

Drawing on the Margins of History: English-Language Graphic Narratives in Canada

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This study analyzes the techniques that Canadian comics life writers develop to construct personal histories. I examine a broad selection of texts including graphic autobiography, biography, memoir, and diary in order to argue that writers and readers can, through these graphic narratives, engage with an eclectic and eccentric understanding of Canadian historical subjects. Contemporary Canadian comics are important for Canadian literature and life writing because they acknowledge the importance of contemporary urban and marginal subcultures and function as representations of people who occasionally experience economic scarcity. I focus on stories of “ordinary” people because their stories have often been excluded from accounts of Canadian public life and cultural history. Following the example of Barbara Godard, Heather Murray, and Roxanne Rimstead, I re-evaluate Canadian literatures by considering the importance of marginal literary products. Canadian comics authors rarely construct narratives about representative figures standing in place of and speaking for a broad community; instead, they create what Murray calls “history with a human face . . . the face of the daily, the ordinary” (“Literary History as Microhistory” 411). My research finds that contemporary Canadian graphic narratives create mundane personal histories using a medium that is inherently attuned to exaggeration and fragmentation. My reading of graphic narrative is based on “autographics,” a recent field of scholarship that analyzes the interactions between visual and verbal forms of communication in works of life writing. I draw on visual rhetorical studies and communication design in order to describe “the distinctive technology and aesthetics of life narrative that emerges in comics” (Whitlock 965). The medium of comics playfully manipulates the discourses of documentary evidence and testimonial authority. At the same time, it gives Canadian authors tools for depicting the experiences of ordinary individuals through a rich collection of emotional, sensorial, and perceptual information. Focusing on the work of such authors as Chester

Brown, David Collier, Julie Doucet, Sarah Leavitt, and Seth, I suggest that Canadian comics authors exploit the unique formal properties of the medium of comics in order to interrogate dominant nationalist discourses. They also develop an alternative method for analyzing narratives about the past.

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Dedication

To Dean Ziegler,

my twin brother and best friend.

Thank you for bringing laughter and joy into my life.

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Introduction

I am amazed by the unpredictability of contemporary graphic narratives. They can be outlandish, absurd, and unruly. They often contain crude drawings that distort the physical appearance of the human form to exaggerated proportions.¹ Although there are many fine examples of graphic narratives that manipulate the conventions of the medium with sophistication, they occasionally lack the kind of formal consistency and narrative complexity found in other works of Canadian literature and life writing. Some of the primary texts from my study fail to match some of the standards that I, as a literary scholar, have been taught to value. Despite these limitations, many contemporary Canadian comics authors articulate insightful accounts of their experiences of alterity, and those of others. The medium of comics gives them the tools to depict the everyday experiences of the individual living in Canada with a rich collection of perceptual, sensorial, and emotional information.

To date, few critics have investigated Canadian graphic narratives in detail. John Bell surveys their development in *Invaders from the North*, but he offers primarily a historical catalogue of prominent Canadian authors. Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith's *The Power of Comics* and Jean-Paul Gabilliet's review of Canadian comics in *The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature* both provide valuable descriptions of Canadian comics history. Aside from a few isolated examples, most comics historians collapse Canadian and American comics without paying enough attention to the unique conditions of Canadian literary history and visual culture. For example, Bart Beaty, in his analysis of the avant-garde of European comics, divides the comics industry into different transnational zones. He skillfully describes the "differences between the comics communities of the United States and Europe (114). But the North American tradition, as he defines it, includes both Canadian and American graphic narratives. He cites a long list of "American" authors, including Canadians Julie

Doucet, Seth, and Chester Brown (113). Most comics scholars adopt some version of Beaty's model of the comics industry and include Canadian authors as part of either American or European traditions. Charles Hatfield, in his otherwise valuable survey of the history of independent graphic narratives in North America, includes Canadian author Chester Brown as part of the American underground comics tradition (110-11). Anne Miller includes the work of Canadian Julie Doucet in her survey of French-European graphic autobiography in *Reading Bande Dessinée*. In order to analyze contemporary Canadian graphic narratives properly, attention must be paid to the historical, cultural, and regional contexts in which authors produce their work because, as I will explain in subsequent chapters, contemporary Canadian graphic narratives align with influential Canadian literary traditions. My study treats graphic narrative as an integrated but unique form of Canadian literary production that shares many overlapping similarities with, while being separate from, other contemporary visual and verbal cultures.

Some clarification of terminology is necessary to avoid confusion, as a number of different terms are used to define graphic narrative and the medium of comics. "Comics," "comix," "comic books," "comic strips," and "graphic novels" each carry a distinct meaning for authors and critics.² In Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester's introduction to *A Comics Studies Reader*, they argue:

the term "comics" is itself filled with ambiguity. In everyday language the term can refer to comic strips ("I was reading today's comics"), comic books ("I store my comics in the attic"), or even people who tell jokes. The term suggests a humorous intent that is inconsistent with the actual content of many, perhaps most, comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels. Comics scholars have consequently devised a variety of labels, from graphic narrative, graphic storytelling, the ninth art, and *bande dessinée*, to capture their target. (xiii)

I treat "comics" and "graphic narrative" as synonymous terms that best describe the multimodal

literary medium that is the subject of my study. Other similar-sounding terms – such as “comic book,” “comic strip,” and “graphic novel” – should all be treated as interrelated forms of graphic narrative that all share similar genealogies, visual mechanics, and storytelling conventions.

My study analyzes works of personal history. It examines a broad selection of texts, including graphic autobiography, biography, memoir, and diary in order to argue that writers and readers can, through these graphic narratives, engage with an eclectic understanding of Canadian historical subjects, figures, and events. Contemporary³ Canadian graphic narratives draw on the discourses of life writing to emphasize the influence of the personal and the anomalous, using the individual as a site for understanding the network of material and cultural forces that compose their reconstructions of the past – they create what Heather Murray calls “history with a human face . . . the face of the daily, the ordinary” (“Literary History as Microhistory” 411). Canadian comics authors create narratives that re-evaluate the traditional scope of Canadian historical discourses, which often only focuses on events of national importance: “traditional history offers a view from above, in the sense that it has always concentrated on the great deeds of great men, statesmen, generals, or occasionally churchmen. The rest of humanity was allocated a minor role in the drama of history” (Burke 3). Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives are important for Canadian life writing and literature because they acknowledge the importance of subject matter left underdeveloped in some accounts of the past because of race, class, or gender. It is possible to read Canadian graphic narratives, for example, as records of urban and marginal subcultures or as representations of people who occasionally experience economic scarcity. Contemporary Canadian comics authors interrogate the construction of Canadian national discourses and to develop an alternative scope for rendering the subjects of history in Canadian literary texts. They draw on the properties of the medium of comics to articulate narratives about the past that focus on the regional, the local, and the personal subjects of Canada.

1. Schizogenesis

“Schizogenesis” describes the formal properties of contemporary graphic narratives. The etymology of “schizogenesis” traces back to a combination of two separate words, “schizo” (split) and “genesis” (creation). “Schizo” has two significant connotations: it is a shorthand term for “schizophrenic” (a condition of mental instability) or, in figurative language, “mutually contradictory or inconsistent” (*OED*).⁴ It also makes a pun on the word “sketch,” which comes from the Italian word “schizzo.” Thus, in my study, “schizogenesis” defines a wide range of similar procedures: “split generation,” “sketch composition,” and “creating-out-of-disorder.” The term defines the formal paradoxes of the medium of comics. As I see it, contemporary graphic narratives often traffic in startling juxtapositions. They are “schizogenetic” because they are chaotic but obsessed with order. They employ formal strategies for rendering both fragmentation and cohesion simultaneously, which is a fundamentally unstable, even illogical, prospect. “Schizogenesis” is their method of dealing with the feelings of instability that are, according to certain influential theorists, a pervasive feature of contemporary cultural production.

Dick Hebdige suggests that contemporary authors are met with an impasse. In his study of postmodern design, he argues, “the experience of *post* modernity is positively schizogenic [schizogenetic]: a grotesque attenuation – possibly monstrous, occasionally joyous – of our capacity to feel and respond” (*Hiding* 195). Hebdige argues that contemporary authors write at a moment of urgency, attempting to overcome the skepticism, bordering on cynicism, that follows in the wake of postmodernism. My study asks, how do authors in the contemporary period position their own subjectivity in relation to others if, as Hebdige suggests, they have lost the capacity to locate a stable emotional and intellectual framework – lost the “capacity to feel and respond.” I borrow and adapt Hebdige’s understanding of the term “schizogenic.”⁵ Whereas Hebdige uses the term to describe the

unstable fissures of contemporary cultures, I use it differently and suggest that instability may also operate as a generative formal principle in some contemporary texts. Whereas Hebdige imagines the “ruptures” of postmodernism pejoratively, as an affective disorder that disables the construction of the individual subject, I take the opposite perspective and argue that these “ruptures” have in them the possibility to generate models of order. Many contemporary comics authors mobilize the “schizogenetic” formal language of the medium of comics to generate some kind of stable narrative pattern.

The structure of the medium of comics is based on two key concepts: the visual architecture of the page and the complex interactions between the visual and the verbal.⁶ My study suggests that these two central formal features are both unstable. This is part of the reason why I developed the term “schizogenesis” to describe contemporary Canadian graphic narrative, because the medium of comics depends continuously on fragmentation.

Firstly, Canadian comics authors rely on the medium’s ambiguous temporal sequencing. The visual architecture of graphic narrative – its grid of panels and borders – creates spatial arrangements that organize “boxes of time” (Chute and DeKoven, “Introduction: Graphic Narrative” 769). This architecture derives from the diptych; in its simplest form, reading comics is a process by which readers combine two images together in their imagination to create a coherent narrative (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 62-69).⁷ This process is more active and ambiguous than those found in other sequential visual media, such as animation. Jason Dittmer provides a thorough interpretation of the complicated structure of the medium of comics in “Comic Book Visualities.” He describes the two conflicting temporalities that readers encounter when they read graphic narratives: “(1) the virtual temporality of the narrative unfolding and (2) the rhythm of reading, in which a panel is looked at and read . . . digested, and then abandoned for the next panel” (228). The relationship between these two temporalities makes reading graphic narrative inherently unstable and

dynamic. Readers must negotiate the tension between the “tableau” effect (the experience of the comics page as a complete composition) and the linear sequence of reading (Miller 83). Candida Rifkind argues that the experience of reading graphic narrative is fraught with a tension resulting from two contradictory impulses, the desire to advance sequentially and the desire “to stop and gaze” (417). Readers may progress from one image to the next along the visual architecture of the page, but they may also, at the same time, interpret each page as a uniform composition. Thus, graphic narratives are both stable and kinetic.⁸ The architecture of the comics page asks readers to negotiate a distinct narrative structure that resembles an unstable “polyvalent weave” (Chute, “Shadow of a Past Time” 209).

Secondly, the structure of the medium of comics relies on fragmented multimodal interrelationships. Hillary L. Chute argues that the visual and the verbal exist in some graphics narratives as “two narrative tracks [that] never exactly synthesize or fully explain each other” (“Shadow of a Past Time” 201). She argues elsewhere in more general terms that the medium of comics contains “productive tensions in its basic structure. The words and images entwine, but never synthesize” (*Graphic Women* 5). As I will soon explain in more detail, comics often create complex multimodal interfaces, and readers shuttle back and forth between visual and verbal discourses continuously when they interpret them.

Although my study focuses primarily on graphic narratives in the contemporary period, I want to discuss briefly earlier precedents because they inform my understanding of the multimodal properties of the medium of comics. Because I work from the assumption that media are defined by patterns of production, distribution, and reception, I turn to the praxis of material culture to describe the medium of comics, beginning with its origin in the popular press of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some comics theorists stretch the history of comics to include earlier precedents – illuminated manuscripts, for example. However, I prefer to restrict my scope and begin

with early political cartooning and humorous comic strips.⁹ Robert Harvey suggests the modern comic strip emerged when authors stopped separating the verbal from the visual (38). He describes “the emergence of a superior humorous effect” in early comics strips that is based on an “economy of expression achieved by verbal-visual interdependence” (26). These early comic strips grant humorous revelations to readers who resolve the code of the text (Harvey 29). Readers are asked, for example, to resolve the tension between the solemn language of a caption and an absurd drawing (Harvey 23). In cognitive theorist Juana I. Marín-Arrese’s analysis of humour in political cartoons, he writes, “Linguistic theories of humor have generally centered on the bisociation of two frames of reference, or the overlap between two opposing scripts and the abrupt shift from one to the other script, triggered by ambiguity or contradiction” (3). The strong influence of humour in early graphic narratives gave rise to patterns of “incongruity-resolution” in the medium of comics (Marín-Arrese 2). Thus, early political cartoons and comic strips, which set the precedent for contemporary graphic narratives, act like puzzles based on the interrelationship between visual and verbal discourses.

The relationship between the visual and the verbal is a key point of tension that defines the structure of the medium of comics. Readers may look at the visual and the verbal at the same time, but when they “read” the images they often ignore the specifics of the written text. Although there are moments of coherence where the verbal and the visual meet, the entire text is always somewhat unstable because readers must shuttle back and forth between the visual and the verbal in order to interpret the complete composition. Thus, I often return to the analogy of the Necker cube: graphic narratives often act like optical illusions built at the intersection of the visual and the verbal. Their visual and verbal discourses are co-dependent but never in perfect harmony.

Graphic narratives often create a distinct interface at the juncture of the visual and the verbal. A humorous comic strip, as I explained in my earlier discussion of Harvey, relies on a

particular kind of multimodal interface, on an “economy of expression” based on both corroboration and contradiction (Harvey 26); the entire composition only makes sense when the reader combines the verbal and the visual together, but they are only capable of “reading” the visual and the verbal separately. In later chapters of my study I explore in more detail different examples of Canadian authors who manipulate the relationship between the visual and the verbal in their graphic narratives. In each graphic narrative the visual exists in a multiplicity of different shifting relationships with the verbal, not simply, for example, illustrating the written text, but also enlarging, reducing, substituting, exchanging, and mutating it. However, in general, I see the multimodal relationship in contemporary graphic narrative as an interface where the visual and the verbal combine together but never synthesize. I follow Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s model for interpreting multimodality. Their theories accommodate a wide variety of different interpretations because they treat the interaction between the visual and the verbal (or what Smith and Watson call “visuality” and “textuality”) as an “interface” (“Mapping Women’s” 25). Each “interface” is an intersection (or “matrix”) for a particular kind of multimodal relationship (Smith and Watson, “Mapping Women’s” 3).¹⁰

All of the formal properties that I have been describing unite to create the multivocal, ambiguous, and fractured language of graphic narrative. The architecture of the page asks readers to advance and to stop at the same time. Likewise, individual panels often contain compositions with conflicting visual and verbal discourses bound together in an unstable relationship. Thus, “schizogenesis” is an essential term for describing contemporary graphic narratives: they depend on unstable methods of composition.

2. The discourses of Canadian literary history

Some of the most famous attempts to chart out a history of Canadian literature ignore many

anomalous details in order to define Canadian literary history as a cohesive whole (Heble 88). Nevertheless, the fact remains, as Murray puts it, “Canadian literature is cadenced, complex, local, concrete, checked, obstructed, problematic” (“Reading” 73).¹¹ Like Murray, I am interested in “the ways English-Canadian literature has been read (read for coherence) and move to a consideration of the ways that it might be read (read for contradiction)” (“Reading” 73). My study articulates an inclusive version of Canadian literary history that accounts for the importance of graphic narratives – marginal literary texts circulating in an uneven market of distribution with connections to popular culture and counter-culture. My study avoids applying certain conventional standards for constructing national literary history that would potentially ignore such marginal literary products.

My study complicates some of the common narratives that persist about the trajectory of Canadian literature in the twentieth century. In *Making Culture* Maria Tippett provides an explanation of the 1951 Massey Commission, arguing that cultural activities became increasingly regulated in Canada after the midpoint of the twentieth century:

Elements of its [Canadian cultural activity’s] pre-Second World War cultural life – the amateur, the autonomously minded organizations, and the private person – would ... remain. But the professional producer, the national organization, and an approach to culture stressing the need to make it ‘accessible’ would, with the help of the Canada Council, come to dominate. These forces helped to erode the laissez-faire, ad hoc, and often élitest manner in which cultural activity had been organized and funded.

(xii)

I agree with one of the central premises of *Making Culture*, that scholars have sometimes overlooked the influence of cultural activities in Canada that predate the Massey Commission. However, Tippett oversimplifies the course of Canadian cultural history when she describes the disappearance of earlier unsystematic cultural traditions. The structures that Tippett witnesses in early English-

Canadian institutions did not completely erode. They reappear in other forms. I suggest that Canadian graphic narratives are similar in their development to the “laissez-faire, ad hoc” products that Tippet describes (although perhaps without the same kind of élitism).¹²

Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives are often anti-corporate cultural products operating outside the confines of professionalized cultural production, in the most part developing in small and independent presses. Although there have been countless cartoonists working in Canada since the first widely-available comic strips were published in *Punch in Canada* in the 1840s, the Canadian comics publishing industry has often been overshadowed by a flood of imports from the United States and Europe (Belton 30). Jean-Paul Gabilliet sums up the dynamics of Canadian comics production:

Comics publishing in Canada has suffered from the same problems that have chronically plagued the country’s culture as a whole: the daunting competition of inexpensive – because previously amortized – French, British, and American material, the limited domestic interest in, and appeal of, home-made cultural products, the difficulty for national producers of having to distance themselves from foreign models and formats, and finally, the insufficient size of the domestic market to support a national comics industry. (“Comic Art” 463)

Canadian graphic narratives have only occasionally approached moments of national cohesiveness, such as in 1940 when the Canadian government, imposing the “War Exchange Conservations Act,” momentarily banned all non-essential imports, including foreign comic books, which relieved domestic publishers from the flood of international products. This measure encouraged publishers to produce comics domestically. It produced a groundswell that was never again replicated with the same level of consistency or popularity (Gabilliet, “Comic Art” 463). Instead, Canadian comics authors are often regionally-based cultural practitioners who never organized systematically as a

national collective.

Canadian literary histories often echo many of the same concepts that Northrop Frye describes in his conclusion to *Literary History of Canada* (1965). According to Frye, Canadian literature can only develop past its infancy when it begins to mimic the models of European literary production:

It is not much to wonder if Canada developed with the bewilderment of a neglected child, preoccupied with trying to define its own identity, alternately bumptious and diffident about its own achievements. Adolescent dreams of glory haunt the Canadian consciousness (and unconsciousness), some naive and some sophisticated.
(347)

Frye creates an influential description of Canadian literary history that relies on metaphors of evolution and development. According to Carl Berger's survey of some of the most influential works of Canadian historiography, early Canadian historians acted similarly. They were either creative writers who used the lessons of the past as a moral compass or empiricists who used history as a tool in a teleological quest for enlightenment (Berger 30-31). Both of these dominant models of early Canadian historical scholarship rely on the rhetoric of progress to describe the rise and growth of Canada's independence as a nation separate from Britain. The "Canadian Revolution," as Berger calls it, was perceived by Canadian historians as a gradual progression: "The development of self-government in Canada was invariably described as slow, continuous, and analogous to the processes of organic evolution" (Berger 34). According to Berger, many early Canadian historiographers turned to models of cohesion and linear progress as a means of structuring national identity.¹³ Many early descriptions of Canadian literary history, like Frye's, follow the same models that Berger describes. It is similar to what Julie Rak writes in the introduction to her anthology concerning Canadian auto/biography: "The 'need' for identity . . . is like the need for a nation to anchor itself in

the fiction of continuous time against the ruptures and social dislocations of modernity itself, and to construct for itself an origin in serial time which gestures towards the future” (12). According to Peter Burke, such paradigms may be understood as the “‘common sense’ view of history . . . [that] has often – too often – been assumed to be the way of doing history, rather than being perceived as one among various possible approaches to the past” (3).

Canadian literary critics have at times been preoccupied with Canadian literature’s “perceived lack of history” (Söderlind 3). However, Canadian literary history, as a discursive construct, does not so much “lack history” as it lacks the qualities associated with specific kinds of historical discourses. Canadian literary history has seen multiple periods of intense nationalism where both authors and scholars organized the body of Canadian literature and described it as a systematic whole: for example, during the Confederation, Modernist, and the mid-century Centennial periods (Saul 6). However, as Murray argues, some traditional methods of organizing literary history have often been difficult to maintain in a Canadian context:

Construction of a national literary history is rendered impossible by the simple fact that ‘state’ and ‘nation’ are in such a complex correspondence here . . . ‘national’ cultural histories are frequently the history of the urban centres and even more often of the dominant social groups; and . . . such macro structures seem inevitably accompanied by macro narratives of national progress and individuation (“Literary History as Microhistory” 412).

Cynthia Sugars reaches a similar conclusion; she suggests that there is a common theme running through Canadian literary criticism, a persuasive state of “unhomeliness” that recurs in many of the most prominent descriptions of Canadian literary history. Sugars is a subtle enough critic to understand that her work sets up a relative comparison, and she avoids suggesting that any anthology of Canadian literary criticism is capable of constructing a pan-national cultural thesis for

Canada (xiii). However, it is still surprising that this prevalent preoccupation with unhomeliness reappears so often and in so many different forms; in pathological terms, it is surprising how this disease, or “dis-ease,” as Sugars calls it, has so many different symptoms (xiii). Indeed, descriptions of Canadian literature have often been caught up in a perpetual crisis of legitimacy, unable to match the imagined ideals of monocultural national communities with traditions of progress. I believe this crisis is mostly rhetorical: it is inappropriate to suggest that other national literatures are any more stable or unstable than Canadian literatures, because this argument still equates the level of “stability” found in a national literary history with its ability to fit into a cohesive and progressive pattern. The inability of scholars to construct Canadian literary history into a synthesizing whole is merely a byproduct of the conditions of Canadian literary history and the prominence of particular historical discourses. If the criticism of the past was continually preoccupied with Northrop Frye’s famous question “Where is here?” (Frye 346) then perhaps literary criticism of the present should be concerned with the new question: “How did we get here?” or, more precisely, “How do we write about getting here?”

The inspiration for my project originated in my reading of Heather Murray’s “Literary History as Microhistory.” Murray calls on Canadian scholars focusing on the construction of Canadian literary history to adopt some of the tenets of “microhistory,” a process “rooted in the attempt to incorporate peripheral or marginal events, figures, and communities into the historical picture” (“Literary History as Microhistory” 406). Although Murray focuses on nineteenth-century literary communities, her description of a microhistorical framework has wider applications for Canadian literary scholarship.¹⁴ I am not concerned with all of methods that Murray describes in her analysis of Microhistory, but instead I focus on the values that Murray witnesses in microhistorical methods. Microhistorical theory is productive as an analytic philosophy for Murray because it helps rectify some of the impasses that distress Canadian literary criticism. She suggests that

microhistories offer possibilities outside of the traditions that have often been used to construct the development of Canadian literary history as a cohesive narrative.

I would like to echo in my study many of the same values that Murray supports in her writing and suggest that a microhistorical understanding of Canadian literary history illuminates the importance of texts like contemporary Canadian comics. Moreover, contemporary Canadian comics authors are often themselves interested in the subject matter of history in their graphic narratives. They search for appropriate methods for describing the kinds of subjects, the historical outliers, that do not fit neatly into the patterns of cohesion present in many narratives of national progress. Instead they narrow their focus to articulate subjectivity localized at specific moments of time and space. Canadian comics authors, in their autobiographies, biographies, and memoirs, follow many of the microhistorical methods that Murray describes. They create graphic narratives that often focus on the micro-structures of the people of Canada – the local and the personal over the broadly national.

3. Autographics and Comics Studies

The terms “graphic novel” and “comic book” are useful shorthand definitions, but they do not accurately describe the structure and content of graphic narrative. Interestingly, many of the primary texts in my study have been classified as “graphic novels,” but they are in fact works of life writing. Many contemporary Canadian comics authors produce personal works of autobiography that share little resemblance with the genres of prose fiction. According to Marlene Kadar’s definition, “Life writing is an umbrella term for a kind of personal or self writing. Canadian readers have shown an increasing interest in life writing, in its conventional forms (such as autobiography or political memoir), its blended experimental forms (such as autofiction, biofiction, and metafiction), and its celebration of ordinary people” (660). Many contemporary Canadian graphic narratives

conform to at least two of the different forms of life writing that she describes, as both “blended experimental form” and a “celebration of ordinary people.”

A growing number of Canadian life writing scholars treat “life writing” as a set of cultural practices or discourses that shape the genres of autobiography, biography, and memoir. This realization allows theorists “to understand how auto/biography can work in non-literary forms in electronic media like photography, television, or the Internet, or in other forms where selves and lives are represented” (Rak 18). It may also be the case that critics have had to adapt in order to understand a rapidly changing body of texts and account for what Susanna Egan and Gabriele Helms call in a 2002 issue of *Canadian Literature* “the innovative nature of much Canadian life writing” (14). According to Egan and Helms, there have been three significant formal developments in Canadian life writing: authors create innovating generic labels to describe life writing, they incorporate the personal essay into their work, and they increasingly engage in collaborative testimonial projects (15). To their list I would like to add a fourth development, the incorporation of visual media as part of constructions of subjectivity and historical experiences.

Some early Canadian life writing criticism avoided multimodal texts. Shirley Neuman notes that the call for papers for the landmark 1996 special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* on autobiography “went largely unheard where art was concerned, and fell on completely deaf ears with respect to other media” (7). Julie Rak interprets Neuman’s observation in the introduction to *Auto/biography in Canada*, arguing, “the lack of response may have been due to a number of factors, but it does point out that, at the time, the study of autobiography in Canada was conceived primarily as part of literary studies” (5). According to Rak, the tendency to overlook multimodal life writing at this moment in the history of life writing studies in Canada was the product of the tradition in life writing scholarship to focus on the analysis of the “literary” texts in their most narrow definition, as a specific set of monomodal written products. Rak is correct to argue that Canadian scholars face a

pressing challenge when they analyze multimodal texts from the perspective of literary criticism: the verbal element often overshadows the visual.

The corpus of life writing scholarship does contain a robust selection of possible exemplars from which to draw for analyzing multimodality in life writing texts. It offers many suitable interpretive models for understanding the constructions of subjectivity that emerge when authors mix media and combine visual and verbal discourses. Early examples of Canadian multimodal life writing criticism may be found in criticism focusing on the works of canonical Canadian authors, often in discussions of photography. Although photography is separate from my area of interest (comics images and photographs mobilize different regimes of visibility) these critical investigations still function as evidence of the methods scholars have used to analyze multimodality in life writing texts. Marta Dvorak's edited anthology *La creation biographique/Biographical Creation* (1997) includes several essays that investigate the images present in Michael Ondaatje's memoir concerning his family's history in Sri Lanka, *Running in the Family*. Josef Pesch argues: "The multiplicity of media Michael Ondaatje utilizes in *Running in the Family* to present memories suggest a striving for a totality of information, for a presentation of a family history as complete as possible" (111). In the same collection Timothy Dow Adams similarly attempts to explain the importance of visual media in Ondaatje's memoir, calling his use of photography "enigmatic and symbolic" (96).¹⁵ Canadian multimodal life writing criticism has often included sophisticated explanations that describe the interaction between different media, but they sometimes treat visual media uniformly. These examples are useful, but they lack the sophistication of later scholarship. For both Adams and Pesch, photography in *Running in the Family* performs a similar function; instead of treating each photograph in Ondaatje's memoir as a unique text, Adams and Pesch often condense multimodal interactions or simply mention that a tension exists between the visual and the verbal without interpreting that tension in significant detail. I avoid relegating the images in graphic narrative to the "textual

function” (Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images* 183) of composition, because I do not want to ignore precise details about each text, like the importance of each author’s choice of drawing style. It may be tempting to treat the visual as an appendage to the verbal, but they exist in a much more complicated relationship.

Later works of multimodal life writing criticism develop more robust cross-disciplinary approaches that analyze a wide variety of different life writing texts. Smith and Watson provide a set of useful critical terms in the introduction to their 2002 anthology *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image and Performance*. Their scholarship, founded in feminist politics, avoids the conventions that treat autobiographical references in visual texts created by women as being “merely personal” or “merely narcissistic” so as to broaden the criteria used to define life writing and to engage with under-analyzed texts created by female authors, including, for example, dance, quilting, and family albums (“Mapping Women’s” 4). Drawing from the provocative work of contemporary installation artist Tracy Emin – an artist whose work is a “gesture performed publicly that expands the modes of self-representation at a shifting matrix of visibility and textuality” (Smith and Watson, “Mapping Women’s” 3) – Smith and Watson describes contemporary autobiographical practices as complex performative acts of self-representation. Their scholarship is important for the development of multimodal life writing criticism because they show how different constructions of subjectivity may be produced in a single multimodal life writing text through the interrelationship between different modes and media, at the “shifting matrix of visibility and textuality” (“Mapping Women’s” 3). Some of the best life writing scholarship from the last ten years replicates their methods and concerns. Prominent in the field is “autographics,” a distinct body of criticism that emerged in the early 2000s that engages with the dynamics of multimodality and life writing. Gillian Whitlock coined the term “autographics” in 2006 in a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* devoted to recent works of graphic narrative. Whitlock defines “autographics” as the “the distinctive technology and aesthetics of life

narrative that emerges in comics. Unique mediations of cultural difference occur in the grammar of comics, which make demands on the reader to navigate across gutters and frames, and shuttle between words and images, in an active process of imaginative engagement with others” (965). Anna Poletti and Whitlock expand the term further in 2008 in a special issue of *Biography*, applying autographic criticisms to a wide range of primary material, such as autobiographical zines. They still continue with Whitlock’s initial arguments about the centrality of comics to the field of autographics. Drawing on Scott McCloud’s analysis of comics, Whitlock argues, “Comics are not a mere hybrid of graphic arts and prose fiction, but a unique interpretation that transcends both, and emerges through the imaginative work of synthesis that readers are required to make between the panels on the page” (968-69). Whitlock seems so captivated with graphic narratives that she provocatively claims that the autographic interactions present in the medium of comics “can free us to think and imagine differently” (967). My study follows Whitlock’s example and analyzes how different comics authors employ the multimodal properties the medium of comics to coordinate constructions of identity, including issues related to subjectivity, agency, and embodiment. The medium of comics, Whitlock suggests, promotes a special (though vaguely-defined) form of literacy. In other words, graphic narratives do not replicate other methods of constructing subjectivities and organizing self-knowledge.

The inter-disciplinary challenges of interpreting graphic narrative can be daunting. As Poletti and Whitlock observe, “Critics of life narrative are now called upon to develop more advanced visual and cultural literacies to interpret the intersections of various modes and media and the complex embodiments of avatar, autobiographer, and reader/viewer gathered under the sign of autographics, and these demands can make us too feel hamstrung and half blind”(v). Canadian comics authors draw from the models found in both written life writing texts and from the models of self-representation found in the history of self-portraiture; however, their work does not

conform precisely to either one of these categories. The conventions found in visual and verbal texts are not always compatible. Verna Reid describes the difficulty she experienced adapting some of the common generic labels of life writing (“autobiography,” “biography,” “memoir”) for the purposes of analyzing acts of self-representation in the work of some prominent Canadian visual artists. For example, she finds that some of the conventions of painting encourage scholars to avoid treating self-portraiture as life writing: “self portraiture is often seen as a vehicle of experimentation, not expression of self-perception” (17). The scholarship that analyzes constructions of subjectivity in graphic narrative needs to search for a middle ground that highlights the unique properties of the medium of comics. In an attempt to avoid becoming “hamstrung and half blind,” I situate myself as an autographic scholar in reference to the field of “comics studies” and its descriptions of the multimodal language of graphic narrative (Poletti and Whitlock v). Comics studies is a field that provides analytical tools capable of interpreting the mechanics of graphic narrative with accuracy because it treats the medium of comics as a unique cultural tradition with its own history and compositional techniques.

Although I situate myself as part of a “second wave” of comics scholarship that includes the work of autographic scholars – and I am, therefore, less interested in the repeated acts of self-definition that came with the “first wave” of comics scholarship – I still need to define a precise methodology for interpreting graphic narrative. Hillary Chute writes that the field of comics studies has been slow to develop:

there are not yet many compelling book-length studies of comics from within the academy. Even though academic publishing on comics is on the rise, the most useful recent texts are still, by and large, anthologies that are yet spotty, and not-always-easy-to-locate works published abroad, where academic study of comics has a more established and serious history. (“Decoding Comics” 1015)

While I might quibble with Chute's assumption that works of meaningful scholarship must originate within academia, I agree with her argument that there is an absence of systematic comics scholarship. Beginning in the early-to-mid twentieth century, the earliest contributors in the history of comics scholarship, the scholars who predate the "first wave" of comics studies proper, were often non-academics, journalists, and book reviewers.¹⁶ When comics scholarship came from academia, it often originated in the developmental sciences, such as psychology. In such cases, however, scholars often glossed over the complexities of individual texts and treated them as transparent cultural artefacts. Social scientists could be concerned with questions of content, praising comics for their childish vitality or condemning them for their simple vulgarity (Heer and Worcester, "Craft, Art, Form" 101). These early examples of comics scholarship replicate many of the same assumptions that dominate early scholarship about popular culture: many scholars overemphasized the social impact of popular culture or they only treated its products as incidental curiosities (Nicks and Sloniowski 3-4). In such cases, when comics were seen as being dangerous to social well-being, they could even become the target of incendiary campaigns against the medium.¹⁷

The sporadic efforts of these early scholars do not amount to much of a critical consensus in the field. The next generation of comics scholars created numerous studies that attempted to rectify the inflammatory rhetoric of early critics like Fredrick Wertham, while focusing on the historical developments that led to the emergence of graphic narrative as a distinct medium (Nyberg, Rosenkranz, Witek). This first wave of comics studies scholars created numerous theorizations, definitions of terminology, and systematic appraisals of the medium: "The formal turn has led to an increased attention to comic-as-a-language: what are the constituent elements that make up comics, how is the demarcation line separating comics from other art forms to be set" (Heer and Worcester, "Craft, Art, Form" 101). The formalist impulse in comics studies reached its high point in the work of scholars from the 1980s and 1990s in North America (Saraceni; Varnum

and Gibbons) and Europe (Groensteen; Fresnault-Deruelle).¹⁸

First wave comics studies scholars often attempt to establish a framework for understanding the mechanics of the medium. However, their formalist tendencies often overlook crucial concerns. In his survey of the field from the 1980s, Eric Smoodin accuses some comics historians of creating misappropriate and misleading scholarship. Although some of the scholars he reviews express a desire to talk about political issues, they often de-contextualize comics and emphasize individual artistic accomplishment (Smoodin 129). Smoodin suggests scholarship concerned with the formal mechanics of the medium of comics is developing inadequate critical dialogues:

the twin impulses of artistic transcendence and dehistoricization mark all of the studies that I am considering here . . . [They] dismiss issues of racism, misogyny, and classism. Thus despite being applied to relatively new disciplines, their critical methodology invokes models that other, more accepted forms of popular culture study – that of the live-action feature film, for instance – have rejected over the last 20 years. It seems as if, in the early stages of writing about comic strips, comic books, and cartoons, many historians are still working toward a suitable language and an appropriate critical methodology. (131)

Smoodin accurately pinpoints a pressing dilemma for comics studies: scholars can become so narrowly focused that they can overlook crucial issues related to race, gender, class, and other political discourses. The draw of the formalist impulse is still part of comics studies, as many scholars still attempt to construct a robust critical vocabulary for describing graphic narratives. Recent comics scholarship broadens the earlier approaches in order to consider additional issues of culture and identity (Miller 67). Second wave comics studies scholars, still searching for an appropriate methodology for the field, are careful to embed their formalist arguments within a critical framework that attends to the debates of contemporary scholarship (Chute; Heer and

Worcester; Gardner; Meskin). Even the most generalized theories of visual semiotics acknowledge the importance of context, that texts are produced and deciphered in specific interpretive communities (Kress 8). A sufficient explanation of the formal dynamics of Canadian graphic narratives must always, therefore, return to relevant political, ethical, and historical contexts.

It sometimes suits my critical discourse to break down comics into its basic constitutional elements, separating, for example, the visual from the verbal; however, it is important to remember that, as W.J.T Mitchell puts it, media are always intertwined: “all arts are ‘composite’ arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes” (“Beyond Comparison” 118). While it might be true, from a theoretical perspective, that all media are mixed, it is often important for practical reasons to describe them as though they were separate. I want to be flexible enough to attend to a wide range of cultural traditions without indiscriminately applying inappropriate analogies that distort the fundamental properties of the medium of comics.

It seems logical for comics studies, as a nascent field of scholarship, to search for precursors in other critical traditions. Some comics studies scholars look to art history for theoretical models. In *Unpopular Culture* Bart Beaty argues that contemporary European comics authors increasingly draw inspiration from visual art. A more popular trend in comics studies is to focus on cinema. Many scholars turn to film studies to find an appropriate critical vocabulary.¹⁹ Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew P. McAllister (*Film and Comic Books*) and Thierry Groensteen (*The System of Comics*) trace sites of comparison between comics and cinema. Groensteen is one of the most influential and insightful critics of European comics (or *bandes dessinées*, as they are called in French), and he often uses insights from film theory to describe the architecture of the comics page. Although he designates comics studies as a separate scholarly tradition – he calls graphic narratives the ninth art (*neuvième art*), in accordance with the traditional terminology of French cultural

production (*The System of Comics* 92) – Groensteen relies heavily on the writing of seminal film theorists like Christian Metz (*The System of Comics* 159). Although Groensteen makes it clear in *The System of Comics* that the semiology of comics and film are distinct, he often takes “short detour[s] through the theory of cinema” (26). For example, he argues that the comics panel shares important similarities with the cinematic “shot”: they are both the smallest unit of composition available to authors (*The System of Comics* 26). Henry John Pratt, in his insightful analysis of the structure of narrative in comics, also draws a comparison between the visual language of film and graphic narrative:

Like comics, film usually contains words (which, following the advent of sound in film, are typically heard instead of read) but is primarily a visual medium with a prominent pictorial element. In film, both the pictures and the words generally combine in producing the narrative . . . [I]t might be plausibly asserted that comics and film employ very similar narrative strategies. That is, comics tell stories in the same way films do, but in different visual media. (107-08)

It often seems as though the language that comics authors and theorists use to describe comics mirrors the technical vocabulary of film. They both often describe the visual field in terms of the movements of the film camera, including the use of “close-ups” and “pans” in different comics panels. Indeed, even some of my own descriptions of comics depend on the vocabulary of film. However, it is important to keep comics and film separate from one another. Every moment of ekphrasis (a verbal description of a visual image) in comics studies criticism creates a subtle sleight of hand. These are limited analogies that only approximate the multimodal dynamics of the medium, and I do not want to suggest, like earlier scholars, that there are in fact comparisons to be made between the formal structure of comics and film. Cinema is perhaps the most influential force in contemporary visual culture, as its terminology has come to dominate the language used to

describe pictorialism and spectatorship.²⁰ It might be useful for the purposes of clarity to describe individual panels using the language of film, but these descriptions are only approximations brought on by cultural conventions.²¹

When one compares comics to film, one runs the risk of distorting the production and reception of each medium. True, graphic narrative shares some historical parallels and visual narrative conventions with film – film animation, in particular (Dowd 8). The medium of comics is fundamentally separate from film because the two media do not share the same basic experience of spectatorship, such as the sense of voyeurism that comes with the cinematic screen. Moreover, comics allow the reader to control the pace at which the sequence of images progresses (Chute, *Graphic Women* 8). Though I may, in my descriptions of graphic narratives, employ cinematic terminology, the affective experience of comics more closely resembles the literary practices of reading. Comics and film have a completely different relationship to visuality. Reading a comic book no more resembles watching a film than it resembles walking through a gallery of photographs. If comics studies can learn anything from the precedents of film studies, it is from the influential feminist cultural critiques that interrogate the consumption of media. Comics studies scholars have sometimes failed to develop precise methodologies for rigorously interpreting the experience of spectatorship and pictorialism in comics (Smoodin 134-35). Comparing comics to film might be useful as a provocative thought experiment, but it is, like any other analogy one may develop, an assessment that only approximates the unique properties of the medium of comics (Lewis 33).

There has been some resistance to using literary critical traditions to analyze comics, but it is more appropriate than using film studies. Aaron Meskin describes the dominant objections in the “comics as literature” debate and concludes that they are all inadequate (224).²² Graphic narratives have almost always developed in accordance with literary practices: they have been sold through networks of distribution and reception that resemble the ones used for other literary products.

Simply put, graphic narratives are designed to be read: “Comics were born in the age of mass culture. Without modern printing technology and the distribution networks that allow for mass dissemination, comics as we know them would not exist” (Heer and Worcester, “Culture, Narrative, Identity” 173). In this way, comics publishing may be understood in relation to fields of study such as the history of the book and the production of newspapers and magazines. The sensorium of experience of reading also mirrors the experiences associated with other literary products: reading a graphic narrative is solitary, a silent dialogue between narrator, narrative personae and the reader. A distortion of these basic propositions, such as when gallery exhibitions display comics pages as pieces of visual art, turns graphic narrative into a completely different medium.

The properties of multimodal literature like graphic narrative may encourage experimentation, both in terms of form and content. Comics replicate many of the same conditions that David Lewis witnesses in contemporary picture-books, where the combination of words and pictures invites inventiveness (76). This is not to say that the properties of graphic narrative are completely open, as fundamental principles still limit the medium of comics; however, along a continuum, the conventions of graphic narratives are perhaps less secure than the ones present in other media. It is still possible, however, to overemphasize the freedoms of the medium. For example, seminal comics theorist Scott McCloud often describes the untapped potential of graphic narrative. His landmark work of first wave comics criticism *Understanding Comics* ends with a gesture towards the future possibilities of the medium of comics (211-12). McCloud’s writing is sometimes more speculative than analytical. He strays into unfounded assumptions because of his infectious enthusiasm for his subject. Many first wave comics scholars follow McCloud’s example and describe the medium’s need to improve. For example, Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, writing about “The Maturation of the Medium,” describe the history of comics in North America as the development from simplicity to artistic achievement (*The Power of Comics*). Similarly, in Poletti and

Whitlock's assessment of autographics, they argue, "The expectations of autographers such as Bechdel and Spiegelman that there is a sophisticated and highly literate market for autographics is an interesting indicator of just how presumptive and condescending it is . . . to characterize the genre in terms of a naive and juvenile reader and a serialized and regimented production process" (xi). Poletti and Whitlock's analysis, like McCloud's, suggests that the medium of comics can only develop to a place of respectability when its creators abandon the medium's former history of unsophisticated production and commercial distribution. Comics scholars should abandon instead the rhetorics of "maturation," "evolution," and "development" and challenge the idea that comics authors need to move beyond the historical foundations of the medium in popular culture and satirical political humour.²³ Some comics studies scholars are chasing after a phantasm, an unrealistic image of what comics could become in the future, instead of properly attending to the medium as it already exists.²⁴ When comics studies scholars stress the freedoms open to the production of graphic narrative, describing how the medium might be used, they overlook how it has been used during its history. In their attempts to rehabilitate the medium and elevate it to the pseudo-modernist pantheon of creative arts, they overlook many of the qualities that make the medium interesting.

Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives draw inspiration from the tradition of counter-cultural comics. Beginning in North America in the 1960s and 70s, many comics authors created self-consciously provocative graphic narratives that, as a collective, rejected the self-regulations of mainstream comics publishing (Gardner, "Autobiography's Biography" 5-6; Hatfield 7-8).²⁵ They were often satirical and subversive authors who rejected the values that they associated with cultural and political conservatism (Duncan and Smith 52, 56). These mid-century comics authors quickly abandoned their simple contrarianism and became interested instead in methods of life writing and, more broadly, the discourses of history. Contemporary Canadian comics authors echo the values of these early underground cartoonists, but they are less interested in simply opposing dominant

cultural trends and are preoccupied instead with the literary subjects that also occupy the attention of other contemporary Canadian authors.

4. Comics and representations of historical subjects in Canadian literatures

The overall formal properties of the medium of comics do not change significantly from one country to the next, and all North American graphic narratives share similar patterns of production and distribution. However, as Sourayan Mookerjea suggests, “North American culture, politics, economy, and society are not assimilable to that of the United States, and yet proximity, dependence, and domination by that imperial behemoth overdetermines all cultural-political debates regarding social justice, substantive political equality, national identity, and popular cultural production in Canada.” Simply conflating these two separate cultural contexts is misleading because, as Mookerjea’s insightful comment acknowledges, the close proximity of the United States and Canada does not invalidate the uniqueness of Canadian cultural and literary traditions. Canadian authors share some of the same interests as American authors – an interest in the discourses of history, for example – but the implications of those interests are different in each country.

Canadian graphic narratives share many of the same thematic interests and concerns as other works of contemporary Canadian literature. Importantly, contemporary Canadian authors often interrogate the methods through which historical knowledge is recorded and preserved in literary documents (Gibert 486). There are Canadian poets (Ondaatje, Atwood), novelists (Findley, Shields), and short story writers (Munro) who formulate “parodic codes” in their writing for “reformatory” purposes, to contest and revise established literary traditions (New, *A History* 264-66).²⁶ W.H. New writes about works of contemporary Canadian literature that

achieve self-expression without resorting [to] . . . familiar techniques of social representation; they occur most frequently within a frame of reference involving

received language and tradition but are themselves gestures against passive surrender to such traditions. The mockery that exists in the distance between subject and language, or between the new text and the model with which it obliquely connects, establishes the voice of the present as an independent one, however, marked by it is by place, past, class and gender. (*A History* 270)

These texts stress the need for innovation and experimentation, because they show suspicion concerning established conventions of literary composition. Authors working in the small-press and independent press seem especially prone to produce “innovative expressive forms” (Gabilliet, “Comic Art” 467). They search for original methods of composition that avoid “familiar techniques of social representation” (New, *A History* 270). In the context of contemporary Canadian literary culture, such techniques often revise familiar methods of historical representation.

Definitions of contemporary Canadian literature often point to the central importance of historical subject matter. Robert Kroetsch suggests that he, like many Canadian writers, grew up without a clear understanding of the events of the past (6). His predicament inspired him to search for methods of unearthing the hidden fragments of Canadian history (Wylie 5). Kroetsch describes Canadian literary texts developing fragmented methods for reconstructing historical subjects. Describing the importance of compositional techniques of palimpsestic archaeology, he suggests Canadian authors often trust the “fragments of story” and let them “speak their incompleteness” (24). Some more recent works of contemporary Canadian literature are even more cynical than Kroetsch about the project of history recovery. Some recent authors reach the point where ambiguous formal devices articulate the past only as a series of continuous re-arrangements without end (Hlibchuck 154). They echo the tenets of deconstruction, the theory that some experiences are beyond representations and are only available in discourse as an endless series of partial re-articulations (Agamben 13). These authors treat their own representations of historical subjects as

being unstable because they always filter an understanding of the past through the present, which is always subject to change (Wylie 260). Contemporary Canadian comics authors employ similar strategies because they too often experiment with methods of historical representation; however, importantly, they are not nearly as subversive as other genres of Canadian postmodern literature.

According to Linda Hutcheon, perhaps the most influential Canadian literary theorist of the early 1990s, historical intertextuality is one of the central concerns of postmodernism. She draws an analogy between the techniques of postmodern architecture, which recall the antiquated styles of the past, and postmodern literature. She sees a special attentiveness to historical discourses in Canadian postmodern literary genres, particularly “historiographic metafiction,” which combines historical intertextuality with self-reflective irony (“Historiographic Metafiction” 4). For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction engages in a playful game of self-reference because they acknowledge the role of the author in shaping the structure of the text. She witnesses in postmodernism a special doubling of discourse, leading to a contradictory form of intertextual parody: it is not simple mimicry, but an ironic relationship of mutual implication and denial:

In contemporary theoretical discourse, for instance, we find puzzling contradictions . . . the conventions of both fiction and historiography are simultaneously used and abused, installed and subverted, asserted and denied. And the double (literary/historical) nature of this intertextual parody is one of the major means by which this paradoxical (and defining) nature of postmodernism is textually inscribed. (“Historiographic Metafiction” 4-5)

Interestingly, Hutcheon emphasizes in her description of historiographic metafiction that the combination of historical and literary discourses in postmodern texts is ambivalent, even paradoxical. Hutcheon locates an ironic playfulness and seeming instability at the heart of the poetics of postmodernism. I say “seeming” because the split discourses and parodies of

postmodernism need not be treated as such perplexing conditions for all Canadian authors. I provide a description of historiographic metafiction in order to illustrate how playful techniques of historical representation operate in certain works of contemporary Canadian literature and to suggest that the “puzzling” nature of the poetics of postmodernism need not be treated as unstable at all (“Historiographic Metafiction” 4-5). Even though many contemporary Canadian graphic narratives articulate representations of historical events and experiences with occasional irony, they still validate the project of historical recovery and documentation.

In all the above examples, I provide different descriptions of Canadian authors searching for innovative methods of articulating historical events and experiences. Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives adapt the strategies of earlier postmodern literatures. W.H. New writes:

Postmodern techniques in the 1970s and 1980s emphasized the power of the storyteller to disrupt illusions of reality, highlighting the artifice of narrative instead, and generally play with speech formulae and conventional expectations . . . But some subsequent writers also began to ask if history were not more substantial than ‘mere’ narrative and to use postmodern techniques of interruption and fragmentation not as a refusal of history’s ‘reality’ but as part of a process of rereading and reconstructing the reality. (347)

Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives are both a continuation and a transformation of the textual strategies that New describes. They do not simply create disruptions that destroy the “illusions of reality” (New 347). Instead, I see in contemporary Canadian graphic narratives the desire to represent the past while self-consciously acknowledging the author’s role in shaping the structure of the text. Dekoven notices how, in certain contemporary graphic narratives, “the complexities of historicization across time and space are not reduced to sameness or to capitalist regularity and simplicity, but neither is historical temporality repudiated” (332). Similarly,

contemporary Canadian graphic narratives articulate ambiguous representations of historical events and experiences, without complete subversion and irony. Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives deny the ideal of completely objective historical representation. They remind the reader that all historical representations are subject to mediation, but they take this complex situation as a necessary starting point for productive composition.

I contend that the medium of comics has access to inherent properties that shape its deployment of cultural discourses, such as the discourses of history and of subjectivity. In my study I most often describe the medium of comics by saying it provides a set of tools for authors, but I could say equally that the medium habitually enacts certain practices. It constructs a “strategy,” what Michel Foucault would call a whole set of “maneuvers, tactics, techniques” (“Discipline and Punish” 550).²⁷ Thus, my study provides an account of how contemporary comics authors enlist the medium of comics, with its distinct media-specific tools, in service of their central interests – historical discourses and life writing.

I work from the McLuhanesque proposition that every medium has an inherent content that shapes the information it communicates. There are, for example, formal possibilities available in film that are not available in prose. Therefore, every medium is attuned to different cultural discourses. The medium of comics open up avenues of historical explanation that are not available in any other literary format. My understanding of historical discourses derives in part from the theories of Hayden White.²⁸ He suggests that all historical discourses are inherently textual and that formal choices prefigure the range of possibilities available for representations of historical subjects. In the preface to his work *Metahistory*, White provides a general description of “historical work”:

I treat the historical work as what it most manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse. Histories (and philosophies as well) combine a certain amount of ‘data,’ theoretical concepts for ‘explaining’ these data, and a narrative

structure for their presentation as an icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past. In addition, I maintain, they contain a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature, which serves as the precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively 'historical' explanation should be. (xi)

I believe that authors of historical narratives are confronted with a similar set of choices as historians. White argues that historical discourses are structured by formal linguistic patterns, such as the choice of emplotment. Each of these patterns, what White calls a historical "style," is associated with a matching ideological impulse.²⁹ Similarly, the formal choices that literary authors make for representing historical subjects carry with them political and social implications. Thus, representations of historical subjects in the medium of comics carry crucial implications: as Chute argues, there is an ethics to the aesthetics of comics ("The Shadow of a Past Time" 213).

It is possible to acknowledge the restrictions that condition historical discourses without taking it to the next step and claiming that, for example, the events and experiences of the past are completely inaccessible to the people of the present because historical discourses are nothing more than a meaningless play of linguistic signs. I avoid taking White's theories too far and implying that all historical explanations are equally valid. White supplies a language for describing certain prominent historical discourses. He recognizes the importance of an author's formal choices of composition. Although he is certainly skeptical about certain methods of historical scholarship, I do not see his theories as necessarily debilitating. Simply put, mediating factors shape every historical discourse, and representations of the past are shaped by the medium through which those representations are expressed.

Some critics have suggested that comics have "aphoristic" qualities that allow them to simplify the complexity of the events of the past (de Beeck 808). Ian Gordon argues in his review

of recent historical comics in *Radical History Review*, “Perhaps these graphic works are like a good lecture: they entertain, rouse curiosity, and provide enough information on which to get by, but also raise enough questions requiring further reading that the audience understands the limits of the knowledge they have obtained. These are not small accomplishments” (192). There is some logic to this argument, because the poetics of cartooning often rely on visual minimalism. However, contemporary Canadian comics authors resist the simple aphoristic qualities of the anecdote. Comics may be reductive in their composition, but they are complex and ambiguous for the reader (Duncan and Smith 133-34, 158). As I will explain over the course of my study, the medium of comics manipulates the discourses of documentary evidence and testimonial authority.

My study suggests that graphic narratives offer a “sketchy” platform for manipulating historical discourses. I say “sketchy” because the medium of comics seems to resist many of the conventions typically associated with representations of historical subjects, including the traditions of literary realism. White suggests that historiography has been dominated by a univocal language that idealizes progressive narratives of cohesion and stability (*Metahistory* 66). White’s scholarship is somewhat misleading because he only provides a single, fairly limited, definition of the “historical field” as a single monolithic entity and suggests that all historical scholarship follows the same narrow paradigm. I want to avoid making such generalizations (*Metahistory* 66). White is merely describing one particularly influential model that idealizes transparent language and nineteenth-century realist narrative traditions (*Tropics* 42). The problem with that model is that it obscures its own political implications and denies other possibilities outside of its own framework. The historical discourses found in many contemporary graphic narratives are much different than the historical discourses that White describes because the medium of comics is inherently meta-discursive. Its visual discourse foregrounds its own artificiality.

The unique properties of the medium of comics grant authors some of the tools necessary

to construct a distinct and challenging mode of historical representation. If literary realism is still the dominant genre for creating unmediated renditions of historical subject matter, then graphic narratives are provocative because they are incapable of rendering formal transparency (White, *Tropics* 42). The medium of comics is often associated with a familiar set of negative qualities that equate it with unreliability. These conventions are arbitrary; nevertheless, if social significations shape cultural texts, as semioticians Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress suggest, then the stylized visual language of comics marks it as being inaccurate and artificial (2-3). Furthermore, Chute and DeKoven argue in their introduction to their special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* that:

Graphic narrative, through its most basic composition in frames and gutters . . . calls a reader's attention visually and spatially to the act, process, and duration of interpretation. Graphic narrative does the work of narration at least in part through drawing – making the question of style legible – so it is a form that also always refuses a problematic transparency, through an explicit awareness of its own surfaces. (767)

Chute and DeKoven make it clear that graphic narrative manipulates the reader's perception of the textual plane. The visual conventions of graphic narrative point the reader's attention to the surface of the page and away from its immersive representative environment. Thierry Groensteen writes:

The reader of comics not only enjoys a story-related pleasure but also an art-related pleasure, an aesthetic emotion founded on the appreciation of the exactness and expressivity of a composition, pose, or line. There also exists, in my opinion, a medium-related pleasure. It cannot be reduced to the sum of the other two, but is related to the rhythmic organization in space and time of a multiplicity of small images. Comic art is the art of details. ("Why are Comics" 10)

As Groensteen suggests, the formal texture of the medium encourages attentiveness; the "medium-

related pleasure” is the product of conscientious attention to graphic details, the “expressivity of a composition, pose, or line.” The medium encourages readers to narrow their attention and focus on the composition of the page (Groensteen, “Why are Comics” 10). Thus, contemporary Canadian graphic narratives often deny passive spectatorship. They are highly interactive and participatory, and they demand astuteness and cognitive dexterity.

Chute argues that comics have the capacity to create ““annotations of time and space” that allow readers to witness the commingling of different renditions of historical events without synthesizing them (“The Shadow of a Past Time” 202). Jared Gardner makes a similar argument:

[Graphic narrative] is at heart a bifocal form, requiring a double-vision on the part of reader and creator alike. It is this feature that marks comics as closer to the archive than to traditional narrative forms. Like the archive, the comics form retains that which cannot be reconciled to linear narrative – the excess that refuses cause-and-effect argument, the trace that threatens to unsettle the present’s narrative of its own past. (“Archives, Collectors” 801)

In Chute’s analysis of *Maus*, American Art Spiegelman’s monumental work concerning his father’s experience of the Holocaust, she argues, “[Spiegelman] represents the accreted, shifting ‘layers’ of historical apprehension not only through language but also through the literal, spatial layering of comics, enabling the presence of the past to become radically legible on the page” (“The Shadow of a Past Time” 212). Chute notices how graphic narratives confront readers with multiple co-existing representations of time and space. They self-consciously foreground the construction of the relationship between the present and the past, or, as Chute describes it, the “shifting ‘layers’ of historical apprehension.” If this is the case, then graphic narratives are built for the kind of historical “heteroglossia” that Peter Burke describes: “According to the traditional paradigm, history is objective . . . Today, this ideal is generally considered to be unrealistic . . . we perceive the world

only through a grid of conventions, schemata and stereotypes . . . We have moved from the ideal of the Voice of History to that of ‘heteroglossia,’ defined as ‘varied and opposing voices’” (5-6). My study looks at a group of contemporary authors who create multivocal texts that resist the pull of historical synthesis by drawing the reader into a highly active level of readership. The unique properties of the medium of comics grant authors some of the tools necessary to construct a distinctly challenging mode of historical representation.

I emphasize before I begin that my study focuses on a select group of contemporary Canadian graphic narratives, with a primary focus on English-Canadian texts. I address occasional French-Canadian authors, but they are not the primary subject for my study. I will emulate projects like *The History of the Book in Canada* and divide English and French Canadian cultural production. English and French Canadian graphic narratives are separate because of the differences in language, in their cultural traditions (French Canadian graphic narratives have some important connections with European *bande dessinée*), and in their methods of production and distribution.

The remainder of my study focuses on the work of individual comics authors. I focus primarily on comic books, the serial-pamphlet publishing that dominated comics production in Canada for most of the twentieth century.³⁰ It is my hope that I will be able to illustrate widespread trends in contemporary Canadian graphic narrative by analyzing a few select examples. Thus, while I may focus on an author like Seth for his playful use of self-caricature and his interest in the cultural traditions of the past, I see his interests as being indicative of widespread trends operating in the work of other contemporary Canadian comics authors. In each chapter, I analyze separate articulations of historical subject matter in Canadian comics, including my central theoretical concern with such concepts as the construction of personal identity, agency, embodiment, and experience. By analyzing the way different authors describe the individual (the micro-subject of historical narration) this study accounts for the micro-focus of contemporary Canadian graphic

narrative, how it often pulls away from broadly national concerns and narrows in on the isolated subject living in Canada.

Chapter One focuses on the author Seth. Like many other contemporary Canadian comics authors, he foregrounds the very methods through which he constructs representations of historical events and experiences. He asks the reader to become aware of the medium that shapes his mediation of the past: he asks the reader to become aware of the structure and the history of the medium of comics. In *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, Seth casts his comics persona as a kind of cultural detective, searching through used book stores and magazine bins for information about early-century Canadian cartooning. Interestingly, in the earliest issues of his comic book *Palooka-ville*, readers bear witness to his experimentations with different forms of subculture. He begins in his younger years as a white-haired urban punk before adopting his signature anachronistic appearance, dressed in a pin-striped suit and fedora. Just as Seth's persona's appearance in his graphic narratives replicate the aesthetics of the time periods that captivate him, so too does Seth's own work fold an understanding of the past into the present. Seth's choice of personal style is important because it demonstrates how he adopts patterns of counter-cultural re-inscription, as described by Dick Hebdige (*Subculture* 16). Manipulating the conventions of caricature and stereotyping, Seth's graphic narratives describe the performative practices of identity as a series of shallow self-portraits.

The medium of comics presents a unique opportunity to examine issues of bodily representation. Chapter Two describes the concept of embodiment in contemporary Canadian graphic narratives with an analysis of the work of Julie Doucet. Her comics broaden what Sidonie Smith calls the "normative limits of . . . gender" (10). Smith's scholarship, building on Judith Butler's description in *Gender Trouble* of the conventional configuration of the author as a disembodied universal subject, considers how different authors re-imagine the concept of the devalued feminized body (Smith 10-11). Doucet creates absurd, unflattering personal self-portraits, while cataloguing the

grime, grit and filth that surround her life. She takes advantage of the properties of the medium of comics in order to construct experimental graphic narratives that evaluate what we might call the micro-politics of the body, the complex system of cultural representation that contributes to the formation of her embodied subjectivity. She flags the importance of embodiment for her readers through the construction of her graphic narratives as “text-objects” (Poletti, “Auto/assemblage” 101). For example, in *365 Days*, she positions her writing so that it curves around the contours of her drawings. The reader must disregard the traditional horizontal boundaries of text, twisting her diary upside down in order to read it. This simple process is one of the many ways she experiments with the way readers interact with her graphic narratives as physical objects to encourage their awareness of the material world.

Chapter Three examines the discourses of confession, which feature prominently in many different works of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative. Confessional discourses are an interesting site of analysis because they emblemize the emotional concerns of the individual. Chapter Three suggests that Canadian comics authors often construct confessional accounts that are highly interactive and inclusive. The properties of the medium of comics are capable of calling out to readers, asking for their sympathy and their intellectual and emotional investment. Therefore, contemporary Canadian graphic narratives often have the potential to draw in the reader. In doing so “comics confessions,” as I am calling them, position the reader as an intimate confidant instead of an impartial judge. By analyzing a variety of different graphic narratives, Chapter Three offers an account of the relationship between public and private space – or, more accurately, the collapse of these two categories in works of graphic life writing and memoir. It draws heavily on the writing of Lauren Berlant, who, through an analysis of what she calls “intimate publics,” describes affective exchanges circulating in certain markets of cultural production (*Female* 5). She writes: “Publics are affective insofar as they don’t just respond to material interests but magnetize optimism about living

and being connected to strangers in a kind of nebulous *communitas*” (*Female* xi). This chapter suggests that contemporary graphic narratives draw in the readers as part of the “community” (the *communitas*) of the text.

Chapter Four focuses on the construction of Canadian national discourses, analyzing testimonial and documentary poetics in contemporary Canadian graphic narratives. Wyle argues that an awareness of the influence of social class has been difficult to integrate into Canadian national discourses:

The stereotype of Canada as culturally harmonious has its counterpart in the image of Canada as free of class strife, and . . . recent historical novels, like the work of a growing number of historians, serve to counter that image of social harmony. They question such triumphalist narratives and ask at what cost to those who work for them the triumphs of the elite come, illuminating the lives of workers, farmers, domestic servants, the unemployed, and others traditionally left in the shadows beside the spotlight on “public” figures and events. (97)

Importantly, Wyle begins his study by considering the depiction of historiography in the general public. He treats J.L. Granatstein’s *Globe and Mail* article “The Death of History” as a veiled attack on some of the common practices and values that define many recent social histories (3). If it has been the project of recent constructions of Canadian history to avoid the omissions that have characterized Canadian national discourses in the past by shifting the “spotlight” onto unconventional topics, then it becomes important for my study to consider how Canadian graphic narratives integrate particular constructions of the experiences of alterity into the forums of public knowledge. In other words, I want to examine attempts in Canadian graphic narrative to contribute to collective memory. Chapter Four suggests that David Collier relies on both the visual and verbal rhetorics of the popular to create anti-institutional historical narratives. Collier’s work, including his

depictions of his own experiences with unemployment and the wrongful imprisonment of David Milgaard, subvert notions of cultural and social harmony in Canada. Does Collier's conversational, informal tone allow him to represent the "everyday" practices of Canadian social history? It might be possible to treat Collier's work, like many other Canadian graphic narratives, as a form of colloquial literature that reflects the conditions of non-professionalized communication. In this sense, it is my goal in my final chapter to describe the inclusive, communicative gestures that permeate the contemporary graphic narrative of Canada.

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- ¹ Seminal comics theorist Thierry Groensteen echoes a similar point when he describes the visual conventions of graphic narrative: “[Comics] are, unlike other drawings, narrative and not illustrative, executed on a very small surface and destined to be reproduced” (“Why are Comics” 9).
- ² The first graphic narratives published in North America were labelled “comics” after publishers and audiences conflated the medium with its most familiar content: the humorous gag cartoon. The popularity of the term “comics” persisted, even after newspapers and other periodicals started publishing non-humorous graphic narratives (Harvey 36). The ambiguous term “graphic novel” continues in the medium’s tradition of inaccurate labelling. Though the term “graphic novel” has now often been used indiscriminately to describe all contemporary comics, it is best understood primarily as a marketing term that designates long-format graphic narratives. The term is misleading because it inappropriately stresses the novelistic impulse of recent graphic narratives, while, in practice, most “graphic novels” are anthologized collections of serialized comic books and comic strips that do not conform to the conventional standards of extended prose fiction.
- ³ For the purposes of this study, I define the “contemporary” time period as beginning in the late 1980s.
- ⁴ See also Deleuze and Guattari’s inventive work of cultural theory concerning schizophrenia, which they treat as an ambiguous and contradictory mental condition with tremendous symbolic importance. Although my research is not highly invested in their theories, they have heavily influenced certain descriptions of contemporary cultural life: “their discussion of schizophrenia has in some sectors become emblematic of postmodernism” (Buchanan).
- ⁵ I will only use the term “schizogenetic” in the rest of my study, although I treat it as being

interchangeable with the term “schizogenic.”

- ⁶ See David Kunzle’s “Rodolphe Töpffer’s Aesthetic Revolution.” Most comics scholars begin the history of comics with Rudolph Töpffer, a nineteenth-century writer, cartoonist, and theorist. Töpffer’s work defines three of the most important formal features of graphic narrative: 1) the central importance of the interaction between the visual and the verbal, 2) the medium’s preoccupation with exaggeration and caricature, and 3) the system of panels and gutters that controls the medium’s architecture.
- ⁷ Jason Dittmer argues, “it is up to the reader to stitch [comics] together into a meaningful narrative via the topology of images and absences” (230).
- ⁸ Jens Balzer separates the tradition of spectatorship in graphic narrative from the “contemplative, frozen gaze of landscape painting,” suggesting that comics “demand the distracted gaze of the *flâneur* . . . Constantly in motion, they set writing in verticals and decentralize the image” (31).
- ⁹ Graphic narratives have been compared at various times to the Bayeux Tapestry, hieroglyphics, and the cave paintings in the Lascaux region of France. Again, Kunzle makes a compelling case for Töpffer as the earliest meaningful precedent for the current definition of graphic narrative in *Father of the Comic Strip: Rodolphe Töpffer*.
- ¹⁰ Although Smith and Watson avoid proposing exhaustive definitions, they offer an explanation of the most common “grammars” that regulate the interaction between the visual and the verbal in multimodal life writing texts. The visual and the verbal may exist in any number of different interdependent relationships, but primarily they operate “relationally,” “contextually,” “spatially,” and “temporally” (“Mapping Women’s” 4-5, 21).
- ¹¹ For this reason, Murray suggests that the corpus of literature in Canada perpetually falls short of the universalizing standards of national history-writing that overemphasize the importance of

“great works” of literature (“Reading” 74-5).

- ¹² Contemporary Canadian comics authors sometimes work in close association with popular literature and commercial design. They draw inspiration from the humorous comic strips of Canadian newspapers and magazines, such as the work of cartoonists Doug Wright and Albert Chartier. See Seth’s fascinating account of his own experiences investigating the material archive of Canadian popular culture in his introduction to *The Collected Doug Wright*.
- ¹³ This method of imagining the progress of time conforms to what Hayden White calls an “organicist” philosophy of history writing (*Metahistory* 29).
- ¹⁴ Murray implies that her framework might be applicable to later time periods in Canadian literary history: “The pairing of the microhistorical method with the micro level of the rural region, town, or community may be better suited to the period prior to the First World War . . . Or perhaps not, for where the cultural significance of the geographic community (and especially the small town) may have declined in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, urban subcultures or the elective communities based on nation, race, gender, politics, or aesthetics may have assumed a proportionately greater importance” (“Literary History as Microhistory” 420). I suggest that Murray’s description of the shifting dynamics of Canadian cultural history is accurate, and that graphic narratives emerge from the later micro-communities of urban subculture.
- ¹⁵ In Timothy Dow Adams’ *Life Writing and Light Writing*, his monograph that addresses the relationship between photography and life writing, he argues that many different authors resist the tendency to treat photography as an unmediated representation of material reality (3, 55). Adams’s work suffers somewhat when he applies restrictive generic labels to photography, when it should properly be treated as its own distinct medium (Adams, *Light Writing* 132).
- ¹⁶ See Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester’s edited anthology *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular*

Medium. Early scholars include such influential writers as Marshall McLuhan, Umberto Eco, and e.e. Cummings. For a description of the early distrust of the medium in academia and print journalism, see Nyberg 29.

¹⁷ See childhood psychologist Fredrick Wertham's now infamous indictment of comics in *Seduction of the Innocent*.

¹⁸ In Karin Kukkonene's article concerning the use of metaphor and metonymy in comics storytelling, she describes the study of comics as being invested in a "new formalism" (96).

¹⁹ As Heer and Worcester write in their introduction to *A Comics Studies Reader*, the tendency in the field of comics studies to treat film studies as its intellectual precursor is somewhat ironic since the medium of comics predates cinema (xii).

²⁰ Dittmer, drawing on the scholarship of Marcus Doel and David Clarke, suggests, "the dominant visuality today is cinematic, resulting from (and producing) the expansive film-based culture that we inhabit" (226). He goes on to describe the pervasive influence of this cinematic culture, how it leads to "our tendency to reconstruct past experiences by visualising them through the cinematographers' bag of tricks – slow motion, sepia tones, and the like" (226).

²¹ See Pascal Lefevre's "Incompatible Visual Ontologies" for a thorough analysis of the challenges that face the adaptation of comics to film.

²² According to Meskin, scholars who resist treating graphic narrative as literature share three primary concerns; they argue that: 1) comics do not possess "literary" qualities, 2) comics are primarily visual, and 3) comics have their own unique properties as a medium that should be appreciated as being distinct and separate (Meskin 224). Meskin rejects these major concerns as being unconvincing.

²³ It is true that the medium of comics has possibilities that authors have not yet explored – the

medium of comics could, like any other medium, develop to the point where it abandons the traditions that have come to define it. However, I could easily suggest an alternative hypothesis; it is also possible that comics will continue on its present course and never abandon its roots in the fields of large-scale cultural production. I provide this counter-example to illustrate how such speculation is an unproductive enterprise.

²⁴ The title of McCloud's follow-up to *Understanding Comics, Reinventing Comics*, is evidence enough of his desire to reimagine the properties of the medium. He writes, "Unfortunately, there's no way to replay the 20th century with different variables to test this idea but in our imagination we can at least postulate a world in which comics never existed then in this blank slate, pose a simple idea: to communicate a narrative of some sort by placing one picture after another. Then, give some paper and pens to a thousand writers and artists, give them no guidelines for content or style, tell them they can add words if they want, and set them loose" (119).

²⁵ Although contemporary Canadian graphic narratives draw some influence from pulp fiction genres, I address more often in my study the "comix" tradition, the mid-century underground comic books that rebelled against the mass-market products of the early twentieth century (Hatfield 8).

²⁶ For example, in *Running in the Family* Michael Ondaatje ironically juxtaposes photographs with verbal descriptions of the past. He emphasizes the dissimilarity between two different historical representations in order to question the possibility of representing the past with complete accuracy. See Timothy Dow Adams and Joesf Pesch.

²⁷ I draw from Foucault's description of the dimensions of "micro-physics" in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault is not a media theorist, so I am adapting his theories in this instance.

²⁸ I treat White's writing as a valuable resource for understanding the structure of historical

discourses. The tendency to treat White as a structuralist seems somewhat misleading:

“‘structuralism’ initially functioned simply as a tool kit for doing new things with old, and often neglected, texts . . . In retrospect, White has glossed *Metahistory* by agreeing that it was indeed ‘basically. . . structuralist.’ It was, purely and simply, a ‘study of nineteenth-century historical writing’ that borrowed the tools of literary theory, and in particular applied the notion of ‘emplotment’ borrowed from the criticism of Northrop Frye” (Bann 148)

²⁹ White describes “style” as follows: “a historiographical style represents a particular *combination* of modes of emplotment, argument, and ideological implication. But the various modes of emplotment, argument, and ideological implication cannot be indiscriminately combined in a given work . . . There are, as it were, elective affinities among the various modes that might be used to gain an explanatory affect on the different levels of composition” (*Metahistory* 29).

³⁰ I was constrained by certain limitations when I chose my primary texts for this study. Because my study looks at a tradition of small-press and independent publishing, I often focus on authors who, later in their careers, reprinted their earlier work as book-length publications.

Chapter 1 – A Series of Shallow Self-Portraits: Caricature and Self-Parody in Seth’s Graphic Narratives

Contemporary Canadian comics authors often fixate on the concerns and experiences of the individual. They often create micro-histories that construct representations of historical subject matter that do not stretch beyond a specific local context. Such precision is necessary to avoid the sweeping generalizations of some methods of historical representation and some conventions of Canadian national discourse that overlook the experiences of “ordinary” life. In later chapters I describe in more detail the ways in which contemporary Canadian graphic narratives construct this category of “ordinary” experience; first, my study begins with an account of how the medium of comics manipulates the discourses of subjectivity through parody and exaggeration. Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives construct a special theatre of individuality out of the language of comics – as I will often repeat in my study, the medium’s “schizogenetic” language is fragmented and indirect, but it offers many benefits. Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives are populated by thousands of cartoon people, playful representative images with blank facial features and exaggerated gestures. Cartoons – or what I prefer to call “caricatures” – reappear continuously in comics as one of the most prominent conventions of the medium. When Canadian comics authors render representations of their physical likeness in their work, they synthesize visual information, which solidifies their identity according to a stable set of exaggerated personality traits made manifest on the surface of the drawn body. This strategy modifies some of the dominant conventions of traditional self-portraiture found in other visual media because of the serial effect of comics architecture: authors do not produce a single stereotyped self-portrait, but multiple, shifting representative personae that speak in separate unison. Thus, contemporary Canadian comics authors create multiple autobiographical accounts in their graphic narratives that are always inadequate. The

drawings make claims about the author's subjectivity while, at the same, rejecting the possibility that any single representative drawing is capable of crystallizing the author's experiences. Thus, through the methods of caricature, Canadian comics authors coordinate subjectivity through a series of shallow self-portraits.

This chapter focuses on the work of comics author Seth as a representative example for the formal methods of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative. His work delves into the benefits and demands of caricature as a strategy of visual composition and as a method of self-presentation. In his graphic narratives, Seth obsesses over the medium of comics. As Seth's persona mentions at the beginning of his fictionalized autobiography *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, "It seems like I'm always relating things that happen to me back to some mouldy old comic gag or something like that" (2). I see this declaration as the operating principle that motivates Seth's work as a whole. He is fascinated with the traditions and the history of the medium of comics, and he includes them throughout his work.

Seth's methods of visual composition offer the reader a wealth of suggestive visual information with only a few bare details. When Seth creates an autobiographical persona in his graphic narratives, he faces a series of decisions. How will he construct his representative drawings? What features of human anatomy does he include? On the opening page of *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (henceforth *It's a Good Life*), readers find a typical example of Seth's methods of visual composition. Seth's persona walks through the streets of London, Ontario. Seth replicates his physical appearance with a few careful lines (Fig. 1). His compositional strategy is consistent across the entire page. He surrounds his persona with other representative drawings rendered with similar methods. Seth establishes the outline of a two-dimensional human form walking down the street. His persona's face, like his body, is composed of a collection of elemental shapes: a circle shields his eyes and a single straight line creates the impression of a mouth. When Seth zooms in and replicates



Fig. 1. Seth's comics persona walking down the street in London, Ontario (*It's a Good Life* 1).

the distinct morphology of his facial features in more detail in the third panel, he still only applies bare brushstrokes that only tentatively suggest form and figure (Fig. 1). He avoids clear verisimilitude, choosing instead stylized and simplified visual information.

The medium of comics is self-consciously unreliable. The highly stylized drawings of graphic narrative violate many of the conventions of photographic realism. Caricatures are representational drawings that follow some of the rules that govern mimesis in visual artwork, such as linear perspective and shading. However, if caricatures are embedded in a system that invests them with specific social values, then they are incapable of rendering clear verisimilitude because of the low modality of the visual field (Hodge and Kress 2-3). All caricatures may be interpreted by readers as being unreliable, because their visual rhetoric depends on the simplification of detail and the language of exaggeration, absurdity, and stereotype – hence, Seth’s cartooned drawings are “stylized.” Therefore, it is remarkable that contemporary Canadian comics authors create works of life writing and historical narrative in the medium of comics, because their drawings deny clear documentary reference: they create images that seem incapable of offering reliable representations of the people and the events of the past because those images are so exaggerated and stylized. However, as I will explain in more detail in Chapter Four, under certain conditions these seeming limitations only strengthen the rhetorical credibility of the text, because the incompleteness of the visual field testifies to its sincere immediacy as testimonial document.

There is an irony that marks the central argument of this chapter. My overall study suggests that contemporary Canadian graphic narratives often construct accounts of the past that focus on the experiences of the individual. They resist the kind of sweeping generalizations that often result from broad speculations about large groups of people. Therefore, it is ironic that I focus on “caricature,” because that concept often involves generalizations and stereotyping in other contexts. I see Canadian graphic narratives as strategizing complex methods of self-representation. Writing

about the concept of “experience” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Joan W. Scott wonders how it might be possible to historicize experience without generalization (33). Scott, drawing on the theories of Gayatri Spivak, argues that it should be possible to “make visible the assignment of subject-positions” (Spivak qtd. in Scott 33). She adds that it would be necessary, in such accounts, to historicize experience by articulating an understanding of the “processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced” (Scott 33). The language of graphic narrative, which is based on generalization and stereotype, is uniquely positioned to articulate such an understanding of historical experience. Seth, like many other contemporary Canadian comics authors, profits from caricature as a formal method, because it gives him the tools capable of articulating a multifaceted self-in-process. In Seth’s graphic narratives he takes two separate actions simultaneously: he offers an autobiographical account while, at the same time, criticizing the concept of stable identity.

In contemporary Canadian graphic narratives readers often encounter the following compositional strategy: the author effaces the concept of cohesive selfhood, while acknowledging the relational qualities of subjectivity that emerge through social contact and communication. Authors often narrow in to describe the experiences of the individual, but then situate that description in a relation context: the isolated subject existing in a network of other people. In the following chapter, I provide an account that partly explains how I arrived at my definition of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative as a body of literature often dominated by the dual concepts of “sketch composition” and “split generation.” Contemporary comics authors generate absurd cartoons that exaggerate physical morphology. Their graphic narratives may become schizophrenic, because they are full of so many drawings that grotesquely alter human form and action. These methods are somewhat fragmented and erratic but, by disregarding the goals of consistency and cohesion, contemporary Canadian comics authors may simultaneously account for the experiences of the individual subject while acknowledging wider social contexts. They retreat

from the alienating isolation of individualism in favour of an embedded, socially constructed account of subjectivity.

1. Seth's drawing style: the façade of calm

Seth, born Gregory Gallant, is one of the most prominent contemporary comics authors in Canada. Since 1991, he has been writing and drawing his own comic book, *Palooka-ville*. He serialized his first extended graphic narrative between 1993 and 1996, reprinting it later as a collected work (*It's a Good Life*). In addition to Seth's work on *Palooka-ville*, he has published an assortment of other stand-alone graphic narratives, including *Wimbledon Green* (2005), *George Sprott (1894-1975)* (2009), and *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* (2011). Seth's work has been anthologized in many of the most prominent collections of contemporary graphic narrative, including Jessica Abel and Matt Madden's widely-circulated series of anthologies *America's Best Comics* and Ivan Brunetti's *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories*.¹ Seth has worked as a book designer, most notably on the collected works of Charles Shultz and John Stanley. His illustrations have appeared in countless magazines and newspapers, including *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *Collier's*. In 2005 he exhibited his drawings at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. He has been profiled in national Canadian publications, including the *Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*, and he has been interviewed by the CBC on both television and radio. In short, Seth is a prolific author and a public representative of the comics community in Canada.

Many comics authors develop a stable set of compositional strategies for synthesizing visual information. In some works of graphic narrative the presence of caricature is more obvious than in others, but caricature is almost always present in some form. Almost all graphic narratives contain cartoon drawings. At the same time, each individual act of caricature is idiosyncratic, as though every drawing bears the signature of the author who created it. In the early years of Seth's professional

career he discovered his own personal drawing techniques. He developed consistent methods of simplification and exaggeration for his drawings. It is possible to chart the development of his methods through his sketchbook, *Vernacular Drawings*. This abridged collection begins with Seth's sketches from 1989, at the point in his career when he started working independently and publishing his own graphic narratives. *Vernacular Drawings* suggests that Seth carefully designed the methods of cartooning that he would use to compose the visual field in his graphic narratives. His drawings are meticulously planned, even in his sketchbook. The tone of *Vernacular Sketches* is consistent, oscillating back and forth between ironic humour and dour melancholy. Seth's muted colours and dominant shadows make most of his compositions look drab. They are contemplative, rarely depicting speed or movement: even when Seth depicts a collection of superheroes, he has them absently staring off into space, as though they were posing for a classroom photograph (104). Seth rejects the kind of kinetic dynamism that characterizes the Kirby-esque adventure comics of the 1960s. He instils instead a sense of calm into the visual rhetorical structure of his drawings with elegant and minimalistic compositional methods.

Seth infuses his work with the imprint of handcrafted irregularity. Making his work as artificer obvious to his audience, he articulates an ethos of self-revelation and transparency. He re-imagines the aesthetics of modernist graphic design, which idealize clarity and elegance (Heward 17). Unlike artists who render objects differently depending on their position in the background or the foreground, Seth draws all figures and buildings in his graphic narratives using the same hand-drawn techniques. Even the borders of the panels are drawn with the same quivering line. His smooth brushstrokes vary in thickness and consistency; they replicate the effect of a "weighted line" that is "gestural. . . calligraphic . . . almost to the point of a pictogram" (Myers 176). However, in contrast to the methods of some other contemporary autobiographical authors, Seth's drawings do not promote anxiety through jarring line-work.² The flowing tranquillity of Seth's personalized

brushstroke envelops the comics page.

Seth's authority as an author depends on a system of value that prizes the reliable effect of casual compositions. In the introduction to his sketchbook, Seth describes his creative process and writes that the majority of his sketches were based on a motley collection of textual sources, the "paper ephemera that endlessly passes through [his] studio," including old yearbooks and photographs of early-twentieth-century entertainers, silent film stars, and vaudevillian actors (4). Ironically, Seth's declaration – his reliance on "paper ephemera" and other soon-to-be-forgotten reference material to create his simple drawings – lends him authority as an author. He frames his work as uninhibited but sincere expressions. In this respect, Seth's drawings replicate the rhetoric of the visual and verbal sketch – a topic I explore in more detail with my analysis of "sketchbook vernaculars" in my fourth chapter. Alison Byerly argues that sketchers preserve "a sense of spontaneity" ("Effortless Art" 355) by casting themselves in the role of "the casual artist, the type of dilettantish observer, or *flâneur*" ("Effortless Art" 350). She elaborates, arguing, "The sketch embraces a certain ease or even disdain; the artist *could* draw a detailed portrait if he wished, but chooses to give a rapid impression of certain elements of the scene rather than elaborate them into a complete picture" ("Effortless Art" 349). Byerly concludes by describing the benefits of this strategy: "Like the visual sketch, the literary sketch relies on an apparent absence of intentionality to validate its disinterested truthfulness" ("Effortless Art" 355). Seth carefully manipulates his drawing to suggest inattentiveness. He embraces the logic of the sketch – the seeming spontaneity of subjective impressions – and applies it to compose the visual field in his graphic narratives. As I will explain in the final section of this chapter, caricatures in graphic narratives, unlike literary or visual sketches where improvisation and simplification are meant to create the impression that the text is giving unmediated access to material existence, set the stage for the author's self-reflexive performance of authorship.

Seth's visual oeuvre has been remarkably consistent over the course of his career. His work as a commercial illustrator depends on consistency: he created a professional brand to lend himself notoriety as an artist.³ Thus, the consistency of Seth's personal style is not inevitable, but a conscious compositional choice (Wolk 125). In *Reading Comics*, Douglas Wolk argues that cartooning "style" offers many intriguing interpretive possibilities: "the fact that drawing style is the most immediate aspect of comics means that what you see when you look at a comic book is a particular, personal version of its artist's vision – not what the artist's eye sees, but the way the artist's mind interprets sight" (125). I would like to describe the compositional strategies of graphic narrative without relying on Wolk's terminology, which adopts a congratulatory rhetoric that celebrates the "artist's vision" (125). Furthermore, his assessment of "style" is misleading because it imagines a uniformity that does not necessarily exist. "Style" in graphic narrative is more accurately described as a set of compositional strategies that authors choose to compose their representative drawings. Seth's methods are not always identical.⁴ Despite the casual appearance of his drawings, Seth deliberately crafts his visual compositions. They only create the impression of inattention. They are blunt and subtle at the same time – outlandish images crafted in minute detail.

Seth controls the reading experience with his drawings in order to emphasize calm and ease. If we return to the opening panels of *It's a Good Life* with the image of Seth walking down the streets of London, it is possible to describe some of the common compositional techniques that reappear throughout Seth's graphic narratives. In his introduction to Seth's work, Todd Hignite describes Seth's "laconic brush strokes with minimal touch of color and shadow" ("Seth" 194). Seth relies on a form of visual minimalism that values quiet, understated, and comforting drawings. In *It's a Good Life* Seth limits his palette to a simple combination: black ink on faded yellow paper with a muted blue shading colour, which, according to some theories of compositional design, encourages feelings of relaxation (Myers 309).⁵ *It's a Good Life* is printed on thick paper stock that not only replicates the

faded appearance of oxidized paper but also bridges the limited colour gap between the black ink and the blue colouring. This narrow range of colour lowers the level of contrast and, consequently, causes all the images on the page to fade away from the reader to a comfortable distance (Myers 235). Seth's drawings are not completely two dimensional, but they look flat because of their narrow colour palette and limited amount of shading. Indeed, for this reason, when Seth works as a commercial illustrator and strictly visual artist, his drawings can become straightforward, almost repetitive. Nevertheless, Seth's compositional methods afford him a wide range of expressive possibilities while keeping his drawings relatively depthless, immobile, and placid.

It is difficult to pin down Seth's compositional philosophy. A fitting example may be found with the illustrations he provided for his father's memoir, *Bannock, Beans, and Black Tea*. Seth spent years crafting the delicate book design and drawing the pictures that accompany his father's words. I must be clear that *Bannock, Beans, and Black Tea* is not a graphic narrative, but an illustrated memoir, and Seth worked on it only as a book designer, an editor, and an illustrator, so I use it here as an isolated example of Seth's methods. Importantly, Seth's book design and illustrations conflict with *Bannock, Beans, and Black Tea's* agonizing narrative about John Gallant's poverty during childhood: "Ironically, the public ugliness and private shame the book describes are framed in an object of aesthetic beauty" (Rifkind 419). Hardship and suffering are bound in a pleasurable reading experience: this disharmony is the key to Seth's compositional philosophy. Seth mentions in an interview with Bryan Miller that he appreciates elegant book design because it creates a "mobile of things in balance." Quoting this phrase, Candida Rifkind argues Seth is "nostalgic for the harmonious visual vocabulary and elegant book design of an earlier period when objects, if not people, were less disposable than they are now" (419); however, she somewhat misinterprets Seth's work by assuming he completely endorses the ideals of textual harmony. Seth only creates the façade of calm. As Villy Tsakona explains, the multimodal structure of graphic narrative is often

ambiguous: “In cartoons, meaning is produced . . . via two semiotic modes, the verbal and the visual . . . the visual code and its interaction with the verbal one result in the non-linearity of cartoon messages” (1171). Following this example, I want to describe the unstable (what Tsakona calls “non-linear”) interrelationship between conflicting semiotic codes in multimodal texts. In her description of *Bannock, Beans and Black Tea*, Rifkind describes the benefits of Seth’s drawing style as follows:

The violence of representation . . . is visible in the gaps between the visual and the verbal, form and content, through which Seth betrays the larger aesthetic histories and the smaller paternal memories that haunt him. In this way, a deceptively simple picture book folds readers into the gaps between the real and the representational, raising intricate epistemological questions about how a life can be shown, but also about how it can be known. (420-21)

Rifkind suggests that there is a rift between form and content in *Bannock, Beans, and Black Tea* because readers interpret the visual and the verbal separately. The placid drawings open up a “gap between the visual and the verbal” because they do not seem to match the subject matter they represent. In “Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics,” Jared Gardner writes about the relationship between text and image and also the relationship between the present and the past in contemporary graphic narratives. According to Gardner, in the work of historically-minded authors like Seth, “Nothing is unsettled by the coexistence of past and present, text and image. The double-vision that allows present and past to coexist is not uncanny, but natural, inevitable, and responsible” (802). As Gardner suggests, the multimodal interface that appears in Seth’s graphic narratives (the relationship between “text and image”) may indeed reflect Seth’s understanding of the relationship between the past and the present – I will discuss this topic in detail in the next section of this chapter. I disagree with Gardner’s final analysis. The two binaries that he describes – the temporal relationship between “past and present” and the formal relationship between “text and image” – are

both much more complicated than simple “coexistence.” Rifkind comes close to describing Seth’s compositional philosophy, but Seth’s graphic narratives are not nearly as balanced as either Rifkind or Gardner describe (although, to be fair, Rifkind focuses on Seth’s collaboration with his father’s memoir and not his graphic narratives).

In descriptions of Seth’s work the tendency has been to overemphasize the harmony he creates. In his graphic narratives the visual field is calm; however, if one pays attention to the sequencing devices in his graphic narratives, it becomes clear that he denies the tranquility his drawing style seems to offer. The images that Seth creates in each individual panel, taken out of context in isolation as free-standing compositions, are soothing and relaxed. He composes calm drawings – I might even call them bucolic if Seth did not focus on urban geography. However, the architecture of his graphic narratives, the arrangement of the panels across the page, often resists the calming influence of his drawings. His graphic narratives are often energetic, which clashes with the tranquility of his drawings. Seth often uses what Thierry Groensteen calls the “irregular and discrete” page layout: he chooses panels that conform to the needs of the narrative and he separates them along a clear grid (*System of Comics* 93-95, 98). This formal strategy encourages the reader to progress regularly through the narrative, braiding together discontinuous action. For example, the fifth chapter of *It’s a Good Life* opens with a cascade of montage images (113-117; Fig. 2). This scene employs what Scott McCloud calls “aspect-to-aspect” transitions by juxtaposing images of children playing, hockey players, and the changing seasons (*Understanding Comics* 74). Seth shows, through a series of still images, time passing by. This montage sequence functions as evidence of Seth’s preference for progressive sequencing devices. His tranquil images do not remain stable but move relentlessly from one scene to the next. Thus, in Seth’s graphic narratives, the interaction between words and image is never as simple as co-existence, harmony, or even irony. It is a complicated cohabitation. Through the multimodal interplay of the medium of comics, Seth



Fig. 2. A sample two-page spread from the montage that opens the fifth chapter of *It's a Good Life* (114-15)

develops an idiosyncratic textual language of personal subterfuge and indirect address. As will become clear in the following discussion, the unstable structure of Seth's graphic narratives makes sense because, in his work, he projects a troubling uncertainty concerning all of his personal philosophies and interests.

2. Seth's anxious antiquarianism

In his graphic narratives, Seth returns to many of the same intellectual preoccupations; in particular, Seth often reflects on his anxious antiquarianism. His persona in *It's a Good Life* is

“immersed in [his] past – wallowing in it” (41). Over the course of his career, Seth searched for appropriate methods of describing the past. It serves as both a thematic interest and as a method of composition. In *The Art of Difference: ‘Documentary-Collage’ and English-Canadian Writing*, Manina Jones argues that many Canadian authors are compelled by the documentary impulse (3). Jones begins her introduction by claiming “It has become a critical commonplace to say that the documentary is the quintessential Canadian form of representation” (3). Seth follows a similar interest, and his work recalls other genres of contemporary Canadian literature.⁶ In an interview, Seth expresses his desire to record and understand the experiences of the past while describing the elusive qualities of memory:

I recall the sense of being somewhere – the visceral feeling of being in a childhood room, for example. The images themselves in such memories are Frankenstein constructions of what might have been in the room. You almost have to reassemble the room piece by piece when thinking of it . . . These memory pictures are almost reduced to symbols – the memory reconstructed in the way you might move around the little people in a Fisher-Price toy set . . . Perhaps you can’t draw a field of grass that truly replicates the real field but you can create these high contrast images (or iconified images) that replicate the memory of viewing such a field. It’s a symbol or a series of symbols. (Seth, “Q&A: Seth”)

Seth is “wallowing” in the past (*It’s a Good Life* 41); it exerts a dominant, almost overpowering, influence in his graphic narratives, but it remains on the periphery of clear understanding. There are moments of clarity, but they are elusive and transitory. Therefore, Seth’s interest in the past is a mournful enterprise, a complex endeavour filled with feelings of inadequacy and failure. As he describes it, historical inquiries are necessary but melancholic tasks, relentless Sisyphean labours where one re-arranges fragments that are incapable of articulating a complete understanding of

previous experiences. So when his comics persona in *It's a Good Life* expresses an interest in uncovering information about the history of graphic narrative in Canada, Seth foregrounds the limitations that impede that endeavour.

Seth describes the history of comics and cartooning in Canada as a cultural tradition that is often only accessible through the decaying ephemera of popular culture, and his professed desire to discover intellectual and artistic precursors in this deteriorating archive produces an anxious antiquarianism. *It's a Good Life* is filled with casual references to the history of comics, such as Tintin, Charlie Brown, and the “holy trinity of cartoon characters from [Seth’s persona’s] childhood – ‘Nancy,’ ‘Andy Capp’ and ‘Little Nipper’” (42). It ends with an appendix and short glossary describing different comics authors and characters. Seth anticipates an uninitiated, perhaps even unsympathetic, audience, and he defends the value of the medium of comics by offering evidence of its extended history. He asserts the credibility of his position as a cartoonist by establishing a comics tradition and seeking out earlier ancestors. Discovering methods for describing the past may be important to Seth for practical reasons, because, from his perspective, Canadian comics authors have not been given the credit they deserve and will continue to lapse into obscurity.

Canadian comics authors working at the end of the twentieth century had few resources available to them for understanding their own intellectual and cultural history.⁷ For this reason, I see a common thematic interest in many works of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative: they often show an interest in the earlier precedent of Canadian cultural history. Seth has published numerous volumes devoted to the neglected and obscure works of comics authors he admires, many of them specifically Canadian authors like Doug Wright.⁸ Michel Rabagliati writes about being inspired by Canadian comic strip artist Albert Chartier (Oliveros). David Collier writes about the accomplishments of Canadian graphic designer Paul Arthur in *Portraits from Life*. Importantly, Seth, Rabagliati, and Collier all describe discovering the work of earlier Canadian artists accidentally after

searching through unlikely locations. As I see it, many Canadian comics authors built up their artistic education by becoming cultural historians. They benefited from a similar training, learning about different methods of materialistic historical inquiry while searching through the abandoned artefacts of disposable popular culture. Through their experiences of self-directed scholarship in the “archive” of comics – neglected flea markets and used books shops – many Canadian comics authors developed skills for sorting the anomalous fragments of the past.

It's a Good Life depicts a series of historiographical research methods. It is, therefore, a testament to the difficulty one faces accessing the past along an uneven temporal continuity. The central thread of its narrative follows “Seth’s” (Seth’s persona’s) unsatisfying attempts to uncover information about the life of an obscure Canadian cartoonist, Jack Kalloway (Kalo). This search provides Seth with the opportunity to ruminate about the process of historical preservation and memory. Seth’s persona roams through used book stores and thrift shops; he reads through countless publications such as *Canadian Magazine*, attempting to clarify the trajectory of Kalo’s life and career. “Seth’s” endeavours are incomplete. He makes inquiries at a reference library; he writes letters to the editors of *The New Yorker* and the office of the Ontario Registrar General; and he conducts personal interviews with members of Kalo’s family. He initiates a relentless quest for further information about Kalo’s life and work, but he only finds more pieces to collect from a never-ending puzzle. The appendix at the back of *It's a Good Life* ends with an appeal to future scholarship, which suggests that “Seth” is left accumulating historical evidence *ad infinitum*.

Because Kalo, the central historical figure in *It's a Good Life*, is the creation of Seth’s imagination, Seth is limited in the type of documentary evidence that he can provide in his semi-autobiographical graphic narrative. While the target of Seth’s investigation is imaginary, the concern that his fictionalized search addresses is genuine. If Seth already possessed information about his earlier artistic and intellectual predecessors, then he would not have to invent imaginary examples.

The incompleteness of the historical record necessitates Kalo's creation. Moreover, Seth continuously blurs the boundary between fiction and non-fiction in his work – a concept I will describe in more detail later in this chapter. Seth is more playful with historical references than other contemporary Canadian comics authors, such as Chester Brown, David Collier, and Sarah Leavitt. At the same time, Seth's graphic narratives repetitively describe the importance of preserving information about the people of the past. I do not want to advocate with my description of Seth's work an extreme form of skepticism that questions the validity of all historical endeavours – it would be inaccurate to suggest that all historical endeavours are fictionalized accounts where authors invent imaginary stories about imaginary historical events and experiences. Seth constructs a complicated form of self-analysis that criticizes his antiquarianism. He invokes skepticism without accepting it completely.

Seth's persona in *It's a Good Life* is fascinated with the events and actions of the people of the past and the fragments of their lives that survive in the present. Seth advocates a form of materialist history. Jared Gardner argues that many contemporary comics authors like Seth are obsessed with popular ephemera, including collectibles and thrift-store bric-a-brac (Chute and DeKoven, "Introduction: Graphic Narrative" 772). Gardner suggests authors who share the same interests as Seth deny the goal of perfect historical reconstruction, and they are instead interested in what he calls the "soon-to-be-past traces of the living present" (803). The act of collecting preserves the material historical archive from the sweeping tide of the "soon-to-be-past." Perhaps Seth avoids making broad historical generalizations; instead, he is concerned with the actions of individuals and their tangible effect on the material world. A materialist historical philosophy may be inherently unrewarding because it denies utopian historicism and "sees only a catastrophic accumulation of death and loss" (Hlibchuk 145). Unfortunately, the remnants of the past are still subject to the inevitable forces of decay and neglect. Seth sees in his work the crumbling material fragments of

culture as the only tangible evidence of the lives of the people of the past, so he is left with the process of collecting as the best, but imperfect, method of historical preservation.

In some respects Seth glorifies the activities of the collector. *It's a Good Life* begins at the moment when Seth's persona purchases for the first time a collection of *New Yorker* comic strips from a cluttered used bookstore, which leads him to investigate the work of a Canadian cartoonist (1-3). Seth presents his own identity in his graphic narratives as a person who obsessively collects, and his work is filled with many other characters who, like him, are archivists. For example, the fictional character Simon Matchcard in *Clyde Fans* creates expansive inventories of Canadian postcards. At the same time, however, Seth is suspicious of the collector's impulse. In Valerie Rohy's analysis of the obsessive collecting tendencies found in recent graphic life writing, what Derrida might call "archive fever," she writes:

the rational intent to collect and to preserve is inseparable from the blind pulsations of the drive; the logic of repetition essential to archive building (copying, codification, cataloguing, writing) contains another, deathly side. Each scrap added to the archive both contributes to the goal of knowledge and, by multiplying the avenues of inquiry, defers the accomplishment of that goal. (353)

Seth's comics personae and other fictional characters are often caught up in quixotic quests founded in nostalgia. Seth treats their archival impulses as pathological; the collector obsessively systematizes the material fragments of the past according to some consistent but arbitrary set of organizing principles. The desire to collect may be nothing more than an improper and unrealistic dream.

After buying a bundle of old magazines, Seth's persona stands in front of a "Seldom Seen Antiques" shop and remarks: "The world my parents grew up in doesn't seem to fit together with this one. The bits and pieces of that time still lingering around today seem like remnants of some ghost world – a vanished world" (43). It is no small coincidence that Seth invokes the discourse of

ghostliness when he describes his activities in a junk shop, because the material fragments of the people of the past – the “bits and pieces of that time” – haunt the people of the present as a constant reminder. Seth’s anxious antiquarianism is inherently unsatisfying because it is based on the theory that one of the only ways of gaining access to knowledge about the lives of the people of the past is through materialistic evidence. If I may borrow the terminology that scholars such as Justin Edward, Teresa Gibert, Cynthia Sugars, and Gerry Turcotte use to describe recent genres of Canadian literature, Seth creates in his graphic narratives a “ghost history.” He is not writing the same kinds of Gothic narratives that this term might imply, but I briefly describe this genre because Seth’s graphic narratives share with it similar methods for structuring the relationship between the past and the present. Teresa Gibert argues that authors draw on the discourses of ghostliness because they give them a language capable of analyzing the kinds of ephemeral subjects that are often prohibited from public discourses (478). “Ghost histories” acknowledge the hidden or under-analyzed subjects that fall outside certain nationalistic histories by constructing a timeline in which the past mysteriously haunts the present. Seth’s graphic narratives similarly obsess with constructing systems of knowledge that explain the “vanished world” of the past that, paradoxically, exists for the people of the present as both a presence and an absence. The past lingers in the present like a nebulous phantom.

Seth’s graphic narratives create representations of historical subjects that depend on uneven historical temporalities that resist the simple univocality of certain historical discourses. The past and the present are mutually influential in his work, and their relationship is more complicated than direct access, existing, instead, in a kind of convoluted and messy cohabitation. In this sense, Seth creates archaeological compositional methods.⁹ Robert Kroetsch argues that such archaeological methods individuate different “layers” of historical temporality that cohabit as a discontinuous mixture (7). Seth’s nostalgia avoids glamorization; rather, he uses a heightened historicism to coordinate his own

understanding of his own subjectivity in the present.¹⁰ He does not strive for neat descriptions of historical influence, finding value instead in the messy work of historical recovery. The past and the present fold on top of each other, perhaps not as the perfect palimpsestic co-habitation that Kroetsch describes but instead as a dynamic interaction. Canadian comics authors like Seth both replicate and transform the compositional methods of other contemporary Canadian authors.

There is no clear separation in Seth's graphic narratives between the present and the past, because the influence of the past haunts the present. Therefore, in his work Seth explains how authors interpreting historical evidence are influenced by the subject of their interest. His work avoids a progressive teleological rhetoric – the belief that the events of the past serve as separate originating causes that determine the conditions of the present. Michel de Certeau argues that certain foundational practices of historical inquiry separate “the past” from “the present.” These acts idealize orderly accounts of historical progress. De Certeau suggests that separating “the past” from “the present” is somewhat misleading, because it depends on a narrow periodization of time and *passéism* that overvalues rationalist, univocal historical discourses. “Historiographical labours,” (“Writings and Histories” 31) as de Certeau calls them, sometimes read the past as a stable subject of objective study; they construct a chronology that separates the “postulate of interpretation (which is constructed as the present time) and its object (divisions organizing representations that must be reinterpreted)” (“Writings and Histories” 25). In his account, the periodization of history can be a circular and confusing process of simplification:

The explication of the past endlessly marks distinctions between the analytical apparatus, which is present, and the materials analyzed, the documents concerning curiosities about the dead. A rationalization of practices and the pleasure of telling legends of former days . . . the techniques that allow the complexity of current times to be managed . . . are combined within the same text in order to produce both

scientific “reduction” and narrative techniques turning the strategies of power into metaphors belonging to current times. (31)

Thus, de Certeau suggests that the periodization of history is a continuous “reduction.” He sees something almost insidious and isolating about it, because it separates the political and social texture of the lives of the people of the past from those living in the present. Seth treats the historiographical labours that de Certeau describes as being inadequate. I speak in such theoretical terms because in some respects Seth’s antiquarianism is unfocused. His antiquarianism behaves as a general preoccupation with the material evidence of the past. He is fascinated with the objects from the past simply because they are from the past and their very textuality seems to offer him some insight. Thus, Seth’s graphic narratives, searching for appropriate methods of historical research that avoid the periodizations that de Certeau describes, fold an understanding of the past into the present.

Seth’s persona often becomes cynical because it is so challenging to discover information about Kalo’s life and work. Near the end of the penultimate chapter of *It’s a Good Life*, Seth’s non-diegetic narration describes his frustrations. He wants to abandon the project of historical reconstruction and recovery. He faces the possibility that his desire to reconstruct biographical information is limited: “[Kalo] was married. He was a businessman. His name was Jack Kalloway./ Piece it all together and it’s barely a quarter of the puzzle [. . .] / [. . .] just empty facts” (136). According to Katie Mullins, the “black sky” panels that accompany Seth’s written text ask the reader to become conscious of the structure of the medium of comics: “the author comments explicitly on how panels are pieced together to create meaning and require the reader’s interpretation . . . The black panels [in *It’s a Good Life*], then, suggest that the reader and Seth share a similar task of extracting meaning from events in the narrative” (19). To this insightful analysis I would also add that this sequence suggests that the process of historical interpretation is similarly complex. The

darkened panel that separates the final two statements widens the gap between the “empty facts” that Seth has accumulated about Kalo’s life and the “puzzle” of historical reconstruction.

Seth’s persona struggles to comprehend the historical influences that are so important to him. In the fifth section of *It’s a Good Life*, Seth’s persona watches a spectacular fireworks display while reciting a far-ranging monologue concerning Canadian popular literature. The fireworks serve as a symbol of loss and decay: even these spectacular, city-wide, public events instantly pass away. “Seth’s” face is often covered in shadow, even though the streets of the city are brilliantly illuminated (122). At one crucial moment the fireworks spotlight Seth’s face, just when he describes reading *Canadian Magazine* (119). The repetition of his persona’s shadowy face in the first and third panel suggests that the majority of Seth’s life is spent “in the dark.” He only experiences fleeting moments of clarity that fade into darkness.

Seth casts himself as a cultural detective engrossed in the history of Canadian popular culture. In *It’s a Good Life*, Seth’s persona becomes obsessed with the life of one particular cartoonist, but he can only discover partial information about his life. He often repeats his frustration: “It occurred to me the other day that maybe I’m wasting my time looking for Kalo. He’s a kind of nobody – a one-hit wonder” (125). Importantly, Seth’s persona worries that he will be unable to assemble a clear account of Kalo’s life because the man is a “nobody.” Kalo, according to “Seth’s” assessment at this point in the narrative, is unremarkable. However, it is important to consider that he is speaking to his intellectual and emotional confidant “Chet” (the comics persona of fellow Canadian cartoonist Chester Brown).¹¹ I see this as a key point in the narrative, because it articulates skepticism without resorting to nihilistic cynicism. Chet’s concerned face implies an ironic reading of Seth’s pessimistic rambling. The correct reading of the scene is that Seth’s search for information about Kalo is difficult but necessary. Seth’s anxious antiquarianism offers certain advantages. It is true that Seth’s complicated understanding of the relationship between the present and the past

makes it difficult for him to create a complete interpretation of Kalo's life; however, his methods are beneficial because they give him access to subject matter from the historical record that might otherwise remain hidden. It is worth noting again that Kalo is a fictionalized construction of Seth's imagination. He stands in place as a representative figure, highlighting genuine concerns. Kalo, the "nobody," is precisely the type of historical personage who is often neglected by conventional historical record-keeping. He is not an influential and celebrated public figure. Access to information about his life, and people like him, is perhaps only available through the materialist archive, as unsatisfying as that realization may be. "Seth's" interest in cultural history originates in his desire to form interpersonal connections, to bridge the gap between the present and the people who he sees as being his intellectual and emotional ancestors.

Seth's anxious antiquarianism is melancholic because the past is accessible primarily through either living memory or fragmentary material evidence. In interviews Seth describes some of his inspirations. He based his fictional graphic narrative *Clyde Fans* on his memories of an abandoned business in Toronto. Describing his first encounter with its storefront, he remembers: "There is an actual old storefront in Toronto called The Clyde Fans Company. It looks exactly like the one you see when I draw it. It was still in business when I first used to walk by it and I always noticed it because it was a nice old storefront" (Seth, "Palookaville – Clyde Fans Creator Seth"). The description of the scene draws the audience into an imagined sensory experience with the storefront. Seth's account of the actual "Clyde Fans" store in Toronto recalls another moment in *It's a Good Life* when Seth's persona similarly peers into a storefront window while wandering the streets of Toronto. Curious about the history of the people who inhabited the building, Seth's persona laments: "I can't walk by a place like this without my apologies going out to the poor thing/ All that beautiful '30's detailing – wood shelves, tile floors, tin ceilings [. . .] and all of it abandoned, crumbling [. . .] forgotten. It kills me" (42). The second half of his description is juxtaposed with an image of "Seth's" face cemented

against the storefront window, pushing with such force that the brim of his hat is bending backwards. He makes an imprint on the window with his chin and hands. The window acts as a metaphorical barrier that separates Seth from the remnants of the decaying past. As a way of seeing past the window, Seth creates a work of graphic narrative that represents the soon-to-be-forgotten past, including the lives of people who are long dead but still linger in the present through material evidence. As Seth remarks, “I used to always wonder who they were and bit by bit I started putting together a story” (Seth, “Palookaville – Clyde Fans Creator Seth”).

3. Avoiding isolation

Seth maintains a complicated relationship with the past, wavering somewhere between reverence and dread. He fixates on the slow death march of decline and decay and still he resists the comforts of simple nostalgia. He treats his obsession with the past with skepticism, as he searches through the material archive of popular culture with some ambivalence. Seth’s persona in *It’s a Good Life* often worries about how his own obsessive historicism may be a self-delusion. At one point, he interrupts his own wallowing monologue and descends further into desperation and inarticulate malaise. Momentarily arresting his “profoundly stupid and futile conversation” (123) with Chet, he begins describing his nostalgic tendencies. The scene is crucial because it dramatizes the most cynical implications of Seth’s anxious antiquarianism. At the precise moment of extreme exasperation, moments before Seth’s persona rejects his search for Kalo, the project that structures the progression of the narrative, he describes his failed attempts to combat the decay of the material archive of the past and uncover information about his intellectual forebear. At this moment he treats his interest in the soon-to-be forgotten remnants of the past as a hopeless struggle and meaningless enterprise: “things are obviously getting worse from year to year” (124). Tellingly, the bottom triptych during this scene creates a self-centered composition where it appears as though Seth’s persona is

having a conversation with himself (Fig. 3). Seth dramatizes the final results of his unhealthy cynicism. When his persona turns his head back to address the previous panel, he is spiralling into solipsism. The progression of the panels is jarring, as it interrupts the customary left-to-right reading practices of comics. Seth's persona directs the reader's eye back to the previous panel in order to complete his obsessive self-dialogue. Thus, the structure of the narrative suggests that readers should question the validity of "Seth's" skepticism. If his historical inquiries are an act of empathy, then the rejection of this search is an unhealthy inward regression.

In his graphic narratives, Seth sometimes grasps for unfulfilling alternatives to escape his obsessive historicism. For example, Seth expresses a desire to wallow in a shallow world of personal introspection. He wants to remove his body from the progression of time by retreating into his own memories. Importantly, however, Seth treats these desires like a fool's paradise, a captivating but untenable dream. In *It's a Good Life* Seth's persona analyzes his anxiety concerning the progress of time while describing a visit to his mother's apartment, which he imagines as a sanctuary "sealed in amber" (12). These thoughts remind him of a series of anecdotes from his childhood that are similarly comforting. Seth's persona remembers isolating himself from human contact inside a cardboard box: "I used to like to get inside cardboard boxes and close them up behind me. I enjoyed being in that safe, confined space/ My mother's place is a lot like those boxes" (12). Both his memories and his mother's apartment are secluded sanctuaries because they protect Seth's persona from the progression of time by reaching a state of pleasing atemporality. When Seth's persona escapes into these timeless environments, he is resisting the anxiety produced by the onslaught of modernity, the processes that de Certeau calls the separation of the present from the past ("Writings and Histories" 24). Seth's pleasant memories are juxtaposed on the opposing page with his utter frustration concerning the vulgarity and senselessness of modern urban living. I contend that the later moments in *It's a Good Life*, when Seth starts to wallow ("things are obviously getting worse



Fig. 3. Seth's persona describes his anxious antiquarianism (*It's a Good Life* 124).

from year to year” [124]), allow readers to re-evaluate this earlier description of his mother’s apartment.¹² The comfort that Seth witnesses in his mother’s apartment should be seen as a form of escapism, which Seth treats with contempt. At one point in *It’s a Good Life*, Seth’s persona remarks: “No problem is so big or so complicated that it can’t be run away from’ . . . That’s me in black and white. I have been, without a doubt, a true adherent of Avoidism” (95). Although the moments of frozen time may have appeal for Seth’s persona, they are part and parcel with what he describes as an unhealthy philosophy of alienation and retreat. Historical atemporality may be a form of sanctuary, but it is unfulfilling because it feeds off anti-social instincts and leads to self-alienation.

When “Seth” describes his desire to “close [boxes] up behind me,” he is identifying his desire to remove his physical body from interpersonal interactions (*It’s a Good Life* 12). Readers should be wary of “Seth’s” expressed desire for isolation because Seth’s graphic narratives often depict the anxious search for emotional and intellectual community. Seth’s solipsistic desires conflict with the content of the majority of his graphic narratives, which often show characters wandering through the streets of urban centres in Canada, boarding trains or other forms of transport. He shows a suspicion in his work of the restrained social interactions that define etiquette in public places, as well as the remoteness of middle-class individualism (Moore-Gilbert 18). Just like the Canadian novels that Lisa Salem-Wiseman writes about in “Divided Cities, Divided Selves: Portraits of the Artist as Ambivalent Urban Hipster,” Seth’s graphic narratives negotiate the twin poles of engagement and detachment (114). In *It’s a Good Life*, Seth’s persona seems ambivalent, even antagonistic, to the other people who walk past him as he wanders the streets of Toronto. Maia Joseph, writing about some of the dynamics of contemporary urban poetics in Canadian cities, writes: “The flâneur’s relationship to the city has been associated with idleness, voyeurism, social alienation and anxiety, and distraction” (159). Joseph focuses on the social dynamics present in a different Canadian city, Vancouver, but I see in her analysis some provocative similarities with Seth’s

work about Toronto. In particular, Joseph pinpoints the kind of anxiety that preoccupies Seth's imagination. Salem-Wiseman, drawing on the writing of Erving Goffman, describes the predominance of a strategy of "civil inattention" among members of contemporary urban communities: this strategy requires that strangers give "enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present, while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design" (Goffman qtd. in Salem-Wiseman 11). Daniel Coleman argues that strategies of social civility are prominent in Canadian cities because of the continued influence in social situations of outdated models of British civility (4, 10). This situation leads to the isolating social practices that can often dominate contemporary Canadian urban living, what Lyn Lofland calls "co-presence without co-mingling" (qtd. in Salem-Wiseman 11).¹⁵ Seth's graphic narratives dramatize two conflicting desires: to escape social interactions while still interacting with others. Despite "Seth's" expressed desire to retreat into an atemporal internal world of memory, Seth emphasizes in his graphic narratives his own embodied subjectivity as a person inhabiting a social environment interconnecting with other people.

Seth turns to the language of the medium of comics to work through some of his anxiety regarding the progress of time. In this respect, Seth shares similar goals as those of other contemporary Canadian autobiographical authors like Fred Wah, Daphne Marlatt, Michael Ondaatje, and Roy Kiyooka, who employ, as Joanne Saul describes it in *Writing the Roaming Subject*, "a range of innovative textual strategies, not merely to write about their own lives, but also to work through the experience of displacement rather than seeking simply to reflect or to represent it" (4). Seth is hampered by feelings of intellectual and emotional isolation and he plays out some of his ambivalence through the medium of comics. As I argued in an earlier section, Seth's graphic narratives produce the façade of calm, setting tranquil images in a relentless sequence. Seth employs the unique structure of the medium of comics, the fragmented timeframes created by a sequence of

still images, to represent and “work through” his feelings about the progress of time and his own desire for emotional isolation (Saul 4).

Given Seth’s anxiety concerning the progress of time, it is fitting that his graphic narratives resist simple fixed temporal narrative structures. Importantly, there is a direct parallel between the comfort Seth’s persona finds in secluded sanctuaries (the pleasurable atemporality he finds in both his mother’s apartment and his memories from childhood) and the structure of graphic narrative. When Seth’s persona in *It’s a Good Life* describes his memories, he says they are like getting “inside cardboard boxes . . . in that safe, confined space” (12). Seth uses identical terminology to describe the medium of comics.¹⁴ In a short article called “The Quiet Life of Cartooning,” he writes:

There is something very lovely about the stillness of a comic book page. That austere stacked grid of boxes. The little people trapped in time. Its frozen and silent nature acting almost as a counterpoint to the raucous vulgarity of the modern aesthetic. Of course, the drawings aren’t really frozen . . . I actually find it very difficult to look at a cartoon and hold on to the stillness. The essence of the cartoon language carries a kind of animation with it. This is true even with a single drawing, but it is especially evident when one panel is placed next to another. That juxtaposition creates a tension that implies motion and time.¹⁵

Seth preserves the desire for atemporality, for a secluded lifestyle free from the progress of time, without embracing it wholeheartedly. The formal structures of Seth’s graphic narratives, the “boxes” that he creates, are both stable and restless. In my introduction I described contemporary Canadian graphic narratives in a similar way: they are “schizogenetic”; they create through fragmentation and instability. Seth’s graphic narratives ask the reader to sustain at least two different desires, both to advance from panel to panel and also to stop and consider each visual composition separately. Again, this is the conflicting temporal structure I described in my introduction, the split semiotic system

that asks the reader to follow the progressive sequence of reading and also to “stop and gaze” (Rifkind 417). Each panel contains a drawing that seems to freeze a single moment in time, but Seth resists the petrifying influence of his own drawings using the serial architecture of the medium of comics. In this way, the medium of comics is capable of rendering uneven temporal sequencing devices. In Seth’s work, he sabotages his own attempts to subdue the relentless anxiety he feels regarding the progress of time, while still preserving that fascination with frozen inadequacies.

There are moments in Seth’s work when he seems to accommodate his desires for isolation by replicating the traditional Enlightenment theory that treats individuals as free-standing, disembodied subjects (Gergen xiv).¹⁶ On the opening pages of *It’s a Good Life*, as Seth’s persona walks past crowds of people on a snowy downtown London sidewalk, his inner-monologue provides a short introduction to the history of cartooning. There is a split here between the images and the subject matter of the written text. Similarly, Seth’s persona reflects contemplatively while on board a train en route to Toronto shortly after visiting his mother’s apartment (11-12). A distinct disembodied text of non-diegetic narration is marked off from the images set within the panel. Seth layers white writing on top of a black background, as though the words were floating in a nebulous void of interior subjectivity. These two scenes both sustain the equivalent in comics of free indirect discourse because it is unclear whether or not the words emanate from Seth the author or Seth the narrative persona (Rohy 347). Seth’s thoughts seem frozen in time because they do not match the timeframe he depicts in each panel. The images of the train travelling across the countryside mark a progression in time that is incongruous with the monologue. Taken on its own, the written narration, dwelling on the history of the medium of comics, could be seen as evidence of Seth’s preference for the disembodied subject. However, at all times the visuals on the page locate Seth’s persona at specific areas of Ontario. Seth juxtaposes regulated representations of time and space against frozen recollections of memory. These formal methods allow Seth in *It’s a Good Life* to situate his thoughts

in a multimodal relationship that continuously positions his persona as an embodied subject. The interaction between the words and the images allows him to sustain at least two different narrative trajectories simultaneously. In an earlier section I described the façade of calm in Seth's graphic narratives. Here he reverses his strategy, combining tranquil thoughts with kinetic images. Both strategies have a similar effect: Seth sets up a system of disorder in his graphic narratives. Both examples are fitting representatives of the fragmented formal process of "schizogenesis" that I described in my introductory chapter. He relies on the medium of comics to produce stability out of a fragmented visual language.

4. Caricature as autographical self-portrait: "collector, miniaturist, melancholic, narcissist, technophobe, sentimentalist, troglodyte, alarmist, prattler, milquetoast" (Seth, *Wimbledon Green* 127)

Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives are often concerned with the past because it offers their authors a means of understanding their own subjectivities in the present. With Canadian comics authors such as Ann Marie Fleming and Sarah Leavitt, historical subject matter is interlaced with a discussion of the author's own subjectivity. Seth combines separate intellectual pursuits: historiography with the process of self-identification and self-understanding. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write that historical narratives and life writing share a number of similar concerns and strategies (*Reading Autobiography* 13-15). If we adopt their definition of autobiography – as "a set of shifting self-referential practices. A site for negotiating the past, reflecting on identity, critiquing cultural norms" (*Interfaces* 9) – then life writing and historical narratives share similar goals. They both reflect on the events of the past to interrogate the present. Seth's graphic narratives are "historical" in the sense that they dwell on the relationship between the present and the past, but they are most often primarily autobiographical. Seth writes about historical inquiries because the subjects of the past interest him but also because they provide him with the opportunity to interrogate his own

subjectivity.¹⁷ Mullins argues that Kalo acts as Seth's double, as they are both Canadian cartoonists with short names who grew up in Ontario: "Seth's interest in Kalo's work is largely based on the similarities Seth sees between himself and Kalo: not only are both men lesser-known cartoonists but, according to Chet, they also share the same drawing style . . . In fact, in many ways Kalo and Seth are parallel characters, even doubles" (23). Historical research and life writing are part of the same trajectory of interest. "Seth's" search for information about Kalo's life is part of the project of self-understanding; therefore, *It's a Good Life*, like the vast majority of Seth's graphic narratives, shares similarities with works of life writing

From the beginning of Seth's career, his graphic narratives have focused on autobiographical subjects. Seth worked as an illustrator for the Vortex series *Mister X* in the 1980s, but abandoned these collaborative projects almost immediately. The first issues of *Palooka-ville* were immediately concerned with experiences from Seth's own life. He has published numerous other autobiographical comics in other periodicals, such as *McSweeney's* and *The Walrus* (Hannon 4-5). *It's a Good Life* depicts events early in Seth's adulthood in the 1980s when he first started working as an illustrator and comics author in Toronto, and the title of the work comes from one of his mother's favorite sayings. *Bannock, Beans, and Black Tea* begins with an autobiographical introduction written, tellingly, as a graphic narrative. It is unlike the rest of the memoir, which combines John Gallant's prose and Seth's illustrations. Thus, the medium of comics is Seth's preferred personal idiom. As Seth mentions in a recent 2010 roundtable discussion, autobiography will always be one of his primary interests as an author (Brown et al.).

Seth often draws on the conventions of autobiography, even when his graphic narratives are not explicitly autobiographical. In *Clyde Fans: Part 1*, Seth creates a fictionalized biographical portrayal of two brothers, Abraham and Simon Matchcard. He recounts the events of their lives as the proprietors of the eponymous Clyde Fans Company. In a feature about Seth's career in *Quill and*

Quire, Craig Taylor argues Abraham and Simon are substitutes for two different versions of Seth's autobiographical persona: "Seth has used two fictional characters that represent both sides of him: the extrovert, Abraham, who's forced out into the world of sales for his working life; and the introvert, Simon, who prefers to stay home and catalogue his exotic postcard collection" (Seth, "Modern Life is Rubbish"). This autobiographical reference is inscribed into the text because Simon resembles Seth in dress and physical appearance. I would not go so far as to argue that works such as *Clyde Fans*, *Wimbledon Green*, and *George Sprott* are strictly autobiographical. Rather, they all draw from a collection of different generic categories, including historical narrative, popular literature, and life writing.

Seth constructs nebulous texts that do not sustain clear autobiographical reference. This study was inspired in part by my desire to understand how the medium of comics, which seems so insistently jocular and unreliable, can be used to create works of life writing and historical narrative. As Benjamin Woo describes it, the "truth claim[s]" of graphic narratives are ambiguous because "non-fictional comics are inescapably hyperreal" (175). They offer to the reader a perplexing "system of simulacra contained on the page" (Woo 175). *It's a Good Life*, like the majority of Seth's work, is sometimes difficult to classify in clear generic categories. Although Seth calls *It's a Good Life* a "picture novella" on the cover, it is more accurately classified as a work of experimental autobiography or memoir. In an interview Seth responds to the charge that *It's a Good Life* "wasn't real"; he points out that "Most of it is true in a way. Just the plot isn't true . . . I wanted to write about [the more nebulous qualities of daily life] but I also wanted to tell the story of this cartoonist so I figured I would just combine them" (Seth, "Palookaville – Clyde Fans Creator Seth"). Seth took liberties while writing *It's a Good Life* and distorted his own personal experiences from his time living in Toronto. He invented people he never met and created conversations that never occurred (Seth, *A.V. Club*). Nevertheless, I still treat *It's a Good Life* as a work of life writing. Seth is merely being

playful about his role as an author, while adopting a broad definition of autobiographical reference.

Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives manipulate the structure of the medium of comics, which depends on methods of composition that continuously foreground the imprint of the influence of the author. I suggest that the medium of comics is inherently attuned to meta-discourses. I am not referencing here the explicit moments of self-reference that occasionally appear in works of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative, when, for example, Seth depicts his comics persona holding his drawing pad in *It's a Good Life*, (38). This scene is only a single moment of self-analysis, the kind that often appears in autobiographical comics; it reminds the reader that Seth spent countless hours developing his own compositional methods to create his graphic narratives. Philippe Lejeune describes the ambiguous practices of self-portraiture as follows: “The painter is, in the self-portrait, doubly present: as character represented, and by the painting itself” (“Looking at a Self-Portrait” 116). Similarly, in the medium of comics, the author is “doubly present.” While autobiographical comics often include explicit moments of self-evaluation, the medium itself embeds self-reference into the fabric of the page through the methods of caricature (what Seth calls “cartooning”). Seth and Art Spiegelman (author of the seminal comics memoir *Maus*), working together for an exhibit concerning contemporary visual culture, define “cartooning in its purest form” as follows: “the creation of a cartoon language that is infused with the actual sensibility of the artist’s life and experience in the world right now” (qtd. in Greenville 48).¹⁸ Despite some of the elusive terminology present in Seth and Spiegelman’s definition, I concur with their statement concerning the structure of the medium of comics. When Seth and Spiegelman suggest that caricatures facilitate the expression of the “sensibility of the artist’s life and experience in the world right now,” they are referring to the conscious rhetorical process that allows comics authors to announce their presence to their audience by personalizing their graphic narratives: “[it is] a way of declaring that everything on the page [is] the work of the artist’s hand” (Wolk 41). If Seth and

Spiegelman are correct, caricature foregrounds the influence of the author by colliding representative drawing with coded personal voice.¹⁹ It is an intimate process that binds an author to his or her work. Because of the visual stylistic conventions that govern caricature – the expression of the author’s idiosyncratic storehouse of technical methods – the influence of the author is constantly being announced to the reader. It is often possible to identify the work of individual authors because their distinct compositional tendencies register as a kind of visual signature. (I can remember walking past a magazine rack and instantly recognizing one of Seth’s *New Yorker* cover illustrations.) The pervasiveness of Seth’s line, the fact that every mark on the comics page is constructed with the same techniques, ensures that the same effects permeate his entire graphic narrative.

In autobiographical graphic narratives there are two processes going on simultaneously: the meta-discourses of caricature emblemize the influence of the author, and the visual properties of the medium give the author the opportunity to interrogate his or her own subjectivity through acts of self-portraiture. When Seth draws a picture of his comics persona in his graphic narratives, he tells the reader about more than his physical appearance. His drawings allow him a range of options to ruminate about the construction of his own identity. In Omar Calabrese’s encyclopaedic *Artists’ Self-Portraits* he argues that self-portraiture has been notoriously difficult to define, resulting from a simple etymological contradiction: the word “portraiture” derives from two separate roots, *protracho* (to draw something in place of an original) and *retracho* (to portray an object repetitively). Self-portraiture is not simply a reproduction of physical resemblance. It depends more often on metonymic or self-reflexive clues embedded in the composition (Calabrese 316). Artists invoke what Calabrese calls the “discourse of self-portraiture” when they announce their intention to describe their identity (30). In the list of definitions that Calabrese provides, resemblance is only a negligible condition of self-portraiture.²⁰ The ability of an image to “stand in place of” and, therefore, represent the author may depend on the reproduction of the artist’s physical likeness, but self-

portraiture is much more complex than simple verisimilitude: “the portrait was originally the reproduction of a physical identity, concerned with someone’s appearance . . . However, one can expand the meaning of both identity and appearance. In fact identity is given by a person’s image, but also by his other properties – what he possesses, for example, or what he has said and done” (29). While resemblance is a common element in many forms of self-portraiture, it is not essential.

Self-portraits are “self-enclosed microcosm[s]” that produce stagnant reproductions of the author’s identity (Calabrese 315). Therefore, they often depend on stereotyping. They are an attempt at describing an individual’s absolute and innate personality traits. Importantly, the representation of a single cohesive identity is, for many contemporary Canadian comics authors, a difficult endeavour. A representation of a single cohesive identity is as uninformative and insincere as an absurd self-portrait. As I wrote in an earlier section of this chapter, Seth’s anxious antiquarianism leads him to imagine the spectral presence of the past persisting through the decaying fragments of material culture. He is, therefore, grappling with an insecure and shifting historical framework. Accordingly, nothing is consistent, including self-representation. If identity is treated as a continuity of subjectivity, as theorists like Gergen suggest, then identity is always fractured in Seth’s graphic narratives because there is no clear consistency across time (Gergen 135).

I now come to my final point, which builds on all the earlier evidence that I provided in this chapter. Seth does not simply draw himself like a cartoon character in his graphic narratives; Seth understands identity to be a form of caricature, a paradoxical expression of inadequacy.²¹ Seth obsesses over the properties of the medium of comics because he treats subjectivity in his graphic narratives as a deliberate and self-conscious series of absurd self-portraits; in other words, he imbues the discourses of subjectivity with the logic of the cartoon. Seth dwells on caricature, with its tendency to solidify personality traits, because it gives him the opportunity to illustrate the transitory nature of identity through the serial architecture of graphic narrative. In this way, Seth, like many

contemporary Canadian comics authors, depends on parodic codes of self-expression. He presents himself as a cartoon in order to portray the construction of his personal identity in his graphic narrative as a continuous process, one that depends on his interaction with others in a dynamic social environment.

Seth's graphic narratives are based on relational theories of subjectivity, dwelling on what some life writing theorists call the "second persons" that emerge when human beings interact in social environments (Sherwin 151). Seth's graphic narratives provide an intriguing site for life writing scholarship because he creates such complex self-caricatures in them. In order to present his subjectivity as an ever-changing location of shifting relations and contradictory identifications, Seth constructs the shallow impression of stability. The cartoon self-portraits that Seth creates are the phantom limbs of subjectivity: pervasive but inadequate social "second persons." The logic of relational subjectivity mirrors caricature in the sense that they both create stereotyped, crystallized subjectivities positioned at a particular moment in time. Announcing one's identity is like an attempt to articulate a stable self-portrait, but, because of the inherent social and relational effect of one's embodied presence in the world, these identities are always inadequate and absurd.

In his graphic narratives Seth often attacks the very concepts he seems to support, critiquing, for example, his own narcissistic and unproductive desires to retreat from dynamic social relationships. Simple evidence for Seth's methods of self-presentation may be found in his choice of personal appearance. Seth presents himself in his graphic narratives as a person who spent years carefully crafting his identity. In the earliest issues of *Palooka-ville*, readers bear witness as Seth's persona experiments with different forms of subculture. He subversively re-casts his identity ad hoc, beginning first as a white-haired urban punk before discovering his signature anachronistic appearance. These personal transformations are important because they show how he adopts patterns of countercultural re-inscription, as described by Dick Hebdige in *Subculture* (16). Seth



Fig. 4. A sample photograph taken from an interview with Seth (*A.V. Club*).

always represents himself in his graphic narratives wearing early-twentieth-century clothing. In published photographs, he replicates the same appearance (Fig. 4). Clothing is a stylized, temporary, and adaptable method of self-presentation that announces his identity to his audience through an impermanent cultural gesture. In some ways Seth is drawing from the conventions of self-portraiture, where clothes are meant to regulate the surface of the body and project subjectivity (Calabrese 278). Seth's choice of clothing maps his interests manifestly onto his body. More importantly, these choices are also meant to be taken as outlandish or absurd. Seth's choice of

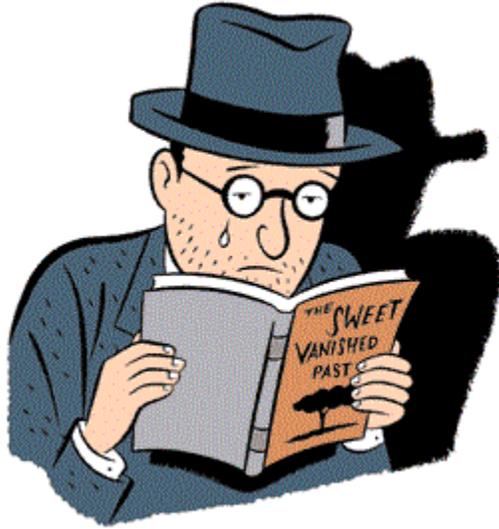


Fig. 5. The image that appears on Seth's publisher's website ("The Sweet Vanished Past").

appearance is telling because it is such an obtuse method for making his fascination with the lingering presence of the past explicit to his audience. Seth presents his identity using methods that foreground his ambivalence about his own self-interests.

Seth is draped in irony. One of the most common images of Seth, the one that appears at the end of *Vernacular Drawing* and on his publisher's website, is an image of him holding a small book titled "The Sweet Vanished Past" (Fig. 5). Seth persona's body is hunched over with the book held close. A single tear dramatically trails down the side of his weepy, tired face. As one of the most common public visual representations of Seth as an author, the "Sweet Vanished Past" image, much like his choice of clothing, highlights the importance of antiquarianism to his identity. Intriguingly, Seth uses this image to mock his autobiographical persona as a hopeless nostalgic. Ironic details – the trite title "The Sweet Vanished Past" and the overly-dramatic tear permanently suspended on his cheek – suggest that Seth is aware of the possibility that he may be seen by others as an outdated sentimentalist who glamorizes the past. These generalizations do not fully account for Seth's interest in the past because he avoids simple nostalgia and develops instead a subtle form of anxious

antiquarianism bound to an uneven temporal framework in his graphic narratives. Nevertheless, Seth does not shy away from the stereotype that pictures him as a mere nostalgic; rather, he embraces his inadequate persona. It may be possible to treat the “Sweet Vanished Past” image as a cipher: it is indicative of the methods of self-parody that reappear in Seth’s graphic narratives. Seth’s understanding of his own identity in his graphic narratives is already paradoxical and unreliable because he relies so often on the compositional strategies of caricature. In Seth’s work, identity is not a natural reflection of an innate inner nature, but a conscious form of self-production. The obvious comparison here is with the theories of performativity famously articulated by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, in the sense that both Seth and Butler radically deny interiority and foreground self-production. Instead of resisting inaccurate misrepresentations, Seth recasts parody as the very basis for constructing representations of his identity.

Self-parody reappears continuously in Seth’s graphic narratives. *Wimbledon Green* follows the fantastic adventures of its titular character, the “Greatest Collector in the World,” as he parades around Ontario searching for old comic books. The graphic novel has deeply cynical qualities that work against its light-hearted tone.²² Although the character imbues the act of collecting with the larger-than-life qualities of the tall tale, Wimbledon Green’s greatest triumphs are often unimpressive, such as over-bidding at an auction for rare collectibles (17). Like the majority of Seth’s graphic narratives, *Wimbledon Green* is both satirical and introspective. It mocks the collectors who sometimes dominate comics fan communities, presenting their actions as self-aggrandizing fantasies. Collecting is not a grand adventure but the solitary activity of lonely individuals.²³ This satire is a form of self-criticism, because, as I mentioned in an earlier section, Seth presents himself in interviews and in autobiographical texts like *It’s a Good Life* as being a preeminent collector.

In *Wimbledon Green* Seth creates other, more unflattering, moments of personal introspection with the Jonah character. Seth and Jonah possess a number of unmistakable similarities: they share

identical physical features; they wear similar clothing; they are both authors and designers; and they both adopt a mythological pseudonym. Like Seth, Jonah is an author who writes small chapbooks; Jonah's creative efforts are, however, utter failures (Seth, *Wimbledon Green* 66). In one crucial scene, a rival collector Ashcan Kemp describes Jonah with utter contempt (Fig. 6). Paired with Kemp's description is a series of images that support Kemp's analysis because they show Jonah to be a brutish, insensitive, narcissistic "prick" (Seth, *Wimbledon Green* 64). Seth's narrator describes Jonah's misplaced nostalgia as a form of anti-social neuroticism: "He made an open display of his 'eccentricities.'/ Matching his home, his clothes, his music. . . even his car to his tastes/ This was just a pathetic bid for attention./Even this interest in the past was shallow – a reflection on his narcissism" (Seth, *Wimbledon Green* 65). At the end of *Wimbledon Green*, in the author profile, Seth lists a series of descriptors that are reminiscent of Jonah: Seth calls himself a "collector, miniaturist, melancholic, narcissist, technophobe, sentimentalist, troglodyte, alarmist, prattler, [and] milquetoast" (127). Despite these obvious parallels, "Jonah" is not simply a masochistic moment of self-introspection; rather, the character suggests that Seth is at least skeptical about the qualities that make him recognizable. He ruthlessly assaults his most prominent personality traits, mocking interests that he emphasizes in his other graphic narratives. I focus on Jonah and Wimbledon Green (and the "Sweet Vanished Past" image, for that matter) because they all demonstrate how ambivalent Seth can be about the concepts he uses to construct his identity. Importantly, Seth's persona in *It's a Good Life* and Jonah in *Wimbledon Green* are indistinguishable as representative caricatures. Seth does not alter his visual compositional strategies when he switches from life writing genres to satire. He already treats autobiographical practices as forms of self-parody. He is caught up in two different impulses, both asserting and denying the self. For example, in the author profile in *It's a Good Life* Seth calls the adoption of his pseudonym a "youth error."²⁴ Seth carefully constructs an absurd self-image about which he is himself ambivalent. In his work, self-presentation is a conflicting cycle of



Fig. 6. "Jonah," Seth's satirical alter-ego.

vanity and disgust.

Seth represents his anxiety in his graphic narratives through serial self-portraiture. In each one of his autobiographical graphic narratives, Seth creates hundreds of separate self-portraits. It is a diverse collection of self-utterance. There is not a single caricature, but multiple drawings all working in separated unison. Thus, Seth's graphic narratives construct self-images that document static identity in continuous motion; though there are certainly some similarities and consistencies that repeat from panel to the next, each one is subtly different. These alterations allow him to suggest that his representations of self-knowledge are similarly mobile. The reader is faced with a series of discontinuous visual and verbal utterances that reproduce Seth's likeness and his thoughts. Unlike film (another visual medium that also creates countless representations of the human body) graphic narratives do not adhere to strictly chronological time. Instead, each self-portrait exists on the surface of the page simultaneously asserting and denying momentary utterances of self-knowledge.

Seth's graphic narratives employ a specific form of historical narration that narrows in to articulate the contradictory experiences and feelings of the individual, one embedded in a dynamic, nebulous, and essentially relational, social environment. Each one of Seth's parodic graphic self-portraits creates a separate utterance of subjectivity that draws from the conventions of both written life writing and visual art. According to W.H. New, in late-twentieth-century Canadian literature many authors use their writing to announce their differences from other individuals. These authors mark, "presence: being in the world, being in Canada, being 'X.' Not just being 'Generation X' . . . but being in – finding being through – their self-proclaimed category, one that provided the grounds for speaking, that permitted these speakers to claim validity for their own experience of life" (*A History of Canadian Literature* 322). Authors situate these "narratives of presence" in a complicated network of social and cultural identification. A declaration of "being," as New puts it, is dependent on a number of different intersecting discourses, including, for example, contradictory identifications with

both communal and individual identities. Saul, writing about a variety of different prominent contemporary Canadian authors, writes: “In trying to evoke their pasts – pasts that consist of multiple movements – these writers explore the various levels of subjectivity from which they speak. They negotiate the tension between articulating a sense of self (in its wholeness and unity) and interrogating a sense of a finished self (on the basis of gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality)” (129-30). Seth finds caricature useful because he understands identity to be a subversively inadequate form of self-expression. Thus, despite the tranquility of Seth’s drawing methods, his graphic narratives are founded on the schizophrenic language of parody and self-deception. The reader is confronted in Seth’s work with deceptively elegant and pleasing drawings. With other Canadian authors like Julie Doucet, these strategies of self-interrogation become more intense. Even Seth’s most abusive critiques are still dulled with a hint of gentle satire. Doucet’s drawings are intentionally provocative and energetic, whereas Seth’s are quiet and tranquil. Doucet, like Seth, interrogates the discourses of subjectivity and life writing, but she does not find even the modest comfort that Seth discovers with his momentary and inadequate self-portraits.

Notes

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- ¹ Seth provided the cover illustration for the first volume of Brunetti's anthology and a short autobiographical comic strip for the inside flap of the dust jacket.
- ² The "ugly" drawing style, made famous by authors like Robert Crumb, incites unease (Wolk 52). This drawing style is present in many different works of contemporary graphic life writing, possibly because it rejects the streamlined production methods of the popular genres of commercial graphic narrative.
- ³ Interestingly, Seth describes the development of what he calls his personal "style" as a kind of self-made artistic prison (Chester Brown et al.).
- ⁴ Seth drafted *Wimbledon Green* and *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* in his sketchbook, employing a design strategy that is more casual than the one he used for *Clyde Fans*. This change suggests Seth finished the intellectual project he began with *Vernacular Drawings*. He no longer uses his sketchbook to develop a storehouse of cartooning methods for his graphic narratives.
- ⁵ Although Seth sometimes changes his colour scheme – choosing, for example, light rose colours for *George Sprott* – he rarely uses more than one or two muted colours in his graphic narratives.
- ⁶ Jones begins her account of contemporary Canadian documentary poetics with Dorothy Livesay's description of documentary poetry. Livesay saw documentary poetry as an important Canadian literary tradition, drawing inspiration from early figures like Canadian film producer John Grierson (Jones 3-4). Livesay's description of documentary poetry was also, as Stephen Scobie claims, a provocation that initiated an interest in documentary poetics among certain Canadian authors: "once a form is *named* . . . its possibilities are opened up, liberated, made widely available" (qtd. in Jones 5).
- ⁷ There are few studies available that focus on the history of Canadian graphic narratives. Most

focus on comics strips and political cartoons from the nineteenth century. See Peter Desbarats and Terry's Mosher's *The Hecklers: A History of Canadian Political Cartooning and a Cartoonists' History of Canada*.

⁸ See *The Collected Douglas Wright* and *Forty Cartoon Books of Interest*.

⁹ Kroetsch popularized similar methods: "Kroetsch's own fragmentary, juxtapositional method of composition . . . in which portions of found documents participate in a collage effect, encourages a sense of the writer as an archaeological finder and provisional interpreter of fragmentary evidence, rather than the creative originator (or 'author') of a literary work, or the recuperative, totalizing agent Foucault labels the 'historian'" (Jones 9).

¹⁰ Jeet Heer reviews the theoretical implications of Seth's work, explaining how he manipulates some of the traditions of nostalgic writing: "nostalgia turns the past into a theme park, a fun place to visit but with no bearing on our lives . . . [but it also] manifests a popular need to connect to the past . . . Part of Seth's achievement as an artist is that he combines these contradictory attitudes toward nostalgia . . . For Seth, the past is not a refuge from the present but a way of criticizing the modern world."

¹¹ My study treats the collaboration between Seth and Chester Brown as an important development in the history of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative. Their shared interest in innovation inspired them to explore the discourses of life writing in their comics.

¹² Readers should treat all of "Seth's" statements with skepticism because *It's a Good Life* is, according to Katie Mullins, a form of "autocritique" (11). Seth's satirical self-interrogation questions the failures of his personal philosophies.

¹³ Maia Joseph describes the "crisis of urbanity" that exists in certain American cities. Drawing on the work of cultural critic Liam Kennedy, she describes the challenges that face contemporary social organizations: "the close proximity of strangers in the city refuses to cohere into a civic

unity and public space becomes increasingly privatized, commodified and militarized” (Kennedy qtd. in Joseph 153). She suggests that, while highly idealized notions of urbanity have been commodified for middle-class consumption, the most pervasive response to the contemporary city is fear and avoidance.

¹⁴ If the connection between memory and the medium of comics was not already apparent, Seth makes it clear with the language that he uses to describe graphic narrative: “[Cartooning] is the underlying drive of why and how you stack those little boxes up on a page to make the story move” (“Q&A: Seth”).

¹⁵ Comics theorists employ the same kind of terminology to describe graphic narrative. Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven call the discontinuous narrative structures as a series of “boxes of time” (“Introduction: Graphic Narrative” 769).

¹⁶ See Sidonie Smith’s *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* and Smith and Julia Watson’s *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*. They offer compelling arguments that suggest the conception of disembodied rational subjectivity systematically prevents some people from being recognized as legitimate subjects.

¹⁷ Gardner argues that the pathological impulse to collect gives certain comics authors the language and the tools to understand their own subjectivity: “we can see the collection as fundamentally an autobiographical narrative, one told by the arrangement of texts and images from the past to tell a story to the present” (801).

¹⁸ Seth and Spiegelman praise authors with idiosyncratic compositional methods. They write about George Herriman, whose *Krazy Kat* comic strip inspired the title of the exhibition: “With all its vivacity, slapstick and sublimely quiet moments intact and interwoven, *Krazy Kat* is a pure expression of what cartooning is about” (Seth and Spiegelman qtd. in Greenville 29).

¹⁹ According to Todd Hignite, comics authors often negotiate with the expectations and limitations

of commercial illustration. For this reason, the medium of comics has sometimes been a site where “the goal of maximum salability collided with coded personal voice” (“Introduction” 4).

²⁰ Calabrese offers the following definition of self-portraiture: “First, the work that we call ‘self-portrait’ must contain the trace of the grammatical category *I-here-now*, which functions as a simulacrum of the communicative production of the text itself. Linguistics and semiologists call all this the ‘instance of enunciation’ . . . Second, the work that we call ‘self-portrait’ must also contain a trace of reflexivity . . . Third, the work that we call ‘self-portrait’ must likewise textually manifest what we have named ‘intention’ or communicative ‘will.’ And in fact, unlike other works that simply bear the stylistic gene of their author, it indicates the speaking subject’s will to do or will to be” (30).

²¹ In “Cracking the Mirror: Self-Representation in Literature and Art,” James Heffernan describes the seemingly inevitable dilemma of self-representation: “first, the impossibility of mirroring one’s life exactly at any one moment, and second the inevitability of role-playing” (528).

²² In his introduction to *Wimbledon Green* Seth claims: “The whole thing was just meant to be fun” (“The Origin of Wimbledon Green” 11). At the same time, the project provided him with tools for analyzing his emotional experiences: “Why the passion for the material? I should probably have spent this effort on trying to communicate something deeper: perhaps some comics about my day to day existence moping about in my basement studio. That’s what my real life is all about, not auto-gyros and faithful retainers. Yet, in an odd way, I think this comic is closer to my own life than I understood while drawing it. It doesn’t take much insight for me to see the urge to churn out this story was connected to a deep melancholy” (11).

²³ The dynamics of the situation remind me of Kelly-Anne Maddox’s analysis of contemporary Canadian novels. She describes characters who express dissatisfaction with consumerist conventions that teach them to desire the acquisition of material objects over interpersonal

relationships: “consumer society has led people to surround themselves less and less with other people and more and more with objects” (88).

²⁴ Seth describes the moment in his life when he changed his name from “Gregory Gallant” to “Seth.” He now regrets the decision: “I picked the most pretentious, scariest name I’d heard, and it was Seth. I liked the Egyptian connection, too; Seth was the brother of Osiris. I was very determined about it . . . It worked well for separating myself from my younger self, but it’s not the name I’d pick if I were choosing now. It really seems pretentious to have a single name” (Hannon).

Chapter 2 – “I draw myself so ugly, I am going a bit too far here” (*365 Days* 05.11.02): Risk and Embodiment in Julie Doucet's Graphic Narratives

I suggested in my introduction that contemporary Canadian graphic narratives do not often work from a broad historical framework that claims to speak for the concerns of a widespread community of individuals. They articulate the kind of daily events that slip beneath notice with many different accounts of the past. In this chapter, I focus on contemporary Canadian graphic narratives that concentrate on registers of personal experience that acknowledge the presence and concerns of “the body” – for what could be more grounded and common than the day-to-day experiences of the body? Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives often describe the precise personal experiences of the individual subject, and, just as the specific concerns of the individual may be eliminated from the broad concerns of nationalistic histories, the experiences of the body may also be eliminated from descriptions of the individual (Gergen xx).

I wrote in my introductory chapter that contemporary Canadian graphic narratives often challenge traditions of good taste and literary value. The aesthetic choices made by some authors make their work seem amateurish and underdeveloped. For example, when I first read some of Julie Doucet's graphic narratives, I was bewildered and unnerved. I had difficulty appreciating accounts of comics history that suggested she was one of the most accomplished and influential comics authors in Canada. My response to Doucet's graphic narratives was understandable, given her dominant themes and compositional strategies. By emphasizing the unflattering events of her life, Doucet creates uneasy self-portraits that catalogue the grit and filth of her urban experiences. Her choice of subject matter made me uncomfortable, so I internalized my own feelings and transferred them to an aesthetic evaluation. My initial experience with Doucet's work is not representative of some kind of universal response, but this anecdote may illustrate some of the challenges that contemporary

Canadian graphic narratives make to some systems of critical evaluation. I now find value in Doucet's graphic narratives precisely because they are incessantly unpleasant. They scorn clear visual literacies and offend bourgeois sensibilities of discretion, civility, and propriety. However, they are not simply transgressive and shocking. They are, like many other contemporary Canadian graphic narratives, designed to be uncomfortable and confusing because these compositional strategies allow her to create sensitive and conscientious accounts of her embodied subjectivity. Through the visual discourse of the medium of comics, Doucet draws self-portraits of her body that externalize her cynical attitudes about her body-image (her thoughts and emotional attitude about her body). She maps out and makes visible the misogynistic traditions that influence the construction of her body-image. In doing so, she fragments her sense of self by making it clear that her body-image is only a single component in a larger network of different discourses. Her graphic narratives are important as works of Canadian literature because they create such nuanced depictions of Doucet's embodied subjectivity. Her graphic narratives employ representative schemes that revise cultural conventions that regulate the importance of the body in accounts of individual experience.

Sidonie Smith calls attention to the importance of the "politics of the body": she argues that the ideal of the disembodied subject "functions as a sorting mechanism whereby the culturally dominant and the culturally marginalized are assigned their 'proper' places in the body politic. This politics of the body as border/limit determines the complex relationship of individuals to their bodies, to the bodies of others, to fantasies of the founding subject, and to the body politic" (10). Michel de Certeau notes that the binary thinking that sustains many traditional forms of historical narration sustain the myth of the objective observing subject: "[it] takes for granted a rift between *discourse* and the *body* (the social body). It forces the silent body to speak. It assumes a gap to exist between the silent opacity of the 'reality' that it seeks to express and the place where it produces its own speech, protected by the distance established between itself and its object" ("Writings and

Histories” 24). De Certeau suggests that the concerns of the people of the past are relegated to the past and, perversely, replaced by the objective disembodied producer of historical knowledge who is separate from them in the present. Similarly, Smith argues that the exclusion of the body from historical discourses is a tool for maintaining hegemonic social and political relationships. It polices the boundaries between public and private discourse to isolate and to belittle certain marginalized subjects, including, importantly, women.

Many of the traditions of Canadian literary history exclude the female body. It is often left outside of national imagery. According to Robert Lecker, “the canon is frequently viewed as a dream of national unity, hierarchical tradition, or centralist notions of coherence and order” (14). As Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli mention in their introduction to *A Mazing Space*, the collection they edited concerning women’s writing in Canada, female authors were sometimes in the past situated at the periphery of Canadian literary traditions because their writing did not fit its exclusionary models: “[their] texts are not those of literary histories with their binary model of center and margin”. Such exclusions are based on an inappropriate assumption: because the female body is often pictured as unruly (as I will describe in more detail later in this chapter), it is seen as an inappropriate topic for canonical Canadian literature. When the female body does appear in the Canadian canon, it can be seen by some authors as a pejorative force that inhibits creativity. I focus now on the formation of certain attitudes in the early part of the twentieth century because I see them as formative concepts that still inform current literary practices. The literature of the Postmodern period in Canada revises many Modernist traditions. Carole Gerson argues that a small group of Canadian writers who were active between the two World Wars made some of the most crucial insights that shaped accounts of Canadian literary history, and they conceived of a history devoid of women (47). These Modernist critics were influenced by common assumptions at the time that created binaries between weak feminized sensitivity and active masculine creativity. They treated women’s writing as inferior because

they uniformly aligned it with sentimental fiction and domestic fiction (Lecker 55). Robert Kroetsch refutes this account of Canadian literary history, claiming that the *künstlerroman* of Canadian literature often involves female artists; however, Kroetsch is being overly optimistic by citing only a few isolated examples, characters like Mrs. Bentley in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*.¹ One is just as likely to find examples from the history of Canadian literature that describe femininity in pejorative terms.² For example, Dorothy Livesay, a prominent Canadian author who began her career during the same time period as Ross, writes in her early poetry about a binary between active masculine creativity and passive domestic femininity. In "Bartok and the Geranium" she describes the separations of gender:

She has no commentary
Accepts, extends
.....
And all the while he whirls
Explodes in space
Never content with this small room
.....
Wrench from the stars their momentary notes
Steal music from the moon (6-18)

Moreover, Livesay treats the culturally-prescribed feminine activity of childbearing as though it were antagonistic to creativity. In "Three Emilys" her poetic speaker argues that Emily Carr, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickenson were all only able to achieve success in their careers as artists because they avoided having children: "I, born to hear their inner storm/ Of separate man in woman's form/ I yet possess another kingdom, barred/ To them, these three, this Emily" (17- 20). Thus, as Barbara Godard writes in her description of Nancy Miller's analysis of feminist poetics, feminine creativity is

often regulated and constrained by restrictive gender roles: “women are writers whose texts manifest themselves as fantasies within an economy in which they are objects of sexual exchange, circulated within the limitations of an erotic destiny encompassed by the terms of marriage and death” (“Mapmaking” 4). For these reasons, I believe it is important to recognize Doucet, an author working on the periphery of the Canadian cultural industry whose work does not conform to exclusionary literary imagery that marginalizes the female body. There are countless authors in Canada who, like Doucet, revise these Modernist traditions, including eventually even Livesay herself, but I cite these patterns to provide some context for the discussion of contemporary Canadian literature that follows.³ In Doucet’s work an awareness of one’s embodiment is not an impediment. It is a crucial part of her account of individual experience.

Doucet enlists the properties of the medium of comics, drawing on the structures that I described in my introduction as being “schizogenetic.” Doucet’s methods are somewhat chaotic, which recalls my description of “split generation” or “creating-out-of-disorder” from the same introduction. Her comics, developing fractured formal strategies, are “schizogenetic” in their depictions of her subjectivity. Out of her erratic compositional methods, she articulates an expression of her subjectivity that focuses on the concerns of the body. These strategies offer her certain advantages. For example, they allow her to detach from her own autobiographical persona in order to achieve a more nuanced appreciation of her body that avoids internalizing cultural patterns of self-disgust. In her work, Doucet makes a clear distinction between her own sense of embodied subjectivity and her body-image, which may be unduly influenced by factors outside of her control, such as misogynistic traditions that treat women’s bodies as grotesque objects. However, as I will go on to illustrate in this chapter, her compositional strategies are risky because she relinquishes control and shatters her sense of self in order to describe this nuanced depiction of her embodied subjectivity. Not only do Doucet’s compositional strategies have the potential to alienate readers, but,

surprisingly, perhaps even perilously, they also have the potential to alienate Doucet (the author) from her own comics personae.⁴

1. Hyper-density of composition

Julie Doucet is one of the most prominent members of the underground comics community in Canada. She was born in Saint-Lambert, a suburb of Montreal. While studying fine art in the 1980s at CÉGEP du Vieux Montréal and Université du Québec à Montréal, Doucet began independently publishing graphic narratives. They appeared in small photocopied pamphlets or in local music and art magazines. Following her first creative efforts, Doucet began her career in full with her comic book *Dirty Plotte*. She published it independently at first before it became a serial comic book in 1991. According to Doucet's website, "*Dirty Plotte* began life as a photocopied fanzine. In it Doucet would document in French and in English her day to day life, her dreams, angsts, fantasies" ("biography"). Her early comic books often include works of graphic life writing, including graphic memoirs, diaries, and dream-journals. Brash and abrasive, her comics are well-known for their wild drawings and innovative subject matter. The majority of Doucet's publications are short pieces, often no longer than a few pages. Her graphic novels often collect an assortment of her short graphic narratives into a single volume. Although Doucet is well-known for her autobiographical comics, she has a diverse career, working in a variety of different media and genres. Her work has been published all over the world and translated into German, Finnish, and Spanish. Doucet was one of the first signature authors for Drawn and Quarterly, one of the most influential comics publishers in Canada (Gabilliet, "Comic Art" 476). She was also published internationally by L'Association, makers of such graphic prominent comics autobiographies as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and David B's *Epileptic*. In the last ten years Doucet has published only a few sporadic graphic narratives, including her diary *365 Days* and an account of her collaboration with French

director Michel Gondry (*My New New York Diary*).⁵ A tireless innovator, Doucet now works primarily as a visual artist, making collage illustrations and silk-screening.

In the majority of the descriptions of Doucet's graphic narratives, scholars tend to emphasize the coarseness of her drawings and the brutality of her subject matter. She has a fascination with knives, scissors, and broken bottles, for example (Engelmann 54). When she appears in comics histories, they often only describe her work briefly, pausing to mention how she is transgressive and provocative. Roger Sabin writes in his survey of comics history *Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels* that "[Doucet's] *Dirty Plotte* . . . was a hilarious, melancholic and disturbing odyssey through her everyday life, and took in the boredom of living alone, troubles with men, misadventures with tampons, and thoughts on breast cancer" (211). For Sabin, "Doucet's work is a mix of sleaze and dark surrealism, but somehow exudes a joie de vivre" (211). I quote Sabin to provide an example from the system of evaluation that is often used to evaluate Doucet's graphic narratives. Sabin provides an informative summary of Doucet's work; for example, he describes Doucet's tortured and melancholic psychological landscape. However, Sabin, and critics like him who highlight the subversive qualities of Doucet's graphic narratives, tends to overemphasize the crudeness of her work. Although Doucet often dwells on the aesthetics of anxiety, she aspires to loftier goals than creating simple transgressive trash. I concede that Doucet often writes about raw emotional subject matter, but none of these descriptions adequately communicates the ambiguities of her work. They assign a simple transparency to her alienating graphic narratives, and this does not do justice to their complexity.

The cover of *My New York Diary* provides Doucet with the opportunity to describe her dominant compositional strategies: it acts as a cipher that signals her thematic and aesthetic interests.⁶ The cover superimposes Doucet's autobiographical persona over a colourful image of the New York waterways. She has an exasperated expression on her face (Fig. 7). A similar image appears on the

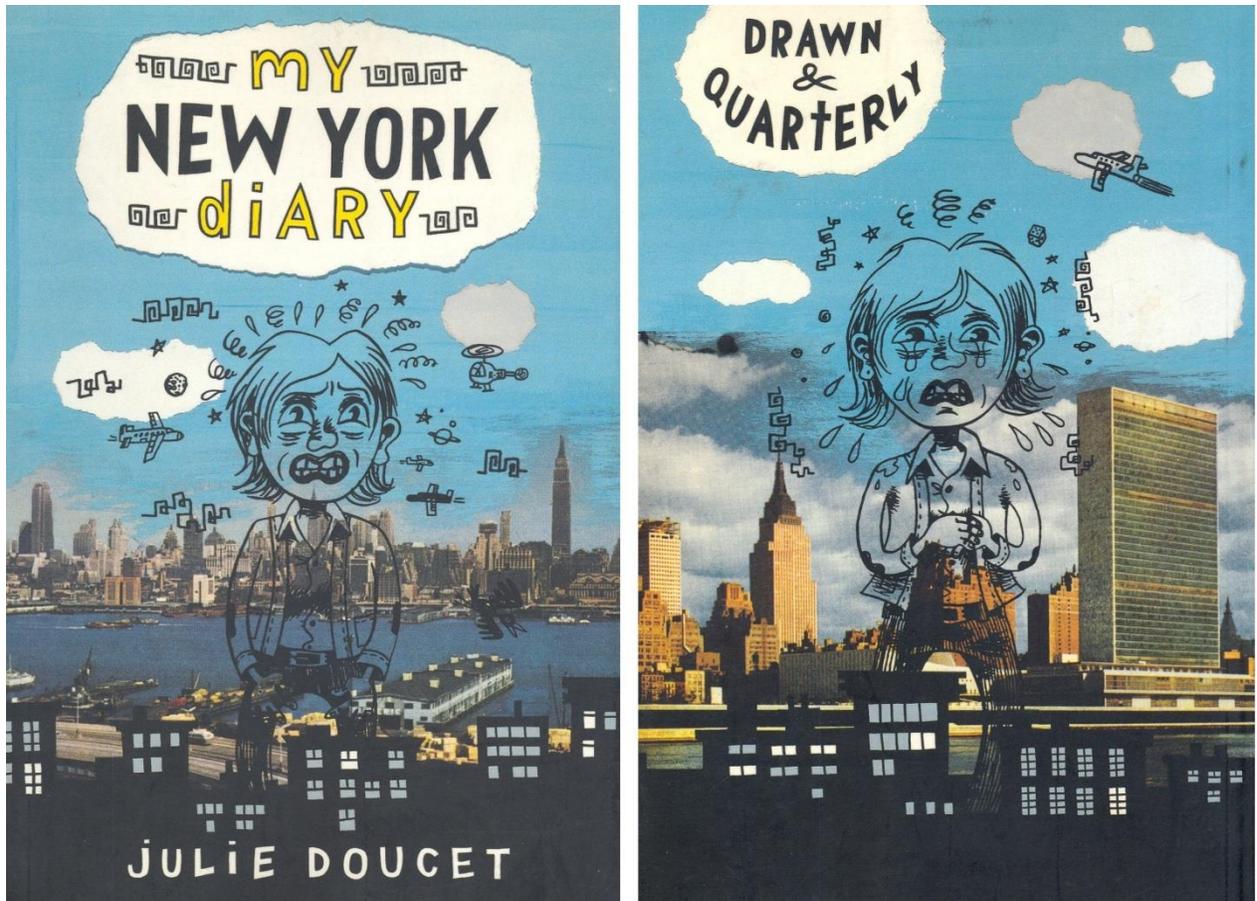


Fig. 7. The front and back covers of Doucet's *My New York Diary*.

back cover: Doucet's persona seems to be weeping – tears launch from her eyes with such force that they soak her shoulders – but her facial expression combines an awkward mixture of sadness, anger, and frustration (Fig. 7). Ragged debris and fumes pulsate from Doucet's persona's face on both covers. It looks like she is producing waves of undesirable waste. There are bizarre symbols, including stars, droplets, and spiralling lines. The composition of the page creates a link between these markings and Doucet's persona's pained expression. The markings resemble the kind of symbols that often appear in comics to indicate emotions; they are an example of what Kennedy calls a "pictorial rune" (qtd. in Eerden 245). Loops and spirals are common to the vocabulary of comics and are often used to indicate confusion; however, both covers are more complex than this

simple one-note emotional pitch. Some of the other markings replicate the kind of indecipherable symbols that comics use to censor indecent language. If Doucet is making an indirect reference to these comics conventions, then these symbols are a testament to the profane subject matter of her work. They are non-representative exasperations of existential angst and anger. With these two covers, Doucet cues a frazzled emotional register that cannot be described using a single description. Her feelings are conveyed through the brute graphic intensity of the images. The spiralling symbols have a non-verbal quality that can only be approximated in language. Thus, both cover images are deceptively cryptic. There is more complexity to these images, and, by extension, to Doucet's graphic work as a whole, than feelings of simple exasperation. Even though Doucet's work is often set in the confessional mode, Doucet still obscures the visibility of her feelings. Doucet's account of her subjectivity creates a complex mixture of emotions that denies complete transparency to the reader.

Doucet's autobiographical graphic narratives often include countless overwhelming images, hyper-dense visual compositions that are difficult to interpret. A typical example may be found in the opening episode of "My New York Diary" (not to be confused with the collection in which it appears, *My New York Diary*). Doucet's autobiographical persona makes her final preparations to leave her Montreal home to live with her unnamed boyfriend. Doucet's persona, worried about her life-changing decision, arrives at a train station in New York City, and she walks with her boyfriend through the squalor of Washington Heights, their new neighbourhood in Manhattan. The panels are littered with debris: garbage, empty cans, and bottles cover the sidewalk. The entryway to their apartment building is covered with crumpled papers, dust bunnies, and empty tin cans. Doucet depicts her persona's reaction entering her boyfriend's apartment for the first time in the middle of the page in an extended panel (Fig. 8). She represents a stockpile of material objects, a myriad of stuff, in the space that surrounds her autobiographical persona in this cramped room. Books, toys, and knickknacks fill her persona's boyfriend's shelves. As Jonas Engelmann notes, the panels in these



Fig. 8. Doucet's persona, surrounded by trash and debris, enters her boyfriend's apartment ("My New York Diary" 5).

sections swell to an unnerving breaking point where they seem like they are going to explode (54). Even when Doucet depicts an empty room in the final section of “My New York Diary,” using simple staging techniques to eliminate extraneous props, she still covers the floor with stray dust-bunnies and wads of paper (Engelmann 52). These compositional strategies are designed to provoke feelings of panic: Doucet leaves “little to no free space” on the page (Engelmann 54). Here graphic narratives are “very difficult to penetrate at a glance. The treatment of the text adds to the impression of claustrophobia” (Engelmann 54). These feelings are thematically appropriate because Doucet’s persona increasingly feels imprisoned in New York, as her relationship with her overbearing boyfriend deteriorates. The boundaries of her personal space collapse, and she starts to feel threatened by the people and the general clutter that surround her. Returning home from a short walk to pick up her mail, Doucet’s persona sprints into her apartment: “home at last!” (15). Ordinary trips down the street become overwhelming tests of endurance because she feels anxious being outside. Doucet’s persona is under siege because Doucet surrounds her with a swirling mass of objects clustered along the picture plane. In this way, Doucet’s drawings suggest impending disaster.

Not only does Doucet include a large number of different discrete material objects in her drawings, but she also emphasizes the grime and grit of everyday living. When she enters her boyfriend’s apartment for the first time, the stove depicted in the top right corner of the panel is covered with crumbs. Its door is smeared with cooking stains (Fig. 8). The stove is surrounded by garbage, morsels of food, empty cans, and skittering bugs. Doucet chooses to emphasize the creepy crawling-over-your-skin qualities of contamination. Her graphic narratives are often remarkable for the amount of information that they include in each panel. They introduce variable textures to most material objects in order to add an additional layer of graphic detail. Blank walls bear cross-hatched squares and erratic cracks (“My New York Diary” 52). People’s faces are often covered in stubble and sweat (*365 Days* 04.01.03, 06.01.03).⁷ Thus, Doucet fills her graphic narratives with anxious

marks covering almost every available surface. There is almost no free space left; she fills the *tabula rasa* (the blank slate) of the page.⁸ This compositional strategy is designed to make her graphic narratives stressful. Her drawings create a tangled network of graphic details that has the potential to overwhelm the reader's eye.

Doucet's overflowing compositions subvert the conventions of comics that prize elegant simplification. Reading graphic narrative is a delicate balancing act: authors fill their work with simple iconic images that depend on a process that McCloud calls "amplification through simplification" (*Understanding Comics* 30). Jason Dittmer, building on McCloud's insight, argues that comics become less understandable as narrative when they include more graphic details: "[violating] the visual semiotic 'rules' of comics by aspiring to representational 'validity' [leads] to a failure of narration; a reliance on the overly-explicit pornography of detail, rather than a reduction in complexity such that readers' eyes [are] drawn to the 'action'" (225). Dittmer acknowledges the multimodality of the medium of comics and avoids treating the visuals in graphic narrative as freestanding compositions. Instead, he describes the way they service narrative. I contend that Doucet's overflowing compositions amplify this "over-explicit pornography of detail" that Dittmer describes. Therefore, they make the reading experience stressful. In comparison to other Canadian comics authors like Seth, Michel Rabagliati, or Guy Delisle, whose compositional strategies depend on elegant and calming brushstrokes that synthesize visual information, Doucet includes a large amount of graphic details in her work, which places stress on the reader. As I will describe in a later section, this compositional strategy is key for her to explore the aesthetics of alienation. Thus, while her drawings have the potential to confuse her audience, they offer her the benefit of an expressive and nuanced vocabulary of self-expression.

On the whole, Doucet prefers black and white drawings when she creates long-form graphic narratives. She only occasionally includes colour in her visual compositions (for example, in her "A

Recurring School Nightmare” story collected in *My Most Secret Desire*). When she does include colour in her drawings, it is often only for a single image or an isolated portrait. She developed these tendencies in the early years of her career, when she published independently and only had access to simple printing technologies. Jean-Paul Gabilliet suggests that she, like all of the founding members of *Drawn and Quarterly*, is taking part in a tradition that began in the graphic autobiographies of the 1970s with the experimental comics of *RAW* magazine (*Of Comics* 107).⁹ I am not certain that Doucet was directly influenced by autobiographical authors like Robert Crumb and Justin Green, but she replicates many of their compositional strategies, such as their anxious black-and-white drawing style. According to compositional theorists, her stark drawings may provoke feelings of anxiety (Myers 172). The lack of colour allows her to foreground the quality and texture of her own distinctive line-work. Working in the idiom of underground autobiographical comics – replicating the style of authors like Crumb with his “neurotic quill-lines” (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 126) – she employs a visceral drawing style that heightens the graphic intensity of the page.

Doucet’s compositional strategies suit her paranoid worldview of menacing anxiety, impending threat, and danger. In her work, the reader is confronted with a tangled mess of confusing black scratches on white paper. Her compositional strategies may prove alienating for the reader because they disrupt common strategies of visual literacy. They violate the compositional conventions that direct the viewer’s eye through the visual field. In her overview of “visual intelligence,” Ann Marie Barry describes two dominant methods that theorists use to describe perception. One theory, the older theory, suggests that perception is an intuitive biological process (40-41). The second theory suggests that perception is more analytical, like a computer systematically searching for information (40). I do not pretend to venture an exhaustive description of visual perception, but I would like to propose two central hypotheses about it. First, for an individual to construct a viable model of the visual field, some system of organization is necessary. The two major

theories of perception both emphasize the importance of order. There are some theories that suggest that viewers are compelled to establish some kind of order in even the most chaotic compositions, even if this is only an imagined order. Barry, drawing on Gestalt theories, calls this phenomenon the “spontaneous emergence of self-organization in a non-linear system” (100). Second, the most plausible theories of visual intelligence acknowledge the fact that perception is thoughtful and analytical. The theories of perception that emphasize the active role of the viewer in interpreting sensory data are compelling because they avoid replicating binaries that separate the visual from the verbal on the basis of the imagined higher complexity of the verbal. Interpreting images is just as thoughtful as reading written language. Perception may seem to be instantaneous, but it takes place over a period of time, as the eye searches through the visual field and interprets key information in a sequential manner. I am drawn to Rudolf Arnheim’s crucial insight from *Visual Thinking* that perception is a temporal process of evaluation. Visual literacy is a product of learned patterns of behaviour that teach individuals methods for targeting relevant information in the visual field. Thus, readers seek out codes embedded in a visual composition in order to direct their gaze and organize perception.

Doucet’s overflowing compositions thwart the reader’s ability to assemble the visual field into working order because she crowds the picture plane with anxious graphic marks. Doucet avoids some of the devices that might add salience to her drawings. The reader is often bereft of the kind of sign-markers that might signal a hierarchy of visual information (Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images* 212). For example, Doucet rarely situates her persona in a prominent position in the panel. Her awkward use of text pushes her persona toward the border at uncomfortable angles: “The speech bubbles seem to take up what little space is left, and seem to try to crush the protagonist” (Engelmann 54). Moreover, Doucet’s black and white line-work minimizes the visual hierarchy and evens out the composition of the page, making her drawings even more difficult to interpret. The

dearth of colour in her graphic narrative lends uniformity to the comics page. Readers are left with the impression of a naive observer: they are withheld the tools necessary to organize the visual plane into an orderly sequence and, therefore, they can easily become overwhelmed or become frustrated with Doucet's compositional choices. Visual literacy deteriorates when individuals can only perceive the visual field as a single homogenous entity (Kostelnick and Roberts 48, 50). Doucet's graphic narratives are not indecipherable, nor do they resemble abstract expressionism. Indeed, Doucet's hyperframes often conform to the basic sequential architecture of the medium of comics, the comforting system of panels and gutters arranged along a rectangular grid that directs the reader's gaze according to left-to-right reading patterns. However, Doucet's individual panels are often chaotic. The hyperframe transitions the reader from one panel to the next, but many panels, these overflowing compositions, are stressful, and they take time to interpret. In this way, Doucet creates alienating compositions in her graphic narratives that violate some of the conventions that govern visual literacy.

Although many contemporary Canadian graphic narratives contain exaggerated and absurd drawings, they still follow many of the conventional rules of representative drawing that have been passed down since the Renaissance, including the use of horizon lines and vanishing points to simulate three-dimensional space. Doucet distorts these methods. According to Christopher Braider, instituting three-dimensional space depends on systematically controlling the picture plane; he uses strict, almost militaristic, language to describe the activities of representative painters:

A necessary correlate of the painterly projection of three-dimensional space is the imposition of a systematic perspective defined relative to the fixed standpoint of an incarnate observer. It is indeed this necessary formal feature of Renaissance art that justifies speaking of an 'appropriation' of space in the sense of a seizure or usurpation of it, a more or less violent making it one's own. (300)

Unlike the painters whom Braider describes, Doucet is loose with her drawings, often ignoring the conventions of linear perspective. She distorts her drawings so that her personae fly around at grotesque angles (*365 Days* 09.12.02, 22.12.02).¹⁰ When Doucet draws her boyfriend's apartment for the first time in "My New York Diary," she expands the composition, rendering both the walls and the full expanse of the floor in the same panel (5). The narrative stage opens up before the reader in an impossible display. Doucet's graphic narratives are somewhat three-dimensional, as they replicate some of the dominant strategies of representative drawing and linear perspective, but they are unsystematic. She tilts the floor to an obtuse angle, as though her person was standing in an uneasy diorama. This makes it difficult for the reader to locate the coordinates of Doucet's persona in three-dimensional space. It looks like she is on the verge of tumbling out of the picture plane.

As Doucet's drawings move outside of the simulated geography of three-dimensional space and flatten out towards the picture plane, they become more difficult to interpret. Anticipation is an important part of perception because it is goal-directed. Viewers search for pertinent information and ignore anomalous stimuli (Kostelnick and Roberts 50). Barry uses the concept of "completion" to describe this process: ambiguous elements in the visual field are subsumed into a unified pattern (54). Thus, readers rely on their expectations to interpret the visual field. W.J.T. Mitchell argues that linear perspective has been dominant in Western visual cultures since it was systematized in the fifteenth century (*Iconology* 37). Be that as it may, I do not agree with Kress and van Leeuwen's suggestion that pre-Renaissance viewers were bereft of the tools capable of organizing visual compositions (*Reading Images* 136). Kress and van Leeuwen generalize about visual cultures across time. Although it may be tempting to see visual literacy as an innate biological process that develops uniformly in all individuals, I treat it as learned behaviour. Thus, comics authors who want their readers to be able to interpret their compositions must follow some of the dominant strategies used to structure immersive three-dimensional space. While linear perspective is not the only way of

regulating representative compositions, it is the most influential. And if expectations influence visual literacy, then readers may be disorientated when authors destabilize linear perspective.

Without a clear road map, the reader's eye can easily become lost in Doucet's visual compositions. Because they use so many alienating compositional strategies that thwart clear visual literacy, Doucet's graphic narratives risk becoming confusing for her audience. Doucet makes her graphic narratives demanding to provoke a form of anxious vertigo. The net result of all the different compositional strategies that I have been describing is that Doucet puts stress on the reader to interpret her drawings. For that reason, Doucet's account of her subjectivity may become unintelligible, and she risks forcing her audience to abandon the task of reading completely. It seems like she is daring her readers to fixate on the transgressive brutality of her work; however, I want to avoid overemphasizing the disruptive potential of her drawings. Although Doucet's work is abrasive, it coordinates, like many other contemporary Canadian graphic narratives, a variety of different competing emotional and intellectual considerations. In particular, it creates nuanced depictions of personal experiences that are especially attuned to issues of bodily representation.

2. Graphic embodiment

Doucet's anxious and alienating autobiographical graphic narratives do not create comfortable accounts of her subjectivity. Up to this point I have primarily addressed issues related to formal structure, while suggesting Doucet's graphic narratives disturb clear visual literacies. In addition, her graphic narratives are uneasy because they do not conform to some of the traditions that shape the discourses of subjectivity. I describe her comics as being "uneasy" with some hesitation: they violate an exclusionary, but influential, cultural tradition. According to some of the discourses of subjectivity, the ideal subject must not acknowledge the presence of the body. Cartesian rationalism assumes that subjectivity is an acquisition that depends on an individual's

“monadism and isolation” (Moore-Gilbert 20). The imagined removal of an innate inner self from the body creates a separation between agency and embodiment (Meynell 2). Critiques of this tradition have been widespread, including scholars who argue that the mind/body division is an artificial discursive divide incommensurate with the experiences of everyday living (Campbell 27). Importantly, many of the early scholars who critiqued the mind/body division failed to consider issues related to gender. Sidonie Smith’s scholarship, building on Judith Butler’s description in *Gender Trouble* of the conventional configuration of the author as a self-actualizing subject, considers how exclusionary models of disembodied subjectivity eliminate the feminized body (10-11). Paul John Eakin argues that the mind/body divide is established along gender lines: the disruptive body is coded as irrational, emotional, and, above all, *feminine* (36). The autonomous disembodied subject depends on a binary between the rational male mind and the feminized body. These traditions make it difficult for women to conform to some of the most influential models of subjectivity: “women’s culturally mediated activities of child bearing, mothering, and caring for others . . . positioned them, symbolically, as antithetical to the ideal autonomous agent” (Meynell 5). Thus, according to these exclusionary traditions, women are incapable of acquiring their own autonomy and becoming a self-actualizing subject, because they are tied to their own irrational bodies.

Doucet follows one of the many possible feminist responses to traditions of disembodied subjectivity by emphasizing the presence of the body. She follows a constructivist approach to subjectivity and considers how the subject is formed through different historical and cultural discourses within established power structures (of gender, race, age, ability, sexuality, etc.). Her personal website immediately makes her interest in the body clear: the first page foregrounds issues of bodily representation, confronting viewers with the image of a reclining sunbathing woman (Fig. 9). The viewer must search through clippings appended to the image of the woman’s body in order to navigate the website. The experience is sardonically sexual, as the bathing-image erupts in

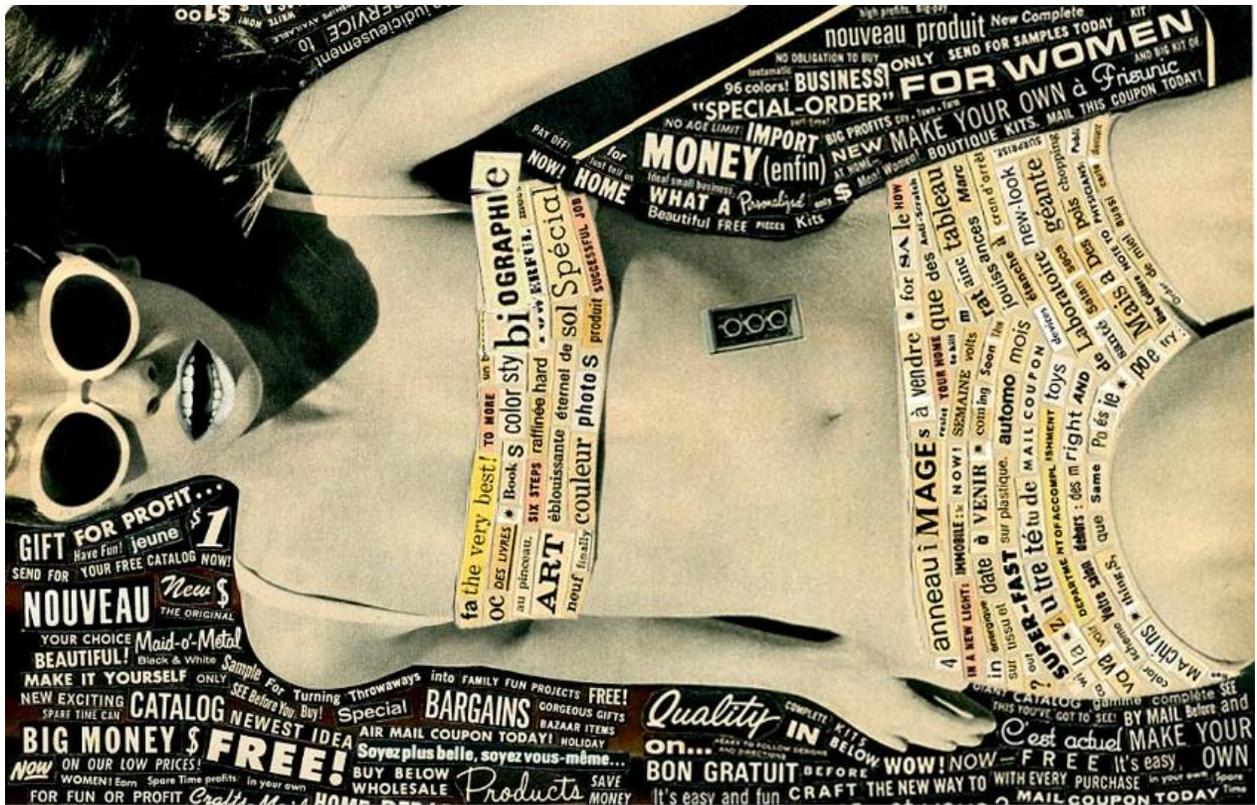


Fig. 9. The first screen from Doucet's website (*juliedoucet.net*).

mechanical “ooooo” whenever the viewer discovers each of the hidden links embedded in the bathing suit. Thus, Doucet asks viewers to become aware of the way they interact with representations of women's bodies.

Doucet continues with these interests in her autobiographical graphic narratives by foregrounding the demands of her autobiographical persona's body. For example, in “My New York Diary” her persona's body urgently interrupts the progression of the narrative through a series of abrasive epileptic episodes. Of course, there is no connection between female bodies and epilepsy, but the way she deals with her conditions is telling: it illustrates the demands a person may face fitting into a society that ignores the presence of the body. Her epilepsy is a site of tension because her body should, according to the gendered traditions of disembodied subjectivity, properly remain silent. However, Doucet's persona is unable to manage her unruly body, despite her attempts at



Fig. 10. Doucet's persona experiences an epileptic episode ("My New York Diary" 23).

control. She often worries about the dosage levels of her epilepsy medication. The tremendous stress her persona feels living in an unnerving city instigates a series of epileptic episodes (Engelmann 54). Because she is caught in a claustrophobic relationship with her controlling boyfriend, her condition escalates. There are only a few signs that foreshadow the first epileptic episode in “My New York Diary” – Doucet’s persona briefly mentions her epilepsy while visiting a clinic – so the seizure comes almost as a complete shock. Her persona has a subdued, though awkward, conversation about job applications with her boyfriend, before she is suddenly overcome with confusion. Doucet interrupts the progression of the narrative to depict her persona sitting stunned on her chair babbling in French (Fig. 10). The captioned narration supplies an explanation of the epileptic episode that is removed from the events represented in the rest of the panel. Doucet widens the separation between the retrospective “I” narrator and her comics persona at the moment of the seizure because the seizure renders Doucet’s persona incapacitated and, therefore, mute. When Doucet’s persona experiences her next epileptic episode, it is even more jarring (Fig. 11). Her boyfriend’s anxious words hang in the terminal panel at the bottom of the page: “Julie?.../ Julie are you ok now?” (30). His questions serve as both a sign of Julie’s absence (“Julie?”) and as an open-ended interrogation of her physical well-being (“Julie are you ok now?”). Curiously, Doucet removes her persona’s body at the exact moment when it is announcing its presence most traumatically. In his insightful analysis of Doucet’s graphic narratives, Engelmann writes: “epilepsy is primarily inscribed into the body and not focused to the outside world. The violent consequences of the disease for the real body cannot be communicated, and therefore they are transferred in the comic to a formal level. As a consequence, the text body itself becomes the location of the literary and visual memory” (54). Doucet removes her representative body at the moment of the seizure because she is adopting a strategy of composition for communicating the effect of this invisible disease. Doucet needs to adopt such



Fig. 11. Doucet's persona experiences another epileptic episode ("My New York Diary" 30).

circuitous methods because of the influence of the traditions of disembodiment that treat the body as a simple blank canvas that projects inner personality traits. Paradoxically, these traditions often render the body mute, even though the body houses *the* speaking organ (it is the site of the mouth that speaks) (Kukla 82). Doucet's epilepsy does not allow her body to conform to the traditions that systematically silence the presence of the body, and the experience is terrifying for her. Her epilepsy disrupts the day-to-day and taken-for-granted functionings of the body. Doucet's persona's body announces its presence through its own paradoxical negation. Importantly, these disruptive epileptic episodes remind the reader that Doucet's persona is at the mercy of her body – or, at the very least, to remind the reader that her embodied experiences are an important consideration in her autobiographical account.

Doucet welcomes her audience into her project of bodily self-awareness. Consequently, her graphic narratives encourage readers to recognize their own bodies as they engage in the physical act of reading. Doucet constructs her graphic narratives as “text-objects,” Anna Poletti's term for work preoccupied with the interaction between narrative, image, and materiality that “explicitly [engages] the reader in an embodied experience of reading” (“Auto/assemblage” 101). I give myself licence to borrow this term from Poletti's reading of zines because they share so many similarities with graphic narratives: they both employ the same underground distribution network of independent publishing; they are both shaped by subculture, in particular by the countercultural politics and aesthetics of the punk movement; and they both share the same fascination with the interaction between image and text.¹¹ In *Intimate Ephemera*, Poletti's analysis of zine culture in Australia, she argues:

zines eschew the value attached to the ‘accessible text’ as both a mass-produced object available for purchase in a plethora of locations and as an ideology of text construction and layout, in favour of intimate, handmade and decidedly gestural text-objects which invite the reader to negotiate the gaps in texts that often present

themselves as profoundly messy. (5)

Many of the intellectual occupations and compositional strategies that Poletti describes may be found in Doucet's drawings. For example, Doucet begins "The First Time" (*My New York Diary*) with a full-page black-and-white drawing of Chuck, a sunglasses-wearing hipster who is the subject of Doucet's sexual attention (although, as it turns out, not the participant in her first sexual encounter). Hand-drawn letters wrap around Chuck's head. They provide a short introduction that describes Doucet's persona "julie," a "typical ingénue" educated in what she considers to be a repressive catholic high school. In order to read the introduction, the reader must disregard the traditional horizontal boundaries of text, twisting Doucet's graphic narrative upside down. Doucet replicates this formal strategy of composition throughout her career. In *365 Days*, she often curves lines of written text around the contours of her drawings. They follow horizontal, vertical, and diagonal trajectories, looping in dizzying spirals (Fig. 12). These formal strategies allow Doucet to experiment with the way readers interact with the text as a physical object.

In *365 Days* Doucet emphasizes the material properties of the text and her own embodied interactions with it.¹² The cover of *365 Days* acts as a meta-fictional scene that comments on her diary as a whole (Fig. 13). Importantly, her persona strains under the physical effort assembling the text. She actively searches through old magazines to create a collage, cutting out numbers for the title: "ok, here's a good 6" (Fig 13). Katherine Carter notes that in many diaries authors depict the material creation of the text, including the "physical location or scene of writing" (21). Doucet's graphic narratives ground the text in what Butler calls the materialities of the body:

It must be possible to concede and affirm an array of "materialities" that pertain to the body, that which is signified by the domains of biology, anatomy, physiology, hormonal and chemical composition, illness, age, weight, metabolism, life and death. None of this can be denied. But the undeniability of these "materialities" in no way



Fig. 13. The cover of *365 Days*.

Days. She does not disengage from sensorial experience and retreat into her own internal reveries when she examines her own subjectivity in her autobiographical graphic narratives. When Doucet constructs her graphic narratives as text-objects in order to emphasize the embodied experience of reading, she suggests to the reader that the material demands of the body must be acknowledged.

Readers must engage with the materialities of the body when they read her work, twisting her diary upside down in order to read her spiralling words.

In Eakin's examination of the state of life writing scholarship to date, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, he advocates for a sophisticated model of subjectivity that includes multiple "registers of self" (1). This model acknowledges the fundamental social, relational, and embodied nature of subjectivity. In Kenneth J. Gergen's recent psychological and philosophical study *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*, he argues that the theory of a bounded self must evolve. Critics should describe subjectivity in terms of relationships, coordinates and processes (xv). Some of the most sophisticated forms of life writing criticism replicate Gergen's observations about relational subjectivity. Susan Sherwin acknowledges the relational aspects of being, recognizing the potential for subjectivity to transform in different social situations: "we need an account of personhood that recognizes persons as beings with certain types of bodies and biological capacities that allow certain forms of social interaction. That is, persons are embodied beings that are formed – in essential respects – through their social relations" (151). She suggests individuals do not possess a single, unifying selfhood; they become multiple as they evolve over time or adapt to different relationships. Eakin draws from Ulric Neisser's description of the interaction between "the ecological self," "the interpersonal self," "the extended self," "the private self," and "the conceptual self" (22-23). Of course, Neisser's attempt to separate subjectivity into different categories is a bit of an intellectual fantasy. The different selves that he describes always work in relation to one another and can never be completely separated. There are inevitable slippages and ambiguities between them, so it may be misleading to break down subjectivity into its different constitutional elements. Nevertheless, as Eakin points out, these structuralist schemas can be useful for life writing criticism because they counter the concept of a single unified "self" that is "a reification that obscures the multiple registers of self-experience" (22-23). In other words, critics like Eakin, Gergen, Neisser, and Sherwin

all call for models of subjectivity that account for the dynamic and polymorphic qualities that emerge out of relational being.¹³

In some descriptions of embodiment in life writing criticism, the body is treated as a simple construction. Just as Neisser and Eakin describe the different elements that combine together to create a single unified concept of the “the self,” I want to describe the divisions of “the body.” The body’s absence from academic discussion is not surprising, given the traditional divisions that separate the mind from the body, about which I have already spoken in my description of feminist reappraisals of disembodied subjectivity. Eakin suggests that issues of embodiment were almost completely ignored in life writing criticism until recently, when they found a new crucial importance (35-36). He explains how, beginning in the 1980s, many life writing critics began responding to influential critics like Georges Gusdorf, who describes the autobiographical subject only as a freestanding individual. Such an account minimizes the importance of the body and relies on tacit assumptions about class, race, and gender to assign normative values to universal selfhood (Eakin 35, 47). Life writing theorists have reached a consensus in their rejection of the mind/body division, acknowledging the contributions that the body makes to a complete understanding of subjectivity. It is easy to find life writing criticism that describes different autobiographical authors who emphasize the legitimacy of the concerns and physical desires of the body (Eakin 9). For example, in Valerie Raoul’s introduction to *Anatomy of Gender*, a collection of feminist scholarship from 1992, she describes the efforts to integrate issues of bodily representation into academic discourses: “The reclamation of the female body by feminist scholars challenges the view that sexual difference is natural, revealing instead the way in which the concept of Woman is a socially constructed category” (6). Raoul, like many other critics from the early 1990s, has the tendency to describe the body as singular and self-evident: she writes, “the body is a product of both self and society, literally and metaphorically. The body is properly human only when it is culturally accepted” (18). One witnesses

similar tendencies in some works of Canadian literary scholarship. For example, in Ann Brown's description of prominent novels written by female authors after the Quiet Revolution in Québec, she writes about the general category of "the body" without much elaboration: "By exposing the hypocrisy inherent in our culture in matters pertaining to the body, women writers have also shown that mental experiences reflect bodily ones" (229). It may be time to move past the kind of criticism that points out the mere presence of bodies and to begin to include more nuanced descriptions of embodiment. Indeed, the experiences of the body differ wildly from one person to the next. As Smith and Watson note, "Subjects narrating their lives, then, are multiply embodied. There is the body as a neurochemical system. There is the anatomical body . . . the 'imaginary anatomy' . . . And there is the sociopolitical body, a set of cultural attitudes and codes attached to the public meanings of bodies that underwrites relationships to power" ("Mapping Women's" 10). An individual's sense of embodied subjectivity is made up of a variety of different factors, the least of which is her or his own anatomy and physical morphology (I am tempted to say physical morphologies, because one's appearance is subject to so many distortions from one day to the next). It seems reasonable to acknowledge these different factors and produce a nuanced description of the body that thoroughly acknowledges a full spectrum of issues, including the degree to which the body is emphasized by different authors and the properties of their embodiment. Such a description would aim for more ambitious goals than simply encouraging an awareness of the body (although that still remains important). Rather, it crafts a mode of qualitative measurement, a dense description of common personal experiences.

Doucet's graphic narratives acknowledge the unstable, transitory, and negotiative properties of embodiment. In particular, Doucet's graphic narratives are dominated by descriptions of her "body-image," her emotional attitudes and thoughts about her own body. Letitia Meynell, drawing on Cartriona Mackenzie's theories of embodiment, describes the division between "body schema – the

non-conscious, non-intentional organization of experience and action that guides ordinary daily activity – and body image – the ‘perceptual awareness of one’s body [. . .] mental representation of one’s body, beliefs about it, and emotional attitudes toward it’” (14). According to Elizabeth Grosz:

The body image unifies and coordinates postural, tactile, kinesthetic, and visual sensations so that these are experienced as the sensation of a subject coordinated into a single space; they are the experience of a single identity. This image is the necessary precondition for undertaking voluntary action, the point at which the subject’s intentions are translated into the beginning of movement, the point of transition in activating bones and muscles. (83)

The concept of “body-image” is important in the study of graphic narratives because comics authors are often creating representative bodies in their drawings. One of the strengths of the medium of comics is that it possesses tools capable of foregrounding issues of bodily representation and embodiment. Because of the visual dimension of the medium of comics, authors constantly reproduce self-portraits. They create caricatures of their clothing, mannerisms, and expressions. These autobiographical personae manipulate postural activities for the purposes of dramatic storytelling, like a series of actors populating a simulated stage. However, unlike living stage actors performing in person, these autobiographical personae have the potential to change wildly in their physical appearance. Thus, they may depict different aspects of subjectivity, including an author’s perceptual awareness of his or her own body.

Doucet’s fluid and dynamic autobiographical personae morph in size and in order to reflect changes in her own emotional landscape. She infuses her drawings with her subjective interpretations of the past. As retrospective recollections, Doucet’s autobiographical graphic narratives avoid replicating the conventions of other documentary visual media that prize impeccable rhetorical authority, such as photography.¹⁴ According to Douglas R. Nickel, photographs only seem

trustworthy because of the rhetorical credibility of the automated mechanisms that produce them. Photography seems to produce unmediated representations: it relies on “mytho-poetic associations that propose it as unique, unprecedented, the modern technological fulfilment of what had previously been merely fantastic imaginings” (Nickel 50). Doucet does not pretend to replicate the same kind of rhetorical authority with her drawings. She rejects objectivity and embraces subjective imagery in her graphic narratives. Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that the conventions of central and linear perspective are crucial for establishing objectivity, for giving the impression, rhetorically, that an artist has removed his or her biases from his or her composition (*Reading Images* 136). Doucet avoids these conventions with her compositional methods. She often subtly manipulates the proportions of her drawings from one panel to the next. She began in her early work only making subtle alterations. Her narrative personae grow and shrink in small increments. In “Julie in Junior College” (*My New York Diary*) Doucet’s persona engages in a series of conversations with her roommate, always in the same position sitting across from him on the other side of their kitchen table. Each conversation looks similar, but Doucet distorts her persona’s size depending on her emotional state. In the early conversations she takes up the majority of the panel (“Julie in Junior College” 3). When her persona starts to struggle with depression later in the narrative, her body shrinks in size and moves to the edge of the panel (“Julie in Junior College” 9). Doucet makes even greater distortions to the size of her representative personae in her recent work. On some pages of *365 Days*, her persona grows enormous: when she walks down the street surging with manic emotions, she towers over the buildings that surround her (04.01.03). Thus, her body-image has the potential to transform because her sense of her own embodied subjectivity is always in process, depending on the context of her social situation. Doucet’s personae are authentic in their depictions of her body because they reflect Doucet’s subjective emotional impressions of the past. She is not simply concerned with creating representative actors in her graphic narratives that replicate clear

verisimilitude and the distinct morphology of her physical appearance; rather, she makes distortions to her drawings that reflect in some way the dynamic experiences of embodied subjectivity.

The comics page, as a representative stage, takes on the characteristics of Doucet's emotional landscape. It becomes a textual location for Doucet to play out her own psychological dramas. When Doucet creates her graphic narratives, her drawings sometimes become surreal. She embeds her own erratic and contradictory feelings within this representative framework. In *My Most Secret Desire*, Doucet collects her dream journals and other imaginary recollections, which occasionally recount her dark and disturbing fantasies about body mutilation and alien abduction. Read alongside her other work of life writing, these fantastic graphic narratives take on additional meaning. For example, Doucet may not have been abducted by aliens, but she suggests that she felt like she was. She constructs a surrealistic "psychic landscape of affect and eros" (Chute, *Graphic Women* 43).¹⁵ Interestingly, Doucet begins most of her dream narratives by mentioning a specific date: her fantasies are fixed to specific autobiographical coordinates. She interprets even surreal and speculative narratives using the discourses of life writing. Although she fills her graphic narratives with occasional fantastic imagery, she is preoccupied with describing her own grounded experiences, particularly her own grounded experiences of embodied subjectivity.

3. Doucet's grotesque bodies

In her graphic narratives Doucet makes her comics personae look disorderly, even monstrous.¹⁶ She is obsessed with the unflattering and unmanageable qualities of the human body, what Kristeva calls the abject (Shapira 51-52). If I were to pick one word to describe Doucet's drawings, I would call them grotesque. Her graphic narratives are full of uncomfortable doubles and distortion to the body, including impossible enlargements, swellings, and mutilations. Grotesque literature is defined by two qualities: duality and deformity (Hutchison 187). In some respects most

Canadian autobiographical graphic narratives satisfy the first requirement of grotesque literature, because they create countless unnerving doppelgangers. They are filled with autobiographical personae that replicate the author's likeness and appearance. Doucet's own particular drawings satisfy the second requirement of grotesque literature because they distort the proportions of the human body. At the beginning of the fourth and final "winter" section of "My New York Diary," Doucet's persona, speaking directly to the reader, describes her final days in New York while sitting on a chair in the middle of her empty apartment. Doucet puts her persona on display. The simple structure of the moment-to-moment panel sequence allows the reader to focus on the subtle nuances of her personae in a series of twelve self-portraits (Fig. 14). Doucet distorts the musculature and skeletal structure of plausible human anatomy. Her persona's shallow body is missing some of the shading techniques that might suggest mass and weight. When Doucet enlarges the size of her persona's head, it teeters atop a flimsy body that seems incapable of supporting it. She often snaps her characters's necks and twists their heads around backward ("My New York Diary" 5). Her persona's body remains somewhat consistent from one panel to the next, but Doucet, exploiting the plasticity of the cartoon image, makes subtle distortions that keep her drawings looking loose and dynamic. Her persona's body often sits in an erect posture, either in the isometric position or facing the reader directly. Her arms often flap around flimsily. Her feet and hands are bent at sickening angles, almost as though they have been pinned down flat onto the surface of the floor and wall. Thus, Doucet's personae resemble puppets: their bodies make awkward movements, as though they were lifeless objects being held up by a rigid apparatus that swings them around wildly and can only approximate the movements of the human body. Doucet's drawings are uncomfortable, and, on the whole, grotesque.

Doucet's erratic puppet drawings oppose the ideals of harmonious body proportion, violating normalizing patterns of superficial beauty. In Rebecca Kukla's fascinating article "The



Fig. 14. Doucet's persona addresses the reader directly and explains her experiences after leaving New York ("My New York Diary" 53).

Phrenological Impulse and the Morphology of Character,” she describes the historical developments that created the popular misconception that the surface of the body is linked to imagined inner personality traits: “we read the outer form of the body as a characterological text in scientific, medical, and popular discourse” (77). According to this theory, the human body should properly conform to harmonious body proportions in order to project desirable qualities of character (Kukla 88). Doucet’s drawings violate these conditions because they make such bizarre distortions to human anatomy. Importantly, representations of female bodies have often been tied to the aesthetics of the grotesque: “The image of a female body dominated by gaping orifices and biological flux is part of the historical arsenal of misogyny, a way of grounding women’s ‘aberrance’ in their distasteful corporeality and thus naturalizing it” (Shapira 52). In this way, according to influential discourses of embodiment that define female sexuality, women’s bodies are often inherently disorderly. Critics writing about the grotesque in Canadian literature, such as Lorna Hutchison, are heavily indebted to the theories of Michel Bakhtin. In Yael Shapira’s recent 2010 article “Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque,” she writes: “Bakhtin does not acknowledge what many later critics have noted: that his ‘grotesque’ has both conceptual and historical ties to women” (51). Shapira describes misogynistic cultural traditions that limit and control disruptive femininity through narrow-minded representative frameworks. According to these exclusionary standards, the female body is the grotesque object par excellence and prime emblem of disorder. Shapira cites the insightful analysis of Kathleen Rowe: “[t]he grotesque body is above all the female body, the *maternal* body” (qtd. in Shapira 51). Because Doucet’s personae create multiple depictions of her unruly female body, Doucet’s drawings oppose systems of bodily self-regulation.

I see Doucet as opposing misogynistic conventions that project repulsive deformity onto the female body. Like other late-twentieth-century authors, she writes, “to reclaim the female body as literary subject matter” (Shapira 51). Her drawings are important reframing devices that broaden

what Smith calls the “normative limits of . . . gender” (10). They actively engage with the cultural poetics of the female imaginary. Laura Mulvey has shown how the traditions of spectatorship in film often dehumanize women and reduce them to passive receptacle of voyeuristic pleasure. In the medium of comics, there is the potential for a different relationship between the female body and the viewer. It does not always conform to the traditional economies of viewership that define the consumption of body imagery (Chute, *Graphic Women* 45). All too often the traditions of visual media incite passivity in the viewer. Some of the most influential patterns of visual literacy assume images are self-evident.¹⁷ In her fascinating 2011 study *Graphic Women*, Hillary L. Chute suggests that contemporary graphic life writing re-evaluates some of the most prevalent conventions of visual culture: “there is a new aesthetics emerging around self-representation: contemporary authors, now more than ever, offer powerful nonfiction narratives in comics form. Many, if not most, of these authors are women” (2). In Chute’s description of the “ugly excess” of comics, she argues that some authors – American Aline Kominsky-Crumb, for example – communicate their unruly fantasies with an unruly visual language (*Graphic Women* 29-30). Kominsky-Crumb is relevant here because her graphic narratives share similarities with Doucet’s. Both write works of life writing that readers and critics have often called disorderly. Chute describes life writing that actively engages with a political project:

to visualize how sexuality, even when disruptive, does not have to be turned over to the gaze of the other. Peopled by ‘excessive’ bodies, [Kominsky-Crumb’s] so-called uncivilized work, which disrupts a masculinist economy of knowledge production, demonstrates that a crucial part of the struggle to represent the realities of gender beyond sexual difference involves our writing – and drawing – aesthetic elaborations of different ways of being with our sexuality. (*Graphic Women* 30)

Contemporary feminist poetics often confront the discourses of aberrant embodiment that frame

femininities: “contemporary women’s writing furnishes mirrors of authentic female experience, diverging from those imposed by male-dominated literary conventions” (Godard 10). Doucet, in her comics, opposes systems of value that configure the female body as unmanageable, dangerous, and unknowable. She takes an active role in the portrayal of women’s bodies. Therefore, her work is important for feminist reasons, because it re-evaluates a limited horizon of expectations.

The aesthetic conventions of contemporary graphic narratives are tied to the history of independent comics publishing in the second half of the twentieth century in North America. In the past, the comics industry developed policies that controlled representations of the female body because they assumed that these images always had the potential to become pornographic. For the greater part of the twentieth century, many of the comics published in North America conformed to a self-imposed system of censorship that prohibited obscene content. The language of this policy, the Comics Code, focuses unduly on female sexuality: “sexy, wanton comics should not be published. No drawing should show a female indecently or unduly exposed, and in no event more nude than in a bathing suit” (qtd. in Nyberg 39). The policy targeted and prohibited drawings of femmes fatales from crime comic books and any other over-sexualized drawing of female sexuality. Importantly, nowhere in the Comics Code does it mention male nudity or sexuality. Gabilliet suggests that Canadian publishers were heavily influenced by these policies, more so than their American counterparts. The lack of First Amendment rights gave legislators the initial freedom to increase the scope and severity of comics censorship in Canada (*Of Comics* 218-19). Wolk suggests that by the mid-point of the twentieth century many countercultural comics authors intentionally violated the Comics Code: “the ‘60s underground cartoonists’ response to the less slick but semi-realistic look of mainstream comics in their day: an embrace of ugliness, in style more than in content. And, similarly . . . the alienating effect of making readers find their artwork intellectually appealing rather than attractive” (Wolk 52). Thus, early “underground” comics emphasize the presence of female body

imagery as a way transgressing prohibitions and violating the Comics Code. They embrace the disruptive potential of the discourses of female sexuality.

Doucet's career began after the heyday of 60s "underground" cartoonists. She is an early member of the next wave of contemporary authors who followed them. Wolk calls Doucet the inspiration, the "godparent," of the "rough wave" of contemporary comics authors writing after the millennium (367). The "rough wave" authors adapt the objectives and the methods of their predecessors: "ugly drawing is no longer 'transgressive' enough to shock anyone – but that's not really the point now. What these young artists have in common, ideologically, is the anti-Hollywood narrative, anti-representational, labor-intensive, make-it-nasty tendencies of contemporary visual art" (367). With his description of contemporary comics history, Wolk makes misleading evaluations that stop short of considering the complete ideological, ethical, and political implications of Doucet's methods. Wolk pictures a simple evolution in the interests of contemporary comics authors. According to his analysis, Doucet, as the godparent of the "rough wave" of contemporary cartooning, has simple goals in mind. He suggests Doucet is only interested in "transgressive" imagery because she wants to be subversive for the sake of being subversive.¹⁸ His terminology – the "transgressive" values of "rough" and "ugly" drawing – relies on normative aesthetic values that prize the superiority of harmonious aesthetics and misses key issues related to social, political, and historical context (Comfort 1-2).

Hutchison writes that the grotesque is useful as a literary device because it asks readers to re-evaluate their ideological assumptions: "Once readers have read a passage that is grotesque, so the theory goes, the sensation of discomfort provoked by the aesthetic typically leads readers to grasp what they have read in a new and revealing manner" (191). I do agree with Hutchison that the aesthetics of the grotesque may allow authors to interrogate repressed or deplored elements of Canadian culture (although I prefer to speak of the grotesque as a compositional strategy instead of

a generalized theoretical category). However, Hutchison's analysis replicates the misogynistic economy of concealment and shame that aligns the female body with the grotesque. The female body is only transgressive – provoking this “sensation of discomfort” that Hutchison describes (191) – if one assumes that it should properly remain hidden. Doucet's grotesque drawings are part of a formal strategy of composition that allows her to expose a representation of her feelings about her own body, not to hide them. Chute writes that contemporary graphic narratives avoid the elusive language of unrepresentability that sometimes dominates contemporary life writing:

the force and value of graphic narrative's intervention, on the whole, attaches to how it pushes on conceptions of the unrepresentable that have become commonplace in the wake of deconstruction, especially in contemporary discourse about trauma. Against a valorization of absence and aporia, graphic narrative asserts the value of presence, however complex and contingent. (*Graphic Women* 2)

Many contemporary Canadian graphic narratives avoid the “valorization of absence and aporia” that Chute describes. Doucet's graphic narratives may only be described as disorderly if critics replicate the same system of evaluation that treats women's bodies as repulsive objects. In other words, the grotesque is only repulsive in Doucet's graphic narratives if critics decide to accept the terms that define abhorrent female body imagery.

It should be possible to describe Doucet's disorderly drawings without taking the next step and projecting pejorative terms onto them. Graphic life narratives are based on a unique artistic and intellectual tradition, and they are distinct from both visual artwork and literature. As Chute points out, “The medium of comics is not necessarily about ‘good drawing’ . . . but rather what Spiegelman calls *picture-writing* and Satrapi calls *narrative drawing*: how one person constructs a narrative that moves forward in time through both words and images” (*Graphic Women* 6). In other words, autobiographical comics authors rarely invoke simple aesthetic criteria of critical evaluation. For

example, Doucet's autobiographical graphic narratives are not a testament to her abilities as an artist; rather, they contain a group of irregular and dynamic drawings that, as a collective, describe her subjectivity (Chute, *Graphic Women* 58). Doucet draws grotesque bodies, not because they are grotesque objects in some kind of simple representative scheme, but because she is reconstructing her emotional landscape, particularly her feelings about her body-image. She creates grotesque drawings for feminist reasons, because they broadcast the way misogynistic traditions frame the female body. Her drawings engage with cultural traditions that teach people to feel revulsion towards the female body, and she wants to reconsider the terms of this disgust. Importantly, however, Doucet must also contend with autobiographical traditions that remove disorderly female bodies from models of personhood. Because of the cultural history that ties representations of female bodies to the grotesque, the female subject is often ignored, regulated, and contained. It is kept separate from the activities that traditionally define subjectivity, such as rationality and contemplation. Doucet creates distorted, enlarged, and exaggerated body imagery because it reflects her feelings about her own body as a person embedded within a repressive culture. She describes what it is like to contend with an abrasive and inhospitable cultural tradition.

4. A risky proposition

Doucet breaks down her account of her subjectivity into different categories, using, for example, variations in the size of her comics personae in order to project her body-image. Her drawings become unruly because they project the values of misogynistic cultural traditions that have been passed down to her, like the one that treats certain forms of female sexuality as inherently grotesque. As a result of these compositional strategies, she risks alienating herself and her reader. There is something counter-intuitive about her methods because she does not offer unified declarations about her subjectivity. Since Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "readers have been conditioned by

the ideology of individualism to think of autobiography as a theater in which the self's uniqueness, privacy, and interiority are on display" (Eakin 110). Positivist theories elevate the self-actualizing individual and assume that the subject is only fulfilled through the complete "acquisition of 'sovereignty'" of the self (Moore-Gilbert 20). Many psychologists agree that a feeling of personal coherence may be necessary for a healthy sense of wellbeing and that individuals must achieve psychological unity to avoid disorder (Gergen 135). Gergen questions the dominance of these assumptions that assign normative values to psychological order; he questions, justifiably it seems, whether or not these definitions are innately biological (22). In any event, even if they are merely patterns of learned behaviour that result from persuasive cultural traditions, they are nonetheless very influential. They define how individuals customarily understand their own subjectivity. Thus, according to these standards, Doucet's graphic narratives are potentially alienating because they do not depict a uniform evolution of the subject.

My study describes the importance of contemporary Canadian graphic narratives as micro-narratives and personal histories. Doucet's graphic narratives report on the haphazard, daily, and mundane events of Doucet's life. Thus, they often replicate diary genres, both in terms of their focus and their structure.¹⁹ In Kathryn Carter's introduction to *The Small Details of Life*, her cross-century collection of Canadian diarists, she writes that diaries are "perennial and plastic, spanning a register of writing styles from reportage to confession, polemic to introspection" (6). Diaries are perhaps one of the most malleable and chaotic of life writing genres. They often do not conform to many of the literary values of order and cohesion, as they typically report on the trivial details of daily life and include many repetitions and loose narrative threads. Instead, they benefit from other qualities, such as, for example, the ability to incite empathy and to engage the reader (Carter 9). In this sense, Doucet's autobiographical comics, because they draw on the genre of the diary, do not create an account of the uniform evolution of the subject. They do not seek the sovereignty of the self, but

employ different methods for assembling their autobiographical accounts. The structural logic of the diary is, as Carter argues, the haphazard amalgamation of anecdotes, bereft of extended retrospection. That being said, the diary still follows its own internal logic: “The unspoken syllogism of diary writing is this: if all of the seeming unconnected details of life are written down – waiting in traffic, filling out tax forms, battling ice storms, making mincemeat tarts – then maybe the sense of it will emerge. The act is one of preservation or putting up stores; the diary is a Mason jar packed with a rich harvest of details” (19). Doucet’s graphic narratives are one such example of writing that records a “rich harvest of details” and speaks to the daily conditions of the lives of individuals living in Canada.

The construction of a cohesive account of the evolution of the subject depends on certain compositional patterns. Seminal life writing critic Philippe Lejeune argues that in prose autobiographies it is often easy to confuse the speaking subject with the object of the narration because there is an assumed continuity between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist of the narrative (“The Autobiographical Pact” 12). Many autobiographical texts present readers with at least two different versions of the author: the narrator speaking in the present and the historical subject acting in the past. Eakin claims autobiographical discourses often collapse these two versions of the author; they create an “illusion of self-determination . . . *I write my story; I say who I am; I create myself*” (43). Eakin reminds us that continuous self-narration is impossible:

Most autobiographers, however, proclaim the continuous identity of selves early and late, and they do so through the use of the first person, autobiography’s most distinctive – if problematic – generic marker: the “I” speaking in the present – the utterer – is somehow continuous with the “I” acting in the past – the subject of utterance. (93)

The rhetorical position of the author, the “I” of the present, is so convincing that it makes it

difficult to notice the split between the subject and the object of the autobiographical discourses: “Use of the first person – the ‘I,’ autobiography’s dominant key – compounds our sense of being in full command of our knowledge of our selves and stories . . . [it] bridges the gaps between who we were once and who we are today” (Eakin ix). Graphic life writing presents a slightly different formal situation because, unlike the prose autobiographies that Lejeune and Eakin describe, the gap between “who we are and who we were” is more pronounced. Some of the properties of the medium of comics allow Doucet to distance herself from her autobiographical comics persona with ease. The multimodal properties of the medium of comics – its distinct blending of visual and verbal discourses – create a separation between the speaking subject and the autobiographical actor. Chute describes how different comics authors use “the inbuilt duality of the form – its word and image cross-discursivity – to stage dialogues among versions of self, underscoring the importance of an ongoing, unclosed project of self-representation and self-narration” (*Graphic Women* 5). In Marni Stanley’s description of queer comic authors, including Canadian Leanne Franson, she argues that many autobiographical comics authors attempt to disturb the usual expectation that “the distance between the author, the narrator, and the central character is minimal” (54). Whenever Doucet includes a caption with written text, the reader is reminded that there is a clear separation between Doucet’s autobiographical narrator and her comics persona.²⁰

Doucet splits apart different versions of the author through the multimodal properties of the medium of comics; therefore, she does not create a comforting description the autobiographical subject as single sovereign authority. Joan W. Scott suggests that models of autonomous subjectivity – models which constitute “subjects as fixed and autonomous, and who are considered reliable sources of a knowledge that comes from access to the real by means of their experience” (28) – inhibit active interrogation of dominant cultural traditions. In order to avoid the kind of pitfalls that Scott describes, Doucet creates a separation between the subject and the object of autobiographical

discourses in her graphic narratives. A unified speaking subject would risk erasing the presence of her body; therefore, she can only describe her body-image when she shatters her cohesive sense of self. In other words, ironically, Doucet gives her body a voice that is separate from her own subjectivity in order to describe her own embodied subjectivity. She relinquishes the authority of the uniform subject in order to create a more nuanced depiction of her own subjectivity, and joins with her audience as a curious spectator who, at a distance, interprets her autobiographical account. However, because Doucet's compositional strategies thwart clear visual literacies, they may prove alienating and unintelligible to her audience, herself included.

It may be possible that the evaluations of Doucet's graphic narratives that overemphasize her coarse drawing style and subject matter are the result of critics failing to recognize Doucet's compositional strategies. It seems possible that Doucet's work is often unintelligible and alienating because her methods of communication disregard certain influential models of autobiographical discourse. If subjects are always embedded in social relationships, then every autobiographer is dependent on the evaluations of others. Sherwin writes: "[individuals] are essentially social beings who do not, and cannot, exist in isolation. Hence, we cannot determine if a being is a person simply by looking at their biological or psychological characteristics" (149). If I am to recognize the inherent social character of subjectivity, I must also abandon all of the benefits of isolating individualism – in particular, I must relinquish the theory that any individual is above or beyond the restraints of her or his own social obligations. Doucet takes incredible risks when she creates her graphic narratives because they have the potential to alienate her audience. It is not certain that she will receive the acknowledgement of her peers. For these reasons, there is something commendable, almost courageous, about Doucet's graphic narratives. She endangers the status of her subjectivity by creating grotesque and unintelligible autobiographical accounts – or, if I may borrow Judith Butler's terms, she "risks [her own] unrecognizability" (*Giving an Account* 23).

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* Butler proposes a complex set of theories for navigating the discourses of subjectivity, based on a wide variety of philosophers who describe the project of self-analysis, including Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, G.W.F. Hegel, and Friedrich Nietzsche. As her title suggests, Butler investigates “the demand to give an account of oneself,” drawing from Foucault’s somewhat cynical account about the formation of the subject (135). She suggests that every individual must negotiate systems of normative behaviour because of the inherent social conditions of living. Patterns of learned behaviour set the standards against which individuals judge their own legitimacy as subjects. When Doucet interrogates a dominant convention, such as the misogynistic tradition that devalues the female body, she does not simply question a single cultural relationship but an entire system (or “regime of truth”) that defines her social relationships with others: “Thus if I question the regime of truth, I question, too, the regime through which being, and my own ontological status, is allocated” (Butler, *Giving an Account* 23). When individuals interrogate the systems by which they are constituted as legitimate subjects, no matter how inappropriate those systems may be, they are putting into question the very system by which they are recognized by others as a subject. Butler’s analysis engages with the convoluted possibilities that may result when theory is brought into practice. It calls attention to the inner-workings of everyday culture, which is so often a messy balancing act between cultural determinism and personal agency. I find it compelling when Butler describes the potential risks that result from active self-reflection:

a price must be paid. To tell the truth about oneself involves us in quarrels about the formation of the self and the social status of truth. Our narratives come up against an impasse when the conditions of possibility for speaking the truth cannot fully be thematized, where what we speak relies upon a formative history, a sociality, and a corporeality that cannot easily, if at all, be reconstructed in narrative. (*Giving an Account* 132)

Thus, according to Butler, self-analysis can at times put an individual's own subjectivity in danger: "self-questioning of this sort involves putting oneself at risk, imperiling the very possibility of being recognized by others, since to question the norms of recognition that govern what I might be, to ask what they leave out, what they might be compelled to accommodate, is, in relation to the present regime, to risk unrecognizability" (*Giving an Account* 23). Despite the dangers that Butler witnesses in her description of "giving an account of oneself," she suggests that personal critique is important as a project of ethical responsibility. If I understand Butler's goals, she opposes the nihilism that is found in the extremes of Nietzsche's philosophy and also in the overblown ideals of individualism. For Butler, it is necessary and ethical "to risk unrecognizability" despite the abundant costs and dangers.

Chute describes the element of "risk" that is involved in creating abrasive life writing: "graphic narrative, invested in the ethics of testimony, assumes what I think of as the *risk of representation*. The complex visualizing it undertakes suggests that we need to rethink the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility that have tended to characterize trauma theory as well as our current censorship-driven culture in general" (*Graphic Women* 3). This is a key theoretical passage for contemporary comics and graphic life writing. When Chute writes about the "risk of representation," she describes more than formal issues of composition. Doucet must contend with countless obstacles that discourage her work. Indeed, her ordeals became so difficult that she famously abandoned comics publishing in the late 1990s (Gabillet, "Comic Art" 476). She describes how writing graphic narrative became an unpleasant experience, how it became a stressful burden that she felt compelled to endure: "For me autobiography is a disease" (Doucet, *Ladygunn*). She lost whatever motivation inspired her career as a comics author because the demands became insurmountable.

Doucet may have begun creating graphic narratives because it suited her marginal position

within a dominant North American Anglophone culture. Doucet often self-identifies with a distinct and separate Québécois cultural community. The first issue of *Dirty Plotte* begins with Doucet's persona standing in front of a map of Québec surrounded by a homogenous North American English-speaking territory, as though she were living within a solitary nation within a nation (Sabin 211). My study analyzes a diverse group of different graphic narratives, and it does not always make a clear distinction between French-Canadian and English-Canadian comics authors. It is an oversight I want to acknowledge at this point in my study – I focus too much on Anglophone authors. Moreover, I must avoid subsuming a distinct French-Canadian comics tradition within a undifferentiated national Canadian history. I support regionalist history writing that avoids centralist generalizations. There are subtle differences between English and French comics traditions: for example, many Québécois authors draw from the history of *bande dessinée* (French-Belgium European comics).²¹ Some critics argue that Québec did not replicate the same kind of comics censorship that existed in other parts of English North America. For example, Michel Hardy-Vallée calls the Montreal comics community a “singularity” and “a haven” (89). I am cautious of such congratulatory terminology because it oversimplifies complex historical developments, but it still seems clear that many locations in Québec favoured independent comics publishing. It is no small coincidence that Montreal is home to some of the most influential and successful comics publishers in Canada, such as Drawn and Quarterly and Conundrum Press. Thus, when creating her graphic narratives, Doucet took advantage of an available audience open to her countercultural and anti-hegemonic sentiments. It seems unlikely to me that her alienating graphic narratives would have found print in the 1980s and 1990s if it were not for the opportunities available to publish independently. She participated in a small-scale network of comics production, which spread to other regions of Canada as well but was particularly well-established in Québec.

I do not pretend to be able to divine authorial intention and guess all of the reasons why

Doucet began creating graphic narratives or why she abandoned them, but I am convinced of a few central premises: Doucet began her career because she saw in graphic narrative an available forum of self-expression. In a 2010 interview, Doucet describes the beginning of her career:

When I first started to draw comics I wasn't starting a career. I didn't even expect to ever be published: such a thing seemed impossible. It was in the 80's, there really was no future at the time, so might as well do something you liked. Which was for me drawing silly stories. No censorship whatsoever, total freedom. I knew guys who were doing fanzines. I joined them, but eventually got frustrated with them because they were too lazy, too slow. So I decided to create my own. It was my home, my art space.

(Ladygunn)

In the 1980s and early 1990s Doucet's graphic narratives made a marginal impact on the landscape of Canadian literary production. Although some of Doucet's early graphic narratives were eventually collected together for book-length publications, they were not designed for mass publishing. They barely registered as public documents. Doucet created self-published pamphlets for a small circle of readers, and she could not have predicted even her own modest amount of popularity, nor could she have hoped that her graphic narratives would have led to fame and recognition.²² Doucet drew from the aesthetics and ideological impetus of do-it-yourself zine culture. This form of cultural production offers few professional and financial rewards, but it gives authors the opportunity to choose the type of labor they want to perform (Duncombe 95). Many comics authors favour publishing in the independent and small-market press because it grants them some measure of creative control. Sabin argues that underground comics are "not dominated by commerce. They are self-motivated work instead of profit driven escapism" (178). Notwithstanding Sabin's apparent prejudice against popular mainstream graphic narrative ("profit driven escapism"), he accurately describes the medium's imagined initial benefits. It would be naive to suggest that the networks of

independent publishing in Canada offered a forum for authors to create work of pure personal reflection; however, it is likely that Doucet, and many of the contemporary comics authors from her generation, were motivated by an attractive opportunity that seemed to allow them to follow their own interests and control their own work.

In a 2006 interview for the *Montreal Mirror*, Doucet describes her decision to abandon her comics career. “I’m very happy about it. It took me quite a long time to figure out why and I’m not sure I even have because I feel my reaction is out of proportion. I really don’t want to hear about comics anymore, I don’t want to read them. And it’s not really about the medium anymore, but the crowd” (“Plotte Twists”). The connection between Doucet and the comics community disintegrated. Doucet abandoned comics publishing in part because the strain of it outweighed its apparent rewards. It became a brutal and demanding ordeal for Doucet to write her graphic narratives because they tortuously worked through uncomfortable aspects of her embodied subjectivity. Thus, Doucet’s autobiographical comics are treacherous for her: she takes personal risks – she casts alienating depictions of her own subjectivity – and she takes professional risks – she publishes independent comics with only a miniscule audience. From the perspective of the history of Canadian graphic narrative, her rejection of the medium of comics is significant because it illustrates the turmoil some authors experience publishing comics. It may be tempting to argue comics authors gained increasing amounts of recognition and support in the last half of the twentieth century; however, some significant authors, and perhaps female authors in particular, continued to struggle to find a sympathetic audience.

Doucet’s narratives are crucial for the history of Canadian literature and life writing because they analyze the lives of people living in Canada without resorting to disembodied traditions of historical narration. Doucet’s graphic narratives emphasize the presence of the body through a variety of methods: she enlists the medium of comics to describe the contested materialities of the

body, which encourages readers to become aware of the body as an ontological category. She also uses devices, such as her epileptic episodes in *My New York Diary*, to disrupt the silent day-to-day functions of her narrative body. However, Doucet's graphic narratives have more at stake than making simple announcements that proclaim the presence of the body – to announce to the audience that individuals have bodies that impact their position as subjects interacting in the world with others. Doucet creates descriptions of her embodied subjectivity that take into account the complimentary, sometimes contradictory, concepts that all form together to create a nuanced sense of her embodied subjectivity. Her graphic narratives take these tremendous risks, and they risk falling into obscurity.

Canadian life writing scholarship has in recent years spent time acknowledging the importance of feminist issues. Early Canadian life writing critics often only use autobiographies to compile taxonomies for nationalistic projects (Rak 1). According to Julie Rak, the next group of Canadian life writing critics from the 1980s and 1990s also exclude feminist politics and concerns (1). Helen M. Buss, in her influential monograph concerning Canadian women's autobiography *Mapping Our Selves*, attempts to rectify this oversight. Buss claims that the humanist and the post-structuralist account of subjectivity – the two dominant models of subjectivity to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century – both exclude the presence of women because they are gendered as male (3). Buss would like to include feminine subjectivity in the critical dialogue by mapping out the presence of women's life writing in the past (148-50). Doucet may be a contemporary author (who published only in the recent past) but her work should be recognized as part of the reclamation project that Buss describes. Barbara Godard, writing in the 1980s, succinctly summarized an important point about literary criticism that still seems relevant: "The literary archaeologist haunts the archives and second-hand bookstores seeking evidence of the lost voices of women writers and, peeling back the layers accreted, attempts to constitute that interpretive community which will give these writers

renewed circulation and understanding” (vi). Doucet’s graphic narratives were marginal small-press publications, and they are precisely the type of disposable life writing that has the potential to go missing from literary histories. My study endeavours to chart the careers of small-press authors like Doucet who continue in the tradition of Canadian women’s life writing.

Notes

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- ¹ Frank Davey describes the sexual imagery present in Sinclair Ross's work. When Mrs. Bentley, the protagonist of Ross's most famous novel *As for Me and My House*, laments the death of her dog, she implicitly comments on the divisions of gender: "men as 'wolfhounds,' restless and death-seeking, women as homebuilders" (*Surviving the Paraphrase* 175).
- ² Kroetsch's analysis includes backhanded compliments that replicate normative assumption about gender. He often treats assertive female figures with suspicion: "we see the woman as the powerful artist-figure; we see the strong woman, busily writing a journal or a diary or letters, conniving the world into shape and existence, the man in the study or the bedroom or the bathroom, drawing failed pictures or pretending to write . . . needing monotonously to be humoured or genitally 'suckled' in a parody of the nurturing source" (26). Kroetsch makes the domestic relationships that he describes sound perverse, as though these "strong women" are making a mockery of their proper gender role as "the nurturing source."
- ³ I cite in this chapter early examples of Livesay's poetry from the Modernist period. She moved well beyond this initial framework during her extensive career, writing poetry that foregrounds the embodied experiences of living. For example, in "Aging" Livesay's poetic speaker engages in a dialogue with her own body: "My body haunts me / thieves in on me at night . . . there's no / one still spot no / one still time I'd swear: / *The pain is here*" (1-12). See Livesay's selected poems in *The Self-Completing Tree*.
- ⁴ As noted by the *OED* definition, "alienation" refers to feelings of estrangement: "turn away in feelings or affection, to make averse or hostile, or unwelcome." If Doucet wants to transform her autobiographical persona into a stranger, she is engaging in a perilous activity because personal alienation is the exact definition of mental illness: "Mental alienation: Withdrawal, loss, or derangement of mental faculties; insanity" (*OED*).

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- ⁵ Not to be confused with her earlier work, *My New York Diary*.
- ⁶ Doucet created this cover for *My New York Diary* when it was printed for the first time as a complete collection, years after she wrote her initial *Dirty Plotte* comic books. Therefore, the cover is the product of a different stage of her career, when she was experimenting with multimedia collage.
- ⁷ Since *365 Days* is unpaginated, my citations replicate the system appearing inside the diary.
- ⁸ See Hillary L. Chute's explanation of the work of Lynda Barry. She describes Barry's compositional methods, which similarly produce a dense visual field (*Graphic Women* 112).
- ⁹ For a general overview of the impact of *RAW* magazine, see Gabilliet (*Of Comics* 95) and Sabin (188, 193).
- ¹⁰ As Doucet's career has progressed, she has become increasingly disinterested in the conventions of linear perspective and vanishing-point drawing. When she starts to ignore the sequential architecture of graphic narrative, her chaotic compositional choices start to spiral out of control. For example, in *365 Days*, she experiments with methods of spontaneous draftsmanship.
- ¹¹ According to Duncombe, "zines are noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute themselves" (6).
- ¹² See Bart Beaty's *Unpopular Culture*. Doucet shares similarities with many different contemporary European comics authors. Beaty offers an account of contemporary European graphic narrative, arguing that many authors abandon literary traditions in favor of the art-book traditions of the fine arts.
- ¹³ Some theorists claim that the medium of comics is well suited to describe the polymorphic properties of subjectivity. In Chute's description of contemporary comics, she writes: "Unsettling fixed subjectivity, [autobiographical graphic narratives] present life narratives with double narration that visually and verbally represents the self, often in conflicting registers and different

temporalities”(*Graphic Women* 5). Chute’s findings are well founded. It seems as the medium is designed to create, as Gergen calls them, visualizations of “multi-being” (150). For a more detailed explanation, see the Seth chapter in my study, where I described the construction of subjectivity in contemporary Canadian graphic narrative as a series of shallow self-portraits.

¹⁴ Jason Dittmer suggests that comics differ from other visual media because of the “the elasticity of drawn panels and the lack of an intended ‘reality effect’” (222). Joel Black defines the “reality effect” in cinema, claiming film is “first and foremost a ‘literalist medium’ whose nature is to make things explicit – to reveal or display the world in an evidentiary sense that is beyond the capability of traditional representational or art media” (8).

¹⁵ Certain contemporary comics authors have a broad range of generic and thematic interests. They combine “pornography, humor, science fiction, visual surrealism, and feminism” (Gabilliet, *Of Comics* 81).

¹⁶ In the cover illustration of *New York Diary*, Doucet’s anxious persona towers over the New York skyline, like a terrifying movie monster threatening to destroy the city.

¹⁷ See Nickel 42. In “‘Impressed by Nature’s Hand’: Photography and Authorship,” Nickel cites the legal term *res ipsa loquitur* (the things speaks for itself) to describe the visual discourse of photography, suggesting that the medium is often seen as being self-evident.

¹⁸ Wolk does not dismiss Doucet outright. His analysis begins to construct a thorough interpretation: “when I talk about ‘ugly’ cartooning here, I don’t necessarily mean that it repels the eye – most of what I’m talking about is actually pretty compelling – or that it doesn’t reward attention. I just mean that it’s the result of a conscious choice to incorporate a lot of distortion and avoid conventional prettiness in style” (52). Wolk’s findings are limited by his imprecise terminology and clumsy writing – his claims that Doucet’s drawings are “actually pretty compelling” despite their lack of “prettiness in style.”

¹⁹ Doucet's graphic narratives often include the word "diary" in the title (for example, *My New York Diary*) and they often contains time markers. Chute suggests that autobiographical comics are diaristic because they are created in a medium that is entirely handwritten (*Graphic Women* 6, 10-11).

²⁰ Engelmann writes: "The gap between text and image and the incongruity between the time levels is kept as vast as possible" (53). Curiously, Engelmann does not provide evidence to support this claim about Doucet's composition strategies. I wonder whether or not these qualities are unique to Doucet's work or an inherent property of the medium of comics. As I described in my introduction, the relationship between visual and verbal discourses in the medium of comics is often unstable.

²¹ Beaty notices that the tendency to separate North American and European comics traditions is sometimes misleading: "there are a large number of cartoonists who exist simultaneously in both worlds. Julie Doucet, to take but one example, began publishing fanzines in Montreal . . . [French publisher] L'Association subsequently translated her work" (245). In *365 Days*, English conversations exhaust Doucet's persona and she searches for ways of escaping to Paris, describing her feelings of solidarity with European social customs and culture. Although she wrote many of her first graphic narratives in English, she is much more comfortable with French (in fact, English might be her third-best language, behind German). Almost all of Doucet's recent graphic narratives have been published in French first and then translated into English.

²² The clientele for Doucet's first graphic narratives was small but not insignificant. Doucet published for a public audience and she received recognition for her work. Moreover, I contend that every author writes for some audience, even in extreme scenarios of isolation. The privacy of diary writing, for example, does not exclude the presence of an imagined listener: "Diary writing engages in dialogue with an audience – a real or imagined community of one or many – who

already understands a great deal of the narrative. That audience may be a future self, a trusted friend, a sister, a husband, a family, or an entire village” (Carter 12).

Chapter 3 – Public Dialogues: Intimacy and Judgement in Canadian Confessional Comics

There is a common motif that appears in many works of Canadian graphic narrative: confession. For example, both David Collier and Julie Doucet construct autobiographical accounts that avoid listing their personal achievements. They frame their accounts, instead, as though they were divulging embarrassing details about the past. Collier's cynical self-portraits criticize his personality faults, while Doucet discloses her disturbing, sometimes violent, sexual fantasies. Similar strategies of personal revelation are present in the work of Chester Brown, Sarah Leavitt, and Scott Waters. Their graphic narratives explore a wide variety of different topics, yet the very disparity of their interests points to the centrality of what they share. Taken together, they exemplify models of historical narration present in contemporary Canadian graphic narratives. To explain these models, this chapter coins a category of formal composition I call "comics confession." Peter Brooks describes the essential structure of confessional texts as a close bond between confessant and confessor: "It contains, and activates, elements of dependency, subjugation, fear, the desire for propitiation, the wish to appease and to please" (35). He writes about the primary patterns that define the relationship between the author and the reader. It often exists as either as an idealized partnership, an affective exchange between sympathetic equals, or as a negotiation between confessant and impartial observer. Most confessional texts situate the reader somewhere along this continuum. Canadian comics authors often draw on the properties of the medium of comics in order to create revelatory accounts that are highly interactive and inclusive. They often shift the distinct three-part structure of confessional discourse – with its central interplay between confessant, confessor, and confession. Their comics confessions align with the desires for dependency and appeasement that exist along the continuum of affective exchange. In this way, contemporary Canadian comics authors treat the medium of comics as though it were a welcoming confession

booth. They manipulate the basic properties of witnessing and judgment in confessional discourses to position the reader as an intimate confidant instead of as an impartial judge, which elicits empathy for the events they describe.

My study animates a discussion of micro-historical knowledge. If contemporary Canadian graphic narratives often focus on, as I suggested in my introduction, the demands and concerns of the individual, then it is logical that they should engage with confessional discourses because they influence articulations of “private” experience. Often, through confessional discourses, readers bear witness to knowledge concerning individual subjectivity, a local subject embedded within a framework of widespread cultural trends. Thus, the confession’s traditional association with transparent private communication enables comics authors to debate, with public informality, the experiences of the individual.

1. Confession’s troubling transparency

In this chapter I focus on the concept of confession in a literary context, but it bears mentioning at the onset that it is widespread in its application. It surfaces in a variety of different scenarios: “The confessional mode has been associated with ecclesiastical, judicial, medical and psychological discourses, as well as with literature” (Radstone 27). For example, the concept of confession serves a specific role in a psychological context, which shares some tangential similarities with its role in a medical context, but it would be a mistake to conflate these two situations because each has such separate aims and goals. A clear way of understanding confession, in the broadest terms, is to treat it as a set of cultural discourses operating in a wide variety of different scenarios. In a literary context, confessional writing may be understood as a collection of distinctive genres that make extensive use of confessional discourses.

In his survey of the Canadian novel, David Williams writes about the influence of

confessional discourses in Canadian literature. He bases his scholarship on traditions of artistic production emerging at the end of the nineteenth century that praise the autonomy of literature. Such theories manufacture an account of the specialized set of skills necessary to assess aesthetic merit in the literary arts (Williams 6). In Williams's estimation, certain Canadian authors draw inspiration from confessional discourses because they provide them with a means of transferring into their fiction the texture of everyday life in all of its mundane details. He describes such contemporary strategies of composition as an "ideological shift" away from earlier aestheticisms, as the "deconstruction of both 'timeless art' and the self-sufficient artist" (8). Williams should be credited for the sophistication with which he analyzes confessional texts. For him the act of confession is at once an act of revelation and an act of obfuscation. Nevertheless, his central thesis concerning the influence of confessional discourses in Canadian literature rests on two misleading assumptions. First, he downplays the importance of confessional texts by privileging certain genres of literary writing, such as the novel. Second, he treats confessional texts as though they maintain an inherently close relationship with material reality, as though confessional texts record the author's observations with perfect accuracy. There is some justification for Williams to talk about confessional discourses as though they were capable of intruding on the arbitrary formal barriers that bar social and political concerns from the subject matter of literature. However, by overlooking the complexity of confessional discourses, Williams showcases his inability to appreciate the subtlety of Canadian life writing. As Jo Gill convincingly argues in her introduction to *Modern Confessional Writing*, confession is not

a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience, but a ritualized technique for producing truth. Confessional writing is poietic not mimetic ... It is not the free expression of the self but an effect of an ordered regime by which the self begins to conceive of itself as individual, responsible, culpable and

thereby confessional. (4)

Even though confessional texts often employ formal structures that render life experience clear and identifiable, they should be treated as more than self-evident records of the events of the past.

Indeed, confessional texts are only dependent on invoking the rhetoric of personal transparency.

Confessional authors often follow a similar set of compositional strategies and aim to disclose an excessive amount of details about the past. For example, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions*, one of the founding texts of confessional writing, Rousseau offers an account of his experiences of early life, all the while apologizing for inconveniencing the reader with an overabundance of inconsequential minutiae. He self-consciously describes his role as author as though the discourses of confession force him to follow a strict code of conduct that compels him to expose his past:

These long details of my early youth may well seem extremely childish, and I am sorry . . . I should like in some way to make my soul transparent to the reader's eye, and for that purpose I am trying to present it from all points of view, to show it in all lights, and to contrive that none of its movements shall escape his notice, so that he may judge for himself the principle which has produced them. (169)

Rousseau clarifies the correlation between the act of confession and the explanation of minute details. He also explains the importance of judgement in the interpretation of those details. He aims to make his life "transparent to the reader's eye" and recount his experiences from early childhood: "The notion of transparency is vital to Rousseau, whose desire to abolish all veils between himself and his readers is a repeated motif in the *Confessions*" (Brooks 161). Such strategies of composition lend Rousseau, and authors like him who employ similar confessional discourses, a remarkable testimonial authority. Indeed, for these reasons, Brooks coins the term "queen of proofs" to describe the resounding influence of confessional practices in general in his wide-ranging study *Troubling*

Confessions (4, 9). Rousseau's confessional text, like many of the confessional texts that follow it, is defined by its characteristic use of the rhetoric of personal transparency.

How do comics authors navigate confessional discourses? The structure of rhetorical transparency in comics is wrought with tensions. As a practical example I look at the work of Chester Brown. In the early years of his career, Brown produced his own independent comic book *Yummy Fur* (1983-94). The first issues are born out of the madcap traditions of cartooning and caricature. They are surrealistic satires that proceed at a kinetic pace. Brown focuses on scatological subject matter and fills his graphic narratives with supernatural creatures. He conceives of inventive and crass scenarios, oftentimes raining down punishment on his dour and witless protagonist Ed the Happy Clown.¹ Interestingly, in the nineteenth issue of the series Brown begins writing introspective autobiographical comics concerning his early childhood growing up in the suburbs near Montreal and his experiences as a struggling artist living in Toronto.

In the early issues of *Yummy Fur*, Brown lets loose the chaos of his scattered imagination and fills his graphic narratives with grotesque fantasies. For example, the cover of the sixteenth issue of *Yummy Fur* contains a peculiar drawing of the Frankenstein monster parachuting in front of a serene backdrop (Fig. 15). The cover of the nineteenth issue, by contrast, contains a photorealistic composition with de-saturated colours (Fig. 15). In the earlier cover image Brown directs the reader's gaze toward the sky, whereas the nineteenth issue focuses on the mundane details of the dirty ground. Brown's perspective, lowering to the grit and grime of the sneaker on the sidewalk, shifts to suit his new creative interests. He now focuses on sombre, drab, and understated topics, including mundane details like the wilting of an autumn leaf. With the anxious subject matter of the broken glass, Brown telegraphs his shift in attention. He sets his sights on personal revelations that are, like the glass, sharp and painful. Thus, with the cover image of the nineteenth issue, Brown announces his interest in the discourses of life writing in general, and confession in particular.

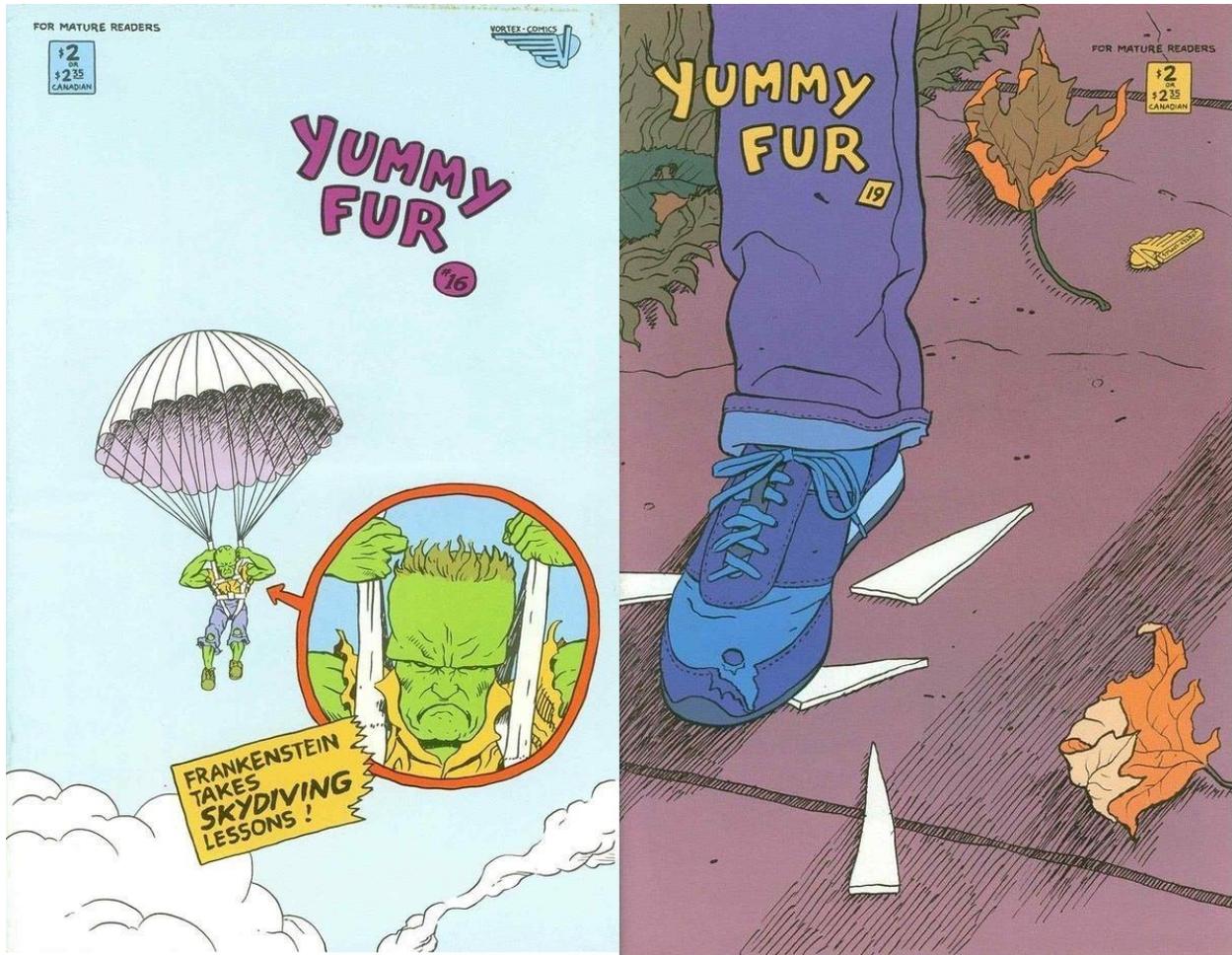


Fig. 15. The cover of the sixteenth and the nineteenth issue of *Yummy Fur*.

In Brown's graphic narratives he often presents himself as an impartial observer to the events of his own life. The majority of the nineteenth issue of *Yummy Fur* is devoted to "Helder," a short graphic narrative that focuses on Brown's experiences while living in a rooming house in Toronto in the early 1980s.² When Brown's autobiographical persona first moves into the building, he encounters the eponymous Helder, a man who, in stark contrast to the reserved and introverted protagonist, is loud and aggressively outspoken. When Helder's fiancée leaves him because of his abusive behaviour, Helder begins dating Anne, another tenant living in the building. Although Brown avoids representing scenes of abuse in explicit detail, he suggests that Helder commits violence

against his new girlfriend. Brown's persona finds suggestive evidence: a smashed door and broken glass scattered around Anne's window. Tellingly, Brown presents his persona as a detached observer to the violence directed against members of his immediate social community. He contemplates telling Anne about Helder's history of abuse but does not intervene, and, as a result of his inaction, he indirectly sanctions Helder's pattern of behaviour. Brown's persona seems quietly indifferent to the events occurring around him. His facial features are almost always blank (Fig. 16). Other characters react and respond to the events of the narrative. Brown's friend Kris goes so far as to speak for him in order to compensate for his complete passivity. During one awkward confrontation where Helder attempts to initiate an argument with Brown's persona, Kris defends him: "Listen Helder, Chester doesn't play games! He's the most honest and straightforward person I know!" (62). Although Brown undercuts her claim – writing a caption next to her words that states, "take this with a grain of salt" (62) – her assessment of his integrity also accurately defines Brown's ethos as an author. Brown treats his role as though he were a distant observer to the events of his own life, as though he were only a medium of automatic transmission that records without censorship or comment. In this respect, he replicates the methods that are familiar to many confessional authors: he invokes the rhetoric of personal transparency, becoming an impartial observer assembling meticulous details about the events of the past.

Brown makes compositional choices in his graphic narratives that reinforce his detachment as an impartial observer recording the events unfolding around him. During the early stages of his career, his compositional techniques underwent a series of alterations that culminated in the nineteenth issue of *Yummy Fur*. He increasingly subdued his erratic drawing style. His early drawings often contain a flurry of anxious cross-hatching and rough line-work. In "Helder" his drawings remain loose and variable, retaining some similarities with his earlier compositions, but his draftsmanship become more precise and consistent.³ Although Brown's compositional techniques in

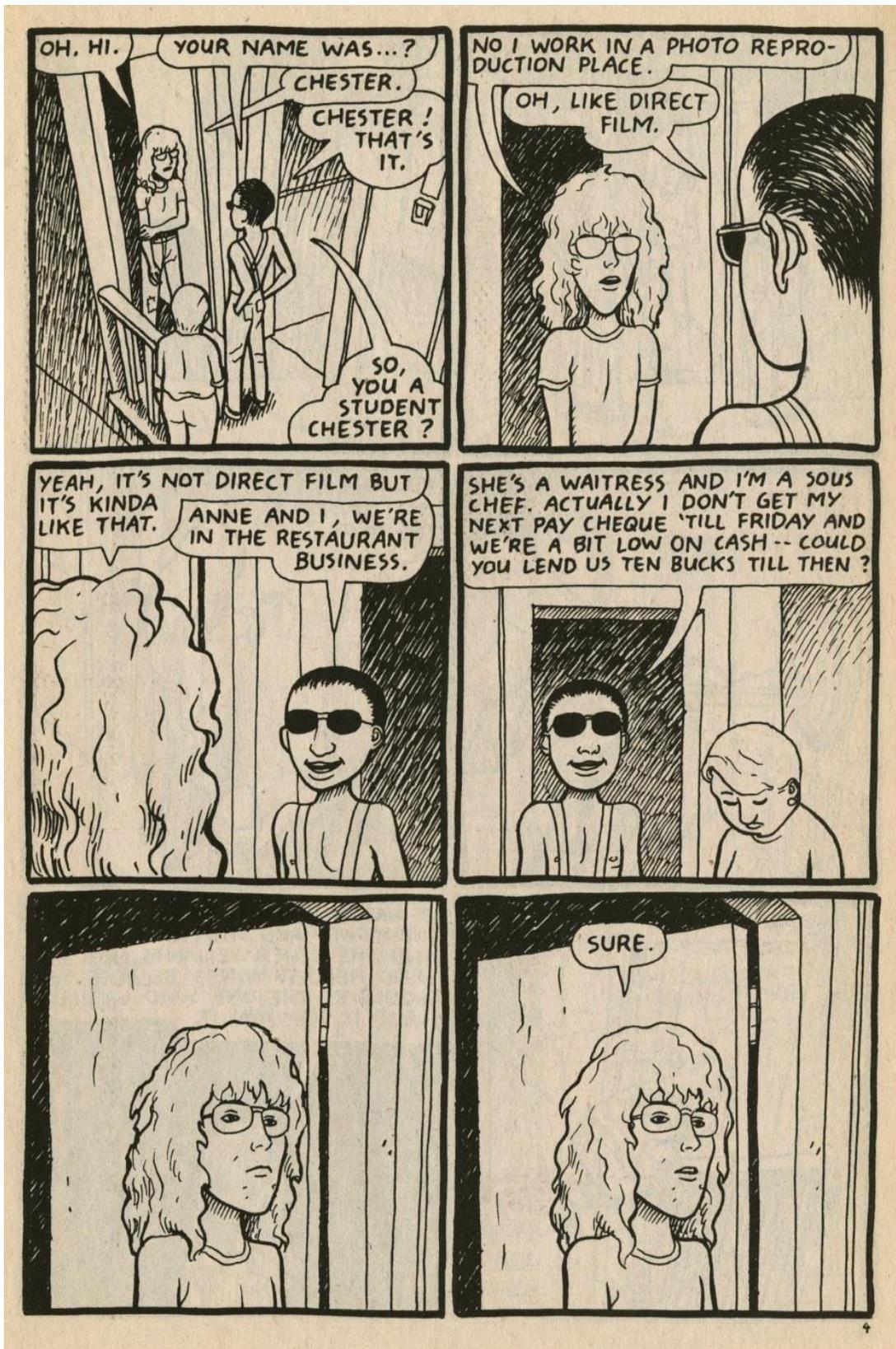


Fig. 16. Brown's persona remains emotionally detached while he addresses Helder ("Helder" 4).

“Helder” are still wild and expressive, they show more restraint than his earlier drawings. Moreover, the pacing in “Helder” slows down to a crawl.⁴ Brown includes contemplative drawings that depict his persona absently washing dishes (Fig. 17). These panels are somewhat superfluous according to the system of closure that controls the sequential mechanics of comics because they could be eliminated without disrupting the progression of the narrative. They direct the rhythmic structure of the panels on the page. They slow down the pacing and allow Brown to dwell on mundane daily activities. Such methods lend a rhetorical authority to Brown’s confessional text because they allow him to suggest to the reader that he is recording his past experiences without exaggeration. He allows daily chores to share space with other over-dramatic moments of conflict. Thus, the text becomes a reliable medium of automatic transmission, and Brown subdues his role as author actively shaping the events of the past into a narrative, even though he still is in effect the principal subject matter of the text.

Brown’s global compositional strategies, which corroborate the disinterestedness of his observations, establish his credibility as a reliable interpreter of the past. However, the structure of his confessional text is problematic and ambiguous, despite its surface-level claims to transparency. Brown constructs a complicated mode of personal address with several different layers of competing self-reference. For example, there are at least two separate autobiographical personae operating in “Helder.” There is the first-level autobiographical persona who interacts with Helder, and there is the second-level autobiographical persona who addresses the reader directly and retrospectively interprets the events of the past (Fig. 17). Subtle changes in hairstyle separate the two different renditions of Brown’s autobiographical persona. The second persona is more professional, with combed hair and serious expression. He analyzes the events of the past while standing in front of a black background. The simple staging of the panel allows Brown to present the second persona in an ambiguous context. By dividing his autobiographical persona in half, Brown undercuts his own

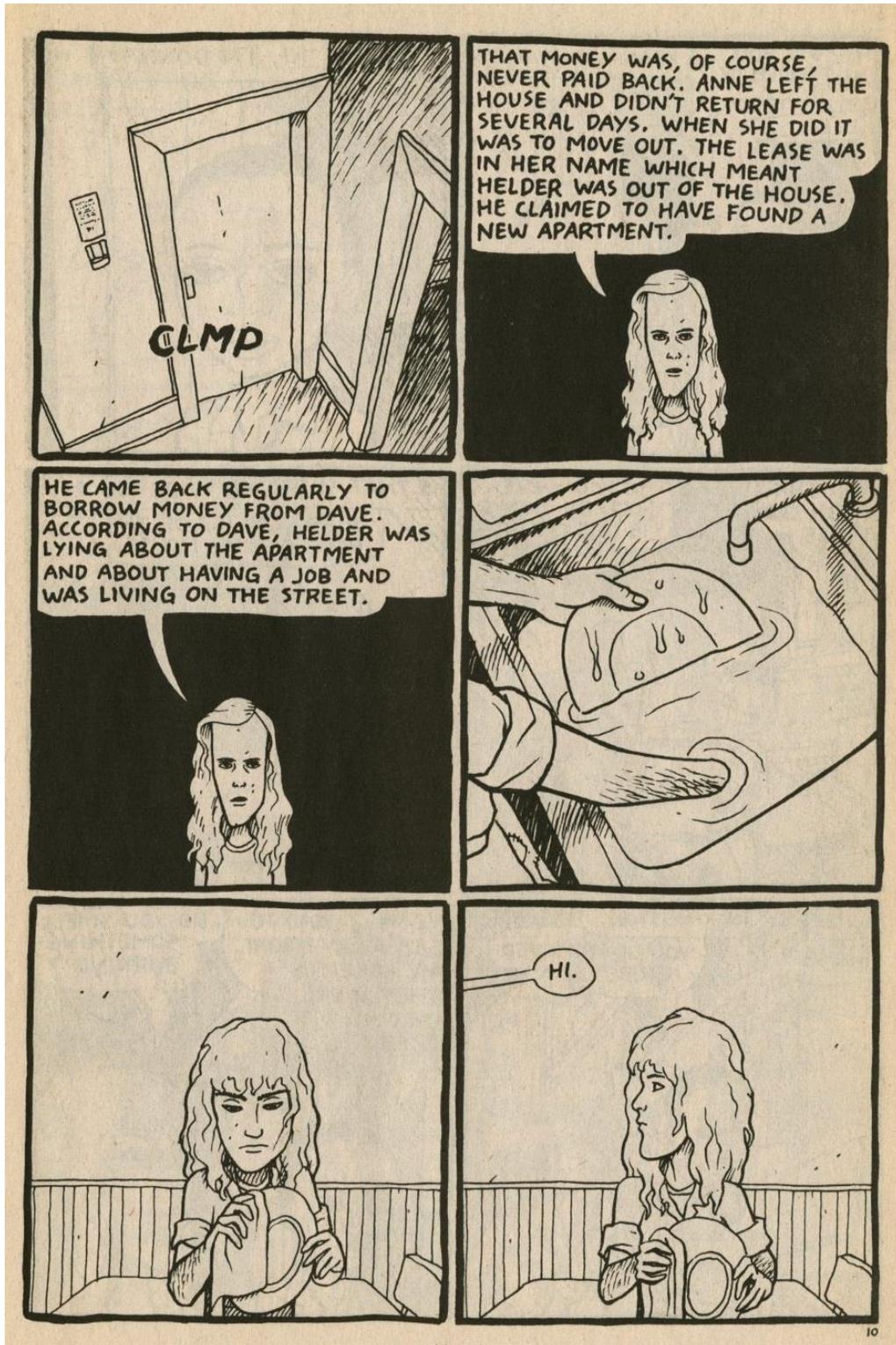


Fig. 17. A scene from “Helder.” Brown’s first comics persona washes dishes, while his second persona retrospectively describes the events of the past (10).

strategy of detachment and transparency because he marks his graphic narrative as being contrived. The second persona foregrounds Brown's role as author shaping the events of the past into a constructed account. Indeed, the more vigorously I unpack the structure of Brown's work, the more I find evidence that the medium of comics entangles his rhetoric of transparency. If I wanted to complicate my description of his graphic narratives even further, I could also point out that his second authorial persona, the one commenting on the events of the past in front of a black background, is additionally distanced from yet another version of Brown, the author who is constructing the text. Brooks, describing the tensions inherently built into the structure of confessional discourses, sees the potential for "infinite regress" in confessional texts (52).⁵ Brown's work is similarly insecure, a labyrinthine game of self-reference with the reader caught up in an endless cup-and-shell game with the presence of the author.⁶

Brown divides his autobiographical persona in half in "Helder" in order to concretize the hidden structures of his work. Many confessional texts operate, as Susannah Radstone describes them, according to "a mode [of narration] in which the position of the confessional subject is divided between a narrated 'I' located in the narrative's past, and a narrating 'I' located in the narrative's present" (22). She suggests that this mode of narration is the product of the trope of "becomingness" that often dominates confessional texts: "Becomingness constructs its subject as caught up in time's forward trajectory . . . [It] produces a central protagonist characterized as in process" (37). The temporal trajectory of the text thus situates Brown's second persona in an ambivalent relationship with the first persona who exists in the past. "Helder" constructs a mode of personal address that situates the subject of the narrative in a transitory state. The security of Brown's textual identity is fragmented: the persona in the past is in the process of becoming the persona in the present.

For authors to make it seem as though their confessional texts create transparent renditions

of the past, they must often navigate a complex, even paradoxical, formal situation. As I see it, if confessional authors want to present the text as reliable and accurate, they must conflate the events of the past with the text. Authors describe the past in an act of self-revelation, as though they were transcribing them without exaggeration. Confessional texts thus give the impression that they can, through acts of meticulous transcription, concretize the recollections of the author. This leads to a complicated scenario: the text authorizes its account of the past by freeing the text from the author's influence. But, as Brooks writes in his analysis of Rousseau's famous example:

Rousseau offers an allegory of the act of confessing as an act of self-exposure, with the implicit warning that confession is never direct, simple, straightforward, but rather a discourse whose relation to the truth takes the shape of a tangent, since it involves fantasies and fictions that are both gratuitous (pure inventions) and predetermined (by sexual orientation) and are in some sense (according to the dictates of desire) truer than what we might normally consider the truth. (51)

Thus, in most confessional texts, the author situates him or herself in relation to his or her autobiographical persona as an infinite digression. Brown's rhetorical claims to transparency depend on his ability to streamline the formal complexity of his graphic narrative, with its multivalent narrative structure with competing levels of self-reference.

Brown shows skepticism about his own models of personal address. Indeed, he makes a confession of shame in "Helder" that stems from his contempt concerning his own indifferent behaviour. Although Helder's brashness seems to contrast with Brown's persona's reserved personality, they both share one quality in common: they are both emotionally detached. Helder wears sunglasses and slicks back his hair to broadcast his cool and indifferent attitude. Brown's persona stares blankly as the events of his own life unfold around him. In subsequent issues of *Yummy Fur*, Brown continues to evolve as an author by adapting new tactics of self-revelation that

modify his initial compositional strategies. The twentieth issue of *Yummy Fur* contains the autobiographical graphic narrative “Showing ‘Helder,’” which dramatizes the final editorial decisions that Brown faced when he created his earlier graphic narrative “Helder.” He includes scenes with his autobiographical persona sitting at his desk anxiously drawing earlier issues of *Yummy Fur*, and, as the title suggests, he “shows” these early drafts to his peers. For Brown as a confessional author, the process of composition proceeds as a series of imprecise decisions taking place over a period of time – as made evident by the present participle in the title, “*Showing* Helder.” Brown’s persona agonizes about the structure of the text. Trying to streamline his strategy of transparent personal address, he solicits advice from his friends and professional colleagues. His friend Kris convinces him to make alterations to an early draft of “Helder.” He eliminates self-referential dialogue from certain panels (they do not appear in the final published version) that would have had his first-level autobiographical persona speaking directly to the audience. Importantly, Kris admits in the final pages of the graphic narrative that she misled Brown with disingenuous editorial advice: “Just to make a point about how you never listen to me” (Fig. 18). Thus, Brown makes it clear that his confessional text is subject to outside influences, like a friend’s conflicted advice. He relinquishes control, rejecting the conceit that the author holds sole sovereign authority over the creation of the text.

The page layout in “Showing ‘Helder,’” exemplifies Brown’s evolving strategies of composition. The visual architecture is loose and dynamic, standing in sharp contrast to the rigid grid of “Helder” (Fig. 18). Brown chooses here an open-ended structure and eliminates the borders of his panels. His drawings roam across the surface of the page. Without the benefit of the consistent panel structure, the reader’s eye can easily become lost because the relationship between different images is so dynamic. This strategy allows him to suggest that the process of composition, which “Showing ‘Helder,’” dramatizes, is similarly fluid and unstructured. The cover of the twentieth issue



Fig. 18. The last two pages of “Showing ‘Helder’” (100-1).

contains an image of Brown altering an earlier drawing from “Helder” (Fig. 19).⁷ This image sums up many of the dominant issues present in “Showing Helder.” The construction of his autobiographical graphic narrative is an uneasy process. His persona’s brush is still dripping with ink, frozen in time at the point when he is beginning to make alterations to his graphic narrative. His hand is frail, as though at any moment it could slip and disturb the consistency of the line on the page. The cover image foregrounds the unstable variations that took place over time as part of the process that led to

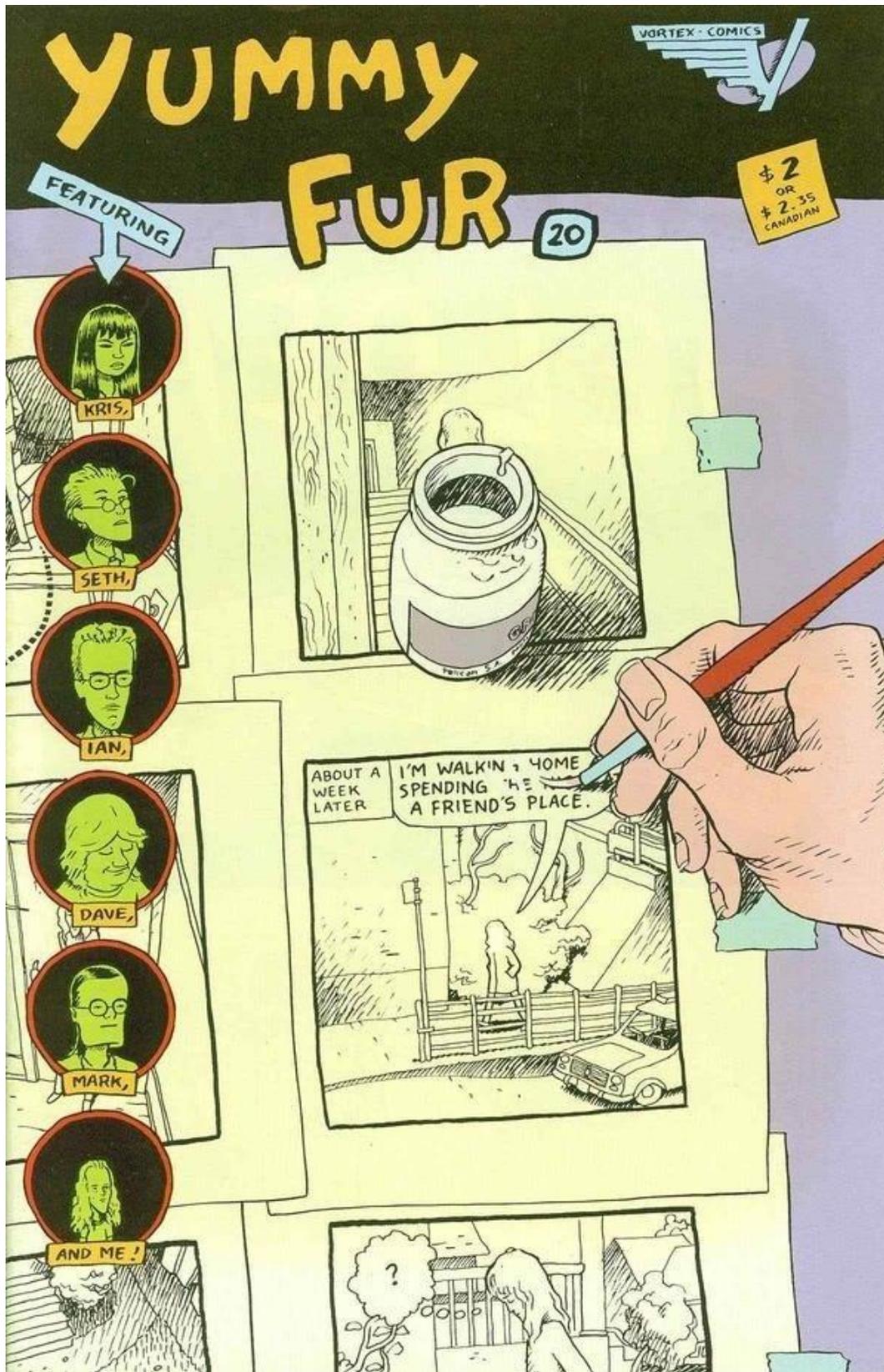


Fig. 19. The cover of the twentieth issue of *Yummy Fur*, the issue that contains “Showing ‘Helder.””

the final product. Moreover, the cover, depicting his comics persona in the act of editorial intervention eliminating clues from his graphic narrative that would have foregrounded its artificiality, telegraphs the fact that Brown's autobiographical narrative is not a medium of automatic transmission. His work is subject to countless unstable manipulations. His persona, holding a brush covered in white ink, is about to eliminate material from his graphic narrative in order to secure the rhetorical credibility of the text. Thus, Brown suggests with the cover that the seemingly simple process of "telling the truth" is an artificial act that requires painstaking care and effort.

In Brown's graphic narratives, there is a complex interplay between transparency and mediation. When Brown undercuts his authority in "Showing 'Helder,'" he disrupts the testimonial credibility of his earlier work "Helder." He describes to his audience the manipulations that took place when he created his earlier graphic narratives. It is also possible, however, that he describes the editorial process as a fumbling mess of sometimes haphazard decisions in order to establish, again, his own transparency as author. Brown's work replicates some of theories that David J. Bolter and Richard Grusin propose concerning the tension between immediacy and hypermediacy. In their analysis of new media products, they suggest:

Like other media since the Renaissance – in particular, perspective painting, photography, film, and television – new digital media oscillate between immediacy and hypermediacy, between transparency and opacity . . . Although each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium. Thus, immediacy leads to hypermediacy. (19)

Brown's graphic narratives explore the capacity to which the medium of comics is capable of furnishing a system of tenuous immediacy, following the same patterns Bolter and Grusin describe in their analysis of new media. At one end of the spectrum that Bolter and Grusin describe is the

conceit of media without mediation. At the other end is the ideal of total media awareness: the self-conscious appraisal of the ways in which media mediate one's experience of material reality. Brown's graphic narratives shuttle from immediacy to hypermediacy. Indeed, "Helder" and "Showing 'Helder'" almost perfectly replicate these two opposing categories. Thus, "Showing Helder" returns to many of the same rhetorical strategies that began in "Helder," despite its change in subject matter and compositional structure. Brown's self-revelations are absolute, as he exposes his own shortcomings as an author. Both ends of the spectrum that Bolter and Grusin describe share the same desire for sincerity: immediacy and hypermediacy both reach for the same objective, but employ different strategies for doing so.

The medium of comics has the potential to disrupt the clarity of confessional discourses, because the medium is at once transparent and elusive. On the cover of the twentieth issues of *Yummy Fur*, Brown draws his persona eliminating lines of self-referential dialogue. Tellingly, his persona makes this decision because he decides the dialogue is unnecessary. His decision speaks to the structure of the medium of comics as a whole. His persona eliminates self-referential dialogue because the medium of comics is already inundated with formal properties that announce the medium's artificiality. As I wrote in my introduction, the stylistic traditions of graphic narrative, which rely on stereotype and simplification, foreground the author's influence shaping the structure of the text. The rhetoric of the cartooned visual image announces to the reader that he or she is witnessing an inaccurate exaggeration. The author announces continuously that he or she is engaging in acts of artificial self-creation. Furthermore, as I argued in an earlier chapter concerning self-portraiture and graphic narrative, autobiographical comics often contain what I called a series of shallow self-portraits: a collection of exaggerated autobiographical personae that self-consciously describe the author's experiences. These two different compositional conventions playfully manipulate the documentary authority of the text. Thus, graphic narratives have the potential to

unsettle the system of personal transparency on which confessional texts depend. Comics authors may render a confessional account in their graphic narratives, but the process of transference is clumsy because of the predominance of exaggerated self-portraits and self-referential drawings. This is part of the reason why I arrived at the word “schizogenetic” to describe contemporary Canadian graphic narratives, because they draw on the medium’s fragmented and contradictory language of formal composition to create their accounts of the past. Thus, comics authors who work with the discourses of confession have to negotiate with a troubling textual situation for their acts of personal testimonial.

2. Comics confessions

This chapter defines a strategy of personal revelation that operates in many works of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative. This strategy, what I call “comics confession,” does not revolutionize common trends in confessional discourses. For example, I will go on to define comics confession as a brand of intimate exchange, and this quality is certainly evident in other confessional texts. My contention is simply that the medium of comics emphasizes certain structural principles present in confessional texts. I want to describe “comics confession” as a distinct model of interactive and inclusive personal address. Comics confessions engage readers and ask them to participate in a private dialogue through an extensive formal strategy of textual intimacy.

Confessional texts may be analyzed according to a formulaic discursive structure. They are based on the basic act of verbal confession, which Michel Foucault defines in “Subjectivity and Truth” as a ritualized activity: “To declare aloud and intelligibly the truth of oneself” (173). Chloë Taylor argues in her 2009 survey *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault* that Foucault’s definition takes for granted a fundamental relationship between a confessant and a listener: “For Foucault, such a declaration, a confession, is always made in the presence of another” (7). Taylor,

again drawing on Foucault's definition, argues, "A case of a 'virtual' other for Foucault is found in the practice of autobiographical writing in which one projects a reader even if one never in fact intends to offer one's text to her . . . The text is written 'aloud' in so far as one is delivering it to another in one's imagination" (7). This is an important distinction for confessional texts because it notes that the declaration of a confessant's confession is almost always made in the presence of a listener; therefore, it invokes a "You-I dialogue" (Brooks 95). The presence of a listener is fundamental to the basic structure of personal revelation in confessional texts, even when the confessor is removed from the confessant. The listener may be implied, even if she or he only exists in some kind of imagined form.

Confessional authors often ask the reader to take on the role of adjudicator who assesses the confessional text. Brooks describes confessional texts as interpersonal exchanges between confessant and confessor that invoke many of the same structural principles as prayer, in the sense that the speaker defers judgement to the listener: "the addressee of the confession is called upon as witness and judge of its efficaciousness" (95). Taylor notices the correlation between confession and self-surveillance. The confessant presupposes, through the explanation of the details of her or his actions, an impending judgment, like a prisoner awaiting trial (71). It could be said, then, that within the dynamics of confessional discourses there is often an implied listener who, taking on a symbolic role, becomes the person to whom the confessant reveals hidden shame. The reader interacts with the confessional text as implied impartial observer and as judge to the account: the reader acts as the confessant's confessor. This confessor has the implied authority of judgement. While confessional texts do not always replicate the same desire for religious absolution that motivates spiritual confessions – religious confessions occur in a specific social context, and it is perilous to make too many broad generalizations – confessional texts often replicate their basic structure.

The confessional text acts as a mediator between the author and the reader. Brooks writes:

“the confessional mode [is] a crucial kind of self-expression that is supposed to bear a special stamp of sincerity and authenticity and to bear special witness to the truth of the individual personality” (18). As I described earlier in my discussion of Brown’s graphic narratives, a confessional author will often employ the rhetoric of transparency in order to transcribe into the text the substance of her or his life experiences. The confessant presents the text as an act of mediation without mediation. The text transforms into a stand-in that is indistinguishable from the presence of the author. Rousseau, for example, grants *The Confessions* such an authority that, as Brooks argues, he treats it as though it were capable of replicating all of his actions and deeds: “Rousseau claims that he will come to his Sovereign Judge at the last trumpet with ‘this book in hand’” (Brooks 160). The content of the confessional text becomes the externalized substance of the confessant’s hidden identity, and it relays this substance of details to the listener for the purposes of judgement.

The confessional text often acts as the metaphorical stand-in for the presence of the author recounting the experiences of his or her life. It constructs a metonymic representation of the identity of the author. Interestingly, the text can be so successful in this capacity that it supplants the author entirely. Confessional texts would seem, then, to conflate the author with the text, as though it were possible, through the transcription of intricate details without censorship, for the text to create a substitute for the author’s identity. In order to facilitate the seamless conflation of the confessional author with the confessional text, several different rhetorical sleights-of-hand have to take place that elide the actions of the confessional author shaping the structure of the text. As I described in the earlier section concerning the rhetoric of transparency, the author becomes merely a transcriber of her or his own experiences of the past. Through this act, the confessant begins to stand separate from the events represented in the confession. And, in turn, the reader’s attention, the shadow of judgement, may shift from the author to the text. The author can become an onlooker and observer to the events of his or her own life, almost in the same role as the audience reading the

text.

Thus, confessional texts often replicate the same simple repetitive dynamic. They may be understood according to a three-part model, a confessional dialogue defined by the relationship between the author, the reader, and the text. Gill writes, “[a confession] is generated and sustained not by the troubled subject/confessant, but by the discursive relationship between speaker and reader (confessant and confessor) or, for Leigh Gilmore, developing Foucault’s model, by the triangular relationship between ‘penitent/teller’, ‘listener’ and ‘tale’” (Gill 4). Drawing on Gill’s, Gilmore’s, and Foucault’s research, this chapter offers the following definition: comics confession is a mode of interpersonal address that shifts the basic discursive relationship in confessional texts between “teller,” “listener,” and “tale.” The confessional text loses its close association with the confessant, in principle because of the traditional association in graphic narratives with self-conscious and artificial pictorialism. The increased distance between confessant and confession allows the author to take on the role of impartial observer with ease. In turn, the reader moves into closer proximity with the text.

Comics confessions may allow authors to emphasize the rhetorical gap between the confessant and the confession via the dynamic interaction of text and image. It is my contention that this disassociation is localized *in the visual* as a means of personal documentation. In order to justify this claim, I offer an analysis of Scott Water’s visual memoir *Hero Book*. I hesitate first before my analysis begins to point out that this text serves as a somewhat muddled example because its visuals do not conform to the customary compositional strategies of cartooning that often appear in graphic narrative, such as simplification and exaggeration; however, I include *Hero Book* here because it provides a clear example of the process of disassociation achieved through the interaction between word and image in autobiography. Although *Hero Book* is not, strictly speaking, a graphic narrative, it employs text and image in a manner that perfectly replicates the strategies of confessional comics. In

Hero Book, Waters describes his regrets from young adulthood when he trained to become a member of the Canadian Armed Forces. In one crucial section he includes a series of lavish glossy images. He writes commentary next to these photographs: “Perhaps this is all I need to show you. Everything I’ve tried to drag back across this chasm of time can be distilled down to a hairless torso, a farmer’s tan and a *GPMG* [general purpose machine gun]” (Fig. 20). This example, like many other confessional dialogues, may be analyzed in terms of the three-part structure of author, text, and reader. Waters (the retrospective “I”) speaks to his audience about his past (“you”) as it has been mediated by the text: “*this* is all I need to show you” (my emphasis). He renders his life experiences from the past with bold transparency; it is telling that Waters focuses on the vulnerability of his body, his “hairless torso, a farmer’s tan.” As confessant he distances himself from the confessional text through the act of visual display: “this is all I need to *show* you” (my emphasis). He observes this figure with scorn and detachment. Through the interaction of text and image, Waters, like many other authors of graphic narrative, distances himself from his autobiographical persona.

As Hillary L. Chute perceptively argues while describing the multimodal properties of graphic narratives, “With comics, images carry an immediacy and proximity, while the form overall is deeply, self-consciously artificial, composed in discrete frames; it thus necessarily flags a certain aesthetic distance, an interpretation of depicted events” (*Graphic Women* 92). Charles Hatfield agrees, arguing, “The worldview of the autobiographical subject, often a confused young naïf, contrasts with the more mature and comprehensive, or simply more jaded, view of the author. In comics, this sense of *otherness* may be enacted by the tension between representational codes: the abstract or discursive (the Word) versus the concrete or visual (the Picture)” (128). Thus, comics have the potential to disassociate authors from the events they portray because of the multimodal properties of the medium of comics, in much the same way Water distances himself from his earlier autobiographical

Perhaps this is all I need to show you.
Everything I've tried to drag back
across this chasm of time
can be distilled down to a hairless torso,
a farmer's tan and a GPMG.



Sometimes referred to as *Asshole with Pig*.

Fig. 20. Waters includes a photograph from his youth in *Hero Book*, which he describes from a critical distance (N. pag.).

persona in *Hero Book*. The visual depiction of an autobiographical persona paired together with a retrospective text allows the author to cut ties with the person she or he was in the past.

Graphic narratives employ formal cues that are designed to call forth their audience and engage them provocatively. Thus, they may encourage, following the triangulated discursive relationship of confession, a heightened level of interaction between the reader and the text. Marshall McLuhan proposes a famous binary that defines “cool” and “hot” media: “cool” media subdues its audience by appealing to non-rational faculties; “hot” media demands active interpretation (22-25). It is possible to describe the medium of comics as a form of “hot” media

because it makes so many requests on the reader. Its basic formal operation of reading is “closure,” a process whereby the reader assembles a continuous narrative from a discontinuous sequence (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 62-69).⁸ It asks readers to assemble a sequential narrative from a selection of scattered images. Thus, the medium of comics calls on readers and asks them to participate in the creation of the text. Because the basic meaning-making operation in comics is dependent on such interventions on the part of the reader, the medium is inherently highly interactive.

Many Canadian comics authors employ compositional strategies that complement the basic interactive properties of the medium of comics through subtle formal cues. In *Tangles*, Sarah Leavitt writes about her experiences dealing with her mother’s battle with Alzheimer’s. *Tangles* is, like many other prominent examples of recent graphic life writing, an inter-generational memoir that weaves together Leavitt’s personal reflections with an account of her family (Rifkind 424). It is also a confessional text, where Leavitt describes her actions from the past with regret. In her introduction, Leavitt describes the evolution of her textual project: “I ended up with a box of notes and sketches, some careful and considered, some dashed off in the middle of a crisis and barely legible or blotched with dried tears . . . I chose a small number of drawings and notes, compiled them into a book and made a few colour copies.” Although she intended at first to write a traditional prose memoir, Leavitt altered her plans and wrote a graphic memoir. It seems reasonable to suggest that part of the reason why she altered her original plan was that the medium of comics presented her with opportunities that properly served her purposes.

Leavitt’s compositional strategies disrupt the reader’s role as objective adjudicator of the text. For example, Leavitt heightens the interactive qualities of the medium of comics with formal cues designed to draw in the reader. Some of the most affective scenes in *Tangles* contain drawings of Leavitt’s mother writhing in suffering and pain. Leavitt writes: “The woman at the nursing home was

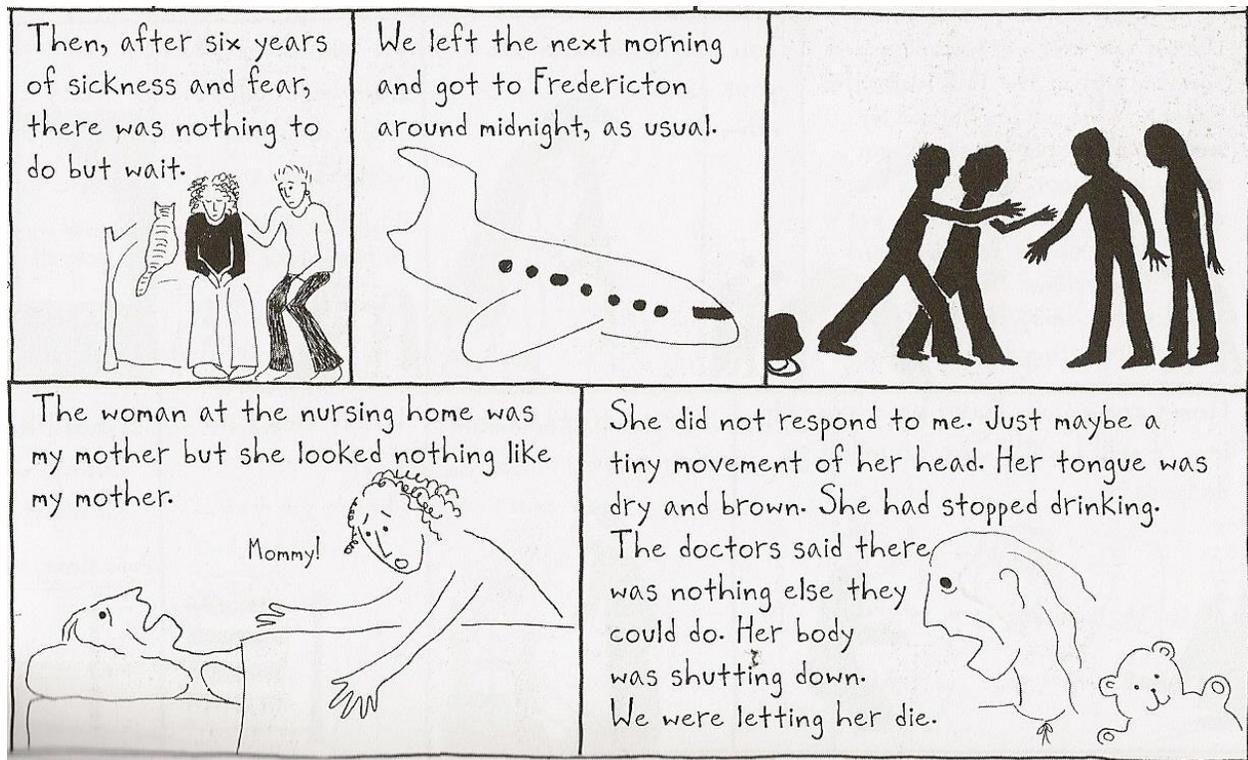


Fig. 21. Leavitt's persona observes her mother in the final stages of her illness (*Tangles* 119).

my mother but she looked nothing like my mother” (Fig. 21). I contend that the image of her mother here operates as an empty vessel ready to be filled with the reader’s interpretations. McCloud suggests that the simplified cartooned images of graphic narrative often act as empty vessels or blank slates. For example, the simplified design of some drawings – imagine two dots and a curved line as a substitute for a person’s face – is open-ended. This vacancy leaves it to the reader to concretize the abstracted image left blank by the composition of the drawing. If McCloud is correct and the visual rhetoric of caricature draws in the reader, then the experience for the reader when he or she is confronted with the abstracted drawing of Leavitt’s mother is a moment of projection that encourages an intense exchange with the text. Interestingly, the drawing of Leavitt’s mother is more streamlined and simplified than other drawings in *Tangles*. Leavitt subtly augments the level of abstraction precisely at the moment when the text replays the experience of empathizing with her

mother. She asks the reader to furnish the abstracted composition of the caricatured visual image with objects from her or his imagination. The consumption of this panel is best described as an interactive experience, in which the reader must fill up the image with an imagined moment of suffering and pain.

McCloud observes that “a picture can evoke an emotional or sensual response in the viewer” (*Understanding Comics* 121). Many different theorists seem to support his casual observation. In her analysis of visual communication, Ann Marie Barry goes so far as to suggest that people are inherently receptive to visual images because they bypass some of the rational functions of the brain: “Both written and oral forms of language must be cognitively processed first, whereas the image is perceptually processed along the same alternative pathways as direct experience. The image is therefore capable of reaching the emotions before it is cognitively understood.” (78). For this reason, Barry suggests that visual images have the ability to “speak directly to the emotions, bypassing logic” (78). Although both McCloud and Barry offer insights concerning the potentially evocative influence of visual images, they undermine their findings when they assign fixed criteria to a variable situation and make too many over-extensive claims. Charles A. Hill analyzes visual communication with more sophistication, asking such crucial questions as, “How, exactly, do images persuade?” (25). His answers are varied, as “many practitioners . . . instantiate, in their daily practice, a variety of principles about how to take best advantage of the persuasive power of representational images” (25). That being said, he notices certain common threads:

Conventional wisdom says that representational images tend to prompt emotional reactions and that, once the viewer’s emotions are excited, they tend to override his or her rational faculties . . . Psychological research suggests that this conventional explanation of the rhetorical power of images is broadly accurate in outline, though inadequate for explaining how persuasive images work. (26)

Social semioticians, adopting an approach that avoids Barry's universalizing claims about visibility, reach similar conclusions. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress devise the theory of "modality" to describe the impact of images in a social context (121). They argue that the low modality of cartooned drawings make them seem self-evident and artificial, which contrasts with the rigorous difficulty of some traditional forms of fine art. While cartooned drawings are less authoritative than other modes of visual documentation, they benefit from a suggestive authority that animates imagined feelings of intimacy (Hodge and Kress 122). The net result of these theories is all the same: visual images, especially cartooned drawings, encourage a heightened level of interaction with their audience.

The formal mechanics of the medium of comics depend on multiple acts of indirect interpretive projection. At the beginning of *Tangles*, Leavitt's persona describes an anecdote about her dollhouse, one of her favourite childhood toys. As she grows older she realizes that the dollhouse gave her the opportunity to test models of social interaction. Leavitt's mother gave it to her as a child to serve as a teaching tool, "to try to help us understand our relationship to each other – big sister, little sister – through imaginative play" (34). The dollhouse is emblematic of the formal structure of the text.⁹ Much like the dollhouse, Leavitt's graphic narrative allows her to replay her social interactions with her family through "imaginative play." These dramatizations are stressful for her, because of the taxing symptoms of her mother's Alzheimer's. As Leavitt's mother's illness becomes more severe, her actions become increasingly chaotic. She loses the ability to communicate as her language skills deteriorate: "There were more gaps in her speech. She pursed her lips and breathed out hard as she searched for words" (Fig. 22). Leavitt's persona often repeats her frustration taking care of her mother during her trying illness: her father tells her, "She [her mother] doesn't know what she's saying. / It doesn't help anyone when you get mad at her" (Fig. 22). Leavitt's persona's inability to show compassion for her mother's struggle with Alzheimer's amounts to a series of guilty



Fig. 22. Leavitt's persona expresses her frustration concerning her mother's Alzheimer's (*Tangles* 21)

confessions. In another scene, she becomes frustrated again with her mother's vague gestures: "She was pointing at the birds, but they'd flown away already. I knew that but I pretended to have no idea what she was trying to say. I was sick of trying to fill in the gaps in her speech. I was sick of helping her. I was sick of her being sick" (73). *Tangles* includes many such moments where Leavitt reveals her shame concerning her response to her mother's illness. Her persona's act of imaginative play, which had once been a source of childhood pleasure, turns into an uncomfortable activity and guilty burden. By constructing a highly interactive text, as I have come to define it, Leavitt shares with her readers some of the responsibility for empathizing with her mother's experiences. She asks them to replicate her actions trying to understand that painful experience. Thus, Leavitt enlists the properties

of the medium of comics to draw in the reader and, in doing so, constructs an empathetic description of her mother's terminal illness.

My analysis of the indirect methods of contemporary Canadian graphic narratives recalls my description of "schizogenesis" from my introductory chapter. Leavitt relies on the poetics of caricature to generate a description of the individual subject that encourages the reader's conscientious concern. The fact that she enlists the medium of comics to construct this personal testimony is remarkable, given that the term "comics" has often been used as symbol for thoughtless entertainment. The etymological evolution of the term began with the early history of the medium in large-scale literary production. The term "comics" derives from a shortening of the term "comic strip," as "A sequence of small drawings telling a comic or serial story in a newspaper" (*OED*). "Cartoon," another term commonly associated with the medium of comics, likewise originates in the networks of large-scale literary production: "A full-page illustration in a paper or periodical; *esp.* applied to those in the comic papers relating to current events. Now, a humorous or topical drawing (of any size) in a newspaper" (*OED*). As these examples illustrate, the terminology of comics is tied to the newspaper's network of distribution and consumption, entrenched such as it is in the fields of large-scale cultural production. It developed, therefore, as a way of defining literary products that are commercial in their design.

"Comics" and "cartoons" were developed as terms to describe bland, repetitive, and impersonal publications. It is ironic, therefore, that the medium of comics has at other points in its history been criticized for fostering an overwhelming emotional relationship with its audience.¹⁰ The regulatory conflicts that erupted in the 1940s and 50s in North America were tied to debates concerning the possible troubling influence of visual media. Sabin describes this period of history as follows:

In a few short years, comics became the scapegoat for various forces of reaction and

... The immediate cause was the objections of sections of the public in America (and to a lesser degree in Britain) to the two obvious genres: crime and horror . . . [comics] caused a furor. In America, the idea that they were at least partly responsible for the rise in juvenile delinquency quickly gained ground. (68)

Jean-Paul Gabilliet argues that the anti-comics anxiety that spread across North America at the midpoint of the twentieth century was particularly influential in Canada, to a certain extent because the lack of first amendment rights allowed for more stringent policies prohibiting content (*Of Comics* 218). Those who worried about the adverse effects of reading graphic narrative – the imagined potential for it to stunt intellectual development and inspire acts of violence – proposed theories that emphasized the penetrating influence of evocative visual images (Gabilliet, *Of Comics* 41-43). They suggested comics’ audience of young consumers were blind to the subconscious effects of the medium. In doing so, they crafted a paradoxical scheme for describing the medium: it was simultaneously alarming and trivial, a form of bland entertainment with a staggering influence. Thus, they established a precedent that suggests, paradoxically, that the medium of comics is at once too impersonal and too intimate.

Many early comics authors employed the rhetoric of exuberant enthusiasm to promote their products, and future generations of cartoonists often replicate these formative strategies of composition. Comics historians argue that the medium of comics established methods for creating a welcoming market of consumers. The earliest graphic narratives were designed to attract readers in a highly competitive commercial market.¹¹ Popular adventure comic books from the mid-part of the twentieth century developed as part of an extensive “fan” culture that encouraged traditions of open acceptance among their producers and consumers (Sabin 157; Gabilliet, *Of Comics* 256-58).¹² In the 1960s and 70s these patterns of fandom became more amplified and set the tone for the consumption of graphic narrative in North America (Gabilliet, *Of Comics* 262). For example, a

common component of many popular comic books is the “mailbag” section, a collection of letters with comments and questions from readership. Such formal elements call out to the reader like an anxious plea for attention and acceptance.

Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives retain some of the remnants of their earlier predecessors as a residual creative influence. There are compositional strategies available to them that allow them to draw in the reader as part of the welcoming community of the text. For example, in Brown’s comic books he often includes mailbag sections as a direct homage to the mailbag sections present in popular genres of graphic narrative. At the back of almost every issue of *Yummy Fur* are sections where Brown responds to his reader’s comments and questions.¹³ His authorial tone in these published responses replicates the rhetoric that I describe above: jovial and inviting. Even though Brown operated in a different creative environment than the large-scale distribution network from the mid-part of the twentieth century that encouraged interactions with fan communities, his comic books still retain some influence from earlier graphic narratives designed to sustain a wide-ranging audience. Brown’s graphic narratives were distributed in a small-scale market of like-minded consumers. Although the market for contemporary independent comic books exists in a field of restricted artistic production, it originated in mass-market publishing with comic strips in magazines and newspapers.

The uneven market of production and distribution for comics in Canada lays the foundation for my theories concerning the properties of graphic narrative as they relate to the discourses of confession. I provide a more detailed description of this uneven market in my conclusion, but I pause here to mention that the predominance of confessional discourses in Canadian graphic narrative is the result partly of patterns of production and distribution that emerged at the end of the twentieth century in Canada. Canadian comics authors began to re-evaluate the potentials of graphic narratives, no longer treating them as forms of commercial entertainment but instead as sites

for works of experimental life writing. During this time period many of the traditional avenues for comics publishing reconfigured as the market for comic books and comic strips began to shrink. When the production of graphic narratives eroded as a dominant form of popular entertainment and commercial venture, many contemporary Canadian comics authors began to treat graphic narratives as small-scale creative enterprises, as sites for life writing and personal confessions.

Before the mid-part of the twentieth century most graphic narratives followed a limited list of common genres. The first comic books in Canada were often works of pulp fiction, including genres like serial adventure and medieval romance (Gabilliet, “Comic Art” 463-64). These common genres have retained a continuous presence in the publication of graphic fiction in Canada since its first boom in the 1940s.¹⁴ Many comics historians see the latter half of the twentieth century as an important turning point when new authors emerged whose innovations repositioned graphic narrative as a site for life writing. Hatfield, in his extensive study *Alternative Comics*, attributes this deviation in subject matter to the first wave of “alternative” comics authors, including Robert Crumb and Justin Green (129-131). He writes that autobiographical comics from the latter half of the twentieth century fixate on the “ethic of ‘authenticity’ . . . [that stands] in polemical contrast to the fantasy genres that have for so long dominated the comics mainstream” (129). As Hatfield describes it, “alternative” comics authors prefer confessional texts because they contrast so sharply with what they see as impersonal commercial work. They designed graphic narratives that rebelled against the dominant aesthetic, style, and subject matter of the majority of other comics books (Sabin 209; Gardner, “Autography’s Biography, 1972-2007”).¹⁵ In the Canadian context, a similar trend emerged with a generation of authors who began their careers producing autobiographical comic books. In Canada in the 1980s and 1990s, many Canadian authors treated the medium of comics as a site for self-expression as opposed to a commercial enterprise designed for frivolous popular entertainment.

3. Public documents as personal address

Canadian comics confessions, as I have been describing them, initiate an inclusive and interactive dialogue with their audience. They establish a textual practice for fashioning forms of public intimacy, which is a concept that is difficult to describe because it seems to be such a contradiction in terms. Following the trend of recent life writing and cultural studies scholarship, I want to consider how graphic narratives exist in a nebulous arena of cultural exchange, as “a set of conditions that blur the boundaries of public and private” (Highmore 16). I ask, what is the value of graphic narratives that travel across this boundary? As a way of answering, and as a way of fleshing out the final ramifications of my analysis of comics confession, I refine my terminology and explain the precise meaning of the concept of “intimacy” in this context.

My reading of comics confession is based on Lauren Berlant’s “pioneering” work concerning systems of affective exchange (Stein 513). She coins the term “intimate publics” to describe certain cultural practices in North America:

An intimate public operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people’s particular core interests and desires. When this kind of “culture of circulation” takes hold, participants in the intimate public *feel* as though it expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history. (*Female* 5)

Leigh Gilmore refines Berlant’s wandering prose and offers a streamlined definition of her theories: “An ‘intimate public’ . . . is a market plus identification” (“American Neoconfessional” 670). I included my earlier description of the uneven market of Canadian graphic narratives partly to flesh out the similarities that Canadian graphic narratives share with the “intimate publics” that Berlant describes. The history of Canadian graphic narratives does not perfectly correspond to the literary history that Berlant describes because she focuses on nineteenth and early-twentieth century

“women’s culture,” including, for example, works of sentimental fiction. Nevertheless, her theories concerning “intimate publics” are enlightening for my study because Canadian graphic narratives fulfill the central requirement of “market plus identification.” Berlant’s scholarship offers insight into the traditions of small-market circulation that govern Canadian graphic narratives, and I want to adopt her terminology in order to describe the affective exchanges operating in comics confessions.

Berlant reads feelings of intimacy into public documents, which leads her to surprising conclusions, such as her claim that “The autobiographical isn’t the personal” (*Female* vii). She justifies her use of this “non-intuitive phrase” with further explanations that refine her theories: “In the contemporary consumer public, and in the *longue durée* that I’m tracking, all sorts of narratives are read as autobiographies of collective experience. The personal is the general. Publics presume intimacy” (*Female* vii). According to Jay Prosser, such pronouncements issue “a klaxon for biography and autobiography critics today” (Prosser and Berlant 180). He summarizes Berlant’s contribution to the life writing scholarship as follows: “Berlant’s project, then, invites life writing critics to rethink and reframe intimacy in life writing. As she puts it in her introduction to her collection on intimacy, ‘To rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live’” (Prosser and Berlant 181). For Berlant, private experiences are influenced by widespread factors beyond the control of the individual, and, in turn, public experiences occasionally feel personal and privately emotional. Thus, Berlant suggests, quite convincingly, that the division between the private and the public is fluid.

Berlant suggests intimate publics make contributions to public knowledge through circuitous methods. They traffic in texts that initiate feelings of shared belonging. She argues that certain texts construct the imagined expectations that individuals use to evaluate personal fulfillment. They both create and satisfy a desire for emotional and intellectual exchange through their entrenched market of cultural products. Paradoxically, they have the ability to establish a desire for community in a consumer that feels as though it existed before the consumer encountered the text that produced it:

“A certain circularity structures an intimate public, therefore: its consumer participants are perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history; its narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging” (*Female* viii). Intimate publics create a phantasmagoric need that they then go on to fill. Thus, in Berlant’s writing, intimacy becomes a widespread public relationship: for members of an intimate public, “Their participation seems to confirm the sense that even before there was a market addressed to them, there existed a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other’s experience of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent” (*Female* 5). Thus, this kind of public relationship establishes itself in the exchange of cultural products, and it has limited connections with the personal registers of individual emotion. The intimacy operating here is a complex negotiation between the self and generalized definitions of well-being encountered in public life.

Berlant writes” “Publics are affective insofar as they don’t just respond to material interests but magnetize optimism about living and being connected to strangers in a kind of nebulous *communitas*” (*Female* xi). The intimacies of Canadian comics confessions brought about by the interactive and inclusive qualities of Canadian graphic narrative draw in the reader as part of the community of the text, as part of a nebulous “*communitas*” like the one Berlant describes. In a 2011 paper Gabriele Linke assesses the ramifications of Berlant’s writing concerning the collapsing theories of public and private space and argues that Berlant diverges from other theorists because she imagines the possibility of social, emotional, and affective exchanges spreading through the circulation of media: “[Berlant’s] claims that social developments and modern capitalism have made collective intimacy a public and social ideal, creating new institutions of intimacy and collective experience, such as cinema and other entertainments . . . Berlant stresses the power of shared knowledge and experience” (15). Following a similar line of thinking, Prosser offers his own insightful assessment of intimate publics as “laboratories for imagining and cobbling together

alternative construals about how life has appeared and how legitimately it could be better shaped” (Berlant and Prosser 181). Berlant’s scholarship helps me understand how such patterns of affective exchange may operate as a form of community-building. I treat Canadian graphic narratives as a mediated site for the exchange of “shared knowledge” and as an “institution of intimacy and collective experience.” As such, they have the ability to produce a kind of emotional and intellectual exchange for the representation of “alternative construals about how life has appeared” (Berlant and Prosser 181).

In some contemporary Canadian graphic narratives, authors produce welcoming dialogues. They organize patterns of formal intimacy, which augment patterns of imagined public community, similar in their structure to the systems of cultural and emotional exchange that Berlant describes. This chapter explains in formal terms how contemporary Canadian graphic narratives configure feelings of intimacy through a variety of different strategies, such as heightened participatory interactivity. Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives are often “intimate” in the sense that they draw in the reader with structural expectation of like-minded community. They mediate a formal system of emotional exchange among members of the small uneven market for graphic narratives in Canada. They are not “sincere” or “truthful” with their audience, but simply introduce a system of personal testimony that depends on the discursive structures of confession. Berlant’s analysis of intimate publics leads me to the realization that Canadian graphic narratives featuring confessional dialogues have the ability to shape people’s expectations for their lives. And they have the ability, therefore, to contribute to public knowledge in Canada.

4. Shared history: comics confessions as public revelations

It may be tempting to talk about confession as though it relates exclusively to registers of personal experience, especially because of the emergence in this chapter of such concepts as

intimacy; however, this chapter focuses on these issues to explain how constructions of personal experience function in public documents. I want to emphasize that this chapter focuses centrally on issues of historical representation, and how the concept of confession relates to issues of public testimonial and documentary evidence. My introductory chapter makes the claim that contemporary Canadian graphic narratives narrow their scope, developing compositional methods for representing the individual, subjective experiences of the past. In principle this argument replicates longstanding traditions in Canadian literary scholarship for assessing the importance of life writing. Many early critics saw works of life writing as sites for examining historical truth-telling where authors could share information about the micro-structures of the lives of individuals living in Canada. K.P. Stich, an early critic of Canadian life writing, is enlightening in this regard. He writes:

Operating on personal and social levels alike with explicit or implicit emphasis on historicity, good autobiographies are complex cultural documents of life in a specific society . . . the inevitable amalgamation of recollection, imagination, events, ideologies, ideals, and aesthetics remains impressive in the service of such [autobiographies] to the fields of literature, psychology, history, and sociology. (v)

Stich's description treats works of life writing as historical records that collect documentary evidence. Autobiographies are, as he calls them, documents of "life in a specific society." Notwithstanding the value-laden judgments littered throughout Stich's assessment of Canadian autobiography – I have no interest in replicating his definitions of "good" autobiography – I agree with him that many works of life writing generate detailed accounts concerning the people of the past that focus on personal experience.

I diverge from these earlier critics in crucial ways. Confessional texts were slow to integrate into Canadian literary scholarship, and some critics had trouble dealing with them from the perspective of literary history. Even when confessional texts were sometimes first introduced as

subjects for Canadian literary scholarship, they were often treated with derision, as though they were only tangentially significant – as made evident in my earlier analysis of Williams’s assessment of the Canadian novel. Confessional texts were, like other forms of life writing, seen by many literary critics as being secondarily important to the canon of Canadian literature. Indeed, for this reason, Canadian literary scholarship did not initially benefit from a substantial body of critical scholarship focusing exclusively on confessional texts. When they did appear in Canadian literary scholarship, they often appeared for two reasons: either to provide evidence for scholars who wanted to learn biographical details about an author’s life or to provide evidence for genetic criticism, scholarship that charts the precise history of composition for works of canonical Canadian literature. I offer the following example: in Terrence L. Craig’s 1985 paper “The Confessional Revisited: Laura Salverson’s Canadian Work,” he treats Salverson’s *Confessions of an Immigrant’s Daughter* as a tangential footnote to her career. Craig’s argument provides a useful test-case that clarifies my understanding of the methods that some Canadian literary scholars employ to assess confessional texts. Craig downplays the importance of Salverson’s *Confessions*, minimizing the fact that, as a winner of a Governor General’s award for non-fiction in 1939, it achieved at least some significant level of popularity and recognition. Craig writes: “The Governor General’s Award notwithstanding, *Confessions* has faults which weaken its effect. Apart from the unexplained missing years, vagueness is probably its most serious weakness, particularly with regard to dates. Yet, for all its vagueness and contradictions, the book remains a valuable historical document and literary apologia” (87). Craig focuses on the failure of the text to live up to his own expectations about literary continuity and thematic consistency. His analysis depends on a hierarchy of literature that undervalues life writing as inconsequential.¹⁶ Craig argues that confessional texts are beneficial for Canadian literary scholarship only because they provide reliable records of the events of the past. In the second half of Craig’s account, soon after he dismisses Salverson’s *Confessions of an Immigrant’s Daughter* for its “faults” as a sophisticated work of

literature, he offers a small compliment; its failures, as Craig sees them, are mitigated by its value as a historical document. Its lack of formal complexity testifies to its authenticity because it offers a transparent account of Salverson's past experiences. He writes: "It is a remarkable story because of its detailed depiction of the unremarkable – the commonplace matters of daily life . . . [Salverson] illuminated these ordinary people and places with a surprising wealth of detail that contributes much to our understanding of those times" (87). Stich adopts a similar analytical strategy when he describes Salverson's work. He claims that "Much of her authenticity comes from the confessional nature of her autobiography. The title 'confessions' implies emphasis on inner truth" (xiv). Indeed, I am reminded of the fact that Salverson's work was once made available as part of the "Social History of Canada" series from the University of Toronto. In his introduction to Salverson's *Confessions*, H.V. Nelles, the general editor of the series, emphasizes the work's contribution as historical document: "[*Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter*] is an important book for the light it sheds on the social history of Canadian women and immigrants." In this case, the value of the text depends on its ability to reconstruct, with clear verisimilitude and historical accuracy, an author's life experiences. In general principle, I agree with many of the points that these three critics are making; however, I disagree with the particulars of their arguments because they show near apathy concerning the complexity of confessional discourses. Stich, Craig, and Nelles all treat confessional texts as self-evident testimonials and assume there is a direct and unambiguous link between the author and his or her autobiographical persona. If such reasoning is adopted, then works of life writing like Salverson's *Confessions* become the focus of literary scholarship only as sites of subsidiary historical evidence.

The actual content of confessional discourses is somewhat arbitrary, in the sense that a confessant can announce a confession about innumerable subjects, so long as she or he conceives of those subjects as being worthy of a confession. I have avoided speaking too often about the actual

content of these confessions because I want to describe the apparatus of their personal documentary. Confessional texts have an obvious and influential connection with Christian acts of confession. Brooks writes about the predominance of issues related to “standard morality, which censures concealment and values the confession of wrong-doing” (14). Such a focus ritualistically marks the subjects of “standard morality” as the perennial targets of confessional discourses, which might include such issues as sexual deviancy, immorality, and obscene behaviour.¹⁷ However, it would be a mistake to argue that these are the only possible motivations for confessions because there are other forms of confessions besides religious confessions; I could include, for example, secular judicial scenarios. Thus, I follow a wider avenue of understanding with confessional subject matter, treating it as a somewhat arbitrary category of shame attributed to acts by the confessant. The *OED* is enlightening in this respect because it defines “shame” as an affective response subject to contextual interpretation: “The painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonouring, ridiculous, or indecorous in one’s own conduct or circumstances . . . or of being in a situation which offends one’s sense of modesty or decency.” I can imagine a person feeling shame for any action, so as long as he or she attributed the proper affective response to it. It is important to make this qualification about the essential plasticity of shame as it relates to confessional discourses because it recognizes that one person’s sense of shame may not necessarily correspond to that of another. Thus, in Sarah Leavitt’s *Tangles* the author “confesses” her feelings of shame concerning her mistreatment of her mother. In this case, her confession does not relate exclusively to rigid categories of sin or morality. Therefore, I suggest the subject matter of confession is malleable to the affective criteria of the confessant and free of necessary content: I might even go so far as to argue that shame is a value-free category. My analysis risks such a broad definition because it helps acknowledge the widespread adaptability and availability of confessional discourses.

Confessional texts make their stock and trade in the exposure of the unmentionable,

however that concept may be defined. Brooks writes: “Confession of wrongdoing is considered fundamental to morality because it constitutes a verbal act of self-recognition as wrongdoer and hence provides the basis of rehabilitation” (2). Confessional texts focus on the personal and the emotional experiences of the past, most often dwelling on hidden and profane subjects. They describe topics that authors deem private and shameful. It should be apparent, therefore, just how closely the notions of public testimonial and intimacy are linked in these confessional texts. The extrication of shame is achieved through the process of revelation, of transforming private actions into public declarations. Thus, confession is a vehicle for bringing to light for public consumption subjects oftentimes limited to the sectors of private activity.

The net result of the properties of comics confession that I describe in this chapter, particularly the heightened level of interactivity, is that the reader may become compromised as an objective judge. If I were going to describe the traditional three-part relationship in confessional discourses between the author, the text, and the reader using spatializing metaphors, I would describe it as a triangle, with the author and the text in close proximity to one another. In comics, the confessor may sidestep the role of judge, which is the typical role in confessional texts, and become an intimate confidant. The confessional booth of the text shifts and becomes a personal exchange of like-minded peers. A comics author’s explanation of shame enters into this welcoming dialogue, which creates a conventionalized opportunity for personal disclosure.

Many Canadian comics authors incorporate the discourses of confession into their graphic narratives because they prize the ethos of personal revelation, as though reaching a state of uncompromising honesty through acts of self-exposure is a central artistic achievement. My analysis will help refute the claims that occasionally appear in Canadian literary scholarship that treat confessional texts as though they were devoid of conscious planning and sophistication. It is my desire to describe the complexity of these confessional texts: they merely employ careful rhetorical

strategies for configuring a captivating form of direct interpersonal address. Thus, this chapter suggests that contemporary Canadian graphic narratives exist in a field of cultural exchange that draws on formal systems of structural intimacy. It defines comics confessions as an interactive and inclusive mode of personal address, as a welcoming confessional booth for the author to explore prohibited topics. As I will go on to describe in the next chapter, Canadian graphic narratives have the potential, because they exist as part of an intimate public, to describe a whole range of marginalized topics.

Notes

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- ¹ Roger Sabin describes the feeling of *Schadenfreude* (drawing pleasure from the misfortune of others) that results from the scenarios that Brown invents in these early graphic narratives (197).
- ² The page citations for “Helder” refer to Brown’s collection of short graphic narratives *The Little Man*.
- ³ In Brown’s recent work these compositional tendencies preoccupy even more of his attention. For his large-scale biography of Louis Riel he developed a drawing style designed to drain his subject matter of emotional content (Brown, *Inkstudys*). For example, his characters have hollow eyes and vacant expressions.
- ⁴ Brown’s work experiments with the slow rhythms of comics story-telling, culminating in the series *Underwater* (1994-97). Brown decided to abandon this ambitious project because it would have taken decades to finish, given the “glacial” pace of the first few issues (Hatfield 160).
- ⁵ The dynamics of this textual situation remind me of Joanne Saul’s analysis of contemporary Canadian life writing, where she describes the central tension in some works of Canadian life writing between the substances of the author’s life experiences (his or her *bios*) and the author’s written rendition of those details (the text). Saul expands on the term “biotext” to describe this pivoting tension (4). She describes some contemporary Canadian authors who withhold an account of their unified subjectivity in their autobiographical writing in order to work through, for example, some of their feelings of displacement (12, 20-22).
- ⁶ Omitted from the above discussion is an additional complication concerning narrative obscurity in comics. Comics often construct an ambiguous relationship between written text and visual image. For example, Seth constructs a form of indirect discourse in *It’s a Good Life if You Don’t Weaken* in the sections where his persona travels across the Ontario countryside onboard a train. See my chapter “A Series of Shallow Self-Portraits.”

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- ⁷ Such images often offer key insights into compositional process. They function as meta-critical moments where authors comment on their own methods. Similar images may be found in the work of many other Canadian cartoonists, such as David Collier, Guy Delisle, Julie Doucet, and Seth.
- ⁸ Jason Dittmer argues that comics depend heavily on the reader's imaginative projections: "gutters should be thought of as an anti-optical void – there is no story to reconstitute in that space, no missing images, only a relationship to be formed in the reader's mind" (230).
- ⁹ The dollhouse may form a parallel to the medium of comics. Leavitt's description of it reminds me of Sabin's description of the originating act of adolescent reading as an imaginative teaching tool: "comics became a private reading space for children, a place where they could negotiate adult power and authority, and where juvenile fantasies could be played out: a world of naughtiness, make believe violence and what primary school teachers used to call 'messy play'" (28).
- ¹⁰ Gabilliet suggests the publication of graphic narratives originated during a period when there was an increased commercialization of leisure entertainment. This period, between 1885 and 1935, when mass culture first incorporated participatory and interactive elements, was the height of systems of popular culture (*Of Comics* xvii).
- ¹¹ For example, the first comic book in Britain was *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*, an inexpensive and disposable humor pamphlet with a wide readership. Designed as a form of "railway leisure," it could be read quickly and then discarded (Sabin 18). This graphic narrative was the product of the "halfpenny revolution," a shift in models of literary distribution that emphasized quantity over quality and lowered production costs to reach an expanding audience of consumers (Sabin 18-19).
- ¹² There are contrary arguments that treat the comics community as an alienating group of

isolationists. In Sabin's description of the history of graphic narrative he stresses its contemptible qualities (158). He describes the audience for comic books as an anti-social and misogynistic group of obsessives, and is quick to point out that "'fan' is an abbreviation of 'fanatic'" (157). Seth satirizes these traits in some of his fictional graphic narratives, such as *Wimbledon Green* and *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*.

¹³ See almost any issue of *Yummy Fur*.

¹⁴ Nearly eighty percent of all comic books published in North America in the 1940s were superhero comics, a height in popularity for the genre (Sabin 54; Gabilliet, *Of Comics* 20).

¹⁵ In the contemporary milieu, the subject matter for graphic narrative is often split between fantastic fictional narratives and life writing. In Ivan Brunetti's *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction*, for example, autobiographical comics appear side by side with outrageous flights of fantasy. It is telling that Brunetti's anthology includes such abrupt deviations in content, given the definition of "comics" as a medium that is at once too impersonal and too personal.

¹⁶ I see evidence in Craig's writing that suggests he has a narrow understanding of historical representation. He evaluates the structure of social documentary, mentioning that Salverson's *Confessions* "contrasts very obviously with two other views of Winnipeg at this time: J.S. Woodworth's statistical and liberal analysis of Winnipeg's poor immigrants in *Strangers Within our Gates* and Charles Gordon's patronizing and melodramatically unrealistic novel, *The Foreigner*" (88). With his vehemence against the melodramatic, he lays bare his own limited definition of documentary evidence, as though all descriptions of the past have to follow the same pattern.

¹⁷ A perfect example of a contemporary graphic narrative that focuses on this kind of subject matter is *Paying For It*, in which Brown provides a detailed autobiographical account of his experiences visiting prostitutes in Toronto.

Chapter 4 – “I just draw what I see” (Collier, *Hamilton Sketchbook*): Sketchbook Vernaculars and
Documentary Poetics in Canadian Graphic Narratives

In the last chapter I examined confessional dialogues as they operate in contemporary Canadian graphic narratives and suggested that the medium of comics manipulates the distinct three-part structure of confessional discourses in order to initiate, in a public forum, an inclusive and intimate dialogue between the author and the reader concerning matters of private experience. In that chapter I only devoted a limited amount of space describing the content of those confessional dialogues; instead, I opted to focus on formal structures of intimacy. In this chapter I shift my focus to consider some common figures of interest, suggesting that Canadian graphic narratives are significant to Canadian literary histories in part because of their subject matter. In particular, many Canadian graphic narratives, injecting categories of private experience into a public forum, take the opportunity to describe issues related to social class in Canadian society. As I argued in my previous chapter, most authors of confessional texts initiate an interpersonal dialogue with their readers. They employ strategies that construct formal exchanges between an imagined confessant and confessor. Their accounts of the past function as personal testimonials that sanction discussions of private subjects of personal importance. I return again to an earlier example of Canadian confessional writing with Laura Goodman Salverson’s *Confessions of an Immigrant’s Daughter*. According to Roxanne Rimstead, Salverson’s work is important to Canadian literary histories because it is a “testimonial of classed experience” that challenges “bourgeois constructions of nation and gender” (*Remnants* 249). I treat contemporary Canadian graphic narratives as texts that often operate in a similar capacity. Functioning as testimonial projects, they survey a collection of under-documented topics and human subjects that spotlight the presence of an unbalanced social economy in Canada.

In this chapter I consider how some Canadian comics authors integrate the social experiences of alterity into the forums of public knowledge through the testimonial evidence of life writing. I speak to the rhetorical structure of social documentation present in the work of contemporary comics authors like David Collier, Guy Delisle, Jillian Tamaki, Kate Beaton, and Seth, and assess the extent to which these authors treat comics as a visual medium capable of recording the mundane experiences of “ordinary” living. I have two central objectives: first, to provide a framework that contextualizes the emergence of testimonial traditions in Canadian graphic narratives, a formal strategy that I call “sketchbook vernacular”; and, second, to explain the connection between the vernacular stylistic techniques of graphic narrative and their “everyday” subject matter. Addressing the interplay between social documentary and life writing, I situate contemporary Canadian graphic narratives as testimonial projects. It is my contention that contemporary Canadian graphic narratives habitually focus on figures experiencing economic scarcity, people who often travel through the background of “everyday” life without receiving the attention they properly deserve.¹

I have previously described how contemporary Canadian graphic narratives back away from the sweeping generalizations that often correspond with depictions of a cohesive national Canadian community, because such generalizations overlook certain anomalous topics, such as the concerns of localized subjects. According to my study, contemporary Canadian graphic narratives create micro-histories that document the “ordinary” lives of individuals in Canada. To describe this strategy, I continue to employ metaphors – how contemporary Canadian graphic narratives “narrow in” with their “microscopic” focus – which make it sound as if the texts I describe are small-minded or trivial. On the contrary, I emphasize that the personal histories present in contemporary Canadian graphic narratives are vital to Canadian literary histories. In *Speculative Fictions*, Herb Wyile’s account of contemporary Canadian historical novels, he suggests that the teleological narratives of national

unity used to construct a cohesive Canadian national culture preclude certain subjects. As I quoted in my introductory chapter, Wylie writes:

The stereotype of Canada as culturally harmonious has its counterpart in the image of Canada as free of class strife, and . . . recent historical novels, like the work of a growing number of historians, serve to counter that image of social harmony. They question such triumphalist narratives and ask at what cost to those who work for them the triumphs of the elite come, illuminating the lives of workers . . . domestic servants, the unemployed, and others traditionally left in the shadows beside the spotlight on 'public' figures and events. (97)

Wylie suggests that an awareness of the influence of class has been difficult to integrate into Canadian cultural discourses because it conflicts with imagined patterns of progressive social unity. I agree with Wylie's assessment, and focus on contemporary Canadian graphic narratives because many of them, much like the historical novels that Wylie describes, shift the "spotlight" of public awareness onto under-documented subjects. Following Wylie's example, I consider how Canadian graphic narratives depict a category of the "everyday" experience of the "common people" and integrate it into the forums of public knowledge. They often employ the associative logic of the stray observation, with the fragmented gaze of the wandering observer, and create representations of figures and events that have often been excluded from other cultural products. By taking on the quality of social documentary and focusing on a set of conventionalized topics that foreground the presence of an unbalanced social economy in Canada, contemporary Canadian graphic narratives function as "testimonial[s] of classed experience" (Rimstead, *Remnants* 249).

1. A vernacular visual language

I interrogate the methods through which sketchbooks situate personal experiences in order

to understand the force and value of the testimonial evidence that they provide. As I discussed in the last chapter, the medium of comics manipulates the structure of confession to provide comics authors with a set of tools for controlling truth-telling procedures. The medium of comics issues challenges to some traditional forms of visual documentation, primarily because self-reference habitually populates its visual field. As I described in the introduction, the medium of comics announces to the reader its artificiality through its use of exaggerated caricature and through its use of a polyvalent multimodal discourse that assembles an uneven relationship between text and image. Moreover, the medium of comics has, for the better part of its history, been tailored to genres of political cartooning and satire, and its creative traditions are, therefore, tied to exaggeration and absurdity. How, then, do Canadian graphic narratives sanction their systems for presenting documentary evidence when these activities are so often tied to rhetorical claims concerning authenticity? This chapter offers an explanation for the methods that comics authors often employ to overcome this seeming tension that rests at the heart of the documentary poetics of comics.

In order to describe the truth-telling procedures of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative, I now define a category of composition that I call “sketchbook vernacular.” I use this term to refer to some of the most prominent visual stylistic tendencies used by authors of contemporary Canadian graphic narratives. The medium of comics operates as a kind of language, a visual “vernacular,” that draws influence from the casual and offhand compositional techniques of the sketchbook. Sketch genres, including both the visual and the verbal sketch, are widely applicable to contemporary Canadian graphic narrative. Canadian authors often show a compulsion to replicate the compositional techniques of the sketchbook, drawing on its visual rhetorical structure and replicating some of its most common subject matter. I would go so far as to argue that the visual language of many different contemporary Canadian graphic narratives is based on the rhetorical structure of the sketchbook. Through an analysis of these sketchbook vernaculars, I will come to

define the strategies of visual documentation operating in many works of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative.

I begin with a simple observation about contemporary Canadian graphic narratives: many authors share an interest in sketchbooks and sketching. The sketchbook is a near ubiquitous presence in contemporary graphic narratives, and this ubiquity signals its importance to their visual poetics and compositional methods. In recent years the sketchbook has become a common feature on personal websites. For example, Kate Beaton and Jillian Tamaki, two prominent Canadian cartoonists and illustrators, both operate blogs – entitled *Hark! A Vagrant* (Beaton’s blog) and *Jillian Tamaki: Sketchblog, etc.* (Tamaki’s blog). On their blogs Beaton and Tamaki promote their careers as authors, providing updates about their recent publications and other professional accomplishments, including information concerning public appearances and book-signings. *Hark! A Vagrant* and *Jillian Tamaki: Sketchblog, etc.* also both include casual drawings from Beaton’s and Tamaki’s personal sketchbooks. The regularity of these drawings suggests that sketching is a habitual practice, a repetitive activity that is part of their regular routines as comics authors. In one entry Beaton writes: “I was home for two weeks and as usual, I took time to make some sketches with my family.” The subject matter of her sketches on her blog is often autobiographical, including short anecdotes from her career as an author and memories from her early childhood. Tamaki includes fewer sketches on her blog. When she does include them, they are often observations from her urban environment. She includes a drawing of a person kneeling on the ground picking up money: “As seen in front of my apartment. Brooklyn, NY” (“Bad Scene”). Unlike the professional updates, the sketchbook drawings often focus on incidental observations. They detail the small anecdotes of day-to-day experience.

Tellingly, many authors depict scenes in their graphic narratives where characters are drawing in their sketchbooks. In *It’s A Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken*, for example, Seth depicts his

autobiographical persona sitting on his bed sketching, copying illustrations from old magazines. *It's a Good Life* functions as a *künstlerroman* that describes Seth's intellectual and artistic development as a comics author; it is interesting, therefore, that he does not, as one might expect, depict his persona creating *graphic narratives* in it, but he has him drawing in his sketchbook instead (38). This scene points to the persistent connection between the process of creating graphic narrative and the process of drawing sketches. Another example, Guy Delisle repetitively recreates the same kind of scene in his travel journal *Jerusalem*: his autobiographical persona sits and observes the countryside while drawing in a sketchpad. With head bent, he quietly and quickly creates hasty compositions based on his surroundings (Fig. 23). These images function as self-referential moments that dramatize Delisle's methods of creative composition. The reader may draw the conclusion that the sketches that his persona produces in these moments are the first step in the production of the final work that they are reading.² Indeed, Delisle often integrates sketches directly into his work. He begins different chapters in *Jerusalem* with simple drawings. He positions them in a prominent position in the text, in the middle of the page. They give the impression that Delisle ripped pages out from his sketchbook and pasted them directly into his graphic narrative.³ Sometimes the link between sketchbooking and graphic narrative is made more explicit. Seth's graphic narratives *Wimbledon Green* and *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* both claim on their covers that they are "from the sketchbook of the cartoonist 'Seth.'" It bears considering why some contemporary Canadian comics authors repeatedly return to the sketchbook. What is the function of sketch genres and what formal devices do they offer? The answer has widespread applications for the visual structure of Canadian graphic narratives and for the testimonial evidence that they deliver.

A "sketchbook" is a collection of drawings that an author produces over a short period of time. According to the *OED*, it is "A note-book containing preliminary sketches or studies." It presents the author as working through an early stage of creative development. Most definitions of

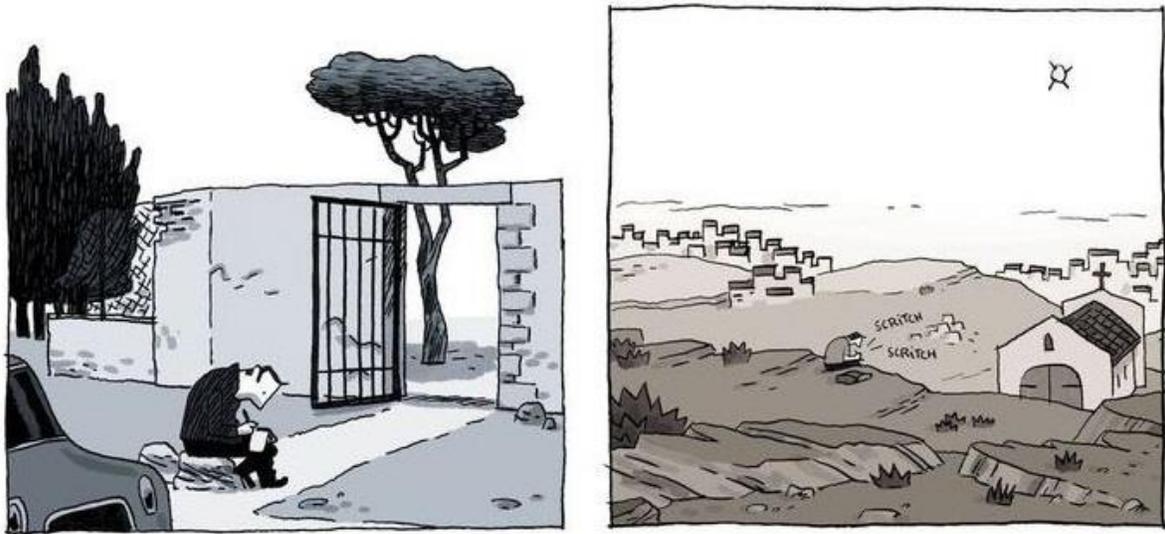


Fig. 23. Two panels from *Jerusalem* where Delisle's persona draws in his sketchpad.

sketching highlight the inadequacy of the composition. In his extensive survey of various sketch genres, John Fagg cites a collection of influential critical sources. He cites Thomas Pauly, who calls the visual sketch a “loose, abbreviated form” (qtd. in Fagg 4), as well as Jeffery Rubin-Dorsky, who argues the sketch is an accessible genre that makes only minimal demands; it is an “unfinished production, the working-out of an idea rather than the idea itself” (qtd. in Fagg 4). Sketching relies on minimalistic compositional techniques. The genre’s only requirement is for quick spontaneous action, evoking a certain “brevity and ephemerality,” according to Kristie Hamilton (2). It offers “‘peeps,’ ‘glances,’ and glimpses” (Hamilton 3). Alison Byerly sums up the compositional structure of the visual sketch in her extensive analysis of sketchbook practices as follows: “The sketch embraces a certain ease or even disdain; the artist could draw a detailed portrait if he [or she] wished, but chooses to give a rapid impression of certain elements of the scene rather than elaborate them into a complete picture” (“Effortless Art” 349). Thus, the sketch sets up a relationship with an imaginary final product, and its visual discourse depends on methods that

foreground the fragmentation of its own composition. It presents a drawing that is incomplete, which is on its way to rectifying that inadequacy without ever reaching a final stage of completion. Frozen in time, it captures the process of drawing at a point of inadequacy, while making an insistent display of its own imperfection. In this respect, its fragmented and erratic methods resemble the “schizogenetic” methods that I described in my introduction.

The process of producing graphic narratives often begins with the production of countless volumes of preliminary drawings. The repetitive activity of sketching is a common practice for authors developing their technical competency. In practical terms sketchbooking is a necessary first step in the gradual process of visual composition. It often begins in the early stages with the production of fragmentary drawings, spur-of-the-moment brainstorming activities that are carried out without much preliminary preparation. Sketchbooks are rarely designed to be published because they function as technical reference material. That being said, some comics authors publish stand-alone collections of their sketches. Seth, for example, published an abridged collection, entitled, tellingly, *Vernacular Drawings*. The stand-alone sketchbook may be seen as an apprenticeship genre. Its publication marks the passage of a stage in the progression of a comics author’s career. The author announces triumphantly that even her or his off-hand compositions, the incidental errata from the sketchbook, are worthy of public interest. The stand-alone sketchbook is often only published by established authors, those who have reached some level of visibility and success. I call it an apprenticeship genre because it showcases the author’s mastery of technical skills of composition. The sketchbook, making implicit claims about the importance of the author’s work as a whole, provides an opportunity for self-promotion by illustrating the author’s artistic process. It signals the fulfilment of an education in technical competency by putting the author’s working methods of composition on display.

One of the basic premises of my study is that the peculiar properties of the medium of

comics give rise in graphic narratives to well-defined patterns of documentary or testimonial poetics. As I mentioned in my introductory chapter, the compositional techniques of contemporary Canadian graphic narratives are bound up with notions of caricature, including methods of simplicity and exaggeration. They are tied, therefore, to the rhetorical structures of the visual and the verbal sketch – hence, the common appearance in Canadian graphic narratives of the sketchbook. So, for example, Delisle depicts his autobiographical persona drawing in his sketchbook in *Jerusalem*; he takes pages from his sketchbook and he copies them into his graphic narrative because sketching is crucial to his visual poetics.

I see precedence for the medium of comics in earlier cultural practices. The medium of comics, as a combination of visual and verbal discourses, draws influence from a variety of sources, from both literary genres, such as the prose sketch and lyrical poetry, and from fine art practices, such as visual sketching. The visual and the verbal sketch are two separate but interrelated genres. In her extensive analysis of the history of the sketch in America, Kristie Hamilton suggests that prose sketches drew inspiration from the authority of the visual sketch (40-41). The first practitioners of the literary sketch adapted the stylistic techniques of the visual sketchbook and translated them to verbal forms. Hamilton notes that prose sketches grew distant from their original influence, to the point where they often only exhibit a tangential association with visual culture (40-41). I will explain the development of the sketch in the Canadian context in the next paragraph, but I pause first to mention that my analysis of the rhetorical structure of sketching is based on a collection of different cultural traditions, so it is important to make a clear distinction between the different meanings of the word “sketch.” It is possible to use the term to refer to two different related genres. It may be used to refer to the visual sketch, which is my primary area of interest for this chapter, but also to the literary genre, as a “brief account, description, or narrative giving the main or important facts” (*OED*). The verbal sketch and the visual sketch are two separate concepts with different

histories and conventions – although many of the preeminent originators of the literary sketch in the nineteenth century drew their original inspiration from the conventions of the visual sketch. My analysis of the sketchbook draws from both of these media simultaneously. It is possible that the medium of comics, as a combination of written text and drawn pictures, is conducive to this combination of these two separate traditions. The two different media follow separate but parallel paths, sharing many of the same principles, values, and compositional methods, such as the same interest in “immediacy and contemporaneity” (Hamilton 41). The history of sketching is a history about the collaborative influence of verbal and visual practices.

The history of the sketch in Canada in both verbal and visual media is extensive. It is too widespread for me to create a complete account of it here, but I offer some remarks that will establish a general framework for my analysis of sketchbook vernaculars within a larger history of cultural production in Canada. The history of the sketch in Canada begins with early European settlement. Many early explorers created sketches of the Canadian landscape that they included in accounts of their travels. In her widely informative *Drawn from Life: Science and Art in the Portrayal of the New World*, Victoria Dickensen describes early visual culture in Canada. She describes Thomas Davies (1737-1812), an artist who drew sketches of famous Canadian locales, such as Niagara Falls. She describes how, in Davies’s drawings, “the artist himself [is] seated on the rocks by the river, pencil in hand, sketching the scene before him” (198). In Dickensen’s account, the early history of Canadian visual culture is dominated by representations of the wild natural landscape: as such, “Their primary purpose is not to evoke aesthetic response, but rather to communicate information” (14). Thus, Davies emphasizes the impersonal objectivity of his sketches: “Everything which is put down in writing of necessity takes on some colour from the opinion of the writer. A sketch map allows of no opinion” (Thomas Davies qtd. in Dickensen 195). The purpose of the drawings is to describe a wild “specimen” (201). Therefore, in its original Canadian context, the visual sketch is a

document based on distant, objective viewership. This history is important to keep in mind when the sketch transitions into a literary environment because the verbal sketch retains some of this same original framework. It continues to focus on modes of precise observation.

The history of the verbal sketch in Canada begins with Thomas Chandler Haliburton's *The Lockmaker* (1835) and continues on later into the nineteenth century with such canonical Canadian authors as Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill. Carole Gerson and Kathy Mezei write: "In nineteenth-century Canadian letters, the word 'sketch' was commonly used as a catch-all term for descriptive prose pieces of varying length. As a genre, the sketch can be defined as an apparently personal anecdote or memoir which focuses on one particular place, person, or experience, and is usually intended for magazine publication" (2). One early example of the literary sketch in Canada is Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*. Moodie's influence on the history of Canadian literature is widely acknowledged. *Roughing It in the Bush* is a diverse text: a "didactic book, an autobiography, and a sketch-book of pioneer life" (Ballstadt 36).⁴ In Moodie's writing, much like in Davies's sketches of the Canadian landscape, she employs sketch genres for their precision. The sketch offers her a method for magnetizing her attention for the purposes of reporting on a specific location – as Gerson and Mezei argue, the sketch "focuses on one particular place, person, or experience" (2). Interestingly, Susan Glickman rejects the common assumption that Moodie's work is full of "self-contradictions" and convincingly argues that Moodie's compositional framework is not an "idiosyncratic failing" (76). Unlike the earlier visual sketchers I described, Moodie does not pacify the chaos she observes. She does not "banish discontinuity from [her work]" (Glickman 76). Rather, she employs the sketch as a means of actively interrogating her local social contexts as an engaged (if puzzled) participant in the scenes she describes. As I will describe later in this chapter, it is possible to describe Canadian comics authors as operating in a similar tradition. The influence of the sketch continues well into the twentieth century in the contemporary texts that are the subject of

my study and in other Canadian literatures that similarly focus on the poetics of documentary.⁵

I now offer a specific example that functions as a test case for my theories concerning sketchbook vernaculars. David Collier is a prolific Canadian author who has been producing graphic narratives since the early 1980s. He published his own independent comic book called *Collier's* from 1991 to 1997. He works in a variety of different genres, writing essays for magazines such as *The Comics Journal* and journalism pieces for newspapers such as *The Globe and Mail* and *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*. In the last decade he has published graphic narratives that collect his earlier serial work. In *Surviving Saskatoon* (2000) and *Portraits From Life* (2001), he writes about a variety of different historical personages, including David Milgaard, little-known Olympian Ethel Catherwood, Grey Owl, and his own grandfather Richard Collier. His graphic narratives are often composed of a mixture of different genres of life writing, including biography, autobiography, and memoir. One prototypical example is *The Frank Ritza Papers*, which contains a variety of different short autobiographical graphic narratives, including an account of his persona's experiences moving from Saskatchewan to Ontario. He writes about discovering the work of the eponymous Frank Ritza while traveling through Northern Ontario, as well as his scattered attempts to find employment, including working manual labour jobs and joining the Canadian Armed Forces. As I mentioned in my introduction, many contemporary Canadian comics authors show an interest in literary historical discourses. Collier's graphic narratives often integrate Collier's own personal experiences with those of other historical personages. They are casual visual documents that foreground the importance of the actions and concerns of the individual subject, "sketches" that combine together social observation and self-analysis.

Collier periodically inserts several different "sketchbook sections" into *The Frank Ritza Papers* that interrupt the progression of the text's central autobiographical account, apropos of nothing.



Fig. 24. A page from Collier's sketchbook in *The Frank Ritzga Papers* ("Los Angeles 1994").

His distinctive drawing style lends an anxious quality to his drawings. Collier's compositional methods in the sketchbook sections are quick and erratic. He relies on methods of minimalism that replicate many of the visual compositional techniques that appear in other works of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative, including the conventions of caricature that prize exaggeration and simplification of the human form. His drawings retain some of the formal cues that suggest depth

and weight, but he keeps the compositions loose and dynamic. On one page of his sketchbook he draws the image of man “asleep on a bench downtown 7pm” (Fig. 24).⁶ The man suspends in the air in the middle of the page. Although Collier avoids rendering contextual information into the visual field, the text that accompanies the drawings references a specific moment in time and place (“downtown 7pm”). The text further implies that the drawing is the product of Collier’s experience and not simply his wandering imagination. Collier creates this figural representation with only a few scattered lines, as though he was pressed for time when he composed the drawing. This suggests that Collier sat down briefly with a pad and paper and drew the man sleeping on the street in a brief amount of time. In his *Hamilton Sketchbook* he produces a self-portrait with his persona sitting on the side of the street, head bent over a pad of paper, working quickly to complete his drawing (Fig. 25). If this is a fair representation of his compositional methods, it makes sense that he prefers making quick abbreviated lines in his sketchbook. Collier cannot maintain consistency in his compositions because he travels without the regulated tools of precise draftsmanship, without the carefully arranged drawing board of an artist’s studio. He prefers the simple methods of pen and paper. Through these drawing methods, he gives the impression that he simply sat down on a street corner and composed his drawings while observing others. The fragmentation of the visual field testifies to the quick pace of the composition. The sketch informs the reader that it was the product of a composition taking place within a limited timeframe at a single location.

The hallmark of the sketch is its casual compositional style. In his analysis of the history of sketch genres, James Farrell argues that the compositional tendencies of the visual sketch establish a mode of disinterested pictorialism, citing Richard Sha’s argument that the sketch is defined by its “hasty brushwork and shading, broken lines, roughness, and irregularity” (qtd. in Farrell 67). In his extensive survey of the historical origins of sketchbook genres in British Romanticism, Sha suggests that sketchers often emphasize the inadequacy of their compositions. He provides a succinct



Fig. 25. Collier includes a series of observation drawings in the “Hamilton” section of *Hamilton Sketchbook*.

explanation of the captivating appeal of the sketch, observing that it “bases its claims to aesthetic status on shared negatives – incompleteness, irresolution” (*The Visual and Verbal Sketch* 1-4). He suggests the rhetorical structure of the sketch presumes inadequacy, as if to anticipate some later, often imagined, fully realized painting or drawing. The sketch is designed to fail as an aesthetic object and then broadcast that failure. Therefore, most sketchbooks rely on a pattern of

composition that Thomas Pauly calls a strategy of “calculated incompleteness” (qtd. in Fagg 4). Importantly, this strategy gives the sketch its captivating rhetorical authority. In theory the sketch’s value primarily derives from criteria that are separate from achievements in technical merit. Value derives instead from the sketch’s ability to suggest to the audience that the author is creating a sincere, nearly unmediated, representation of his or her experience.

Sketch genres rely on conventions of aesthetic authority found in some of the ideals of British Romanticism that prize the creative achievements of the author. Drawing on Sha’s analysis of the genre, Farrell suggests that the sketch is “‘convincingly spontaneous, original and natural’ . . . in contrast to finished portraits and detailed painted landscapes, the sketch can rely on the presumption that ‘less finish, less labor, and less fastidiousness to form is more aesthetic, more truthful’” (67). It is important for sketchbooks to develop a system for securing their rhetorical authority because they often make claims about authenticity. Again, drawing from Sha’s authoritative analysis, Farrell suggests that sketches “encourage viewers to credit the sketch as a representation of the ‘artist’s spontaneous and authentic feelings’” (Farrell 67). By invoking the concept of artlessness the sketch establishes its rhetorical authority and sanctions its own acts of visual display: “its rough composition is seen to confirm proximity to ‘the real’ unmediated by artistic intervention” (Fagg 9). I contend that many comics author, in their use of the compositional methods of the sketchbook, seamlessly connect partial graphic representation with verisimilitude. This visual language, what I call sketchbook vernacular, turns to fragmented and erratic methods as the basis for its compositional structure.

Collier’s compositional methods, which derived from the casual and minimal drawings of the sketchbook, provide him with a set of tools that facilitate his carefully constructed persona as an author. His compositional methods allow him to present himself in his work as a lowbrow anti-intellectual. In the “Hamilton” section of *Hamilton Sketchbook* he draws a picture of a boy on the

street asking him “watcha doing living ‘round here? Don’cha make a lot of money as an artist?” To which he replies, “No” (Fig. 25). Throughout his work, Collier repeatedly shows interest in vernacular forms of language. It is telling that Collier includes the boy’s colloquial voice, with words such as “watcha” and “don’cha.” He translates the distinct qualities of spoken language, in order to record the unique texture of his daily experiences. This drawing from his sketchbook foregrounds Collier’s struggle to establish the legitimacy and value of his work as an author. He takes on the role of a non-professional who works with the informal visual language of the sketchbook and speaks in an informal spoken language. His persona worries about the inadequacy of his career, and, emphasizing his lack of success, he adopts his distinct tone of mocking self-derision.

Collier’s humble authorial persona is central to the structure of his work as a whole. In Hamilton’s assessment of the appeal of the literary sketch in the United States, she describes authors finding value in their low aesthetic demands:

The idea of creating a picture in words – not a completed portrait by a master, but an informal rendering of what “*I saw as I saw it*” – was enormously appealing and enabling to early-nineteenth-century writers, many of whom had not before been writers and would not perhaps have become writers without a genre that incorporated *accessibility* in its conception and associations as well as its material forms. (Hamilton 40)

Fagg describes some of the techniques of early practitioners of the literary sketch, explaining how their minimalistic techniques construct a situation where “a series of short sentences and phrases delineate a large number of objects and people” (8). I contend that sketchbook vernaculars strengthen Collier’s rhetorical authority and lend him composition tools that allow him to describe a carefully constructed category of mundane experiences in an urban environment. They engineer a system of truth-telling grounded in social documentation. His methods reinforce his claims to

sincerity – that his drawings are honest and candid. He takes on the role of a documentarian who reports on his own experiences – and also (as I will explain in more detail later in this chapter) the experiences of others who may be lacking cultural capital. Collier, in such a context, becomes a mere transcriber, not a figure of absolute authority in control of the text. In one of his sketches he writes “I just draw what I see” (*Hamilton Sketchbook*, “Hamilton”). To make up for his self-professed shortcomings as an author, he transforms his creative project into an ordinary activity and engages in a rhetorical sleight-of-hand designed to mask the artistry and artificiality of his work. He claims to draw without any preconceived agenda, presenting a transparent representation of authentic experience. It must be acknowledged, however, that the validity of his accounts does not arise from their unmediated reflection of the world, but from the mediated replication of established tropes: the presentation of isolated moments that visually emblemize vernacular traditions; the association of incompleteness with spontaneity and authenticity. Thus, sketchbook vernaculars establish the rhetorical authority of their acts of social documentation by initiating a system of formal transparency.

2. A visual journal: sketchbook as life writing

At one point in his *Hamilton Sketchbook*, Collier writes, “Why would [anyone] ask me to draw pictures? I don’t think I’ve ever really drawn pictures my whole life” (“Road Trips”). This comment is a backhanded rhetorical gesture designed to validate his accomplishments as an author and artist. There is an implicit irony in this comment because he claims to have never “really drawn pictures” while in the process of drawing pictures. He labels his drawings as personal vanity projects because he suspects they hold no widespread social value – no one should rightfully “ask [him] to draw pictures.” His modesty, this offhand dismissal of his own work, is part and parcel with his ethos as an author. He repeatedly foregrounds his inadequacies and disengages his influence from the images

he presents to the reader. His claims to modesty are tied up with his authorial persona as a humble artist. He dismisses his own artistry to make his drawings seem spontaneous and sincere. His comment leads me to question: if Collier has never “really drawn pictures,” then how should his readers interpret his sketchbooks and graphic narratives. His autobiographical persona makes this spurious claim in order to clarify the foundational compositional philosophy of his work as a whole. Collier is not simply interested in producing objects meant for aesthetic contemplation and appreciation – in other words, in “drawing pictures.” His graphic narratives are instead preoccupied with two interrelated projects: life writing and preparing documentary evidence.

Sketchbooks make a display of the subjective perspective of a central lyrical speaker, including emotional responses, sensorial impressions, and intellectual preoccupations, using an iconographic visual language. Interestingly, Seth calls graphic narrative a mixture of poetry and graphic design. He suggests that graphic narrative shares more structural similarities with poetry than with film because of the “condensing of words and the emphasis on rhythm” (“Poetry, Design and Comics” 19).⁷ He also suggests that they both organize images in a spatial arrangement across the surface of the page. With this in mind, it may be fruitful to treat sketchbooks as a form of visual composition that follows a parallel trajectory with the contemporary Canadian lyric. Collier’s sketchbooks remind me of W.F. Garrett-Petts and Donald Lawrence’s description of contemporary Canadian poetry. They highlight the importance of the traditions of vernacular culture, which might include “the oral tradition of exaggerated language, over-blown images, unbelievable characters, bizarre actions, and fabulous settings” (165). Likewise, it reminds me of W.H. New’s description of the properties of the lyric statement present in some twentieth-century Canadian poetry, including the construction of a participatory “I” speaker who records her or his preoccupations according to the vocabulary and rhythms of vernacular speech (*A History of Canadian Literature* 226).

While I see some incidental parallels between the sketchbook and lyrical poetry, it is more

appropriate to treat the sketchbook as a visual journal that draws on the discourses of life writing. The visual layout of the sketchbook can at times seem erratic, but there is a central structural principle that binds it together: the imagined presence of the identity of the author. Collier's sketchbook functions as a personal database. It gathers the miscellanea of his scattered imagination, including stray observations from his immediate community. Implicitly, the audience is led to believe that this collection of images is capable of functioning as an autobiographical act. The drawings result from the influence of a single governing consciousness; they point to a continuity of subjectivity that implies a cohesive identity. The subject matter of the sketchbook is tied to the author's preoccupations and interests, including the objects, scenes, and images that capture his or her imagination. Outside of the context of the person who assembles the drawings, the content of the sketchbook is without order.

Collier draws images with wild variations in tone and subject matter in the sketchbook sections of his graphic narratives. Not only are individual drawings in these sketchbooks fragmented, but the layout of the entire composition, the relationship between individual fragmented drawings, is chaotic. Sketchbooks have a limited scope: each drawing depicts an isolated scene, sight, or recollection. Collier will document his social interactions, including short anecdotal conversations with family members and strangers on the street. There are a few fantastical images, like the angel depicted above, or the occasional rendition of a grotesque monstrosity, but, on the whole, his sketches focus on mundane sights from his daily experiences. There are certain similarities that remain from one page to the next; however, the relationship between each image remains opaque. Take, for example, the following two-page spread from *The Frank Ritzza Papers* (Fig. 26). In the center of the right page is a woman with flapping wings floating in the air. The image, which resembles a figure drawing in its precise rendition of human anatomy, is missing parts of its legs. Following past the end of the woman's body, the figure merges with a drawing of a man's lower

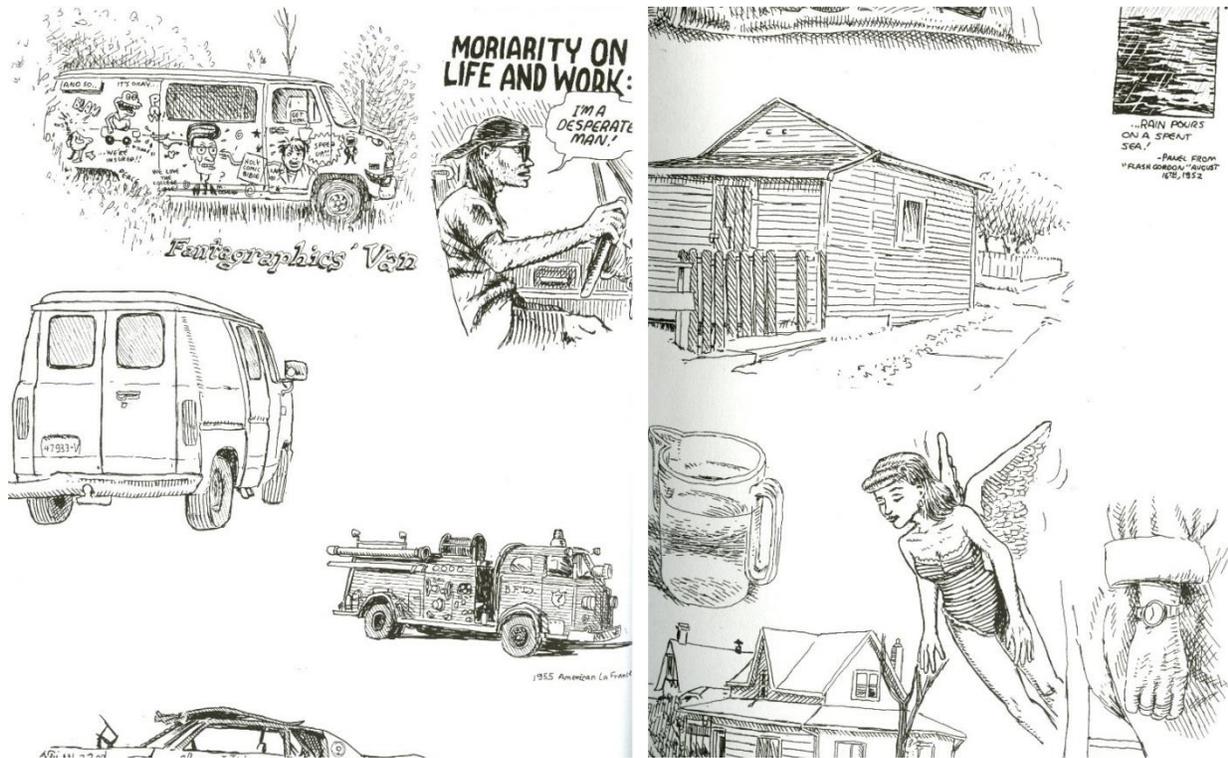


Fig. 26. A sample two-page spread from Collier's sketchbook (*The Frank Ritzza Papers* "Los Angeles 1994").

torso. Collier draws a pant leg and wristwatch. To the left of the woman is a rendition of a pitcher. Above that is the backdoor of a wooden cabin, and above that a tube of toothpaste. Without any sign markers to direct the reader's gaze, he or she transitions from one element on the page to the next at random. The composition is bereft of a clear design strategy. In another example, in the sketch I mentioned earlier of the man "asleep on a bench downtown 7pm," there is the image of a woman's face floating in the air (Fig. 24). Above that Collier draws two parked trucks in a driveway. Again, there is no obvious relationship that links these three compositional elements together. It is a random assortment of images thrown together on the page. There are some repeated visual motifs in Collier's drawings, an interest in modes of transportation, for example. He includes images of trucks, trains, and carts, which he often renders in intricate detail. He shows an interest in urban

decay: back alleys, closed storefronts, boarded-up windows. However, aside from a few thematic similarities, it is often difficult to discern the connection between different disparate elements on the page – it takes on the appearance of a stream of consciousness. There is no obvious compositional strategy because the sketchbook functions as a testament to the distinct qualities of his experiences and preoccupations. The relationship between the different compositional elements is opaque to the reader because only Collier properly understands them. By reading his sketchbook, he suggests, the reader can catch a glimpse of his wandering inchoate subjectivity.

Collier periodically includes self-portraits in his sketchbooks that make a display of the minutia of his physical appearance. In comparison with his other drawings, they are more detailed and orderly. Without much exaggeration or simplification, they avoid the signature compositional techniques of cartooning (Fig. 27). His persona makes a direct appeal to his audience, offering up his body as an object of contemplation and observation. This drawing provides an interesting point of departure for analyzing self-portraiture in sketchbooks as compared with other works of graphic narrative. In autobiographical graphic narratives, comics authors often create numerous renditions of their physical appearance. In an earlier chapter I constructed an account of the purpose of autobiographical personae – calling them a series of shallow self-portraits. Autobiographical graphic narratives present unique conditions for self-portraiture, allowing the author to adopt a disinterested position in relation to her or his own persona, while, at the same time, giving the author tools capable of inserting subtle cues that suggest psychological depth. For example, Julie Doucet creates autobiographical personae that register her own emotional attitudes about her own body through the poetics of caricature. With the sketchbook, the autobiographical enterprise shifts its orientation so that there is more of an emphasis on observation. The author does not necessarily employ the visual

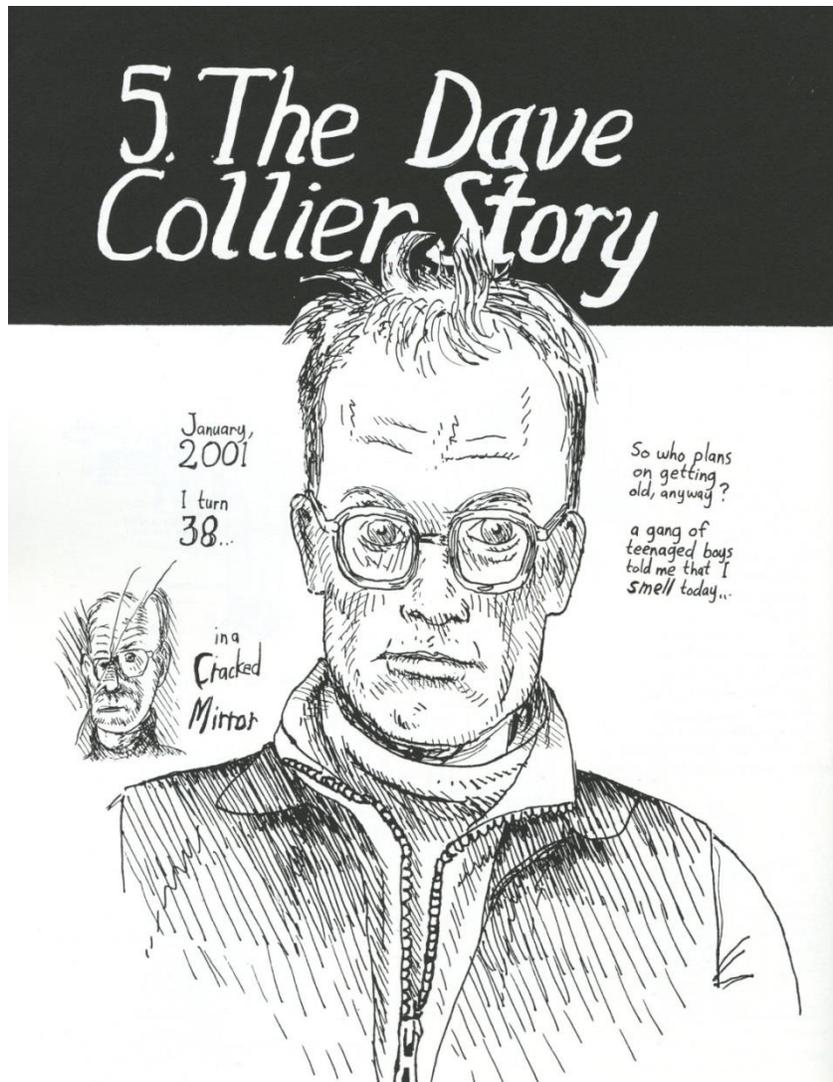


Fig. 27. Collier's self-portrait in *Hamilton Sketchbook* ("The David Collier Story").

poetics of caricature in the same way to describe or comment on his or her own subjectivity. Thus, the self-portrait that appears in Collier's sketchbook serves a different purpose than the autobiographical personae that appear in other sections of his graphic narratives. His self-portrait is only one spectatorial object among many others – it is as if he holds up a mirror to his face and renders a casual representation of what he observes, the same way he would with any other physical object. It is an image with which he does not necessarily identify. It is an imperfect reflection, like the cracked mirror that he positions next to his self-portrait.⁸ Collier offers up the details of his face

as an object of curious contemplation.

The sketchbook follows many of the same structural principles as other forms of life writing. Much like the diary, it collects brief observations that itemize private experience. The diary professes to make records of daily perception and thought, which, taken together, offer a depiction of the author's subjectivity (Carter 19). Both the sketchbook and the diary share the same temporal framework; they both persist in diurnal or quotidian time. They both share an interest in the routines of day-to-day existence. The sketchbook also replicates the same scope as the diary: daily existence on a minute scale. Both the sketchbook and the diary aim to record the author's encounters with material reality in the present moment. As I mentioned above, the visual and the verbal sketch share the same interest in "immediacy and contemporaneity" (Hamilton 41). Because the diary is a repetitive daily practice, it downplays the influence of retrospective analysis, shortening the gap between experiential event and the author's analysis of that event. The sketchbook often positions the author as an active participant in the scene he or she observes; therefore, it has even less of an element of recollection than the diary, which affords some limited amount of reflection and analysis. The sketchbook limits the gap between the moment when the author observes the material world and when the author produces a record of that experience.

The central structural principle that binds the sketchbook together is the imagined presence of the author. The sketchbook functions as a form of life writing that amasses a collection of observations that are often, importantly, tied to a specific location. The author suggests with the sketchbook: I was here, at this spot, at this moment in time. The sketchbook does not provide a grand sweeping overview of the progress of the author's life experiences, but a document of the author's intellectual preoccupations and observations. The author acts as a kind of embedded reporter who describes her or his surroundings. Tellingly, in *The Frank Ritzga Papers* Collier organizes his sketchbooks into different subsections. He applies one of three different labels to the bottom of

each page: “Los Angeles 1994,” “Saskatoon 1998,” or “London 2003.” He makes a special point of locating his physical presence in his sketchbook. Thus, the sketchbook follows the chronotopic impulse of various genres of life writing, such as the travel journal.

In the sketchbook, the author often replicates the same acts as the travel journalist creating records of his or her experiences. As the author travels to various geographical locations in the material world, she or he accumulates a record of those specific locations and then shows that record to her or his audience. In a sketchbook this act of “showing” operates according to the visual rhetorics of display. The truism of travel journal writing is that the author’s description of his or her physical journey often implicitly circles back to focus on the author’s own intellectual developments. Helen Buss describes the structure of different genres of travel writing in her analysis of archival research in Canadian literary studies. Drawing on Marni Stanley’s analysis of the “traveler’s tale,” she describes the central function of the act of “discovery” that propels the progression of a traveler’s narrative, how it implicitly reverts back to issues of identity formation: “Implied in this ‘discovery’ is not only a new knowledge of the territory over which the traveller is moving, but also a self-discovery” (“The Dear Domestic Circle” 3). According to Buss’s assessment, travel journals provide an opportunity for describing various kinds of metaphorical journeys. Geographical mapping becomes an act of self-analysis. It becomes an act of identity construction with the assemblage of a stable narrative of personal growth. Thus, there is a clear reversal of interest: the act of outward display meets up with categories of private development.

I see the sketchbooks in contemporary Canadian graphic narratives as invoking a combination of different life writing genres, including both diary writing and travel journal. Hamilton argues that both the visual and the verbal sketch act as “sanctioned digression[s]” that give authors the license to “incorporate ‘private’ associations in the depiction of purportedly objective reality” (41). I want to stress the capacity of the sketchbook to operate as a mode of life writing, that

the drawings found in a sketchbook turn back and reflect on the author who created them. This remains a crucial consideration in my analysis of sketch genres, as I turn now to consider how sketchbooks, as Hamilton points out, bring together private thoughts with public observation. Collier's sketchbooks function as catalogues of personal interest: taken together, Collier's sketches survey his surroundings and act as a form of personal record-keeping. As such, they implicitly function as a form of life writing because they testify to the imagined impressions of his subjectivity. Hamilton writes that in earlier historical examples, "An author's claim to an unpretentious representation of whatever might strike a 'sauntering gaze' . . . had become more important in sketch writing than any fixed criteria for content or form" (15). The sketchbook arranges a collection of visual miscellanea that attest to the author's interest in the immediate moment of the present. It brings these images together in a spatial arrangement along the surface of the page, following patterns of associative logic that are distinct to the author's own wandering subjectivity, or, as Hamilton describes it "whatever might strike a 'sauntering gaze'"(15).

3. The vernacular topics of "everyday" living

In my explanation of the term "sketchbook vernacular" I have thus far only engaged with the primary definition of the word "vernacular," as a casual or fragmented visual language. In this section I switch focus to address additional definitions of the word "vernacular" and consider the extent to which sketchbooks scrutinize "vernacular" subject matter. Importantly, descriptions of vernacular subject matter often invoke categories of social class. In her extensive survey *The Vernacular Matters of American Literature*, Sieglinde Lemke argues that the concept of the "vernacular" binds together a loose collection of conventionalized topics under a single umbrella term. As Lemke describes it, definitions of the vernacular often depend on vague descriptions of the "common" that, in turn, almost inevitably rely on tacit, sometimes unexpressed, definitions of social class.

According to her definition, a “vernacular” is a non-standard language or dialect. It is bound to a particular region that is populated by a distinct group of people, and that language or dialect only becomes a “vernacular” when that population is a visibly classed group of “common people” (Lemke 3). They are “common” because they are separate from the categories of elite or high culture and lack cultural capital (Lemke 3). I see sketch genres as “vernacular” modes of visual documentation because they follow a similar formula: methods of communication that focus on the concerns of a visibly classed group of “common people” (Lemke 3). Sketchbooks often focus on a collection of conventionalized topics, which, according to the traditions of the genre, often pertain to the broad categories of “common” existence: “working in concert with . . . contemporary visual forms . . . literary sketches made a knowable everyday life seem reassuringly available” (Hamilton 41). Hamilton claims that the sketch was part of a widespread cultural phenomenon that had a tremendous impact on visual culture. She claims that the increased popularity of the sketch coincided with a newfound interest in categories of quotidian existence. It “organized and named the new evanescent reality as ‘the everyday’” (11).

Sketchbooks allow for an expansive and elastic range of subject matter because they follow the logic of the wandering thought or the stray observation. Collier’s sauntering gaze often falls on the “everyday” lives of people who have been obscured in the Canadian cultural imagination, particularly those experiencing economic scarcity or those who are mostly bereft of the material necessities of life. He often observes people who are homeless, unemployed, or under-employed. Here is a collection of four different drawings taken from separate sections in his sketchbooks (Fig. 28). Collier draws people working in the service industry or working in manual labor jobs. He includes an image of “Clara [who] works in the drugstore by my house” (*Frank Ritzka*, “London 2003”). He draws a picture of a woman cleaning a sign, “Sunday Morning Cleaning, Jackson Square Mall” (*Hamilton Sketchbook*, “Hamilton”). He draws Clarence Thrasher, a man who “mined for gold

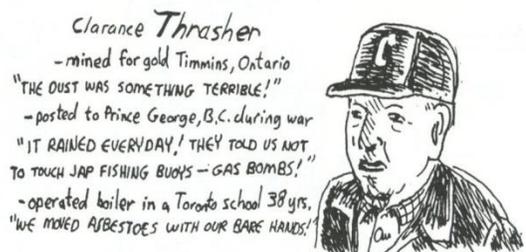


Fig. 28. A series of drawings from Collier's sketchbooks.

in Ontario” and “operated [a] boiler in Toronto” (*Hamilton Sketchbook*, “Road Trips”). He draws a picture of a man walking down the street, who is saying, “Guess I havta apply fer a job at th’ Madawaska door factory” (“Saskatoon 1998”). He includes examples of people experiencing economic scarcity, such as Russ Wilson, a man he calls his “hero”: “Stage manager 1980. panhandler 1995” (*Frank Ritzka*, “Saskatoon 1998”). Next to a rendition of a tire sitting in the back of his pickup truck, he writes “dan fixed me up with a spare tire . . . [he] got out of the army early to help out his dad with his furnature company. After the tax department killed the family’s business, Dan went to work in a tire shop” (*Hamilton Sketchbook*, “Road Trips”). These drawings touch on the lives of a widespread group of people who experience some level of economic scarcity, from mild to severe, and, as a collective, they reverse cultural narratives of upward social mobility in Canada.

At the end of “‘Knowable Communities’ in Canadian Criticism,” Rimstead writes: “The failure to see groupings of workers, the unemployed, the homeless, domestics, prostitutes, and other subjects from below across a national literature reproduces [a] cultural amnesia” (53). This cultural blackout overlooks people who, as I have been calling it, experience differing levels of economic scarcity. I see in some Canadian graphic narratives textual sites that help rectify what Rimstead suggests are some of the oversights present in Canadian literary culture. Collier observes a collective group of people who, as Wylie’s illuminating metaphor frames it, have often been “left in the shadows beside the spotlight on ‘public’ figures and events” (97). He writes about the “lives of workers . . . domestic servants, the unemployed” (Rimstead “‘Knowable Communities’”53). In doing so, by focusing on his experiences and on the experiences of others in his immediate social community, he subverts notions of limitless upward social mobility in Canada that systematically exclude the experiences of people who do not fit into that pattern. Collier’s work is important to Canadian visual cultural and literary histories because it amends the images of Canada that only imagine the country in terms of progressive social unity.

Contemporary Canadian literatures shift the “spotlight” of public awareness onto under-documented topics through the work of contemporary Canadian life writing. Rimstead provides an insightful analysis of the discursive systems that exclude people experiencing economic scarcity, the maintenance of “a seemingly ‘natural’ boundary between the poor and civilized society” (*Remnants* 66).⁹ As Rimstead describes it, there is value in works of life writing because they offer an expansive picture of Canada: she describes the works of authors whose autobiographies and memoirs issue “the most radical challenges to the binary [between people experiencing economic scarcity and “civilized” society]” because they offer “definitions of society that include the poor” (*Remnants* 77). Thus, in Canadian graphic narratives, literary critics may find the force and value of the testimonial evidence of personal experience. Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives often speak to the unique experiences of individuals, without, importantly, stretching the scope of their analysis to make assumptions about the collectively persistent qualities of Canadian society. Rather, Canadian graphic narratives often describe personal experiences that share the “stories of everyday lives” (Rimstead, *Remnants* 77). They issue compelling challenges to definitions of the Canadian literary imaginary that exclude the presence of people who have “everyday” experiences tied to economic scarcity.

This chapter engages with some of the debates that appear in Canadian literary criticism concerning the importance of vernacular traditions in Canadian literary histories. I am reminded of John Sutherland’s famous attack on modernist author A.J.M. Smith in the introduction to his anthology *Other Canadians* (1947) where he criticizes what he sees as Smith’s cosmopolitan tastes that privilege the work of European authors. He champions a reappraisal of Canadian literary traditions so as to emphasize the presence of a social economy in Canada: “For Sutherland, although almost all Canadian writing to date had been ‘colonial,’ the elements for an indigenous literature were available in the ‘common’ language of the working class, in U.S. literary models, and in a ‘rapport

between . . . poetry and the environment” (Davey, “Canadian Theory and Criticism”). Although it is important to interrogate Sutherland’s claims – because, for example, he trumpets the value of the “common” language with an idealized, perhaps even naïve, understanding of that language as being more direct and sincere – his argument illustrates the tensions that exist in Canadian critical traditions that evaluate the importance of vernacular literatures in Canada. According to Frank Davey’s assessment of Canadian literary histories, Sutherland’s writing inspired the work of later critics who theorized Canadian literature “in terms of an opposition between a particularist, indigenous tradition . . . and a cosmopolitan mythopoeic tradition (which sought transcendent universal values)” (Davey, “Canadian Theory and Criticism”). I see contemporary Canadian graphic narratives as operating within the first half of the division that Davey describes. They confront and oppose the Canadian literary traditions that seek “universal values” that transcend the context of specific social and political environments.

4. Documenting fragmented lives

Collier relies on both the visual and the verbal rhetorics of the vernacular, drawing inspiration from the casual drawings of the sketchbook, in order to develop a captivating mode of self-presentation. Moreover, he idealizes vernacular subject matter and vernacular categories of composition. His sketchbooks allow him to present himself as a non-professional observer who earnestly records his experiences and the experiences of those around him. He employs sketchbook vernaculars because they afford him a visual language that gives him the authority to describe the topics of “everyday” living. His methods, like the methods of other contemporary Canadian comics authors, construct a category of “lowbrow” literature that depends on the rhetorics of non-professionalized communication. I say “lowbrow” in the sense that Collier self-consciously brands his work as a form of unsophisticated cultural production. He relies on his authorial persona as a

sincere documentarian to give his work the authority to speak for the lives of others.

In Canadian graphic narratives I often perceive an implicit connection between the visual compositional tendencies of the sketchbook and a broadly conceived category of vernacular topics. In the introduction to *Vernacular Drawings* Seth begins with architect Stewart Brand's definition of the "vernacular": "vernacular means . . . 'common' in all three senses of the word – widespread, ordinary, and beneath notice" (qtd. in *Vernacular Drawings* 4). Seth's sketchbook contains a series of drawings that he claims were not intended for publication – he sees them as technical exercises, simple visual compositions that document his mundane encounters in an urban environment. By selectively choosing vernacular subjects, his sketchbook brings out from obscurity a collection of images that might otherwise remain hidden. The introductory quotation from *Vernacular Drawings* that announces Seth interest in "widespread, ordinary" topics is enlightening (4). Seth invokes this definition of the vernacular for two reasons: he uses it to describe the content of his sketches; his sketchbook contains vernacular subject matter, most notably the urban decay of the Canadian cityscape. And he also uses the word "vernacular" to describe his methods of composition: he treats the casual stylized drawings of the sketchbook as a colloquial visual language. In this way, he conceives of the sketchbook as a mode of social documentation and urban observation grounded in a carefully constructed form of ordinary visual language. Seth's compositional style makes rhetorical claims that allow him to present his work as though it were able to translate the mundane texture of "everyday" life without creative interference. This is a complex process, because the basic properties of the medium of comics are dependent on compositional methods of simplification and exaggeration that foreground the influence of the artist as artificer. For Seth to treat his drawings as though they were able to translate "everyday" experience without interference seems slightly illogical. The visual language of graphic narrative already positions the author as a mediator who selectively interprets and manipulates. It is blatantly partial and inadequate, and it makes no claim to

providing a complete representation of material reality. What I find interesting about the above example is the way Seth seamlessly combines vernacular language and vernacular subject matter. He accomplishes this feat by treating his casual sketch drawings as though they faithfully document his observations without adornment, as if he were presenting in his sketches a catalogue of ready-made objects.¹⁰

There are genres of contemporary Canadian literature that deal with similar issues. In Manina Jones's discussion of contemporary Canadian literature she describes the construction of the genre she calls the "documentary collage." She names the "documentary collage" as:

a 'collage' technique that self-consciously transcribes documents into the literary text, registering them as 'outside' writings that readers recognize both as taken from a spatial or temporal 'elsewhere' and as participating in a historical-referential discourse of 'non-fiction.' The works both invoke and undermine the oppositions between categories such as textual/referential, intratextual/extratextual, literary/non-literary, or fiction/non-fiction, and thus stage a kind of documentary dialogue. (13-14)

The clearest example of the documentary collage is "found poetry," which is closely linked to the ready-made object. I see some parallel between the poetics of the documentary in sketchbook vernaculars and the genre that Jones describes. She describes authors undertaking history-writing projects that grapple with two contradictory impulses: the impulse to record the material world objectively and the impulse to recognize the inevitable manipulative effects of authorial mediation. She writes about authors who re-contextualize "everyday" subject matter in their writing, arguing that they are drawn to the idea of the ready-made object because it allows them to understand the processes through which authors must document the past. For example, Jones describes Robert Kroetsch's "fragmentary, juxtapositional method of composition . . . in which portions of found documents participate in a collage effect" (9). She describes Canadian literatures that foreground the

material qualities of the historical archive; they support an archaeological understanding of history-writing that states that, in absence of the actual presence of the people of the past, history-writing and history-writers are bound to historical evidence that somewhat inadequately testifies to the events of their lives. Authors who choose to record the past events of Canadian history through material evidence (the “documents” of history) have the tendency to worry that they are treating this evidence as aesthetic objects warped by their own subjective interpretations. Jones, describing some of the difficulties found in documentary poetics, argues: “the ‘documentary’ . . . paradoxically reminds readers both of the ‘factuality’ of history and of the construction of that factuality through the collection and interpretation of textual or materially ‘documentary’ evidence” (Jones 8). There is a startling comparison between the methods that Jones describes and the methods of sketchbook vernacular, such as the example I cited above with Seth’s sketchbook, or with the sketchbook sections in some of Collier’s graphic narratives. It is possible that sketchbooks present people’s lives as though they were “objects” of observation, as simple ready-made documents.

In Rimstead’s monumental work *Remnants of Nation*, she describes her concern for groups of people who become mere social fragments sitting on the fringes of the Canadian national imaginary (5). In evaluating some exclusionary strategies in Canadian literary history, she argues that there has been the tendency in some works of Canadian literature to construct a single monolithic identity for “the poor” (5). She describes discursive practices that situate individuals “outside cultural representation itself,” because of the tendency to praise the upward social mobility of those who acquire wealth and “denounc[e] those who don’t” (*Remnants* 5). Some texts assume that people lead partial, fragmented, or incomplete lives simply because they experience economic scarcity or because they lack some of the material necessities of life. Wanting to subvert these exclusionary practices, Rimstead questions the “taken for granted notion of poor subjects as constituted of despair and silence” (4). She argues that it is necessary to consider how different “poverty narratives” (4) are

constructed because they have the potential to marginalize whole groups of people: “The social practice of discursive marginalization and symbolic violence, blaming, naming, or erasing the poor, constructs them as inherently inferior and thus naturally outside of community, the state, the nation, and even cultural representation itself” (5-6). While it is important to focus on sketchbooks because they provide a forum for documenting a collection of people who have been marginalized from some Canadian literary traditions, one must consider the methods that they develop for doing so. Although I find the work of someone like Collier valuable because he confronts what Rimstead calls a “cultural amnesia” by focusing on a group of people who have sometimes been left out of the Canadian literary imaginary, I have some reservations about his methods (Rimstead, “Knowable Communities” 53).

What connections does Collier draw between his subject matter and his strategies of composition? I treat some contemporary Canadian graphic narratives as constructing “poverty narratives” because they focus on the lives of people experiencing economic scarcity (Rimstead, *Remnants* 4). Importantly, sketchbook vernaculars have the potential to replicate some patterns of cultural representation that trivialize the lives of people living in these conditions. Collier’s graphic narratives are filled with incomplete pen and ink drawings – they deploy the fragmented visual language of Canadian graphic narratives that I call “schizogenetic” in my introductory chapter. Collier’s sketchbooks have the potential to suggest that the subject matter they present is, likewise, partial, half-fulfilled, transitory, and fragmented. Collier makes a transition from form to content, from fragmented visual language to fragmented subject matter. His sketches engineer claims to transparency that link partial visual representation with verisimilitude. This compelling rhetorical strategy has the potential to discourage viewers from interrogating their own interactions with his work. As Byerly argues, “paradoxically, the rough workmanship of the sketch elides, rather than exposes, the labor involved in producing it; the creative process is powerfully visible, but the fact

that the process seems incomplete prevents the sketch from becoming an object to be evaluated” (“Effortless Art” 361). Thus, the compositional structure of the sketchbook inhibits the viewer’s productive contemplation of the text because it trivializes the labour that was involved in producing it.

I conclude this chapter with a final discussion of the capacity of the sketchbook to function as a site for preparing documentary evidence. Sketchbooks, as documentary projects that record the events of “everyday” experience, sharply contrast with the captivating appeal of the photograph. They disrupt contemporary definitions of documentary evidence, which often depend on the idealized standards of photojournalism. As Miles Orvell argues, these standards provide a “powerful metaphor for truth” (qtd. in Fagg 8). Photographs construct the visual field in its most captivating state, “presenting a normative vision of the world that could enter the common memory as a facsimile of reality” (Orvell qtd. in Fagg 8). With the photograph, the completeness of the image supports its claims to authenticity. With the sketchbook, the rhetorical structure is different, for its claims are tied to fragmentation of the visual field. The incompleteness of the sketch provides its own captivating metaphors for documentary veracity.

I return to the image from Collier’s sketchbook that I cited earlier in this chapter, the one with the man on the park bench “downtown 7pm” (Fig. 24). It is difficult, as a reader, to draw out a complex understanding of this man’s life. He merely sits without explanation, rendered free from his surrounding context. The text mentions that he is sitting on a park bench, but no park bench is shown. Typically, sketch genres have a narrow scope. They often only focus on an isolated scene or image, removing all supplemental information, including setting and landscape. Farrell argues that sketch authors, by minimizing contextual information, diminish the narrative implications of their drawings; they removed their subject matter from its politics and history (69). In this view, Collier’s methods of composition in his sketchbooks are perilous because he relies on a system of formal

transparency that seamlessly connects incompleteness with verisimilitude. It is possible that sketchbook vernaculars allow for categories of composition that overlook the complexity of the lives of the people they represent. At worst, it is also possible that sketchbooks marginalize the subject matter they describe, turning these subjects into aestheticized objects of contemplation that testify to the author's tastes and intellectual interests.

This chapter suggests that the imagined presence of the author is the central structural principle that ties together the random assortment of drawings present in sketchbooks. The sketchbook functions as a form of life writing because it amasses this catalogue of personal interest: it fashions a serial display of the author's intellectual preoccupations using brief observations from his or her immediate surroundings in the contemporary moment. The sketchbook may be seen as a method of constructing the imagined identity of the author through the sum accumulation of this gallery of images. In doing so, it also has the potential to testify to the sophisticated tastes of the author.¹¹ Sha argues that part of the appeal of the sketchbook is that it congratulates the author for possessing a singular vision that glimpses what others do not. In his survey of the foundations of visual sketching practices, Sha analyzes the "discourse of appropriation" that dominates early precedents from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ("The Power" 73). Certain models of middle-class authorship support this discourse by allowing sketchers to take symbolic ownership of the subject matter that they represent in their drawings: "Part of the cultural authority of the object delineated becomes the sketcher's property – cultural capital – testifying to the 'taste' and social position of the artist/tourist" (78-79). Farrell similarly notes how sketch drawings can become testaments to the taste and high social standing of the sketcher. He describes nineteenth-century authors who are drawn to sketch genres because the sketch suggests "the informality of private production to be shared with familiar acquaintances at home" (40); and, at the same time, they are also a "sign of privilege and a test of class-identified Taste" (40). If, in these early historical

examples the composition of the sketch is self-consciously partial and inadequate, then the real source of interest for the audience is the author who produced them.

In Sha's analysis of the sketch he writes: "sketching empowered the middle-class with a sense of distinction . . . and a way of preserving the distance between itself, and the lower classes and natives by reducing real landscapes and real people to the status of picturesque objects" ("The Power" 73). Importantly, the concept of the picturesque has strong ties to both Canadian visual culture and literary production. In *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing*, W.H. New argues:

'Landing' had brought with it some versions of a new, observable landscape, which – from N.P. Willis's *Canadian Scenery* (1842) to George Grant's *Picturesque Canada: The Country as it Was and Is* (1882), and on into the multitude of pictorial photograph books of the twentieth century – contrived to represent Canada as a series of quaint villages, rustic harbours, dangerous places (whirlpools, rapids, canyons), lone individuals dwarfed by giant space and other *scenic views*. But for many people, writers among them, 'observing' was not enough. Subsequent definitions of land turned the 'new' landscape into something that could also be owned, and 'property' is another commodity altogether. (72)

It is enlightening that in New's account of the imaginative acquisition of the Canadian landscape, he cites an example of the picturesque. Glickman describes the strong influence of the interrelated concepts of "the picturesque and the sublime to Canadian depictions of nature . . . [and] the critical reception to poems informed by these aesthetics" (x). The cultural tradition of the picturesque and the sublime shaped the interpretive apparatus through which many early European settlers understood their new environments. Moreover, Glickman suggests that these original cultural traditions continue to exert a powerful influence on Canadian literatures. She describes them as the

“formative ideas of Canadian culture” (59) that inaugurated certain Canadian literary traditions: “eighteenth-century aesthetic conventions *still* inform English Canadian poetry” (ix). With this in mind, I consider how sketchbook vernaculars compare with these earlier traditions of pictorialism.

The picturesque transforms the visual field into a pleasurable tableau fit for the consumption of a disinterested audience with refined tastes. Many early visual sketches turn to the conventions of the picturesque, in terms of both subject matter and composition. Tirado Bramen defines the picturesque as a way of organizing a vast landscape into an orderly visual pattern. It depends on a mode of detached spectatorship that separates the audience from the picture plane: he describes the fundamental paradox at the heart of this mode of observation: “the picturesque highlights the distinct and unique qualities of people and places in what was considered highly predictable and standardized language (1). Although the picturesque began primarily as a method of observing scenes from the rural countryside, it soon expanded its subject matter and became a method of observing any irregularity in the visual field. Bramen writes that the idea of the picturesque transformed in the mid-nineteenth century and became a “bastion of otherness – of particularity, character and distinctiveness – that resisted the homogenizing pressures of modernization” (7). As a result, there was a shift in subject matter away from scenes of the pastoral idyll. A new form of the picturesque emerged, which continued on into the twentieth century. It focuses on new subjects: “the poor as well as cultural ‘others’ acquired a more prominent place in pictorial composition than they had previously” (Bramen 7). These historical examples of the picturesque provide a fitting example for understanding how authors transform the visual field into a source of detached spectatorship. An author, if he or she wants to establish in his or her drawing a level of pleasure that rivals the pleasure found in the picturesque image, so as to allow for the consumption of bizarre scenes of irregularity in the visual field, she or he must establish a clear separation between the observer and the observed. In Buss’s description of some early precedents in travel journalism,

which often had a fondness for the picturesque (including many Canadian examples), she describes an additional point of comparison for understanding the process of detached observation. Buss describes examples of travel journalists who invoke the vocabulary of the picturesque in their writing in order to create “set-piece[s]” that contain meticulous descriptions of “romantic scenes without human presence” (“The Dear Domestic Circle” 15). She writes about the appeal of certain travel accounts:

their chief attraction . . . was their combination of detailed factual information on geography, climate, population, local culture, and industry with the personable autobiographical style of a genteel Englishwoman, who would impress her audience with her high standards of taste and intellectual accomplishments, while maintaining an amused tolerance of the strange spectacles of a ruder culture, a sensitive eye for the grandeurs of nature, and an optimistic attitude to the future possibilities of the land. (“The Dear Domestic Circle” 2-3)

Here Buss invokes the vocabulary of the picturesque, with the detached observer who maintains “an amused tolerance of the strange spectacles of a ruder culture.” Again, the separation of the observer from her or his source of interest facilitates the pleasurable consumption of the scene and transforms it into a mere object of observation that testifies to the enriched taste of the person observing it.¹²

Sketchbook vernaculars often make a seamless transition from vernacular form to vernacular content. They make the claim rhetorically to provide appropriate formal tools for documenting the subjects of mundane social existence, of an “everyday” vernacular culture. This is a perilous strategy because it is a method of social documentation that relies on fragmented and partial forms of pictorialism. This chapter considers how Collier, and authors like him who employ sketchbook vernaculars, represents people experiencing economic scarcity, whether he treats them as mere

subjects of intellectual interest or if he attempts to establish an empathetic connection with them and suggest to his audience that they are worthy of further interest beyond his own momentary displays of them. At times in his sketchbooks Collier takes on the role of a detached travel journalist reporting on curious subjects of interest, analogous to the sketchers who gained pleasure from the disinterested consumption of picturesque drawings. However, on the whole, his drawings present a more sophisticated and empathetic mode of pictorialism than the one found in early examples of the picturesque.

In order to properly understand the way Collier and other contemporary Canadian comics authors construct categories of “ordinary” experience, one need only consider the compositional structure of their work. According to Hamilton there are two dominant categories of observation: the author can adopt the outsider’s detached perspective or the “insider’s view through proximate participation” (9). These two different categories determine the stance of the sketcher to the subjects he or she is reporting on: he or she reports from either a position of indifference, like the curious tourist that Bramen and Buss describe, or from a position of familiarity without privileged knowledge. According to Sha, sketch genres often succumb to the detached perspective: “The sketcher’s typical pose as disinterested and disconnected *flâneur* further denies the possibility of self-interest. All this erasure enhances the illusion of objectivity. This illusion of objectivity, in turn, is enhanced by the image’s capacity to deny erasure, since images – even by way of analogy in the written sketch – allegedly deliver presence, not absence” (“The Power” 85). Sketchbook vernaculars draw from both sides of the continuum that Hamilton describes. As an observer Collier occasionally adopts the detached perspective, whereas at other times he becomes involved in the scenes he describes. The situation is complex, but the sum total is this: in the sketchbooks in his graphic narratives, Collier often adopts what Hamilton calls the “insider’s view.” The rhetorics of display



Fig. 29. On the left, the image Farrell uses to illustrate his understanding of disinterested spectatorship (84). On the right, a depiction of Collier's persona from *Hamilton Sketchbook* ("Hamilton).

have Collier participating in in the social environments he represents in his sketchbooks. He includes people experiencing economic scarcity as part of his scattered observations and intellectual preoccupations, but he describes these people as part of his own community and alludes to the complexity of their lives.

In the *Rhetorics of Display*, James Farrell analyzes the origins of the genres of sketch journalism. He provides a prototypical image of passive spectatorship: the image of vicar seated in a chair (Fig. 29). The vicar's presence mediates the representative plane for the audience through his detachment and refined tastes: "He serves as a witness to suffering and enters into the experience of the wretched, but he refrains from, and so discourages, any action that might suggest the social, political, or economic responsibility of his class for the conditions depicted" (Farrell 84). Farrell's example provides a conventionalized rhetorical situation for urban observation in the nineteenth century: the vicar centralizes the documentary operation in the detached perspective of a reporter

of higher social standing who witnesses scenes from an emotional distance. The sketch “shows” scenes to viewers, who are meant to consume the spectacle with a measure level of sympathy. The image is unpleasant, but not too unpleasant. It replicates the rhetorical structure of detached observation. It is enlightening, therefore, to set this image side by side with a comparable image from Collier’s work where he similarly positions his persona as a spectator (Fig. 25; Fig. 29). This is a somewhat muddled comparison because the vicar surveys scenes of suffering and poverty, and there is nothing in Collier’s drawing that indicates the boy standing next to him experiences economic scarcity or is otherwise remarkable in any way. However, I risk this comparison only because of the similarities between the two drawings. The two observers adopt nearly identical postures. For Collier, this image is a meta-critical moment where he comments on his own compositional methods and his position as an observer. Importantly, the rhetorics of display here are radically different than the situation that Farrell describes. Collier’s persona interacts with the people he is drawing. A boy approaches him and interrupts his composition. Collier responds to his question while still in the act of drawing. Interestingly, this situation reverses the common patterns of behaviour that define social interactions in large urban environments, which depend on establishing social barriers that separate people when they are living in close proximity with one another. These patterns dictate the rules of civil decorum: “much of urban public life rests on people upholding the tacit working consensus surrounding ordinary social interaction . . . outward behavior that facilitates movement through public places, minimizes physical contact and fear, and protects valued social and moral identities” (Morrill 9). Collier depicts his persona as an embedded participant in the scenes he describes who engages with the other people living alongside him in his urban environment.

The multimodal properties of Collier’s sketchbook allow him to take on the role of a reporter who showcases scenes to his audience, while acting at once as both detached observer and embedded participant. In any text that combines images and words in an act of display, such as a

sketchbook (or in graphic narrative, more generally), the effect of the image is best understood only when one considers the interplay between visual and verbal discourses. Interestingly, in Farrell's analysis of the rhetorics of display he addresses the implications of multimodality in sketch journalism. He argues that the incompleteness of the visual field in the sketch leaves open interpretations that encourage the audience to ask additional questions. As Farrell describes it, "there is no narrative context to aid our understanding of the image . . . We get no sense of the history or the politics . . . Whatever story might accompany the sketch is not made obvious by the details of the picture itself" (69). Thus, "the totality of impression on a reader and viewer is made by a collaboration of image and word within an economy of display" (Farrell 70). Similarly, the multimodal structure of the sketchbook makes demands on the reader. In "Saskatoon 1998" section of Collier's sketchbook in *The Frank Ritzu Papers* he draws a man on the street. Collier's persona observes his appearance, adopting the position of an urban observer documenting the social conditions of his local community. He draws a quick representation of his body from behind: "His name is Larry and his car don't work" (Fig. 30). This is an example of one of Collier's favorite intellectual preoccupations: he often shows a fascination with forms of transportation, particularly those in a state of disrepair. It is tempting to treat this sketch as an example of disinterested urban observation with Collier representing a spectatorial object from a distant perspective. Larry's body is composed of wavering lines, which, again, replicate the fragmented compositional methods that persist in all of Collier's sketches, the prototypical visual minimalism of sketchbook vernaculars. Interestingly, however, Collier's persona avoids secluding his artistic activity from his social community. The multimodal properties of the image hint at the greater complexity of the person in the drawing. The man has a name ("Larry"). Collier locates him at a specific place in time in space (he lived in Saskatoon in 1998) and he lists some basic biographical information that hints at his emotional state ("his car don't work"). There are at least some cues that point to the complexity of



Saskatoon 1998

Fig. 30. Collier observes a member of his local community at a distance (*The Frank Ritz Papers* “Saskatoon 1998”).

Larry’s life that encourage the reader to ask more questions about him.

Rimstead describes the need to avoid producing a singular definition that uniformly labels all of the experiences of people living with economic scarcity. She prefers a different model: “I believe we can uncover many small secrets about subjectivity and everyday struggle as adaptive and resilient steps towards resistance or as self-defeating steps towards consent and domination” (*Remnants* 5).

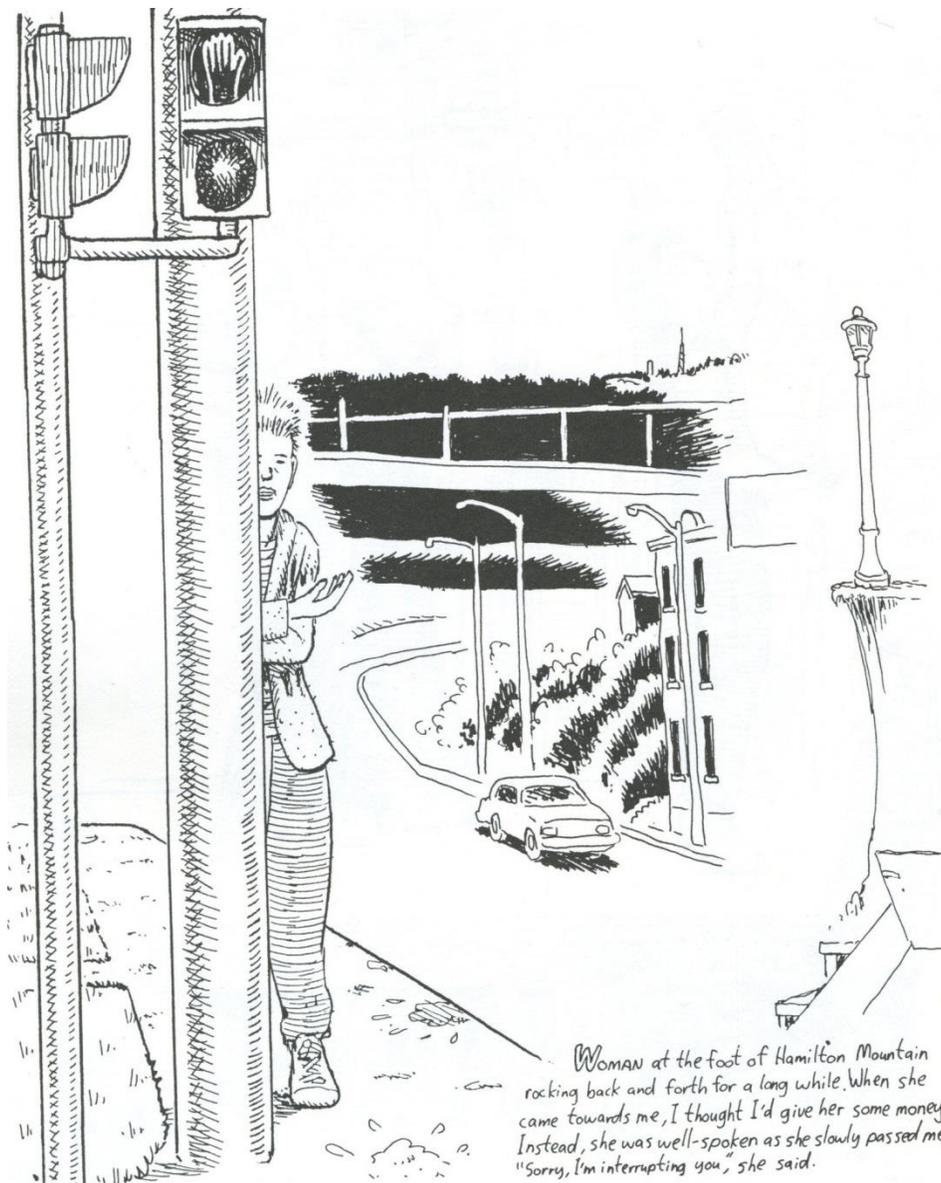


Fig. 31. Collier depicts an encounter with an unnamed stranger in *Hamilton Sketchbook* (“Hamilton”).

Interestingly, Collier develops methods that allow him to avoid assigning a terminal definition to his subject matter. In the “Hamilton” section of *Hamilton Sketchbook* Collier draws a picture of a woman he encounters on the street. The woman, who Collier does not name, clutches her body and covers behind a pedestrian light (Fig. 31). Collier foregrounds his own inability to understand this woman’s life in full in the accompanying text that appears next to the sketch: “Woman at the foot of

Hamilton Mountain rocking back and forth for a long while. When she came towards me, I thought I'd give her some money. Instead, she was well-spoken as she slowly passed me. 'Sorry, I'm interrupting you,' she said" (*Hamilton Sketchbook*, "Hamilton"). Both the image and text depend on the rhetorics of display. The drawing presents the woman's body to the audience from the perspective of a curious spectator and the text labels her with an explanatory note ("Woman at the foot of Hamilton Mountain"). The composition of the image is incomplete, as half the woman's body is hidden behind the pedestrian light. However, the text that accompanies the sketch disturbs the apparent simplicity of the rendition of the woman's appearance. Collier presents her as an unexplained phenomenon that momentarily crosses his path, but the combination of the text and the image signals the complexity of her life and, in turn, Collier's inability to represent her with a single drawing. Thus, while there are certain inevitabilities to Collier's methods that give me pause, I find value in his work because it provides a public forum for discussing the presence of a social economy in Canada that describes the complex lives of people who might otherwise remain hidden.

Notes

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- ¹ This chapter mobilizes the somewhat cumbersome term “people experiencing economic scarcity” instead of the terminology Rimstead employs, such as “the poor.” I prefer this terminology because it emphasizes the fact that economic scarcity is an experience and not a monolithic label that should be used to define an entire group of people as a stable collective.
- ² On Delisle’s blog *Comme ci, comme ça* he corroborates my theory that his sketchbook was central to his process of composition. In one entry, he includes a series of scans from his sketchbook that almost perfectly mirror drawings from *Jerusalem*. He writes: “J’ai pensé que ce serait intéressant de les extraire et de mettre en vis-à-vis les croquis que j’ai réalisés pendant ces moments précis [I thought that it would be interesting if I dug up and posted the sketches that I created during these specific moments]” (“In situ”; my translation).
- ³ Similar techniques appear in the work of many other contemporary Canadian authors, including Jillian Tamaki (*Gilded Lilies*) and Elisabeth Belliveau (*The great hopeful someday*).
- ⁴ Moodie’s interest in the sketch genres, originating in her admiration for Mary Russell Mitford, is well documented (Ballstadt 34). Moodie published many sketches early in her writing career, and she based *Roughing It in the Bush* on her “Canadian Sketches,” a series she had published in the *Literary Garland* (Ballstadt 36). To a certain extent, however, Moodie’s work defies clear generic categorization. Michael Peterman notes that *Roughing It in the Bush* “contains elements of poetry, fiction, travel writing, autobiography, and social analysis” (qtd. in Glickman 76).
- ⁵ Gerson and Mezei write: “In Canadian literature, the sketch can be regarded as a transitional genre that points towards the modern tradition of documentary writing” (3). They see the Canadian nineteenth-century sketch as an originating point of departure for later Canadian authors, including Rudy Wiebe, Michael Ondaatje, and Daphne Marlatt.

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- ⁶ Collier's sketchbooks are unpaginated, so I refer to section titles when citing them.
- ⁷ Graphic narrative's dependency on rhythm is well documented: "Groensteen uses the musical language of 'beats', 'sighs', 'pauses' and 'measures' to describe the reading of comic books as 'a natural rhythm. . . [comics author Christ Ware] has said that: 'In comics you can make the beat come alive by reading it, by experiencing it beat by beat as you would playing music'" (qtd. in Dittmer 229).
- ⁸ James Heffernan writes: "to see how artists and writers represent themselves is to see how they each crack the mirror paradigm of self- representation. Art as well as literature manifests the impossibility of perfectly reflecting one's life at any moment, the inevitability of self-dramatization, and the periodic necessity of self-signification: portraying oneself in ways that look nothing at all like what the mirror reflects" (518).
- ⁹ Rimstead writes about "images which construct market society and the concepts of autonomy, rights, and individualism as *good, orderly nature* while exiling poverty and need to an outside position as *bad, disorderly nature*" (*Remnants* 66). She observes unspoken assumptions that underlie the discourses of liberalism, and worries that they form exclusionary cultural practices that "express concern for the poor . . . but which actually maintains the societal boundaries based on class status" (*Remnants* 66).
- ¹⁰ According to the *OED*, a "ready-made object" is a kind of "found object" that "has been collected in its natural state and presented in a new context as (part of) a work of art."
- ¹¹ I previously made the comparison between sketching and diary writing, as both practices follow similar temporal structures and share similar goals and preoccupations. Interestingly, in many early precedents, diary writing became "a way to indicate class standing. It marked women of leisure and was regarded as a conventional habit among people of culture" (Carter 15).

¹² Glickman describes the paradoxes of the picturesque: on the one hand, it was “egalitarian: anyone with a sketchpad could go out and discover the landscape; anyone could cultivate taste and sensibility. On the other hand, the picturesque attitude was detached and proprietary” (11-12).

Conclusion

What I found immediately appealing about contemporary Canadian graphic narratives was that they almost always frame an understanding of the past through an account of the individual subject. They produce, as I cited in my introduction, an account of “history with a human face . . . the face of the daily, the ordinary” (Murray, “Literary History as Microhistory” 411). I find this aspect of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative especially noteworthy. Canadian comics authors rarely construct narratives about representative figures standing in place and speaking for a widespread community of people. They zero in on and describe the experiences of the individual living in Canada, with a rich collection of emotional, sensorial, and perceptual information. For these reasons, I find contemporary Canadian graphic narratives empathetic and humane. They show concern for the individual subject that balances a wide variety of different, often complex and variable, discourses of subjectivity.

My plans for this study transformed during the process of composition. For example, I expected to write about Chester Brown’s *Louis Riel: A Comic Strip Biography*, because Louis Riel, as a historical personage, perfectly aligned as a representative figure for the “marginal” status of contemporary Canadian graphic narratives. I began with the intention of analyzing the many transitions that took place during Brown’s career, from surrealist black humour (*Ed the Happy Clown*) to confessional autobiography (*I Never Liked You*). I was curious about the decisions that brought Brown to create a large-scale biography of one of Canada’s most famous historical figures. I hypothesized that Brown was creating a playful but accessible biography of Louis Riel. He highlights the gaps in the historical record and, self-reflectively, his own work as an author, acknowledging the limits of historical knowledge while still constructing a stable narrative of Riel’s life.¹ I thought *Louis Riel* was emblematic of Canadian graphic narratives, but I now see it as an outlier: while it focuses

on an “outsider” figure, its scope is too broad. Perhaps it reflects a certain adaptation of the methods and orientations of contemporary Canadian graphic narratives (Brown treats Louis Riel as if he was an “ordinary” historical subject), but it still only provides a special example in the history of contemporary Canadian graphic narratives – more of an exception than the rule.

1. The uneven market for Canadian graphic narratives

Canadian graphic narratives occupy a marginal position within the dynamics of Canadian cultural and literary production.² There has never been a sustained national comics tradition – I use the term “national” provisionally here, only as a self-defined category of cohesion based on common patterns of production. My study builds a method of literary inquiry that is suggestive of a tradition of comics publishing in Canada, but not the only tradition. For example, my description of the conventions of comics confession, which I see as a prominent mode or personal address present in many different works of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative, is tempered with the knowledge that, while there are general patterns that help describe the trajectory of comics publishing in Canada in the latter half of the twentieth century, there are still few comics authors whose careers perfectly mirror each other. It is difficult to describe the Canadian tradition as a whole because Canadian comics have never coalesced as a collective organization and their production has often been sporadic. Canadian graphic narratives have often been the products of authors working in scattered non-professionalized fields of cultural production. I wrote earlier that one predominant narrative that has emerged concerning the development of Canadian cultural history prioritizes the importance of nationalistic organizations. As quoted in my introduction, Maria Tippett argues that prior to the twentieth century Canadian cultural production was dominated by a motley crew of unlikely artists: “the amateur, the autonomously minded organizations, and the private person” (xii). She describes the slow deterioration of the influence of these non-professionals, while contrasting

them with the organizations that followed, including, for example, the Massey Commission of 1949 and the advent of the “professional producer, the national organization” (xii). Her model of Canadian cultural history does not account for the entirety of literary production. The history of Canadian graphic narratives does not conform to the cultural trends that Tippet describes in her account of an increasingly homogenized and nationalistic Canadian culture.

Canadian comics authors are bereft of clear precedents for their professional development. As Jean-Paul Gabilliet argues, it is difficult to define the typical career path for a contemporary cartoonist (*Of Comics* 169). If there is, in retrospect, a trajectory of educational development that many comics authors share, it does not run through the channels of institutional organizations. Some contemporary Canadian comics authors began in Fine Art programs – although others abandoned their university training before graduation. Some contemporary Canadian comics authors worked in the craft trades of visual artwork, such as commercial illustration and animation. In *Paul en appartement*, Michel Rabagliati provides what I believe is a possible illustration of the path of professional development for cartooning. The text describes the early adulthood and education in Montreal of Rabagliati’s semi-autobiographical comics persona Paul. While enrolled in classes for commercial design, Paul is introduced to the technical skills required for a career creating illustrations for magazines and advertisements. His teachers train him in standardized models of graphic design with a pre-determined set of practical tools. Although there is no program in “comics” offered at his institution, he learns from these models precisely the same set of technical skills that he employs in his career as a comics author. In addition, Rabagliati suggests that Paul is influenced in the development of his career as an author by a wide assortment of mundane sources, including graffiti and commercial signage. Rabagliati sometimes includes subtle details in the background of different panels to show the slow influencing of Paul’s subconscious. Thus, Rabagliati charts out a course of education in comics, describing it as the slow infiltration of indirect

sources. I provide an account of Rabagliati's semi-autobiographical narrative to illustrate the motley collection of different models of cultural activity, both institutional and informal, that shape comics authorship. I cite Rabagliati's semi-autobiographical work as an example of a path that may lead to a career in comics, as a possible *bildungsroman* of technical skills.³ Thus, a career in comics in Canada emerges ad-hoc. Plunging into an unstable market, comics authors follow a variety of irregular and unpredictable models of professional development.

One fitting example that fleshes out the issues concerning professional development that I am discussing here may be found in the career of Chester Brown. He has worked as an author full-time, unlike many other authors who split their attention with separate professional commitments. Indeed, Brown may be a unique example in Canada for the single-mindedness of his career; he avoided dividing his time with separate endeavours, such as commercial illustration. I hold Brown up as a clear example of the roadblocks that deter and harass the production of independent graphic narrative in Canada. Brown describes his early career in an extensive interview from 1990, just at the moment when he started creating his autobiographical comics ("The Chester Brown Interview"). After a series of early setbacks, including a failed attempt to move to New York to become an illustrator, Brown aborted all attempts at creating commercial work and began producing his comic books independently. He produced a series of mini-comix – short photocopied self-published pamphlets – following the example of other independent publications in Toronto: "A lot of people in Toronto were self-publishing at this point, standing out on the street with a sign around their neck, saying, 'Buy my book,' or whatever. Chapbooks, poetry" ("The Chester Brown Interview"). The scenario that Brown describes may seem peculiar, but it is no exaggeration: one of Brown's first attempts at distribution ended with him standing on a street corner with a sign draped around his neck selling his work to strangers ("The Chester Brown Interview"). Without a plan and without a clear understanding of his audience, Brown sold works of graphic narrative like a street vendor. The

inefficient scenario that Brown describes, with a burgeoning comics author standing on the corner in a futile effort to reach his audience, is a fitting example of the kind of ad-hoc tactics of professional development that I have been describing in contemporary Canadian comics. Brown was involved primarily in a network of interpersonal distribution, a model of self-publishing emerging primarily in many major metropolitan centres in Canada, such as Toronto and Vancouver. His actions fall in line with Sabin's description of small-press distribution: "This was a network of low- or no-budget comics that were home-produced (often on a photocopier), and generally sold through the post or in specialist comics shops. Because the small press was not tied to commercial imperatives, it became synonymous with self-expression and unorthodox material" (144). John Bell's analysis offers an account of the haphazard distribution networks of early contemporary Canadian graphic narratives, along with a description of their subversive subject matter: "the 'undergrounds' explored the major preoccupations of . . . counterculture, namely, drugs, sex, rock music, and radical politics. Sold in head shops (shops that sell drug-related paraphernalia) across the country, they openly defied . . . the stringent 1950s Comics Code" (Bell and Viau). I consider these distribution networks important because they help flesh out a complete picture of the economic, social, and cultural contexts which dictated the production of many different contemporary Canadian graphic narratives. Brown would eventually expand his career selling mini-comix through mail-order delivery services and other scattered methods of small-market distribution, but his first clumsy attempts at distribution were haphazard, and they show little hint of his later success ("The Chester Brown Interview"). This suggests that there were few options available at the time for authors interested in maintaining control of their own creative enterprise. Indeed, in Canada there was in effect no market to speak of for authors like Brown, save the limited interactions found in his own immediate community.

Before the beginning of the contemporary period starting in the 1980s, the publication of graphic narratives in Canada followed a boom-and-bust pattern of repetitive rise and decline.

Gabilliet argues that the perpetual uncertainty of the market for comic books and the medium's low economic status inhibited authors from organizing collectively into professional organizations (*Of Comics* 175). In general terms, the market for graphic narrative in Canada has almost always been fragmented, and it is perhaps best described as a system of sporadic publication, with alternating periods of productivity and inactivity. Its history has often progressed according to a pattern of uneven development with few periods of sustained economic viability. Bell's account of the history of Canadian graphic narrative suggests that the emergence of each successive generation of authors coincided with the emergence of new patterns of distribution, which opened new markets of consumers. For example, the first comic books in Canada, the "Canadian whites" of the Second World War, were only produced after federal sanctions prohibiting international imports and there was a void left open in the comics market in Canada (Bell, Pomerleau, and MacMillan 24-26). The "Canadian whites" quickly disappeared after those openings were closed when the prohibitions were lifted. Canadian comics have often been susceptible to the overwhelming flood of products from the United States, with its robust publishing industry. Another example may be found with the increased publication of alternative comics in Canada, a "frenzy" as Bell describes it, that coincided with the expansion of the direct-sales market in the 1980s (Bell and Viau). The magazine-rack sales delivery system gave way to the efficient and cost-friendly methods of the speciality comics shop: "in 1986 the alternative-comics field experienced unprecedented expansion. As the direct-sales market developed and comic-books shops flourished . . . The resulting mania was a boon to Canadian printers (who, to this day, still print many of the comics published in North America) and, at least initially, to Canadian alternative publishers" (Bell and Viau). I draw two conclusions from these two separate episodes from the history of comics publishing in Canada: first, that graphic narratives have often existed on the periphery of both literary and visual culture, as either products of popular culture participating in overtly commercial forms of production or as counter-cultural

paraphernalia; and, second, that graphic narratives in Canada, embedded as they are in this uneven market of precarious distribution, have often been hampered by multiple failed attempts at sustained production. I return again to the example of Brown standing on a street corner selling his graphic narratives. He was at that moment a cultural alien, casting his work into the Canadian community with no obvious sense of direction.

The opportunities for publishing graphic narratives in Canada are limited. There are few journals and literary magazines that accept graphic texts. Independent publishers are crucial for Canadian authors to sustain their careers. Thus, I could have expanded the scope of my study with an account of their importance. Montreal's *Drawn and Quarterly*, in particular, has been responsible for securing a small market for contemporary Canadian graphic narratives. Following the editorial direction of its founder Chris Oliveros, it has shaped the history of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative. Its original mandate supported Canadian authors (although those located almost exclusively in Eastern Canada) and upheld their creative freedom. Recent publishers such as Conundrum Press and Koyama Press point to the possibility that independent comics publishing will continue in Canada.

2. Expanding scholarship

As a choice of methodology, my study has only described a limited number of different authors. Through an analysis of their work, I described some of the common tropes and compositional strategies of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative, and linked them with the concerns and interests of Canadian literary scholarship. My central regret with this strategy is that it restricted my scope. I chose depth over breath and only described a handful of authors in detail. I can easily imagine another version of this study which, adopting a different methodology, would have traversed a wide range of different texts, linking them together as part of the complex

interconnected network of cultural and economic production. I have only hinted at what is in reality a rich and diverse community of comics authors in Canada, and I see the necessity of acknowledging more of them. At the conclusion of my study, I would like to touch on just some of the different authors who I would have recognized, had there been enough space to do so.

Missing from my study is an account of the variety of different texts that make up the beginnings of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative. This would include some of the contemporaries of the authors I discussed in my earlier chapters, including Rand Holmes, Leanne Franson, and Colin Upton. In their works, as in many other contemporary Canadian graphic narratives, genres of life writing predominate. Ann Marie Fleming constructs a complex multi-generational account of her great-grandfather, a world-famous magician, in *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam*. Her memoir (and her companion documentary film) rigorously dissects the discourses of nationalism and racial identity. Other multi-generational memoirs include Scott Chantler's *Two Generals*, an account of his grandfather's experience in the Second World War based on his surviving records in his letters and diaries, and Bernice Eisenstein's *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Ho Che Anderson creates an extensive biography of Martin Luther King in *King*. Dave Lapp writes a collection of stories that recount his experience teaching at a drop-in centre in Toronto. As my research continues, I am interested in stretching my terminology to include other works of "autography." For example, Sonja Ahlers and Leanne Shapton both create fascinating texts that combines words, images, drawings, and photographs into an autobiographical account. Their work is not, strictly speaking, written in the medium of comics, but it shares productive similarities with other texts I studied. For example, Ahlers's *The Selves* resembles Julie Doucet's *365 Days* in its use of autobiographical collage.

Interestingly, some works of contemporary Canadian fictional graphic narrative show a concern with topography. They map out specific spatial-temporal locations in Canada, which is a

strategy present in works of contemporary Canadian graphic life writing as well – Seth, for example, memorializes the streets of Toronto and London in *It's a Good Life if You Don't Weaken*. Bryan Lee O'Malley creates an account of the Toronto cityscape in his widely popular *Scott Pilgrim* series. Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's graphic narrative *Skim* is similarly set in Toronto, and I single it out as a fascinating account of youthful emotional and intellectual development. With my focus on the discourses and genres of life writing, I sometimes overlooked the work of Canadian authors who write most often in the genres of fiction, such as David Boswell, Matthew Forsythe, Jeff Lemire, and David Sim.⁴

The creation of graphic narratives is often a collaborative process, and scholarship in the field of comics studies sometimes overemphasizes the work of authors who both write and draw their own comics. Some of the most creative cartoonists in Canada spend the majority of their careers working primarily in illustration, including Michael Cho, Darwyn Cooke, Willow Dawson, Gerhard, and Pia Guerra. Moreover, there are influential Canadian artists who identify solely with the production of fine art, but whose work draws heavily from the traditions of graphic narrative, including most notably Marc Bell and Shary Boyle. Their paintings remove the aesthetic conventions of the medium of comics from their literary context and transfer them to the gallery and the artist's book.⁵

The history of contemporary Canadian graphic narratives has recently seen the emergence of a new generation of authors who are only beginning to establish their careers. Their works follow many of the traditions of earlier authors but show more variety in their expressive vocabulary of cartooned images. This group of emerging authors includes Kate Beaton, Michael DeForge, John Martz, Ryan North, and Zack Worton. In particular, Kate Beaton has found recent popularity for her autobiographical comic strips and creative re-imaginings of famous figures from Canadian history. Beaton began her career publishing on her blog *Hark! A Vagrant*, which is a strategy of

professional development now finding increasing importance for many comics authors. Not only do online venues allow authors to promote their careers, but they also offer new opportunities for independent distribution, which are replacing the earlier systems of small-press and independent publishing.

The ad-hoc model of sales and delivery for contemporary Canadian graphic narrative may be read in tandem with the history of small-press literary publishing in Canada. It would have been fruitful to draw out more connections between contemporary Canadian graphic narratives and the experimental poetics of the 1970s, which I only briefly mentioned in previous chapters. In Bell's survey of contemporary English-Canadian comics history, he writes "the first comic book of the period, *Scriptures*, originated not with the underground press, but rather with Toronto's literary avant-garde" (Bell and Viau). He adds that many "West Coast comix" were the product of "the Toronto pop art Dada scene" (Bell and Viau). The first underground comics in Canada originated in the work of authors like bp Nichol, who experimented with poetry that bridged the gap between the visual and the verbal (Bell and Viau). Some of the most experimental (and sometimes puzzling) works produced by the Canadian avant-garde in the second half of the twentieth century show a connection with the multimodal properties of comics. Nichol's poetics show a debt to the adventure comics of his childhood, such as the early-twentieth century newspaper comics of Winsor McCay. He created works of visual poetry that acknowledge the influence of graphic narrative (Gabilliet, "Comic Art" 467). He even created a few select works in the medium of comics, including a poetic sequence featuring his own comic book character "Captain poetry" and a comics adaptation of Michael Ondaatje's Billy character from *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (New, *A History* 266, 273). According to Carl Peters, Nichol was searching for "a theory of non-narrative prose," and he was drawn to the medium of comics for its multimodal language and for its interest in "notions of movement and framing" (71). Nichol's poetry is perhaps a proto-example of contemporary

Canadian graphic narrative, an early attempt at formalist experimentation that exemplifies some of the shifting perspectives through which authors appreciated the value of the medium of comics. Before the 1960s and 70s, few members of the avant-garde of Canadian literature had acknowledged the importance of comics. I am not certain that Nichol's hybrid visual-verbal poetics truly fit the parameters that are used by critics to define the medium of comics, but Nichol's holds an important place in the history of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative that should not be underestimated.⁶

While researching this study, I repeatedly felt the desire to return to earlier precedent in the history of Canadian graphic narrative, only to find that there was not enough research available. Early Canadian graphic narrative persists as a large and under-examined body of literature. Only recently have graphic narratives been widely published in book form; in the past most Canadian graphic narratives were published as disposable literary products. Therefore, as a new avenue of research, I see great potential in pursuing an interest in periodical studies and modernist poetics. It is possible to adapt some of the same theories and analytical tools that I developed in my research to broaden my understanding of the medium of comics in Canada as a whole. I see value in researching the emergence of its formal structures in foundational texts because it would refine theories about the relationship between graphic narrative and historical narration.

I see a gap in the scholarship that is available concerning political cartoons and comic strips from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Canada. It is important to re-evaluate the impact and importance of this collection of under-analyzed texts, treating them as a unique form of literary-historical documentation and social critique. Reading a political cartoon depends on humorous revelations that are only available in a specific social context at an isolated moment of time. Therefore, early Canadian graphic narratives focus on the concerns of small-scale communities of individuals. The narrow precision of these texts gives them the capacity to document the

everyday experiences of mundane, but important, social and political culture. They privilege, like the contemporary texts that I study, local contexts in order to resist the sweeping generalizations of broad and exclusionary nationalistic histories. By pursuing this line of investigation, I believe it would be possible to trace a genealogy for Canadian graphic narratives.

As I mentioned in my introduction, only a few isolated scholars such as Bell and Gabilliet have written histories that chart the development of Canadian graphic narratives. Theoretical criticism in the emerging field of comics studies defines the traits of the medium of comics by extricating texts from their regional contexts. The only substantial body of scholarship concerning *early* Canadian graphic narratives focuses on political cartooning from the perspective of cultural history, journalism, and early education (Cook; Cumming; Desbarats and Mosher). While this scholarship provides invaluable insight into the history of early Canadian graphic narratives, it overlooks Canadian literary history, treating political cartoons and comic strips as either transparent historical artefacts that attest to dominant public opinion or as lighthearted anecdotal evidence of popular culture.

Crucial early authors include J.W. Bengough and Richard Taylor, as well as illustrators and graphic designers such as Harry Mayerovitch and Avrom Yanovsky. I see the need to situate these works of graphic narrative within the study of print culture by analyzing the periodicals to which these authors most often contributed – Canadian nineteenth-century illustrated satirical journals (*Canadian Illustrated News*, 1869-83; *The Dominion Illustrated*, 1888-91) and humour magazines (*Grip*, 1873-95). I contend that the graphic narratives present in these early periodicals prefigure the visual storytelling techniques and devices that appear in subsequent literary magazines from the early twentieth century, including *New Frontier* (1932-34) and *Masses* (1936-37). Interestingly, early Canadian graphic narratives are stigmatized as the products of mass culture, even though they also often appear in these small-scale literary publications. The political cartoons and comic strips from

these journals and magazines are an alternative tradition of Canadian literature that traverses the boundary between commercial and non-commercial literature.

The study of early Canadian graphic narratives would test some of the dominant assumptions that persist concerning the antithetical relationship between mass culture and literary culture. As Dean Irvine, drawing on the scholarship of Mark S. Morrisson, convincingly argues, “modernist periodicals of the early twentieth century were not always antipathetic to the general public or to commercial culture but rather adapted techniques of mass marketing, advertising, and self-promotion to the non-commercial interests of little-magazine culture” (Irvine, *Editing Modernity* 5).⁷ It is possible to describe the emergent techniques of graphic narrative in Canadian periodicals by tracing the transition from the nineteenth-century popular press to the literary magazine culture of the early twentieth century. This period between the 1870s and the 1930s was a time of rapid technological development when new technical instruments and printing techniques allowed for text and image to appear on the same printed page with increased ease and sophistication. I challenge scholars like Nicholas Hiley, who argues that the vast expansion of the market for illustrated humour magazines caused authors to pander to the middle-class sensibilities of their growing readership (28). On the contrary, I argue early Canadian graphic narratives are provocative, and in certain circumstances incendiary, literatures that incite anxieties about the infiltration and influence of widespread mass culture. In this way, I treat early graphic narrative as an *inclusive* and *populist* Canadian literature that disrupts the exclusionary traditions of Canadian literary modernism.

Early Canadian graphic narratives were rarely republished or anthologized. They most often faded away as the ephemera of print culture. I would be fruitful to foreground the production and publication of periodical literature in order to develop an account of the uneven trajectory of Canadian literary history.⁸ Recent scholarship has replaced the concept of a single tradition of Canadian modernism – “a dominant, elitist, masculinist, reactionary, and exclusionary Canadian

modernism” (Irvine, *Canadian Modernist Meet 1*) – with an alternative model that acknowledges the existence of multiple coinciding traditions with conflicting patterns of influence. This description of Canadian modernist literary culture would complement the methods of micro-historical analysis that I introduced in my introductory chapter. As Heather Murray argues, the conventional methods of understanding literary history, founded in patterns of uniformity and progress, have often been difficult to apply in a Canadian context (“Literary History as Microhistory” 406). My study replaces the concept of a single unfolding Canadian literary history by highlighting the importance of marginal literary products such as early Canadian graphic narrative.

Some scholars argue graphic narratives are valuable because they synthesize, like pithy aphorisms, a vast amount of information about the events of the past. As I cited in my introductory chapter, Ian Gordon suggests graphic narratives have certain limited advantages: “they entertain, rouse curiosity, and provide enough information on which to get by, but also raise enough questions requiring further reading that the audience understands the limits of the knowledge they have obtained” (192). His assessment undervalues the complexity of graphic narrative. Political cartoons and comic strips are drawn in an exaggerated yet simplified visual style that distorts clear categories of testimonial evidence. Unlike other forms of visual documentation, such as journalistic photography and documentary film, early Canadian graphic narratives intentionally abandon the authority of photorealism. Instead, they ask their audience to become active interpreters of Canadian politics and culture. For example, Harry Mayerovitch published a graphic narrative in *New Frontier* in February of 1937. It depicts a cartooned image of a towering Nazi commander clutching the shoulder of a small figure with a caption that reads, “At last we have produced the perfect Aryan” (Fig. 32). Mayerovitch borrows the language of political cartooning, which depends on the complex interplay between text and image. Mayerovitch pokes fun at the famously overweight appearance of Hermann Göring (the towering Nazi behind the emaciated figure). At the



Fig. 32. Harry Mayerovitch's political cartoon: "At last we have produced the perfect Aryan."

same time, he critiques the general ramifications of large-scale political trends, narrowing his focus to the level of the individual with this affective image of suffering. The target of the caption is ambiguous: the figure of "perfection" could be either the smug authoritarian or the starving citizen. In both cases, the satire points out the practical consequences of the political orthodoxy of the Nazi party. Many historians call early political cartoonists social reformers because their work privileges the imagined consensus of an audience with shared political values – Benedict Anderson, for example, describes in *Imagined Communities* the products of mass-printing culture as a means of spreading ideology. However, many early Canadian graphic narratives are more subtle than didactic. They are concerned with pressing daily political issues, but they are often ill-suited as tools of

political uniformity. As is the case with Mayerovitch's satire of Nazi orthodoxy, the object of the critique is blind political idealism itself.

3. Drawing out conclusions

Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives are "Drawing on the Margins of History." This is a simple phrase with widespread applications. I chose the title of my study for two reasons: first, I wanted to flag the importance of the concept of "drawing" for contemporary Canadian graphic narratives. The composition of the page as a graphic, visual construct is significant. The medium of comics is contingent on "drawing" in almost every different meaning of the term; this is perhaps most apparent in comics personae: they create images that extend, elongate, mould, pull out of place, and distort. They aim to depict, delineate, and trace out qualities of individual experience (*OED*). As I mentioned in my introduction, graphic narratives are often erratic and unstable. They present the reader with a network of complicated visual and verbal discourses. There is the interconnected system of panels and gutters, with their unstable temporal frameworks. As I described it, the medium of comics distorts cohesive historical narration, relying on compositional methods of fragmentation and disorder. In such a context, "to draw" something is to unleash a whole collection of unstable methods of composition. At the same time, as I have repeatedly demonstrated, these methods offer many benefits for articulating matters of individual experience. They are methods of productive disorder.

I would like to elaborate on the second reason why I chose the title "Drawing on the Margins of History" as the title of my study, and how my understanding of that title has shifted over time. I recall my mindset at the initiation of this study. I began with a simple premise, that contemporary Canadian graphic narratives often share similar concerns. I noticed that they are often obsessed with historical processes (the discourses of history, history-writing, material archiving, etc.)

and that they often focus on fringe topics from Canadian histories: outsiders and outcasts. Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives “draw” – they elicit information – from these topics. I worked from the assumption that graphic narratives are important to contemporary Canadian life writing and literary studies because they offer opportunities to incorporate peripheral and subcultural figures into Canadian national discourses. I saw, and continue to see, contemporary Canadian graphic narratives as texts that represent those who, because of their occasional lack of cultural capital, do not often enter into Canadian histories – they “draw” them out into a public forum. Thus, I chose the title “Drawing on the Margins of History” because it reflected my understanding of contemporary Canadian graphic narrative as a collection of texts that habitually describe historical subjects “on the margins.” In some respects, however, this title no longer reflects my complete understanding of the field because the word “marginal” carries with it unsuitable implications. For example, I wrote in my introduction that contemporary Canadian graphic narratives lead to an eclectic understanding of Canadian historical subject matter. I pause now to re-define my analysis here. My reasoning hints at a hierarchy of value that situates prominent figures of wealth and public prestige over and above other “outsider” figures. Contemporary Canadian graphic narratives articulate a “marginal” understanding of historical subjects, only in relation to Canadian cultural discourses that valorize patterns of social uniformity. Ironically, the valorization of a cohesive national community shifts the vast majority of people who live in Canada (everyone except for exceptional representative figures who hold offices of public prestige) to the “margins.” Thus, it seems that “the margin” is only marginal in this backward critical discourse. Contemporary Canadian graphics “draw on the margins” only in the sense of the reverse: they draw on the margins by describing the “ordinary” and the “everyday.” They acknowledge the concerns and experiences of the local, socially-embedded, subject – which, by some discursive inversion, has been pushed to the periphery.

Notes

- ¹ I wonder, is it inappropriate to treat Louis Riel, one of the most widely known figures from Canadian history, as a microhistorical figure? As Heather Murray puts it, “how *macro* in scale can the microhistorical method be?” (“Literary History as Microhistory” 420).
- ² At the beginning of the 1970s, at the beginning of the time period which frames my study, contemporary Canadian graphic narratives are caught somewhere between the fields of restricted and large-scale cultural production. They lack the benefits of either category: they do benefit from neither the prestige of the literary avant-garde nor the widespread appeal of other works of popular culture.
- ³ See Seth’s introduction to *The Collected Doug Wright*. Canadian comics authors working at the end of the twentieth century had few resources available to them for understanding the formal properties of comics. Many Canadian comics authors built up their education by becoming informal cultural historians. They often had to search through the abandoned artefacts of disposable popular culture. Therefore, many Canadian comics authors benefited from a similar training, becoming familiar, even obsessive, with methods of reorganizing, sorting, and collecting. Through their experiences of self-directed scholarship in the “archive” of comics – neglected flea markets and used books shops – many comics authors developed skills for sorting the anomalous and unpredictable fragments of the past. Some contemporary comics authors apply the lessons they learned working with the history of comics and the fragments of material popular culture.
- ⁴ It bears mentioning that there are many different Canadian authors who have found success as authors and illustrators while publishing speculative fiction and adventure comic books, including John Byrne, Stuart Immonen, Cameron Stuart, and Ty Templeton.
- ⁵ There are some parallels to be drawn between contemporary Canadian graphic narratives and

“artist books.” Artist books, like many different works of Canadian graphic narrative, are difficult to situate in firm generic categories. Renee Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert point out how artist books sometimes collect together a wide variety of material into a single volume, including autobiographical prose, found objects, and drawings. They describe one example of an artist who included in her artist book various objects -- her purse, her driver’s licence, certificates for memberships to clubs – which “identify the individual without revealing anything personal” (225). Hubert and Hubert suggest that such texts “daringly juxtapose . . . the visual with the verbal” (438). They argue that these challenging compositional structures are necessary because they properly reflect the transitory qualities of life: “An imaginative autobiography dwelling on lived experience must be as open-ended as the book’s structure” (437-38).

⁶ Another important figure is Margaret Atwood, who has, since the 1970s, published her own comics strips in a variety of different publications. To the best of knowledge, these graphic narratives have never been anthologized as a complete collection.

⁷ There is a large body of criticism concerning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Canada, scholars who evaluate the relationship between periodicals publishing and Canadian modernist literature, including key early figures such as Louis Dudek, Wynne Francis, Michael Gnarowski, and Ken Norris, and, more recently, Dean Irvine, Brian Trehearne, and Glenn Willmott.

⁸ My study draws further influence from notable re-evaluations of Canadian literary history that shed light on the importance of previously undervalued texts. See Carole Gerson, Barbara Godard, and Heather Murray.

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