Representation of Truth and Trauma in Personal Narrative: The In-Sight of Graphic Novels

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To assess the ability of the personal narrative graphic novel to represent truth and trauma, it is important to first situate these graphic novels within the discourse on memoir and autobiography, two textual personal narrative forms that have long been seated in the debate about the ability to represent the truth of a life. Truth in personal narrative has largely been defined as a verifiable account of events of a person's life; however, I will argue that this definition does not account for the aims of personal narrative to recount not just the actual, corroboratory experiences of a person's life, but also the emotions registered in particular moments and recalled from the perspective of the present, truths which cannot be as easily verified. In this article, I will assert that contemporary personal narrative explores the notion of truth-telling in order to become more truthful in recounting a life, and that the personal narrative graphic novel takes a step forward in the truth-telling aims of personal narrative through the use of visual elements.

The distinctions made between memoir and autobiography offer an entry point into the discourse on truth in personal narration. While most commonly differentiated from each other in terms of time-span – memoir loosely defined as an episodic recounting of events over a specific time frame, and autobiography likewise loosely defined as a life-to-date chronicle of events – these personal narrative genres have been further distanced from each other through differentiating their modes of communication. Sue William Silverman, in her essay "The Meandering River: An Overview of the Subgenres of Creative

Nonfiction," argues that like biography, autobiography is "theoretically at least, a factual retelling of events [...] based on one's 'life of action,' and thus told more historically than impressionistically." She argues that it "tends toward both a certain documentary sensibility and a well-defined chronological structure," unlike memoir, which, by contrast, she notes "find[s] a more personal, emotional arc to follow" and employs "the use of at least two 'voices' to tell the story, to explore the depth of events," which work to reveal "what the facts mean, both intellectually and emotionally." (15-17)

Problematic in Silverman's essay is not only her usage of "facts," a term just as slippery as "truth," and an argument I will explore throughout this article, but also her assertion that memoir carries personal and cultural baggage that autobiography avoids. This demarcation seems reductive, especially when considering both the wealth of personal narrative that is often arbitrarily labeled as memoir or autobiography for the purposes of consumer marketing, and because it creates a hierarchical importance placed on personal writing that is less- or non-emotional. Perhaps the distinction made between the two is a "content over form" argument, and if this is the case, then the terms 'memoir' and 'autobiography' should be scrutinized. When addressing the literal meaning of the terms, the distinctions in their content are made more ambiguous. By denotation, autobiography, from the Greek, means the writing of one's own life, while memoir, from the Latin, refers simply to memories. Though autobiography by denotation specifies a designated time-span based on the age of the author, and memoir does not, ultimately the tie that binds the two terms is stronger than what separates them. For regardless of time span, each form ultimately points to the same aima literary recounting of a life from a personal perspective. Indeed, both autobiography and memoir utilize the same elements: the recording of the story of a life and the memory to recall it. Due to this shared aim and use of elements, I will henceforth refer to both as "personal narrative," and will utilize arguments specifically regarding autobiography or memoir as inclusive of both.

It is important to note here that this differentiation, or lack thereof, between autobiography and memoir has been very well argued in the discourse on personal narrative, and my joint labeling of the two is certainly not something new. As Timothy Dow Adams remarks in *Introduction: Life Writing and Light Writing; Autobiography and Photography*, while memoir was once considered a subgenre of autobiography, "[m]any scholars now use the term 'lifewriting' when they refer to personal narratives in general, despite the fact

that lifewriting is just English for biography." (460) From his snide comment, it is clear that not only are the terms of personal narrative often confused and conflated, but also that the seemingly obviously distinct third-person biographical writing and first-person personal narration share this same fate. To add even more uncertainty in terminology, and indeed aims, in the discourse on personal narrative, the seeming binaries of fiction and non-fiction also have been made less distinct, if not altogether thrown into question, due in large part to the desire to link truth with fact.

The differentiation between fiction and non-fiction in personal narration was carefully addressed by Philippe Lejeune in his work *The Autobiographical Pact*. The pact is defined as "a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name," that is, an agreement the author offers his reader, by virtue of his name on the cover, to recount his story truthfully from his perspective, thereby enacting the "auto" in "autobiography." (19) Unlike other non-fiction genres such as history or biography, writers of personal narrative are not contracted in this agreement to present factual or corroboratory truth alone. Rather, what the author promises his reader is to portray his own subjective, experiential truth: his personal experiences based on his interpretation of himself and the world at large. Where personal narration certainly contains facts, including, for example, as Lejeune suggests, the name on the cover matching the person found within the pages, and writers in this genre seek to represent the events of their lives as they saw them in the moment and as they see them from the perspective of the present, it is not the goal of this genre to present an unbiased, factual view of events. Instead, personal narrative aims to speak to and also to showcase the subjective truth of individual experience so as to highlight the personal in contrast to the collective, the 'auto' that is perhaps in opposition to or more nuanced than the historical.

Because the personal narrative genre is used by writers who seek to relate the stories of their lives and in so doing possibly offer insight into a facet of the human condition through singular personal experience, they are held by virtue of their goal, as well as their classification as non-fiction, to a certain expectation of truthful representation. What sets apart personal narrative from other forms of non-fiction is this point exactly: writers of this genre strive to find the truth of their own experience so that they may reconcile the events of their lives and thereby gain perspective not only on their own pasts, but often on a collective past as well. And because contemporary personal narrative often relates stories of personal or cultural trauma

or both, truthful representation of individual experience of trauma is extremely important; since the goal of these works is to explore these traumas in an effort to create an understanding of them for both the author and the reader, and to possibly effect an outcome through this exploration writers of this genre are bound by the necessity to be forthright in their descriptions of events and emotions.

While this contract between personal narrative writers and their audience is not something new to the genre, it is little wonder that for a reader to accept experiential truth as the truth is a complicated agreement. For not only does the autobiographical pact suggest that the reader suspend his disbelief, an agreement linked to fiction rather than non-fiction,[1] but further complicating the notion of recording experiential truth is its inseparable ties to memory. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note, autobiography "depends on access to memory to tell a retrospective narrative of the past and to situate the present within that experiential history. Memory is thus both the source and the authenticator of autobiographical acts." (16) This idea of authenticity, along with the autobiographical pact, leaves personal narrative at the mercy of memory, which ultimately subjects the ability of personal narrative to represent the truth to intense scrutiny. Indeed, as Alfred Hornung, in his essay "Fantasies of the Autobiographical Self: Thomas Bernhard, Raymond Federman, Samuel Beckett" suggests, personal narrative that aims to represent experiential truth as the truth is farcical. He writes:

> If conventional autobiographies could be regarded as the proper medium for the realistic representation of a self and for the narrative recovery of past events from the perspective

1 "Willing Suspension of Disbelief," coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, refers to the agreement between a fiction or poetry writer and the reader where the reader agrees not to pass judgment on the work's plausibility in return for the entertainment provided by the writer.

of the present, contemporary autobiographical texts stress the illusory nature of such mythopoeic endeavours. Due to the breakdown of a clear demarcation between reality and fiction or reality and imagination, the traditional conception of the autobiographical genre has lost its degree of certainty and truth. (91)

It is of the utmost importance then, that contemporary writers of personal narrative, as Hornung suggests, explore and examine the question of how one can represent subjective, experiential truth, rather than relying on a pact or a promise of authenticity. Their work must become a self-reflexive reconceptualizing of the genre that moves away from romanticizing the past or creating works of autofiction[2] to instead look more closely at the way memory works and what experiential truth means.

Since personal experience and experiential truth are by denotation biased, writers of personal narrative must address the subjectivity of their accounts for their readers, which they accomplish in two ways: first, through the use of first-person narration, the writer makes implicit to his reader that he is looking through a personal, and therefore biased lens, which immediately undermines the idea of truthfulness, and secondly, through the use of the past tense, he makes clear that he is writing retrospectively, which further complicates the notion of accurate recollection. Because of this position of first-person-past narration, personal narrative is positioned from the onset to explore the impossibility of accurately recounting memories, that is, of trying to re-member memories of past events that have been dis-membered by a retrospective viewpoint. But writers in this genre must take the step forward, and not fall prey to the notion of presenting their

2 "Autofiction," a term coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, is a form in which writers manipulate and restructure the past in order to create a cohesive narrative, often adding in fictitious elements or events for the sake of storytelling; a blending of autobiography and the novel.

lives neatly, concisely, authoritatively, a worry of Paul de Man when he questions, "can we not suggest that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life [...]?" (920)

Writers of personal narrative must work to expose and to analyze the ambiguity, the uncertainty of the question of truth in order to become more truthful in relating stories of personal experience. As Smith and Watson note:

> In life narratives [...], narrators struggle to find ways of telling about suffering that defies language and understanding; they struggle to reassemble memories so dreadful they must be repressed for human beings to survive and function in life. In such narratives, the problem of recalling and recreating a past life involves organizing the inescapable but often disabling force of memory and negotiating its fragmentary intrusions with increasing, if partial, understanding. (22)

Indeed, not only does personal narrative explore traumatic events, it can also work to reveal the way in which trauma begets trauma due to the inability to fully comprehend the past because of this retrospective subjectivity and possible corruption of memory. This double-edged sword of aiming to represent the truth while recognizing the intangibility of such an endeavor is ultimately the goal of contemporary personal narrative. In this exploration of the illusory nature of memory, authors of personal narrative are able to become more truthful in their exploration into the recounting and writing of a life.

Personal narrative graphic novels, or what Gillian Whitlock has termed "autographics," (966) take a step forward in the personal narrative genre's exploration into recounting experiential truth through their exploration of re-membering and recounting memories which, as Smith and Watson claim, defy "language and understanding." Through employing the idea of sight as it is connected to memory, and through the use of visual elements to represent this aspect of memory-making, personal narrative graphic novels move forward in the self-reflexive exploration of the textual personal narrative genre. By using multiple layers of visual information, graphic novels add useful insight into the discourse on the aim and ability of personal narrative. Taking the idea of sight as it is connected to identity, memory, and witnessing, graphic novels play with and employ it as a departure point from textual personal narrative forms; the graphic novel's modes of visual representation of the personal experience are distinctly able to

comment on the discourse of truth and trauma in personal narrative in that they reveal how memory is negotiated by both sight and feeling. Through the use of visual elements, the graphic novel is able to draw the reader into these personal, traumatic stories while simultaneously commenting on the hermeneutic impossibility of the representation of trauma and memory. Utilizing the element of sight in its use of images, its application of traditional comic elements, and its spatial structure, the graphic novel at once bears witness to and situates the reader as a witness tothe story of reenacted trauma, and yet through these same means, also shows the reader the incomprehensibility of trauma and the disjointedness of memory.

First, through the structure of its layout, the graphic novel is able to both pointedly portray trauma and to discuss the truthfulness of this portrayal within personal narrative. Like comics, graphic novels often relate their stories through the combination of sequential panels of images and text that are set apart from each other by gutters of space, which offer the graphic novel a particular means of commenting on the ambiguity of the question of truthful representation. As Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven write, "the diegetical horizon of each page, made up of what are essentially boxes of time, offers graphic narrative a representational mode capable of addressing complex political and historical issues with an explicit, formal degree of self-awareness." (769) These 'boxes of time' create a different kind of reading experience than strictly textual personal narrative. Held within the panels are images of a particular moment of the author's past, each one a box of time, which work to reveal to the reader the author's fragmented vision. These images achieve a particular goal: not only can the reader of the graphic novel gain a wealth of visual information from the images within the frames, he is also constantly visually confronted with what is being excluded from the images and what is missing between each panel.

While the panels call the reader's "attention to the compulsion to transcend the frame in the act of seeing [...] reveal[ing] [his] limited, obstructed vision," (Hirsch 1213) the gutters further highlight that his vision is blocked; the panels constrain what is in their scope and the gutters encourage the reader to consider the gaps in events between the panels. Both these elements, the exclusion and gaps, create an important commentary on the ability of representing truth in personal narrative in that they point to the subjectivity of personal experience and the disjointedness of memory; each make the reader constantly aware that he is only able to see what he is being shown, that is, what the author remembers and reveals to him. Because of his limited vision, the reader

is poised to question what is outside and between the frames, to ponder if there is more to the story, and to actively participate in re-membering the disjointed boxes; he must work to keep pace with the narrative, though there are pieces missing, bridging the gaps in information for himself. In these ways, the reader is further prompted to question the way in which memory works and to question if there is a possibility of representing truth other than the experiential truth he has been offered by the author.

The obstructed vision created by the boxes and the gutters also work to comment on the debate about the ability to truthfully represent trauma within personal narrative. According to Cathy Caruth, the experience of trauma is so precisely temporal that it is impossible for a person to comprehend what has happened in the moment of trauma, and further, to fully understand why he has survived and what it means to have survived. She writes, "What returns to haunt the victim [...] is not only the reality of the violent event, but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known." (6) The paneled images and the gutter space within the graphic novel serve to show the nature of trying to understand something that is unknowable; the spatial layout of the graphic novel works as a diagram of this problematic, revealing parts of the equation, parts of the experience, but never the final solution. In this way, the graphic novel also points to the idea that perhaps trauma cannot ever be truthfully represented because in its inability to be fully grasped, it suspends the categories of true and false; the graphic novel offers instead that perhaps the only means of getting close to the truth of trauma is exactly what it offers the reader: fragmented pieces of information *and* the gaps in between, but never a fully re-membered story. The spatial layout of the graphic novel therefore not only works as a commentary on our efforts to understand traumatic events and to reconstruct memory, it also serves to tie the two ideas together: through restrained vision and gaps, graphic novels call the reader to ponder the difference between seeing and not seeing, of knowing and not knowing – the very fundamentals of remembering, reconstructing, and making sense of the past. Through visual representation, graphic novels literally show the reader that in the search for truth there are often things that are unclear, subjective, unknowable, or just simply missing in our memories of events.

Secondly, through the use of images, graphic novels are able to incite an affective experience in the reader, which not only effectively draws the reader into the story, but also works to comment on the ideas of memory and truth within personal narrative. As Jill Bennett notes:

3 For the images to which Sacco refers, see *Palestine*, 105-109.

> [while] words can be put into the service of sense memory, vision has a very different relationship to affective experience, experience which whilst it cannot be spoken as it is felt, may register visually. The eye can often function as a mute witness through which events register as eidetic memory images imprinted with sensation. (28)

Not only, as she discusses, is vision engaged in the process of experiencing and registering memory, it can work to recount experiences and memories in a method distinct from language. Graphic novels employ images for both of these reasons: to explore how one experiences personal truth and thereby the possibilities of effectively recounting it. In a presentation at the 2002 University of Florida Comics Conference, Joe Sacco spoke about an interview he conducted with a former detainee of the Israeli military for his graphic novel *Palestine*, a journalistic account of his experiences of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. After listening to the detainee's descriptions of his torture, including his being forced to wear a hood soaked in urine, being tied up in uncomfortable positions, and sleep deprived for days on end, Sacco was confronted with the decision of how to visually depict not just the external, but also the internal torture to which the man was subjected. He said:

> at a certain time, he began to hallucinate and imagine things and he was almost beginning to lose his mind [...] So, as I was drawing I was thinking how am I going to emphasize this to sort of add some impact. So, what I started doing was, as the story moves along [was] putting some more panels on a page, basically to make his situation more claustrophobic, to sort of reduce him and reduce the world he's in, reduce the box.[3] (4)

Though Sacco's graphic novel is not purely personal narrative (he writes both about his own and others' experiences), his revelation of his method illuminates how graphic novelists can effectively use the visual to represent traumatic events non-textually. What Sacco accomplishes in these panels goes beyond just a depiction of this man's and his country's trauma visually, however; his drawings of the hooded prisoner offer the reader an entry point to experience along with the detainee this torture and these memories while his reduction of the panel size and increase of the panels per page simulate for the reader the feeling of claustrophobia that the detainee experienced.

While graphic novels utilize the idea offered by Bennett that the visual can offer a "different relationship with affective experience," they also play with this notion. Rather than simply adhering to the idea that images can register for the reader in an immediate manner that is oppositional to reading text, they toy with this supposition in order to question it and to further engage with the reader through this assumption. As W. J. T. Mitchell asserts:

> Reading occurs in time; the signs which are read are uttered or inscribed in a temporal sequence; and the events represented or narrated occur in time. There is thus a kind of homology, or what Lessing calls a 'convenient relation' (*bequemes Verhältnis*) between medium, message, and the mental process of decoding. A similar homology operates in accounts of visual art: the medium consists of forms displayed in space; and the perception of both medium and message is instantaneous, taking no appreciable time. (99)

Graphic novels utilize this "perception" of "no appreciable time" in order to comment on the distinction between the personal narrative graphic novel and textually based personal narrative in order to question the graphic novel's goal of furthering truthful representation through the use of the visual. Simultaneously, as shown above, graphic novels also employ it as a strategy to engage the reader in the story by leading him to believe that images are more immediate than textual language, and perhaps more closely linked to the manner in which the writer both experienced and recalls his memories. These self-reflexive elements offer a double-play on Bennett's idea of the 'mute witness' and Chute and DeKoven's concept of 'boxes of time.' For example, in describing another element of *Palestine*, Sacco spoke about the incredible amount of mud and the prolific amount of political slogans he saw painted on the walls by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. He says:

> A prose journalist is probably going to mention these things, but he or she is not going to mention them at every paragraph whereas a cartoon, just by the fact that I have background I can play with, I can have these things, the mud, the graffiti. All of these things just follow the reader around wherever he or she goes in each panel so that it just creates an atmosphere. (5)

Not only, as Sacco notes, does the consistency of the mud and political posters create an atmosphere in his graphic novel, they also speak to the sense of time – and timelessness – in personal narrative graphic novels. Sacco's mud and political posters both reveal a sense of historical time, and offer the reader a role as a mute witness to this history. Additionally, the pervasiveness of the posters and mud offer the reader a constant reminder that he is being told a story within the context of an even larger story, which works to call the reader's attention, yet again, to the subjectivity of the account he is reading.

Third, through the use of cartoonish drawings, the graphic novel further draws the reader into the story through the use of the visual. Where it could be argued that the affective experience in reading and relating to images is diminished because graphic novels use unrealistic depictions rather than photographs or photorealistic drawings, on the level of relating human emotional indicators, this has been proven inaccurate. Instead, as Ed S. Tan notes, in graphic novels, "[the] characters' emotions are easy to recognize because readers apply the same cues as they do in recognizing emotion in real life." (35) Further, as Scott McCloud notes in his groundbreaking work *Understanding Comics*, rather than diminishing the experience and transmission of personal and cultural trauma, cartoons actually aid this process. He asserts:

> When two people interact, they usually look directly *at* one another, seeing their partner's features in *vivid detail*. Each one *also* sustains a constant awareness of his or her *own* face, but *this* mind picture is not nearly so vivid; just a sketchy arrangement… a sense of shape… a sense of *general placement*. Something as *simple* and as *basic* – as a *cartoon*. Thus, when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face – you see it as a face of *another*. But when you enter the world of the *cartoon*—you see *yourself*. (original emphasis, 35-36)

McCloud's assumption that cartoonish representations of reality allow the reader to envision himself in the place of the characters, and to possibly become more affected by the images presented in the story, is interesting, if seemingly paradoxical. By using comic "everyman"

images, where the detail is missing, the graphic novel offers the reader the ability to supplement what he is being shown with his own sense of reality, thereby placing himself and his experience in the story. This works to speak to the goal of personal narrative; through the use of cartoon images, graphic novels are self-reflexively employing comics to comment on the goal of personal narrative to use personal experience to address larger, more universal ideas of the human experience. By creating a means for the reader to become the characters and experience the traumas, graphic novels are bridging the gap between the personal and the collective.

Similar to the cartoonish images, the traditional comic form of writing works to further draw the reader into the story, and to question this ability. Because traditional comic writing is often employed as the textual part of the medium, rather than typeset fonts, the reader is offered a way into the story that is unlike textual personal narrative. Through the use of handwriting, and sometimes various styles of handwriting, the reader is urged to feel a more personal connection to the text. Because handwriting is humanistic and irregular, when it is used in the graphic novel, it works to create a diary-like feel that engages the reader with the story; and further, the sense of immediacy the handwriting provides offers the reader a feeling of closeness to the story, for it creates the sensation that he is reading an unedited, contemporary account of events. As Friedrich Kittler has asserted, handwriting offers a trace of the human, offering a "private exteriority" that lies in contrast to the "anonymous exteriority" of print. (108) But this idea of the human trace found in handwriting is also toyed with in the graphic novel, for though it is simulated on the page, it is merely a scanned image, a copy, a simulacrum; graphic novels use handwriting to suggest a closeness and immediacy, but highlight that it is just an illusion. In these ways, graphic novels comment on the idea of truth in personal narrative; because handwriting is individualistic, the reader of the graphic novel is at once made constantly aware of the subjectivity of the writer, that the account of events are from a singular, personal perspective, and at the same time that the writing is not from a diary, or contemporaneous perspective, but a reenactment of events from a retrospective viewpoint.

Finally, when the spatial layout and various images within the graphic novel are taken together, the reader is forced to interact with the object of the graphic novel. Rather than reading and imagining the story that is being presented in the typeset language of textual personal narrative, the reader of the graphic novel must learn to read differently all the elements being presented: the images, the text, and the layout of

the novel, moving from one element to the other—and also filling in the gaps of what is not being said or shown. As Will Eisner notes:

> The format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (e.g. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (e.g. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act both of aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit. (8)

Through this engagement with the text, the graphic novel offers the reader not just a challenge in interaction with understanding the structure of the object, but encourages him to further consider the way in which we reconstruct the past to achieve a sense of truth. Because graphic novels present different forms of communication simultaneously, the reader must work to re-member dis-membered elements of the personal narrative to create a cohesive whole. This action ultimately points him to consider the various elements which make up our memories of the past: our own personal experiences, the stories we are told of past events, the items and documented evidence that speak to a past we sometimes do not recall, and how all these elements come together to create our own sense of the truth.

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SUMMARY

Through an analysis of the discourse on the personal narrative genre's ability to represent the truth of a life, this paper problematizes the definition of truth as it is bound to fact. It argues that this definition does not account for the aims of personal narrative to recount not just the corroboratory experiences of a person's life, but the emotional truths which cannot so easily be verified. It shows how, through the use of self-reflexivity, personal narrative explores the notion of truth-telling in order to become more truthful, and how, through the use of visual elements, the personal narrative graphic novel furthers this aim of the exploration of truthful representation in the genre.

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