to be Jewish in America has changed so dramatically over

²⁰ Jewish women, or women more generally, are obviously not the only ones who have been written out of the script of American comics. Much more work needs to be done, for instance, on depictions of race, class, and sexual identity in American comics. Some texts, including those written for academic and mainstream audiences, have attempted to comprehensively grapple with these topics. Some important works include *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (2001), by Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (2003), by Fredrik Strömberg, *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez* (2009), by Frederick Luis Aldama, *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* (2010), edited by Frederick Luis Aldama, *Black Comix: African American Independent Comics, Art and Culture* (2010), by Damian Duffy and John Jennings, *Super Black: American Black Culture and Superheroes* (2011), by Adilifu Nama, the anthology, *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics* (2012), edited by Justin Hall, and *Black Comics* (2013), by Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson III.

the last century, as definitions of Jewishness are always up for debate. The continual shifts and contradictions of what it means to be Jewish or to write or draw as a Jew have implications for other groups based in religious, ethnic, cultural, gendered, regional, and racial identifications. Exploring what it means to be a Jew in contemporary America means engaging in the constructedness of all modes of being in the world. It also means negotiating between the effectiveness and the limitations of categories in themselves. My project provides a model for the continued exploration of such blurred, permeable, and yet ever-present classifications. Similarly, by reading the works of cartoonists whose contributions have long been under-investigated and ignored, I argue for the importance of a continued, active pursuit of knowledge in unexpected places. My focus on the world of graphic narratives contests the view of comics (or “graphic novels”) as “low-brow” or outside the realm of serious literature. Instead, readings of comics can inform and enrich readings of other, more conventional forms of narrative. Like classifications of identity, classifications of art and literature must always be approached tentatively so that we can continue to stay open to new realms of knowledge.

Each of the four chapters of this dissertation addresses cartoonists who have explored themes of Jewish identities in their works, and who present revisionary possibilities for what it means “to unaffiliate Jewishly.” I begin with the story of the self-proclaimed “great-grandmother” of women’s autobiography in Chapter One, “‘My Independent Jewish Monster Temperament’: The Serial Selves of Aline Kominsky Crumb.” Starting with her now-famous comic, “Goldie: A Neurotic Woman” (1972), Kominsky Crumb set the stage for women (and men) who would use the graphic medium to reveal their darkest secrets and explore their neuroses. Unlike the works of the later cartoonists, however, Kominsky Crumb’s work is

centered on the depiction and deconstruction of stereotypes. Ethnicity, sexuality, gender, nationality, religion, culture, and class: none of these categories has been off limits for the cartoonist who, at a recent comics conference, asserted: “I still feel very Jewish... At the same time, I hate it.”²¹ Kominsky Crumb’s comics subvert the idea that individuals are defined by stereotypes or notions of the self collectively composed by others. Her works offer the possibility that by recontextualizing and refiguring damaging group classifications, the artist can offer new ways of imagining selfhood.

This first chapter also establishes Kominsky Crumb as one of the initial and most influential members of what can be seen as a genealogy of what I call “post-assimilated” Jewish American artists and writers.²² I use the term partly in order to call attention to the importance, at this juncture, of identifying new ways of understanding recent trends in Jewish literature. In an interview in 2006, speaking of contemporary Jewish American literature, Vivian Gornick argued that “being Jewish in America is over as a metaphor” (Interview in *Fourth Genre* 148). Gornick’s statement is the most recent, though certainly not the first, articulation of the concern that Jewish American writers would have nothing important to say once they had finished writing about the immigrant experience. This argument has been made most famous by Irving Howe and Leslie Fiedler. According to these scholars, Jewish Americans have assimilated into

²¹ The conference, “Comics: Philosophy and Practice,” was organized by Hillary Chute and took place on May 18-20, 2012 at the University of Chicago. The three-day event brought together some of the largest names in the so-called alternative comics world and put them in conversation with one another. The conference members included Lynda Barry, Alison Bechdel, Ivan Brunetti, Charles Burns, Daniel Clowes, Robert Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Justin Green, Ben Katchor, Aline Kominsky Crumb, Françoise Mouly, Gary Panter, Joe Sacco, SETH, Art Spiegelman, Carol Tyler, and Chris Ware. For the full schedule, and more information about the conference, see its web page: <http://graycentercomicscon.uchicago.edu/> (accessed November 3, 2012).

²² Diane Noomin can similarly be considered a leading figure in the world of contemporary Jewish women’s comics. Like Kominsky Crumb, Noomin’s Jewish dis-affiliations take place through her evocation of Jewish and female stereotypes as epitomized in her fictional character, Didi Glitz. Her Glitz comics were recently anthologized in *Glitz-2-Go* (2012). Noomin also edited two influential anthologies of women’s comics, *Twisted Sisters*, which featured the works of many artists who later came to be key figures in the comics world, including Kominsky Crumb. Some of the other cartoonists published in these anthologies include Mary Fleener, Carol Lay, Carol Tyler, and Julie Doucet.

the mainstream, they have, in some ways, even come to represent at least the literary mainstream. Their experiences no longer stand in for or represent the pain of being an outsider, of always striving to assimilate into a culture that rejects or fetishizes your differences. While Gornick's observation is astute – particularly, that Jewish Americans, as a category, do not currently occupy that position of “other” that has always helped to determine the status quo – the metaphor of Jewishness in America is hardly over. Instead, it is a changed metaphor. In a post-assimilated America, being Jewish has come to mean possessing a particular relationship to the mainstream, of being an insider but always questioning that position by actively distancing oneself from it.

Writing, in part, as a response to earlier cynical critics, Derek Rubin argues that “there is a new central tension” in contemporary Jewish fiction “that has replaced that created by the experience of marginality that characterized much of the significant fiction that emerged from the post-immigrant culture” (508).²³ Rubin identifies this turn as a move away from questions of sameness or difference between Jews and non-Jews to investigations of “the ways Jews define themselves in relation to each other” (513). But this literary turn, or this “new central tension,” is not just a “revival” that looks back nostalgically or reparatively, or that celebrates the Jewish differences that have increasingly come to be understood as chosen (rather than automatically passed on over or between generations). Instead, the works of contemporary Jewish female

²³ Rubin is joined by a host of academics who have recognized and celebrated this literary “revival,” such as Ted Solotaroff, Morris Dickstein, Andrew Furman, and Janet Burstein, among many others. A representative example of this standpoint can be found in Solotaroff's article in the *New York Times*, “American-Jewish Writers: On Edge Once More” (1988). Solotaroff sees the new generation of Jewish American writers engaging in the question of the relationship between Jewish American identity and Israel. See also Morris Dickstein's article, “Ghost Stories: The New Wave of Jewish Writing” (1997). Dickstein identifies some of the more recent topics and issues taken up by what he, too, sees as a new, prolific generation of Jewish American writers, involved in a “new course” of Jewish American identity making. As he explains, “Writing powerfully out of their own experience, the older writers could not begin to confront some of the emerging realities of Jewish life: the unexpected return to religion, the conflicts over assimilation, the youthful rebellion against suburbia, the key Jewish role in the New Left and the counterculture, the growing involvement of American Jews with Israel, and the newly-awakened memories of the Holocaust after 25 years of amnesia” (33).

cartoonists are representative of a more crucial trend of Jewish dis-affiliations: the emphasis is not so much on what Jews, despite their many differences, have in common, but rather on what the individual *chooses* to associate with. These self-inquiries are marked, at least initially, by disclaimers, or a distancing from communal notions of Jewishness. Such a stance towards Jewish identity is both aesthetically and ethically relevant: these artists remain consciously tied to a heritage of marginality but they recognize the privilege of choosing that affiliation, of secular contemporary Jewish difference as, primarily, a choice. In this way, they are able to maintain agency over the process of representing the self without completely letting go of the notion that identity formation always connects the self to others. For these women, autobiographical inquiry inevitably involves the struggle of confronting contradictory notions of self, and especially those that emerge in depictions of the individual subject in relation to the collective subject.²⁴

I use the term “post-assimilated” to refer to the works of cartoonists that represent this new Jewish metaphor based in dis-affiliation. The cartoonists and writers of this “wave” still hold the memory of their parents’, grandparents’, and great-grandparents’ struggles with assimilation, but their works do not begin or end with this struggle or the generational unfolding that results from it. Assimilation is a metaphor for them, rather than a reality, and they use it to describe their relationships to versions of identities and self-classifications that they can neither easily reject nor accept. I use the term “post-assimilation” with many of the qualifications that Marianne Hirsch ascribes to postmemory. “Post” is not meant to imply that we are beyond certain experiences of assimilation, but rather that these new generations are still influenced, however indirectly, by the effects of assimilation experienced by those who came before them,

²⁴ As Mary Egelton explains, “The issue of locatedness and the problem of the subject, that other major theoretical debate of recent years, intertwine and, in both Rich’s work and politics of location writing generally, this double perspective is often expressed through what we might call the problem of pronouns—‘I’, the individual subject, ‘we’, the collective subject and the relations between” (300).

even as they do not necessarily make those experiences central to their own narratives. As Harvey Pekar writes in his introduction to Kominsky Crumb's first collection of comics, *Love that Bunch*, "Aline's parents and most of her grandparents were born in the United States. Much of the old world heritage was lost to her" (III). Pekar's introduction emphasizes the cultural moment that led to Kominsky Crumb's dis-affiliatory sensibility. With her work, she points a critical eye at what she sees as a commercial and disconnected "postwar" generation. But her comics nevertheless move beyond that moment, as she attempts to come to terms with a new version of Jewish being that is not reliant on either cleanly breaking from or connecting with past conceptions of Jewish identity. Instead, as the hyphen in "dis-affiliation" indicates, it is a process of self-discovery that involves a struggle between affiliations and disaffiliations, or a conscious and articulated set of negotiations between breaks from as well as attachments to communal notions of identity.

In "Self-Creation in Vanessa Davis's Diaristic and Autobiographical Comics," I turn to the work of a cartoonist influenced by Kominsky Crumb's work but who has nevertheless moved outside of a direct fixation with the stereotyped Jewish and/or female body. As Davis explained in a recent interview, "I think it's a 'post-feminist' (for lack of a better term) stance. I'm not rejecting the existence of body image, but I'm also not concentrating on it" ("In Search of" 3). Davis's work shifts the focus of autobiographical reflection from the body, its perceived excesses, and its relation to other bodies to the spaces that the body occupies, both in "real" time and on the page. Incorporating diary comics into the fold of short narrative comics and one-page sketches, her texts relay how framing, context, and perspective strongly influence meaning-making. In her graphic memoir, *Make Me a Woman* (2010), as well as in her earlier published graphic journal, *Spaniel Rage* (2005), her persona is consciously and dynamically shaped by the

spaces that she inhabits and shapes. Although Davis is influenced by past conceptions of Jewish identity, her works focus on how that identity can be reframed, primarily in relation to normative notions of identity as “home.” In this way, her comics, like those of her contemporaries, can be seen as furthering the project of visualized Jewish dis-affiliations as enacted in Aline Kominsky Crumb’s comics.

In chapter three, “Memory, Adolescence, and Belonging in the Graphic Memoirs of Miss Lasko-Gross and Lauren Weinstein,” I turn to Miss Lasko-Gross’s *Escape from ‘Special’* (2006) and Lauren Weinstein’s *Girl Stories* (2006). Both are autobiographical narratives that revolve around questions of identity and what it means to feel like an outsider in various spaces and contexts. These texts simultaneously fulfill and challenge expectations of what childhood and adolescent literatures should look and sound like. The focus on childhood and adolescence as the “present” in these memoirs establishes the liminal as a useful and perhaps even essential means of understanding and representing the self. In addition, these authors’ personas relate to their past identities – especially as women and Jews – as figurations of the self that they must simultaneously acknowledge and memorialize. By writing from the point of view of adolescence, these cartoonists demonstrate how to “unaffiliate Jewishly” by taking on a past/passed point of view that nevertheless continually informs a “present” sense of self. As one who is always in flux or between worlds, the adolescent self represents the uneasy sense of dislocation alongside the potent desire to belong that all of these cartoonists are interested in exploring.

In my final chapter, ““But you don’t live here, so what’s the dilemma?”: birthright and accountability in the geographics of Sarah Glidden and Miriam Libicki,” I turn to two works that investigate Jewish women’s relationships to Israel. These texts deconstruct Israel both as a place and an idea. Sarah Glidden’s *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less* (2010) and Miriam

Libicki's *Jobnik!* (2008) series are travel narratives that trace the journeys of their North American narrators in Israel. By challenging the notion of Israel as "Jewish homeland," these graphic memoirs investigate what Caryn Aviv and David Shneer have described as "the assumptions people make about diaspora" (*New Jews* 2). They play with expected notions of the travel memoir genre, revealing the complicated ways that Israel, as a concept and an actual place, affects both the real and imaginary geographics of American Jews in the 21st century. Rejecting oversimplified notions of Israel as Jewish "homeland," Glidden and Libicki's works visualize Rich's politics of location and propose dis-affiliation as a stance related to an ethics of accountability. Their graphic narratives offer the possibility of the spaces imagined and created on the page as ultimately the only comfortable "home" for Jewish American female cartoonists and, potentially, for secular American Jews more generally.

Chapter One

“My Independent Jewish Monster Temperament”: The Serial Selves of Aline Kominsky Crumb

Aline Kominsky Crumb has never disguised her Jewish identity on the page. From her earliest published works, she has incorporated Yiddishisms into the language of her comics, has often drawn her alter-egos displaying symbols of their Jewishness (such as wearing Stars of David around their necks), and has not shied away from continuous criticisms and reflections of the Jewish middle class community that she was born into.²⁵ A close inspection of her comics also reveals a consistent, self-conscious awareness of the anxiety that accompanies representing the body as Jewish. As Derek Parker Royal points out in his introduction to a 2007 special issue of *MELUS* on ethnicity in graphic narratives, comics provide an especially fertile space for the examination of “those very assumptions that problematize ethnic representation” because they have historically relied on visual stereotypes (9). By exaggerating Jewish bodily and behavioral “flaws,” especially in her female personas and characters, AKC confronts such stereotypical notions of Jewish identification by visualizing them.

This chapter will focus on the ways that AKC’s autobiographical comics play with long-held stereotypes about Jewish women and their bodies, about women and their bodies more generally, and about the representation of such bodies and subjectivities in the interface of various autobiographical modes.²⁶ Her work has caused some to refer to her as “sexist and anti-

²⁵ “Kominsky” was the name that AKC acquired from her husband, and not her maiden name. Interestingly, some of the ways that she has been referred to in various interviews and articles include “Ms. Crumb,” “Aline Kominsky,” and “Aline Kominsky-Crumb.” Given the importance of naming in her works, in this project I use the arrangement she uses (“Aline Kominsky Crumb) to sign her name to entries in the blog, “Crumb Newsletter” (<http://rcrumb.blogspot.com/>), which is also the way her name is written on the cover of her memoir. For ease of reading, I will frequently refer to Aline Kominsky Crumb as AKC throughout this chapter.

²⁶ For more on the history of autobiographical comics, see Jared Gardner’s “Autobiography’s Biography, 1972-2007” (2008), his more recently published work, *Projections: Comics and the History of 21st-century Storytelling* (2011), and especially Chapter Four: “First-Person Graphic, 1959-2010,” and Elisabeth El Refaie’s *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (2012). Two academic journals have recently also devoted

Semitic” (*Complete Dirty Laundry* 5) because she does not simply reject such bodily codings in favor of new, more politically correct, or anti-typological portrayals of Jewish women. Instead, she confronts stereotypical representations by recognizing how ingrained they are in her subjectivity and by portraying them as a constant and sometimes even productive influence in how she sees herself and others. In a 2007 interview published in *Heeb* magazine, AKC discussed her Jewish identity in relation to her experiences of growing up in an upwardly mobile, mostly Jewish, suburban community, and particularly in regards to her relationships with “Jewish boys who were real snotty” (49). As she explained, “They were these short, skinny boys who wanted little blond girls. Those boys all grown up still make me feel like a Jewish monster. Whereas when I’m with a goy, I feel exotic and sexy and voluptuous.” With this statement, AKC reinscribes classifications of Jewish men as petite, feminized, and *shiksa*-loving, while she reinforces her own feelings of marginality stemming from another gender stereotype: that of the Jewish woman as “monster.”²⁷ Additionally, what she enjoys about non-Jewish men is their fetishization of the Jewish woman as an exotic, or sexy, other.

In this response, and, as we shall see, in her comics, AKC suggests that longstanding categorizations of Jewish women (and, consequently, of Jewish men as well) can become empowering based not only on who is creating the image but also on how it is being made. In this case, she reveals the contradictions inherent in depictions of Jewish women as both desirable

special issues to exploring autobiography in comics: *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (Winter 2006), Special Issue: Graphic Narrative, edited by Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven, and *Biography* 31.1 (2008), Special Issue: Autographics, edited by Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti. In addition, Hillary Chute’s *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010) focuses on women’s contributions to autobiographical graphic narratives, especially in relation to narratives of trauma. Finally, Michael A. Chaney’s recently edited anthology, *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels* (2011), collects many interesting meditations on the subject by some of the most notable names in academic visual autobiographical criticism, with new (and several republished) essays by Paul John Eakin, Marianne Hirsch, Bella Brodzki, Sidonie Smith, Linda Haverty Rugg, Julia Watson, Leigh Gilmore, Isaac Cates, Bart Beaty, and Hillary Chute, among others.

²⁷ “Shiksa” is a Yiddish and Polish word that means “non-Jew” and was initially coined as a derogatory term. In its more recent North American application, it is a term generally, though not always, used satirically. More on the construction of Jewish “masculinity” can be found in Daniel Boyarin’s *Unheroic Conduct: the Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (1997).

and grotesque in their otherness. By favoring a self-conscious portrayal of how conventional notions of the self and of communal identities continue to define the way she depicts herself and others, AKC risks being misread as an artist confirming these stereotypes even as she sometimes slantingly distorts and dislodges them. Her postwar autobiographical comics present the potential of stereotype as a means of representation that, through re-construction, can lead to new ways of seeing and understanding the self, although these new ways of seeing are also connected to a limiting and destructive past.

AKC experiments with stereotypes to reveal their productive possibilities, as well as their limitations and degradations, not only in relation to her Jewish identities, but also in relation to her identities as a woman. Her Jewish body is always inevitably a gendered body. In her graphic memoir, *Need More Love* (2007), she illustrates the interdependence of these identity positions through serial depictions of various alter egos in the framework of one over-arching narrative.²⁸ While AKC had already published most of the comics included in this memoir, a reading of her representations of Jewish identities not separately but as part of this larger collage-like work reveals how her understanding of Jewishness is integrated into the scheme of a carefully structured narrative. Teetering on the verge of the autobiographical and the imaginary, this text invokes and performs countless anxieties and fluctuations about genre classification and intent, much like the graphic narratives of all the cartoonists examined here. Her ambitious aesthetic project questions the constructions that form and inform self-identifications (of woman, Jew, or artist, for example). It also challenges and makes visible the artificial boundaries between how we define ourselves and how others define us. Finally, it reveals the ways that self-

²⁸ As Nicole McDaniel points out in her essay, “Self-Reflexive Graphic Narrative,” the definition of the word “serial” is currently undergoing a transition: “Now also linked with repetition, seriality can be either recursive and episodic or sequential and chronological” (199). For the purpose of this project, I understand the serial to be aligned with the recursive and episodic, that is, with a lack of any sense of closure.

representation on the page, through the interplay of text and image, can inform, supplant, or destabilize these various constructions. Through these engagements, her memoir reflects the possibility of dis-affiliation as a process of inhabiting a liminal or in-between space. Dis-affiliation in this way becomes a “style” or “temperament” built out of the continual negotiations amid the borders between self and other.

I. “It is me but it’s not completely me”

Born in 1948 in Long Island, New York, Aline Kominsky Crumb is best known as an autobiographical underground cartoonist and the wife of legendary counter-cultural cartoonist Robert Crumb. As Hillary L. Chute points out in *Graphic Women* (2010), which includes a chapter on AKC’s comics and especially her representations of sexuality, “the case of the Crumb family is possibly *the* defining example of [the] double standard at work” (31). While Robert Crumb has achieved worldwide fame and is respected in the comics world for “writing the darker side of (his own) tortured male sexuality,” AKC’s work has been criticized for the very same reason. In fact, Chute’s chapter-length discussion of AKC’s comics is the first critical text to include an in-depth examination of this highly influential cartoonist.²⁹

AKC’s comics have often been looked down upon as scratchy, “crude scrawls” (*Complete Dirty Laundry* 4). Instead of recognizing her works as intentionally stylized, some critics have dismissed them as narcissistic, amateur, and confessional. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out in *Interfaces: women, autobiography, image, performance* (2002), women’s autobiographical projects are often viewed as transparent renderings of their life stories

²⁹ In addition to Chute, several people have engaged with AKC’s comics: Jared Gardner includes a very short discussion of AKC’s comic “Goldie” in his article, “Autobiography’s Biography” (2008), Andrea Most briefly discusses AKC’s work in her essay, “Re-Imagining the Jews Body” (2006), and Sander L. Gilman refers to “Nose Job” in his work, *Making the Body Beautiful* (2001). Most recently, two articles have more extensively explored Jewishness in AKC’s comics: my article, “Visualizing the Jewish Body in *Need More Love*” (2010), which is an earlier incarnation of this dissertation chapter, and Federica Clementi’s “The *JAP*, the *Yenta*, and the *Mame* in Aline Kominsky Crumb’s *Graphic Imagination*” (2012).

instead of carefully constructed interpretations and performances of their memories and experiences, which is what is more generally presumed about men's autobiography. AKC capitalizes on this misreading by frequently putting herself down in her comics, both verbally and visually. As critics and readers have frequently pointed out, she looks much more attractive in photographs and in person than she does in her drawings of her personas. In public forums, too, she often plays along with the idea that she lacks a deliberate consciousness about her artistic style, as though the reason she draws herself as "ugly" is because she doesn't, in effect, have the skills that it takes to draw in what would be considered a more realistic, and therefore ostensibly more skilled, style. In one interview, in response to a question about her artistic vision, she tells the interviewer, "You seem to think I have a more sophisticated approach to the whole matter than I do..." ("A Joint Interview" 122). In this way, she contributes to the false notion of herself as an untrained and amateur cartoonist, a conceit that allows her more freedom on the page, although it sometimes reinforces misreadings of her comics.

Despite this projection, her works themselves draw attention to the performativity and deliberateness of her autobiographical depictions. In individual comics, she often radically changes the style in which she draws herself from panel to panel. Sometimes the variation is as subtle as the shape of her nose or the cut of her hair; sometimes she brings attention to these fluctuations through textual commentary. For example, in many of the collaborative comics that AKC draws with her husband, which I will return to later in this chapter, she includes little starred notes, similar to footnotes, at the bottom of certain panels and pages. In one such note on a page from the very long comic "Krumb and Kominsky in Their Cute Little Life Together," originally published in *The Complete Dirty Laundry Comics* (1992), she writes, "The Bunch changes her look a lot because she likes to draw herself in different cute outfits with new hairdos

whenever she wants to!!” (186).³⁰ Sure enough, *The Bunch*, which is one of AKC’s many personas, is drawn wearing different clothing and with several hairdos throughout the comic. Her hair is down and curly in all of the panels on one page, her feet bearing large and chunky platform shoes. On a previous page, she has her hair up in a ponytail, her legs are unshaven, and her feet are bare. In this way, AKC highlights the very differing images that she has of herself, each dependent on her mood and outlook at the time when she is writing and drawing. In addition, *The Bunch*’s outfits and hairstyles tend to remain uniform over the course of full pages, at which point they often change. Presumably, *The Bunch* does not change her outfit until the artist begins a new day of creating the comic, which starts on a fresh page. In this way, the reader is reminded of the process of drawing an autobiographical comic as something that happens over time, and that is therefore dependent on and bound to the very same shifts in subjectivity as the author herself. By continually refiguring the ways that she draws herself, even or especially through subtle details, AKC’s work reveals the multiplicity of images that individuals have of themselves, which are reliant on context and which undergo endless transformations, both considerable and slight.

AKC uses another powerful technique within her comics to relay the gap between life and the representation of that life, and to draw the reader’s attention to the constructedness of her self-depictions. Scott McCloud has outlined several different categories of word-image combinations that are often used in comics, although he admits that the possibilities are endless (152).³¹ In a “word specific” combination, for instance, the text gives away the storyline and the

³⁰ Only three pages of this comic are republished in Chapter Three of *Need More Love*. Many of the republished comics in *Need More Love* have been excerpted and some, like this one, do not include a title page. The inclusion of just parts of certain comics throughout *Need More Love* adds to the fragmentary design of the text. Since I am examining these comics in the context of the memoir as a whole, I have included page numbers indicating where the images can be found in their republished, and not original, versions.

³¹ McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (1994) is often regarded as a text that helped establish a common vocabulary for such theoretical discussions of comics. He owes many of his ideas and explanations about comics, and especially

image on the page merely helps illustrate what is already written (153). In a “picture specific” combination, on the other hand, the opposite occurs, with the words on the page merely acting as a “soundtrack” to the image. McCloud determines that the most common combination, an “interdependent” one, involves “words and pictures [that] go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone” (155). AKC uses such interdependent combinations to reveal a disparity between what she is thinking and how she presents herself on the outside (often as amenable to others). In an early comic, for instance, she depicts The Bunch talking to an art teacher who she later realizes was only interested in her for her body (*Need More Love* 110). The dramatic difference between how The Bunch represents herself to him – with a smile and the words “Hm... Wow Great!” – and what she is thinking, which is that she has lost some of the pleasure in painting because of the restrictions of the art classroom, comes across through this interdependent word/image combination. The reader has to work a bit harder to put together and accept the co-existence of these often conflicting layers of experience, in the same way that the reader has to recognize The Bunch’s different body-shapes and outfits as representative of the same person. In this way, AKC employs the unique form of comics, specifically the juxtaposition of word and image, to convey the inherently ambiguous and selective nature of self-projection. The visual self on the page is differentiated from the verbal self on the page, which is further divided into internal and external subjectivities (as represented, for instance, by the thought bubble and the speech bubble).

the interactions between words and images, to Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), which he acknowledges in his introduction to *Understanding Comics*. Several other critics have attempted their own word-image taxonomies. A summary of these formalist definitions of comics can be found in El Refaie’s *Autobiographical Comics*, and especially pps. 22-4. Many contemporary comics theorists have built on scholarship of image-text interactions based in other media, including photography and film. Some of the most well regarded of such theories include those outlined by Roland Barthes, especially in his collection of essays, *Image-Text-Music* (1978), as well as visual theorist W.J.T. Mitchell’s *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986).

The global framework and structure of *Need More Love* further establishes AKC's self-imaginings as multiple, fragmented, and often contradictory in sentiment, if not also in appearance, style, and voice. In the memoir, which interweaves many of her previously published works with a running diary-like commentary, she incorporates photographs and paintings of herself alongside her autobiographical comics as another way of highlighting the intentional contrast between the various ways that she sees herself and the ways that others see her. Her inclusion of serial but always slightly differing drawn and recorded autobiographical visions reinforces the idea that every single self-image is built out of a variety of notions of the self. In another interview, she comments on the disparity between her drawn self and her real life self by explaining, "The character that I draw is fictional to some extent. It is me but it's not completely me. There's another part of me that's a little bit more well-adjusted, vain and confident" (*Dangerous Drawings* 172). Here she lends credence to the possibility that her persona on the page, much like her real life persona, is pieced together out of multiple and often mismatched versions of reality.

Juxtaposing photographs beside paintings and drawings also allows AKC to play with and challenge the hierarchy of signification that is so often taken for granted in discussions of self-representation. The photographic image, for instance, has sometimes been assumed to be a neutral object of communication – a nearly unmediated copy of the thing that has been photographed, surpassing writing in its truth-telling capabilities. As Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*, "[p]hotographed images do not seem to be statements of the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire" (4). Of course, as Sontag, Roland Barthes, and others have pointed out, photographs are never unbiased reflections of our

“real” selves.³² The body that has been photographed can never find what Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, calls “zero degree.” Instead, the photograph, like all mediums, is biased and its meaning is dependent on the context that surrounds its production and reception, such as the mind-set of what Barthes identifies as three key figures: the photographer, the subject of the photograph, and the person who is viewing the photograph. Therefore, for example, someone looking at a photograph found in a family album is going to see something very different from someone looking at a photograph in a museum. A photographic representation, and the response that it evokes, is never at a constant.

Comics have, in contrast, generally been presumed to be distant and vague renderings of whatever they are meant to represent. For this reason, cartoonists who draw autobiographical comics all too often find their works being referred to as “graphic novels” instead of “graphic memoirs.”³³ Terminology aside, comics are often presupposed to be less realistic – and therefore less sophisticated – than other kinds of art and writing. Only in the last few decades, with the publications, especially, of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus I* and *Maus II* (1986 and 1991), Frank Miller’s *The Dark Night Returns* (1986), and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986), have comics begun to be perceived as a literary form capable of addressing “serious” and real world concerns (Wolk 8).³⁴ In general, before the *Maus* series and, to a lesser degree, even after, comics have

³² Photography has been theorized in many now well-known texts, including (but certainly not limited to) Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* (1980), Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* (1977) and her palinode *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), and many works written by John Berger, including *Ways of Seeing* (1972). For more on the intersection between photography and autobiography, see especially Linda Haverty Rugg’s *Picturing Ourselves* (1997) and Timothy Dow Adams’s *Light Writing and Life Writing* (2000).

³³ Nancy K. Miller’s aforementioned article, “The Entangled Self” (2007), addresses the issue of why certain kinds of composition, like comics, are so often presumed to be fictional, while others are not. Thus, for example, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus II* was originally placed in the fiction section of the *New York Times* bestseller list, much to the author’s confusion.

³⁴ In *Reading Comics* (2008), Douglas Wolk calls the last few decades a “moment of crisis” for the comics world, as the field of what he calls “mainstream” comics battles the field of “art comics” (11). The hierarchy that has been established by many critics, and especially those unfamiliar with comics, is of “art comics” as highbrow and “mainstream” (often superhero) comics as lowbrow. Indeed, many use the term “graphic novels” rather than

often been presumed to be childish – sometimes, literally, made to be bought and read by children – and lacking in artistic and literary merit.

Both comics and photography are therefore mediums that have been misunderstood, with one (comics) often presumed to be an overly constructed and the other (photography) to be a nearly unconstructed representation of the subjects that they are meant to convey. AKC utilizes these common misperceptions to her advantage when she includes both photographs and comics in her memoir. For her, playing with the repetition of images, and especially of her own image, in these different forms allows her to recognize and draw attention to difference within a general sense of sameness; it offers her the opportunity to trace the expressions and postures that never allow her body to find “zero degree” and, therefore, that gesture to other possible points of rupture hidden within images of the self. For example, throughout the memoir, she includes photographs taken of herself at various stages of life, and these images are presented alongside, and sometimes on pages adjacent to, comics that she draws of herself in these same stages. AKC has admitted that the ways she draws her personas, what she calls “very expressionistic” (*Need More Love* 135), does not at all align with the ways she looks to other people. As she explains of her earlier comics, “I was actually pretty cute at that time, but I portrayed myself as a hideous monster” (151). The reader of *Need More Love* experiences this contrast in sorting through the various images, including comics and photographs, that make up the memoir. Consider, for instance, the photograph of an attractive AKC posing with a guitar at age eighteen (Figure 2). In the photo, with her head tilted downward and her eyes half-closed, she looks shy and demure. Turning the page of the memoir, the reader encounters a cartoon of AKC’s persona at around the same time period (Figure 3). In this comics image, her hair is wild and frizzy, not to mention red,

“comics” to describe what they deem to be more “serious” works. As Wolk and others point out, this issue points to a misperception of comics as a genre rather than a medium that can accommodate many genres.



Figure 2. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 101.



Figure 3. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 102.

a color that signifies her difference. Her eyes bulge and her teeth look huge, as she shouts out in front of a bookstore to the discomfort of another customer, “I’m free at last.” The contrast between the two pictures is not limited to her bodily features; it extends to her behavior and even to her interactions with others, like the ways that others respond to her. As this image suggests, AKC’s comics personas, which are exaggerated or distorted versions of the “real” thing, are paradoxically the depictions that allow her to reveal her deepest secrets and to expose herself, again and again, in ways that she cannot with photographs or other more “realistic” modes. With the comics versions of herself, AKC can feel “free at last.” Because of this dramatic contrast, readers are motivated to look twice at the family photographs that are supposedly traces of her actual self. In this way, the juxtaposition of photographs and comics in the text brings to the surface the gap between self-perception and perception by others, and the question of what any image can actually convey all on its own.

By incorporating different mediums into her memoir, AKC also takes advantage of the liminal status of both comics and photography in the arts world. In 1965, Pierre Bourdieu published his sociological study, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, which argues that photographs are somewhere in between what are considered “noble” and “vulgar” arts. If music, painting, and sculpture are thought of as legitimate arts, for instance, and mass-produced items like clothing and furniture are considered non-legitimate arts, then photography, along with film, is located in the middle of this spectrum. Since cameras have been made easy-to-use and even more-so since the advent of digital photography, taking a photograph is an activity available to those without any artistic experience or aesthetic interest. Yet, the uniqueness of each (printed) photograph – its status as an object and its indexical relationship to its subject – elevates it in this hierarchy above items that are put together on the assembly line. Comics are similarly valued:

although they are mass-produced, comic books bear the traces of the hand or hands that draw and write them. Because of the history of limited avenues available in the distribution of comics, they are also often coveted as collectible art objects. Both mediums, then, hover between low-brow and high-brow art, and each has been traversed by many as an exciting avenue for autobiographical exploration.³⁵

By including both photographs and comics in her memoir to create a hybrid text, AKC runs the risk of marginalizing herself even more-so than she would as an exclusive cartoonist. Unlike in the works of popular cartoonists, including Art Spiegelman and Alison Bechdel, who include actual photographs or drawings of photographs as bookends or singular images within their texts, AKC's memoir is so replete with photographs of herself and others that her work cannot be said to fit into any easily defined category. This marginalization works in much the same way as her self-deprecation regarding her artistic skills. In both cases, although she restricts her audience, she allows herself the freedom to experiment with form in a way that might not otherwise be possible.³⁶ While she subtitles her book a "graphic memoir," many readers might initially be turned off by the lack of a clear categorization of the text based on the differing mediums gathered, in a seemingly unorganized fashion, in its pages. In addition, the overwrought and glittery appearance of the book in itself, as well as its title, *Need More Love*, presupposes a certain flattened and solipsistic leitmotif, thereby possibly even further alienating potential readers. A cartoon drawing of AKC's persona is centered on the cover in a gilded and studded frame. Four small speech bubbles emanate from her character's mouth, which is busy

³⁵ Besides the autobiographical comics explored in this project, other graphic memoirists who have engaged in groundbreaking explorations of the form include Julie Doucet, David B., Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel, Harvey Pekar, Robert Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, Gabrielle Bell, James Kochalka, Jeffrey Brown, and many others. A comprehensive and international list can be found in El Refaie's *Autobiographical Comics*, pps. 237-40.

³⁶ It is notable that AKC considers *Need More Love* to be a "guerilla art statement" (qtd. in Chute 226). Indeed, the night AKC's book was released, the publisher went out of business, and she has since declined opportunities to bring the book back into publication (Chute 225-60).

chewing on a large, bright red Valentine heart. “More shoes,” “More beauty,” “More spiritual enlightenment,” “More pleasure and fun,” the bubbles read. This language of excess signals the catalog of confessional materials bound within the book’s pages, even as it mocks the autobiographical practice in itself as excessive and narcissistic. In this way, AKC’s cover image responds to and satirizes a tradition of autobiography in which authors frequently begin by apologizing for their self-interest and qualifying the content of the material to come.

Most famously in comics autobiography, for example, Justin Green’s introduction to the 1972 classic, “Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary,” pictures the cartoonist with bound arms and legs, hanging upside down and writing with a pen in his mouth that has been dipped in “dad’s blood.”³⁷ The hero apologizes for the “indulgent, morbid, and obscene” content of the following pages, beseeching the reader, “Please don’t think I’m an asshole” (10). The subsequent text makes good on the narrator’s promise, for instance picturing rays shooting out of Binky Brown’s penis as he divulges his personal history of going to Catholic school, coming to terms with his sexual needs and desires, and dealing with his obsessive compulsive disorder. For AKC, the excess of her memoir project is also built out of the explicit and personal journey that she takes us on – one which includes, for example, a comic exploration of her parents’ sex life and drawn images of them engaged in the act. But the excess of *Need More Love* is unapologetically presented, and it extends even beyond the graphic material contained in its pages, in both senses of the term “graphic.” The book is also excessive in its sheer size – it comes to almost four hundred pages – and the expanse of personal materials that it brings together. In a sense, *Need More Love* is a fully fleshed out archive of the self, one that takes into account the many verbal and visual materials that AKC has collected over time and internalized, which have then helped

³⁷ Green’s work is generally considered to be the first full-length autobiographical comic by a North American underground cartoonist, and his book influenced countless other cartoonists, including Kominsky Crumb. See Chapter Four of Gardner’s *Projections*, “First-Person Graphic, 1959-2010,” and especially pps. 127-32.

her form a unique but ever-changing projection of herself in her comics.³⁸ In this way, the memoir stands not just as an independent entity, but also as a supplement to the many individual comics and art works that AKC has produced over time and in various contexts. The photographs in *Need More Love* reinforce the atmosphere of excess that is ingrained not only in this particular memoir, but also in AKC's life-long project of self-inquiry and self-representation.

In drawing on the art of collage in her memoir, AKC reveals the possibilities available to the artist creating “in excess,” the artist willing to purposefully and creatively straddle the line between fantasy and reality. Towards the end of *Need More Love*, she includes a sketch of herself standing beside her friend (Figure 4). The sketch is much closer to her likeness in photographs, and in it she stands with her arms crossed, her mouth closed, and a pair of sunglasses covering her eyes. The image suggests that she is holding something back from the spectator, and it is as much her stance as it is the more realistic depiction of her that enables her to maintain this boundary. If drawing herself as a cartoon allows her to explore and expose the most secretive and hidden parts of herself and her experiences, then this sketch suggests that the closer she moves towards a realistic or photographic depiction, the more she hides herself from the viewer. AKC's inclusion of a photographic album within her memoir therefore allows her to suggest an entire spectrum of self-revelation accessible within its pages. But it is through the comics form alone that she comes closest to conveying her “real” self on the page, through her personas. The force of AKC's work therefore emerges from the creation of a character on the page who exposes herself as somehow a part of, or attached to, the real life author, but who is

³⁸ Gardner also discusses the relationship between comics and archives in Chapter Five of *Projections*, “Archives and Collectors, 1990-2010,” pps. 149-79. He argues that “it is the structural affinities of the comics form with the “database aesthetic” that has contributed to the increasing visibility and relevance of the comics form in the twenty-first century” (149).



Figure 4. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 290.

also a distanced, exaggerated, and made-up version of the “original” – one who “is me but [is] not completely me.”

II. “In the beginning I felt loved...”

Goldie is one of Kominsky Crumb’s earliest semi-autobiographical recurring characters. In a recent interview, AKC describes Goldie as a kind of alter ego representing the worst or most hated parts of her. As she explains, “my maiden name is Goldsmith. They used to call my father ‘Goldie,’ so it went back to my father. And also since I didn’t like my father very much, I sort of hated that name, and my character was a part of me that I felt was repulsive, and the name sort of fit that character” (Interview, *Believer* 62). Here, in the choice of her alter ego’s name, she demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the most hated and feared aspects of herself and her childhood. She is loyal to this past, even the elements of it that she wants to forget. Her

incorporation of negative concerns in her comics, and especially her frequent retellings of the traumatic events of her childhood (including teenage experiences of date rape, and physical and emotional abuses from her parents), indicate her awareness that to take oneself out of the past and into the present requires a constant revisiting of those past events. In addition, the incorporation of a diary-like narrative interspersed throughout *Need More Love*, in which she frequently retells the same series of events that are portrayed in her comics, performs a privileging of the past, in all its different incarnations, through a rendering of the self that is mired in the present.

With the comic, “Goldie: A Neurotic Woman” (*Need More Love* 140-4), AKC traces the first twenty-two years of her life through various images of herself (as Goldie) that dramatically diverge.³⁹ In the first panel, we see a smiling, curly-haired little girl with a doll protected in her arms and a tiny Jewish star around her neck (Figure 5). The caption reads, “In the beginning I felt loved....” In this panel, she is framed by a rectangular box and surrounded by relatives ogling and admiring her from the sidelines. The box-within-a-box arrangement suggests that such unadulterated love requires stringent boundaries, that unconditional love is related to an understanding of the self as an object, as divided from others. Soon, puberty hits: her hair loses its bounce, her body balloons, and large, round blemishes cover her face. “With puberty came ugliness and guilt.....” the narrator writes, and she depicts herself in a panel alone, surrounded only by a light that accentuates her new, unwieldy frame (Figure 6).

³⁹ “Goldie: A Neurotic Woman” was first published in the premier issue of *Wimmin’s Comix*, the first on-going comic drawn exclusively by women. The first published comic drawn and written by women only was *It Ain’t Me Baby* (1970). Two years later, *Wimmin’s Comix* put out their first issue. In publication from 1972-1992, *Wimmin’s Comix* has featured many of the most well-known underground women cartoonists, among them Phoebe Gloeckner, Dori Seda, and Roberta Gregory. For a history of women’s underground comics, consult the introduction to Hillary Chute’s *Graphic Women*. Trina Robbins has written various (non-academic) histories of women and comics, including *The Great Women Cartoonists* (2001) and *From Girls to Grrlz: A History of Women’s Comics from Teens to Zines* (1999).

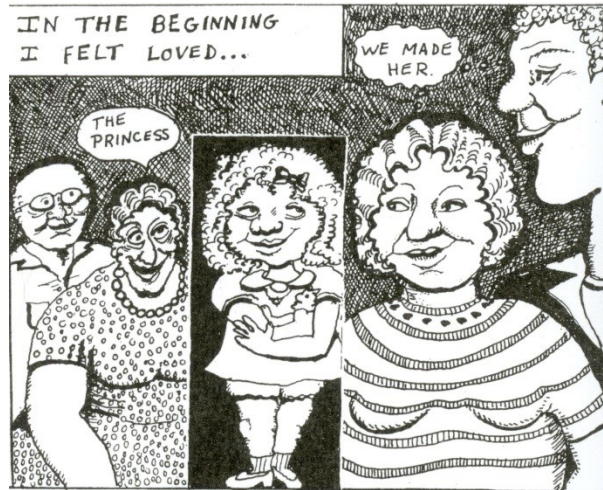


Figure 5. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 140.



Figure 6. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 140.

This dramatic metamorphosis occurs in the span of a single page, emphasizing the sense of helplessness and lack of agency that emerge from Goldie’s changing and aging body. In the next few pages, she juxtaposes her first sexual experiences and hungers with her father’s verbal abuses (“Ya can’t shine shit,” he says to her one day as she applies make-up in front of the bathroom mirror) and her desire to “attract a boy” (141). These episodes culminate in a panel that reads, “I was a giant slug living in a fantasy of future happiness” (Figure 7). Here, her body

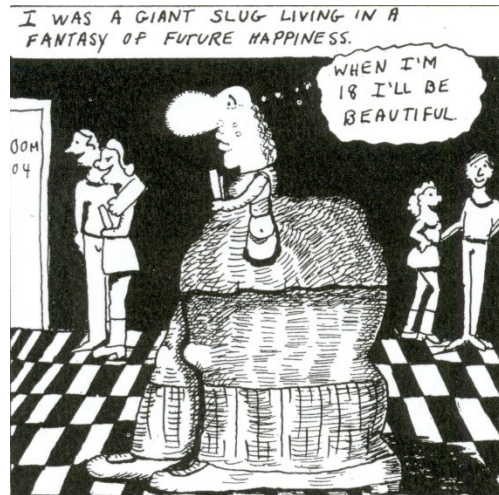


Figure 7. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 142.

indeed comes to resemble a giant mass, with formless legs and an exaggeratedly bulbous nose. In the background, we see two happy, skinny couples looking off into the sidelines. This panel contrasts with Goldie as a framed and admired golden child and again suggests that happiness and self-image are connected to the status of her boundaries in relation to others. As a slug, her body overtakes the frame and, although she is spatially a part of this school crowd, the borderlessness of her protruding body actually highlights her otherness, the sense that her experience is taking place in another dimension. She looks off to the side just like the other teenagers, but the dramatic distinction between what she is thinking – “When I’m 18 I’ll be beautiful” – and how she looks suggests that she is not seeing whatever it is that the others are seeing outside of the frame. This teenaged Goldie is no longer subject to the gaze of the other because she cannot recognize where, both literally and metaphorically, she ends and others begin.

If the first half of “Goldie” traces the narrator’s transformation from a smiling, protected little girl, literally boxed in on the page, to a wretched, borderless adolescent – one who cannot distinguish how she sees herself from how others see her – the second half expands on the

traumas of this early narrative with her adult self. As an adult, Goldie acts out the roles that match how she believes others see her: sex object, Jewish wife, artist-muse. In each case, she does not last long in her roles because of the contrast between how she feels and how she wants to be seen – a gap that is often demonstrated in the text through a pronounced disparity between what she is thinking (as depicted verbally in thought bubbles or narrative text) and how she presents herself (as depicted usually visually in facial and bodily expressions). The divergence between her inner and outer selves impels her to try out new roles in the hopes of finding some sense of relief, of repossessing the sense of wholeness that she felt as a child surrounded by clear and closed boundaries separating her from others. In just a few pages, she pursues drugs and sex, gets pregnant, marries a “sensitive insecure Jewish boy with a job,” moves to the desert, leaves her husband to pursue other men, alcohol, and drugs, and finally finds that other women and her own brother have “turned against me.” In one panel, which shows her lying naked on a bed with men lined up at her front door (one leaving the house with a satisfied grin on his face), she explains, “The more I was ostracized the more I degenerated” (144). As with Goldie-the-child, the adult Goldie depicts her actions as determined by outside forces. Instead of her changing body propelling the downward spiral, adult Goldie finds herself “compulsively” pursuing pleasure and inevitably “end[ing] up in a state of despair.” It is only in the last three panels, when she begins to “analyze the past events of her life,” that she finally starts to blame and implicate others, instead of feeling self-hatred. In a sense, in becoming “indignant at everyone else,” she learns to distinguish herself from others, to rediscover and, for the first time, to possess of her own agency those boundaries that were forced on her as a child.

Tellingly, the Star of David appears twice in “Goldie.” It first appears in the opening panel when Goldie is still the “golden child,” her image framed by loved ones. The star

disappears as Goldie's childhood story unravels, signifying that her conception of herself as Jewish and her subsequent omission of that identification is intimately tied to her relationship with her changing, increasingly sexual (and sexualized) female body. The second Star of David appears in a panel depicting the beginning of Goldie's first and unhappy marriage (143). The star looms large behind the bodies of the newlyweds, suggesting a point of union or connection between them. However, the couple's body language, the thought and speech bubbles next to each character, and the captions accompanying the image tell a different story. "It happened so fast," her new husband thinks, as Goldie declares, "You're all mine." Goldie's neediness, in comparison to his sense of shock and inevitable suffocation, presage the unfolding of a marriage characterized by miscommunication and emotional isolation. The Star of David, so prominent in this mismatched union, comes to symbolize the life and home that this couple will build together, as the *chuppah* is meant to symbolize in Jewish weddings.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, as the larger context of the panel shows, it is a home premised on misunderstandings and the pressure of familial expectations. "Thank God he's Jewish," Goldie's mother's thought bubble reads. In both cases, the Star of David represents an identity-symbol forced on Goldie by her family, and the narratives that unfold after the star is depicted and then omitted suggest this enforced and isolated version of an inherited identity as ominous and, inevitably for Goldie, unsustainable. AKC's inclusion of Jewish symbols and concerns in "Goldie," which will become even more central in the next few comics I explore in this chapter, reveal her desire to grapple, through what I have been calling dis-affiliation, with the complexities and contradictions of what it means to be a contemporary secular Jew in America.

In the last panel of the comic, Goldie sits in the driver's seat of a car with her cat in tow, this time looking straight at the reader, and the caption reads, "Finally after 22 years of trying to

⁴⁰ A *chuppah* is a ceremonial Jewish wedding canopy or covering.

please other people, I set out to live in my own style!” (Figure 8). It is unclear from the rest of the comic that she *has* any kind of personal style, except for the one drawn onto the page and tying together the young and old Goldie, the narrator undergoing trauma, and the narrator drawing and telling of the trauma. This panel suggests that it is Goldie-the-artist who inevitably

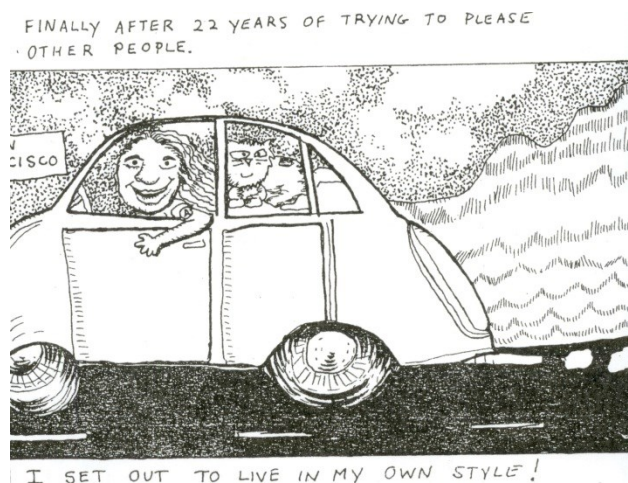


Figure 8. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 144.

ties together and gives voice to the young, happy child, the miserable slug, and, finally, the adult-pursuing independence. The style is both overarching and still being sought out, as she recognizes the impossibility of ever reconciling these many versions of herself in terms beyond the merely superficial. Yet, that surface says a lot because it marks the traceable voice of an artist. With this voice, the past that haunts and hurts her, including those versions of her identity that were forced on her, also serves as the basis of her self-exploration. This boxed-in version of Goldie inside the car represents her desire both for boundaries and for continuous movement in relation to those boundaries. She becomes an insider and an outsider in relation to her own life, able to articulate the traumatic experiences of puberty through adulthood from the inside, through the voices of a child, an adolescent, and finally an adult, because of her distance from them as an autobiographer-artist, as one who has learned to seek and observe from the outside. Goldie looks at us, in this last panel, from inside the frame of her car, which symbolizes

movement and possibility, but she is stagnant in this image, still trapped in the boundaries of her own constructed narrative.

In this final panel, Goldie's positions as the insider-outsider artist as well as the outsider-observing consciousness are analogous to her identities as a woman and Jew. For AKC, the questions surrounding Jewishness and the representation of that Jewishness begin with the paradox of Jewish identity as both inherited and chosen. Werner Sollors, in his seminal text, *Beyond Ethnicity*, refers to "the conflict between contractual and hereditary, self-made and ancestral [...] – between *consent* and *descent* – as the central drama in American culture" (5-6). AKC seems to be moving past the figuration of various forms of identity as based either in consent or descent. Instead, she represents how certain elements of being Jewish – adopting various cultural and religious practices, identifying *as* a Jew in a certain community – can be accepted or rejected (what I am calling "consent" or "choice"), whereas other aspects of being Jewish – your familial ties, how others see you – are without choice (what I am calling "descent" or "inheritance"). The same goes for her identity as a woman: as we will see more clearly in her other comics, and especially in "Nose Job," while she has some choice in terms of how she represents her female body, there are expectations and pressures that are passed onto her from others, including her mother and her male partners, based on her status as woman. Her representation of being an artist as an identity based primarily in consent at the end of "Goldie" allows AKC a safe vantage point from which to explore the elements of her identity that are thrust onto her. It is paradoxically through an exploration of and experimentation with the inherited aspects of her identities that she can establish choice both from within and alongside these identities.

III. “So I managed to make it through high school with my nose!”

The comic “Goldie” appears in Chapter Two of *Need More Love*, entitled “Escape.” This chapter focuses on the beginning of Kominsky Crumb’s career as a comic artist, the vocation that allowed her to escape from (and then return to, in her work) the strict confines of her family and her childhood community. By putting her first comic in the second chapter of the memoir, AKC suggests the importance of “Goldie” in terms of the story of her career rather than primarily in terms of the events of her early life. Conversely, her comic “Nose Job” (originally published in issue 15 of *Wimmen’s Comix* in 1989) forms part of the first chapter of the memoir, “Post-War Jerks,” which centers on her childhood and adolescence. This chronological play – the comics are situated not in the order they were drawn or published, but rather in terms of the unfolding of her subjectivity and her maturation as an artist – suggests that “Nose Job” reflects AKC’s struggle with her Jewish identity before she had come to identify herself as an artist. In a sense, then, this comic can be read as prefiguring that artistic “style,” the freedom that being an artist affords her in terms of the way she sees and depicts herself.

Early on in the “Post-War Jerks” chapter, she sketches her family’s “upwardly mobile” move to Woodmere when she was still a young child in one of the brief, diary-like pages that are interspersed throughout the memoir. Her description of the community presumes everyone in it to be Jewish; along with socio-economic status, Jewish identity is what ties the community together and forms the backdrop of her childhood:

The financial and social pressure to keep up was monstrous in the Five Towns [...]. An education was seen merely as a way to make more money. The ultimate for Jewish boys was to go to medical school and become doctors, or gods as far as everyone was concerned. For us girls, a good education was the way to land a rich husband and secure a

“better life,” meaning a large, showy new house, a big brand new car, the right schools, summer camps and beach and country clubs, the absolute latest fashion (“It’s what they’re wearing deah dahling!”), and every beauty treatment available – including a nose job, fairly routine in this socioeconomic group. (30-1)

AKC here delineates the status of “Jewish boys” as separate from that of “us girls,” pointing to the gendered differences built into the Jewish identity of her childhood community, as well as the specificity of her point of view as a woman. Yet, the description of both groups as subject to the expectations of a silent but persistent majority “pressure” highlights the interconnection between the Jewish boys and girls – both are subject to certain inherited expectations. Her comic “Nose Job” picks up on this question of gendered difference in light of a common otherness in the Jewish community of Five Towns.

“Nose Job” (*Need More Love* 86-8) stars The Bunch, who, as I have already mentioned, is a recurring alter-ego in AKC’s works.⁴¹ In an interview in *The Comics Journal*, she describes the origin of her character’s name in a narrative that echoes the story of how she came up with her alter ego Goldie: “I saw Honeybunch [Kaminski, a Robert Crumb character] as a cute, cuddly little victim, dumb and passive and compliant. I wanted to make the thing the exact opposite, a strong, obnoxious, repulsive, offensive character, but with a name that related to Honeybunch, so I shortened it to The Bunch which sounded disgusting” (66). Honeybunch Kaminski was the character drawn by Robert Crumb before he had ever met or seen her; for years, Crumb had been drawing this character that coincidentally resembled AKC, both visually and by name. In the context of the naming of both Goldie and The Bunch, AKC took names that had been “passed on” to her (retroactively, in the case of Honeybunch) by the men in her life and

⁴¹ The full title of the comic reads, “Just Think... I could’ve ended up looking like Marlo Thomas instead of Danny! If only I’d had a Nose Job.”

revised them, thereby claiming some agency over the naming process. In both cases, the characters she created came to be associated with this newfound agency – the ability to rename herself – but also with the inevitable ties she shared with the negative, or “disgusting” and “repulsive,” aspects of her past self. In addition, by including a definite article, “the,” before The Bunch’s name, she continues in a sense to objectify herself, but it is a depersonalization that takes place on her terms.⁴² The names of these characters therefore encapsulate the impossibility of ever fully detaching from the senses of self that others, mostly men, have projected onto her in the past – the inherited aspects of her identities – despite having somewhat freed herself from these prescribed roles through her art.

Even within her chosen personas, AKC frequently hints at the split that she inevitably experiences in having to draw just one version of herself on the page. The title panel of “Nose Job,” for example, reveals the rupture that she feels in writing one account of her history at the expense of dispensing with other fantastical accounts of her story, of the roads not taken (Figure 9). The panel is framed by two images of The Bunch in the present day: on the left side, The Bunch is depicted as she is usually represented, with a somewhat oversized nose, unruly red hair, large eyes and lips, and a shapely set of breasts; on the right side, The Bunch is drawn as she would ostensibly look had she chosen cosmetic surgeries, with a ski-slope nose, dark and straightened hair, and wearing a red blouse with a bow-tie that hides the shape of her body. The peace sign necklace that she is wearing on the left is gone on the right, signifying, like the change to more conservative dress, that the bodily alterations could inevitably lead to differences in her personality or at the very least in the other ways that she might choose to represent that personality had her life taken a different turn. The inclusion of these two self-representational possibilities at the opening of the comic serve to level The Bunch’s imaginary and “real” selves.

⁴² This character is often, but not always, referred to as “The Bunch,” rather than just “Bunch.”

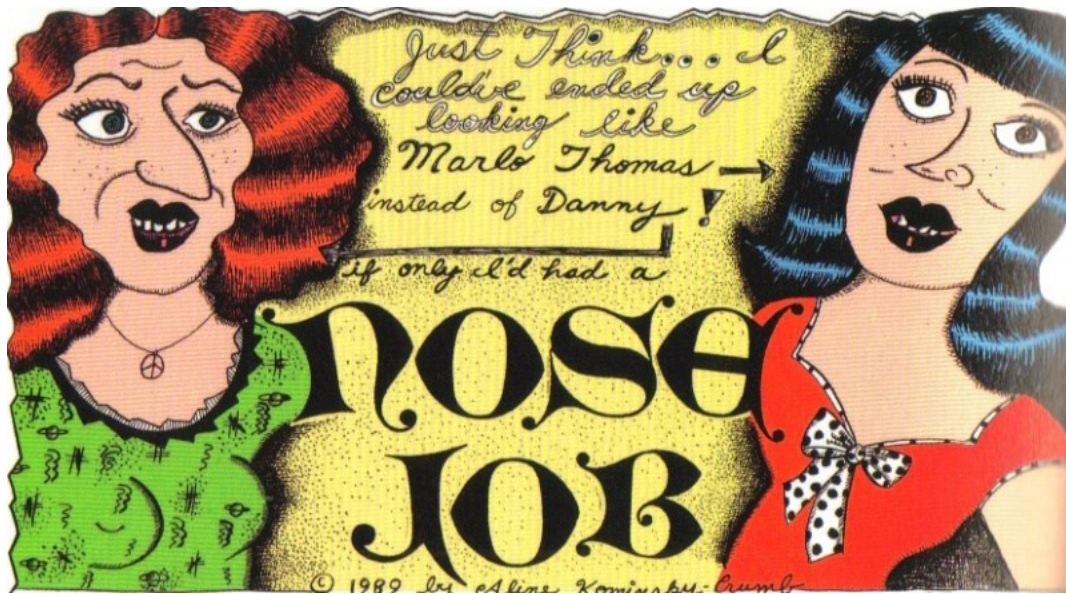


Figure 9. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 86.

As Jared Gardner writes of autobiographical comics, “[t]he split between autographer and subject is etched on every page, and the hand-crafted nature of the images and the ‘autobifictional’ nature of the narrative are undeniable” (“Autobiography’s Biography” 12). These two images – the “real” and the “imaginary” The Bunch placed side by side – acquire equal status in this comics world; they reinforce the fictionality intrinsic in any hand-drawn image. Further, they reveal AKC’s continual reassessment of the events of her past in relation to the present, her speculations about what might have been had she made different decisions in her life.

The comic then continues with the “real” The Bunch musing about plastic surgery: “Growing up with cosmetic surgery all around me... At 40 I can’t help dreaming about surgical possibilities.” She connects her reluctance to have plastic surgery with her experience of growing up on Long Island where, as she explains, “a disturbing epidemic” took place in 1962, as her Jewish classmates all began to show up in school with “pug noses + lots of eye make-up + cover

up under the eyes....” (87).⁴³ AKC depicts The Bunch in one panel alongside her friend, Stephanie Karasick, facing two young women with noses that have clearly been altered, but are still slightly distinct from each other (one is long and straight, the other a tiny “button”) (Figure 10). Although there is meant to be a strong contrast between the two sets of women in this panel – those, like The Bunch and Stephanie, with “big nose pride” and those without it – the drawing portrays four women with similar hairstyles (bangs, shoulder-length hair, and bows) and slightly parted, thick lips. What distinguishes the women most of all, besides the detail of their noses, is the way they are positioned. Stephanie and The Bunch face the front of the page, standing together as a pair, while we see only close-up profiles of the other two women, who almost block our view of the others. The symmetrical positioning of these two pairs of women reflects their interchangeability. Andrea Most’s “Re-Imagining the Jew’s Body: From Self-Loathing to ‘Grepts’” (2006) describes AKC’s graphic explorations of Jewish identity as focused on “[t]he distinction between Jew and non-Jew” (23). If, for AKC, this distinction is “a central organizing opposition” (21), an opposition that reveals itself in her comics in the way that Jews talk, eat, and look, then in showing two sets of Jews who are supposed to be opposed to one another but are clearly not, she works to set up and dismantle the possibility of opposition from *within* the group of Jewish women. Even with their nose jobs, these women do not “pass” in AKC’s eyes because, like them, she knows their histories, what they originally looked like. The contrast between the two sets of women is more a matter of context and perspective – of the way they stand in relation to one another, of who AKC chooses to have a voice in this panel – than of content, of what they look like on the page. In a sense, then, there is no escaping certain inherited aspects of one’s identity, even if one’s view of the situation can be manipulated and changed.

⁴³ For a social history of Jews and plastic surgery in contemporary times (including, as mentioned, a brief discussion of AKC’s “Nose Job”), see Chapter Six of Sander L. Gilman’s *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (2001), “Assimilation in the Promised Lands” (especially pps. 186-99).

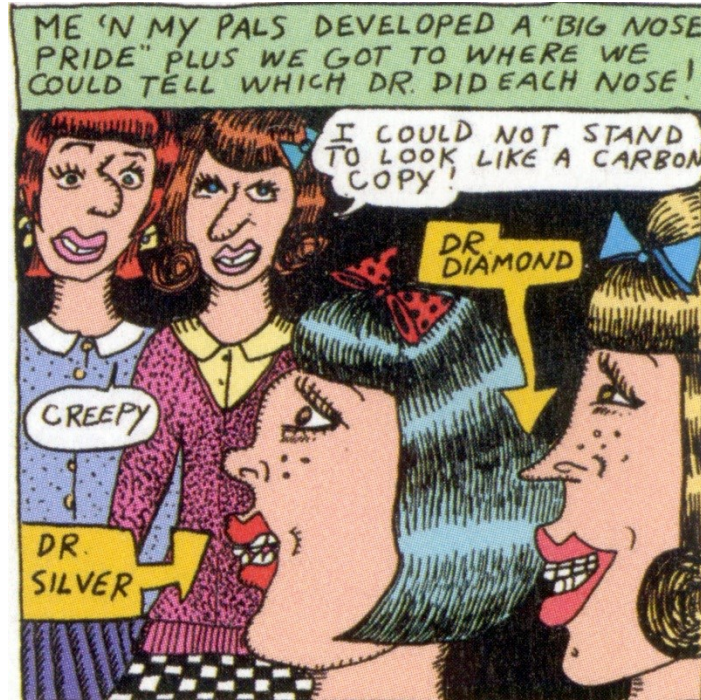


Figure 10. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 86.

In the next panel, whatever comfort The Bunch derived from being a part of a pair is taken away when Stephanie shows up to school looking, literally, like a different person (Figure 11). The Bunch wonders, “Who is that button-nosed beast? Sounds like my friend Stephanie Karasick, but it doesn’t look like ‘er!!” In this image, both women look dramatically different from the previous panel. The contrast is not only in how changed Stephanie looks from her previous self, with a new face that does not correspond at all with her old face, but also in how the women are situated in relation to each other. Large white speech and thought balloons fill up most of the panel, and the faces of the two women are nestled at opposite edges, looking at each other. Although they are having a conversation, only The Bunch’s lips are parted, while Stephanie’s remain closed. As with the previous panel, the opposition between the two women is a matter of positioning – of where they stand in relation to each other, of who gets to speak (or who gets to draw the comic). But here, the women also look very different from one another. The

Bunch is no longer wholeheartedly part of any group; her refusal to change her looks – to disguise herself – paradoxically marks her isolation from the Jewish community around her.

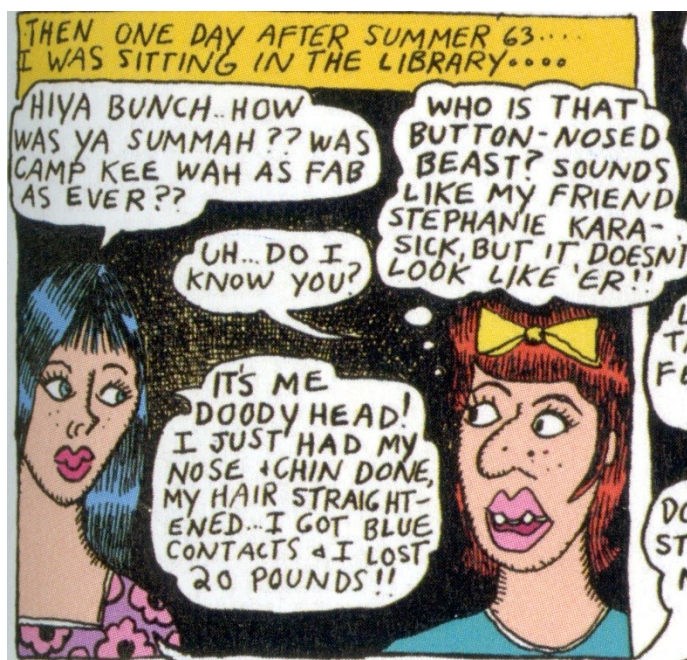


Figure 11. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 86.

As this comic ends, The Bunch narrates, “So I managed to make it thru high school with my nose! I was the only one o’ my friends with their ‘original’ face” (88). For AKC, maintaining that link to her original face is obviously a point of pride, even though, as an adult, she wrestles with questions of whether or not to get an eyelid job or a facelift.⁴⁴ With this simultaneous disidentification and identification with her younger self, she “celebrates the multiple possibilities of Jewish self-representation” (Most 27). She can feel a certain pride in her Jewish body (and nose) even as she recounts her struggles with body image as a teenager, and although

⁴⁴ A *New Yorker* cartoon by Crumb and AKC from November, 28, 2005, “Saving Face,” returns to the question of plastic surgery. In this cartoon, published sixteen years after “Nose Job,” AKC decides to have plastic surgery (a facelift) and returns home to justify and explain her decision to a somewhat horrified Crumb (and, ostensibly, to herself as well). AKC’s decision to record and publish this experience in her comics reflects her dedication to a notion of the self as always changing and even outgrowing or contradicting previous narrated (and pubic) versions of the self.

she continues to struggle with these issues as an adult. But it is always primarily in relation to her discomfort and distancing from the group that she forms a connection to her Jewish self.

In “Nose Job,” then, AKC portrays herself as both an insider and outsider Jew. She is the product of her upbringing, tempted by many of the same desires and values that she criticizes, but also one who has moved away from and often actively works against this way of life. This insider/outsider status crystallizes later in her life in her identity as an artist (as we have seen at the end of “Goldie”), an identity that allows her a sense of choice and freedom within the framework of the inherited aspects of all of her identities. At one point in “Nose Job,” The Bunch muses, “How come boys get to keep their noses?” (87). For AKC, the question of Jewish identity – and how to represent that identity – is always inevitably related to her identity as a woman. Karen Brodtkin has argued that Jews in America have experienced “a kind of double vision that comes from racial middleness” (1-2), from existing simultaneously inside and outside the realm of normative ethno-racial boundaries. In this comic, The Bunch experiences her identities as a woman and as a Jew as similarly granting her such a double vision, the ability to define herself through an ambivalent and dis-affiliatory relationship to an assigned identity. If, as a woman, The Bunch has to deal with the problem of the assimilation of her body, of whether or not to keep her nose, she can frame and draw that story as one of both personal agency and group dis/identity. She is forced to confront her nose because she is a woman and her body is therefore most valued for its conformity to a certain aesthetic norm, but it is also as a woman that she is able to claim her own independent Jewish identity, to stand *as* a Jew *outside of* the Jewish community. The inherited aspects of her identity positions, which include the stereotypes associated with being a Jew and a woman, ironically allow her a starting point from which to explore choice or individual agency in the face of what is forced or passed on to her by others.

IV. “But I don’t want to seem Jewish anymore...”

The third and fourth chapters of *Need More Love*, “Love, marriage and motherhood” and “The sunny south of France,” are organized around Kominsky Crumb’s experiences of “settling down” and starting a family of her own in settings very different from her childhood community in Long Island. Despite her move from the United States to France between these chapters, they collectively mark a new and important stage in her life narrative and also a new stage in terms of the trajectory of her aesthetic subjectivity and her career. Chronologically speaking, at this point in the memoir, she has already established herself as a cartoonist, and her artistic explorations now focus on two other roles, besides artist, that she has chosen for herself as an adult: namely, that of being a wife and a mother. What she reveals over the course of these chapters is the relational nature of these chosen roles, and how she similarly claims them primarily in terms of her dis-affiliations from them. The ways that she figures herself as a wife and mother are always dependent on a distancing from the person at the other end of that relationship, as well as a distancing from the ways that these roles have historically been figured by others. Her explorations of marriage and motherhood therefore parallel her experiences as an artist, as her comics are always informed by the many others – cartoonists, autobiographers, artists, writers – who have come before her.

Throughout these chapters, AKC includes various (republished) comics created collaboratively between herself and her husband. As she recounts, after breaking her leg in six places, she was forced to wear a cast for six weeks.

To keep me from getting too bored, we started to work on a two-man comic story, something Robert had done with his brother Charles when they were kids. We just

rambled on without any particular aim, plunging into crazy fantasies about invading aliens and Tim Leary, mixed with real details about the floods we were living through, and for the first time drawing our mutual “sexploitation.” We just let ourselves go and had fun with it. (176)

These playful collaborations stress the relational nature of the various identities at play in the comics (Jew/non-Jew, man/woman), as well as the very style of the artist. As we shall see, this style, born of the struggle to negotiate between inherited and chosen identities, paradoxically shows itself also to be a matter of both the inherited and chosen realities of the identity of the artist.⁴⁵

In “Euro Dirty Laundry” (*Need More Love* 249-63), which is featured at the beginning of Chapter four, Crumb and AKC’s self-identifications in terms of individual artistic styles literally bump up against one another on the page, revealing how much these identifications are dependent on the delineations and articulations of boundaries between self and other.⁴⁶ Although they have very different drawing styles, their collaborations mask these differences by offering no clear boundaries between the works of each individual artist on the page. While it may be clear that Crumb, who has a more classical and realistic-looking drawing style (heavy on details and cross-hatching), has drawn his own figure and thought or speech bubbles, and it is also clear that AKC has drawn hers, it is often less clear who has filled in the backgrounds, drawn the headings, or started the comic to begin with. In this way, their comics question the boundaries between self and other, artist and muse, creator and collaborator. By inserting such collaborative

⁴⁵ The collaborative comics of AKC and her husband (and sometimes their daughter, Sophie) were recently collected in a volume, *Drawn Together: The Collected Works of R. and A. Crumb* (2012).

⁴⁶ This comic also lists their daughter, Sophie Crumb, as the third collaborator. The part of the comic that I am looking at involves only her parents.

comics into her graphic memoir, AKC's work also questions the rigid definitions of life writing as writing by and about a single, representable subject.

The content of these comics further expands on the question of boundaries. At the beginning of "Euro Dirty Laundry," AKC declares, "But I don't want to seem Jewish anymore... It's too yucky and unpopular. . . Everyone hates the Jews!" (Figure 12). Here, she draws herself to look like Frida Kahlo, with thick eyebrows and a cross around her neck. In this panel, her visual self-depiction emphasizes the possibility, in autobiography, of turning one's self into whatever image suits one's particular desires at a moment in time (as well as the desires of the public, of what sells). Her words, however, reverse that possibility by declaring her Jewishness on the page. This word-image collaboration asserts the agency of the artist to reclaim or reject certain facets of her identity, all the while demonstrating the impossibility of ever fully hiding or passing. In other words, even the artist is not free, in creating depictions of herself (and others), of inherited notions of what this self looks and sounds like. Further, AKC's choice of Frida Kahlo emphasizes how much an author or artist's power is related to her status in the real world, and especially to the other identifications that are both chosen by her and imposed on her by others. Like AKC, Kahlo was married to a famous artist, the Mexican painter Diego Rivera. During her lifetime, Kahlo's artistic merit likewise took a backseat to her husband's, and she only became famous for her own talent after her death. By choosing Kahlo's visage as her "self-portrait" on the page, AKC inserts herself into an inter-ethnic narrative and creates a lineage of female artists whose works are always inevitably influenced by the way they are perceived by others off the page, particularly on the basis of gender.

The panel is complicated even more by Crumb's "side" of the page. He draws himself waving his hand in a Nazi salute, as he says, "I'm not anti-Semitic! Some of my best wives have



Figure 12. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 249.

been Jewish... Ha ha Seig heil!” In the context of Jewish American woman’s literature, the representation of interfaith marriages has often been a place to air out the anxieties and fantasies of assimilation. As a third-generation American, AKC, with her husband, fits herself into the conversation, but reconfigures the boundaries of this fantasy/anxiety as a space that can and should be talked about from the point of view of both the Jew and non-Jew. The anxiety of the Jew to assimilate and, consequently, to lose her heritage is in this way understood as dependent on the anxiety of the non-Jew *not* to be seen as anti-Semitic or as part of a history of anti-Semitism.

In the next panel, Crumb draws himself in traditional Hassidic garb, asserting, “Why I’m practically a Jew myself, I’ve been hanging around with Jews so long.” As the two are facing each other in this panel, this visual stereotype can be seen as an image that is dependent on the mirrored face of the other. Crumb’s caricature brings to the forefront the question of how much

one can reinvent or play with one's identity in autobiography without in some way reducing the self or the other to a stereotype. Crumb asks this question several panels later, after he has taken the joke even further, having depicted himself pondering his "Jew paranoia" in a panel in which his wife is absent. It is, presumably, her absence from the panel and not the content of it (which is no more offensive than the earlier ones) that prompts him to finally ask, "Are you offended by that last panel, Aline?" AKC responds, "No. . . I started it didn't I?" (250). The question of who "started it" emphasizes the difficulty, in such a collaboration, of deciphering between self and other, or, more generally, of deciding who should take the blame for such characterizations.⁴⁷ In the context of Jewish American comics, this set of panels stands as a commentary on who is to blame for the characterization of Jews in popular culture. Like Crumb and AKC's collaborative comics, the self-identification of the Jew is as much a product of the fantasies and paranoia of the self as of the other. In terms of the self-identifications of the artist, this comic illustrates the impossibility of ever claiming an artistic style as completely free of outside influences, even and especially those that the artist wants to reject or escape.

In her collaborative works with her husband, which allow AKC to question the boundaries between self-creation and collaboration, AKC is interested in playing with visual and verbal stereotypes on the page as one way of examining the pervasive and inescapable outside influences that inevitably shape an autobiographical project. In the chapters focusing on marriage and motherhood, these explorations also take place in her comics about motherhood. As an identity that has been chosen by her, motherhood has the potential to signify a role that allows AKC to feel free and to further indulge in her "own style." Yet, as her comics reveal,

⁴⁷ For more on the ethics of collaborative life writing, see G. Thomas Couser's *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (2004), Chapter Three: "Making, Taking, and Faking Lives: Voice and Vulnerability in Collaborative Life Writing." Although Couser is writing about prose memoirs, his discussion on possible exploitations involved in collaborative life writing could also readily apply to collaborative comics.

motherhood is an identity status that is always inevitably associated with inheritance – that is, the inherited relationship that she shares with her own mother, as well as the stereotypes about Jewish mothers that have more generally pervaded North American literature. In her comics about motherhood, AKC links these personal and collective inheritances through the Jewish mother stereotype, thereby demonstrating the inevitable struggle and interaction between her own perception of her mother and the perception passed onto her by others, about Jewish mothers more generally.

When AKC depicts Jewish women, and especially the women of her family, she pictures them as lacking in self-control. These portrayals in many ways connect these women with AKC's own personas. For example, she frequently represents herself (in real life and in her comics) as a limited and undisciplined female artist who lacks control in the very way her hand shapes figures on the page. Additionally, she often depicts her personas as giving in to their carnal, basic desires, whether they are sexual, sensual, gustatory, affective, or verbal. In the case of both her own personas and her drawings of other Jewish women, she presents this lack of self-control as a component of Jewish identity, and especially of gendered Jewish identity. In the comic, "Moo Goo Gaipan" (*Need More Love* 191-3), for instance, she pictures herself in the opening panel sloppily eating noodles with chopsticks as her speech bubble reads, "Us Jews love Chinese food." The next row of the comic depicts two panels that directly refer to the stereotype of the Jewish woman as one who consumes, but does not produce. In the first panel, AKC's persona narrates, "The women in my family really know how to eat" (Figure 13). In this case, she takes the subject of her cartoon – a generalization about all of "us Jews" – and narrows it down to make it a gendered classification, one that can be traced down the matrilineal line of her own particular family. The women depicted in the panel have exaggeratedly thick lips,

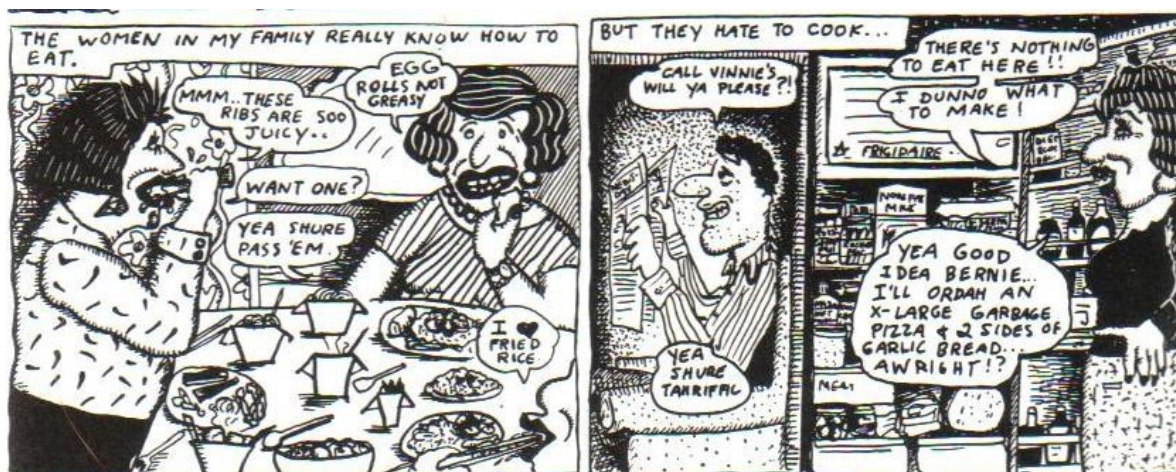


Figure 13. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 191.

emphasizing not only the excessiveness of their hungers for the many plates of food crowding the table, but also their propensity to focus on looking “done up,” even if their overly applied make-up only adds to the grotesqueness of the scene. Jewish women, as portrayed in AKC’s comics, are narcissistic and obsessed only with their own desires and needs, which are boundless. In the next panel, the narrator adds another sweeping statement about the women in her family, “But they hate to cook...” The woman pictured in the panel, presumably AKC’s mother or some other female relative, is revealed to be helpless, excessive, and wasteful, shouting into an overfilled refrigerator as her husband sits comfortably reading the paper in the next room. Without looking up, he suggests that she “call Vinnie’s,” and affirms her overdone suggestions for what they should order with a brief, “Yeah shure tahrifac.” The black line drawn between the two further distinguishes and isolates them from each other; if the Jewish woman has her head stuck in the refrigerator, ruminating over her many cravings in the face of mountains of food, the Jewish man is left untouched by the scene. Jewish women’s excesses and feeble-mindedness are well-documented and serve to make Jewish men look more analytical, balanced, and calm in contrast.

Riv-Ellen Prell has written about portrayals of Jewish men and women in America over the last half century or so, and how these portrayals often “mirror” the relationship between Jews and dominant American culture. To Prell, stereotypes of Jewish women’s bodies reflect the anxiety that many American Jews felt as they came to assimilate into mainstream American culture. In one essay about postwar representations of Jewish women, entitled “Why Jewish Princesses Don’t Sweat” (1996), she writes about popular depictions of the Jewish woman’s body as passive. As she explains, although this body “is one of consuming desire... [it has] no object of desire other than the self” (80). According to Prell, this stereotype about the Jewish woman’s body can be said to reflect “power struggles over the control of economic and emotional resources” (*Fighting* 12) experienced by a generation of people who were new to the middle class. Stereotypes of Jewish women then reflect the fear that, for people who are not raised with it, access to money and other cultural capital can lead to greed, self-absorption, and bad taste. AKC’s Jewish women embody more particularly the postwar anxieties of a group of people that has moved up in the world, often at the expense of, or at the very least in the shadow of, earlier generations of Jews (including especially their parents and grandparents), as well as other minority groups.⁴⁸ That this excess is reflected more plainly on women’s bodies in many of the comics merely affirms the notion that stereotypes are dependent on and built out of power structures that must, by definition, paint one group of people as monstrous in their relation to

⁴⁸ In addition to Brodtkin’s and Jacobson’s examinations of Jewish American history and identity in relation to other minority groups, a few full length works have been written specifically examining the relationship between Jewish and Asian American identities as represented in literature. These include Judith Oster’s *Crossing Cultures: Creating Identity in Chinese and Jewish American Literature* (2003), and Jamie Cleland’s dissertation, “*I Had Always Thought I was a Yankee*”: *Creating the Representative American Self in 20th Century Ethnic Autobiography* (2007). There is still much to be examined in this area. The relationship between Jewish and African American identities has been more comprehensively explored, especially in the context of particular places and landscapes. Works on this topic include Katya Gibel Azoulay’s *Black, Jewish, and Interracial* (1997), Jeffrey Melnick’s *Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South* (2000), and Cheryl Lynn Greenberg’s *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (2006). Dean J. Franco’s *Race, Rights & Recognition: Jewish American Literature since 1969* (2012) also addresses how Jewish American writers “have responded to the changing social regimes of racial recognition in the United States” (4) through a look at contemporary Jewish American literature.

another more powerful group, which is then legitimized. The title of the comic, “Moo Goo Gaipan,” written on a Chinese take-out box, also points to this phenomenon. Moo goo gai pan is a dish that is an Americanized version of what is already an American invention, what many Americans believe to be authentic Chinese food. The title of the comic therefore alludes to an inter-ethnic stereotype that gets written into an essentialized, intra-ethnic narrative. In this way, AKC establishes a kind of network between various ethnic and gendered representations; self-depiction, her comic argues, is always a collaborative and often contradictory mixture of what Karen Brodtkin calls ethnoracial assignment and ethnoracial identity: how one is viewed by dominant society and how one views one’s self.

If to be seen *as* a Jew and/or a woman is, in some ways, to be misread, then part of AKC’s project is figuring out how, as an artist, she can seek out ways of somehow controlling or manipulating these misreadings, particularly by, in turn, assuming and rejecting them for herself and others. As the one in control, creating and arranging these various images on the page, she defies the classification of Jewish women as unproductive and lacking in self-control, although her specific depictions reinforce these old stereotypes. Additionally, her categorically based illustrations of women and Jews highlight a kind of uneasiness about inheritance and descent. For AKC, there is always a tension between perceptions that have been passed on and internalized, and perceptions that are still being questioned, rejected, and then refigured on the page. In her autobiographical comics, she often confronts that tension with explorations of the women in her own family. In this way, she grapples with what happens to old ways of seeing as they getting written into the scripts of subsequent generations, as well as how certain iconographies function intergenerationally.

“The Bunch, Her Baby, and Grammaw Blabette” (*Need More Love* 214-5) presents a particularly revealing and potentially offensive portrayal of her mother. The title of the comic is telling, as AKC has always given careful attention to the names of the people she draws in her comics, including herself (in this case, her persona is “The Bunch”). In her autobiographical comics, she calls her mother’s character Blabette. As the name suggests, Blabette – who likes to blab and whose face resembles a blob – is a hyper-exaggerated representation of various stereotypes about Jewish women, and especially Jewish mothers. She is materialistic, demanding, and oblivious. In the comic, The Bunch, her baby daughter, and Blabette go on a vacation together to visit the outdoors. Blabette attempts to calm the baby, who cries when she tries to hold her and then ends up throwing up all over “Grammaw’s handpainted jogging suit” (215). The narrator remarks that Blabette is “totally useless” in this situation because she “just had her nails wrapped.”

Blabette’s comments and facial expressions drive the narrative, and they contrast starkly with depictions of The Bunch as reserved – she doesn’t say very much – and consistently drawn – her hair, clothing, and the style in which she is rendered on the page remain the same throughout the comic. These are both uncommon traits for The Bunch (as well as AKC’s other personas) who, as I mentioned before, is frequently depicted in various ways throughout even a single comic. Yet, as the title of this comic suggests, AKC is interested here in relationality and interdependence: in this case, how depictions of Blabette influence and refigure the way The Bunch is constituted on the page. In one panel, for instance, mother and daughter are drawn with their profiles facing each other, the baby in the middle, as Blabette’s words spread and take up most of the space between them (Figure 14). The Bunch’s head, and especially her trademark hair, are cut off at the corner of the panel and we only see her eye, frozen in what looks to be

The depiction of Blabette as monster can additionally be understood as a comment on AKC's process of self-creation on the page. A close up of Blabette fills the final panel of this two-page comic (Figure 15). A bright yellow light surrounds her head, encasing it and freezing her in time. Here, AKC is clearly depicting what she sees as her mother's excessive and suffocating personality – “So relax. . Don't get upset. . Don't get nervous!” Blabette implores, as



Figure 15. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 215.

her body language indicates otherwise. But this image can also be read as a kind of self portrait. As a Jewish mother, AKC is also implicated in the final monster image. In this way, the monster represents yet another, though perhaps a quintessential, dis-affiliatory persona in her vast repertoire of personas. In *The Female Grotesque*, Mary Russo writes about the grotesque female body as a depiction which exceeds the very norm that defines it and therefore “leaves room for chance” (10). For Russo, much like AKC's ever-changing personas, the grotesque body “is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing” (8). In a sense, by assuming the role of

the monster, for herself and for those who are closest to her, AKC refuses the normative, constrained categories of “womanhood” or “Jewishness,” although she claims the very possibility of difference that is written into these identity labels.

V. “My independent Jewish monster temperament”

Towards the beginning of *Need More Love*, Kominsky Crumb describes the end of her relationship with a “real cowboy named Ray Edington” in the late 1960s. She writes, “His violent ways quickly lost their charm, and his macho nature inevitably clashed with my independent Jewish monster temperament” (122). With this wording, she makes clear the link between her independence and her status as a woman and a Jew. Through her comics, she has recast these identities as hybrids of consent and descent, acceptance and rejection, which therefore represent the possibility of agency in the face of essentialized identity labels. She claims her Jewish identity alongside her status as a “monster,” set apart from other woman and from other Jews. In this way, she “transform[s] what was considered pathetic and abject into something sexy and glamorous” (Bloom 3). Her use of the term “temperament” is especially interesting given Goldie’s interest in finding her own “style.” The *OED (Oxford English Dictionary)* defines temperament as a “state or condition with respect to the proportion of ingredients or manner of mixing.” For AKC, finding a “style” or “temperament” is a matter of combinations – of doling out parts in search of a certain whole. Her Jewish identity can be understood in the same way, as a matter of rejecting and inevitably accepting certain aspects of her identity, of finding choice within inheritance.

In an interview published before her memoir, she links herself to a “tradition of complaining Jewish comedy,” which, she explains, “is deeply imprinted in me” (A Joint Interview 128). Then, in a move typical of her insider/outsider self-fashioning, she adds, “what I

think is funny is quite often sick to most folks.” To claim any status as an insider, to put herself in line with a group of inherited traditions or characteristics, AKC always needs simultaneously to set herself at a distance. It is, as she makes clear, her temperament that sets her apart, a state of being and a style that is both within and outside of her control. This emotional climate sets the tone throughout her work; her comics, like her identities, stem from a world of experiences mostly outside of her control that, as an artist and writer, she shapes.

In her book on non-fiction writing, *The Situation and the Story*, Vivian Gornick, another contemporary Jewish writer with an interest in the preservation and expression of independent temperaments, writes about the importance of finding and creating a narrator “who can bring under control the rushing onslaught of my own internal flux” (25). As she explains, “we pull from ourselves the narrator who will shape better than we alone can the inchoate flow of event into which we are continually being plunged” (24). For AKC, that narrator, or set of narrators (from Goldie to *The Bunch*), must be rewritten and redrawn, all the while maintaining the common thread of an independent and rebellious style and temperament. This artist’s temperament links those many versions of the self together – past and present, Jewish and non-Jewish, independent and co-dependent, artist and novice, visual and verbal – to provide an optimistic space for play even within the confines of her personal and communal histories of self-imagining. Her independent Jewish monster temperament is a manifestation of her role as an artist, and especially a cartoonist, as one who deliberately makes room for chance and doubt – and therefore creates a world of possibility – in every last hand-drawn, “crude scrawl.”

Chapter Two

“What Would Make Me the Most ‘Myself’”: Self-Creation in Vanessa Davis’s Diaristic and Autobiographical Comics⁵⁰

Vanessa Davis is another cartoonist invested in what it means to represent the self on the page through vignettes, or snippets. Characterized by multiple artistic styles and a general lack of clear-cut panel divisions, her comics portray the self as a textured, patch-worked entity that changes from moment to moment, depending on framing and context. Her sketches, as well as her narrative and diary comics, collectively and often humorously visualize the animated and inexhaustible project of claiming and representing the self.⁵¹ Born in 1978, Davis’s comics represent another version of the post-assimilated Jewish American female artist. Like the works of Aline Kominsky Crumb, many of her comics visualize the struggle of responding to and rebelling against pre-conceived notions of selfhood based in gendered, ethnic, religious, and regional identifications. But unlike Kominsky Crumb, Davis’s work does not evoke her religious or ethnic identities primarily as a response to stereotype. Rather, she frames her identities as revisable and individual processes that, though developed out of textured diachronic and synchronic realities, inevitably converge in the present tense of the artist’s composition.

In *Need More Love*, Kominsky Crumb often looks back at the values of her parents’ generation and her childhood experiences in Long Island in order to understand the ways she has moved away from or past them. In contrast, in Davis’s graphic works, the persona on the page is *always* in-process, both in the past and present versions of herself, rather than an entity that has

⁵⁰ In this chapter, like Philippe Lejeune and others, I do not distinguish between the journal and the diary. Some critics make a debatable distinction by correlating journal writing with an intended public audience and content that is less personal. This distinction sets up a hierarchical dynamic – with the diary often cited as a “feminine” and the journal as a “masculine” form – between two modes of writing that have, despite their differing histories and genealogies, become otherwise indistinguishable.

⁵¹ I use the phrase “narrative comics” to describe the often previously published comics that Davis includes in the text. I use this term to differentiate between Davis’s diary comics, which are generally marked with dates, and her one or two page sketches, which do not include any text.

definitively changed, or moved away from a previous iteration over time.⁵² In this way, her graphic memoir, though also rooted in dis-affiliations, can be considered a narrative of continual self-creation and revision, or a testimonial to the present, rather than a narrative hinging on a static, unyielding past.

Davis has published two full-length books, *Spaniel Rage* (2005), her early graphic journal, and her most recent work, *Make Me a Woman* (2010), a collection of comics and drawings, including diary entries and pages taken out of her sketchbook. The title of Davis's graphic memoir reinforces Simone de Beauvoir's famous words about the construction of female identity, namely, that "one is not born a woman, but becomes one." But the name of the book, presented ambiguously somewhere between a directive and a plea, also highlights the notion that there is always an active subject forging the creation of that woman. Whether the final authority over that subject lies with the author herself or with someone else is a puzzle that repeatedly surfaces in the many layers of her work, and it is a puzzle which is generally left unsolved. As Davis has pointed out, "The comics form might not come up with a lot of answers, but it can really illuminate the questions" ("Vanessa Davis Keeps It Complicated"). In this way, Davis's texts, like all of the comics explored in this dissertation, are postmodern in the sense of postmodernism as a form of inquiry that "calls all categorical thinking into question along with the modes by which categories are consolidated and maintained" (Gilmore 4). Both *Spaniel Rage* and *Make Me a Woman* are books that illustrate, literally and figuratively, the process of becoming, while they also accentuate its mysteries, the blurry boundaries where private or inward explorations and public, published performances, exposures, and influences overlap.

⁵² Unlike in the comics of Kominsky Crumb, the personas in Davis's comics share the same name as the author, Vanessa Davis. In order to distinguish between the two, I will refer, throughout this chapter, to Davis's persona on the page as "Vanessa," while "Davis" or "Vanessa Davis" will refer to the cartoonist herself.

This chapter will trace the movement from *Spaniel Rage*, a book of daily journal entries with almost no overt recognition of various categorizations of identity, to *Make Me a Woman*, a text very much rooted in typologies of the self, including especially gender and religious/ethnic identities. In *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2008), Paul John Eakin distinguishes between “self” and “identity” as follows: he marks “self” as a “larger, more comprehensive term for the totality of our subjective experience,” whereas “identity” points to “the version of ourselves that we display not only to others but also to ourselves whenever we have occasion to reflect on or otherwise engage in self-characterization” (xiv). This distinction similarly marks the change in emphasis between Davis’s two books. Many of the narrative comics included in *Make Me a Woman* were originally written for and published by the online daily magazine, *Tablet: A New Read on Jewish Life*, between 2007 and 2010. These comics, intended for such publication, contain explicitly Jewish content, unlike the diary comics in *Spaniel Rage*.

As the shift in form from a book primarily consisting of diary comics to a hybrid text including both diary comics and narrative ones reveals, the move from an exploration of the self as an undefined and uncategorizable entity to the self as consisting, in part, of a struggle against a series of fixed categories reflects the more ostensibly public form of the second book. Although the journal can never exist as an entirely private work, its pretense of privacy is conducive to explorations of a more unspecific representation of selfhood. In other words, the self depicted in the journal is relatively free from the concerns of how it does or has appeared to an outside “other.” In contrast, a reflection of the self as created in and for the public eye, as in *Make Me a Woman*, is more clearly based in predetermined visions of identity that are shared by disparate, sometimes overlapping communities. Throughout *Make Me a Woman*, Vanessa engages in a

process of self-discovery by questioning and juxtaposing multifarious versions of self-knowledge. Even so, she is always aware of the various, pre-determined categorizations of self – her Jewishness and her femaleness, mainly – as public identities. In this way, although both texts convey self-revelation as a process located in an ever-transforming and transformative present, they also reflect how genre conventions and imagined audience influence the ways that such explorations get played out. In the end, in both works, despite their differing slants, self-creation is simultaneously cast as self-exile: even while the artist literally composes and recomposes herself, she is never any closer to forming a complete image or understanding of her personhood as a single, chronological entity. Both texts consequently reflect “identity as an *activity* rather than a product” (Hyman 127).⁵³ As part of the newest generation of Jewish female cartoonists, Vanessa Davis’s works are an example of how pre-established significations of the self and identity paradoxically lead post-assimilated writers and artists away from essentialized or simplistic notions of the signified.

I. “But that is only a small part of why I feel like total shit”

Published in 2005 by the now defunct Buenaventura Press, *Spaniel Rage* is a collection of what Davis describes, on one of its title pages, as “comics and drawings that I made in sketchbooks from 2003 to 2004.”⁵⁴ The book can most easily be categorized as a graphic journal, with one or more often, but not always, dated entries filling up each page. As French theorist Philippe Lejeune explains in his essay, “On Today’s Date” (2006), page-dating is one of the characteristics that helps define the modern day diary and distinguish it from other literary and

⁵³ In her contribution to the collaborative essay, “Jewish Identities in Action: An Exploration of Models, Metaphors, and Methods” (2008), Tali Hyman stresses the need for ethnographies of Jewish communities that “study identity formation as an ongoing activity rather than a product that can be fixed in time” (124). Hyman uses the metaphor of a movie camera, rather than a still photograph, to explain this sense of capturing identity-as-process. For more on Hyman’s dynamic ethnographic approach to Jewish identity, see pps. 123-127 of the essay that includes Charmé’s spiral model of understanding Jewish identity.

⁵⁴ Buenaventura Press was a well-respected publisher of independent comics and anthologies. The press closed down in 2010 due to financial difficulties.

non-literary forms, including autobiography. The date scrawled or typed at the top of the page reflects “people’s relationship with lived time” (80) — specifically, it demonstrates an awareness of the continual passing of and subsequent accounting for time. It also stands as a “pact of truth” (79) in that it “*certifies* the time of enunciation.” By tracking time on the page (or, for some, on the computer screen), the diarist testifies to what is beyond her control, while she also acknowledges her powerlessness over the situation, the inevitability of death and, consequently, of the diary project. That Davis dates some but not all of her journal entries is significant, most importantly because it hints at her work’s ability to complicate stylistic conventions in order to create new, hybrid forms of self-representation that defy normative expectations. As she explains in an interview, “I think that it’s important for people to try to be realistic and not strive to fit some template of what works or what sells or what’s popular or what’s considered legitimate. I think people should just do what works for them and see where that takes them” (“Interview: Vanessa Davis”). Davis’s work in many ways reflects this independent style. Three quarters of the way through *Spaniel Rage*, for example, she includes various short comics that she labels “Other Stories,” and which she marks as each having been published previously in other locations. The title of these comics, in stressing “otherness,” points to the difficulty of categorizing the various types of texts included in the book, and therefore establishes what will become, in both of Davis’s works, a more general preoccupation with categorization and typology. The inclusion of these longer form comics at the end of what is primarily a graphic journal also complicates the possibility that her works, in publication, will fit a particular, clearly defined genre or market standard. By incorporating images created for publication alongside images presumably drawn for her eyes only in what started as a sketchbook, her graphic journal thwarts the simple distinction often constructed between the two forms of creation. In this way,

her text questions the notion that authorial intention or imagined audience is ever clear-cut or formulaic. A resistance to such conformity is similarly pronounced in her later work, *Make Me a Woman*, which, like Kominsky Crumb's memoir, represents an even more dramatic departure from a categorizable literary product with an intended audience.

The structure of *Spaniel Rage* additionally draws attention to the published journal as a work that has inevitably been exposed to edits, and that has been transformed in the process of its publication.⁵⁵ The title page is drawn in the handwriting of the artist, with watercolors filling in bubbled, black-and-white cursive letters. In this way, the title, *Spaniel Rage*, as well as the name of the press and the city of publication are adopted into the pages of the graphic journal and reestablished as part of the journal writing itself. Davis's work therefore blurs the distinction between paratext and main text, and preempts the possibility of ever fully differentiating between the two. As Gérard Genette explains in his book on the topic, the paratext (like the author's name, the title, or the introduction to a work) "surround...and extend" the text, "to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption in the form... of the book" (1).⁵⁶ In the case of Davis's work, the intimacy of the hand-drawn paratext prompts readers to approach the book as a unified project that does not distinguish between its creation by a single author and its publication history. The overall structure of the book therefore resembles the way that the self gets established in its pages – as an entity that cannot fully be understood by looking at isolated

⁵⁵ Lejeune and others have written extensively on the near impossibility of reading diaries — and especially contemporary ones — in the form that they were originally written, pre-publication. Consider, for example, the fact that printed versions of diaries often do not reveal the various nuances of the original text – from handwriting (and changes in handwriting) to the spaces left between words (Culley 16). The history behind the creation and publication of Anne Frank's diary has been an especially enlightening case that highlights the difficulty behind ever truly unraveling the transition between the original work and its later manifestations, especially when that work has passed through many hands on its way to publication. For more on the history of the publication of Anne Frank's diary, see especially Suzanne L. Bunkers's "Whose Diary Is It Anyway? Issues of Agency, Authority, Ownership" (2002) and Philippe Lejeune's "How Anne Frank Rewrote the Diary of Anne Frank" (2005).

⁵⁶ Genette divides his conception of the paratext into the peritext – elements inside the covers of a book – and the epitext – elements outside the book, but somehow related to the book (like interviews or reviews).

experiences, memories, or reflections, but rather that needs to be considered in the context of the text as a whole, including factors that take place outside of, or alongside, the author's immediate creative control. The hazy boundary between text and paratext additionally destabilizes a notion of the self as insider or as the one who belongs, even in an iteration of one's own life story. Just as the paratext is marked by the hand of the author, the journal entries themselves, creations emerging from and reflecting the inner life of the artist, are equally and easily subject to the taint of outside influences, including those of the publisher and of the anticipated and actual readers of the journal.

The question of audience and influence is especially important in a genre that is often mistakenly presumed to be written for the self alone. Margo Culley writes in her introduction to *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present* (1985), "[t]he importance of audience, real or implied, conscious or unconscious, in what is usually thought of as a private genre cannot be overstated. The presence of a sense of audience, in this form of writing as in all others, has a crucial influence over what is said and how it is said" (11-12). The framing of Davis's text draws attention to the question of audience from the very outset of the book. The image adjacent to the title page, for example, proposes Davis's graphic journal as a work that does not simply fall into any preconceived notion of a public or a private document (in intention or execution), but rather wavers somewhere between both spheres. Beside the handwritten, and in this way individualized, title page, there is a full-page drawing, which is the first image we see of Vanessa (Figure 16). She is pictured standing in front of her car in a supermarket parking lot. There is no verbal etching attached to the image, but for the word "Publix" scrawled across a terra cotta roof and a "Fresh Sushi" sign leaning against the

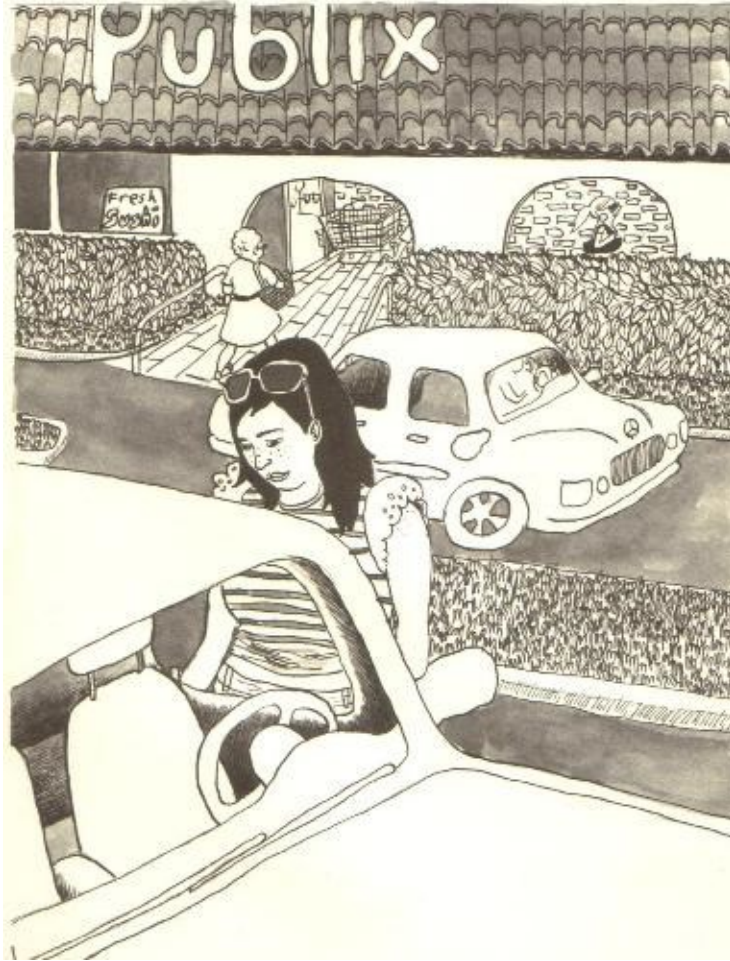


Figure 16. Vanessa Davis, *Spaniel Rage* (Oakland, CA: Buenaventura Press, 2005).

supermarket wall.⁵⁷ The lack of context or narrative attached to this drawing prefigures the style and tone of the rest of the graphic journal, which does not focus on a directed accretion of experiences and reflections in order to form a narrativistic whole, but rather documents a “paratactic” and fragmented panorama of the self recorded in spurts over a single year.⁵⁸ Vanessa stands looking down at the door of her car, ostensibly fitting her key into it, although this action is obscured by the vehicle. The image presents her moment of passing or moving from a public space into a semi-private one, an act that, in itself, is partially hidden and partially visible.

⁵⁷ Publix is an employee-owned supermarket chain with most of its stores located in Florida, which is where Davis grew up and where her mother lives.

⁵⁸ In her essay, “Engendered Autobiographies” (1991), Rebecca Hogan aptly describes the format of diaries as “paratactic on the level of grammar and syntax...[and] on the level of full entries and of content too” (103).

Although the driver, once in her car, is in charge of the vehicle and controls its direction, speed, and temperature, the car windows, which ensure that the driver can see out, also allow others to see in. Thus, the driver, while in her car, exists in view of a larger public, as part of the landscape of the road or the highway, but also manages to carve out her own secluded realm within this public. Similarly, the journal writer, whether or not she ever intends to show her journal to others, is always at risk of having her work exposed merely by putting down words or images on a page. In this sense, she is always affected by, and maintains an awareness of, the possibility of an audience larger than herself. Her journal entries are never entirely immune to observation from others. Therefore, her seemingly private universe, in being transcribed onto the page, is always a part of a larger public landscape. As Lynn Z. Bloom argues, “it is a mistake to think of diaries as a genre composed primarily of ‘private writings,’ even if they are – as in many women’s diaries – a personal record of private thoughts and activities, rather than public events” (24). Journals written with no intention of publication always involve some kind of awareness of a possible public audience since “the writing act itself implies an audience” (Culley 8). Conversely, even if the author had intended the work to be published from the outset, there are always private meanings hidden in the journal that certain audiences will never have access to. Vanessa, as pictured at the opening of Davis’s journal, is documented at the cusp of both of these worlds, the private and the public, reflecting the status not just of the writer of the graphic journal but also of the reader, who is about to enter someone else’s semi-private world through the space of a semi-private document.

The content of the journal beyond the title page and opening image also hinges around these concerns of audience and intention, and the constructed distinction between public and private spaces and acts. A number of the journal sketches figure Vanessa in her apartment and,

often, even more privately, in her bed – a repeating setting in both of Davis’s books. Other recurring scenes illustrated throughout the journal include Vanessa at work, on the telephone, at a restaurant with a single or various friends and family, in bars with friends or on dates, at concerts, and commuting on a subway train. These repeating themes emphasize the journal as a space where the seemingly inconsequential gets recorded, where daily experiences that might otherwise be forgotten – either because they are so often repeated or because, in memory, they fade so easily into more significant events – are documented. Many of these scenes are either left unnarrated or involve narration that consists only of dialogue, without any overarching narrative voice to interpret or connect the various scenes.

For example, in one sketch, Vanessa sits in front of her computer, at her work desk (Figure 17). The same scene is depicted in three adjoining panels with almost no space separating them. The only changes between the images are details: Vanessa’s arm moves from the mouse to the keyboard and back to the mouse again. Her chair swivels slightly. Her head tilts to the right, as she moves closer to a subtly changed screen, and then back again. In itself, the entry featuring Vanessa at work presents a seemingly inconsequential slice of life. The cinematic quality of the journal entry, which looks like part of a film strip, imbues the images with the sense of time passing, but their static nature slows down that time and signifies the sense of monotony that comes from working long hours at a desk job. However, taken with the other various scenes depicted in the journal – a moment sitting alone in the bathtub looking glum, a pair of sketches picturing Vanessa fussing with her hair – the text conveys the weight of such moments as the basis of the emotional framework of an individual life. The images of Vanessa at her office desk in particular demonstrate how even trivial experiences that occur in public spaces yield intimate results; these lead to self-knowledge just as readily as moments of terror or shame

experienced in the bathroom or in the bedroom. In this way too, Davis's text complicates the notion of the journal as a place reserved for inward and private reflection.

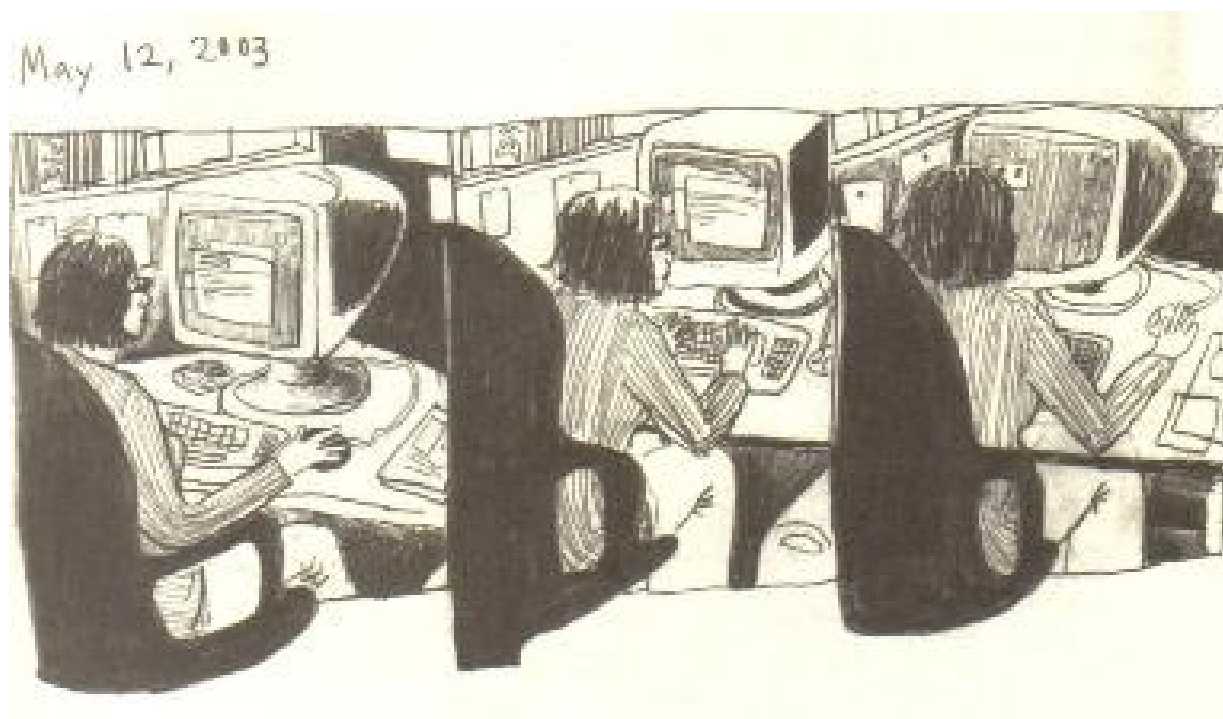


Figure 17. Vanessa Davis, *Spaniel Rage* (Oakland, CA: Buenaventura Press, 2005).

As many critics have pointed out, while the journal can focus on an exploration of a person's "inward journey," meaning her inner thoughts, emotions, and experiences, "the reader must remember that the idea of the diary as the arena of the secret, inner life is a relatively modern idea and describes only one kind of diary" (Culley xiii). In other words, to presume journal writing to be an act of confession and self-contemplation – one that focuses solely on one's secret or private thoughts – is an assumption that ignores not only many of the historical precursors to modern day journal writing, but also overlooks the many different kinds of journal writing that exist even today. Davis's published text, which I have defined as a graphic journal, emerged from images put down in what she calls her sketchbook. While the images she draws are clearly related to the dominant modes of journaling that are generally practiced – journal

writing as a record of the events of daily life and journal writing as a space for introspection – many of her entries are also spaces where she can work out aesthetic issues and create or develop a method of cartooning. Indeed, various aspects of many of the illustrations throughout the text point to the journal’s function as, among other things, a work book, in the sense of a book where work-related problems can be recorded and explored, or simply where writing habits are noted. For instance, on an image dated May 24, 2003, the author places a starred footnote in the corner of an image that says “Not even close resemblances to Rebecca and John.” Several of the images include self-criticisms related to her work habits, like the introduction to an entry dated July 2, 2003: “I haven’t drawn in more than a week. But that is only a small part of why I feel like total shit.” This particular notation reveals how self-reflections in terms of work related habits often overlap to combine with other, less specific considerations, such as a general ontological anxiety. Both the structure and content of the graphic journal thereby redefine the scope and practice of journaling as a space of relative freedom from conventional genre standards, expectations, and norms, where narrative practices that are often isolated from one another can collide and interact to reflect a self in the making.

By juxtaposing various kinds of explorations and experiences within the same text – those taking place in public spaces and those taking place in private ones, those formulated in a social setting and those framed in relative isolation, those primarily focused on aesthetic issues and those primarily testifying to daily experiences and modalities – Davis’s journal presents self-investigation as a process that, despite its fragmentary nature, inevitably unifies to form a kind of connection on the page. As Culley explains, “[k]eeping a life record can be an attempt to preserve continuity seemingly broken or lost” (8). Indeed, by bringing together the various aspects of our lives that are normally thought of as disconnected, like significant life events

alongside mundane everyday realities, the journal, graphic or otherwise, can help create a sense of cohesion between various senses of the self over time. In their introduction to *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries* (1996), Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff argue that the unique forms of diaries, unlike autobiographies or other forms of personal writing, “challenge us to question the boundaries between the public and the private; and they encourage us to assess the social, political, and personal repercussions of segmenting our lives, our texts, our culture, and our academic disciplines” (2). As Davis’s journal entries show, in yoking together various forms of experience, a stronger sense of a unitary self is born, even if it is a self in exile, or a self that is always subject to unknown, future possibilities.

One way of understanding how this unification through fragmentation occurs is by recognizing the integral difference between autobiographical writing and journal writing. As Lejeune writes in his essay, “The Diary as ‘Antifiction,’” “the problem of autobiography is the beginning, the gaping hole of the origin, whereas for the diary it is the ending, the gaping hole of death” (201-2). Since the diarist never knows what will happen next, life is presented as a series of unfolding events without any “retrospective point of view” (Cates 213).⁵⁹ Generally, there is no way of knowing what past events will gain in significance over time or will become irrelevant, so all events, experiences, and reflections stand within a certain range of equality on the page. In this way, journals, unlike autobiographies for example, represent a relatively unsentimentalized or unfiltered view of everyday life, as much as that is possible. This unfolding more closely resembles life as it is actually experienced, with the act of representing one’s self as

⁵⁹ For this reason, as various critics of journal writing have pointed out, fictional diaries often sound overly contrived and constructed. It is this sense of an unknown future that cannot be accurately replicated in the fictional realm. Isaac Cates provides a striking example of this occurrence in his essay, “The Diary Comic” (2011), which focuses on the works of the cartoonist James Kochalka, who has published a daily diary online for over twelve years. Cates writes about Kochalka’s comic from September 10, 2001, which, he explains, “preserves a moment of easy innocence before terrible events rang in a new national temper” (213). This ability to depict innocence without “self consciousness about that innocence” is what Cates argues distinguishes the diary (and especially the daily diary) from the autobiographical narrative.

something that is always entrenched in the present, with no clear or definite sense of what the future holds or how the past will link to that future.⁶⁰ It is this structural difference between diaries and other forms of personal writing that ensures that even the most public journal – a journal, for example, written with the intention of publication – always maintains some pretense of itself as a private document. The narrative structure of the journal can never fully be decoded, since the future arc of the story always remains a mystery to the writer herself, and therefore retains a sense of itself as a private document. Even, or perhaps especially, for the journal writer, as well as for her audience, the journal is a somewhat contained and mysterious text.

As a mode of life writing that always involves some mysterious elements and hinges on an unknown future, the graphic journal therefore differs dramatically from the recently popularized graphic novel memoir, in which the storyline frequently pivots around an often traumatic event or series of events from the past.⁶¹ As Isaac Cates explains, “A memoir, in comics or in prose, requires a degree of structure, a degree of deliberate storytelling, that is not available to diary comics, because the diarist can never entirely see the larger plots and arguments that his life will eventually fulfill” (214). By presenting life as a set of vignettes without any obvious links between the individual images, the graphic journal more clearly reflects the absolute integration of past experiences of all kinds into an animated present, especially because there is rarely a definite sense of how one experience will relate to another over time. It is in part for this reason that Davis’s journal conveys a self that is reflective of

⁶⁰ Clearly, no form of life writing, including the journal entry, can ever fully recapture or embody what was originally experienced. For an overview of the constructedness of self-narration, see, for example, the first chapter of Paul John Eakin’s *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2008), entitled “Talking About Ourselves: The Rules of the Game,” especially pps. 1-31.

⁶¹ Some of the most well-known of these recent full-length graphic memoirs revolving around trauma include: Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2007), Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis I and II* (2004, 2005), David B.’s *Epileptic* (2006), David Small’s *Stitches* (2010), Harvey Pekar, Joyce Brabner, and Frank Stack’s *Our Cancer Year* (1994), Josh Neufield’s *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* (2009), Ari Folman and David Polonsky’s *Waltz with Bashir: A Lebanon War Story* (2009), and Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (2002). These texts focus on both remembered singular moments of trauma, as in *Fun Home*, and/or a remembered repeated trauma of the everyday, as in *Persepolis*.

Eakin's "totality of [a] subjective experience," rather than, as in *Make Me a Woman*, a self composed of predetermined, public identities. The added autobiographical narrative element incorporated into Davis's second book allows, instead, for a more focused self-analysis. Thus, it could be argued that in *Spaniel Rage* Davis rehearses many of the themes that she later and more directly explores in *Make Me a Woman*. The graphic journal is a document that allows her the freedom to pose questions without necessarily answering them – it serves as a kind of dress rehearsal for a more fully developed and manifestly public exploration of what eventually reveals itself, for the author, to be the most urgent and vital set of questions about self-representation and self-knowledge.

II. "So the big day finally came"

From its opening pages, *Make Me a Woman* is a text that both resembles and differentiates itself in important ways from Davis's earlier work. Like *Spaniel Rage*, *Make Me a Woman* is a book that illustrates the very private and individual nature of the process of becoming. But it also accentuates the boundaries that are blurred between personal or inward explorations and public performances, exposures, and influences. The book includes previously published and often full-colored comics alongside black-and-white journal and sketchbook entries. The divergent uses of color reflect various narrative tones, with the more muted black-and-white sketches and ink washes suggesting intimacy and the brighter colored pictures reinforcing the distance between reader and text.⁶² As at the beginning of *Spaniel Rage*, the introduction by Davis describes what she has included in the book, which could otherwise be

⁶² Will Eisner has discussed the connections between color and tone in comics. For example, in an interview about his sepia-colored *A Contract with God*, he explained, "it was the only way of introducing color in a way that gave the book a tone. I felt it developed an intimacy between me and the reader, as if we were talking in hushed tones" (86). Eisner and Scott McCloud agree that black-and-white comics demand closer, more careful readings, whereas comics drawn in colors call attention to the text as surface. For more on this argument, see McCloud's "A Word About Color" in *Understanding Comics*, pps. 185-92.

seen as a slapdash or arbitrary collection of comic art. The introduction to this second memoir is longer, more informative, and conscious of the larger audience that will be reading the book due to the artist's increased exposure in, among other places, the "alternative" comics world.⁶³ She writes: "This book collects comics and drawings that I made between 2004 and 2010. Some are as yet unpublished strips and sketchbook pages. I moved: Diary entries take place in New York, where I used to live; California, where I moved in 2005; and Florida, where I grew up and where my mom still lives. A lot of the stories were printed in zines and anthologies. And a bunch of them appeared on-line as part of a monthly column I did for *Tablet* magazine." The introduction implies that the text loosely tracks some kind of structured narrative based in the author's geographical relocations over time – the move from Florida to New York to California – although it also reinforces the possibility that the works contained in the collection, as well as their arrangement, are somewhat random. This introduction complicates audience expectations, given the format of Davis's text as a large book and the often inaccurate association of that format, the "long form" comic, better known as the "graphic novel," with the "structure, breadth, [and] coherence" of the novel" (Hatfield 5).⁶⁴ What the reader encounters over the course of the memoir, instead, is a chronicle of the process of recording the self as it is made, unmade, and remade within a particular timeframe that nevertheless encompasses a past and future outside of its pages.

Just as the opening of *Spaniel Rage* can be read as a prelude to what is contained within its pages, the opening images of *Make Me a Woman* can also be considered precursors to the

⁶³ The publisher of this second work, Drawn & Quarterly, attests to this fact. A publisher of independent comics, Drawn & Quarterly represents many internationally popular cartoonists – the veritable superstars of the underground comics world. These include, among others, Lynda Barry, Charles Burns, David B., Miriam Katin, Joe Matt, Seth, Joe Sacco, Adrian Tomine, and Chris Ware.

⁶⁴ For more on the history of the term "graphic novel," its relation to the history of the format of comics, and the reception of comics by the public, see Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics* (2005), especially Chapter One: "Comix, Comic Shops, and the Rise of Alternative Comics, Post 1968," pps. 3-31.

graphic narrative that follows. Although the title page at first seems, once again, to be drawn in the hand of the artist, the writing, which is minimally etched in black and white print and script and carefully matches the writing on the introductory page as well as on the publication information page, is also possibly the result of a computer programmed font.⁶⁵ In this way, the work presents itself as a more professionalized, and less individualized, text, while it also maintains a link to its presentation of itself as a handcrafted work of art. There is, as in *Spaniel Rage*, a self-portrait of the artist on the page opposite the title page (Figure 18). This opening image reinforces the instability of all life writing and drawing as precariously situated on the border of public performance and private act. In this colored self-portrait, Vanessa sits, naked, on a stool, with a guitar covering her “privates” and a harmonica lodged in her mouth. She looks nonchalantly at the reader. The image portrays her as preoccupied: her hands and mouth, the tools of creation of her verbal and visual narratives, are engaged. If the opening image of *Spaniel Rage* presents an artist teetering between two worlds, a bit unsure of her place, this artist exhibits confidence in her self-exposure, while she also conveys herself as almost too-busy to notice the audience that inevitably watches her. Since *Make Me a Woman* is a text that includes both previously published comics and journal entries, from its outset it reveals itself as a work intended for and aware of a public audience, even as it continues, like *Spaniel Rage*, to flaunt the unstable boundary between the public and the private. Much like the cover of Kominsky Crumb’s *Need More Love*, this somewhat satirical image advertises a kind of easy access into the author’s most intimate self. But in Davis’s text, the added element of the covered privates also

⁶⁵ It is not unusual for cartoonists to use computer programs instead of writing out words by hand, as the process of lettering comics can be painstakingly time-consuming. For example, for her work *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel created her own font. She “wrote out each letter of the alphabet for a studio, Blambot, which then generated the font through a program called Fontographer” (Chute, *Graphic Women* 255).

offers up the pretense of private engagement and inevitable secrecy. Certain parts will remain covered.



Figure 18. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010).

Additionally, Davis's book includes a whole series of full-colored portraits of women interspersed between various narrative comics and journal entries, challenging the notion that an autobiographical narrative must consistently feature the self as principal actor. With one

exception, these images do not reflect a clear relationship to the comics that come before and after them, and they are accompanied neither by narrative explanations nor clear indications of who is being portrayed.⁶⁶ Although some of the drawings feature a woman who resembles Vanessa – generally, a brunette with brown hair, freckles, and a curvy figure – many are images of women who are clearly *not* the same as Vanessa, as indicated by their hair color, body types, and certain ethnic/racial features (like skin color). A good number of these “anonymous” portraits display bodies in motion, with colorful outfits contrasted against the white background of an otherwise empty page (Figure 19). As the subtle but significant movements of the bodies captured in these images reveal, these are not women who are merely being looked at and drawn as they have been adorned, or as adornments in themselves, but, rather, these are women engaged in the process of being looked at, who are somehow consciously and actively involved in the making of themselves as visual subjects. Their accessories – hair styles, jewelry, purses, shoes – as well as their basic outfits point to individual histories that have been woven together on these pages through the eyes (and hand) of a single artist. These fashion choices have the capacity both to unite and distinguish them from one another.⁶⁷ The dancing, moving portraits, set between other types of image/text combinations, contextualize a self in the making amongst a larger community of women or, more generally, a self-portrait created alongside other self-portraits.

⁶⁶ The exception is an image on the page succeeding the short comic, “Make Me a Woman,” and preceding the slightly longer comic, “Big Fun,” of a young woman wearing a Hard Rock Café tee-shirt and doing sit ups. Since the subsequent comic is about VD’s experiences at “Fat Camp,” the image prefigures the narrative that follows.

⁶⁷ Davis’s interest in fashion – and her understanding of it as a political tool – comes across in the narrative comic, “Money Can’t Buy Jappiness,” in which she traces the history of Vanessa’s slow coming into consciousness about the politics of fashion and consumerism. She was also the illustrator of a 2010 book written by Leora Tanenbaum, entitled *Bad Shoes & the Women Who Love Them* (2010), about the history of shoe fashions for women. The book is an attempt at recording and recognizing the political significance of such a history, as well as an effort to persuade those who wear uncomfortable shoes to think about the physical consequences. As Tanenbaum explains in her introduction, “My fervent hope is that when you finish reading this book, you will choose to reduce the amount of time you spend standing and walking in them... Be smart about how often you wear them and for how long. If you wear them too much, you will end up with disfigured feet” (7).



Figure 19. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010).

By including this collective of anonymous women in an autobiography, the text reflects its interest in exploring what Hillary Chute describes as “the self in conversation with collectivities” (104). Chute uses this description to talk about the cartoonist Lynda Barry’s *Naked Ladies! Naked Ladies! Coloring Book*, a work that Barry created after discovering a pack of

pornographic playing cards in Las Vegas displaying and advertising 52 women.⁶⁸ As Chute explains, *Naked Ladies!* “is a book that involves but decentralizes the self,” revealing a “desire to move beyond the individual” (104, 105) by displaying a sequence of images of women alongside a seemingly unrelated prose narrative about a single self. Like Barry’s work, Davis’s *Make Me a Woman* is a text that forefronts an individual narrative but immerses it in a sea of the dynamic postures and poses of anonymous women. In this way, both texts attempt to show how conceptions of the self and identity are inextricably, and often ambiguously, located in portrayals of the self in relation to various collectivities. As Smith and Watson argue in *Interfaces* (2005), “Identities materialize within collectivities and out of the culturally marked differences that constitute symbolic interactions within and between collectivities” (10). The portraits of women included throughout *Make Me a Woman* represent Vanessa’s affiliations at the boundaries of many different communities, both real and imagined.⁶⁹ The range of colors depicted in these images connects them not only with the self-portrait that opens the book, but also with the many full-colored narrative comics contained within it. These communities are bridged together through surface-level resemblances – colors, styles, and clothing, for example – which act as a unifying backdrop to the diverse themes explored in greater depth through the lens of Vanessa’s individual life.

⁶⁸ Chute’s analysis of *Naked Ladies!* is part of a full chapter discussion of Barry’s works, and especially *One Hundred Demons*. For more, see *Graphic Women*, Chapter Three: “Materializing Memory: Lynda Barry’s *One Hundred Demons*,” pps. 95-134.

⁶⁹ In contemporary theoretical discourse about nationalism and transnationalism, the term “imaginary community” has come to refer to a group of people who affiliate with one another and assume certain commonalities even though every individual is not known to every other individual. See Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (2006), pps. 1-7. In his delineation of the concept of “nation” as an “imagined community,” he writes, “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). In the case of Davis’s drawn women, I mean “imagined” in both Anderson’s sense of an established community based on a shared construct – like the imagined communities of “women” or “Jews” or “Americans” in general – but also “imagined” in the sense of the made up, or the imaginary.

The inclusion of anonymous women in *Make Me a Woman* also points to one of the key differences between Davis's early graphic journal and her memoir. Whereas *Spaniel Rage* is focused on tracing the moments that make up a self in the present, through a telling of both the significant and mundane experiences of that self's daily life, *Make Me a Woman* is additionally invested in exploring the documentation of a self through questions of identity and categorization – questions that inevitably link that self with larger publics. One of the earlier comics in the memoir, the title comic, demonstrates the way that the identities explored, and specifically Jewish and female identities, are assembled as a series of images that are always changing based on the unfolding of these explorations. The one-page, black-and-white comic, "Make Me a Woman," first pictures Vanessa standing at a podium in front of a crowd reading her Bat Mitzvah Torah portion speech (Figure 20). The narration begins, "So the big day finally came...", while her speech bubble reads, "Tamar showed lots of INITIATIVE when she tricked her fiancee's father into impregnating her by posing as a prostitute."⁷⁰ The irony of the seriousness of her pose juxtaposed with what the twelve year old narrator is saying highlights one of the recurring themes of the text, which is the contradictory nature of Jewish identity for women – and especially young, unmarried women – who often figure as second-rate citizens in Jewish culture and history. At twelve, Vanessa, who attends an all-Jewish day-school, has no means of evaluating her place in the community, or of assessing the narratives passed on to her as "empowering." She has no other community to contrast with her own, no sense of what else empowerment or "initiative" could potentially mean for her.

In the following image, a young woman sits in a chair being drawn by a cartoonist, while the narrator explains that "[m]y party didn't have a theme, but we did have kind of a mean-

⁷⁰ The entire text of *Make Me a Woman* does not include page numbers, a formal omission that adds to the sense of timelessness in the way that identity gets figured, again and again, in the present, as though each time it is being (re)made anew.

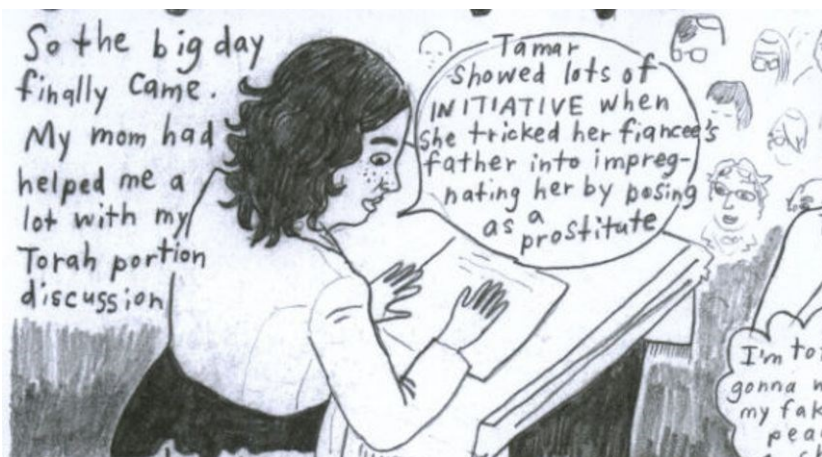


Figure 20. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010).

spirited caricaturist.”⁷¹ The young woman – who could be, but is not necessarily, the same person as Vanessa – is drawn by the cartoonist with wild, unkempt hair, an upturned nose, and long, exaggerated arms, while her actual self sits meekly in a chair with her arms folded. In both the narrative about Tamar and the drawing by the Bat Mitzvah cartoonist, the young Vanessa (or someone like her) is placed as the object of projections that are being passed on to her by others. It is not a coincidence that the “mean-spirited” caricaturist is engaged in a vocation that Vanessa will take up later in life perhaps, in part, in order to revise this earlier, detached, and misguided portrait depicted of herself and of others like her. Only at the end of the comic can she acknowledge this earlier lack of perspective, when she includes a reflection about her Bat Mitzvah from the perspective of the present day artist drawing on this memory. This coming-into-consciousness stems partly from her exposure to another version of the Jewish coming-of-age ritual, this one emerging from a television show called *The Wonder Years*.⁷² She writes about arriving at a new understanding about her own Bat Mitzvah upon watching the show and

⁷¹ Since there are no clearly defined boundaries between Davis’s panels, my reading of the “following” panel as the one just under the first is my own interpretation. While the page generally suggests this particular sequence, as it is chronologically sound, one might also read the comic from left to right in three segments going down the page. This “alternative” reading is especially likely upon the reader’s first encounter with the page, since most English-speaking comics are meant to be read from left to right.

⁷² *The Wonder Years* was a popular and acclaimed television show that aired from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. The show followed a man recalling his coming-of-age in a middle-class American suburb in the 1960s.

recognizing the distance between the main character's experience and her own: "Years later I watched the wonder years where Paul has a sweet bar mitzvah party at a rec center and I was embarrassed because mine was so fancy." Here, in being presented with another version of this religious rite of passage, Vanessa comes to understand that her own perspective is rooted in the context of a particular time and place, and specifically, in this case, in her economic background. This consciousness about growing up in a privileged class – and the realization that it was not a universal background for all American Jews – sets her on a path of understanding her own Jewish identity as highly individualized. In this way, the comic reveals how identifications of all kinds – in this case, of class and ethnicity/religion – often intersect to influence the way that subjectivity emerges and transforms over time. It is as a self in relation to other, often overlapping collectivities that Vanessa can productively reflect on her earlier life.

This narrative comic, placed early on in *Make Me a Woman*, suggests that what will inevitably make Vanessa into a "woman" (and, similarly, into a "Jew") is the belated but essential recognition that the meaning of identity is always somewhat dependent on context, and especially the context of one individual or community seen alongside an other or many others. Vanessa's notion of identity will inevitably transform over time and in different settings. However, past definitions and understandings of identity are not to be simply dismissed or forgotten. While all of the comics in the book are drawn by a present day artist who has been exposed to many more ideas and communities than the adolescent that she draws and who therefore has a perspective that dramatically differs from her younger self, the book still manages to show how disparate notions of identity continue to be relevant to the present day artist. In this way, *Make Me a Woman* remains a text that is very much fixed in the present while still being indebted to the past, or to many pasts. The juxtaposition of past and present perspectives within

the same comic demonstrates how conceptions of Jewish identity change over time for every individual although they are always connected to static notions of identity based in both communal and individual histories. The black-and-white nature of the comic, which serves in part to level the various time-frames and communities, also emphasizes their relationality.

Davis's explorations of her Jewishness throughout *Make Me a Woman* therefore reflect the two dimensions – the diachronic and the synchronic – integral to Charmé's model of Jewish identity. The narrative comics throughout reveal a self whose perception of her own Jewish identity has changed over time, as well as a self who is always conscious of the many other identities (especially her gender) that intersect with and help define her understanding of Jewishness as something that is never independent or isolated in its existence. The structure of Davis's individual comics, as well as the arrangement of the text as a whole, reinforce this notion of a spiral development of identity – what Charmé, in borrowing from Jean Paul-Sartre's ideas, describes as “a series of revolutions that preserve the past but also move on to higher levels of integration” (122). These “higher levels of integration” are reflected on the page, for example, as Davis's comics generally lack clear borders between panels; instead, various panels bleed into one another, both across and down the page. Her comics generally do not include gutters, the spaces between panels that have so often been theorized in conversations about the way that comics function and are read. McCloud and other comics theorists have written about the gutter as “host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics” (McCloud 66). According to McCloud, the spaces between panels require the participation of the reader, who must use her imagination to fill in gaps or account for lost time between panels.

In contrast, Davis avoids drawing panels completely on most of her journal entries and even her longer-form comics do not allow for any spaces between panels that often meld into one

another or are separated by white spaces that are filled with the handwriting of the author. Davis has described this style as reflective of a desire “to be spontaneous... to feel out the process... Also, I found panels intimidating, as I had to pre-plan things too much to structure the comic that way. And I liked how the open space left room for details, and improvisational visual connections” (“A Womanly Chat”). This visual tactic makes the author more accountable for the work in one sense – the reader, after all, cannot fill in spaces that do not exist – while it also allows the reader greater freedom in how she chooses to read the comics. The lack of spaces between panels visually compounds the past and the present, as the moments of transition between timeframes (generally represented by the gutter) is excised. In this way, the architecture of the page reinforces the notion that impressions of past experiences are always connected to, and somehow based in, previous understandings and reflections – a “spiral” integration of the past into the present.

A journal entry pictured around the middle of the memoir, dated September 1, 2005, demonstrates this spiraling anatomy of the book as a whole through its anti-climactic visual execution (Figure 21). The September 1st entry marks the moment of the text when Vanessa first mentions, and reflects on, her move from the East to the West Coast, a shift that shapes the overall structure of the narrative. The September 1st entry is unique – it is a full-colored drawing instead of a black-and-white sketch – yet it is also the first in a mini-series within the text, preceding a number of similar, full-colored journal entries. These journal entries involved pre-planning rather than more spontaneous drawing. They figure somewhere between sketchbook drawings and long form finished narrative comics (coloring takes time and is unusual in a journal



Figure 21. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010).

entry or sketchbook), and were made to appear like finished works.⁷³ The juxtaposition of the September 1st journal entry among a series of full-colored entries downplays this particular page's significance, and instead presents it as one of many equally weighted experiences. The September 1st entry also lacks panel divisions – instead, the image functions as a kind of oversized, full-page panel. The opening narration bubble introduces the thematic illusion of time passing while it simultaneously encapsulates the emotional paralysis that overcomes Vanessa in reflecting on this life change. “I’ve been gradually freaking more and more out about moving away,” she states, and the sentence is presented in short line breaks, like poetry. In format as well as syntax – the phrase “freaking out” is divided by a slow but steady increase in anxiety marked by the words “more and more” – this wording emphasizes the fragmented sense of time that dominates this individual comic, as well as the book as a whole. Similarly, the serialization of Vanessa’s image reflects an anxiety that is both fluid and weighted; her head is drawn a total of five times from different angles and displaying a subtle variety of expressions of general angst and worry. Speech bubbles emanate from Vanessa and her friends, crowding the middle of the page. These almost overlap and offer only snippets of longer conversations. All of these formal elements combined thwart a simplistic or chronological delineation of Vanessa’s emotional states. Instead, the page visually represents the impact of Vanessa’s move as a series of small shocks whose significance can only be fully distilled through their compounded effect. Additionally, the images are shaded in dark and rich reds and browns, a color scheme that embeds the manifold, disparate figures and elements of the entry into a single amorphous mass, almost, but not quite, frozen in time.

⁷³ These full-colored journal sketches were published in 2006 in the comics anthology, *Kramers Ergot #6*, published by Beunaventura Press. Their inclusion in this anthology, which includes mostly full-colored comics, might also explain why these particular journal comics were so carefully colored.

The impression of time simultaneously passing and slowing down, with past and future experiences and emotions blending into one another, evokes that notion of a “higher level of integration” that Charmé attributes to his spiral model of identity. Vanessa, about to leave her job, experiences varied, sometimes conflicting thoughts and reactions regarding her impending move across coasts. “Don’t people leave New York all the time? Everyone’s lives go on! Things change!” she asserts at one moment, although at another she is pictured sobbing in response to an email asking her if she feel scared. “I – I doooo!” she types onto the computer screen. These confused and sometimes contradictory reflections mark a moment in the text when Vanessa’s perspective is to be dramatically unsettled – she is moving from the East Coast, where she lives, often, among a community of others ostensibly like her (including but not limited to Jews), to the West Coast, where she exists in what she later describes as a “self-exile.” Yet, the chaotic nature of time frozen but still passing that this comic journal relates highlights the way that Vanessa’s past experiences, perspectives, and identifications continue to affect and influence her, no matter what changes she endures over the course of the entire text. In a sense, this spiral representation of time represents Vanessa’s sense of self over the course of the entire memoir; it reveals how an impending and pivotal shift in her point of view is tied not, as it may seem at first, to a single event, but rather to a journey of self-exploration that begins much earlier, and ends much later, than this particular geographical relocation.

III. “Isn’t homesickness just part of self-exile?”

Various critics have written about contemporary Jewish American women’s literature as preoccupied with a desire to reflect on, remember, and sometimes even return to the past. In her essay, “Recalling ‘Home’ from Beneath the Shadow of the Holocaust: American Jewish Women Writers of the New Wave” (2006), Janet Handler Burstein argues that unlike works from the

earlier part of the twentieth century, which featured narrators leaving home in order to find themselves, contemporary Jewish American women's writing (from the last thirty years or so) often shares a common theme of women who set out on journeys to understand and connect with their pasts. Burstein explains, "women's writings of the new wave... seek continuities, often imagined as reconciliation with people long estranged from the writer" (39).⁷⁴ What many of these women writers are looking for, in an effort to better understand themselves, is to reunite with a notion of home that "has been lost or denied," or "to retrieve what they believe has been withheld" (43). For these authors, many of whom are the children or grandchildren of immigrants (if not immigrants themselves), "home" is often an estranged relationship to a person, history, or place. The desire to find or return "home" resides in a need to better understand their relationship to the present, and how their identities as women and Jews connect with the experiences of the generations that came before them, and especially the worlds of their mothers.

In a sense, *Make Me a Woman* is a text that enacts this move away from and subsequent search for "home" within its pages, beginning with the diary comic from September 1, 2005. In Davis's book, as in many other contemporary works of Jewish American women's literature, this notion of home is primarily metaphorical, and consistently aligned with the pursuit of a secure and familiar sense of self. But Davis's memoir is not primarily interested in a return to or a reflection on the past, so much as it is focused on an integration of past experiences and reflections into the present moment, or a revised understanding of "home" as something that both is and is not bound to a particular place or concept. This rejection of a conventional notion of "home" is at the root of Davis's Jewish dis-affiliations. Her work establishes "home" as a notion

⁷⁴ Similarly, in her essay "'The Girl I Was': The Construction of Memory in Fiction by American Jewish Women" (2003), Sylvia Barack Fishman argues that "[f]iction by American Jewish female writers in the second half of the twentieth century often depicts women remembering their past" (145).

that is not simply tied to a particular time and place, but is, instead, an expansive concept that changes over time, encompassing many differing versions of familiarity and estrangement, intimacy and isolation. *Make Me a Woman* is a book that emphasizes not a return to (or move away from) some lost place or past, but rather identifies the question of home as one that persists over the course of a lifetime and one that, for the artist, must be contended with afresh with every piece of self-representation. The search for home thus serves as a repeating trope in Davis's work, bridging together the epistemological pursuit of coming to terms with one's various identities along with the aesthetic enterprise of representing those identities. No single artistic form or style – from black-and-white sketches to full-colored portraits – therefore represents the artist's "home," as each instead forms part of a larger mosaic of self.

The second half of *Make Me a Woman* tracks Vanessa's journey as she leaves New York City for California – her move away from "home." But this coastal move is not presented as a clear or seamless shift within the text. Instead, various diary comics noting experiences that happen in venues in New York City (on the subway, in SoHo, or at the Yaffa Café, for example) are suddenly interrupted by the September 1st entry. The journal entry is then followed by other comics that take place in established New York locales – in the sex shop *Toys in Babeland*, for example – and then several comics that do not give any clear indication of where they take place. In fact, these entries, including one dated September 3rd, 2006 (a full year ahead of the September 1st comic, although positioned only several pages later) and a narrative comic titled "Nightmoves" convey a sense of confusion and chaos regarding time and space as Vanessa finds herself at various parties, thrown together among groups of people, many of whom are strangers.

What follows these jumbled up comics often taking place in public spaces are two narrative comics that situate Vanessa in a most intimate space, her mother's house in Florida,

where she grew up and where her mother lives. In the first of these, titled “Me ‘n My Sister,” she and her sister sit on a flowery sofa in a cozy living room, perusing what are ostensibly old family albums. Two pages later, the comic “Crispy Christmas” begins with Vanessa explaining that she normally goes home to Florida “for Christmas” while her boyfriend stays in California. The news that she now lives in California (and has a boyfriend) comes suddenly, almost as an afterthought in the context of a story about the family dynamic on her visits to her childhood home, which ironically are prompted by the celebration of a Christian holiday. The inclusion of these comics, which convey a deep sense of intimacy with her surroundings at the point of the memoir in which Vanessa shifts her life from New York to California, reinforces the aimlessness and confusion that she feels in the midst of this move, and especially the inconsistent nature of her sense of familiarity in all places or more generally in notions of the familiar versus the unfamiliar. Vanessa’s depiction of Florida as a place that both is and is not “home” triangulates her journey from the East to the West Coast, foreshadowing the consistent sense of simultaneous rootlessness and rootedness that Vanessa feels throughout the memoir. What the move from the East to the West Coast above all demonstrates is the somewhat arbitrary nature of the concept of home.

Vanessa focuses directly on her experiences in California towards the end of the memoir. In particular, the narrative comic “Stranger in a Strange Land” conveys the feeling of “homesickness” that she experiences in her new surroundings. As she explains, “Every place I’ve lived, from my upbringing in South Florida, College in the Midwest and South, to even a short stint in Central America, I’d always been around New York Jews. I couldn’t imagine any place being THAT different.” She describes Santa Rosa, her new locale, as a “funny place” with a “limited number of professional opportunities, bars, and guys to date.” Several drawings of

green fields on the opening page accentuate the difference between her new and old cities. But the main element that sets apart Santa Rosa is not the number of Jews but the ways that they relate to their Jewish identities. She explains that, although there are “some Jews here... and they’re my friends... I think that they might connect with their Judaism in a different way than me – I’ve never been in a situation where I had to feel like it made me different.” Below this textual explanation, in a set of three images, Vanessa is seen having a conversation with a friend about what it was like to grow up Jewish in California (Figure 22). Her friend explains, “Yeah, when we were little, we just didn’t tell people we were Jewish!” Vanessa replies, “That is so weird! And you guys are only half Jewish anyway so what’s the big deal?” In the third and final image tracking this dialogue, the friend looks annoyed and Vanessa sheepishly admits, “Oh my gosh. I didn’t mean it like that! I’m sorry – I’m an idiot!”

This conversation demonstrates the alienation that Vanessa experiences in her new element; she cannot hold a conversation with a friend about her Jewish identity without inadvertently (though deservedly) being perceived as offensive. Yet, what this dialogue also reveals is how a common Jewish identity, much like any other shared affiliation, does not necessarily or easily unite her with others. Instead, in this particular case, it becomes a fracturing identity, dividing two people presumably belonging to the same community. Visually, the comic reflects this separation between the two women as her friend is slowly silenced over the course of the three panels. In this situation, even though Vanessa finds herself in conversation with a Jew from the West Coast, she still feels homesick for what she calls “the ubiquity of Jewishness in East Coast culture – how lots of people seem kinda Jewish, the diversity of Jews there...” However, it is not necessarily being or identifying as Jewish that unites Vanessa with others or makes her feel comfortable around them, but, rather, a more intangible characteristic of being

“kinda” Jewish – an identity that cannot easily be summed up or defined. In this way, the comic reflects the slippery nature of the term “Jewish” as something without an essential core, a term that is dependent on the point of view of the person who uses or claims it, as well as the setting in which it is used. Vanessa’s seemingly simplistic delineation of home versus not-home is revealed as insubstantial and flawed from its very inception.

In addition to articulating the somewhat arbitrary and constructed nature of identity labels – how one’s individual perspective is what leads to qualifying another person as “kinda Jewish” or “only half Jewish” – this narrative comic also explores the question of individual agency in light of such identifications of self and other. Titled “Stranger in a Strange Land,” the name of the comic emphasizes Vanessa’s role as the stranger who does not belong, even though she is the one making the judgment calls throughout the narrative. The name of the comic stems from a story in the biblical book of Exodus, in which Moses names one of his sons Gershom because, he explains, he has been a “stranger in a strange land,” having been banished from Egypt by Pharaoh and having thus borne his son in exile. The title of the comic therefore alludes to a person who has been forcefully exiled from his home country, unlike Vanessa, who has chosen to leave the East for the West Coast. In this way, the name of the comic, as well as the content contained within it, suggests the possibility that Vanessa’s sense of rootlessness is simultaneously a chosen state and one that has been forced upon her. Additionally, in the context of the memoir as a whole, it is possible to read her homesickness as a feeling that is not altogether new to her, but, rather, a state of being that has followed her from the East to the West Coast. Although this particular narrative comic seems to align a comforting sense of being “kinda Jewish” with those living on the East Coast, as opposed to those living on the West Coast, the earlier comics and journal entries in *Make Me a Woman* make it clear that this set of binaries

(Jewish, East Coast, and home versus not-Jewish, West Coast, and exile) is not as straightforward as it seems.

For example, early on in *Make Me a Woman*, Vanessa often undergoes the sense of being an outsider or different from others. She encounters this feeling of marginality both as a member of a tight-knit Jewish community and, later, as one who has moved outside that community. In “Modern Ritual” and “Preparation Information,” comics tracing her thoughts about Judaism just prior to her Bat Mitzvah, she already recognizes the apprehensions she feels about her relationship to certain religious and cultural aspects of being Jewish. “Modern Ritual” begins with Vanessa explaining how she grew up “almost exclusively around Jews.” Despite her continued exposure to Jewish life and rituals, before her own Bat Mitzvah she finds herself experiencing “some doubts.” Her rabbi somewhat alleviates these concerns with his observation that “The Torah is full of metaphor!” and his suggestion that she take her religion less literally. Nevertheless, she continues to experience strong misgivings, as evidenced by her fainting spell on the day she practices her Torah portion in front of a cantor. The comic ends by focusing not on the religious aspects of this rite of passage, but on the social and commercial traditions surrounding the Bat Mitzvah, like the excesses related to those having the parties. The shift from the spiritual to the material reveals the complexity of Vanessa’s relationship to her Jewish identity. Her questioning stance, which in this context defines her understanding of what it means to be Jewish, is more than simply a strictly religious issue (a difficulty with believing in a monotheistic god, for example). Instead, Jewishness is, in this case, a highly stressful classification linked to the expectations of others, whether from those in her own peer group or religious representatives and authority figures. This early ambivalent and dis-affiliatory response to Jewishness is one that she maintains over the course of the text and that reveals itself almost

There are some Jews here though, and they're my friends. I think that they might connect with their Judaism in a different way than me — I've never been in a situation where I had to feel like it made me different. I've definitely come to take it for granted.



Figure 22. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010).

Oh, well. I moved here partly to get away from East Coast sensibilities and values. Isn't homesickness just part of self-exile? Isn't it a Jewish legacy to not fit in really anywhere? Isn't it always that you can take the girl out of Brooklyn, but not Brooklyn out of the girl?



Figure 23. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010).

entirely through her interactions with others. It is an outlook that simultaneously encompasses her affinity with, and her separation from, a consistent or communal notion of what it means to be Jewish or to identify as Jewish.

Several years after her Bat Mitzvah experience, Vanessa finds herself having switched from a private, Jewish day school to a public school. Like her move from the East Coast to California, the change in environments leaves her with conflicted feelings. On the one hand, as she recounts in the narrative comic “Dyspeptic Academic,” she finds a resemblance between these two communities in the fact that “[a]t both schools I was ensconced in a small, tightly-knit community, where we were told we were special...” In that sense, her desire to belong is somewhat continually appeased in both of these early educational environments. On the other hand, it is through her exposure to public school, and the opinions of those who are not part of her early, religious community, that she recognizes how much she is concurrently connected to and distanced from that earlier affiliation. In one scene from the same comic, she argues with her public school social studies teacher about a map of Israel that marks the West Bank and Gaza Strip as disputed territories. “No it isn’t! Israel won it in the Six-Day war!!” she argues. Several panels later, in a conversation with a public school peer who likens the “situation in Gaza” to “ethnic cleansing,” Vanessa, pictured with a scowl on her face, thinks to herself, “What do I even know about anything anymore!” These two incidents highlight the confusion that she undergoes in hearing, possibly for the first time in her life, opinions about Israel that question what she once thought she had understood about the situation. At the same time, she experiences an equal discomfort in a dialogue that she depicts between herself and a peer from her Jewish day school after she has left that school. As her childhood friend talks about the religious persecution of the Jews and how, as a result, they too deserve affirmative action, Vanessa counters, “Jews weren’t

brought here as slaves and then terrorized for 100 years after!” The distance that Vanessa experiences from her childhood peer reflects her aversion to the view of Jews as victims or as a persecuted minority in modern day America. As these two conversations, set side by side on the page, disclose, in interactions with others in both public and private school, Vanessa finds herself sounding out the voice of a questioning minority, presenting an alternative point of view to one who might not otherwise be exposed to such an opinion. Her status in both of these communities is, in this way, strongly defined by her ability to question, and oftentimes reject, the majority. Even in the context of being at “home,” then, Vanessa is not necessarily always an insider, just as in situations that impart her with a sense of homesickness, as in conversation with another woman who identifies as Jewish, she is not necessarily always an outsider.

As revealed in these early comics in *Make Me a Woman*, Vanessa’s Jewish identity surfaces most often at the moments that she confronts and interrogates the opinions and expectations of those around her. Regardless of their affiliations, she is most “Jewish” when she engages with others in dialogues that allow her to express her differing opinions or that lead her to moments of internal crisis about the status of her own points of view. In each of these encounters, she experiences a kind of satisfaction from voicing (or merely thinking) her oppositional viewpoints, even though the conversations generally lead her into further lines of inquiry regarding her own identity instead of presenting her with any definitive answers. These earlier encounters differ from the conversation that she has with the woman she addresses as “half Jewish” in the later comic “Stranger in a Strange Land.” This comic ends with Vanessa apologizing for her comment, and in this scenario it is her friend who stands as the minority or outsider, as the one challenging a majority (in this case, a Jewish one). The idea that someone is Jewish only if she was born to a Jewish mother is a belief that is often expressed in more

conservative or orthodox religious Jewish communities, like the one of Vanessa's private school upbringing, as the result of a religious statute.⁷⁵ Yet, for Vanessa, whose own experiences have revealed to her the myriad ways that a person can be Jewish, this utterance reveals an ignorance and insensitivity to the importance of allowing others to take charge over their own identities, and to question the dominant opinion.

Beneath the conversation with her “only half-Jewish” friend, the comic “Stranger in a Strange Land” ends with Vanessa sheepishly, and somewhat reluctantly, accepting the reality of her new home, as open-ended and confusing as that reality feels. She narrates, “Oh, well. I moved here partly to get away from East Coast sensibilities and values. Isn't homesickness just part of self-exile? Isn't it a Jewish legacy to not fit in really anywhere? Isn't it always that you can take the girl out of Brooklyn, but not Brooklyn out of the girl?” The open-ended questions link this comic to Vanessa's earlier childhood comics in which questions were posed but never fully answered. Under this set of questions are three consecutive images of Vanessa sitting in bed with Philip Roth's famous novel, *Portnoy's Complaint* (Figure 23). In the first image, Vanessa enjoys the novel, as illustrated by her entertained facial expression and speech bubble, “Ha!” In the second image, Vanessa looks annoyed, her eyes rolling upwards instead of focused on the novel. In the final image, Vanessa is asleep, one of her hands still touching the book and the other clasped at her side. This series of drawings prompts a connection between Vanessa's reactions to a touchstone of contemporary Jewish American literature and her feelings of rootlessness in relation to her Jewish identity. It unites Vanessa's sense of exile in California – where her definition of Jewishness narrows, at least in conversation with her “half-Jewish friend” – with her experience of being a Jewish woman whose own image has been narrowly written and

⁷⁵ According to the *mishna*, the first religious document to assemble the Jewish oral tradition, a person is only considered a Jew if she has been born to a Jewish mother or if she has converted to Judaism.

established in the mainstream canon of Jewish American literature. The comic links the experience of stigmatizing another person (in this case, another woman who identifies with being Jewish, but who Vanessa identifies as “only half Jewish”) with the experience of having been stigmatized. “Self-exile,” at least in part, is therefore a state of having lost sensitivity to the porousness of categorizations, to the way that naming someone else is a way of asserting power and taking away that person’s authority over her own identity. Vanessa significantly points to her location as a state of “self-exile” and not exile, thereby taking responsibility for the ways that she has imagined Jewish identity, for herself and others. Self-exile is a matter of perception: it is a state of forgetting, and of having to be reminded, of one’s complex relationship to belonging in any defining category.

The images of Vanessa reading *Portnoy’s Complaint* additionally link this forgetfulness to Vanessa’s own experience of reading other imagined Jewish identities in acclaimed works of literature that supposedly represent universal experiences of what it means to be Jewish. Much has been written about images of women that have emerged from a Jewish American literature (or, at least, from a publicly visible “canon”) that is, too often, based in a misogynistic viewpoint that stereotypes Jewish women. As mentioned in Chapter One, in *Fighting to Become Americans* (1999), Riv-Ellen Prell argues that the fracturing that occurs within minority groups, as between Jewish men and women, often reveals the dynamic of the group as a whole as it does or does not fit into larger society. She writes, “One is not simply in or out of a group, assimilated or merely acculturated. Rather, relations between members of the minority group continue to mirror relations between the minority and majority groups” (20). According to this model, the way that Jewish men have depicted Jewish women over time is partially a reflection of the ways American culture has perceived and interacted with Jewish culture and society. In her

introduction to *Talking Back* (1999), Joyce Antler chronicles the stereotypes that Jewish men have created of Jewish women: the “Yiddishe Mama, the Jewish Mother, and the Jewish American Princess” (1).⁷⁶ Antler argues, “[s]uch contradictory images of Jewish women – domineering and vulnerable, manipulative and quiescent, alluring and unattractive – highlight the impressive yet threatening aspects of Jewish women’s roles and their power.” Both Antler’s and Prell’s books trace the ways that Jewish American women, especially since the second wave of the feminist movement, have responded to such representations in their own art and writings. Prell, for example, discusses 1970s feminist novels as counter-representations to earlier depictions of the Jewish woman’s body, as well as 1990s “talk back art,” which “envision a Jewishness that does not depend upon the consuming woman as an icon” (242). Kominsky Crumb’s comics, which utilize and exaggerate stereotypes of Jewish women in order to render them absurd, can similarly be understood as a kind of “talk back art” – an art that is very much focused on earlier (mis)representations of Jewish women.

Davis’s representation of Vanessa in bed reading Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* is also a response to such earlier representations of Jewish women. However, unlike other “talk back art,” Davis’s work is not primarily focused on looking *back* at stereotypical representations of Jewish women. Instead, as the comic “Stranger in a Strange Land” demonstrates, her exploration of stereotypes begins with the very personal question of what it means to be an artist engaging in acts of representation that involve the danger of oversimplifying the subject at hand, whether that subject is the self or an Other. The comic begins with Vanessa talking to a friend about a column that she has been hired to write for *Nextbook* – a conversational tidbit that emphasizes

⁷⁶ As discussed, in *You Never Call! You Never Write!: A History of the Jewish Mother* (2007), Antler provides a thorough history and analysis of stereotypes of the Jewish American mother, from the early 1900s to contemporary times, as well as feminist and postmodern responses to such stereotypes.

Vanessa's controlling status as artist and creator.⁷⁷ At other points of this same comic, Vanessa recounts conversations with others that reflect her own propensity to categorize others, as well as her struggle to understand this inclination. In another set of panels, she somewhat apologetically emails an old Israeli lover to tell him that the film, *You Don't Mess with the Zohan*, reminded her of him.⁷⁸ In his response, he tells her, "An obnoxious reason indeed! It's like if I told you I saw some dumb American girl at McDonald's doing her stupid American thing, and thought of you!" By including Vanessa's own personal experiences not just with stereotyping other Jewish women, but also with stereotyping Jewish men, Davis's comics reveal the porousness between those on the inside and those on the outside, between those who have been stereotyped and those who stereotype. Her work thus both responds to and creates anew representations of identity across various communities, as her comics engage with and account for her own artistic imagination in the present as much as they do with influences from the past that continue to affect her artistic choices and enterprises.

The images pictured at the end of the comic, of Vanessa reading Roth's novel, are an epilogue to the narrative, reflecting a complicated response to stereotypical depictions of Jewish women in American literature and art. Significantly, in the first image in this series of three, Vanessa finds enjoyment in the book – an important acknowledgment that although Jewish women as depicted in Roth's novels in many ways hurt Jewish women's perceptions of themselves (not to mention Jewish men's perception of *themselves*), they also contribute to a persistently influential cultural celebration of Jewishness in America, however flawed and contradictory that celebration. As Davis has argued, "*Portnoy's Complaint* was important – those

⁷⁷ *Nextbook* is the name of the non-profit organization that runs *Nextbook Press*, as well as *Tablet Magazine*.

⁷⁸ *You Don't Mess with the Zohan* is a 2008 American comedy starring Adam Sandler, who plays a respected Israeli soldier who has left his life combating terrorism to become a hairdresser in New York City. The film is loaded with overstated stereotypes of Israelis, not to mention Jews and Arab Americans.

depictions had never been put out there, that Jewish voice was important to hear, for so many reasons” (“In Search of the Whole Truth” 2). The central panel picturing Vanessa grimacing at the novel reflects more typical and public feminist responses to the works of Roth, not to mention reactions to other important Jewish American male literary figures (as well as comedians) from the 1950s and 1960s.⁷⁹ Yet, this image is followed by a final one that is perhaps unique to a generation of Jewish women coming of age in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, whose relationship to feminism differs from the generations before them. In this third image, Vanessa has fallen asleep, and drool emerges from the corner of her mouth. One of her hands still clutches the book, but the other is aimed away from it. The connection to the past is still there, in traces, but the post-assimilated Jewish woman artist, as depicted here, in a sense has moved forward; she is fully engaged in an imaginary dream-world that still barely grasps at what ostensibly put her to sleep.

These images, presented as a series with no panels dividing the individual pictures, are visually linked to the set of images representing Vanessa in conversation with her friend. By including these two sets of panels in the same comic about homelessness and self-exile, Davis’s work connects the violence of publicly feeling exiled from one’s own identity with the private, everyday interactions that often lead a member of a group to marginalize another within that group. That Vanessa presents her reaction to Roth’s novel in the very private space of her bed – her individualized heart-covered pillows propping her up – suggests an inevitable muddling of public and private spaces when it comes to self-perception. Homesickness is therefore a state of feeling like an outsider at “home,” as much as it is a state of feeling like an outsider far away

⁷⁹ For more on the birth of the Jewish woman as “comic monster,” see Chapter Four, “From Marjorie Morningstar to Jennie Grossinger: The Suburbs, the Catskills, and the Jewish Mother Joke,” and Chapter Five, “‘American Mother of the Year’ Versus Monster Mothers: Will the Real Sophie Portnoy Please Stand Up?” of Antler’s *You Never Call! You Never Write!*, pps. 100-47.

from “home.” It is a recognition that the notion of home, in itself, like identity, is a concept that changes over time, but that also holds many sometimes contradictory meanings within the same present.

IV. “...This broad-minded Judaism, that lets me belong, even when I pull away”

In addition to tracking Vanessa’s journey across coasts, but not necessarily away from “home” (or into “exile”), *Make Me a Woman* is a book that follows Vanessa’s experiences of dating both Jewish and non-Jewish men over time as yet another fraught indicator of her ever-changing understanding of and connection with her Jewish identity. For many contemporary Jewish American women artists and writers, the theme of relationships between Jewish women and non-Jewish men is a recurring one that allows them to explore the false presumption that non-Jewish men lead Jewish women into a state of separation or dispersion from their Jewish identities and heritages, or that relationships with such men represent a condition of not being “at home” with their Jewish identities. Like Kominsky Crumb, Davis often paints her persona as uncomfortable around Jewish men, a discomfort that similarly, if paradoxically, stems from her over-familiarity with them. In the comic “Dyspeptic Academic,” for instance, Vanessa reflects on her often negative experiences with Jewish men in grade school: “Sometimes I think that this overexposure to developing Jewish boys has contributed to a lifelong romantic aversion to them.” Here, she once again engages in narrow categorizations of the “other,” this time in order to better understand her own battles with what is expected of her as a Jewish woman in contemporary American society. Unlike Kominsky Crumb’s personas, however, Vanessa reveals, at times, not only a distaste towards dating Jewish men, but also, somewhat conversely, an overt anxiety about what it would mean to unite with a non-Jewish man and how this union would affect her Jewish identity. In this way, Davis’s work engages not just with the importance

of rebellion or rejection in claiming agency over one's identity, but also in recognizing how outside, communal expectations often interact with and influence an individual's most intimate desires.

Later in the same comic, Vanessa sits at a "big Jewish wedding" staring longingly at a man (labeled a "Jewish TV writer") across the table (Figure 24). The adjoining panel portrays a day-dream in which she is dancing with another (presumably non-Jewish) man and asking him, "If we ever have kids, I can raise them Jewish, right?"⁸⁰ In this image, Vanessa combines the fantasy of affiliating with a non-Jewish man with the fantasy of fulfilling the obligations that have been passed on to her – through her family (predominantly her mother) and community – of maintaining a link to her Jewish heritage, and especially of transferring that heritage onto her (hypothetical) children. In Davis's work, then, we see both a repetition and a revision of the anxieties and desires of earlier Jewish American women's writing about exogamy.⁸¹ Vanessa is able to question the expectations of Jewish womanhood that are passed on to her without fully rejecting them. She modifies these expectations to suit her own particular needs and desires, maintaining all the while an awareness and acceptance of the impressions that these outside pressures have made on her. Additionally, by framing her fantasy question about having children with a non-Jewish man as an event that is a hypothetical and not definite plan (an "if" instead of a "when"), Vanessa rebels against the cultural assumption and expectation that, as a woman, she will ultimately procreate, or at least want and attempt to procreate – even as she leaves it open as

⁸⁰ The presumably non-Jewish man pictured in the second panel looks similar to Vanessa's boyfriend in California, named Trevor (and his comical response to Vanessa's question – "I was thinking we'd raise them Zoroastrian!" – aligns with the way Trevor is portrayed in other comics). "Dyspeptic Academic" is dated 2009, but was likely placed at the beginning of the book due to its focus on Vanessa's early Jewish life. Yet, in reading these images, which come long before the reader has been introduced to Trevor (or to Vanessa's move to California in general), this man can be viewed as much as a stand-in fantasy of any non-Jewish partner, as a figure representing her real life boyfriend.

⁸¹ For an overview, see Sylvia Barack Fishman's *Double or Nothing?: Jewish Families and Mixed Marriages* (2004), and especially Chapter Eight, "Interfaith Romance in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture," pps. 101-23.

a possibility. Vanessa's fantasy thus simultaneously reconciles her need to accommodate herself to the expectations of others, a need that she has adopted into her own "sense of identity" (as she admits of the daydream), with her desire to question and rebel against those very expectations.

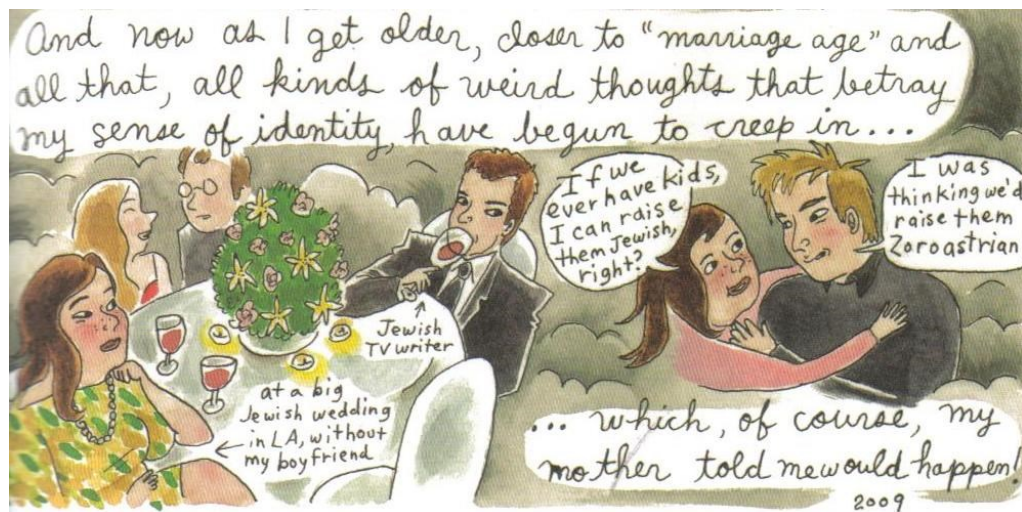


Figure 24. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010).

Throughout the first half of *Make Me a Woman*, before Vanessa finds herself in a monogamous relationship with a non-Jewish man in California, there are several other comics that additionally trace her interactions with various men, and these comics each similarly address the question of how to accommodate the desire to maintain a Jewish identity without necessarily bowing fully to the expectations of others. In "Wild Ride," Vanessa records the time that she spends with an Israeli in New York City. "Jewish American girls and Israeli guys – isn't that our REAL birthright?" she quips in the opening panel, as the Israeli man lets out a chuckle. Vanessa goes on to describe him as "insufferably charming" and "strangely familiar." These depictions correspond with an email exchange with her Israeli ex-boyfriend in "Stranger in a Strange Land," in which she reveals her own predisposition towards lumping Israelis together, a tendency that evokes often misdirected feelings of nostalgia and familiarity in her. Vanessa's candid descriptions of her perceptions of Israeli men in her comics reveal yet another dimension

of the way she conceptualizes her own Jewish American identity. For her, as for other American Jews raised to perceive Israeli culture and history as an extension of their own heritage, Israel marks a kind of “home away from home.” Israeli men, then, represent the “strangely familiar” in that they are (according to this model) Jewish but not American. A relationship with an Israeli man therefore could potentially serve to bring together Vanessa’s conflicting needs to rebel against and simultaneously maintain her Jewish identity in the ways that others expect her to; it would conceivably satisfy her desire to affirm and cultivate the “insider-outsider” status that she experienced as a child and teenager – the very sense of enforced “rootlessness” that she brands as her own “Jewish legacy,” although her comics reveal the simultaneous sense of rootedness she often feels both in and out of this very Jewish legacy.

The opening images in “Wild Ride” reflect Vanessa’s idealistic fantasies of her relationship with this Israeli man, even in the face of their obvious incompatibilities (Figure 25). One panel depicts a close up of their faces, with the Israeli man telling her, “Just so you know, this is just for tonight.” Her eyes look skeptically away from him, as her thought bubble reads, “No kidding!” Yet, despite what seems like an acknowledgement of the casual status of this relationship, the panel is followed by another, in which she sits at her computer with one arm on her chest and another on her forehead as her speech bubble records her swoon. She is reading an email in which her Israeli lover once again attempts to maintain an emotional distance from her, as he has written to her, “It probably won’t go anywhere, but let’s meet up.” Vanessa’s swoon is surrounded by red hearts that connect the previous panel – in which she reveals what can now more clearly be read as only a superficial skepticism – with a panel depicting her inability to break out of the fantasy that she has created from an ideal of the Israeli man as her “birthright.”



Figure 25. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010).

The rest of the comic slowly breaks down her illusion, as this man's individual quirks and behaviors disclose how her Israeli fantasy lover is less than an ideal mate. This move towards reality comes slowly for Vanessa, and the comic never marks a clear or epiphanic moment when she recognizes the shallowness of her dream world and how little it corresponds with reality. Instead, Vanessa continues to cling to her fantasy. The comic ends after she and the man have gone on a motorcycle ride in Manhattan. They end up alone in the private space of Vanessa's apartment, where, she notes, "he seemed upset." "That was a long, dangerous motorcycle ride!!" he exclaims, as Vanessa looks at him from her seat on the couch, her expression difficult to read. What this comic humorously records, most significantly, is a superficial relationship between two characters who seem to be communicating on different planes. Vanessa's idealistic fantasy, which turns her Israeli lover into a characterization of who and what she wants to identify herself with, is matched by his comment, on one of their dates, that "I always wanted to be an artist... Instead, I just date artists." The glimpses that the comic imparts of the Israeli's personality hint at

his own superficial reasons for spending time with Vanessa, a motivation mirroring her own desire to be defined by the person that she chooses to date.

In a later narrative comic, presented about half-way through the memoir, and entitled “Framed!?”, Vanessa narrates yet another early dating interaction that reveals much about her fears and expectations regarding who she is expected to partner with – and who she would like to be able to choose free of outside concerns or opinions. In this comic, Vanessa helps her mother, who runs the Palm Beach Jewish Film Festival. Despite the setting, she is ironically pursued by the non-Jewish theater manager, Jake, during her time there. She explains the unusual circumstances that have brought her in contact with someone she does not necessarily have much in common with. “We were some of only a few young people working the festival, so we ended up hanging out at the theater during the week.” Jake finds her artistic identity to be a point of commonality, much like the Israeli lover in “Wild Ride,” and he asks Vanessa whether she thinks “tattoos are art?” Despite her non-committal response (her speech bubble reads, “Huh! Uh, yeah! I mean, of course! ..?”), Jake shows her his full-scale body tattoo of a Christ-figure hanging on the cross, with the words “Praise the Lord” sketched out on the small of his back. Here, while Jake aligns himself with Vanessa’s artistic affiliation (much like the Israeli), his tattoo pronounces his symbolic distance not only from her Jewish identity, but also from her ambivalent attitude towards representations that promote an unequivocally unified sense of self-identification. Yet, over the course of the narrative, Vanessa reveals that she is “FREAKED OUT” by Jake, not for the reasons that might seem otherwise obvious, but because she is uncomfortable with “guys who liked me before I liked them.” In the end, she goes out with him, once again against her better judgment: “Forcing myself to be open-minded in that particular way was always kind of wrenching and stressful. I don’t trust myself,” she narrates. Vanessa’s

omission of the possibility that she might be uncomfortable with Jake because he is not Jewish is reflective of a more general tendency, throughout the memoir, of a need to remain “open minded” even when circumstances do not necessarily warrant it. This need, in return, conflicts with her sometimes inevitable predisposition towards categorizing and labeling others, as in the comic “Stranger in a Strange Land,” and it also, as in the case of this particular comic, often simultaneously clashes with her own inclinations and desires. Taken as a whole, these comics reflect Vanessa’s struggle with towing the line between outside expectations and personal needs, with the urge to rebel and the yearning to fit in or to feel like part of a community of others. Even or especially through her rebellions, she finds herself in a kind of “self-exile,” often putting her theoretical propensity to remain “open minded” ahead of her lived reality and desires.

The first half of *Make Me a Woman* traces Vanessa’s fraught attitude toward being pressured into a relationship with a Jewish man, and her complicated desire to get around this expectation – to remain “open minded” – all the while somehow maintaining a link to her Jewish identity. Interestingly, in a later comic, Vanessa assigns this very ability to be flexible and broad-minded as something directly aligned *with* her Jewish identity. In this way, her decisions about whether or not to consider dating non-Jews are directly connected to the ways that she experiences and understands what it means, for her, to be Jewish. In “Holy Rollin’,” a narrative comic presented towards the very end of the memoir, Vanessa presents a history of the Jewish rituals and traditions she has participated in since her childhood, and how her engagements have changed over time. For example, in reference to the Jewish high holidays, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, she describes how, over time, she has grown “resentful of the ritual and obligation of it all.” Despite her own personal interpretations of holiday practices over time – like wearing a charm on the high holidays in order to protect her loved ones – eventually she gives up any overt

act associated with those days of the year. As she explains, “I defied my own rules and decided to leave the life and death of myself and loved ones up to fate.” The last page of the comic shifts from a historical overview of the ways she has practiced and performed Jewish rituals over time to a current day perspective. In the first panel on this page, she presents her mother’s advice to her in the present perfect tense, thereby recognizing how this piece of advice has influenced her over time and continues to have an impact on her. She narrates, “My mother has always said: Wherever I am in the world, if I’m around Jews I feel at home!” Throughout the rest of the comic, although she exhibits a slight continued cynicism towards her mother’s words (relating, of them, “I always just thought of it as like, a ‘mom’ thing to say”), she explains how, in fact, “I’ve come around to my mom’s view of things with the being around Jewish people stuff.” The comic ends as she sits with a group of friends at a “Matzoh Ball Party,” concluding: “I feel lucky to have been brought up in this broad-minded Judaism, that lets me belong, even when I pull away” (Figure 26). Interestingly, it is not a return to ritual or obligation that allows Vanessa to feel like she has returned to Judaism. Instead, it is social practice and, in particular, a party that permits her to link her Jewish and American heritages, as Matzoh Balls have traditionally been held in major cities in the Northeast on Christmas eve as a way of allowing Jews to enjoy the holiday period in a secular fashion.⁸² In other words, Vanessa’s “return” to her Jewish identity – or, at the very least, her reconciliation with her mother’s version of what it means to be Jewish – involves not a repetition or assimilation of past rituals and obligations into the present, but rather a flexible connection with others who are interested in celebrating Jewish culture (or, in this case, food) in the context of other, non-Jewish traditions and cultures.

⁸² The phrase “Matzoh Ball” is, of course, a pun on the traditional Ashkenazi Jewish food, made from Matzoh meal and generally eaten in a soup broth during Passover. The phrase “Matzoh Ball Party” is somewhat redundant, and the pun, stemming from the dual meanings of the homonym “ball,” is usually simply termed a “Matzoh Ball.”



Figure 26. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010).

The image of Vanessa at the “Matzoh Ball Party” is also significant because aside from being surrounded by several unnamed women, the panel includes a drawing of Vanessa’s non-Jewish boyfriend, Trevor, participating in the event. Trevor is pictured earlier on in the same narrative comic, as well, lying in bed beside Vanessa, silently listening to her with his head tilted in her direction, as she worries aloud (Figure 27). Indeed, throughout the second half of the memoir (and several times in the first half), Trevor is drawn into various comics, although he is usually a silent actor in Vanessa’s narrative.⁸³ His presence, especially in the latter half of the book, signifies Vanessa’s movement away from her fantasies and desires and into an actual (and not imagined or undeveloped) relationship with a man. It is paradoxically in the space of her connection with Trevor, pictured at various points in the text, that she finds herself most able to fully express and explore her Jewish identity, as opposed to her relationships with other Jewish and non-Jewish men, in which her religious/ethnic affiliation is rarely mentioned or shown.

⁸³ See footnote 80 for an example of one of Trevor’s understated appearances early on in the memoir. Although he is a featured participant in many of the diary comics relating their day-to-day lives throughout the memoir, in general he remains a silent observer in most of the narrative comics that include him and that generally address Vanessa’s thoughts about her Jewish identity. “Talkin’ ’bout my Generation,” a narrative comic in which Vanessa discusses the merits and pitfalls of Robert Crumb’s illustrated *The Book of Genesis*, is another exception. In this comic, Trevor engages in a discussion with Vanessa about Crumb’s representation of women in the book and whether it’s a fair assessment of the relationship between men and women in biblical times.

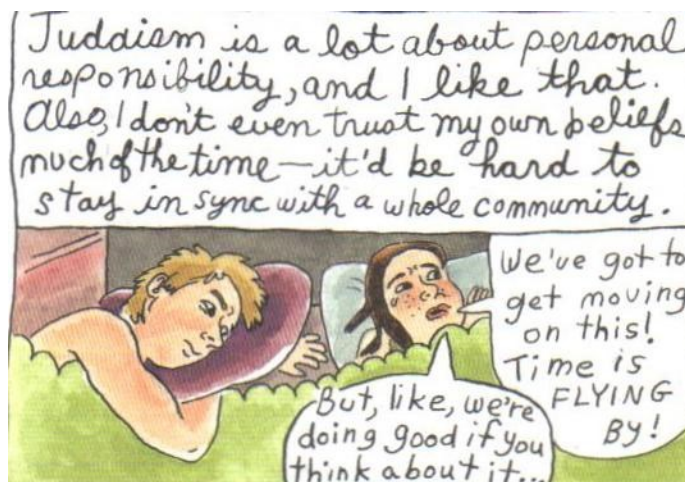


Figure 27. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010).

Trevor is a silent but comfortable participant at the Matzoh Ball, and he is a patient listener as Vanessa ponders Judaism’s connection to “personal responsibility” and her ability to “stay in sync with a whole community.” In this way, Vanessa’s assessment that her mother was right about feeling “at home” around Jews is actually a reinterpretation. For Vanessa, intimacy is tied to a sense of being able to pull away as much as it is attached to the possibility of inviting others – so-called “outsiders” – into a newly defined notion of home.

In one of the only comics in which Trevor is given a voice, a diary comic dated March 18, 2008, he is an active participant in a conversation about the Jewish holiday of Purim. This comic opens with Vanessa sitting at her computer, as Trevor is pictured in the background, his face hidden. “Purim is a fun holiday!” Vanessa exclaims, and he turns to hear her description of the food eaten on Purim, asking questions and asserting, “That sounds fun,” when she describes the tradition of drinking “till you don’t know the difference between good and evil.” When Vanessa describes Hamantaschen, the triangle-shaped cookies traditionally eaten on the holiday, Trevor responds, “Yeeuch! Sounds like more gross Jewish food.” The next panel is untitled, as Vanessa stares at her boyfriend, while he sits with a self-satisfied look on his face (Figure 28). His eyes are closed and two lines beside his lips reveal a slight grin, while she looks on

expressionlessly. This silent moment between the otherwise engaged couple reflects a pause in the narrative, in which Vanessa presumably absorbs the conversation and contemplates a response. On the one hand, the comic could end with Vanessa silently accepting her non-Jewish boyfriend's tongue-in-cheek response to Jewish food, as, earlier in the memoir, she omitted her reaction to Jake's tattoo in "Framed!?" On the other hand, this conversation affords the otherwise silent-on-the-topic Vanessa to finally address (aloud) what it means, for her, to be dating a non-Jew. In the end, the next panel depicts a playful acknowledgement of a conversation between two intimates, who are revealed to be equals. Facing her computer again and this time with *her* eyes closed – wearing an expression almost identical to Trevor's expression in the previous panel – Vanessa tells him, "Well, that'll be a funny panel in some future comic where I flashback on my non-Jewish boyfriend!" (Figure 29). As in the collaborative comics drawn by Aline Kominsky Crumb and Robert Crumb, discussed in Chapter One, this image humorously addresses the question of who or what is allowed to speak for or about a minority group, and how the context of the conversation affects what is or is not permissible for its participants to say. This diary comic reflects a dialogue originally held in the private space of the bedroom that has been made public by the hand of the author. The statement that Vanessa will "flash back" on her non-Jewish ex-boyfriend in a future, imaginary panel reinforces the actuality that this is a conversation that is being recorded, on the page, by a cartoonist who is consciously turning her everyday life experiences into art. The comic has been created, in part, for laughs, but it also captures and records an otherwise private moment between intimates whose relationship (as a Jew dating a non-Jew) has been misunderstood and caricatured in the public eye, and it revises that characterization in a public way. By exaggerating her reaction to Trevor with a comedic



Figure 28. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010).



Figure 29. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2010).

come-back, Vanessa presents the two characters as equals on the page, able to productively expose and exploit the stereotypes associated with their coupling – namely, that the non-Jew will never be able to look at the Jew without categorizing her (through idealizations and/or degradations) or engaging in overt acts of anti-Semitism. Indeed, in the very last panel of the

comic, titled “Epilogue,” Vanessa’s boyfriend giggles in bed as he reads a book about Hitler (entitled “The Early Years”), while Vanessa looks over at him angrily, the covers drawn tightly under her neck. The comic depiction of this very private, intimate space (Vanessa is leaning, in the panel, on the same heart-covered pillow pictured in the *Portnoy’s Complaint* panels) exaggerates pre-conceived, stereotyped roles of the Jew in conversation (or in bed) with the non-Jew, even as the interaction, as a whole, and Vanessa’s disclosure of it in her memoir, simultaneously discloses a loving relationship between two people clearly at “home” with one another.

V. “What would make me the most ‘myself’?”

Vanessa’s reinterpretation of her mother’s words – that “wherever I am in the world, if I’m around Jews I feel at home!” – is an important gesture signifying not an omission or disaffiliation from the world of her mother, but rather an integration of that point of view into her own, ever-evolving perspective, a dis-affiliation. Throughout *Make Me a Woman*, Vanessa often mentions her mother’s words in narratives in which she explores her Jewish identity, and she uses those words as a starting point for her examinations.⁸⁴ In this way, she accepts the affiliation or rootedness that she experiences as part of a larger community of Jews (and especially of Jewish women), although she simultaneously finds a way to rebel against many of the presumptions and expectations of that community.

In the final comic included in the memoir, “Fast Forward!”, as the title reveals, Vanessa attempts to move from her focus on the past and the present (and especially the past as part of the present) to concentrate on the future. She begins by recalling her move, “almost FIVE years ago,” to California, and how, since then, her life has felt “like a bit of a time warp.” She then lists

⁸⁴ See, for example, Figure 24, in which, upon asking her non-Jewish dance partner whether they could raise their kids Jewish, the narrator admits that this betrayal of her sense of her Jewish identity is something “which, of course, my mother told me would happen!”

the many changes that her friends, near and far, have gone through over those years, “big changes,” that have made her feel left behind. As she narrates, “I don’t know what to do next. I don’t totally know what I want.” At this part of the comic, once again, she inserts her mother’s words into the narrative. As she narrates the question, “What would make me the most ‘myself?’”, the image underneath the narration pictures a younger Vanessa sitting beside her mother, who asks her, “What do you consider yourself FIRST: A woman, a Jew, or an American?” Framed also as a question, her mother’s words mirror her own journey towards understanding her identity as open-ended and never definitive, a journey that is focused on unraveling possibilities instead of insisting on definite, clear-cut truths. Underneath the image of the two of them in a car, the narrator adds, “She’s also told me, ‘Be here now.’” This panel brings together the main thematic explorations of *Make Me a Woman* – what does it mean to choose one identity over another? Is there a way to best understand or represent the self as a single, definite entity? – while it reiterates the memoir’s own emphasis on the present as the most formative moment in any exploration of identity and the self.

The final comic stresses Vanessa’s continued connections to Jewish culture and traditions, but it also affirms her desire to create her own open-ended, individualistic destiny in the face of such affiliations. In the second to last panel, Vanessa narrates a phone message she receives from her mother and her “surrogate grandmother” Betty on Yom Kippur. Without identifying which of these women leaves the message on her machine, thereby establishing them as representatives of a larger community of Jewish women, the panel is filled with their words: “Vanessa, the rabbi said in his sermon today that when you’re confused about what to do, just pick something! The worst thing you can do is NOTHING!” In response, in the final panel, Vanessa narrates, “So let’s do it! What, I don’t know. But isn’t it nice to know that we’re all in it

together?” Below these words – framed, yet again, as a question – the panel pictures a group of people at a party dancing, their heads covered by the narration and musical notes additionally filling up the frame. This unidentified group, situated beside a panel representing Vanessa’s Jewish communal relationships, reveals her synchronic affiliations, even as it reinforces her ability to connect these various affiliations, to create a “we” out of diverse communities. For Vanessa, depicting the self on the page is a process based not in choosing one representation over another, but in recognizing the diverse truths inherent in all representations of the self created over time and connected by the present. It is through the process of composition, of piecing the self, line by line, on the page, that the artist can finally find and claim a space of belonging.

Chapter Three

“I Always Want to Know Everything True”: Memory, Adolescence, and Belonging in the Graphic Memoirs of Miss Lasko-Gross and Lauren Weinstein

Despite the roots of modern cartooning as a means of political and cultural satire, as well as the abundance of graphic narratives clearly written for “mature” audiences, comics are often mistakenly presumed as reading material primarily meant for the young. Many cartoonists have had the perplexing experience of seeing their works advertised as children’s or young adult literature.⁸⁵ During a recent interview, for example, Art Spiegelman claimed that when he first heard about parents and teachers sharing the *Maus* series with twelve year olds, he thought, “wait, that’s child abuse.”⁸⁶ Although Spiegelman eventually came around to an understanding of comics as “democratic – each person will take what he will,” the presumption that they are generally intended for younger audiences also presents practical difficulties in terms of the marketing and distribution of texts. Lauren Weinstein’s graphic memoir, *Girl Stories* (2006), was originally placed in the young adult’s book section of Barnes and Noble.⁸⁷ As she explains in an interview, “[a] book that blurs the lines for adults and kids is a really hard thing for people to

⁸⁵ For the sake of simplicity, I do not differentiate between the concepts of “children,” “young adults,” “teenagers,” and “adolescents” throughout this chapter. My focus is mainly on the parts of the addressed texts that deal with questions of identity taking place during the years between young childhood and adulthood, which are generally referred to as “adolescence.” For a detailed history of these terms, see Michael Cart’s *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, especially Chapter One: “From Sue Barton to the Sixties: What’s in a Name? and Other Uncertainties,” pps. 3-20. Cart argues that the construct of adolescence was invented and popularized with the 1904 publication of G. Stanley Hall’s *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*. He additionally lists two other foundational texts that have shaped western notions of the various stages of life development. These include Robert James Havighurst’s *Developmental Tasks and Education*, and Erik Erikson’s *Childhood and Society*, both published in 1950.

⁸⁶ From a public interview with Hillary Chute at the 92nd Street Y, New York, New York, October 6, 2011. Spiegelman’s “revised” vision of *Maus* as a text that can be appreciated by kids as well as adults can be seen in his comic, “In the Dumps,” originally published on September 27, 1993 in *The New Yorker*, in which he depicts a conversation that he had with children’s book writer and illustrator, Maurice Sendak. As Sendak tells Spiegelman in the comic, “Kids books... Grownup books... That’s just marketing. Books are books!” (*MetaMaus* 81). Sendak’s sentiment is echoed by Cart. In writing of the recent adult/young adult literature “crossover phenomenon,” which he cites as taking place since the early 2000s in England, Australia, Canada, and America, he argues, “it is not necessarily readers but revenue that is driving the crossover phenomenon” (118). For more, see *Young Adult Literature*, Chapter Eight: “So, How Adult is Young Adult? The Crossover Conundrum,” pps. 111-122.

⁸⁷ It was only in 1997 that the Barnes & Noble chain decided to create a separate section, in its stores, for “Young Adults” that would be housed outside of its Children’s Departments (Cart 59).

figure out how to market” (*Believer* 50). Many people still mistakenly presume that a narrative drawn in the comics form is one that should automatically be appropriate for both children and adults, and perhaps especially for children. Among other reasons, this assumption exists, especially in North America, because of the popularity of the mainstream superhero genre, which often caters to children and adolescents (at least as the starting point of an often life-long attachment), as well as the prevalence of animated films intended for young audiences. As Charles Hatfield has demonstrated, “the idea persists that comics are rooted in childhood, that is, that [they] are grounded historically in children’s culture and psychologically in some longed-for, Edenic state of childlike carelessness, innocence, and simplicity” (“Introduction to ‘Comics and Childhood’”).⁸⁸ The creation of a comic that, intentionally or not, blurs the line between what is and is not suitable for certain audiences can therefore be a means of challenging normative notions of authorial intent and audience expectation, or of unshackling an author or a work from “genre bondage.”

The autobiographical comics of Miss Lasko-Gross and Lauren Weinstein both complicate the possibility of categorizing their works as intended for a particular age demographic. Lauren Weinstein’s *Girl Stories* takes place during a young woman’s adolescence, specifically, from age thirteen to fourteen or fifteen. Miss Lasko-Gross’s *Escape from “Special”* (2006) begins in childhood, with a recounting of the narrator’s “earliest memory,” while her second memoir, *A Mess of Everything* (2009), concludes when the narrator finishes high school. Unlike the works of Kominsky Crumb and Davis, the voice of a present day, adult narrator does not drive these

⁸⁸ In his “Introduction to ‘Comics and Childhood,’” Charles Hatfield cites various articles recently written for popular periodicals, which relate comics to childhood sensibilities. In particular, he references “Not Funnies,” an article written by Charles McGrath for the *New York Times Magazine*, published July 11, 2004. In this essay, despite recognizing the complexity of “graphic novels,” McGrath ultimately argues that “this is a medium probably not well suited to lyricism or strong emotion. . . [Comics instead] appeal to that childish part of ourselves that delights in caricature.” Hatfield also references Peter Schjeldahl’s October 17, 2005 article for *The New Yorker*, “Words and Pictures: Graphic Novels Come of Age,” which reinforces many of McGrath’s notions of comics as a medium directed at young people.

memoirs. Instead, the child's or adolescent's voice and physical presence comes to dominate these books, as though they were narratives being written by their author's young personas just as the events had unfolded. The covers of the memoirs establish this conceit early on. Whereas the figures drawn on the covers of *Need More Love* and *Make Me a Woman* portray a narrator who is close in age to the author publishing the works, the cover of *Girl Stories* pictures the face and torso of an adolescent giving a thumbs up, and the cover of *Escape from "Special"* shows a young woman drawing in her notebook while sitting in a classroom (Figures 30 and 31). Given our general contemporary understanding of adolescence as a moment of transition, the focus on childhood and especially adolescence as the "present" in these memoirs establishes the liminal as a useful and perhaps even essential means of understanding and representing the self. In these works, the middle and high school years present a time when reflections about the self and identity – questions of "who am I?" and "what am I?" – predominate, and when categorizations of the self, such as gendered, religious, ethnic, sexual, or even cultural affiliations, potentially assume an overwhelmingly devastating or comforting force, depending on how and in what context they are introduced. In this way, the transitional frame of adolescence is emphasized as a privileged state of knowing, recalling, or experiencing certain defining moments in the story of one's life.

By forefronting questions of identity and classification in graphic renditions of adolescence as the present, the two books under study in this chapter emphasize the aesthetic and narrative possibilities inherent in periods of transition. Yet, despite their emphases on social constructions and categorizations as the dominant lenses that adolescents use to read and to be read by one another, unlike the graphic memoirs of Kominsky Crumb and Davis, *Escape from "Special"* and *Girl Stories* are texts that do not often refer explicitly to the Jewishness of their



Figure 30. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006).

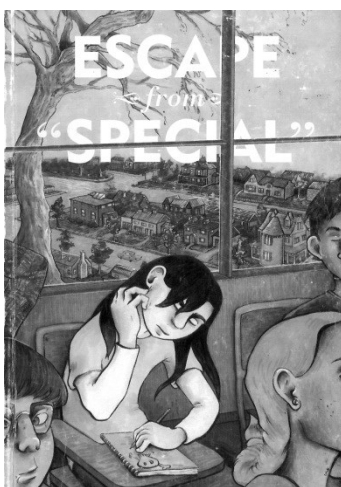


Figure 31. Miss Lasko-Gross, *Escape from "Special"* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2006).

main characters. Although questions of Jewish identity are integral to these memoirs of adolescence, the theme of Jewishness surfaces more often through absences, or silences about ethnic and religious identity and experience, rather than through direct engagements with such matters. While Jewish themes, symbols, and references can be found in these graphic memoirs, Jewishness is mutedly, though definitely, established through more general metaphors of feeling like an outsider, or of being singled out as “special.” As a label that is sometimes attributed to the personas by others and sometimes self-proclaimed, being “special,” a “freak,” or “other” comes to stand, at times, as a source of strength and power. At other times, it gets inscribed as an identity label that leads to self-doubt, agony, and the shattering feeling of a sense of

rootedlessness. Jewishness, as it is indirectly signified, is consequently always open to imaginative revision, even as it runs the risk of effacement or displacement in light of more universally applicable – and therefore, in some ways, “safer” – metaphors for identity. In this way, Lasko Gross’s and Weinstein’s graphic memoirs convey a dis-affiliatory stance that is based in Jewishness as an abstraction, rather than a system of easily recognizable and traceable affiliations, gestures, symbols, traditions, and expectations. These texts pose the possibility of post-assimilated Jewishness as a stance that can be applied, more generally, to postmodern selves resisting the possibility of identities as easy or seamless classifications or constructions.

I. “I Always Want to Know Everything True”

Published in 2006, *Escape from “Special”* is Miss Lasko-Gross’s debut graphic memoir. It is followed by a second memoir that continues the story chronologically, entitled *A Mess of Everything* and published in 2009. The initial book, which is the focus of the first half of this chapter, traces the persona’s life from her “earliest memory” to the summer before high school, while the second book tells the story of her high school years. Both focus on the problem of what it means to truthfully represent the self on the page when that self is located in the lost past of childhood and adolescence, in memories that are generally unverifiable. The texts are composed not of a single, cohesive narrative, but instead of separate story-fragments, some as short as one page, and one even up to fifteen pages long.⁸⁹ The structures of the books therefore fall into a similar hybrid category as the graphic memoirs of Vanessa Davis, Aline Kominsky Crumb, and Lauren Weinstein. For all of these cartoonists, the memoir text comes to be composed of separate vignettes, which do not seamlessly lend themselves to narrative cohesion, collaged

⁸⁹ The stories in the first book are generally shorter than those in the second. In fact, within *Escape from “Special,”* there are twelve one-page stories and fourteen two-page stories, whereas within *A Mess of Everything*, there are two one-page stories and seven two-page stories. This chapter will focus on the first book because it is more invested in the issues of categorization and identity that I am concentrating on here.

together to reflect a fractured sense of self. This kind of aesthetic fragmentation leads to an increased burden, on the part of the reader, to follow the text and imagine the connections between individual incidents and themes, a burden that can also be translated into a sense of freedom and agency in that reader's relationship to the book as a whole.⁹⁰

Lasko Gross's first graphic memoir is focused on the relationship between images and memory, and especially the uneasy correlation between the two. What the reader witnesses on the page of an autobiographical work is always, of course, a modified or translated version of that memory. As Lorna Martens argues in her study of narratives of childhood, *The Promise of Memory* (2011), "[b]etween the recollection and the product of the text there is a gap, similar to that between a dream and the account of the dream" (11). The various formal and stylistic elements that compose Lasko Gross's memoir – from the large block letters that make up the chapter headings to the often simplistic and exaggerated features of the characters' bodies and expressions, framed in uneven, clearly hand-drawn panels – serve as constant, patent reminders of that gap, the subjectivity behind the text. The book reveals other gaps as well, and especially the distinctions between the outward events, places, interactions, and objects that document the persona's youth, and her internal world, including the contours of her emotional experiences. If, "the accuracy of a personal memory often counts far less than its emotional importance" (12), then this memoir is a testament to how affects can be strikingly and uniquely captured on the page through visual-verbal interactions.

The very first story, entitled "Taxoplasmosis: My Earliest Memory," in its opening panel pictures the persona, Melissa, standing beside her mother's bed, grasping a Bert doll (Figure

⁹⁰ The gaps between individual stories can be understood as, in some ways, parallel to the space between panels, known as the "gutter." In both cases, a pronounced break between images (in one case, between individual images and in the other case, between a series of images) offers the reader a space to imagine connections, or to assert her own imaginative authority. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud refers to the act of establishing such connections as "closure."

32).⁹¹ Her mother’s eyes are closed and her eyelids are puffy and swollen, with a rash covering part of her face. Melissa’s thought bubble, drawn in the shape of a puff of smoke, reads, “Mom?” as her mother’s closed eyes face off into the distance, unaware of the daughter watching her and depicted, in this image, as a disproportionately small figure beside the bed. Melissa’s arms clutch her doll as she gazes at her semi-conscious mother, whose only sign of life is a groan that emerges in white block letters on the next panel. The girl’s inquiring look, in the opening panel, is reflected by the doll, who also stares with wide eyes at the unconscious mother – though the doll’s “gaze” can be read as vaguely confident (if not glassy-eyed), rather than anxious. The



Figure 32. Miss Lasko-Gross, *Escape from “Special”* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2006), 1. distinction between Melissa’s and her doll’s outward appearances, emphasized by the shared angling of their faces, prefigures the disparity she experiences between her inner and outer worlds. While her doll represents what will become her somewhat nonplussed visual (and verbal) exterior in times of stress or crisis, her own expressive look more closely matches the distressed and uneasy affect suggested by the style of the comic as a whole. Throughout the text, this

⁹¹ As Miss Lasko-Gross has explained in interviews, while her given name is “Melissa,” she generally goes by the name of “Miss” to everyone besides her immediate family. Any reference to “Melissa” throughout this chapter refers to her persona, while “Miss Lasko Gross” or “Lasko Gross” refers to the author of the text. Additionally, Bert is one of two featured Muppets characters, Bert and Ernie, on the popular U.S. children’s television show, *Sesame Street*, which premiered on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in 1969.

ominous and foreboding tone is often conveyed in thought bubbles or narrative fragments that contrast with the expressions and postures that Melissa presents to the world and that often lead others to misread her and make her feel misunderstood.

Aside from offering an alternate or more all-encompassing vision of Melissa's affective reality, the inclusion of the depiction of this childhood object in a comic representing her "earliest memory" also prefigures a common theme throughout the first half of Lasko Gross's memoir (as well as Weinstein's memoir, *Girl Stories*), of the importance of objects in the recollection of early life. In her introduction to *The Promise of Memory*, Martens explains the significance of "[t]he habitation of space" as well as "things" in the act of self-definition. As she writes, "They grant the comfort of self-extension" (44).⁹² As an extension of her self, the doll represents the part of the persona's inner life that is not captured by the drawing of her own face and body within the image. Instead, it reflects the more restrained side of Melissa's emotions. The inclusion of the doll in this first panel broadens the spectrum of Melissa's inner life – and especially its contradictions – as it is reflected on the page. Between her own visage and the doll's, the drawing conveys everything from Melissa's feelings of intense longing, uncertainty, and worry to her impassivity, reserve, and even confidence. The childhood object, which appears in various forms throughout the memoir, for instance as different dolls, serves as an additional vehicle for self-expression and reflection.⁹³ It increases the surface area, so to speak, of Melissa's inner life as it appears on the comics page. At the same time, in contrasting with the affect that is drawn into Melissa's body, the doll simultaneously reflects a kind of affective self-exile that

⁹² Martens discusses how the roles of places and objects in human development have generally been slighted, although she cites two well-known sources that have engaged the topic: D.W. Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* (1971), which discusses transitional objects, and Bill Brown's edited anthology, *Things* (2004).

⁹³ In "Meet the Band," for instance, another short comic from *Escape from "Special,"* Melissa receives a teddy bear from one of her mother's band mates and takes it along with her when the band goes on tour for the summer. Melissa replaces one of her old bears with a new one in the final panel of the comic, and tells it, "Don't be offended, I still love and honor you very much!" (41). In this comic, too, the doll's faces portray human expressions and change, however subtly, over the course of the comic.

persists throughout the memoir. As Alison Bechdel writes of her childhood Teddy Bear, Mr. Beezums, in the graphic memoir exploring her own childhood, *Are You My Mother?* (2012): “He’s not me, but he’s not not-me, either” (115).⁹⁴

Furthermore, in this rendering of her earliest memory, Melissa features her mother as the central character, the person who, in addition to her doll, though even more fundamentally, serves as a proxy for her own sense of self. Melissa’s horror here is based in seeing her mother lie dormant and silent – her corpse-like appearance throws into question Melissa’s sense of self, as she can only as yet define herself in relation to her (m)other. The potential loss of her mother, as alluded to in this image, or, at the very least, the temporary incapacitation of her mother, means a potential shattering, for Melissa, of any sense of place, of belonging. If her mother is not conscious and, by extension, if she is not interacting with and caring for Melissa, then she cannot fulfill her role as “mother” and Melissa cannot fulfill her role as cared-for daughter.⁹⁵ This opening comic, which exposes Melissa’s early fear of alienation, serves as a precursor to the question of identity that is explored throughout the book, a question that inevitably shifts outside of, or beyond, the family. Here, Melissa’s mother is depicted as almost a monster – a strange, sickly, and ghostlike presence whose resemblance to the real thing (“Mom?”) increases the

⁹⁴ Bechdel’s memoir is similarly engaged in the question of the emergence of subjectivity, especially in relation to the family (and, in particular, the mother). In one panel in her memoir, describing the comfort she found, as an adult, in sleeping with her “old Teddy Bear,” and the subsequent embarrassment she experiences, as author, in sharing this detail, she writes: “But Mr. Beezum is not some mass-produced, button-eyed toy. His finally crafted gaze expresses a sublime and infinite compassion. It always calms me to look at him.” The image under this narrative pictures Bechdel’s persona holding the doll in her hands and staring at him, and beside this image, she adds, “He’s not me, but he’s not not-me, either.” Her persona’s engagement with the doll as an object of affective transference parallels Melissa’s interaction with her doll in this early scene.

⁹⁵ This comic envisions the mother from the point of view of the young child in order to reveal the origins of that child’s inner life, thereby erasing the perspective of the mother. Feminist theories of “the mother” have emphasized the importance of recognizing that reflections of the mother, such as this one, have often ignored her existence as a subject in her own right. For more on the topic, see the anthology, *Representations of Motherhood* (1996), edited by Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, and especially Jessica Benjamin’s “The Omnipotent Mother,” which reveals how the concept of motherhood has been constructed in psychoanalysis as a means of relegating women to a subordinate role. See also E. Ann Kaplan’s *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992).

horror and anxiety captured in this visual. Even, or perhaps especially, this most “natural” of affiliations is a site of potential distortion and surprise, a space where belonging, though it should feel the easiest, is also contradictorily most easily unmoored.

This opening panel finally reflects how, from the very outset of her remembered life, Melissa experiences an uncertain and disproportionately minor, and even subdued, presence in relation to those around her, a lack of self-affirmation that only becomes more pronounced when she finds herself among her peers. From the beginning, just as “Mom?” remains a question lingering in the otherwise silent air, Melissa’s own place in the story, too, figures as an unsettling question, as she is drawn, even in this opening panel, off to the side of center stage in the narrative of her own life. This depiction of Melissa as a peripheral character, rather than the protagonist of her own opening life, differs dramatically from Aline Kominsky Crumb’s Goldie, whose sense of being the center of the world is firmly captured with the words, “In the beginning I felt loved...” In contrast, Lasko Gross’s memoir features the search for identity and self-knowledge not as a turn away from a previous, ideal state, but rather as a continual search that has no clear starting or ending point. Like all of the works of the contemporary, post-assimilated cartoonists explored in this project, coming to terms with identity and a sense of self is a process not of rejecting one set of identities or disidentifying with a particular self-image, but rather of accepting the cyclical nature of a continual process of becoming in which the present is always in tension with the past. Even with her “earliest memory,” in which Melissa experiences the feeling of being a stranger in her literal home, she is still driven towards a search for a metaphorical home – a pursuit that will continue to motivate her throughout the memoir.

The story comic that follows this earliest memory in the book, another related to the persona’s relationship with her mother, also prefigures Melissa’s continued search for identity

and reveals it to be a journey that begins, almost literally, at birth, even as it maintains its urgency in the memoir's "present." This comic, entitled "Kidnapped," which takes up five full pages of the text, could arguably be viewed as part of the "Taxoplasmosis" comic, since there are no clear or definite beginnings and endings to each of the separate stories that make up the book. In fact, despite their fragmented themes and emphases, the individual and short comic narratives found throughout the book do not vary, in form, in any dramatic way from one another. The only way to differentiate between them is through their titles, which fluctuate stylistically. They are drawn with significantly different lettering – some in cursive, some in block letters, some accompanied by images, some bleeding out or drawn into a separate panel, and some occupying a good deal of space on the page. The various lettering techniques heading each chapter can be read as a reflection of the persona's desire to define herself by continually experimenting with different identities, a driving force behind many of the stories in the text as a whole. Additionally, the inconsistent lettering of the titles, which creates an uneasy indication of where one story ends and another begins, adds to the dream-like quality of many of these chapters, which are based on memories that coalesce to form one long, phantasmagorical memory-text.

The title of what is arguably, then, the second story within the book is presented in a splash panel, an oversized image which in this case takes up the entire page (Figure 33). The letters composing the word "Kidnapped" are drawn in what looks like a collage of different cut-out letters, a design meant to mock the style of a ransom note. This panel features four female faces, a detail that foreshadows the importance that female relationships will play in both memoirs and especially in Lasko Gross's second memoir, *A Mess of Everything*. A drawing of the persona's face, with her eyes shut and a large set of "zzzz"s emerging from her head, is depicted at the top left corner of the page. Below the sleeping figure is an image of the narrator's



Figure 33. Miss Lasko-Gross, *Escape from “Special”* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2006), 2.

mother, Jacqui, who is recognizable from the opening panel, although in this image her face does not have a rash and she is naked. With unnaturally long, sinewy arms and her eyes shut, the mother grasps at yet another depiction of the persona, this time pictured with a look of terror on her face as she stretches her arms out towards an unknown figure off to the right of the page. Only the ends of the hands of this unknown figure are visible in the panel, and they seem to almost but not quite reach the persona’s hands. Finally, beside the mother stands another, older woman, with her eyes shut as well, and her hands also grasping at the narrator’s body.

As the comic unfolds, the persona wakes screaming from her dream (“Mom!”) and asks her mother, point blank, “Jacqui, are you my real mother?” (3). Her mother comforts her with reassurances (“Well, I was there at your birth” and “Of course I am. You just had a nightmare”),

but Melissa cannot believe what she does not remember and she cannot understand why she cannot remember her birth (3-4). This story visualizes the horror of dreams when they cannot be differentiated from waking life, a tension that is made analogous to the horror of not being able to disentangle “reality” – or “truth” – from memory. If she cannot remember something, then could it have really happened? The opening panel includes two versions of the persona’s face – the sleeping Melissa, with her eyes closed, and the running, moving Melissa, with her eyes open – in order to reflect the fragile border between full consciousness and the dream-state. By depicting these two disparate but always connected versions of herself, Melissa offers the possibility of various self-representations co-existing at the same moment in time, as her persona gets drawn over and over again in different, sequential panels on the same page (and sometimes, as in this case, within the same panel). Her fear of having been “kidnapped” reflects a more general concern with belonging, thereby also linking this comic with the opening one, which is focused on her relationship with her mother. In this image, Melissa is among a community of women stretching their hands towards her, prompting her to associate with them, to join them. She runs away from them – from this forced affiliation – but it is unclear who she is running towards, a pair of hands with no face or body attached. There is both a sense of horror and of excitement, or possibility, at the prospect of being “kidnapped,” of not belonging and of not having any real or imagined memory of where one might fit in.

As the comic progresses, Melissa’s mother leaves her alone in bed, musing about her own consciousness and memory. Throughout the book, scenes that take place with Melissa alone in the privacy of her bedroom or bed very often result in moments of intense introspection. They contrast with the isolation she experiences when she is among other people, and especially groups of others, and suggest, as in Davis’s comics, that certain kinds of solitariness allow for

carefreeness and imaginative freedom while others result in anxiety and despair. In this scene, once Melissa's mother has left the room, a series of thoughts and questions about the subjectivity of memory and truth culminate with the sentence, "I always want to know everything true" (Figure 34). The panel depicting this thought pictures a close-up on Melissa's eye, with two drops pouring down her face. One of the drops is obviously a tear, as it clearly emerges from the bottom of her eyelid. The other ambiguously located drop can be read as a tear, representing sadness, or as a drop of sweat, representing exhaustion or anxiety. The image presents the verbalized desire to remember (to "know everything true") as an aspiration closely entwined with the visual representation of various affects: to remember is therefore a subjective act affiliated most strikingly with images, which are filtered and shaped by emotions.⁹⁶ The "I"



Figure 34. Miss Lasko-Gross, *Escape from "Special"* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2006), 5. wanting to remember "everything true" is represented by a drawing of a single eye, thereby reinforcing how memory is also always fashioned through an individual consciousness, the eye reflecting the I. In this case, too, the eye is an artist's eye, and specifically a comics artist, which further affects and reflects the translation of that memory on the page as it becomes mapped onto a visual-verbal language with specific conventions and a particular history. The panel consequently can be read as a testament to this impossible wish to "know everything true." At

⁹⁶ The link between images and memory has been well-documented, especially in trauma studies. See, for example, Cathy Caruth's edited anthology, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), and especially her introduction, "Trauma and Experience," pps. 3-12.

the same time, the image captures the importance of consciousness, subjectivity, and the internal world – as epitomized by emotions – as the keys to external representations, what eventually gets inscribed on the page. While Melissa cannot ever remember everything “true,” at the very least she can capture the remembered affects related to certain experiences, and bring these to life on the page. The very subjectivity that motivates Melissa’s search for “home” – for an “objective” representation of herself and her memory – is also, therefore, paradoxically, what prohibits its completion.

Taken together, these two opening story-comics reflect Melissa’s desire to record the “truth,” and they align that desire with her continued concern with belonging and/or not belonging. Questions of identity, memory, and subjectivity interweave throughout the memoir, tentative inquiries that remain unresolved even as they inform and provoke one another. Depicting the past is a way of capturing the experience being reproduced, including how the self is embodied. As Melissa moves through her narrative of childhood and towards adolescence, these general phenomenological inquiries – *who am I? where did I come from?* – fold into more specific questions of identity, especially in relation to other children in her peer group. She finds herself confronting not only what it means to have been born in a particular time and place, but also the significance of acknowledging such filiations and affiliations in an effort to capture a more comforting sense of how she fits into the larger world.

II. “But of course I believe in God”

In her book on adolescent literature, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), Roberta Seelinger Trites differentiates between childhood and adolescent literature by explaining how the former genre generally deals with conflicts in the protagonist’s immediate environment, whereas the latter focuses on tensions between the

individual and the social forces and institutions, including but not limited to the family, that she encounters in her daily life.⁹⁷ As she explains, “The chief characteristic that distinguishes adolescent literature from children’s literature is the issue of how social power is deployed during the course of the narrative” (2). Trites sees the conclusions of works of children’s literature to be generally comforting, in that these books “often affirm[] the child’s sense of Self and her or his personal power” (3). In contrast, adolescent literature is concerned with the ways in which adolescents “learn their place in the power structure... [and] learn to negotiate the many institutions that shape them” (x). Lasko Gross’s memoir, which traverses memories from her early childhood through adolescence, generally confirms this trajectory. While her sense of self is not always strongly affirmed by these early childhood memories, she does derive a certain sense of agency from her ability to question her place even in what is presumably a most secure environment. She experiences amplified but correlated feelings of alienation once she enters school and encounters her peers as an adolescent. The ways that she then questions her position in the world are affected by these early interactions and memories. The transition from childhood to adolescence, as traced in *Escape from “Special,”* thus reveals how Melissa’s struggles and negotiations with “social power,” as a young adult, are intricately tied to her sense of belonging/not belonging, which extends as far back as her conscious memory and her initial emergence as a subject in relation to her mother.

The key difference between Melissa’s early life and her later experiences among her peers is that her feelings of alienation are exacerbated once she leaves home. Various comics throughout the first half of the book trace her introduction into new schools or additional settings

⁹⁷ For more on the distinction between childhood and adolescent literature, as well as a discussion of how these genres relate to and overlap with other categories of literature, including the *Entwicklungsroman* and the *Bildungsroman*, see Chapter One in *Disturbing the Universe*, ““Do I dare disturb the universe?”: Adolescent Literature in the Postmodern Era,” pps. 1-20.

involving other young adults and teachers; she is generally cast as an outsider almost right away, not only in her own mind but also in the ways that others treat her. Her difference is often linked to the way she thinks and behaves around both her peers and adults, and particularly her once-empowering insistence in questioning what is generally taken for granted or recognized as the status quo. This kind of questioning is no longer harmless, or easily dismissed. Instead, it separates her from her peers. The comic, “The First Mindfuck,” for example, features Melissa sitting in art class with her classmates, who are all drawing pictures (12).⁹⁸ When the teacher tells the group, “Ooooh, you’re all doing great pictures!!” Melissa raises her hand to interject, “But they’re all different so they can’t all be great” (13). In response, her teacher explains, “No two people see things the same way.” Soon after, Melissa is pictured in a series of panels, set apart from the rest of the group, with her hands over her head, leaning on the table in front of her (Figure 35). When her teacher approaches to ask what is wrong, the words that appear at the top of the panel read, “I don’t know anything for sure.” As with the “eye” panel from “Kidnapped,” Melissa’s reflections belong to an unacknowledged narrator, and they are captured not in a speech or thought bubble, but instead in a more ambiguous narrative accompaniment incorporated into the image. The aimlessness of the words pictured over her head visually reinforces the feelings of isolation and confusion that she experiences after this, one of a series of moments of internal crisis recorded throughout the memoir. This particular crisis stems not only from her inability to accept the teacher’s praise, but also the belated but powerful recognition of her own subjectivity relative to a whole group of others – a recognition that is triggered by her entry into school. In addition to her initial desire to “know everything

⁹⁸ Although this comic clearly takes place while Melissa is still a child (definitions of the timeframes of childhood and adolescence vary considerably, but in this case Melissa has clearly not even begun to enter puberty), I read it as an “adolescent” experience due to its focus on the ways that Melissa interacts outside of the home, and especially among others in her peer group. Most importantly, this comic epitomizes the many experiences traced throughout the book of Melissa’s sense of alienation as an adolescent.



Figure 35. Miss Lasko-Gross, *Escape from "Special"* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2006), 15.

true,” and her fear that she cannot parcel out truth from fiction, imagination from reality, Melissa now also finds herself concerned with that fear in relation to her connection with others around her. How, she wonders, does her sense of truth and reality – and, by extension, the truth and reality of her own identity – shift in the context of her position as part of a larger peer group? Can her identity be pinned down in such a setting, a recognizable set of attributes that positions her in a certain category or into particular sets of categories, or is it an indeterminable distinction, a function of the subjective ways that she sees herself, that others see her, *and* that she now sees herself when she is around others?

The possibilities of ascertaining the verifiable “truth” – most importantly a distinct understanding of how she is defined in relation to others – continually elude Melissa, although she persistently searches and hopes for certainty, often against her own better judgment. In the case of the image of her head resting on the table and her eyebrows furrowed, Melissa’s gloom is captured through her body language as well as the black space that engulfs her. Her isolation, and especially the distance that she feels in relation to her peers, is emphasized by the panels that come before this one, images in which she is pictured with her head on the table as the rest of the class laughs and plays around her. This sense of difference from the other students, especially in various classroom settings, persists throughout the book, as she changes schools, as well as ages into new grades and classrooms. Like many adolescents, Melissa desires transformation, to be

less like her self, and more like others – a transformation that would ostensibly help her define her identity more easily. In one depicted scene that takes place when she is a bit older, in a school bathroom, she gives herself a pep talk in the bathroom mirror. “Dress like Becca, everyone loves Becca” (78), she thinks. This experience, which takes place in the comic, “How It Seems,” reflects Melissa’s desperate attempts to learn from and copy the social cues of her peers in an effort to erase her perceived differences from them and, by extension, to find comfort in fitting into an established communal identity. The comic more generally tracks her entrance into a new school, and the humiliation and shame that she endures when other children pick up on her behavioral anomalies (“How come you never look anyone in the eye,” one boy asks her), as well as her scholastic weaknesses (she is the last to finish an exam, and another student tells her that she has the handwriting of a small child). She works hard to repair these deviations, to smooth over the peculiarities that confuse and seclude her, in order to limit the ways that she is marked as different.

Despite Melissa’s frequent attempts to fit in, however, there are certain points in the memoir in which she takes great pride in not being associated with others, in being set apart or “special.” Significantly, these moments often coincide with the occasions throughout the memoir in which she references her Jewish identity. For example, the comic directly following “How It Seems” relates Melissa’s entry into Hebrew school, as the title, “Of Little Faith: Jew School,” attests.⁹⁹ In this comic story, as the teacher sits at the front of the classroom, Melissa’s thought bubbles reflect her impatience with what she views as the enforced morality of the lecture. “How DARE they tell us how to live” (80), she thinks to herself. In the following panels, on the car ride

⁹⁹ In this case, “Hebrew school” – or “Jew school,” as the narrator satirically calls it – is the Jewish equivalent of “Sunday school.” Generally taking place on Sundays or weeknights, this schooling, a supplement to secular education, focuses on Jewish history and culture, and often involves the uses of religious texts and/or Hebrew language learning.

home, she argues with her mother about not wanting to undertake this extra schooling: “You never made me do any religious stuff before this year,” she tells her mother. “You waited too long. I’m too old and too smart to fall for any of it” (81). Melissa’s desire to assert her own independent thinking and rebel against authority emerges only once she is introduced into a classroom setting that is premised on the assumption that she belongs there. She is immediately affiliated with others in the classroom because she is Jewish – a label attached to a particular set of expectations about what she and these others are supposed to believe (and, presumably, how they are all supposed to act as a result of those beliefs). As opposed to her experiences in a “regular” (secular and public) classroom, it is this presumption of sameness that pushes her to rebel against it, even if this rebellion is only, or mostly, internal. She can feel confident being different, in this case, not solely because this difference is primarily internal, but more importantly because it is something that she chooses, a rebellion that she stakes out, first through language, in the private space of her mind, and then in the conversation that she engages in with her mother on the car-ride home.

In *Reading Autobiography* (2010), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe the basic paradox of identity and affiliation: “identity as difference implies also identity as likeness” (38). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others have shown, to identify is always to partially disidentify or counter-identify.¹⁰⁰ In order to rebel, even internally, against her religious school teacher – and, consequently, to separate herself from others in the class – Melissa has to yield, if unconsciously, to the ties that bind them together: the Jewish thread that has led them all to “Jew

¹⁰⁰ In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), José Esteban Muñoz describes the complexities of disidentification and identification, especially for “those subjects who are hailed by more than one minority identity component” (8). This project is, in part, an attempt to understand that process from the point of view of those who hold the potential and, oftentimes, the desire to “pass” in mainstream society – at least from the standpoint of their Jewish identities. Such a project is meant to help us better understand how the locationality of the person in question is an inevitably defining element of what Muñoz so aptly identifies as the “work” of identity making and performance.

school.” This paradox is made even clearer in “Of Little Faith II,” a comic located almost forty pages later in the memoir, in which Melissa is once again pictured in Hebrew school. The title of this sequel comic is drawn in a lettering style that is similar to that of the original comic, with the main difference being that Melissa’s face in this case is drawn alongside the title (Figure 36). Only a small part of her face is pictured, a quarter of it, including a single eye, framed by a



Figure 36. Miss Lasko-Gross, *Escape from “Special”* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2006), 115.

furrowed, devilish brow, an ear, and several strands of hair. This portrayal of her face reveals two small Jewish stars drawn onto it, and instead of a pupil the center of her eye features a third Jewish star. The comic then depicts Melissa conspiring with a friend in class, who agrees with the absurdity of a lecture about the story of Noah and the flood. Her friend, who is also a young girl with long, dark hair, asserts, “As if the whole world could flood!” as Melissa looks on, happily agreeing and thinking to herself, “I’m not the only one.” In a series of panels following, however, each picturing Melissa at the center of the image with her friend no longer in the picture but for her word bubbles, Melissa is brought back into isolation as the friend asserts from off the page, “But of course I believe in God!” In the third and final panel of this series, and on the page as a whole, Melissa is pictured in profile, sitting at her desk morosely, with eyes closed, and thinking, “I really am alone.” In this image, she is drawn as though sitting by herself at the desk even though, as earlier panels reveal, it is a desk she is sharing with this friend. Her eyes are shut and her head hangs down heavily. An oval-shaped spotlight falls over her figure, as though

to feature her isolation and her sense of being cast out of a space where it seemed like she would finally fit in, if only because her internal rebellion had been externally acknowledged by a fellow student.

This sequel to “Of Little Faith” reflects Melissa’s continued inability to fit in, even when it is through rebellion that she attempts to assert her likeness to others. The stars pictured on Melissa’s face at the beginning of the comic symbolize this enigma: the mark of being Jewish affiliates her with others, while her internalized rebellion against this marking divides her from them. In showcasing the symbol of the Jewish star, there is no space for nuance, for the recognition that certain aspects of this affiliation forever mark her, whether she likes it or not, while others cast her, in a sense, outside of herself, or at least cement her to an identity that she seeks to reject. Just as, in Aline Kominsky Crumb’s comics, the Bunch’s refusal to undergo rhinoplasty reflects her desire to dis-affiliate by *not* assimilating like the other middle class Jewish women that she grows up with, Miss Lasko Gross’s depiction of her persona, Melissa, with several Jewish stars pictured on her face is an acknowledgement of an identity that she wishes to claim as her own through rebellion and rejection. As Miss Lasko Gross has explained in an interview about her books, her “semi-autobiographical” comics examine “how you define yourself by what you’re struggling against.”¹⁰¹ In order to struggle against her Jewish identity, Melissa has to acknowledge it, to recognize the desire for “truth” and certainty that draws her towards an engagement with Jewishness in the first place.

Melissa’s preoccupation with being Jewish is not consistently addressed throughout the memoir, even though the search for self-definition that takes place in *Escape from “Special”* is often encapsulated by the images of her that emerge when she is grappling with elements of her

¹⁰¹ From “‘A Portrait of the World Through My Eyes’: An Interview with Miss Lasko-Gross.” This interview, with Tahneer Oksman, is also forthcoming in *Graphic Details: Jewish Women and Comics*, an anthology to be published by McFarland Publishers in 2013.

Jewish identity. Instead of being showcased, these Jewish engagements are frequently subsumed within the larger framework of her desire to fit in with others in a more general sense, to assimilate as an adolescent in a so-called universal, non-ethnic, non-racial, and non-gendered coming-of-age story.¹⁰² This universalized depiction of Melissa's sense of otherness is captured most expressly in a self-portrait that the author/narrator presents shortly after the "Of Little Faith" comic. Melissa is presented in this full-page image sitting at a desk, drawing, while engulfed in a large flame (Figure 37). The portrayal of Melissa drawing at a desk is a representation that marks the cover of the memoir and winds its way through many of the pivotal moments tracked in the two books; it is a visual trope that binds the different themes and experiences traced throughout these works. The desk represents the institutions that confine her and attempt to normalize her, even as the act of drawing frees her, presenting a way out of otherwise stifling modes of behaving and thinking. This drawing of an isolated and marginalized Melissa, as exemplified with the word "(Special)," which is drawn over her body, represents not only the pain of separation and estrangement from the self and Other, but also the power and the drive to repair this separation through a provocative and solitary engagement with art. The underlying impulse of *Escape from "Special,"* as with all of the other texts explored in this dissertation, is how self-representations can help revise feelings of outsidership, which are often initially formed in childhood. The personas explored in these diverse texts claim their senses of not belonging by literally drawing their displacements. Each panel or page becomes a space in which to experience, simultaneously, home and not home. This aesthetic possibility is

¹⁰² Class is also downplayed throughout the book, although it is addressed most directly in one comic, entitled "Relative Deprivation" (59-61). In this comic, Melissa and her friends, two brothers, are rifling through the lawn in front of one of their houses when she finds sixteen cents ("some treasure," as they call it in their game). The kids argue over who should keep the money, with the boys asserting that "we should get the dime because we're poor and you're rich," and Melissa countering with the statement that "[w]e have the smallest house in town, and our car's rusty" (59). In addition to this comic, class is inadvertently addressed, through visual cues, in other parts of the memoir, particularly with the labels evident on the clothing of certain girls at school, but it is never otherwise directly addressed as an integral component of Melissa's search for self-identification.

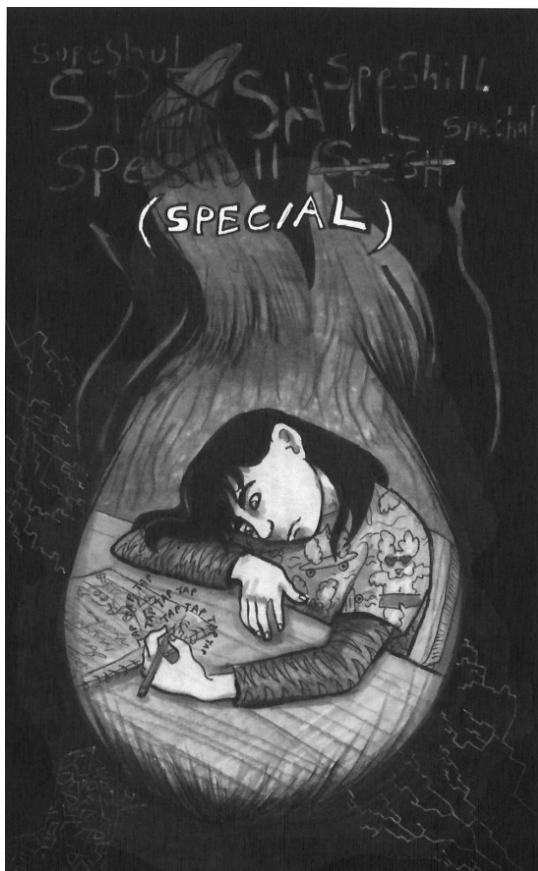


Figure 37. Miss Lasko-Gross, *Escape from “Special”* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2006), 82.

symbolized here by the flame surrounding Melissa’s body. Her identity as an artist has the potential to free her, although it also has the potential to erase and replace the more particular categories of difference through which she is defined, to consume these various social constructs and categorizations into one assimilated, fiery mass. To be “special” is a label whose meaning is dependent on context. This ambiguity offers a possibility of escape from the confines of a clenching, exclusionary identity, while it also scorches the reality of the many categories – including ethnicity and religion – that realistically come to define the way that others see her and that she sees herself.

If dis-affiliation in many ways helps to establish a person’s identities, then this representation of Melissa as “(Special)” blots out the particular ways that she chooses to dis-

affiliate throughout the memoir. Like her inexplicable, often unidentifiable differences from others – an otherness that she has trouble verbalizing and consequently understanding or coming to terms with – her Jewishness emerges as a largely symbolic difference, an indirectly addressed signifier that she grapples with at various defining moments throughout the book and that often disappears in light of more general metaphors of difference. Jewish identity is therefore, paradoxically, a concern that resurfaces in *Escape from “Special”* at key moments throughout the text, even as it is established as a kind of back-story, a detail of secondary importance to a more conventional or “mainstream” story of adolescence and belonging. Yet, it is in these moments of grappling with her Jewish identity that Melissa first learns to dis-affiliate and that therefore mark Jewishness as a social construction that has the potential to free her from the confines of being a person who is objectified and humiliated (as she is in her “regular” school) into one who can see herself as a subject, who actively reacts to the identity assigned to her through her individualized rebellions.

The disappearance of the question of what it means to identify as Jewish in Miss Lasko Gross’s second memoir, *A Mess of Everything*, mirrors Melissa’s general loss of interest in taking on many of the questions about truth and identity that preoccupy her in the first book. This thematic shift is related to Melissa’s aging out of “Jew School” – the religious institution that marks almost all of Melissa’s engagements with her Jewish identity in *Escape from “Special.”* There are several exceptions to this direct connection between Melissa’s explorations of her Jewishness and her religious schooling that are recorded in *Escape from “Special”* – such as a comic, “Psychosomatic Refusal” (54-56), in which she refuses to attend synagogue with her parents, and another, “Summers in Exotic Atlantic City New Jersey” (49-53), in which she confronts her grandfather’s racism and notes its injustice and hypocrisy, “especially since we get

so upset when people hate us 'cause we're Jews," as she tells her parents (52). Another exception is the comic, "The Gruswerk's Sabbath" (62-64), in which she attends a Sabbath dinner with her friend's family and acts out at the table while prayers are being recited. In the final panel, after being scolded by the father, she thinks to herself, "I'm glad my family isn't Orthodox and has a sense of humor" (64). In all of these comics, including the ones about her experiences in "Jew School," Melissa's explorations of her Jewish identity are linked to her parents and to her family more generally. This is arguably a consequence of the basic affinity between religious affiliation and family. As Trites explains in her discussion of religion as it is addressed in adolescent literature, "Adolescent novels that deal with religion as an institution demonstrate how discursive institutions are and how inseparable religion is from adolescents' affiliation with their parents' identity politics" (38). In the second memoir, as Melissa moves her attention increasingly away from her parents and more completely towards the world of her peers, and as her activities slowly shift outside of her parents' control and begin to reflect her own chosen affiliations and involvements, her interest in her religious identity almost completely vanishes.

This move away from an emphasis on categorizations of identity does not occur in Lauren Weinstein's *Girl Stories*, a book in which Jewishness is more often than not presented through silences or omissions, rather than direct engagements. In Weinstein's graphic memoir, because religious identity is never tied to any particular institution, like school or synagogue, there is a more ambiguous sense of what being Jewish means to its narrator, Lauren, over the course of her daily life.¹⁰³ Like Melissa, Lauren's sense of being an outsider can inevitably be traced, among other factors, to her Jewish roots, but this association often has to be extrapolated from what is presented in the text. In this way, *Girl Stories* proves to be a kind of corollary text

¹⁰³ Weinstein's persona has the same name as the author, so, for the purposes of clarification, "Lauren" refers to the persona in the book, whereas "Weinstein" or "Lauren Weinstein" refers to the author.

to *Escape from "Special."* Lauren's tenuous relationship to her Jewish identity, like Melissa's, empowers her, but its often only-metaphorical presence also means that Jewishness is continually at risk of erasure.

III. "Okay! Fine! You can read it!"

Initially published as a series of short comics on the teen website, gURL.com, Lauren Weinstein's *Girl Stories* follows Weinstein's persona, Lauren, as she finishes middle school and enters high school.¹⁰⁴ *Girl Stories* is composed as a series of short comic vignettes, reflective in this case especially of the way the comics were first constructed. Despite their parallel emphases on adolescence and identity, Lauren Weinstein's graphic memoir follows a trajectory different from *Escape from "Special."* Lasko-Gross's book opens with a preoccupation with filial ties and moves towards an engagement with affiliative registers, with boyfriends, friends, and classmates. *Girl Stories*, in contrast, begins where Lasko Gross's first memoir ends, even though the two page introduction to the book features school and family as the dual focal points of the persona's life (Figures 38 and 39). On the first page of this introduction, the narrator presents a scene from her school: "Welcome to my life," she writes, "which is currently like being in jail! I'm in eighth grade, and I've been going to the same stupid school with the same stupid fifty people since Kindergarten!" (5). The image underneath this narration pictures a school hallway filled with students and teachers engaging in various activities, all crowded into the same space. In the second page of the introduction, the narrator presents her parents: "Meanwhile my parents are

¹⁰⁴ gURL.com was founded in 1996. According to the site, it is a "leading online community and content site for teenage girls." In an interview, Weinstein talks about the creation of these comics for gURL.com as one of her first jobs out of college, around 1997. She explains of the website editors, "Their idea was for me to write semi-autobiographical stuff about high school..." Weinstein was simultaneously writing "weird little gag comics" for *The Stranger* in Seattle. Many of these comics, serialized as "Little Laurie Sprinkles," can be viewed on her website, <http://www.laurenweinstein.com/little-laurie-sprinkles/>. For more on Weinstein's career trajectory, see "Thinking Panoramically: An Interview with Lauren Weinstein," her interview with Tahneer Oksman, forthcoming in *Graphic Details: Jewish Women and Comics*.

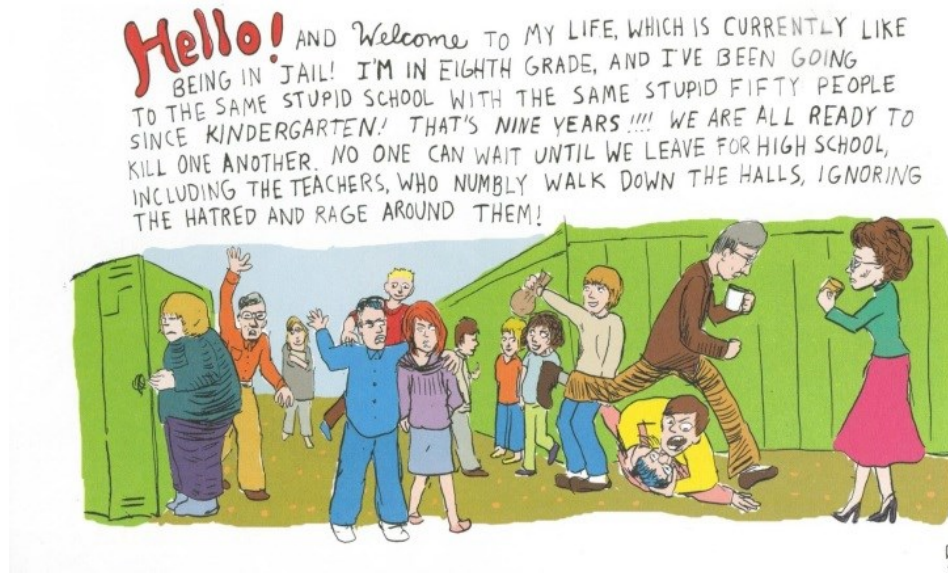


Figure 38. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 5.



Figure 39. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 6.

totally messed up” (6). The word “meanwhile” suggests that the narrator’s family life is a concurrent plotline unraveling alongside her school life. Two separate panels are depicted below this second page of the introduction, with Lauren featured in both. In each image, she is standing behind a parent, asking for a favor, and receiving an indifferent response. Her repeated presence in these portrayals of her parents contrasts with her absence from the panoramic school hallway

drawing. Life at school is portrayed as bustling, explosive, and still somewhat unpredictable, a world that has yet to be fully explored or comprehended, whereas her home life, symbolized by her interactions with her parents, is depicted as boring and predictable, characterized by her parents' obsessive preoccupations.

In spite of this dually focused introduction, which pits Lauren's home life alongside her life at school, the book is primarily focused on what happens to Lauren after she has emerged from the realm of her family into the larger, more mysterious world of her peers. After this brief introduction to her parents, the book includes few interactions with them. The exceptions, the scenes in the text where Lauren's parents appear, are generally brief moments in which a statement made by Lauren's father emphasizes his general absence in and obliviousness about her life, as in the comic "John and I go to the Movies." "So... Is he your hero?" Lauren's father asks after he arrives to pick her up at the end of a date with John, interrupting a kiss between the two of them (124). In the comic, "Math Madness," after an afternoon spent engrossed with her boyfriend instead of studying, her father asks her, over dinner, "How's the studying going?" (145). As he asks this question, with her mother dubiously but silently looking on, Lauren responds with a lie, hiding her hickey under a turtleneck sweater. In *Girl Stories*, family is a riddle that has already been solved, a trite interruption from the exhausting and engrossing world of school, where the real story unfolds.

Although family is not emphasized in *Girl Stories*, the book is interested, like Vanessa Davis's *Make Me a Woman*, in the contrast between private and public lives and identities, as well as the lived experience of the body in these various registers. The memoir is structured as a private diary, a conceit that is introduced in the inside cover. "This is the book of Lauren R. Weinstein," the page reads. Framing the book as a diary composed in the "present" of

adolescence adds an emotional urgency to it, as though Lauren does not know how events will turn out.¹⁰⁵ “If found please don’t read!” the inscription on the inside cover continues, although it concludes, “Okay! Fine! You can read it!” This opening prefigures the tension between private and public that winds throughout the memoir – the contrast between the ways that Lauren presents herself to others in her real life and the ways that she presents herself not only in private, but also to the readers of her “private” diary. In other words, even the so-called nonpublic or intimate act of diary keeping becomes a performance, an act colored by Lauren’s overwhelming adolescent self-consciousness, which urges her to share everything she thinks and does as a matter of course.

The diary conceit also affords Weinstein’s persona, Lauren, with a sense of agency and reflection that might otherwise seem absent in this memoir about the pains of adolescence. Like Melissa’s “Jew school” rebellion in *Escape from “Special,”* Lauren’s humiliations are transformed into acts of defiance through the self-conscious scheme of the diarist recording life as it unfolds. This framework is especially important, given that the memoir begins with Lauren already entrenched in a sense of alienation among her peers. In *Girl Stories*, “special,” the potentially redeeming, if ambivalent, word denoting alienation and difference found in Lasko-Gross’s memoir, is absent. Instead, the correlating version of Melissa’s “self-portrait” is, for Lauren, an image in which the unequivocal word “freak” is scribbled over and again on the page, with a set of faces – presumably, the classmates who label her and cast her as an outsider – looming beside the repeated word (Figure 40). At the bottom of the page is an image of Lauren’s musical hero, with the words, “Well, I might be a freak, but at least I have my music and art,”

¹⁰⁵ Although I am attributing this representation to Lauren, obviously Weinstein is the one depicting her adolescent persona on the page. The “diary”’s conceit, however, is that Lauren is the one drawing the images over the course of her adolescence. For the sake of simplicity in this part of my discussion, I will address Lauren as the creator of the comic diary, although it would be more accurate to point to Lauren/Weinstein as collaborative creators.

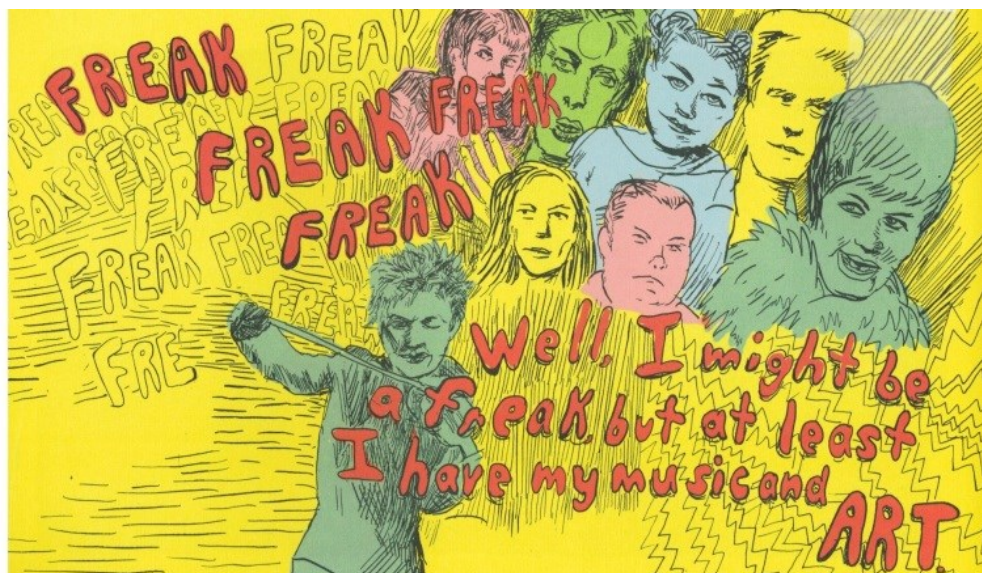


Figure 40. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 46.

written in block letters beside his face.¹⁰⁶ Lauren’s potential for escape is, like Melissa’s, based in her art, but her focus – in drawing others, instead of herself, in what is a kind of self-portrait – is in the ways that she can manipulate others *through* her art and writing. Like her acknowledgement, on the book’s inside cover, that her “private” journal is an object that she not-so-secretly wants to make public, Lauren’s juxtaposition of the word “freak” alongside images of other people, and not herself, is her way of shaping the story to cast herself not as victim but as storytelling agent, or even heroine. Additionally, in something of a paradox, it is the absence of her body in this “self-portrait” that reinforces the connection between the ways that she experiences everyday life in her body and her search for self-identification. In other words, she feels most like a “freak” when she is invisible, when she is out of touch with her physical body.

¹⁰⁶ In *Reviving Ophelia* (2005), Mary Pipher writes about the adolescent girl’s obsession with music as a common feature related to the emotional intensity that is experienced throughout adolescence: “Music is important to most girls at this time. It catapults them out of the world of their family and into the world of their peers. It expresses the intensity of their emotions in a way that words cannot. . . Music fits the emotional experience of girls much more closely than ordinary adult speech” (66). Lauren’s musical hero throughout *Girl Stories* is Morrissey, the lead singer of the English alternative rock band, The Smiths. In the comic “Morrissey & Me” (47-56), Lauren documents her fantasy of being “watched over” by Morrissey as she is bullied in school. Once she enters high school and finds herself no longer an outsider, her Morrissey fantasies disappear from the book.

Lodged on the brink of a constructed private/public divide, the many publicly-private confessions that Lauren makes throughout the book, beginning with the ones recorded on the inside front cover (“There are way too many personal secrets!”), cast her search for identity and belonging as a communal effort, or an undertaking that always involves a dialogue with a real or imagined community of others. In addition to transforming the focus on herself within her life narrative from central character to creator, the diary structure allows Lauren to be alone with herself, a prerequisite to fully and unabashedly exercising her imagination, although she still takes pleasure and comfort in the potentially “intrusive” company of others. Art not only accommodates her attempt to resolve, or at least engage with, the riddle of identity, but it also helps her escape from the confines of isolation and alienation. She feels less alone whether or not the audience she imagines actually exists.

After its introduction, the book features several comics that portray Lauren’s solitude, and specifically the imaginative engagements that take place in the space of her bedroom and on the page. The activities described in these comics can be read as precursors to, or even analogies for, the very act of composing the diary, as they establish an imagined, manipulable audience through the likenesses of dolls. Through her Barbie-play, Lauren is able to perform, in a safe, controlled environment, her preoccupations with confession and shame. In the comic “Barbies!” for example, Lauren “admits” to playing with dolls. This confession is shameful because she is supposedly too old for such play – “I know, I’m thirteen and I still play with Barbies...” (8). Playing with Barbies is a disdainful act because of its accordance with certain often publicized problematic cultural norms and practices. As Jacqueline Reid-Walsh and Claudia Mitchell write in their essay on Barbie-play, “in the culture of a feminist class Barbie is beyond the pale, so the simple admission of play is a transgression of the norm of the class” (4). Lauren issues her

“embarrassing” confession, and then, in response to her transgressions – the act of playing with Barbies and the act of admitting to playing with them – she follows up with explanations and justifications, asserting control over the way her disclosure is read and appraised. In a kind of afterword to her comics about Barbie, in the comic “A Letter to Myself,” she humorously explains, “I am less superficial than that, really. I care about other things...” (15). She goes on to cite “world hunger,” “nuclear war,” and “the order of the universe” as some of her other, non-trivial concerns. In addition to reframing her interaction with Barbies as an anomalous guilty pleasure, she justifies and even takes pride in the seemingly conventional act of playing with these dolls by recording, in detail, what Erica Rand describes as “queering Barbie” (12), or using the doll and her accessories in ways that are not endorsed by its seller, the Mattel company.¹⁰⁷ As Lauren explains, “Once a Barbie enters my realm she goes through at least three weeks of reconditioning” (9). She then conveys, through words and pictures, the stages of transformation that she puts her dolls through, turning them into unsanctioned and unconventional Barbies, including an “Astrobabe,” a “Punk,” a “Fabulous Vampire Superstar,” a “Cavegirl,” and a “Mom” with blue hair and bags under her eyes (10). Lauren’s “queer” Barbie-play foretells the many themes that take up the rest of the narrative, but especially the tension between the conventional and the unconventional, between wanting to fit in and taking pleasure in not fitting in, in rebellion. Her manipulation of these dolls grants her the power to shape their appearances and, consequently, their identities, while the very engagement in play with such a popular toy allows her to feel like a “typical” American adolescent girl, or the opposite of a “freak.” Like

¹⁰⁷ See Rand’s *Barbie’s Queer Accessories* (1995). In her introduction, Rand makes clear that she is using the term “queerness” with both senses of the word in mind (which she recognizes as always “entangled”): first, the “narrow sense” of queerness as a term connoting gender, and second, the “broader sense” of “odd, irregular, and idiosyncratic” (11). In this discussion, I am focused on the broader sense of the term.

Melissa, Lauren is interested in the possibilities of transformation, although, for her, transformations are expressed externally rather than internally.

Lauren's Barbie-play reflects her desire for companionship, and particularly, as she explains, her search for someone she "trust[s]" (12). The last few pages of "Barbies!" reveals the ways that her game-playing changes when she is with a friend. She first describes Genine, a young girl portrayed throughout the book as an unequivocal outsider, who does not satisfy Lauren's demand for a partner who "[has] a good imagination, but [is] also [] malleable" (12). On the final page of the comic, Lauren sits alone in her room, engaged in play but frowning, as the narrative above her reads, "The only person who I have ever met that was good at playing Barbies with me was Diana, who was my best friend until about two years ago, when she decided to be cool" (Figure 41). This passage sets the book up to be a story about loss and the subsequent search for companionship, as well as the connections and collisions between the self and others in the adolescent quest for transformation. In deciding to be "cool," Diana has already performed this transformation. Genine, more of an outsider than Lauren, is oblivious to it, and Lauren is left, as a result, both desiring and dreading its possibility. Her imaginative life, satisfying up until adolescence, turns stifling and disappointing as she is forced to reckon with the world outside her bedroom, or the actual people for whom her dolls are only meant as temporarily replacements, as practice.

Lauren's interest in Barbies finally also documents the memoir's preoccupation with the (female) body as a site of adolescent anxiety, desire, and humiliation – the target of the longed for, or dreaded, changes. In her article, "Identity's Body" (1994), Sidonie Smith writes about the body, in memoir writing, as a potential site of simultaneous identification and disidentification.



Figure 41. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 13.

She describes it as a starting place for many memoirists, especially in their searches for a singular sense of identity, since “[b]odies seem to position us as demarcated subjects separate from others and to locate us in bounded temporalities and trajectories of identification. Thus the body seems to be the nearest, most central home we know” (267). However, Smith adds, the very closeness of the body and its unity, “temptingly stable and impermeable,” is nothing more than a façade, disruptable as soon as we take into account its politics, or the differences that need to be stifled in order for us to consider it a reflection of a singular, categorizable, and unitary self. For this reason, along with its potential to “anchor” us, “[t]he body is our most material site of potential homelessness” (267). Like memoir writers, many adolescents, in searching for a point of entry to understanding or locating their identities, might also begin with the body. This is, in part, because, “[a]dolescence is a developmental moment of intense awareness of and preoccupation with the body” (Irvine 22). The adolescent body, subject to intense flux and growth, often becomes the starting point for experiments with various forms of identification, or self-making. In this way, Lauren’s Barbie metamorphoses prefigure the ways that she will

experiment with the outward characteristics of her own body, in an effort to control how she perceives herself and how others perceive her. As the forerunner to her own search for identity, the Barbie comics that open the memoir illuminate this search for identity in and through the body as a pursuit fraught with anxiety, discomfort, and melancholy, which nevertheless lends itself to creative and imaginative possibilities.

Lauren's foray into the world of her peers begins, most fittingly, with a physical transformation. She depicts herself walking in the school hallway dressed in a colorful outfit, her face contorted and her outward appearance contrasting with the group of students looking relaxed and bored behind her (Figure 42). Her effort to join the group inevitably fails, and she finds herself ostracized by the very students that she tries so hard to associate with. The various comics that trace her path as she steers between alienation and conformity depict her physicality in dramatically divergent ways. Lauren plays with style and color throughout *Girl Stories* in order to reflect her persona's inner life. The coloring of the comics, especially, varies in relation to the affects and tempos attached to the events described. For instance, as Figure 42 reflects, Lauren's emergence into the school hallway as an active participant, rather than an observer, is accented with primary colors, a figuration that extends beyond her own outfit and into the depictions of other people in the panel as well as the comic's lettering. A thought bubble doubling as the title to the story is pictured a vibrant red, with a yellow background. The bright colors of this comic reflect the animated energy attached to Lauren's anticipation, her energetic hopefulness at finding a way into the world she so badly covets. The colors also reinforce Lauren's location not only as central character but also as narrator, or as the one whose affect literally shades the environment that she writes about. Later comics tracing Lauren's humiliation



Figure 42. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 16.

and alienation are drawn dramatically differently, in terms not only of the shades of color depicted but also the ranges of color.

In the comic-story “The Tub,” for example, the narrator describes a humiliating incident, which takes place after she has already become an outsider at school. The comic is drawn in various drab greens, with the same dull pink background highlighting the narration. Lauren’s face is nearly unrecognizable, rounded, yellow, and accented with worry lines, as she raises her hand to volunteer for a class project that will ultimately compound her feelings of alienation (Figure 43). With a much narrower range of colors reflecting her experience, the drawing of the comic overtly and strikingly reflects Lauren’s positioning within this particular story. The restrained coloring correlates with her experience as one who, even in the process of volunteering in class – an act that supposedly demonstrates choice – is confined in her options; she is a character who is inevitably humiliated, or acted upon, rather than one who asserts any control. With only a few colors represented on the page, the affects reflected are downtrodden and melancholic. This is a recognizable variation from the comics in the book in which Lauren



Figure 43. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 39.

feels the potential to actively shape the way she fits into her environment and the story that she chooses to tell about those experiences.

Ultimately, Lauren’s ability to reconstruct her experiences on the page liberates her from the sense of a lack of control over the ways that others view and treat her, the constraints that she experiences in real life. Like Melissa in *Escape from “Special,”* her status as an outsider is consistently linked with her ability to make art, although, unlike Melissa, those very artistic talents are what lead her to find a way into, and eventually actively out of, the clique that initially banishes her. Yet, this artistic freedom has its limitations. Despite the self-reflexive nature of her memoir, and the conscious attempts that Lauren makes – with line, color, style, and form – to control her own adolescent body, that body repeatedly surfaces as a problem. Lauren’s preoccupations with her unwieldy body ultimately serve as a metaphor for her inability to locate a comfortable space for herself on the map of adolescence as she depicts it, to experience an identity as home.

IV. “And I have a bigger nose”

Halfway through *Girl Stories*, Lauren prefaces her high school experiences with a panoramic, two-page drawing that is reminiscent of the middle school hallway scene depicted early on in the book. In this later image, entitled “Whoa! It’s High School!” Lauren pictures a



Figure 44. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 104-5.

large group of students engaged in various activities and crowded outside of school, with some school buildings of different shapes and sizes serving as the background (Figure 44). The shift from an indoor to an outdoor scene reflects the wider world that high school introduces, a world that spills outside of school hallways and edges towards unknown, expansive spaces. Lauren is pictured on the left side of the page, her body presented somewhat apart from the other students and her eyes shifting away from them, as if to bridge this new world with the one that came before it. Her lone figure is mirrored by the depiction of a smaller figure, standing even more alone in the background just over her shoulder. Like Lauren, this young woman is also dressed in blue, though her outfit is darker, her body slimmer, and her facial features are represented by black smudges. On the other side of the panorama stand two of Lauren's friends from grade school, including Diana, and they call out to her.

Through the mapping of her body on the page, this image delineates Lauren's place among her peers as interposed somewhere between complete alienation (like the lone figure in the background) and connection. Like the earlier parts of the book, her high school quest consists of trying to figure out where or how she fits into the crowd. Peppered with adolescent male and female bodies of various shapes and sizes, this crowd represents the many anonymous figures

that compose a backdrop to what might look like something of a “universal” adolescent narrative of identity and belonging. The factors that differentiate these students come down to their appearances – their shapes, haircuts, facial features, and the colors and styles of their clothing. But these differences are somewhat muted by their collective presence in the panorama. Just as Lauren’s figure could easily be passed over in this depiction of young men and women loitering on school grounds as time ostensibly passes, the students in this picture do not stand out as individuals. Instead, they are defined by their postures – how they fit in relation to others, or to the larger crowd more generally, and which bodies they do or do not stand beside. This representation of the beginning of Lauren’s high school experience therefore simultaneously emphasizes and downplays the importance of the individual body. The adolescent body is easily assimilated into the crowd, although it simultaneously prevails as a potential marker of individuality and of the otherwise hidden or internal self.

High school also marks Lauren’s increased interest in and awareness of her gender and sexuality, particularly in relation to her interactions with a boy, John. He too is pictured in this high school crowd, although his presence is only signaled on the subsequent pages of the comic. Like Lauren, John remains somewhat anonymous as part of the crowd until their coupling casts him into the role of boyfriend. Their relationship directs the narrative back towards an engagement with individual bodies, as her early recordings of their dates showcase the two of them up close. In a series of panels on the last page of the comic, “Skate Date,” Lauren and John stand shyly beside each other, and the minimal dialogue on a page that is colored in various shades of blue sets the tone of the anticipation – and eventual consummation – of their first kiss (Figure 45). Lauren’s thought bubbles add humor to the limited bits of conversation recorded between the couple, while they also highlight the disparity between the calm, matter-of-fact



Figure 45. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 118.

depictions of the two figures and the disbelief that Lauren experiences internally. “Now we’re kissing,” she thinks to herself in a panel that depicts them kissing, reflecting her need to narrate in order to make something true. “And now we’re Frenching,” the next panel reads. Beside the careful drawings of the couple, along with Lauren’s accompanying thoughts, is a crude close-up drawing of a pink mouth with a large tongue lodged in it. The insertion of this mouth at the end of “Skate Date” transforms what is otherwise a conventional narrative about a first date between two teenagers. By focusing in on the corporeal, the messy and unattractive shape and look of the mouth as it is being kissed, this final image upsets the otherwise agreeable, normative storyline of the young man pursuing the compliant young woman and sealing his conquest with a calculated kiss.

In their review essay, “Writing Back: Rereading Adolescent Girlhoods through Women’s Memoir” (2005), Elizabeth Marshall and Theresa Rogers argue that many contemporary memoirs written by women about adolescence offer counter-narratives to popular culture’s notions about what their experiences are actually like. Reading four memoirs in particular, they

assert that “[w]omen’s retrospective constructions of adolescent girlhood provide alternative scripts about gender” (17). Throughout *Girl Stories*, portrayals of Lauren’s body frequently interfere with what otherwise could be read as a conventional adolescent narrative, emphasizing Lauren’s subjectivity and legitimizing her point of view. By transforming the innocuous and somewhat disembodied representations leading up to the “first kiss” into a disproportionately magnified and unattractive anatomical image, the protruding mouth at the end of “Skate Date” empowers Lauren as storyteller by recording the reality of her otherwise “typical” adolescent experience from the perspective of a resistant female body. The image of the mouth visualizes the abject in what would otherwise be a detached and stereotypical representation.

In another interaction between the couple, recounted in the comic “John and I Go to the Movies...” Lauren’s experience of the situation is conveyed, in contrast, in a series of images depicting *only* her external body as it corresponds with his. Despite its portrayal of Lauren’s experience on the date from a perspective that seems, at first glance, to erase her individual subjectivity, this page can also be read as a counter-narrative to the typical adolescent narrative, although in this case it is a deconstruction rather than a disruption. The first page of the story features a sequence of small panels – eighteen total – without a single word besides the title of the story interfering with these images (Figure 46). The images depicted look like the photos that are produced in a photobooth, a conceit that adds to the sense of performance of the occasion. The series begins with an image of Lauren and John sitting beside each other, from the point of view of an observer, as though their interaction at the movies is, in itself, a spectacle. The panels then zero in on the couple’s hands, as they inch together, and these depictions are portrayed from Lauren’s and John’s vantage points. The point of view then shifts once again, and repeatedly, picturing fragments of the two of them (arms and legs, mostly) from diverse angles, with

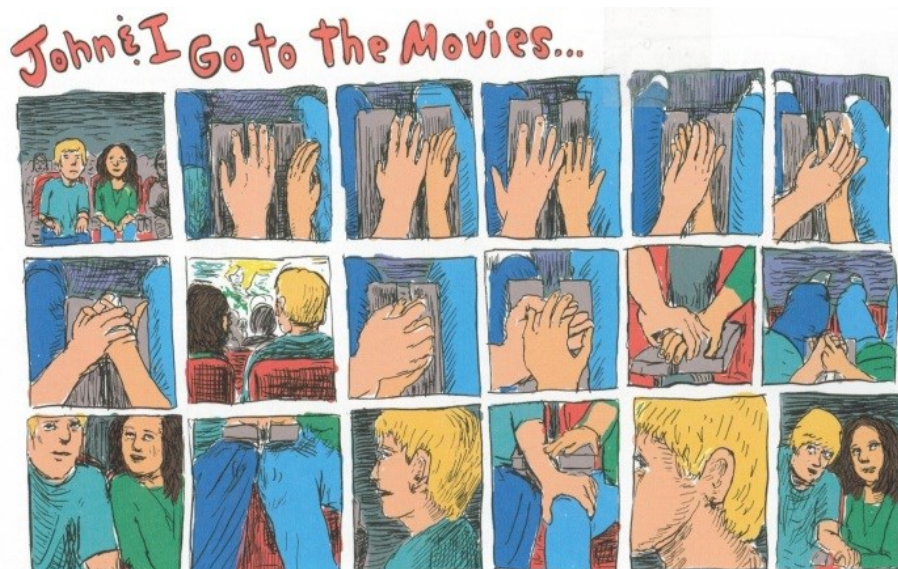


Figure 46. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 121.

Lauren's individual perspective sometimes interjecting. The last panel on the page features a close up of the two, once again from the viewpoint of a third person, an imaginary observer, and this time they are holding hands and their heads are slightly angled towards one another. This image resembles a drawing of a photograph, as the couple's eyes seem to be concentrated on an anonymous onlooker. Their stances look artificial, as though this entire interaction had been staged for the benefit of that observer.

The posed interactions depicted within these panels draws attention to the couple's bodily postures as pretense. Their behaviors are conveyed as affectations based, presumably, on a mirroring of actions and behaviors that are learned and absorbed from the wider world, including the movie screen. The voyeuristic portrayal of these bodily interactions reinforces the performativity of Lauren's diary project as a whole. Her role as diarist, which compels her to record the unfolding details of her life, complements her place as director and star of this adolescent plot, as she acts out the prescribed role of the teenager on her first real date. In each case, there is a consistent awareness of a potential real or imagined audience, and this

mindfulness transforms her from one passively undergoing these experiences to one actively shaping them. In depicting herself as passive participant in her role of a teenage girl on her first date, Lauren ironically unmask her actions on that date and her subsequent depictions of them as calculated performances, played out by an active, thinking subject.

As the relationship continues, Lauren eventually expresses a discomfort with these expected behaviors and performances. Once she is assimilated into something of a normalized plot or scenario – in this case, the clichéd teenage lovers plot – she rebels. This rebellion erupts in “Women’s Lib,” a comic which begins with Lauren signing up to participate in a march for women’s rights and then depicts her, in the adjacent panel, sharing the news with John as they sit together, both topless, on her couch. Exchanging John’s company for the rally (or sex for politics), Lauren travels to Washington, D.C. with a girlfriend, although she cannot stop thinking about him while she is away. Once at the rally, she pictures herself as a member of the group, an image reminiscent of the high school crowd drawing, even as it figures her place in *this* group as central rather than marginal (Figure 47). She draws herself at the front and almost middle of the picture, her arms wrapped around a friend with their raised fists emulating one another, and also mirrored by another participant standing just behind them. In this crowd, Lauren not only finds herself paired beside another woman – as her friend, Diana, is paired in the high school crowd – but she has also become the one at the center of this group of people. Instead of reveling in the possibility of belonging that the image offers, however, Lauren continues to feel unsettled. In contrast to her enthusiastic and attentive posture, her thought bubble reveals that she is still focused on her relationship with John: “I mean, what was the last really good conversation we had?” she wonders. The comic exposes the performativity of the shift from her preoccupation



Figure 47. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 163.

with her boyfriend – and her identification as his girlfriend – to her political preoccupation. Both her political and romantic engagements are dependent on her identification with others, and these prove superficial in part because they nullify her multidimensionality. She can only belong, it seems, by choosing certain affiliations over and above others.

Despite this failed political affiliation, however, the image of Lauren in a crowd of women, and paired with a girlfriend, proposes female friendship as a site of potential for the sense of belonging that she craves. Especially in comparison to Lauren's depictions of herself and John, which generally feature the two of them in relation, only, to one another, the portrayal of Lauren beside another woman and situated in a larger crowd of (almost all) women suggests that her connections with other women offer a key to her identification troubles. In fact, reading through *Girl Stories* with the theme of female friendships in mind, it is possible to see Lauren's diary as a record, foremost, of her desire for connections with other women, and her sense of identity as tempered by these connections. The title of the graphic memoir emphasizes this scheme. *Girl Stories* is a book that consists not only of stories about what it means to be a girl,

but also crucially what it means to be a girl among other girls. Lauren's early Barbie comics also reinforce this thematic structure.

Lauren's final, and most dramatic, estrangement is from her girlfriend, Diana, a friend whose presence (and absence) figures throughout the memoir and often coincides with Lauren's sense of belonging and/or not belonging. The comic "Diana" appears soon after Lauren records her split with John. The title panel of this comic is a full-page, featuring Diana's name neatly scripted against a background of green trees with two disparately shaped, magnified noses poking through the trees (Figure 48). The comic then introduces the friends with an image of the two of them standing next to each other. "This is my friend Diana," the narration reads. An arrow points to Diana's head, as though to single her out, although she is the only other person in the image besides the narrator. "We are really great friends," the narration continues. "Look at how beautiful and special she is! And skinny too!" The next page features a close up of two brown eyes with colored stars drawn around those eyes (Figure 49). Because the two young girls "have many things in common," the close up could be of either girl. The image itself does not leave open the possibility of any distinction between the two. The words written below the image, however, tell of their differences: "Except her hair is shinier, and she has this awesome widow's peak, which frames her larger more mysterious eyes. And I have a bigger nose."

The introduction of the nose in this comic as a potential marker of difference disrupts the narrative. In comparing herself to another young woman who looks a lot like her, Lauren posits the potential for affiliation and identification in the female body. But the nose makes such an affiliation impossible; it becomes a disproportionate marker for the differences that are otherwise absent or indirectly addressed throughout the memoir. If Lauren's search for identity as home is most accessible in finding a body that matches her – another woman's (or a doll's) body – then



Figure 48. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 170.



Figure 49. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 172.

the nose becomes the protruding marker that makes even this inevitable affiliation impossible. It disrupts the possibility of gender – and, by extension, any other “easy” identification – as home.

Although the protruding nose is never directly revealed to be a *Jewish* nose, the potential for such an association presents itself in various moments throughout the memoir. With one

exception, Jewishness is mentioned indirectly and in passing in only a few instances in the text. One of these instances occurs early on in the memoir, in a comic depicting a letter that Lauren addresses to the makers of Barbie.¹⁰⁸ In the letter, Lauren reports four “frustrations with your product,” and one of these includes the fact that “I have never been able to find a pretty brown-haired, brown-eyed Barbie. All your Barbies look like Aryans!” If the Barbies represent the connection between Lauren’s search for identity and her identifications in relation to the female body, then it is in part the Jewish elements of Lauren’s body that preclude her ability to locate her body as home. The ambiguous nose in “Diana” therefore links Lauren’s sense of being an outsider with her Jewish identity, while also leaving open the possibility that this inability to assimilate is something that cannot be traced to any single element of her self or her identity.¹⁰⁹

By not presenting Jewishness as the focal point of Lauren’s sense of alienation, *Girl Stories* argues for Jewish identity as one of many defining categorizations of a person’s self-identifications, which vary in significance depending on the time and place of a specific situation, or the way that particular moment is mapped out on the page. The exception to the lack of directly addressed Jewish themes throughout *Girl Stories* – an eleven-page comic entitled “The Chanukah Blues” – is therefore telling not only for its content, but also for its peculiarly slapstick and fantastical tone and style. Featured early on in the book, the comic opens with Lauren uncharacteristically addressing her Jewish identity directly, as she sits on Santa’s lap and

¹⁰⁸ In another comic, “The Dysfunctional Family Thanksgiving,” Lauren’s cousin introduces his girlfriend at the dining room table, and his mother responds, “She’s not Jewish, is she?” (138). This overt reference to Jewishness in the context of a romantic affiliation reinforces how the theme of intermarriage is often the space, in contemporary American literature, where the topic of Jewish identities surfaces. Similarly, the name of a character in the memoir, “Glenn Schwartz,” suggests a Jewish identity, although in an interview Weinstein admitted that this character was “an amalgam of people and maybe some of those people were Jewish and some were not.” See “Thinking Panoramically: An Interview with Lauren Weinstein.”

¹⁰⁹ Weinstein talks about recognizing the depiction of the Jewish nose in “Diana” as an explicitly Jewish nose in the “Thinking Panoramically” interview. As she explains of her drawing of Diana in the comic, “Her nose is not as *schnozzy* as mine. That was definitely a real feeling I had.”

tells him that she doesn't want anything for Christmas because she is Jewish (64-74). The rest of the narrative reflects Lauren's continued sense of alienation in relation to her non-Jewish peers, a feeling that leads her to exaggerate her differences. As she relates, "In Kindergarten I was the one who told all the Christian kids that Santa didn't exist" (65). In the comic, Lauren is approached by "Latke Boy," an oversized potato pancake, who is personified and tells her, "I help Jewish boys and girls everywhere get over the Chanukah Blues" (Figure 50). On the final



Figure 50. Lauren Weinstein, *Girl Stories* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 71.

page, Lauren stands beside an oversized menorah with her parents hugging her while she uncharacteristically smiles and accepts their embraces without word. "The Chanukah Blues" is an anomalous piece in relation to the rest of the memoir not only because in it Lauren addresses her Jewish identity directly, but also because of the way that it is drawn. Each page of the caricatural comic presents a dramatically divergent image of Lauren – she is drawn as a tall, lanky figure, a young innocent, and an almost grotesque adolescent on pages that are connected by a dull and light pink background that is absent from the rest of the book. Many of the characters that Lauren encounters throughout the comic are nowhere to be found throughout the

rest of *Girl Stories*, and the ones that are (like her parents) are almost unrecognizable. “Latka Boy”’s incongruous nature in relation to the rest of the book reinforces Lauren’s inability to identify with her Jewish identity in any easy or direct manner. Instead, as its farcical tone reveals, such an unquestioned and direct relationship to her Jewish identity makes Lauren, as narrator, artist, and subject of the story, uncomfortable. The comic stands out, in relation to the rest of the book, in the same way that depicting herself mainly in terms of her Jewishness makes Lauren into a character who is alien to herself.

Ultimately, over the course of *Girl Stories*, Lauren’s inability to fixate on a singular aspect of her identity as home ultimately reveals how, like all the other personas examined in this dissertation, she is most comfortable in a state of self-imposed homelessness or self-exile. Her potentially Jewish nose comes to signify this identity as self-exile, although it also allows her to distance herself from directly addressing her Jewish identity by presenting it as an abject and grotesque body part, a material stand-in for something that is never defined or directly referenced, and that therefore easily dissolves into obscurity. In the image of a woman’s eyes portrayed in the comic “Diana” (see Figure 49), the nose-as-difference is absent from the page, and a widow’s peak, instead, signals the identity of the brown-eyed, brown-haired girl drawn on the page. The nose disappears just as easily as it first appears, reflecting both the power and the vulnerability of any metonymical mark of difference. Even the unassimilated or “kept” Jewish nose is, in this way, susceptible to erasure.

V. Self Visualization Activity

In a cartoon collected in Lauren Weinstein’s first collection, *Inside Vineyard* (2003), she pictures a rocky seascape and two ghostly outlines of people, with the words “you” and “other”

etched inside of these figures (Figure 51).¹¹⁰ Below the image, a rectangular box features a sampling of possible people and creatures that can be inserted into the blank space of “your companion.” The list reads: “(1) snail; (2) sea lion; (3) Cheryl; (4) proud Indian; (5) Smokey; (6) Mercenary; and (7) Jesus Christ.” Each of these potential Others is drawn in a shape that does not easily match the long, ghostly silhouette of the “other” figure posed by the sea. Finally, beside the title of the comic, a tiny sailor, standing with one leg crossed over the other, is pictured, looking off into the distance. Despite its satirical, cryptic, and fantastical bent, in a single page this comedic “Self Visualization Activity” encompasses many of the features of Weinstein’s and Lasko-Gross’s memoirs. The self is always identified in relation to the Other, and both are phantoms whose presences can potentially, though never comfortably, materialize to reflect a bafflingly particular individual presence. In other words, people, in life as well as on the page, are always situated somewhere between complete anonymity and particularity, between stereotype and anti-stereotype.

By listing certain identity labels in relationship to names and figures that do not match in any discernable way, this cartoon, much like the texts under examination in this chapter, question the ease with which people are labeled and referenced in relation to one another. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008), “People are different from each other,” or “the sister or brother, the best friend, the classmate, the parent, the child, the lover, the ex-: our families, loves, and enmities alike, not to mention the strange relations of our work, play, and activism, prove that even people who share all or most of our own positionings along these crude axes may still be different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but

¹¹⁰ Published in 2003, *Inside Vineyard* is a collection of mostly single-page cartoons, many of which originally appeared in the alternative weekly newspaper in Seattle, Washington, *The Stranger*, which was founded in 1991. The book contains no page numbers. Weinstein’s third book is an epic, entitled *The Goddess of War*, about the adventures of Valkyrie, the great-granddaughter of Thor, and published in 2008.

different species” (22). Both *Escape from “Special”* and *Girl Stories* are texts that question the ease with which identifications are imagined and framed. These books posit Jewish identity as an ambiguous but discernable marker of individuality and difference, a marker whose power resides in its absence as much as in its presence. It is because Jewishness emerges at key moments in the texts – and all but disappears at other moments – that it maintains its significance as an unstable but consistent marker of difference.

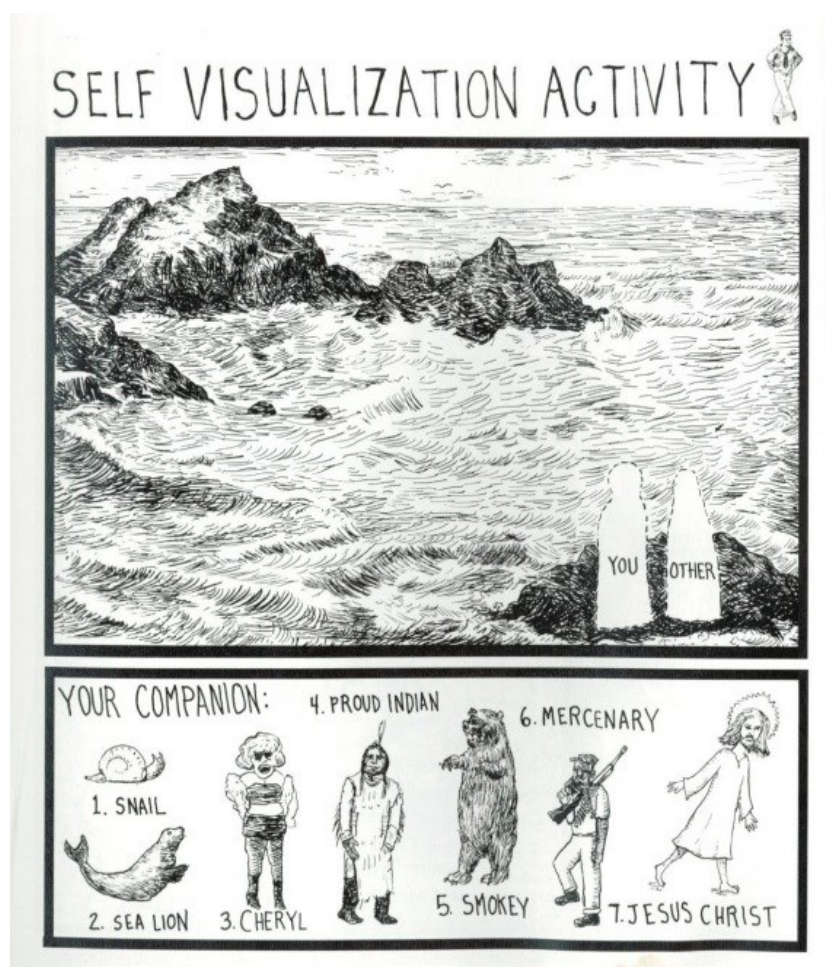


Figure 51. Lauren Weinstein, *Inside Vineyard* (Gainesville, Florida: Alternative Comics, 2003).

In presenting such Jewish engagements in relation to more universalized accounts of the self as it moves through the transitional framework of adolescence, both memoirs resist easy categorization or genre-fication. At one point in *Escape from “Special,”* Miss Lasko-Gross’s

persona, Melissa, tells her childhood therapist, “I don’t want people to know my identity” (70). “And what is your ‘identity?’” the therapist asks in reply, a question that confounds Melissa, who can only respond by asking, “Is that a trick question?” Identity, in both of these cartoonists’ works, is posited as a question, an unexplainable paradox. As with genre, categorizations of identity are starting points, or places of departure for larger conversations about how and why such categorizations continue to exist, and what it means to defy them.

Chapter Four

“But you don’t live here, so what’s the dilemma?”: Birthright and accountability in the geographics of Sarah Glidden and Miriam Libicki

Throughout this dissertation, I have been utilizing the language of exile and diaspora – of home, homelessness, exile, and self-exile – to discuss the ways that contemporary Jewish American women cartoonists figure their identities.¹¹¹ Given the longstanding associations, rooted in the Old Testament, of Jews as travelers and wanderers, as well as more recent employments of such concepts by scholars exploring Jewish identity, the application of such terms by contemporary Jews to describe themselves seems inevitable.¹¹² Yet, despite these connections, as many have recently pointed out, there is a danger in relying too heavily on such rhetoric to describe the situation of a group of people – however diverse and diversely located – whose place in the American landscape (as well as, generally speaking, in most parts of the world) is no longer easily or directly related to a condition of literal exile. As Susan Stanford Friedman articulates in *Mappings* (1998), “the metaphor of migrancy may well be the luxury of the housed and the relatively stationary” (102). To ruminate on one’s sense of homelessness is to

¹¹¹ In their introduction to *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* (2005), Caryn Aviv and David Schneer explore the history of the term “diaspora” from its Biblical origins, as a term meaning “dispersion,” to its contemporary usages. They discuss a variety of connotations of the word in contemporary discussions of Jewish identity. In certain contexts, it carries negative implications, “suggesting spiritual diminishment and exile, rather than just dispersion from a homeland” (3), while in others it maintains positive ones, connoting “diversity in the modern world” (17). Aviv and Schneer additionally point out the distinct histories of the terms “exile” and “diaspora” (17). For the purpose of this discussion, I make no particular distinctions between the two. For more on these terms, see Aviv and Schneer’s introduction, “From Diaspora Jews to New Jews,” pps. 1-25. See also two notable contemporary texts on Jewish history and identity devoted to the subject: Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin’s “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity” (1993), and Howard Wettstein’s edited anthology, *Exiles and Diasporas: Varieties of Jewish Identity* (2002). See also Irving M. Zeitlin’s *Jews: The Making of a Diaspora People* (2012). Zeitlin argues for Jews as “the archetypal or prototypical diaspora people” (1) and his book surveys the historical and sociological lineage of this proposition.

¹¹² Ranen Omer-Sherman links the intellectual employment of such concepts in contemporary postcolonial discourse, as located most famously in the works of Paul Gilroy and Edward Said, to discussions of Jewish identity that took place in the 1800s. As he writes in *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature* (2002), certain “conceptual permutations and mutations of diaspora can be traced to a late-nineteenth-century movement among Jewish intellectuals who sought ways to account for the Jews’ persistence over the long span of centuries in a variety of lands that were not their homeland” (3). Omer-Sherman notes that “each of these [intellectuals – including Gilroy, Said, and anthropologist James Clifford] has readily acknowledged his creative debts to the pioneering intellectual efforts of Jewish diasporists” (12).

recognize the possibility of what it means to belong, to have a home. It is an act that potentially, and harmfully, erases the realities of those living in literal exile.¹¹³ Additionally, this diasporic discourse subtly but powerfully evokes Jews as impotent victims, a characterization that can lead to problematic justifications – what the cartoonist Harvey Pekar has termed “Jewish claims of fairness” – for illegitimate and otherwise indefensible actions.¹¹⁴

The works of the cartoonists under discussion in this chapter – and primarily Sarah Glidden’s *How To Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less* (2010) and Miriam Libicki’s comic series, *Jobnik!* (2008, and ongoing) – reject the comfortable figuration of Jewish identity as premised in diasporic conceptualizations. At the same time, the personas of these texts continue to grapple with the ways that such constructions affect their senses of what it means to be Jewish.¹¹⁵ In their accounts of travelling to Israel as part of a tour group (in Glidden’s case) and as a dual citizen and member of the Israeli Defense Forces (in Libicki’s case), these personas struggle with the discomfort that accompanies “metaphoric articulations of identity issues” (Friedman 102), especially in the case of the relationship between North American Jews and Israel as the so-called “Jewish homeland.” They recognize the importance of moving beyond language as signifier and image as icon to confront the material and historic realities of identifications rooted in actual places, and that affect people as individual bodies. In addition,

¹¹³ As Friedman elaborates: “I am not entirely comfortable with the appropriation of the language of migration for metaphoric articulations of identity issues when the real conditions of involuntary movement, refugeesim, and homelessness are so desperate for so many people around the globe” (102).

¹¹⁴ In his posthumously published graphic narrative, *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me* (2012), Harvey Pekar makes the connection between the history of Jewish exile as caused by oppression, and the resultant justifications made, by some, of certain actions in recent Israeli history. As he writes, “Being Jewish does not automatically absolve one of guilt. Despite the fact that Jews have such a long history of being oppressed, Israeli treatment of Palestinians eats at Jewish claims of fairness” (149).

¹¹⁵ For the sake of brevity, the full title of Glidden’s book, *How To Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less*, will hereafter be referred to as *Israel*. Additionally, Libicki’s *Jobnik!* was originally published as a serial comic. The earliest issue was published in 2003. The first six issues have since been compiled into a single book, published in 2008, with later issues still coming out individually. At the time this chapter was written, the ninth issue was the most recent publication, released in July 2011. All of Libicki’s works have been self-published by Real Gone Girl Studios.

they acknowledge the impossibility of establishing closed, linear narratives to unite and reflect those realities. Glidden and Libicki paradoxically employ the medium of comics, a language premised in large part on stereotype and shorthand, to convey the importance of researching and relaying detailed and individual histories in order to locate the self, and particularly the Jewish self, outside of metaphor and stereotype. Perhaps more than any of the other cartoonists discussed here, their texts reflect dis-affiliation as an ethical posture, a way of envisioning an ethics of accountability that recognizes self-representation as inextricably connected to the ways that others come to see and be seen.

Both of these cartoonists' works, moreover, can be categorized as travel narratives, a genre that, much like adolescent literature, is focused on the transitional as a way of locating and orienting the self. In his book *Travel Writing* (2002), Casey Blanton argues that "there exists in the journey pattern the possibility of a kind of narrative where inner and outer worlds collide" (3). It is the transitional moment – or movement – that educes such collisions, allowing an individual's inner and outer worlds to fully engage in a space that is somehow "safe" because it is neither here nor there; the self in transit remains unfixed and relatively free. In that sense, travel memoirs, which "dramatize[] an engagement between self and world" (xi), are texts in which questions of identity can be worked through to their utmost potential. The dramatic engagements reflected in such works, in which identity issues unfold primarily in relation to space, follow what Susan Stanford Friedman pinpoints as "the new geographics." According to Friedman's model, identity, "constantly on the move," is figured most aptly in special terms, which, as explained in the introduction to this project, is what makes comics such an interesting medium for its exploration. Autobiographical comics in particular, and especially ones focused on travel, promote an understanding of identity primarily as a function of space and movement;

they offer the possibility of a spatialized graphics that depicts the self, and subjectivity, as it unravels, or of the self as process.

In their travel narratives, by emphasizing explorations of the self away from “home,” the texts under discussion here challenge the very notion of “home” as a fixed concept, an idea that, as Caryn Aviv and David Schneer point out, presumes people – and, by extension, communities – to have locatable centers and peripheries. In *New Jews*, Aviv and Schneer question the concept of diaspora as a model for understanding contemporary Jewish identity, especially because such a model “has discounted or overshadowed the extent to which people – as individuals and as groups – are creating new forms of home in a more mobile world” (18). Instead, Aviv and Schneer emphasize a communal Jewish identity founded in transnational constructions of home that are based in a global world, as well as in “the ways in which many Jews are remaking their sense of home and establishing new kinds of roots, not just to particular pieces of land but also to concepts, ideas, stories, and spaces” (20). *Israel* and *Jobnik!* are books that establish travel, and the narration of travel, as the in-between spaces where their central personas feel both most and least at home, as they too question that very concept. Through their visual-verbal experimentations with self-portraiture, these works interrogate not only the centrality of a specific locale or nationality in the establishment of a sense of a Jewish self, but also the very possibility of mapping out *any and all spaces* as home or not-home. Instead, these graphic narratives re-imagine home, and subsequently identity-as-home, in terms of movement rather than stasis, and as expansive and rhizomatic in nature.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ The term “rhizomatic” here references Deleuze’s and Guattari’s works on the representation and interpretation of knowledge. For more on “rhizomes” or the “rhizomatic,” see *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987).

I. “We are a little bit ‘there’ already”

Despite its origins as a mini-comic tracking her two-week trip to Israel in 2007, Sarah Glidden’s *Israel* is the most linearly structured of all the graphic narratives explored in this project.¹¹⁷ The majority of pages of the book are divided into nine rectangular panels of identical size, with narrative remarks and speech bubbles fastidiously drawn and arranged. Yet, in spite of what appears to be a straightforward story following the evolution of a series of events presented in sequential order, the book stealthily traverses the boundaries of its own apparent linearity by offering various points of rupture within and between individual panels, especially when it comes to the ways that space and time are represented. Spanning 206 pages, *Israel* is divided into seven discrete chapters, each tracing a leg of Sarah’s journey on the guided Birthright Israel tour: Orientation, The Golan Heights, The Kinneret, Tel Aviv and Environs, The Desert, Jerusalem, and Post-Birthright.¹¹⁸ Five of these chapter titles are named in terms of places traversed, whereas the first and last chapters (“Orientation” and “Post-Birthright”) disturb this corresponding arrangement. These two titles refer only indirectly to places; they point, instead, to more ambiguous figurations that simultaneously bookend and interrupt the place-as-time scheme encompassed by the structure of the memoir as a whole. In addition, in the five chapter titles that refer to places, locations are situated as comparable to one another, even though the places named represent regions with disparate geographies, topographies, and levels of historical and cultural significance. For example, as the focus of an entire chapter, The Desert, unspecified in name but referring to Israel’s Negev, which spans over half of the country’s land area, is made

¹¹⁷ Glidden’s self-published mini-comic won the Ignatz Award for “Promising New Talent” at the Small Press Expo in Bethesda, Maryland in 2008. In several interviews, she recounts the experience of being approached by an editor from DC Comics at a New York indie comics festival, “MoCCA Fest,” and soon after signing with Vertigo, an imprint of DC Comics, for a book-length version of the mini-comic. See Glidden’s interview with Alex Deuben on Comic Book Resources, <<http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=29216>>.

¹¹⁸ “Sarah” refers to the persona of *Israel*, whereas “Glidden” or “Sarah Glidden” refers to the author of the text.

parallel to the city of Jerusalem, the nation's capital, a sacred site for three of the major monotheistic faiths, and the focus of another chapter. The structure of the book, which initially appears as a basic consecutive unfolding, therefore plays with the notion of places as discrete, substitutable, and easily identifiable and classifiable units.

The chapters present travel, and especially planned travel, as an enterprise that is inevitably characterized by the unexpected. The titles of the seven chapters are not presented all at once in a table of contents at the beginning of the book. Instead, they appear only within the span of the text itself, separate from the generally uniform multi-paneled pages. Each title page, encountered by the reader as the story unfolds, is structured as a map, with the name of the chapter etched into a box presented at the top left corner of the page. This box also sometimes functions as the map's legend. The individual maps are water-colored drawings, and they distinctly feature a somewhat limited variation of colors in order to forefront certain aspects of the pictured geographical location over others. The varied depictions of the seven full-page maps incorporated into the text, which differ in the ways that they picture the scope as well as the context of each particular place, draw attention to the maps as subjective constructions of the author-persona, dependent on her individual experiences of the locations represented.¹¹⁹ For example, in the map of "Tel Aviv and Environs," the page is divided almost equally in two, with the Mediterranean Sea spanning the left side of the page and an intricate drawing of the streets of Tel Aviv traversing the right side (Figure 52). The sea is colored pale blue, while Tel Aviv is drawn in combinations of faded oranges, browns, and pinks. The map features only five landmarks: Mike's Place (a bar), Hotel, Rabin Square, Miri Aloni Square, and Independence Hall. Each of these indicates a place that Sarah visits, and an event that she recounts over the

¹¹⁹ Because these maps, as chapter headings, could be considered part of the paratext as well as of the text, I attribute them to the "author-persona" of the book, rather than to just one or the other.

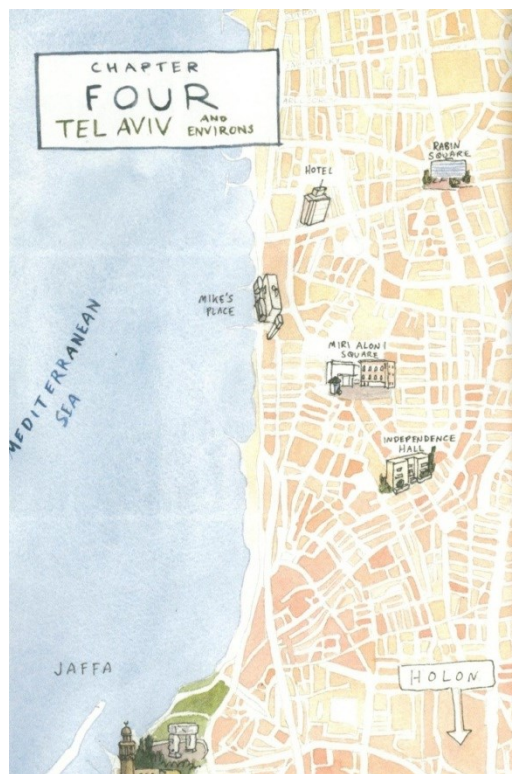


Figure 52. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 78.

course of the chapter, although “Miri Aloni Square” is a fabricated name attributed to the area where she encounters the famous singer.¹²⁰ By marking these sites on the page in drawings that are exaggeratedly out of scale with the web-like grid of streets pictured, the image represents space as subjectively determined by the individual map maker. The drawing of Tel Aviv is inflected as much by Sarah’s sensorial experiences and the material indicators that she encounters externally, as by her internal, sometimes even imaginary, world. Furthermore, by featuring human-made structures, like streets and a hotel, in opposition to the relatively consistent and uninterrupted blue sea, the map, like the chapter it precedes, foregrounds the two

¹²⁰ See pps. 90-1 of *Israel* for Sarah’s run-in with Miri Aloni. As one of the Israeli tour guides, Nadan, explains, “She was like the Joni Mitchell of Israel in the early 90s” (91). Despite Aloni’s early fame, which included being the singer who sang at the peace rally where Yitzhak Rabin was killed, she had to eventually resort to singing on the street for money. According to one of Sarah’s guides, “her husband was crazy and he ruined her” (91). The rendering of “Miri Aloni Square” is therefore a play on the irony of the situation. In the book, when Sarah encounters her, she is likely playing on Nachalat Benyamin Street, a kind of pedestrian mall in Tel Aviv with shops, cafes, and frequent street fairs.

kinds of interactions – with people and with the land – that inform the persona’s journey and her subsequent understanding of Israel. As Sarah comes to realize about the conflict in Israel in this chapter about Tel Aviv, “it seems that it’s never really been about religion but about land” (87). This particular drawing of Tel Aviv, which visualizes the city as a piece of developed land but also as part of a larger geographical topography, calls attention to various characteristics of the area in time and over time. Tel Aviv is “prime real estate,” a “port city,” and a tourist site with a “great view” (87).¹²¹ It serves all of these functions, but it is not defined by any of them individually.

The map of Tel Aviv at the beginning of Chapter Four is also portrayed differently from other maps featured as chapter headings throughout the book, such as the one of the Golan Heights (Figure 53). As its key reveals, this map, like those pictured at the beginning of the “Orientation” and “The Desert” chapters, is focused on the politically disputed and militarized boundaries within and around the country, as well as the bus routes and highways that enable the persona’s journey to, from, and around this particular area.¹²² Instead of the details of streets contrasted with the wide, empty stretch of the sea, this image features an amorphous expanse of land, colored pale yellow and delineated by various disruptive lines painted in reds, pinks, and black. The yellow area is simply labeled “Israel,” with the bordered countries of Lebanon and Jordan rendered as white, or blank, spaces that bleed off the page. By emphasizing this part of the country as a geographical region marked by seemingly haphazard human-made boundaries and thoroughfares, but otherwise dislocated from individuals and communities, the author-

¹²¹ Sarah actually views Tel Aviv “across the bay” from the port city of Jaffa (87).

¹²² The dotted line visible in this map but absent in its key is noted earlier in the book as an indicator of the “separation barrier.” The group’s tour guide, Gil, discusses this barrier in the first chapter. Constructed by the State of Israel, the barrier runs along the West Bank and has caused great controversy. While the Israeli government maintains that the wall has led to a decrease in the incidence of Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel, opponents argue that, among other issues, the wall violates international law. The existence of the barrier severely restricts the ability to travel for Palestinians who live near it.

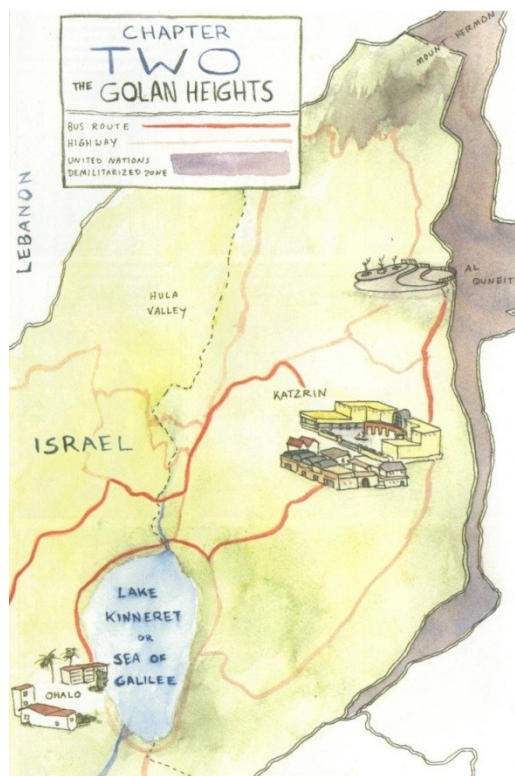


Figure 53. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 30.

persona differentiates these areas, and the chapters that take place in them, from the ones, like Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, that are defined in large part in terms of Sarah’s interpersonal interactions within those places. In these ways, not only is each representational map depicted as predicated on Sarah’s subjectivity at particular moments of time (the moments that Sarah encounters the place and the moments that she reflects on and draws that place), but each is also dependent on her experience of that area within the trajectory of the narrative as a whole. As her journey unfolds, Sarah’s understanding of Israel, and especially of what she terms “the situation,” transforms from the abstract and indirect – a knowledge based in large part on research and books – towards the concrete – a knowledge based on people and the personal stories that they transmit.¹²³ Although the shift is never complete, as abstract knowledge has its

¹²³ I am following Glidden’s lead here, of referring to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians as “the situation.” The quotation marks around the words point ironically to the layers of complication and violence that are

place throughout the text, the basic movement of the book, and of Sarah's journey, is away from theoretical, second-hand knowledge and in search of material and first-hand ways of knowing and telling.

The opening chapter of the book, "Orientation," introduces those very gaps between theoretical and concrete knowledge, and in particular Sarah's expectations for her visit to Israel in relation to her actual experiences. Sarah travels with the guided tour known as Birthright. On its webpage, the organization, whose full name is Taglit-Birthright, describes itself as one that "offers the gift of a free, 10-day educational trip to Israel for Jewish adults between the ages of 18 to 26."¹²⁴ In a recent review essay of books written about Birthright since 2008 (four in all, including Glidden's *Israel*), Philip Getz argues that the central question surrounding Birthright is whether or not "Birthright's main purpose is to encourage participants to make *aliya* (move to Israel), or at least become Zionist activists" (24).¹²⁵ While Getz believes this unpronounced agenda is untrue, Glidden, like many others, approaches her trip unsure of whether or not she will be offered something of an objective look at Israel.¹²⁶ Although in the opening chapter she dutifully quotes Birthright materials that advertise the trip as one in which the group "will be exploring the history and politics of Israel in an open-minded and pluralistic manner" (9), Sarah continually asks herself, especially at the beginning of her journey, whether or not "Birthright is trying to brainwash me" (27). Her desire to prepare herself for a potentially biased trip leads her to investigate all she can about the region, and especially its history and politics, from a variety

masked by the succinct and unfraught phrases often used to talk about a conflict tied to a long and complicated history.

¹²⁴ See the "About Us" section of the Birthright Israel website, accessed June 22, 2012:

<http://www.birthrightisrael.com/site/PageServer?pagename=about_main>.

¹²⁵ The other books reviewed here include: *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity* (2008), by Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan, *What We Brought Back: Jewish Life After Birthright, Reflections by Alumni of Taglit-Birthright Israel Trips* (2010), edited by Wayne Hoffman, and *Tours that Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism* (2012), by Shaul Kelner.

¹²⁶ Kelner's book, for example, argues that the organizers of Birthright stage every aspect of the trip so carefully that they end up administering an anti-pluralistic message.

of sources before she even leaves on her tour.¹²⁷ The full title of the book, *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less*, thus satirically refers not only to the time Sarah spends abroad with Birthright, but also to the days leading up to and extending beyond her trip.

Sarah's experience of travel is therefore not relegated to a clearly delineated time or place (i.e., the ten or so days that she spends in Israel). Rather, it is characterized by a more indeterminate sense of time that is mirrored by a similarly polysemous understanding of Israel as a place. This uncertain framing of her trip is Sarah's way of challenging Birthright's packaged commodification of their so-called educational tours, which proclaim wide-sweeping goals to be achieved in the span of ten days.¹²⁸ Instead, as Sarah shows, her education necessarily extends beyond what is officially sanctioned by Birthright. For example, in this first chapter of the book, she retrospectively recounts her time spent researching before she has even left for Israel. As she writes, "After the two of us decided to go on this trip I spent every moment reading about Israel, Palestine and the conflict" (11).¹²⁹ This element of her self-education is expanded on in various narrative boxes featured in panels that picture her at the airport, undergoing security checks, and eventually finding her seat on the plane. The starting point of her trip is consequently hazy. Although the title of the book suggests "60 days or less" as the span of time in which she is focused on and visiting Israel, the unfolding of this opening chapter contrarily collapses time and suggests the pursuit of "understanding" Israel as endless and indeterminate.

¹²⁷ The bibliography at the end of the book lists nine sources in all, including, for example, *The Masada Myth* (1995), by Nachman Ben-Yehuda, the aforementioned collection of essays and reflections, *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (2003), edited by Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon, and *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (2009), by Mark Tessler.

¹²⁸ The aforementioned "About Us" section of the Birthright-Israel website, for example, includes the following pronouncement: "The trip aims to strengthen participants' Jewish identity; to build an understanding, friendship and lasting bond with the land and people of Israel; and to reinforce the solidarity of the Jewish people worldwide."

¹²⁹ Sarah is referring here to her friend, Melissa, who, after some persuasion, joins her on the trip. Sarah recalls her initial contact with Melissa about the trip in a flashback (17). She describes Melissa as "one of my closest and oldest friends... [and] also one of my only Jewish friends." While Sarah tries to convince Melissa that one of the main impetuses for their trip would be to "check out the reality on the other side of the green line," it becomes clear throughout the book that Melissa does not share Sarah's "obsession" with the conflict. Instead, it seems that one of her main reasons for travelling is that she has never been abroad before (19).

The text more generally challenges the conception of time as linear, and the possibility of grasping a complex “situation” by approaching it as a straightforward narrative, with a discrete beginning, middle, and end – or with clearly delineated “sides.” Sarah begins the trip with this expectation. As she tells her boyfriend before she leaves, “I’m ready to go there and discover the truth behind this whole mess once and for all. It’ll all be crystal clear by the time I come back!” (6). However, once at the airport, and only two pages into the book, this possibility is already brought into question, as her notions of time and place – and therefore the potential of identifying a single, unifying “truth” – are disturbed. An unsettling interaction with airport security prefigures the ways that conventional understandings of time and place break down throughout Sarah’s trip and influence representations of the experience in her travelogue. When she first checks in with her airline, the security clerk for El-Al questions her about the reasons for her trip. He asks her to recall specific aspects of her Jewish background, such as the number of guests at her Bat Mitzvah and the name of her Torah portion.¹³⁰ In response to his questions, Sarah pictures herself standing and looking isolated, shy, and scared in two consecutive panels (Figures 54 and 55). In the first panel, her hands are clasped and she fumbles her words as she nervously responds. In the next panel, she depicts herself as a young girl, and she is wearing what was presumably her Bat Mitzvah dress. This dress matches, in color, the outfit that she wears in the “present,” thereby connecting the two temporalities. In this second panel, her hands clutch at her waist and her eyes look to the ground as she tells him, “We didn’t have a DJ. We had a luncheon in my backyard with food and stuff.” The shuffling between Sarah’s “present” and young selves in these consecutive panels suggests that the line of questioning about her Jewish identity and history breaks down the way that she perceives herself in the text’s

¹³⁰ The “Torah portion” is a weekly section of the Hebrew bible read during religious services. One of the rituals attached to the Bat or Bar mitzvah is to train for and read a Torah portion in front of a congregation during the Sabbath services that fall closest to the young woman or young man’s birthday.



Figure 54. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 8.



Figure 55. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 8.

“present.” Although the book opens with her confidently confronting a desire to know the “truth” about Israel – a desire that is not evidently linked to her Jewish identities – the clerk’s questions tie her theoretical quest with the history of her own Jewishness. Her Israel trip thus relates to a much more expansive life-long journey of coming to terms with her Jewish identities, whether or not she initially overtly recognizes this correlation.

In addition to a collapsed sense of time, which integrates Sarah’s present and past selves, her sense of place is also challenged from her early experiences at the airport, as she finds herself already submerged in a strange mix of the familiar and the unknown even before she has left the country. While in line for the security check, she depicts two men standing behind her, one of

them dressed in traditional Hasidic garb.¹³¹ This visual detail assumes prominence several pages later, as she passes another (presumably) Hasidic man, this one carrying a guitar case. In the first panel in which she encounters him, she looks over with a smile on her face while the narration box above her reads, “Heh! A rock n’ roll black hat” (Figure 56). In the following panels, this man transforms from an amusing sight to a cultural progenitor, as he spies an unclaimed bag by his feet and frantically asks passersby if the bag belongs to them. The bag that is invisible to Sarah in her initial encounter with the “rock n’ roll black hat” emerges as an important element symbolizing the fear of terrorism that permeates everyday life in the Middle East. As Sarah reflects in a narrative box at the top of the following page, “So maybe even though I’m technically still in Newark, it does feel like we are a little bit ‘there’ already” (11). Sarah’s



Figure 56. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 10.

journey to Israel is premised from the beginning in a collapsed notion of time and place, a series of reflections that confuse the past and present, the “here” and “there.” Even before she has left the United States, she is forced to confront the complexity of a “situation” that she has underestimated: not only is she unlikely to discover the truth, as though it were a latent set of facts waiting to be unearthed, but her journey “there” inevitably forces her to confront the truth

¹³¹ Within the Hasidic world, there are various styles of dress. For the purposes of this discussion, I am collapsing such distinctions and using “Hasidim” to refer generally to the men that Sarah pictures on her trip who are dressed in dark suits and black hats, and either wear traditional earlocks (*peyes* in Yiddish) or have long, uncut sideburns.

about her life “here,” or the ways that her North American Jewish identities affect her perception of Israel and the region’s politics more generally.

Once Sarah has landed in Israel, but while she is still at the airport, she undergoes yet another encounter that forces her to confront the various constructions of “us” versus “them” that also challenge the problematic distinction between “here” versus “there.” She pulls her luggage off a carousel, and another Hasidic man standing beside her shifts away from her, presumably to avoid contact (13).¹³² Soon after, upon being greeted by her cousin, Matt, she asks about whether “they are the same as Hasidim in New York?” As she asks this question, the man who pulled away from her is pictured on his cell phone, although there is no indication of what language he is speaking or whether or not he is a native Israeli (Figure 57). The man’s ambiguous nationality is an integral component of this encounter, as it deconstructs the easy association that could be made between religion and nationality. His observable affiliation with being a religious Jew does not necessarily immediately place him at home in Israel, even though his presence there is not an unexpected but rather an ordinary part of everyday life. In an attempt to answer her question,



Figure 57. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 13.

¹³² Often, observant Jews who follow the laws of modesty, or *shomer negia*, refrain from purposefully touching members of the opposite sex. Levels of observance vary, but strict Jews might try not to even stand or sit next to a member of the opposite sex in order to avoid even accidental contact.

Matt explains, “For the most part Israel is a pretty secular state. The orthodox cause a lot of controversy though.” The possibility of Israel as a “secular Jewish state” is one of the paradoxes that Sarah, a secular American Jew, grapples with throughout the memoir. Her own Jewish identities are not defined by her religious beliefs or even necessarily by any particular cultural affiliation. Similarly, many Israelis, both Jewish and not Jewish, do not necessarily define themselves by their relationships to religion and Jewish culture, although other people’s perceptions of them (as well as, presumably, their own self-perceptions) are inevitably affected by these elements. Sarah’s many interactions throughout *Israel*, beginning at the airport, consequently reflect the difficulty of placing people into distinct categories based on nationality, religion, or other factors taken outside the context of a person’s particular life story.

The Hasid’s presence at Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv also collapses Sarah’s sense of the distinction between “here” versus “there” by reminding her of her home, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. When she first sees all of the Hasidic Jews at the airport, her narrative thought box reads, “Wow, so many Hasidic Jews! It feels like we’re in South Williamsburg!” (13). Her initial experience in Israel disrupts her feeling of being over “there” by reminding her almost immediately of home. The reminiscence extends beyond this general observation. The incident with the Hasidic man who avoids touching her as she manages her bag leads Sarah to flashback, on the following page, on an encounter she had with the Hasidic Jewish community in Brooklyn when she was in her early twenties (14). She writes about graduating from art school and looking for a place to live in the “bohemian Williamsburg neighborhood.” But she takes a wrong turn and ends up on the “ultra-Orthodox” side of town, rather than the “ultra-hip” side. When a Hasidic man asks her to come help him turn on his lights because of the Sabbath, Sarah

agrees to do so and lauds herself for being a “good Samaritan.”¹³³ Unexpectedly, however, he attempts to put his hands down her shirt when they are alone in the stairwell. Sarah recalls this incident – her violation by a man who ostensibly is not “supposed to touch women” – when she comes across the Hasidic man at the airport who purposefully avoids contact with her. As her cousin tells her about “the rift between the Hasidic and secular Jews in Israel,” she explains in a narrative box, “I can’t help but feel satisfied as my own prejudices are validated” (14). Sarah here identifies herself with secular Jews in Israel, if only in opposition to religious Jews. In that sense, her impression of being a foreigner in Israel is immediately challenged, as she finds herself joined by others who share in her bias against a particular brand of Jewish identity. Her own prejudice against Jews therefore ironically ties her to other Jews, allowing her to identify with one communal sense of Jewishness as she disidentifies with another.

As in the other texts explored in this project, Sarah’s Jewish identifications are most often pronounced when she counter-identifies with specific beliefs and behaviors about what it means to identify as Jewish (like *The Bunch* refusing to get a nose job). Her interactions throughout *Israel* lead her to recognize how such seemingly unwavering identifications and disidentifications break down as she meets and relates to people as individuals, instead of types. Although, in this case, Sarah’s view of the Hasidic man as stereotype remains unchallenged, as her journey continues she is forced to confront many of her other misperceptions, including especially how she regards her own Jewish identities and, in turn, how she considers the situation in Israel.

¹³³ The Sabbath, or Shabbat, is the Jewish day of rest and, as such, a range of activities that are considered “work” are prohibited, including cooking and lighting a fire (or turning a light switch). An observant Jew might ask someone who he presumes or knows to be non-observant or not Jewish to turn on his light for him on the Sabbath if he has forgotten to leave it on.

II. “I still don’t really know what that point of view is yet”

Sarah’s early identification with secular Jews, framed in opposition to her encounters with religious ones, unites her with a larger community of Jews. However, many of her other identifications throughout the book – as a woman, an artist, a journalist, a skeptic of Israeli policies and politics, and the girlfriend of a non-Jew – often lead her to feel disconnected from this same transnational secular community, as though these other characteristics preclude her from ever fully identifying with *any* communal sense of Jewishness. From the beginning of her trip, for example, Sarah is wary of identifying with others in her Birthright group, and she consistently pictures herself as separate or isolated from them.¹³⁴ In an early set of images on the tour bus, she draws herself first leaning over her seat with a hopeful look on her face as the narrative box above her head somewhat humorously reads, “I’m sure you are all interesting and wonderful people!” (Figure 58). In the following panel, her head slumps and her eyebrows furrow as she wordlessly disbelieves her own statement. As this second, silent panel suggests, Sarah is incapable of fully elucidating her sense of alienation from the rest of the group, although



Figure 58. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 16.

¹³⁴ Although at times she identifies with her friend, Melissa, whom she invited on the trip, she generally singles herself out as different from everyone else in the group, including Melissa.

it often seems related to her assumption that they are not as politically progressive as she is, and especially that they are not as readily distrustful of Israel and its politics. Her sense of being an outsider thus emerges at disparate moments that are uncharacteristically *not* followed by self-analysis about these encounters, but are accented, instead, by silence and visible isolation. In another instance, after watching a government film about the Golan Heights and consequently declaring the trip “a regional propaganda tour,” Sarah is interrupted by an unnamed member of the group, who asks, “You guys thought it was propaganda?” (40). This woman continues the discussion with others watching and participating, while Sarah, looking on angrily, declares, “It wasn’t balanced at all!” Instead of engaging in the discussion that now involves numerous Birthright participants, the conversation that Sarah started ends with her wordlessly observing and eventually even turning her head away as the conversation continues (Figure 59). Over the remainder of the page, she breaks from the group and approaches one of the tour guides to discuss the film, thereby further distancing herself from everyone else. In these and similar incidents throughout the narrative, she portrays herself as feeling so different, or “special,” from the rest of the tour group participants that she cannot even potentially imagine that they might be able to enlighten her in her quest for the “truth.” This self-enforced isolation is, at least initially,



Figure 59. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 41.

generally portrayed in a positive light – she alone, it seems, is willing to face “the situation.” In this particular way, Sarah is differentiated, at least in the first half of the book, from the other alter-egos described in these graphic memoirs of Jewish identity – including The Bunch, Vanessa, Melissa, and Lauren – who offer primarily disparaging, if comedic, self-portrayals.

Like all of the other personas explored, however, Sarah’s identifications and disidentifications are premised primarily in her sense of being an outsider. Her singular status from the rest of the group emerges most strikingly through images that picture her by herself, as though she were travelling around the country free of anyone else’s guidance. This isolation can be read as self-imposed: she sets herself apart from the group in order to decide for herself how she feels about Israel, to avoid the biases of others. As the bus travels to the Sea of Galilee, she is drawn on her own in numerous panels, looking out at the Israeli landscape. In a sequence of such self-portraits, the only panel that features the whole group on the bus still emphasizes her difference, as she alone is awake and looking out the window (Figure 60). The narrative box pictured here reads, “Inside the bus are forty tired people who are much too exhausted to ask any more questions.” Although this sentence presumably includes her as part of the group, the image conversely singles her out as the lone member who, despite her exhaustion, is trying to witness



Figure 60. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 48.

firsthand all she can. The chapter ends with Sarah waking up early at their rest stop near the Sea of Galilee and venturing outside as soon as the first light hits. The final panel pictures her silently looking out at a colorful landscape (Figure 61). In depicting Sarah alone with the land, this image mirrors most of the panels that feature her by herself throughout the text. In fact, many of the concluding panels of the chapters throughout the book portray her on her own, as though to emphasize that this particular narrative of Israel belongs to her alone. These self-portraits suggest that the absence of others is at least partially what enables her to experience the region – as symbolized by the land – directly, or without anyone else’s ideological filters hindering her own vision. Setting herself apart is her way of striving to “understand” Israel, to see the land without anyone or anything else getting in the way.

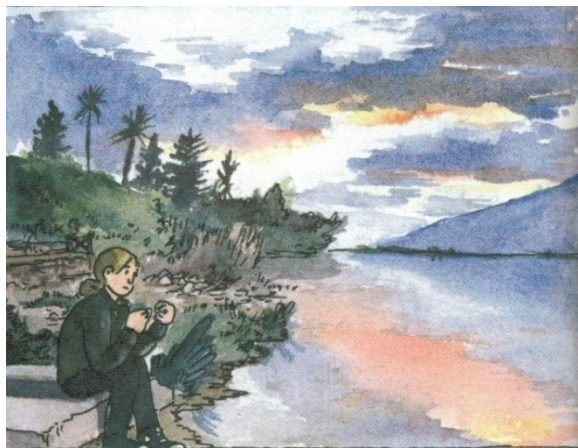


Figure 61. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 54.

Sarah’s mainly self-imposed sense of being disengaged from others extends from those on her trip to those who are Birthright alumni and have visited the country in the past. In this way, like her general reflections of Israel, her initial disidentifications are based in conflated senses of time and space. On the final page of the opening chapter, she describes having read “as many firsthand accounts of the Birthright experience as possible” (29). In many of these accounts, she writes, the alumni described “a real connection” to Israel, and “a few even said

they felt like they were ‘finally home.’” Sarah directly contradicts this narrative of Israel as “home” for all Jews when she provides her own analogy for her journey so far. She writes, “To me, it’s more like spotting a celebrity in a crowded street. / Someone whose crazy life has been splashed all over the tabloid pages for years. / And there they are... / ...Right in front of you.” Underneath the boxes conveying this Israel-as-home narrative, and her own tabloid counter-narrative, she pictures herself as a tourist, holding a camera and taking pictures (Figure 62). An Israeli gas station is visible behind her, and the panels shift from this depiction to one of various unnamed people – many or all, presumably, part of her tour group – walking into the station, as well as standing and smoking in the area that surrounds it. The last two panels on the page return to capture Sarah, and this time she is holding a camera with the Israeli landscape, as well as an Israeli flag, drawn behind her. The final image renders her once again on her own: separated from the group that is proximately right beside her, she looks out over the landscape, and her



Figure 62. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 29.

camera is no longer visible. The words “right in front of you,” drawn in a narrative box in this final panel, emphasize Sarah’s desire to relate to Israel not by way of a metaphorized or imaginary association, but, rather, through a direct engagement with the land as surface, not symbol. As the page reflects, Sarah has to put down her camera – to dislocate herself from her touristic vantage point – in order to dislodge herself from the imaginary relationship with Israel that she recognizes in others, and that she consequently tries to distance herself from by continually setting herself apart from those others.

Despite this desire to isolate herself, however, Sarah eventually recognizes that to achieve such objectivity is impossible, and that considering the points of view of those around her is a necessary precondition for approaching a more balanced understanding of the world around her. It is not enough, in other words, for her to avoid the biases of others; she must explore them, as well as consider them in relation to her own biases. In this way, *Israel* confronts one of the paradoxes about travel narratives in general, and especially travel narratives in relation to journalistic projects. Experiences of travel oblige individuals to face themselves outside of the very communities, institutions, and environments that generally allow them to construct somewhat consistent notions of identities. The individual at “home” does not have the same need to question herself, as well as her connections to others, as these are taken for granted in everyday life, where they remain generally uninterrupted. Once an individual has left “home,” however, these self-identifications are unmoored. Because an individual’s identities are based in her relationships to others, the comfort of these identities disappears once she has left the familiarity of daily life or once she is forced to confront other kinds of transitions (like the shift from childhood to adulthood, which is the subject of Chapter Three). In leaving home, then, the individual is in the best position to examine her own subjectivity, even as the travelling journalist

is confronted with the task of observing others. *Israel* is a book that examines how these two undertakings inevitably overlap, even though they seem to demand conflicting ambitions. As the text reflects, in order to delve into how the self has been constructed, it is necessary to investigate that self in relation to others. And in order to record the lives of others, one must recognize the role that individual subjectivity always plays in such chronicling.

In many ways, then, *Israel* is a work that is focused on the journalist's point of view as malleable, fragmented, and biased from the very outset of the documentary project. In an interview about the book, Glidden discussed how, particularly through her manipulation of the comics form, she tried to make visible what many journalists, in their attempt to remain "objective," often hide about themselves. As she explains, "I had to put mine [my biases] out there for everyone to see... I wanted to show that as a human being, there's more to learning about a complex political situation than just analyzing facts. There are neuroses, prejudices and emotions involved" ("An Interview with Sarah Glidden"). These subjective and internal projections are visualized in various ways throughout the book. Early on, for example, Sarah portrays a courtroom that she imagines in her head, and the case that is under review is called "Birthright is trying to brainwash me vs. Birthright is actually pretty reasonable" (Figure 63).



Figure 63. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 27.

She depicts herself as all of the players in this courtroom: she is judge, prosecutor, defense, and members of the jury. Later in the book, about halfway through the trip, Sarah returns to this imaginary courtroom and it is empty (Figure 64). What Sarah comes to realize over the course of *Israel* is that it is necessary for her to engage with others – prejudices and all – in order to fully confront her own biases. Identifications and disidentifications are not figured in isolation; instead, they are reactions to real or imagined communities and the subjectivities that they shape.

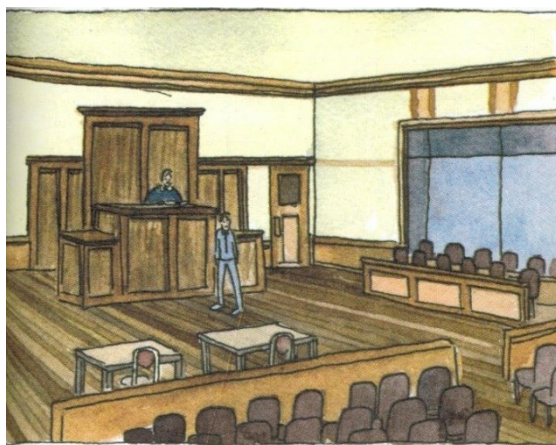


Figure 64. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 107.

This awareness is exemplified halfway through the book, when Sarah is forced to interact with other members of her Birthright group and explore the relational contours of her Jewish identity. She realizes then that her lack of communication with others, stemming from her desire to fully disidentify with a conception of Jewishness that feels foreign to her, has hindered her ability to approach a full understanding of the complexity of her identity and, by extension, her understanding of “the situation.” Sarah’s compulsory interaction with the group occurs roughly a third of the way through the narrative, and it leads to her eventual dis-affiliation (her partial affiliation) with her Jewish identities. She initially dreads the “bonding activity” that is scheduled for Friday evening, a night when the group cannot travel because of the Sabbath. The discussion centers on the individual participants’ Jewish identities, a topic that immediately elicits a groan

from Sarah (66). The members of the group are given a single prompt, “I am a Jew because...” and asked to complete the sentence. Despite her initial antipathy, as the participants begin to talk, revealing diversely ambivalent relationships to their Jewish identities, Sarah becomes attentive, asserting that “the conversation starts to get interesting” (67). In a series of four panels that follows her eventual engagement with others, as well as the end of her unquestioned disidentification (and the beginning of her dis-affiliation) from the group, she pictures herself, in contrast to her earlier self-portrayals, as one who belongs (Figure 65). Although there are a total of six panels that make up this page, these four can be read independently because of the ways that they visually mirror one another, each featuring a single main speaker as the focal point of the image. In the first two panels, Sarah depicts herself listening intently as others around her tell their stories, as though she is finally open to the possibility that other voices can influence her. The Birthright members talking in these first two panels proclaim Jewish identities that are complicated, even though they also echo one another. One tells the group that she was “raised Christian in Ukraine” but eventually converted. Another describes herself as having a mother who converted and growing up in Arkansas, where “we were the only Jews around.” These women relay unique backgrounds – they come from, and grow up in, very different communities – but they share important similarities too: a history of conversion and a sense of feeling at “home” as a Jew. The third panel shows Sarah telling her own narrative of her Jewish identities, which is also different from the ones that come before her. Having been raised in a self-identified Jewish family, Sarah takes her Jewishness for granted or, as she puts it, primarily understands it as “inherited.” In the final panel, a drawing of another participant mirrors Sarah’s own image, and his story similarly involves a Jewish identity that has been passed on to him by his family.



Figure 65. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 67.

Despite the resemblance of their backgrounds, however, Sarah and this young man also disclose important differences. The man mentions that he only “started getting to know non-Jews” after he left for college, whereas early on in the book Sarah tells the reader that Melissa is one of her only Jewish friends. In addition, unlike the man, Sarah limits her identification as a Jew, emphasizing the fact that her family is culturally Jewish rather than religious, and that she is interested in only “some” aspects of that cultural Jewishness, including “learning, eating and arguing” (67). These four depictions of Jewish identities incorporate visual and verbal details that differentiate them one from the other, reflecting the plurality of the subjects involved, even as these minutias bind the stories to one another, revealing also the similarities of the individuals pictured. In the first panel, Sarah is the only listener visible, whereas various group members surround the speaker in the second panel. In the third and fourth panels, Sarah and her male counterpart face one another, but the scales and shapes of their faces differ. Sarah’s face is

rounder than the man's oval-shaped face, and her hand is pictured in her storytelling panel, whereas his is not visible in the following panel. Even the backgrounds of the images are shaded in slightly different tints of yellow. These minor differences, which accent what otherwise would be somewhat seamless visual parallels, convey the senses of sameness within difference, or what José Esteban Muñoz terms "*identities-in-difference*," that emerge from the shared stories of these Birthright participants.¹³⁵ Each individual reveals a particular history of identifying as Jewish, and each is affirmed, in her participation as part of the group, in her own version of this identification. In the end, in hearing the various ways that other people both do and do not affiliate as Jews, Sarah finally feels comfortable considering herself part of the group, if only because the dissimilarities between individual members who all consider themselves "Jewish" are so prominent. At this moment in the text, she figures her Jewish identity in relational terms, and consequently recognizes that such an interweaving does not invalidate her own subjectivity, but rather enriches it. Her story becomes one of many deeply personal and individualized narratives of Jewishness.

This group activity compels Sarah to engage more directly with questions about her Jewish identities, a pursuit that leads her to recognize that her notions of what it means to identify (or not identify) as Jewish inevitably affect her views about Israel. Soon after the group discussion, she wonders "how many other people on this trip I've completely misjudged" (71). By facing her presumptions about others, Sarah is finally forced to reexamine her entire misdirected approach to her Israel mission. Instead of a purportedly objective search for the "truth," she must inevitably recognize her own preconceptions about Israel as deeply rooted in the way that she relates – or, more aptly, does not relate – to her own Jewish identities. As the

¹³⁵ See Muñoz's introduction to *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), and especially pps. 5-8.

chapter ends, she finds herself discussing politics with Nadan, one of the Israeli tour guides. For the first time in the book, she openly explores how her Jewish identities and her political beliefs in relation to Israel intersect. In two panels, she relays the “confusing” contradiction that she has suppressed until now, having chosen thus far to frame “the situation” as a set of events peripheral to her personal history. Here, she finally makes the connection:

I’m Jewish so that means I’m supposed to support Israel no matter what, right?

But according to a lot of people, any support for the Palestinians means that you don’t support Israel.

At the same time, when it comes to politics, I’m left-wing and progressive. And if you’re progressive, you’re supposed to be anti-Israel... Any sympathy with Israel means that you don’t support the Palestinians. So see? I’m stuck! (Figure 66)

With this monologue, Sarah delineates her political and cultural identities in opposition to one another. The way that she emphasizes her political identity over the course of the text, and downplays her Jewish one, consequently can be understood as her effort to stifle that contradiction.



Figure 66. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 77.

In their introduction to *Wrestling with Zion* (2003), Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon pinpoint the reasons that such constructed oppositions persevere. As they write, “a dangerous illusion persists that the Jewish-American community speaks with a single voice...” (8). In this passage, Sarah acknowledges her sense that her desire to criticize Israel is antithetical to the way that she is “supposed” to think and behave as a Jew. As such, she suppresses her Jewish identifications and is made uncomfortable by them when they are brought up by others (as in her interaction with El-Al security). It is paradoxically her recognition of this seemingly impossible positioning that compels her to begin to accept and, consequently, explore her Jewish identities, and to relate the way these identities affect how she has come to view Israel. Kushner and Solomon implore others to examine these very questions that *Israel* brings to the forefront, questions which, they argue, “increasingly – and dangerously – go unexamined.” These include: “What is at the heart of the connection between Israel and American Jews? Why should we have a connection (or not)? What is Israel’s role in shaping Jewish-American identities?” Glidden’s narrative does not take any such associations for granted. If anything, up until this moment in the text, Sarah attempts to counter the construction of the Jew as inevitably affiliated with Israel. Yet, her interactions with other self-identified Jews who come from disparate backgrounds drive her to confront the power of her own assumptions about what it means to identify as Jewish. She begins to question why she feels compelled to define herself primarily in terms of her opposition to Israel, without recourse to her Jewish identities, as though a person could not self-identify as Jewish and simultaneously question Israeli policies, or even the existence of Israel. In the end, the narrative performs the ways that certain prejudices about identity are transformed and challenged through the experience of a North American Jew encountering Israel firsthand. While a connection exists between Sarah’s North American Jewish identities and her views about

Israel, it is not inevitable, and it necessitates continual investigation and self-reflection. As these two panels, set side by side, demonstrate, such self-analysis often unmask the contradictions and complications that compel the individual to lead a kind of doubled existence. Sarah's face and upper torso, in both of these images, are pictured similarly but for the way they are angled. Her configuration on the page provides a visual analogy for how competing narratives of the self can be housed within the same body. What Sarah comes to recognize is that both of these versions of her self can represent "truth."

Throughout the remainder of the book, instead of continuing to cling to a notion of herself as Jewish outsider, Sarah subsequently claims her Jewish identities by toying with the various ways she disidentifies but ultimately identifies with her Jewish self, her dis-affiliations. Her explorations are often reflected in the ways she portrays herself in relation to the people and places that she has travelled to observe and "understand." In certain instances, she goes so far as to try on the possibility of Israel as Jewish homeland, a configuration that she directly rejects early on in the narrative when she compares her visit to Israel to spotting a celebrity on the street. In her chapter on Tel Aviv, for example, describing her walk through a crowd of people, she writes that she unexpectedly senses that "something strange [is] missing" (82). Comparing this trip to Israel with other journeys that she has taken around the world, Sarah asserts that here she feels like "I could easily be one of these people" (83). In a series of images, she pictures herself as a traveler in various other countries (Figure 67). In Paris, she explains, she stands out because of her "complete lack of sophistication." In Guangzhou, China, and Övörkhongai, Mongolia, in contrast, Sarah explains that she cannot possibly fit in because of her bodily differences.

This consideration of Israel as Sarah's "natural" homeland in contrast to these other foreign communities is tenuously laid out. What, for instance, does it mean to "lack

sophistication,” and why does she stand out in Paris and not on the streets of Tel Aviv? What about Israelis who do not necessarily look like her, who, for instance, are not white? Sarah’s overly-simplistic identification with Israel and Israelis collapses readily when, at the end of the



Figure 67. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 83.

page, a man asks her, in Hebrew, what time the parade will start. At that point, she is forced to admit that she cannot easily or automatically belong, even if she wants to. In a single scene, then, Sarah explores, and subsequently deconstructs, the possibility of Israel as homeland through relational configurations that she maps on the page. The comics medium allows her to play with the ways that she can superficially imagine herself as an Israeli insider, even though such external identifications – based primarily in her drawn body – ultimately collapse, in this case due to a linguistic barrier.

Over the course of the remainder of the book, as in this scene, Sarah’s relationship to Israel remains unresolved as she continues to experiment with various ways of relating to Israeli life and politics. Later in the Tel Aviv chapter, she hears a speech detailing the history of Israel’s declaration of itself as a state in 1948. The speech ends with the speaker telling the group, “you are here because the state of Israel belongs to the whole Jewish world” (99). Sarah finds herself accepting these words and consequently undergoing an emotional upheaval. “Are *these* our

soldiers?” she wonders soon after, as she passes six young people dressed in uniform waiting, unarmed, by the side of the road, and exclaims to herself, “My God, they’re so *young*” (Figure 68). By claiming these soldiers as “our” soldiers, Sarah privileges Israel as her homeland once

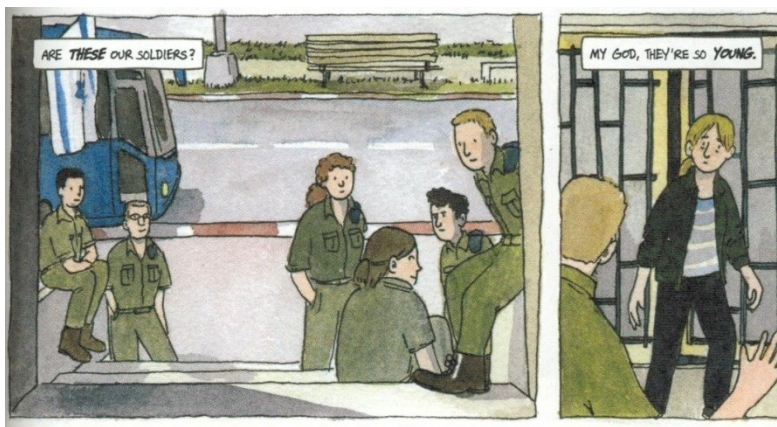


Figure 68. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 99.

again, while she visualizes herself in ways that both engage and distance her from this assessment. In the first panel, she draws the soldiers, “our” soldiers, without her own presence in the image. In the second panel, she introduces her own body as part of the illustration, but this time her words separate her from the Israelis by evoking the age differential between them. Her ability to maneuver herself on the page, as one who simultaneously observes and interacts, or as one who both does and does not belong, is what allows Sarah to examine and challenge, from various angles, the concept of Israel as Jewish homeland. In experimenting with different ways of relating to and dissociating from the country and its citizens, Sarah confronts the identifications that she has, until now, unquestioningly rejected.

Sarah’s persistent examination of her relationship to Israel, even in the face of admonitions from others (as well as from the cynical parts of herself), connects her with the personas represented in the works of other Jewish comics artists, who seek to rebel against authoritative voices that attempt to fix or determine the limits and boundaries of their individual

Jewish identifications or the spaces in which their Jewish identities are expected to be housed. As the narrative progresses, her questions remain explored but unanswered. The common refrain that surfaces as she continues to persistently ask others questions about Israel and its politics is that the issue is “complicated.” “We don’t *have* to agree about this,” Nadan, the Israeli tour guide, finally tells her after another one of their conversations in which they disagree about politics (Figure 69). In response to his assertion, Sarah recognizes that she, too, has trouble responding to the very questions that she came to Israel to answer. Her narrative box conveys this acknowledgement: “I still don’t really know what [my] point of view is yet, and [] maybe I never will,” she thinks.



Figure 69. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 202.

This conversation, and the realization that it engenders, reinforces Sarah’s position as an outsider, both among North American progressive liberals and among the group of Jews that surround her. Instead of locating herself on any “side” of the narrative, she stubbornly refuses to assign herself a simple outlook, conjuring for herself, instead, a liminal or dis-affiliatory stance. Such an awareness of her ambivalence could be read as a renunciation of her plan to find the “truth,” a way of withdrawing from a difficult state of affairs by refusing to take sides. As

Kushner and Solomon point out, one of the gravest “temptations” of those looking at the Middle East from far away is that they will take the easy way out. This often happens, they explain, in two ways: either they leave the challenge of “rigorous analysis, studied, disciplined comprehension, and finally policy itself to the experts, the diplomats, the soldiers, and the leadership of the nations and would-be nations involved” or they “fall back on instinct, on tribal loyalties of various kinds – ethnic, religious, ideological” (1). *Israel* is a book about resisting such tribal loyalties, including even the ones, like Sarah’s progressive politics, that are formed in the pursuit of justice and subsequently do not always get questioned. Throughout the text, Sarah comes to realize that these very political affiliations exert on her just as much pressure to conform as her “inherited” ones. She experiments with various identifications and disidentifications over the course of the book by visualizing them on the page and recognizing, inevitably, that no single image (or narrative) can tell the whole story, that her identities rest, instead, in spaces between.

Sarah’s refusal to take a clear position at the end of the text could also be read as a way of giving in to the first of the temptations outlined by Kushner and Solomon – the desire to let others deal with “overwhelming” complications instead of facing them. The book, however, does not end with this conversation, in which Sarah refuses to offer a particular point of view. Instead, on the following three pages of the text, Sarah records her last night in Israel, her departure, and her arrival in Istanbul, a country where she has decided to stop over on her way home. In two full pages, we witness Sarah undergoing this journey away from Israel without a single word written into any of the panels. These pages reinforce the silence that Sarah has chosen, in refusing to take sides. But on the final page of the book, she finally breaks that silence. Having arrived at a youth hostel in Istanbul, she finds a group of young people gathered in a communal space, and

they invite her to tea. Surrounded by strangers, they begin to ask her questions: “Where are you coming from?” “Isn’t it kind of a war zone?” Sarah, a cup of tea in her hands, begins to answer their questions: “No, no... It’s not like that at all” (206).

In the final three panels of the book, as one of the strangers surrounding her asks her, from off the page, “What’s the deal with that place, anyway?” Sarah pictures herself in three consecutive panels (Figure 70). In the first, she is sipping her tea comfortably, presumably observing the person who is asking the question. In the second, her hand at her mouth, she looks confounded, as though she is unsure where to begin. This second panel represents her continued ambivalence about certain aspects of the situation, her refusal to take sides. The final panel, however, presents the beginning of Sarah’s movement beyond this potentially paralyzing ambivalence. Although she still looks somewhat nonplussed, her hands are positioned as though she is ready to launch into a response and her thought bubble echoes that gesture, as she begins, “Well --.” The concluding panel of the book reflects Sarah’s refusal to stop thinking or discussing “the situation,” even in light of the many uncertainties, contradictions, and complications that she faces in trying to understand it. The end of her journey about Israel is portrayed, instead, as a



Figure 70. Sarah Glidden, *Israel* (New York: DC Comics, 2010), 206.

mere starting point of her exploration of the conflict, the beginning of conversations with others to be continued. *Israel* consequently concludes with a much less assured, and reassuring, Sarah than the one who opens the book. She closes her narrative in the midst of searching for the right words to tell a story that has been translated from an idea, assembled at a distance, to a reality embedded in countless, conflicting realities and histories.

III. “I am still Miriam Libicki”

Towards the end of *Israel*, when Sarah learns that she will not visit the West Bank after her Birthright tour, as planned, she admits to her part in leaving Israel having witnessed only one side of the story. Her decision not to go into Ramallah is based in her fear of travelling without a guide, a move that she is told is too dangerous for her, as a Jew and a woman. “What can I say? I’m a big hypocrite, talking about how people need to move past their prejudices and fears but then I can’t take a fifteen minute taxi trip without someone holding my hand” (200). Here, Sarah recognizes how her choices have affected her outlook – from her initial decision to go on Birthright to the choice not to take a taxi into the West Bank once it is over. Yet, instead of reflecting how such narratives merely distort the ways that history and the Other are represented, *Israel* is a testament to the relevance of one-sided narratives as parts of a larger conversation. The book, which Glidden has described as “more memoir than journalism” (Dueben), is about the transformation of Sarah’s subjectivity in the context of a small and distorted glimpse of Israel’s history, geography, and culture. Sarah shows an awareness of the significance of her missed opportunity to visit the Palestinian territories, which are discussed often throughout the book, though always from a distance. Instead of silencing her narrative in light of such flagrant omissions, she calls the reader’s attention to them, thereby highlighting her travel experience as

one of many possible journeys and pointing to the importance of continued research, dialogue, and testimony from a variety of perspectives.

In an interview about her comics series *Jobnik!*, Miriam Libicki similarly suggests that her works encompass a very limited point of view. She recalls hearing Joe Sacco discuss this aspect of his comics journalism. As she describes it,

he said one of the best things about being a comic artist and not a reporter is that he didn't have the specter of "balance" hanging over his work. He felt it was important to get in with one group of people, and tell their story, and tell what you see, as best as possible. I found that inspiring, because I have felt guilty that my comics don't try to go beyond my own experience. (244)

This conspicuous awareness of the complexities of documenting what one sees distinguishes autobiographical comics in general from autobiographies composed in prose. As a prime example, the body of a cartoonist, drawn repeatedly in autobiographical comics, emerges quite clearly as a depiction filtered through that particular artist's point of view. The drawn body alters, however slightly, with each rendering. This visible subjectivity extends to all that is drawn "from life." As Joe Sacco writes in his preface to *Journalism*, "[d]rawings are interpretive even when they are slavish renditions of photographs, which are generally perceived to capture a real moment literally. But there is nothing *literal* about a drawing" (xi). The journalistic genre's claims to objectivity and factuality, however qualified and cosmetic those claims, are not as easily proffered in comics journalism as they are in prose. In other words, comics make more blatant and visible the subjectivity that inevitably drives every journalistic impulse and colors its subsequent rendering.

The authors of *Israel* and *Jobnik!* both utilize journalistic tactics in their narratives in order to advance their stories. Glidden uses research and persistent interrogation in order to approach an understanding of the people and places that she visits. The purpose of her voyage is to acquire information. Eventually, through the creation of the memoir, which incorporates both material and imaginary ways of knowing, she works to impart this information to others. Libicki's series, which tracks her time in the Israeli army, is similarly invested in recording what is unfamiliar to her. But her work begins and ends with a recognition that this story is primarily about her own life, rather than an undertaking based in a desire to learn about others. In this way, *Jobnik!* is more readily aligned with memoir than with journalism. In her graphic essay on Jewish autobiographical comics, Libicki admits as much, using the term "gonzo literary comics" to talk about her work.¹³⁶ As she explains, "The word *gonzo* (coined about late journalist Hunter S. Thompson in the 1960s, etc.) refers to a creation in which the identity and presence of the creator is inextricably involved, often extending as far as risking the life, limb, or reputation of said creator..." (245).¹³⁷ By stressing her own presence in comics that focus on her experiences in Israel over and above the ones of those that she meets, Libicki distances herself from claiming the journalistic project that she alludes to in the comparison of her own work with Sacco's in the above-mentioned interview. Most importantly, unlike Sacco's texts, which are heavily invested in capturing the voices and stories of others, and specifically "those who seldom get a hearing" (Sacco xiv), Libicki's and Glidden's narratives do not seek out those without a voice. Instead, their works aim to describe whatever people and stories their personas encounter on their journeys, all in the service of tracing the ways that their self-perceptions change over time. Even

¹³⁶ The essay, "Jewish Memoir Goes Pow! Zap! Oy!" was originally created for and published in the edited anthology, *The Jewish Graphic Novel* (2008).

¹³⁷ In 2012, *Gonzo: A graphic biography of Hunter S. Thompson* by Will Bingley and Anthony Hope-Smith was published.

if, for example, Sarah claims that her trip to Israel is an attempt to discover the “truth” about Israel, her narrative, as it plays out, is equally, if not more, interested in discovering how this journey alters her self-identifications.

Libicki’s work is similarly focused on the way that Miriam discerns her own identity over the course of the narrative. Unlike *Israel*, however, in *Jobnik!* Miriam begins the narrative with a recognition that she is already a subject in limbo and that, in a sense, she always has been.¹³⁸ This contrasts with Sarah, who only recognizes the contradictory bases of her identities in the middle of her book. *Jobnik!* instead records Miriam’s sense of displacement as it unravels over the course of the narrative, as well as its origins in her earlier life. The nine issues published so far thus recount Miriam’s time in the army in the “present,” but they also offer diversions from the main story that reference the past.

The prelude to the comics series is composed as a journal, reinforcing the autobiographical nature of the project. With the date, “Monday 11 September 2000,” neatly scrawled at the top, the images on this opening page situate Miriam at rest in various beds, as though to convey her emotional and physical displacement from the narrative’s very opening (Figure 71).¹³⁹ Like most of the *Jobnik!* series, the images are drawn in pencil. This format suggests intimacy and simplicity – as though the reader is encountering a person’s private sketchbook, not intended to be shown to an audience. However, the exhaustive detail apparent in the penciling, and the unique architecture of each page, also convey the careful construction that has gone into the composition of the work. On the bottom of this prelude page, snapshots depicting Miriam engaged in sexual acts are arranged, scattered across a dark surface. The

¹³⁸ “Miriam” refers to the persona of *Jobnik!*, whereas “Libicki” or “Miriam Libicki” refers to the author of the text.

¹³⁹ While nine issues of *Jobnik!* have been published so far, the first six, as well as this prelude, a glossary of terms, and author’s notes, have been collected in a single book. Any page references included hereafter for *Jobnik!* will refer to that collected book, unless otherwise indicated.

drawings of photographs included here thus represent a similar paradox: the intimacy illustrated in the photographs makes looking at them feel like a violation, as though the reader has “caught” Miriam in the midst of these private acts. However, because the images are drawn as photographs, with dates carefully documented at the bottom of each drawn Polaroid, there is also the possibility that these confessions were calculated from the start, intended to be shared with others.

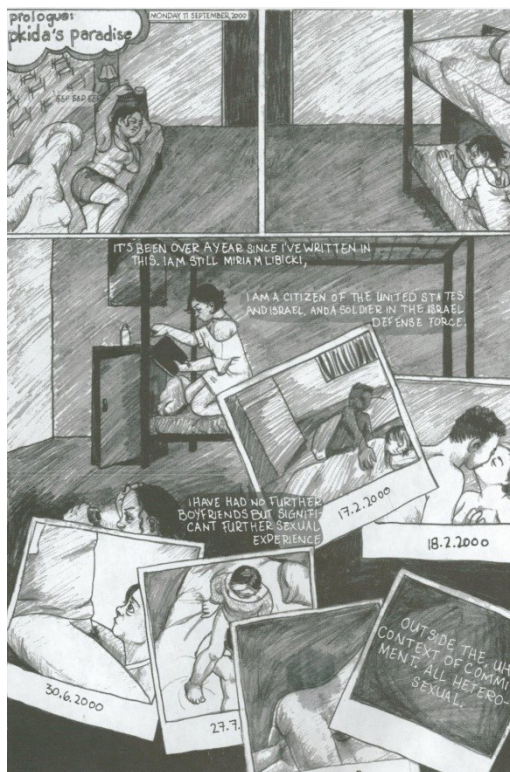


Figure 71. Miriam Libicki, *Jobnik!* (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2008), 4.

As with *Israel*, a muddled sense of time and space carries through *Jobnik!*, reflecting in this case how the daily routines of army life – including especially its inevitable proximity to violence – have impaired the persona’s ability to “find” herself. Indeed, even though a date is so evidently attributed to the opening of the narrative, various other dates, written onto the drawn photographs, preempt any linear unfolding of the storyline and confuse the way time and space get portrayed. The narrator here is pictured in beds and rooms that all look somewhat different –

but there is also the potential that these are three varying perspectives of the same space. Additionally, the opening lines of the prelude complicate the timeframe of the narrative by beginning in the middle of the storyline. “It’s been over a year since I’ve written in this,” the first line reads. “I am still Miriam Libicki, I am a citizen of the United States and Israel, and a soldier in the Israel Defense Force” (4). These words contextualize the comics that make up *Jobnik!*, and they anticipate a narrative that will trace Miriam’s subjectivity in light of these three chief markers of her identity: her name (and, by extension, the self that she attempts to portray on the page), her nationalities, and her decision to enlist in the Israeli military. By including the adverb “still” in this introductory sentence, Miriam reveals how, at the moment that she is writing in her journal, her identity is already open to potential disruptions and transformations. The story becomes one of paradoxically attempting to track her own dislocations.

From its opening, the comic series therefore privileges Miriam’s search for identity over and above any other potential journeys to be imparted over the course of the narrative. Even if the book provides a glimpse at what is generally inaccessible territory – that is, the day to day life of an Israeli soldier – it is always clearly through the eyes of a somewhat naïve young woman as she comes of age. The preface to the book nevertheless anticipates readings of the narrative as cultural translation by including Hebrew words transliterated into English, as well as the definitions of these words and phrases included at the bottom of the pages. These translations situate Miriam as between-cultures over the course of her time in the army. As a woman who was born and raised in America, but is a dual citizen living in Israel at the time the narrative takes place, she positions herself not as visitor or even tourist. Instead, she presents herself as someone embedded in Israeli life and culture, even if she is unable to ever fully assimilate.

Miriam's identity is premised in a desire to connect with others. Her sense of herself as outsider is consequently based in her failure to establish meaningful relationships, especially with the men around her. This alienated identification contrasts with a self-proclaimed allegiance to Israel, a configuration based in a concept of Israel as metaphorical homeland to all Jews. For example, in depicting her recollection of a significant commemoration for Israelis, the anniversary of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's death in 1995, she narrates: "I don't belong in Israel as much as I belong to Israel. Every year on [R]abin's yahrzeit I know it's not even a choice" (Figure 72).¹⁴⁰ This narrative of Israel as home is written into an image in which she draws herself standing in uniform, at attention, among other Israeli soldiers. Her disconnection from others is therefore ironically located in the space of her ultimate connection. In addition, she portrays her affiliation with Israel as inextricably tied to her own mother's "love" of Rabin: "She was afraid for him, for what he was trying to do" (73). In relating her own narrative of her journey to Israel with that of her mother, Miriam situates herself as tied to the country and its politics through a kind of inheritance. That inheritance is symbolized not only in the uniform that she wears, but also in the images of the land that is her "birthright." At the top left corner of the page, she pictures the Israeli landscape as it pans out, from a line of soldiers on a local Israeli army base to the Israeli state as it is situated in the Middle East and, finally, to Israel as a small dot on the earth drawn as a globe. Through this web of images, Miriam's personal history is illustrated as part of something much larger than herself. She belongs to Israel, in her mind, because she is destined to belong to something greater than herself.

¹⁴⁰ "Yahrzeit," which Miriam defines on the page as a "death anniversary," is the Hebrew word for the commemoration of the death of a loved one (usually in one's immediate family) on the day of the year that he has died. Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing Israeli conservative while at a rally in support of a peace initiative called the Oslo Accords. For more on the Oslo Accords, see Geoffrey R. Watson's *The Oslo Accords: International Law and the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreements* (2000). See also a history of the Oslo Accords written by Israeli journalist David Makovsky, *Making Peace with the PLO: The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord* (1995), as well as Edward Said's *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (2001).



Figure 72. Miriam Libicki, *Jobnik!* (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2008), 73.

This framing of Israel as Miriam’s homeland is complicated, however, by her assessment of herself as not belonging “in” Israel, but belonging “to” Israel. By making a distinction between the two, she recognizes that one’s appointed home is not always the place where one necessarily comes to feel at home. This contradiction reveals the limitations of any such metaphorical connections to place. Miriam’s sense of dislocation and displacement in Israel is related to her individual background, which affects how she experiences Israel in actuality. As a voluntary soldier in what is a recognizably male-dominated environment, she is subject to a series of humiliations that are often based in her interactions with men. From the beginning of her time in the army, for example, she is labeled as an outsider by the male psychologist who interviews her. She depicts this event on the second page of the prologue. The military officer lists her so-called abnormalities: “Overly emotional, disconnected from reality, possessed of anxieties (especially social), unable to form interpersonal bonds, sexually conflicted...” (Figure

73). The page in which Miriam illustrates this diagnosis is split in two. The bottom of the page shows Miriam sitting silently, with her arms folded, as she is asked “Sure you haven’t considered suicide a *little* bit?” and is simultaneously given a diagnosis. The word bubbles that stem from this officer bleed onto the top of the page, which depicts various ink-blot, arranged much like the Polaroid photographs in the opening to the prelude. Miriam is pictured alone in the bottom right corner, drawing on a piece of paper. It is unclear whether she is participating in her evaluation or merely drawing on her own. This self-portrait links Miriam’s abnormal diagnosis, and her isolation more generally, with her artistic personality. Her art potentially offers her the key to independence, to creating her own self-identifications, and it also leads others to mark her as different. Although this sense of agency is never realized in the “present” as it is recorded in the issues of *Jobnik!* that have been published so far, it is always latent, waiting to emerge. This artistic promise is, after all, what eventually allows Miriam to recollect and bravely convey her story on the page.

Because of these mainly gendered classifications, as well as her limited Hebrew speaking skills, Miriam is prevented from being assigned a high rank in the army and is instead given the “extremely unskilled job of secretary of the infirmary” (6). In a sense, it is Miriam’s very desire to volunteer in the army – an action that symbolizes her unquestioning belief in Israel as Jewish homeland – that immediately casts her as outsider. Libicki communicated this paradox in an interview about *Jobnik!* and her time in the army. As she explained, “I...think it was a bit of a catch-22: it’s sane to pretend you’re insane in order to get out of military service, but if you are volunteering for army service, odds are that you are insane” (“A Conversation” 248). As a woman and an American, Miriam is not expected to want to participate in what so many others

around her view as an inescapable duty. Her decision to join the army and her view of this act as compulsory, as part of her destiny, marks her as an outsider.



Figure 73. Miriam Libicki, *Jobnik!* (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2008), 5.

Miriam's daily presence in the army consequently comes to stand for a submissiveness and naiveté that native-born Israeli soldiers, as they are depicted in *Jobnik!*, lack. Early on in the narrative, Miriam's difference from others is visualized on a page that shows her going about one of her jobs. In the image, she is carrying an oversized bag of documents that she has been assigned to burn because the base cannot afford a shredder – a minor detail that nevertheless emphasizes her expendability (Figure 74). In contrast to her trivialized presence, she walks in earnest, her eyes downcast and two arms lugging the heavy bag. A series of small panels pictured behind her reflect various Israeli soldiers conversing lightly with one another. The others pictured in these small, square panels banter with one another, or flirt and tease each other. Miriam, however, looks downcast, serious, and alone as she willingly goes about the work that

nobody else even acknowledges. The distance between Miriam and the other soldiers reveals itself in the unceremonious ways that they go about their lives in the military. For the Israelis, being in the army is an inescapable fact of life. Their identities as soldiers are, by necessity, integrated into their identities as young people going about their daily lives, socializing with one another. For Miriam, who grew up in Ohio, being in the Israeli army is a significant act, as it represents her essential tie to Israel. Like the heavy bag she carries, her presence in the army is a burden she carries, or a sacrifice that she feels she has no choice but to make.



Figure 74. Miriam Libicki, *Jobnik!* (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2008), 16.

Miriam's unquestioning affiliation to Israel and the Israeli army therefore paradoxically distances her from those around her. Her blind faith gets translated by others as a kind of willful obedience. This submissiveness extends not only to the tasks she takes on as a soldier, but also to the ways that she interacts with men, as she is repeatedly portrayed as sexually servile and naive. In addition, the first few issues in the series in particular depict a correlation between Miriam's loss of sexual innocence and her gradual introduction to political violence and terror as a part of daily life. These two areas of army life inevitably intersect and reinforce Miriam's sense of dislocation. In chapter two, for example, Miriam delineates her budding relationship with a fellow soldier, Shahar. This is the first of many confusing relationships with men that she

undergoes while she is in the army. Their initial friendship is slow-moving. In a series of panels, reminiscent of Lauren's movie date in Weinstein's *Girl Stories*, the couple is pictured, somewhat innocently, sharing a bus-ride together (Figure 75). Miriam is often drawn in *Jobnik!* sitting on the bus as she rides to and from her army base. These depictions almost always feature a radio broadcast that transmits current events, and especially stories of violence in and around Israel. In these four panels, however, the radio broadcast is absent. Instead, the images focus on the couple's bodies as they weave through sleep and consciousness and, seemingly unaware, their bodies entwine. In this way, Miriam's budding romantic relationship is portrayed as separate from her awareness of Israeli political life.



Figure 75. Miriam Libicki, *Jobnik!* (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2008), 29.

Nevertheless, several pages later the couple is pictured once again on the bus together. This time, the panel that depicts them is crowded in by words emerging from a news broadcast discussing army policy (Figure 76). Shahr takes this opportunity to propose that he and Miriam get off the bus together before their stop, thereby assuring that they will find themselves



Figure 76. Miriam Libicki, *Jobnik!* (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2008), 31.

alone together. Once off the bus, Shahar tells Miriam, “I really don’t think I can have a girlfriend right now.” Shahar’s declaration confuses Miriam, who cannot differentiate between romance and sexuality and therefore goes along with his sexual advances even after he has declared his intentions. Only several panels later, the two are pictured in a kind of embrace. Shahar gropes Miriam as she looks up, somewhat expressionlessly, at the sky (Figure 77). Miriam’s loss of sexual innocence unravels alongside her slow but steady introduction into the military, and its attendant violence, as an implicit part of daily life. Her isolating configuration in this image,

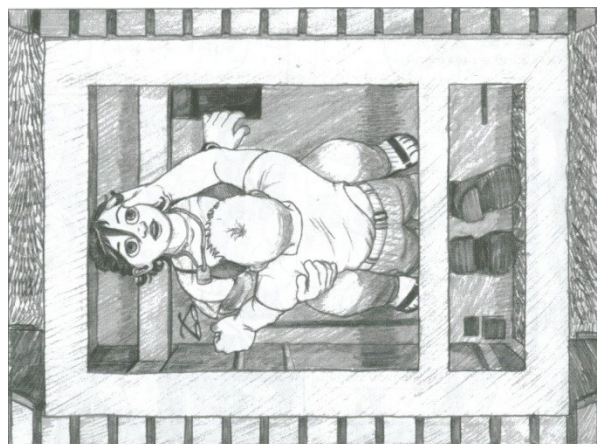


Figure 77. Miriam Libicki, *Jobnik!* (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2008), 33.

which pictures her as disconnected from the event happening to her at the moment and, instead, looking with wide eyes somewhere else, is representative of the many disempowering sexual and political experiences that she undergoes throughout the narrative.

Over time, as in this scene, Miriam experiences a gradual self-detachment in relation to the daily military violence that surrounds her, as well as in regards to her sexual interactions. This disengagement is figured, throughout *Jobnik!*, in images that convey Miriam’s increasing confusion in relation to space. In a powerful image positioned towards the end of this second chapter, Miriam looks up at a sky full of stars and military jets.¹⁴¹ She is illustrated as a tiny and faceless figure at the bottom of the page, as the brightness overwhelms her, and she thinks to herself, “Dear god, where am I?” (Figure 78). For Miriam, the sense of displacement that she



Figure 78. Miriam Libicki, *Jobnik!* (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2008), 45.

¹⁴¹ Libicki has attributed a version of this image, which was the cover of the second issue of *Jobnik!*, to the Zionist illustrator Ephraim Moses Lilien’s image, “The Covenant of Abraham” (1908).

experiences in relation to her peers extends to her global surroundings. Her inability to feel at home amongst other Israeli soldiers is mirrored in her discomfort as witness to daily political life and violence in Israel. The physical disorientation illustrated in this image mirrors the disorientation she feels in relation to her identities, and especially to the narratives of Jewishness that have transported her across the globe.

IV. “I’m mostly an outsider who can’t really understand”

Miriam’s dislocations throughout *Jobnik!* recall Sarah’s confused sense of time and place in *Israel*, as each persona faces the discrepancies between her ideas about Israel against the realities that she faces over the course of her time there. In a sense, *Jobnik!* can be read as a narrative that maps a journey that is counter to that presented in *Israel*. Miriam’s consideration of herself as innately belonging to Israel contrasts strongly with Sarah’s sense, especially at the beginning of *Israel*, that just because she is a Jew, she does not necessarily identify with Israel or feel like she belongs there. Sarah thus opens with a strong disidentification with her identity as a Jew and with what she initially views as a subsequent disidentification with Israel. By the end of her narrative, she recognizes the inaccuracy of her unquestioned connection between the two.

In contrast, Miriam presumes an Israeli affiliation from the beginning of her comic series, an association related to her (and her mother’s) religious beliefs and, consequently, to her Jewish roots. Yet, unlike Sarah, over the course of the narrative Miriam never voices a revelation in regards to the ways that her identifications do not match up in reality. Even though her daily experiences in the army reflect her isolation, she does not overtly question her connection to the country. This lack of self-consciousness about the meaning behind her sense of alienation is, in part, a function of the way that *Jobnik!* is presented. As a quasi-journal, the series tracks the narrator’s subjectivity in the “present” of her time in the army. In contrast, written as a travelogue, *Israel* is presumably a book composed after Sarah returns from her trip and assesses

the meanings behind her journey. In each case, the framework of the text reinforces the way that the persona's subjectivity undergoes and subsequently presents its transformations. For Miriam, the shift in her personal point of view is a slow process that deepens over the course of several years of daily life in the army; for Sarah, it is something that plays out over her ten-day trip, even if it begins and ends outside of that particular time-frame. The structures of both texts, then, however disparate, reinforce the idea that the formation of a person's subjectivity is a life-long process. While that process is often emphasized during the transitional phases in an individual's life, as these phases, like travel, "dramatize[] an engagement between self and world," its effects can never be seamlessly pinned down. In other words, the North American Jew's understanding of her relationship to Israel – as place and as concept – and to her own Jewish identities is a boundless process, rather than a linear unfolding.

Even though the transformation of Miriam's viewpoint is never made explicit in the nine issues of *Jobnik!* that have been published so far, Miriam Libicki has written several visual autobiographical essays that calculatedly explore the very questions that her persona avoids explicitly asking herself throughout the series. Libicki started work on *Jobnik!* as early as 2003. Issue Nine was published in July 2011, and Libicki has stated that the series is ongoing.¹⁴² The autobiographical essays that she has written have overlapped, in time, with her composition of the comic series. In 2005, Libicki published the short visual essay, "Towards a Hot Jew: the Israeli Soldier as Fetish Object;" in 2006, she published the travelogue "Ceasefire," about the second war in Lebanon; in 2008, she published the essay, "Fierce Ease," subtitled "Portraits of Israel;" and, most recently, in 2012, she published "Strangers," an essay about Israel composed "long-distance." In each of these works, Miriam presents herself more certainly in the role of

¹⁴² In the opening page to Issue Nine of the series, Libicki writes, "this issue marks six years i've been working on *Jobnik!* and the halfway point of the series."

journalist, as she seeks to ask, sort out, and visualize the very questions left unanswered in *Jobnik!* Yet, these additional texts also offer continued insights into Libicki's ever-changing subjectivity, a self-consciousness that is perhaps what differentiates these works from *Jobnik!* over and above anything else.

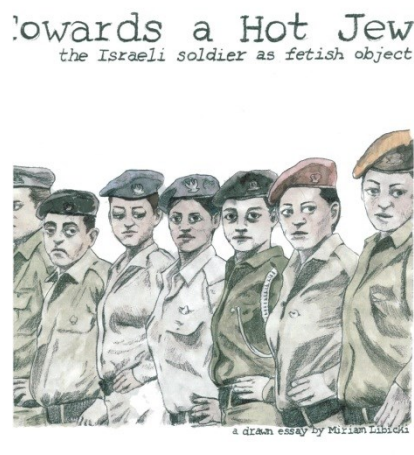


Figure 79. Miriam Libicki, “Towards a Hot Jew” (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2005).

The cover of “Towards a Hot Jew” pictures seven Israeli soldiers standing, in uniform, their bodies and clothing drawn in watercolors against a white, blank background (Figure 79). The people represented are male and female, and they encompass the various ethnicities that, Libicki writes, in part explains why members of the Israeli army are so often fetishized. “Israeli Jews are more multi-ethnic than North American Jews, ingathering the exiles from Europe, North Africa, Ethiopia, the former Soviet Union, India, etc.,” she writes. “Being more varied, they are more exotic and less like the kids you grew up with.”¹⁴³ With these words, Libicki presumes her reader (and fetishizer) to be a North American Jew. The aim of her essay is to convey – as well as deconstruct – the stereotypical visions they have constructed of Israeli soldiers. From its onset, then, this picture essay is an exploration of an idea about Israel and its people that is too often left unarticulated. It investigates the metaphorical depiction of Israel as

¹⁴³ Libicki's essays do not include page numbers.

homeland by considering one of many possible threads that emerges from such an ideational outlook. In this way, the essay takes up one of the many tacit associations between North Americans and Israel that are proposed in *Jobnik!*

On each page of this eleven page essay, beside narrative text conveying Libicki's assessment of the Israeli soldier stereotype or quotes from often academic sources related to the topic, Libicki includes images of Israeli soldiers in various settings.¹⁴⁴ As she has explained, these are mostly drawings of photographs that she took over the course of her time in the army and on "research trips" afterwards ("Miriam Libicki Talks Comics"). In one image, a couple in uniform kisses as the male soldier carries a duffel bag over his arm, an M-16 slung across his other shoulder. In another, a young soldier in uniform listens to music on earphones, while staring at a cell phone clasped in her hand (Figure 80). Several portrayals at the end of the essay picture, finally, Israeli soldiers in relation to Palestinian civilians. These soldiers loom large, as the images emphasize their prowess in relation to the powerless, including a blindfolded man, a child, and several unarmed men and women (Figure 81). All of the visual depictions in "Toward a Hot Jew" lack speech bubbles. The reader must figure out what the actors in each image are thinking or feeling based on the image itself, as well as in the ways that the drawing interacts with the words that surround it.

Libicki's essay is interested in the disparate ways various communities of Jews have come to be represented. She explores stereotypes of North American Jews and how they differ from and influence the ways that Israeli soldiers are perceived by others, including but not limited to North American Jews. By revealing how each group of people constructs the Other or is constructed by the Other, the essay explores the link between Israeli and North American Jews

¹⁴⁴ Libicki cites a variety of sources. These include academics Riv-Ellen Prell and Maurice Berger, cartoonist Joe Sacco, an Israel trip participant, a blog called "Peacepalestine," and an Israeli online message board.

without presuming an automatic or inherited connection. In fact, if anything, in “Towards a Hot Jew,” Libicki responds to the very assumptions that Miriam takes on throughout *Jobnik!* and reveals their bases in historical movements and discussions. The image of the strong or “muscular” Jew, for example, is linked to contemporary figurations of Israeli military aggression and tactical “success.” In contrast, North American Jews are often depicted in American media as emasculated (the men) and passive, though excessive (the women). By reading stereotypes of American and Israeli Jews in dialogue with one another, Libicki reveals the links that should

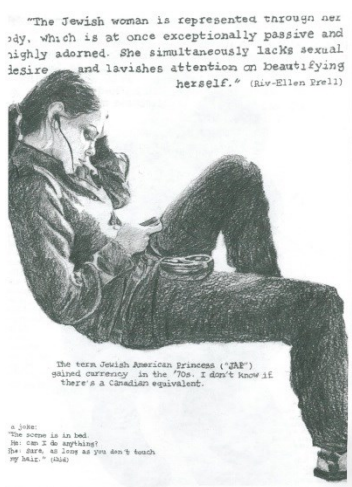


Figure 80. Miriam Libicki, “Towards a Hot Jew” (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2005).



Figure 81. Miriam Libicki, “Towards a Hot Jew” (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2005).

inevitably be made between the two, as well as those that are often, though erroneously, taken for granted. That is, her essay shows how Jewish identifications – both those that emerge from the self and those that stem from others – are never figured in isolation.

The essay ends by invoking Israel as the “ultimate post-colonial/neo-colonial villain.” The images that Libicki includes here reinforce this conception, by picturing Israeli soldiers in positions of power. Yet, because the individual images included on each page are depicted out of context, these final images can also be read as additional constructions. The Israeli soldier as villain, in other words, is an idea, however much it is based in reality. Taken in conjunction with other images, that depiction is not the whole story. Instead, over the course of the essay, Libicki presents various pictures of soldiers that encompass the multi-dimensionality of their lived lives – from likenesses of them as lovers and teenagers to aggressors and perpetrators of violence. The individual illustrations propose these particular portraits as representative. However, read in relation to one another as well as in relation to the accompanying text, the essay argues against a definitive or unilateral rendering of the Israeli soldier. Both the image of an innocent looking woman listening to music and a soldier leading an unarmed and blindfolded man represent the Israeli soldier. Neither tells the whole story, and it is up to the reader to work to understand how seemingly contradictory images coexist. Each rendering of a photograph on the page, however filtered, equally represents *a* reality, not *the* reality.

Published two years later, “Fierce Ease” is an essay, composed in water-colored drawings, in which Libicki continues to scrutinize the relationship between North American Jews and Israelis. This essay, however, is based in the project of recording the voices of Israelis, rather than examining static depictions of what Israelis look like to North Americans. By exploring the mindset of various people who live in Israel, Libicki presents herself, in “Fierce

Ease,” as the Other looking into a world that is now foreign to her. Although her narrative ties the many individual stories of Israelis together, the essay is foremost presented not as a way of “understanding” Israel, but as a way of looking at the actuality of the lives lived there, of listening to individual stories. In this way, Libicki’s “Fierce Ease” resembles many of Sacco’s works. Like Sacco, Libicki here allows the words of the people that she interviews to speak for themselves, although she is clearly the one who frames this narrative of Israeli life and politics.

The people that Libicki interviews are all revealed to have some kind of association with her, and she makes these affiliations clear as she introduces them. For example, her first interview is with Ronnen, “a good friend” from when she was an Israeli citizen. Another interviewee is “Lisa, a Canadian-Israeli reporter and a newer friend.” In each case, Libicki draws on her connections with others in order to contextualize her narrative, which is framed more generally as an attempt to figure out what has changed since she was living in Israel from 1998-2002. “[A]re things much worse here now than they were two years ago?” she asks. She structures her journalistic mission in a way that relates to her personally; the timeframe is based on the last time she lived in Israel, and in that way her essay is meant to help fill in her own personal gaps. The project, in more general terms, is invested in what it means to transform from one reporting on Israel from the inside to one reporting from the outside. A visiting reporter, Libicki’s essay seems to argue, is not allowed to make conclusions on anything but her own relationship to the story. The images depicting Israelis in “Fierce Ease” are accompanied by oversized speech bubbles that display the words of the person pictured, as in an image of Adi, “an old army buddy” (Figure 82). Unlike “Towards a Hot Jew,” in this later essay Libicki allows Israelis to speak for themselves.

outsider who can't really understand" (Figure 83). Libicki concludes her narrative by proclaiming a disidentification with Israel. But it is this very disidentification that, paradoxically, allows her to maintain her connection to it – that paints the backdrop for her dis-affiliatory sensibility.

In this final image, she pictures herself standing in a doorway, with several suitcases resting beside her and a backpack strapped onto her. It is unclear, based on this watercolor drawing, if Libicki is leaving or returning from her trip, and in this way she emphasizes how travel has informed her sense of home. While she admits that “I don't know when I'll go back,” her posture suggests that she is always, somehow, situated between various worlds – her past as an American, her time as an Israeli, and her current life as a Canadian. By ending her visit to Israel picturing herself in this in-between state, she assumes the transitional as home.



Figure 83. Miriam Libicki, “Fierce Ease” (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2008).

V. “But you don’t live here, so what’s the dilemma?”

“Strangers” is Miriam Libicki’s most recently published essay, and she subtitles it, “A long distance view of Israel.”¹⁴⁵ The essay explores the influx of Sudanese into Israel (and mostly into Southern Tel Aviv) between 2005 to 2012, the racist attacks that have followed in

¹⁴⁵ I thank Naomi Kramer for making me aware of this comic essay and helping me obtain a copy.

the wake of these migrations, and the recent policies that have been implemented to cast these refugees out of Israel. In this water-colored visual essay, Libicki begins with an image of her sitting, with a baby on her lap, in front of a computer, as she explains that she is “[h]ome with my first baby now, she’s a couple weeks old.” Libicki’s essay goes on to explore this new “situation” in Israel from the comfort of her home in Canada. Alongside her narrative depicting these events and news stories, she pictures drawings of computer screens displaying written posts on various sites on the internet, including the popular social media sites Facebook and Twitter, as well as her email inbox on g-mail. With these images, as well as with her drawings of photographs of protests and other events related to the topic, Libicki pieces together a narrative response to these events from afar. Her essay represents the culture of connectedness that has slowly begun to lead people to rethink affiliations rooted in national boundaries, in three dimensional places.

In “Strangers,” then, Libicki exposes a transnational online community that is bound to the goings on of a particular place – Israel – although it is housed in the spaceless realm of the “world wide web.” In this way, her essay continues to counter the conception of place (real or metaphorical) as a straightforward marker of identity, and favors, instead, undeterminable and transitional spaces as the ultimate hallmark of postmodern, contemporary identities, including Jewish ones. Libicki’s assessment of the treatment of the Sudanese refugees further leads her to ruminate on her own identity, as an outsider who finds herself continually invested in Israeli life and politics. As she writes,

I left a life of luxury in Israel for a life of even more luxury in Canada. My Israeli passport is burning a hole in my purse. These “infiltrators” walked half a continent for the privilege of living in a dirty city, taking under-the-table jobs if they find jobs at all,

sending their children to schools upstanding citizens sometimes throw molotov cocktails through, but some have lived there eight years, and now they hang up posters to try to convince the citizenry to let them stay.

Who's the Israeli here?

Who is the stranger? (Figure 84)¹⁴⁶

Here she connects her own confused relationship to Israel with the often unquestioned claims that people make to place, referencing Israelis and Jews who declare Israel as their birthright to the exclusion of unwanted others. How can one claim a place, Libicki wonders, from afar? How can an identity based on a metaphorical conception hold up in the real world?

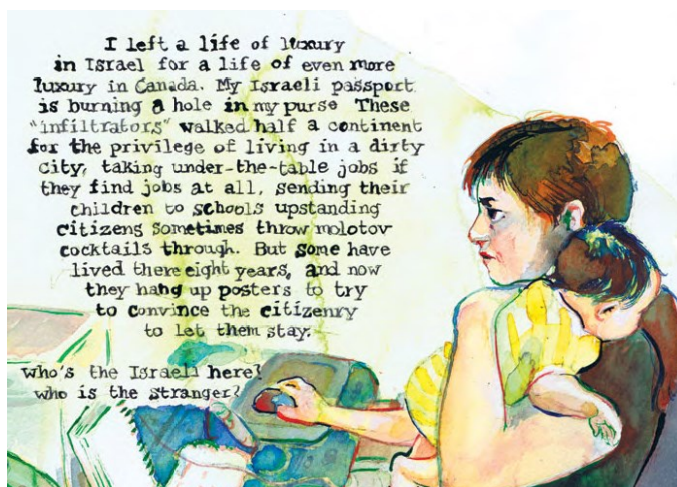


Figure 84. Miriam Libicki, “Strangers” (Vancouver: Real Gone Girl, 2006).

Despite her recognition, however, that she is a “stranger” to and in Israel, Libicki continues to involve herself in its life and politics, attempting to understand, for example, the “horrifying irony” of events in recent Israeli history, like those related to the Sudanese refugees. Her connection to Israel is based in a series of complex questions and contradictions reflecting a desire to counter the tenuous construction of Israel as “Jewish homeland” and to begin to

¹⁴⁶ Libicki here is referring to an incident that occurred in Israel in which a Molotov cocktail was thrown into the front courtyard of a day-care center housing African asylum-seekers.

imagine, instead, new ways of relating to Israel and its politics as a North American Jew. In *Israel*, Sarah is asked by an Israeli a question that undoubtedly persists for many Jews, like Libicki, who have spent a great deal, if not all, of their lives living outside of Israel. “But you don’t live here, so what’s the dilemma?” (*Israel* 77). Rather than quietly assent to the implication of that question – that one is responsible only for the goings-on in one’s own immediate surroundings – Libicki’s and Glidden’s works reflect an ethics of accountability. Even if the authors of these texts and their personas do not fully understand or feel at “home” in Israel, each takes responsibility for the real and imagined dis-affiliations that have shaped their identities.

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