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Displacing the Memorial

Holocaust Comics in Conversation with Memory

This paper explores how the reflexivity offered by graphic narratives makes them ideally suited to questioning how enshrined historical narratives can (and should) be troubled. In fact, many graphic narratives that engage with historical atrocities *insist* that the reader question how the past is framed. Surveying several strategies by which graphic narratives of historical atrocities leverage reader investment, I consider how three planes – identification with characters, inference, and point of view – are used to prompt reflection on the way that history is packaged for consumption and consider how these planes develop an ethical relationship with the reader.

Among the difficulties in studying representations of the Holocaust is the proliferation of memorials that purport to give the visitor a notion of specialized access to the dark recesses of this past. In an age of increasing digitization and tourism, these memorials are less often the sites for reflection that they were designed to be, and are becoming destinations. The memory function served by memorials is compromised by the carnivalesque atmosphere that sometimes surrounds them, which begs we question where memorialization of the Holocaust can occur in some solemnity if not at these sites? In part, the answer lies in literature, one of the few remaining solitary pursuits that cannot be extroverted. Different literary forms – poetry, fiction, memoir – offer alternative pathways into the traumatic core of the 20th century, but the literary form of comics seems uniquely suited to the tensions in representation posed by the Holocaust.

The reflexivity offered by graphic narratives makes them ideally suited to questioning how enshrined historical narratives can (and should) be troubled. In fact, many graphic narratives that engage with historical atrocities *insist* that the reader questions how the past is framed. This paper seeks to survey several strategies by which graphic narratives that grapple with the Holocaust leverage reader investment along at least three planes to prompt reflection on the way that history is packaged for consumption. Furthermore, this consideration asks that the readers reflect on their ethical responsibility to the representations of humans and humanitarian issues in the text. Identification with individual characters as Scott McCloud discusses in *Understanding Comics*, how "the discontinuity of the page urges readers to do the work of inference" (McCloud 1994, xiv) in Charles Hatfield's terms, and how readers are invited to adopt a variety of points of view are all ways in which the reader is asked to tender not only their attention but also their allegiance.

Allegiance, in comics, always comes at a price, however, and I am particularly interested in the ways these planes of identification and reflection complicate

reader reactions to genocide. Focusing on graphic narrative representations of the Holocaust, I will draw from Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz* and Miriam Katin's *Letting It Go* to survey the ways in which facticity is staged in relation to the unrepresentability and unspeakability sometimes ascribed to the Holocaust by both survivors and Holocaust scholars. Because graphic narratives simultaneously show and tell, illustrate and articulate, the tension between the graphic narrative form and the themes of Holocaust scholarship is particularly fraught, and the three planes of identification – closure between panels, identification with characters, and adoption of a variety of points of view – are often set up to undermine the 'facts' elaborated on each. My article draws from contemporary attempts to engage with the Holocaust as history, and the ways in which some of these engagements seek to manufacture an emotional reaction that is ultimately not forthcoming. Readers police themselves on their performance of the "appropriate" emotional and ethical reactions to texts that deal with the Holocaust, and Holocaust comics frequently undermine readers' desires to learn how to correctly perform this engagement.

For example, in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the author depicts a scene in which his father, Vladek, marches through the infamous *Arbeit macht frei* gate at Auschwitz. Artie – the authorial avatar depicted in the graphic novel – remarks to Vladek that "I just read about the orchestra that played as you marched out of the gate…" (Spiegelman 1986, 59). Vladek says, "No, I remember marching, not any orchestras… […] How could there be any orchestras?" Artie interjects that "it's very well documented", but Vladek insists that "No. At the gate, I heard only guards shouting" (ibid.). In order to depict this, Spiegelman shows the prisoners marching near the orchestra in the first panel, and the marchers completely obscure the musicians in the third panel. Both panels are the same length, arrayed parallel so as to equalize the historical facticity of the Auschwitz gate orchestra and Vladek's memory. In these panels, as elsewhere in *Maus*, Spiegelman seeks to juxtapose the vagaries of memory with the datum of records so as to trouble readers' engagement with the Holocaust as 'an' historical event. By questioning the archive, his father's story, and his own motives, Spiegelman's project is to emphasize the extent to which these tensions are a significant part of the 'lessons' that can be taken from Holocaust literature. To set these narratives alongside one another is not to equalize them, but to render them in conversation with some larger truth that exists outside of the frame, that eludes traditional representational strategies.

Spiegelman's self-reflexive questioning begs the same of readers. Early in *Maus II*, Spiegelman depicts himself in conversation with an avatar of his wife Françoise, talking about his motivations and questioning the assumptions behind his project. He recounts how "I never felt guilty about Richieu [Art's brother, who was killed during the Holocaust – KP], but I did have nightmares about SS men coming into my class and dragging all us Jewish kids away" (Spiegelman 1991, 16). Rather than depicting what this nightmarish fantasy looked like in his young mind, Spiegelman instead depicts Artie, looking confused and

defeated, next to Françoise in their car. The prosaic nature of the scene emphasizes the role of the imagination in contemporary engagements with the Holocaust, and the extent to which such engagements are inevitably wanting. "I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams", he continues, explaining that "[t]here will be so much I'll never be able to understand or visualize" (ibid.). These remarks, occurring as they do in a milieu recognizable for any average reader, frame the visualization of Auschwitz to come later in the volume as something necessarily provisional, wherein the representation should be understood as proximate. Lawrence Langer discusses how this shift "from what we know of the event (the province of historians), to how to remember it, […] shifts the responsibility to our own imaginations and what we are prepared to admit there" (Langer 1991, 13). Memory, in this rubric, becomes an imaginative process whereby we reconstruct a lost past based on the knowable detritus of that past, and significantly, introducing the prospect of questioning what can be visualized, and what the limitations are, of our imaginations. While this shift from what took place to how we remember / imagine what took place is an important distinction, Gary Weissman asserts that "[b]y linking 'memory' to how we imaginatively 'remember' the Holocaust, Langer obscures vast differences between survivors' own memories of past experiences and our own imaginings or fantasies of what these experiences may have been like" (Weissman 2004, 102). This points towards the series of ethical dilemmas touched on by Spiegelman that haunt every representation of the Holocaust. The gulf between an experience and its representation, or an experience and our imagined construction of it, inflect representations with a series of questions about what to represent, how to represent, and the perennial problem in Holocaust studies of "unrepresentability". Holocaust scholars have approached this question in a variety of valuable ways, though Henry Greenspan's concepts of the "tellable" and the "hearable" are useful to consider how audience expectations and personal emotional orientation shape testimony. Furthermore, his interest in different qualities of silence, as they illuminate what is said, what is shown, and what remains concealed about the Holocaust is apt in regards to the comic form.

The tension between the Holocaust and the comic form, the latter of which was historically associated with ostensibly light and childish themes, has been acknowledged in contemporary literary and cultural studies. More recently, it has been accepted as a form of literature suitable for engaging with serious subjects. While the image of graphic narratives as a "lesser" form persists in some quarters, it is undeniable that comics have taken their place as a literary form equal in stature to fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, though scholars are still negotiating precisely what this role as a literary and artistic form means for approaching individual comics and their place(s) in culture. Should we replicate the periodicity that continues to dominate literary studies, or should we allow more thematic approaches? To what extent does language and national origin matter in relation to the images, which are integral to the text? I pose these questions merely to point out debates in comics studies that affect how we approach the prospect of

analyzing the form, to say nothing of the content. Spiegelman's *Maus*, used above to illustrate aspects of point of view, memory, and representation, marked the turning point from whence comics came to be understood as serious. Of course, Spiegelman is right to ask the questions he poses in *Maus II*, in part because it positions his work in a longer history of questioning that is part of the representation of violence. Why represent atrocity at all? To what extent is Elie Wiesel's call for silence in the face of such massive suffering and horror the only appropriate response? To what extent is silence the tool of the oppressor? Why should we read a comic in particular about atrocity? What can be gained from graphic narratives that can't be found elsewhere? What is lost in comic form? What *are* our motives in approaching a text about the Holocaust? Why would we choose a work of historical fiction over a memoir in our search for meaning regarding the Shoah?

One of the risks we run in privileging the Holocaust memoir above all else is that it lends readers a sense of unmediated access, while simultaneously obscuring the constructedness of any narrative. Susan Derwin recounts in *Rage is the Subtext* how Primo Levi thought that "the anger that is right (or 'just') is on behalf of that past self that is at odds with the survivor's present community" (Derwin 2012, 40), and that he altered his presentation of his experiences "so that the 'shouting' force of buried rage does not trigger defensiveness in its receivers" (ibid., 11). Similarly, Weissman illustrates the ways that Holocaust representations are subject to being shaped by intended audience sensitivities, explaining that

> *Sweetening* or sugar-coating the Holocaust involves depicting it as a story with a happy ending, thereby denying its true horror. In order to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, many depictions of the Holocaust avoid telling too horrifying and too depressing a story by emphasizing such themes as survival, martyrdom, heroism, rescue, redemption, spiritual uplift, and the triumph of humanity over inhumanity. (Weissman 2004, 12)

The survivor memoir may unintentionally engage in these themes simply because of its source. A survivor writes a narrative of survival, and therefore, the fact of writing a memoir in itself secures a "happy" ending. Furthermore, Weissman parses the tension between history and fiction in his chapter on Wiesel, noting that many schools categorize *Night* as a "novel", highlighting its fictive qualities, while Wiesel himself has insisted that "'[a] novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or it is not about Auschwitz'", (quoted. in ibid., 64). Weisel said this in spite employing literary devices that did more than factually recount his experience, and the fact that his own anecdotes suggest the ability of fiction to tell a truth that a point-by-point recounting would fail to encompass.

Greenspan writes in *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors* that, because experience does not adhere to narrative structure, and particularly because atrocities are extreme experiences that exist outside of our normal expectations, some aspects of the Holocaust may not be articulable in traditional means (Greenspan 2010, 6). Similarly, because of the remainder outside of the range of an average human's experience, some realities of the Holocaust may not be "hearable" by an

audience. The pressure on a survivor or author creating a narrative of the Holocaust is to include experiences that can be described in language that is legible for the listener, which necessarily means that some aspects of survival cannot be framed in linguistic terms that either the teller can explain or the hearer can discern. In a more recent article, Greenspan argues that the *silences* of survivors are also important in regard to understanding their experiences in the Holocaust. He divides these silences into four categories: the unsaid, the incommunicable, the unbearable, and the irretrievable (Greenspan 2014, 230). The unsaid is simply what the survivor *chooses* not to say, partly based on "Survivors' perception of their listeners' knowledge, attentiveness, and emotional capacities" (ibid., 231). Greenspan also notes the "'incommunicable', which refers to the phenomena that survivors realize are inherently difficult to convey", (ibid., 235) including sensory details and some extreme emotional states. His category of "the unbearable" reflects those memories that are too overwhelming to return to, while "the irretrievable" refers to "the dead, the communities of talk (including talk during the Holocaust) now vanished" (ibid., 241).

These categories of silence correlate with the structures employed by comics artists to represent the "unrepresentable", including such structural elements as the gutter, as well as the employment of visual icons (in McCloud's terms) or recognizable symbols (in literary terminology) to stand in for memories that cannot be represented, visually or textually in the normal means, either because the visual would be unbearable or irretrievable, because it would injure the teller of the story, or because it was a circumstance that was witnessed only by the dead. Indeed, Holocaust scholars have questioned over the past few decades how Holocaust fiction might repopulate the "story" of the Holocaust with some of the irrecoverable voices that were lost. Obviously, this brings in a range of issues associated with the co-optation of the voices of victims, the risky ethical positioning of an author attempting such a fabrication, the problem of Holocaust deniers using fictionalized versions of narratives to promote their atrocious ideology, and a host of other concerns. Those concerns need to be discussed with regard to any fictionalization of the Holocaust, particularly those created by non-survivors. Furthermore, the means by which survivors craft their narratives and employ the tools of creative non-fiction to package their stories for consumption are issues for continued analysis. I would like to focus on how those narrative tensions in both graphic memoir and historio-graphic metafictional graphic narratives[1] are used in comics about the Holocaust to work around the issues of unrepresentability raised by Greenspan, Dominick LaCapra, Gary Weissman, Michael Rothberg, Terence Des Pres, and others.

Perhaps it is not only in the tension between truth and fiction that the possibility for the representation of the "unthinkable" lies; perhaps it is also in the tensions of the graphic narrative form. Charles Hatfield envisions graphic narratives as a form that relies primarily on tensions: between code and code as with word and image (Hatfield 2005, 36) and between the single image and the image-in-series (ibid., 41), as each image introduces another point of pressure within any series, and changes the meaning of the series as a whole. Graphic narratives

as a form both conceal and highlight their constructedness, and solicit the reader's closure while simultaneously appearing as an undisturbed whole. Furthermore, as I argued in my book *Ethics in the Gutter*,

> closure as I see it automatically has an ethical dimension; who you are and who you are prompted to identify with, how you are prompted to make inferences about what is and isn't depicted, how you make sense of your own imagination in relation to what is depicted (Polak 2016, 15)

are areas in which graphic narratives can provide a different experience for readers. The ethical dimension is in part arbitrated by the relationships between hearers / readers and tellers / authors, which James Phelan described in *Living to Tell About It* as different "kinds of ethical structure in narrative" (Phelan 2005, 22). He outlined "[n]arrational ethics [as] those associated with the telling; they occur along the line of narrative transmission from author to narrator to narrate to reader" (ibid.), a series of relationships that I argue in my book are emphasized in comics in part through their apparent constructedness. Phelan goes on to designate "Representational ethics [as] those associated with 'fictionalizing person' or creating character" (ibid.), which, in comics dealing with real-world events either as memoir or as historio-metagraphic, involves making decisions about how to depict realities with an eye to both historical truth *and* emotional truths. Finally, he terms "[h]ermeneutic ethics [as] those associated with reading and interpreting, the obligations readers and critics have to a text" (ibid.), a situation that highlights the extent to which the engagement of reading, particularly texts that deal with atrocities, places moral demands on the reader.

Affecting Gutters: Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz* and the Imaginative Irretrievable

Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz* offers a short, tight fictional story of a couple who survived Auschwitz only to be caught up in the genocide in former Yugoslavia in 1993. The bleak grey palette, precise architectural renderings, and relatively realistic characters all serve to foreclose the type of readerly identification and investment McCloud insists rests on the "cartoony", iconic qualities of comics. Images of buildings and landscapes are barely distinguishable from photographs, and human characters are rendered to be identifiable, although this changes as the narrative unfolds. What Croci seeks to provide is recognizable visual tropes whereby the reader can use the symbols of the Holocaust synechdochally to stand in for the larger horror. In early pages, the couple, Cessia and Kazik, are hiding in an abandoned building. Because they know that their lives are nearly over, the final minutes as they wait to be found become a reckoning of their experiences in Auschwitz, which they have not talked of in the previous forty-odd years. The first pages of their "testimony" are illustrated with a train, a double-row of barbed wire fence, and a young Polish boy drawing his finger across his neck as a threat to the Jews within the passing train (Croci 2003, 17). Through images commonly associated with the Holocaust, Croci is setting the

narrative in a recognizable, and somewhat clichéd, visual universe, wherein the ugliness of the symbols stands as a bulwark against the ugliness that lies beyond them. This emphasis on familiar symbols invites an unchallenging identification with the characters and their suffering, as rather than adopting a character point of view or being immersed in a landscape that is unfamiliar (as it would have been to those stepping out of a train), reliance on the kinds of environs well-worn in Holocaust filmography in fact allows the reader a relative space of moral safety, as it does not challenge any of the reader's preconceptions, and instead allows them simply to vicariously access "the Holocaust experience" without challenge.

The familiar visuals are followed by a scene of disembarkation, with SS officers shouting, dogs barking, and Jews huddled, attempting to determine what is happening. A scene made familiar by Holocaust films, Croci's version is visually confusing, with a wide array of panel lengths and heights, and no stable arrangement, heightening the confusion offered by the page. The only particularly remarkable element of the scene is that all of the characters' eyes are depicted as bulging, often with an individual's two eyes pointed in different directions, making the entire group appear mad. In addition, nearly all mouths – of both prisoners and Nazis – are open in something between a gape and a shout, their maws becoming small replications of an abyss. While this scene and the one before it are common in representations of the Holocaust, these gaping mouths emphasize the horror through a displacement. The pages' gutters are black, and so the mouths themselves become replications of the gutters on the page. As I have noted elsewhere, the reader's imaginative projection that metaphorically takes place *in* the gutters between panels has an ethical dimension, as

> the gutter figuratively prompts readers to engage with what is depicted, creating connections between images and ideas as a part of the reading process. […] this imaginative engagement has repercussions for our emotional engagement (Polak 2016, 11)

The gutters are the point at which the reader becomes a collaborator, and Croci's replication of this empty space within the faces of those in the panels is a different means by which he prompts the reader to "see" the Holocaust without a direct representation of "*the* Holocaust", i.e. mass murder in particular.

The bulk of the graphic novel is taken up with a story of survival, in which Kazik is befriended by a savvy inmate who helps him survive through a mixture of murder, thievery, and avoidance. This section of the graphic novel is largely rendered in pale greys, though when Kazik eventually makes his way onto the *Sonderkommando* so that he can see his daughter before she dies, the palette becomes markedly darker.

A six page sequence depicting the procedure surrounding the gas chambers is perhaps Croci's most important ethical contribution in this graphic novel, as the earlier scenes' reliance on worn Holocaust symbols lulls readers into a false sense of moral security; that is, readers, because they are consistently confronted with visuals similar to every other Holocaust narrative they have encountered, assume that they have already learned the lessons this narrative seeks to impart. A non-character-based narrator frames the sequence in the first text box with

"You have to imagine the gas as it starts to take effect, spreading bottom to top", (Croci 2003, 38) while a billow of gas is simultaneously depicted in the panel overlain by the text box. This is a curious tension between the imperative – "You have to *imagine*" (emphasis mine) – and a direct depiction of what the narrator is asking the reader to imagine. Instead of a panel that would support this command to "imagine", Croci chooses to show us a rough approximation of precisely what we are meant to imagine. Is this an indication of a lack of trust in the readers? In our imaginations? Or are we meant to look more closely at the imperative because of this. Perhaps the emphasis is not on *you*, but *have to*, effectively making the command less about the bearer of the imagination but on the importance of attempting the imagining. The third person narrator recounting the scene inside the gas chamber over the course of the page muses,

> You have to imagine the gas as it starts to take effect, spreading bottom to top. […] and in the terrible struggle that ensues… […] You have to imagine the lights going out in the gas chamber… […] it's dark, you can't see anymore, and the strongest strive to climb higher and higher…[…] they must feel that the higher they climb, the more air there will be, and the better they will breathe... (ibid.).

However, the first panel is the only one on the page that can be interpreted as depicting what the narrator is recounting. The second and third panels are aspect-to-aspect of the Auschwitz train gate, the fourth a close up of a woman's sad, suspicious face, and the final panel a group of people in somewhat ragged clothes walking past a shouting man. Illustrating the soon-to-be victims alongside of the contention that we must imagine the scene frames the imagining, on one hand, as the responsibility of the reader, but on the other, as a sure future we know those depicted in the panel will face, the point of view is closer to the guard shouting to move the prisoners along rather than that of the prisoners themselves.

The next page repeats this operation, continuing the disembodied narration accompanying the prisoners approaching the crematorium. The narrator recounts in three text boxes that "[a] battle breaks out and everyone rushes the door… […] It's psychological, the door is there… […] They fling themselves at it as if to beat it down" (ibid., 39). Once again, rather than depicting the scene the narrator has exhorted us to imagine, we instead see three panels of a fearful crowd walking unsteadily in a line. The first two panels picture the crowd, but the third panel places the reader within the crowd, walking in the line towards the doors. This introduction of a closer proximal point of view dispels the distance created by both the verbal mitigation – "*you* have to imagine" – and the distance between the reader and what is depicted in the panels, where we are "merely" spectators. The fourth panel fully encloses the reader in the point of view of one of those walking towards the chamber, as it simply depicts two Nazis, one yelling and one standing guard. However, this proximity is immediately withdrawn, showing the exterior door and then the full exterior of the gas chambers without any human characters by which we could connect with the scene. To offer and then withdraw this identificative pathway is to draw attention to its insufficiency in the face of "you have to imagine". The final panel of the Auschwitz crematorium, peacefully smoking above an idyllic reflection in a

lake, lends the scene an aura of calmness that the reader, knowing what she knows, rejects.

By highlighting the disjuncture between the idyllic appearance of the crematorium and its function, Croci seeks to gesture towards what is irretrievable in Holocaust narratives. Part of the horror, Croci suggests, indeed was the failure of imagination on the part of those who could have resisted, which underscores why he chose to open the narrative with more familiar images of the Holocaust, rather than attempting to immediately immerse the reader in a more complex ethical conversation. Indeed, Des Pres remarks in his landmark text *The Survivor* that "in extremity symbolism *as symbolism* loses its autonomy" (Des Pres 1976, 69, emphasis in original). Des Pres argues that civilization itself is partly based on symbolization (ibid., 156), meaning that the conversion of images from the Holocaust into the familiar symbols *of* the Holocaust in general has already vaulted the narrative outside of the scope of its actual experience. That is, to adapt the trappings of the Holocaust to the modes of civilized communication is to skirt the ethical requirements such a narrative demands.

Two pages later, Croci depicts a two-page spread in a repetition of the first panel depicting the gas. Eight panels are filled only with gaseous clouds, while the narration overlays the gutters. The disembodied narrator recounts, "Where the Zyklon had been poured, there was nothing. Where the crystals had been, there was nobody […]" (Croci 2003, 42). Juxtaposed as it is with a representation of the gas, which is itself a sort of *nothing*, this line sets up an expectation once again of illustration, but is once again undermined by the continuation of the narration.

> …The people were injured, filthy, bloody, bleeding from their ears and noses. They had struggled and fought… […] Some lay crumpled on the ground, crushed beyond all recognition by the weight of others... […] Children with their heads split open, vomit everywhere… […] Menstrual blood, too, perhaps… […] No, not perhaps! For certain! (ibid., 42f.)

Standing in metonymically for the account tallied by the narrator is the gas. While described in detail, all the reader can see is the haze, which would, after all, approximate what could be seen inside of the gas chambers if one was a victim. So, in this instance, is Croci giving the reader access to a victim's perspective, or is this an exercise in a further gutter, where what is depicted in the panel itself becomes emblematic of what we must imagine?

Certainly the latter. It is no accident that Croci chose to position the narratorial text boxes precisely over the gutter, metaphorically "filling" the area that is normally the imaginative province of the reader. However, he does not suffer us to maintain an imagined perspective "within". From deep within the gas chamber, the reader sees Kazik in a gas mask at the door, the light revealing body after body sprawled in poses of terror, fear, or submission, each with blank eyes ad gaping mouth standing in for a process the reader was exhorted to imagine, but did not see. This transition represents one of the most important tensions at stake in comics, one which Hatfield gestures towards but fails to fully elaborate: comics' capacity to simultaneously depict and gesture towards the excess that

remains beyond the representation. This excess – the "irretrievable" in Greenspan's parlance – is not only the horror of the gas chamber that none can encounter and survive. It is also what was annihilated: an entire world that existed before the Holocaust, with all of its variations in people, all of its attitudes and cultural mores, all of its status as a diverse *community*, that cannot be retrieved, or even truly imagined. As Greenspan notes, "Most of us envision the dead through general images of victims rather than as particular people" (Greenspan 2014, 241). This inability to envision the victims as people, as fully human as we are, is one of the major affective gaps that persists in regards to representations of atrocity, and while survivors can describe their own experiences, their lives before and during, the imaginative leap it takes to develop a sense of the communities lost is perhaps beyond the reaches of memoir. While Croci does not seek to reanimate a lost community in its entirety, he does seek to revivify an image of the dead as particular.

Croci's image of the arrayed dead inside of the gas chamber between our point of view and Kazik, standing backlit in the doorway with a gas mask, is Croci's attempt to simultaneously capture the generality of the horror and the particularity of the victims. All of the faces share a visage of bug-eyed horror, many with mouths agape, but each is rendered as a specific individual, rather than a sketchy icon of a face, as can be seen in *Maus* and elsewhere. The specificity of the faces Croci renders throughout the graphic novel detracts from the impression made overall by the "main" narrative, but this dilution actually serves a separate, important purpose, wherein the primary narrative fails to offer closure, catharsis, or a pointed resolution, and so the importance of the untold narratives is highlighted through that very narrative failure.

The story of the two main characters pivots on Kazik's discovery of their daughter still barely alive in that gas chamber. However, Croci undermines this narrative with detailed architectural scenes and landscapes that become more well-developed than any of his human characters. The bleakness of a destroyed series of trenches as one of the women with Cessia remarks, "Couldn't we just hate each other in peace?" (Croci 2003, 63) is at least as evocative as most of the named characters experiences. In fact, reading Croci's *Auschwitz* lends the reader a strange sensation of flattening: flattened affect, to be sure, given the palette, but also a flattening between various horrific experiences within "the" Holocaust. That Ann dies "of typhus just two days before the camp was liberated" (ibid., 67) is ostensibly the major plot hinge on which the narrative turns, but Kazik and Cessia, Ann, and the other named characters are curiously without deep characterization that would mobilize any specific affective affiliation or empathetic response. One wonders whether or not this flattening effect, this flattening of affect, is meant to extend beyond the pages into how the reader conceptualizes their own suffering, or at least, their own access to the suffering of others. Des Pres remarks that "[e]xtremity makes bad art because events are too obviously 'symbolic.' The structure of experience is so clear and complete that it appears to be deliberately contrived" (Des Pres 1976, 175). This emphasis on

the contrived symbolism of the Holocaust suggests that the problem is not with what Croci renders, but rather with our narrative expectations.

Looking Askance: Unbearable Displacement in Miriam Katin's *Letting It Go*

Letting It Go is visually framed as a Holocaust memoir; the cover includes the traditional red-white-black color scheme that has become the *de facto* uniform of Shoah literature in the past few decades.[2] Miriam Katin depicts her avatar, turned mostly away from the viewer, letting go of a balloon with a swastika emblazoned on it. The cover visually primes the reader for an engagement with the Holocaust, while the title suggests that the graphic narrative within will trace a pathway Katin followed to "come to terms with" or "forgive" the Nazis who persecuted her. Visually and textually emphasizing the narrational ethics, whereby Katin's avatar is depicted as seeking a détente with her past, *Letting It Go* in fact mobilizes a more complex hermeneutic effort whereby the reader is asked to ethically engage with an unbearably present past.

The graphic narrative departs significantly from the expectations that have come to stand in for the "genre" of Holocaust memoir. While survivors like Wiesel and Levi, as well as victims like Anne Frank, have been framed as having a plot arc terminating in an expression of hope or some other approximation of a happy ending, Katin refuses to provide the reader with the expected pathway for development. In fact, *Letting It Go* barely addresses her experiences during the Holocaust at all. The vast majority of the text is preoccupied with daily concerns: a roach infestation in a New York apartment, waiting for a call from her son, visiting her aged mother.

In *Letting It Go*, Katin seeks a release for her resentment and rage surrounding the Holocaust so that she is able to deal with her son's decision to move to Berlin, a city she hates. Unlike many Holocaust memoirs, Katin chooses to exclude her experiences during World War II almost entirely, focusing instead on the presence of her *resentment* over her experiences during this period, and her present-day life, which (given that most readers will be at least passingly familiar with "what happened" during the Holocaust) is a curious focus. As if to cue readers to this memoir's alternative strategy of memorialization, *Letting It Go* begins with a meditation on the eventual proliferation of the Knuss coffee maker in the United States. However, once the Knuss brand has reached full saturation, Katin supposes, "someone in Berlin" will press a button and explode all of the appliances, wreaking havoc (Katin 2013, 1f.). This fantasy / nightmare is meant to both illustrate the ways in which Katin perhaps overestimates the cunning of German engineering and, more importantly, how the prosaic can become an existential threat given the right conditions.

The dramatic flourish of such a plot is interrupted by the commonplace: Katin procrastinating while she is supposed to be working on a comic (this

comic?). Wandering around the apartment, cleaning her glasses, sharpening a pencil, all take narrative space that could be directed towards some means of moving forward the plot, but instead, the dawdling prepares the reader for an intensely meditative, intensely quiet graphic novel. A scene of the Brooklyn Bridge in four panels asks, "So, where does a story begin? And if you are inside that story right now, in that situation and it hurts and say you can draw, then you must try and draw yourself out of it" (ibid., 9). The panels merely depict a tiny tugboat hauling a ship into and out of the frame. The argument Katin poses – that one must draw (or write) themselves out of a painful point in their person narrative – is common enough, as is her question about where a narrative starts. But, given Katin's biography, the question of where a story begins is considerably more fraught than straightforward questions about the background to include. A Hungarian-born Jew who, with her mother, had to fake her own death to flee occupying Nazi forces in WWII, part of the question is when Katin's own story begins. Born in 1942, in the middle of the war, Katin was young enough to not remember the early fraught years, though she works to repopulate her past in *We Are on Our Own*. However, given the limitations of memory, the question of whether our own story *can* begin before our recollection of it haunts the edges of both of her graphic novels.

Katin's choice to exclude frames around individual panels, essentially making the panel and the gutter bleed into one another, is one of the major formal aspects that marks her engagement with the problems and limitations of memory, even in regards to the Holocaust. While helping her son fill out paperwork to attain Hungarian citizenship, a decision she dislikes but grudgingly accepts, her avatar sits with a martini looking over the questions on the paperwork. "So, let's see what they want to know," she states, "Questions, questions, questions. About the grandparents, for example. As to who they were. Also, what was their last address. Well. They went 'arbeit' and then they 'frei'-ed. Or roasted." (ibid., 31) Below this play on words, Katin has illustrated a traditional, familiar view of the famous *Arbeit macht frei* gate at Auschwitz, alongside of smoking chimneys. Using these familiar symbols to stand in for the death of her grandparents serves to place her experience at a distance from the reader, but also to illustrate the distance she feels from her own past. After all, her "Holocaust experience" did not include Auschwitz, and because she is estranged from her own grandparents' history, depicting the generality of the gate rather than the specificity of her family is meant to draw attention to this distance.

Another sequence depicts her walking past furniture placed at a curb, signifying the death of a resident of a nursing home. An old woman stops her to ask her about her book and request that Katin look at the woman's own story. Katin recounts, in a depiction of her reading, "So they give me their stories to read, which they hope will become a Hollywood movie. But they are all the same stories" (ibid., 34). The implication here could be that the stories are not shaped for films, but rather, as authentic experiences, lack the narrative structure that would be satisfying to an audience. As with all memoir, without the narrative shaping required by the genre, any collection of experiences is less than legible

to a reader. The use of "but" as the conjunction seems to suggest that there is a break between the idea of a film-ready story and a survivor's account. Furthermore, the "sameness" of the stories is not so much their interchangeability, but, as indicated by the sadness on Miriam's face, a tear rolling down towards the pages of the accounts, their resemblance to the experience, rather than narrative as such. She does not depict even part of any of the stories for the reader as an illustration. Instead, she expects us to "know" roughly what would be contained within the narrative.

Katin employs this deferral of exposure throughout the graphic novel in a variety of ways. Immediately following her remark about the stories, she avoids further thought by going shopping. The few times the reader is allowed something like "direct access" to her experiences, she representationally displaces them. For example, she explains, "Truth is, for the last sixty or so years, I managed to ignore the existence of Berlin successfully", (ibid., 44) an image which overlays a stylized version of Miriam's head, with Berlin depicted as the center of her brain. Berlin also appears on her pointer finger, above Potsdam, Nuremberg, and Dresden, important sites during WWII. Wannsee appears on her upraised middle finger on the other hand, the insulting gesture not to the place *as such*, but rather to its role in hosting the convention at which the Final Solution was hammered out. Following this, rather than experiences of her own during the Holocaust, she instead explains her own sentimentality, recounting Pope John Paul II's work to save a Jewish girl in 1945, and illustrating also her tearful reaction to a mouse dead in a trap. Both the story of the boy who would be Pope and the image of the mouse stand in for other experiences, as do those images on the rest of her list illustrating her "excessive" sensitivity. However, the next sequence stands in stark contrast. Overlain with text boxes that slowly say: "But I could never… […] never feel… […] feel any compassion… […] compassion for these… […] these people… […] the people of Berlin… […] Berliners suffering… […] suffering in May, 1945" (ibid., 47f.), Katin illustrates sketchy versions of photographs showing the devastation of Berlin in 1945. She draws the results of bombing campaigns that destroyed much of the city, rendering streets littered with detritus, starving Germans attempting to find food, and the bodies of both a suicide and a child who was burned to death in a firebombing. These images are not, however, Katin's own experiences. Instead of representing the circumstances which inspired her resentment of Berlin, she takes artifacts that could inspire sympathy for its inhabitants, including documentation of the human suffering during the final years of the war, and frames them in terms of her own inability to empathize. While this operates along the narratorial ethical plane Phelan identifies (2005), it also suggests that perhaps the reader – in their hermeneutic relationship with the comic – is perhaps wanting in empathic closure as well.

Her rejection of empathy is underscored by the next two pages, which illustrate in bright colors the many tourist attractions in contemporary Berlin, from the Ishtar Gate in the Pergamon Museum to currywurst. Furthermore, she labels the completed Reichstag, a building with historical significance both before and

during the Nazi period, as "[a]n enormous glass boob, well ventilated" (Katin 2013, 50). Much like the way in which the images of suffering in 1945 Berlin stand between the reader and Katin's experiences during the war, these illustrations of contemporary Berlin show to what extent the present state of the city is itself a displacement of the past. That the beer bike is a visual twin to a Soviet tank on the facing page is meant to suggest a visual parallel in which these deferments are *themselves* the point of the narrative. Katin is not simply pushing away or concealing her own experiences. Instead, she is attempting to explore – and expose – how this displacement operates in the contemporary city. Her use of displacement is an attempt to illustrate how little of the narrative that guides her reactions to Berlin is tellable, in Greenspan's terms (2010), but still has a representational dimension that requires ethical reflection on the part of the reader, even without a direct representation of her experience of the Holocaust. It is a representation of remembering, rather than a representation of her memory, which attempts in part to avoid the potentially clichéd symbolism of Holocaust narratives by emphasizing anamnesis.

When Miriam finally accedes to her son's request and comes to visit him in Berlin, she opens with the dizzying array of signs and the visual stimulation that is a part of disembarking in any metropolitan area,[3] though the last image she depicts in this collage is a rendering of the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which disrupts this sense of being "anywhere". The specificity of that visual field resituates her "adventure" as a confrontation with a traumatic past. However, instead of some explication of this, she includes traditional scenes of tourism, though these are followed by a dramatic, horrible scene in which Miriam inadvertently soils herself in the hotel bed.[4] A painful three-page spread illustrates in detail her loss of bowel control, making her way carefully to the bathroom, removing her soiled clothes, and working to clean up both herself and the room. This exposure of an embarrassing episode is central to the anxiety at stake in the graphic novel, that she has some fear of the interior becoming exteriorized.

She balances this scene of almost unbearable intimacy with a series of trite tourist clichés juxtaposed with the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Over two pages, Katin represents the field of stelae, beginning with the phrase "Wish you were here!" rendered in a delicate, looping cursive. Four of the following five panels are devoted to the "Holocaust memorial with…" (ibid., 97), depicting a pretzel vendor, an anthropomorphic hot dog dousing itself with ketchup and mustard, a novelty sign in the shape of a soft serve ice cream cone, and two women raising cups of coffee topped "*mit schlag*". Between the third and fifth panel is one rendering of the view of a stela as one looks up from the base of the monument, while all of the other panels are set slightly outside of the monument at the cafes and shops surrounding the square. As with Croci's emphasis on symbolism that stands in for the Holocaust, Katin uses these clichés to emphasize what *isn't* shown, the metaphorical "gutter" inside of each panel, each visual field within the context of the Berlin memorial.

The Berlin Memorial is a curious location. Set in the heart of the city, and appearing for all the world as a site reminiscent of a field of graves, it is nonetheless surrounded by the modern bustle that is a part of contemporary Berlin. In addition, because it is a central location and stands as one of the most important sites of Berlin, it is bounded by the traditional trappings of tourism. Katin's choice to meditate on this highlights the sort of displacement of memory that the Holocaust undergoes even at sites of its memorialization. The inauthentic nature of the tourist draws are in conflict with the supposed "reality" of the memorial, but in a strange way, the inauthenticity of the memorial itself is highlighted. The memorial – rendered all in gray – is set at odds with the colorful scenery, and indeed, on the second page of the sequence, Katin depicts her avatar and her avatar husband at the top of a long set of stairs that go beneath the memorial. He asks her, "What's down there?" and she responds, "The information center. That's the real stuff" (ibid., 98). The above-ground memorial, while reminiscent of a graveyard, has increasingly become something of a circus of tourism, most attendees seemingly more engaged in playing tag, or capturing the striking lines of the memorial in selfies than in commemorating the dead.[5] However, the museum below the memorial commands silence that the area above does not: mimicking the structure of the memorial in light, bright rectangles on the floor illuminate the words of victims, and while people gleefully jump from stela to stela above, visitors carefully avoid treading on the projections below. Rothberg identifies this, rather than "merely" as a symbol, as a screen memory, which he argues is "multidirectional not only because it stands at the center of a complex set of temporal relations, but also – and perhaps more importantly – because it both hides and reveals that which has been suppressed" (Rothberg 2009, 14). By simultaneously showing and concealing the memorial and its rendering, Katin also replicates the traditional structure of the comic, in which the stelae are positioned as panels, which are themselves "windows" into the narrative, while the walkways between become gutters, spaces of imagination, but also spaces in which the memories Katin grapples with are never fully revealed.

Katin excludes "the real stuff" entirely, instead depicting an aerial of the field of stelae, captioning it with: "You think you've seen everything, and then you still haven't" (Katin 2013, 98). The levels of displacement here are dizzying: instead of depicting the words and artifacts of victims of the Holocaust, which were largely relocated from satellite camps to the museum below the streets of Berlin, she instead pictures a representation of a non-representational memorial that, while resembling a graveyard, is *not* a burial site, and, in fact, is not a site of any particular atrocity against the Jews at all. The label gestures not necessarily to the material she encountered below the memorial, but to the extent to which the memorial is an approximation of "seeing" the history that lays behind it, and questioning whether or not the memorial can obscure some of that history.

Katin returns to Berlin later when her work is featured at the Jewish Museum, and rather than depicting sites of historical significance, she focuses on the Ber-

liner Bear, and ultimately ends with anthropomorphized bed bugs having a conversation about Katin. This deferral of recognizable Holocaust memorials or other symbols is a subversion by which Katin seeks to emphasize the displacement that even memorials provide. While the memorials in and around Berlin are meant as a means to reckon with the difficult past, Katin rejects the effort, reasserting her prerogative as a Jewish woman and survivor to make decisions about *how* to remember. She finds herself compelled, by virtue of her son's move, to confront her hatred of the city, but, unlike the plot arc suggested by the title of the graphic novel, she does not abandon her rage. The bed bugs – a nod towards the vermin used in propaganda against the Jews during the Nazi regime, but *not* a simple replication of that imagery – have the final word, and indeed, emphasize how "Her blood will be all over the city. That will call her back" (ibid., 145). Some of their compatriots were sent with her, so that a piece of the city in insect form accompanies her when she leaves. She ironically leaves a piece of herself, her blood, in the city and takes a bit of the city, bedbugs, with her by way of the past that she holds onto in anger.

Signs and Wonders

Among the representational strategies employed by contemporary comics creators in their work to signify the Holocaust, many employ the familiar symbols / motifs that have become synonymous with the genocide. As Greenspan notes, "Many survivors describe having to contend with the Holocaust as represented in the 'public domain'" (Greenspan 2014, 234), particularly in regard to their silences about experiences that may not fit with the dominant narrative of survival, whether that is a moment of happiness or of agency. Indeed, comics creators adopt these iconic images, but attempt to freshen them for greater impact. Furthermore, many comics creators are invested also in exposing the role these symbols play in obscuring aspects of the particularity of individual victims' and survivors' experiences, and the extent to which the dominance of audience expectations regarding Holocaust narratives – particularly in audience discomfort with rage – may efface essential stories.

The use of recognizable symbols of the Holocaust is not a tool to edge around depicting the complex truth, although it can sometimes seem like a method of avoidance. Rather, the use of these tropes can serve as a means of illustrating how the truth has been shaped by narrative expectations that cannot possibly be met. These parameters thus require that 'the story' fall inevitably short of the experience, which, of course, a story cannot help but do, as it is not substantively the same as an experience. In fact, Greenspan's contention that "it is only as we learn to follow survivors' accounts *as* they become disfigured and finally fail… that we begin to approach the Holocaust itself" (quoted in Weissman 2004, 202) stresses how a legible visual field has more to do with the present than the past. The breakdown in the symbolic order prescribed by the, for lack of a better

formulation, genre conventions of Holocaust representation is the point at which the past erupts into the present. That past cannot, these authors underscore, merely be a matter of memory or of mourning, but also must be understood in terms of anger. Indeed, one of the goals of contemporary authors representing Holocaust narratives seems to be how to effectively highlight the displacement and deferral of anger inherent in expectations of mourning, wherein audience discomfort comes less from the depiction of suffering than from the acknowledgement of rage. When Greenspan figures "the unbearable", he is gesturing towards a disavowed aspect of history in which victims and survivors are not only mute sufferers, but are bearers of the highly individualizing affective state of fury. In fact, many of the symbols by which we understand the Holocaust, Spiegelman, Katin, and Croci seem to suggest, are – through their very generality – annihilating forces as well, which must be countered with particularity. To not acknowledge the power of these symbols wouldn't do; the narrative might not be legible for the average reader without these iconic guideposts. However, to leave their power over the contemporary psyche uncomplicated would also be to betray the memory of those murdered in the gas chambers whose irretrievability is obliterated by general symbolism.

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[1] For a longer discussion of this genre of graphic narrative, see my book, *Ethics in the Gutter*.
[2] For examples of this color scheme, please see covers for Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman's *Testimony,* Sharon Kangisser Cohen's *Testimony and Time*, Steven Spielberg and The Shoah Foundation's *Testimony*, Nanette Blitz Konig's *Holocaust Memoirs of a Bergen-Belsen Survivor and Classmate of Anne Frank*, Bernard Offen's *My Hometown Concentration Camp*, and others.
[3] Katin 2013, 87f.
[4] Katin 2013, 93ff.
[5] Shahak Shapira's *YOLOcaust*, social media posts, and personal observation in May 2018.