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Chapter 1

Introduction: Documenting Trauma in Comics

Dominic Davies

What is Trauma?

Trauma is slippery, elusive, spectral; for many, it is *unrepresentable*. If the intellectual and cultural history of the word is inextricably bound up with the Holocaust as 'an unavoidable reference point' (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009: 18), it has since migrated across histories, geographies, and disciplines, morphing, modulating, and adapting at every turn. This restless movement has rendered the specific qualities of trauma all the more scattered and shattered, fluid and fragmented, the subject of extensive and sometimes controversial debate. No essay, or collection of essays, can capture totally what trauma *is*, how it is experienced and felt, how it marks bodies and psyches and histories, or how it transforms so consequentially both individual and social lives. Just as importantly, no essay, or collection of essays, can encompass the multiply innovative ways in which trauma is or, just as importantly, is *not* represented in any literary, artistic, or cultural form—even comics.

Nevertheless, the infectious popularisation of the term in both academic and public spheres over recent decades has thrown the contours of trauma's elusive *shape* into relief, even as that shape remains contested and conflicted, subject to constant critique and reevaluation. This book makes no attempt to assert definitively what trauma is, nor to establish restrictively the ways in which it has been—or might yet be—documented in comics and graphic narratives. If trauma is a thicketed concept that spins and winds its way across many disciplinary domains, this book's nineteen chapters are modest attempts to untangle it. The contributors work with graphic narratives to unpick 'the trauma knot' (Buelens et al., 2014), opening up as many genealogies of trauma—its past manifestations, ongoing recurrences, and future possibilities—as they close. While this may be a book about comics as a form drawn to and from traumatic histories, there remains no closure here.

For Roger Luckhurst, trauma is a Latourian 'knot' (2008: 14-15; see Latour, 1999: 106)—an elastic concept that weaves and loops along networks of institutional and social knowledges, reshaping political and cultural forms, and linking once discrete categories through enticing analogies and metaphorical shadows. Trauma is 'sticky', gathering into its shape multiple affects and forms, and assuming multiple bearings and dispositions—as Sara Ahmed has written of emotional objects more generally, trauma might be said to '*become* sticky, or saturated with affect, as [a site] of personal and social tension' (2014: 11; my emphasis). As Ahmed would likely suggest, we have to 'feel our way' to trauma, a critical and affective poise that, for comics scholar Kate Polak, is built into the readerly encounter with trauma that is documented specifically in graphic narratives (2017: 30). As writers, drawers, and readers of comics, we privilege our embodied reflexes to trace the traces of trauma that imprint themselves on muscles and membranes, buildings and landscapes, monuments and narratives. In this reading, trauma is only ever a shadow of itself.

Maurice E. Stevens offers one useful definition, among many: 'By trauma, I mean the sets of practices that provide explanatory narratives, organise interpersonal and material relations, and establish meaningful frameworks for understanding relatedness, temporality, and embodiment vis-a-vis "overwhelming events". Trauma, here, is an ingathering of practices, a cultural object' (2016: 26). A sticky concept, an emotional object, a cultural form: trauma does not so much describe as it produces; it cannot so much be represented as it can be *documented*. Trauma work is, for Stevens, not about describing events, but making them (28); it involves compiling and reifying an event or process into and as a narrative of trauma. It is then a 'socially mediated attribution'; it may be made in real time as an event occurs, long after the fact, or even *before* it takes place (Alexander, 2012: 13). As Luckhurst insists, 'cultural narratives have been integral not just in consolidating the idea of post-traumatic subjectivity, but have actively helped form it' (2008: 15). Highlighting both visual and popular cultures in particular, Luckhurst (2018: 296) emphasises—with the support of Latour and others—that scientific concepts, psychological terminologies, and psychiatric diagnoses are

inevitably embedded in cultural contexts, borrowing from circulating narrative forms just as often as they set new templates for them.

While a large repertoire of cultural forms have contributed to the ways in which trauma is now socially mediated, comics have played a particularly significant role in refining the aesthetic patterns that now allow traumatic narratives to be recognised *as such* in contemporary Western culture. Writing in 1949, Theodor Adorno famously declared in a deeply resonant if much misquoted statement that: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (1997: 34).[1] Few are unfamiliar with some version of this phrase; all students of trauma, if not all those of history, literature, and art more widely, have found themselves confronted with and likely confounded by it. Although Adorno qualified his statement a few years later, in his book *Negative Dialectics* (1966), he did not there entirely renege on its underlying provocation. While 'it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems', he observed, 'it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living' (2007: 362-363). As readers of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1991) will know, this entanglement of embodied deterioration, cultural narration, and representational crisis, is at the heart of disciplines such as comics studies, Holocaust studies, memory studies, and trauma studies, to name only the few that are most relevant here.

The extent to which these complex, countervailing, and sometimes conflicting trajectories of research and thought all have *Maus* at their centre is somewhat overwhelming. It is instructive to take stock of the field-shaping studies that have built their theories around close analytical readings of Spiegelman's comic. The most influential, perhaps, are Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism* (2000), and Marianne Hirsch's *Family Frames* (1997) and *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012). These groundbreaking studies alone have, with *Maus*, so entwined trauma studies with memory

[1] For a succinct analysis of the oft-overlooked context and shifting historical response to Adorno's statement, see Kyriakides, 2005.

studies and comics studies that they now share much of the same intellectual DNA. Elsewhere Gabriele Schwab, inspired by *Maus* as a 'paradigmatic and generative text' (13), also conducts a reading of the comic in her study of 'transgenerational' trauma, *Haunting Legacies* (2010). It is an important touchstone too for Andreas Huyssen in his book, *Present Pasts* (2003), which explores the role of the built environment in the selective construction and remembrance of traumatic events. Michael G. Levine devotes the second chapter of his study of the relationship between literature and testimony, *The Belated Witness* (2006), to a reading of *Maus*, while in the same year Spiegelman's comic gave Naomi Mandel a vocabulary with which to interrogate the supposedly unrepresentable qualities of trauma in her provocative study, *Against the Unspeakable* (2006).

My point is not to suggest that Spiegelman has become a 'darling of trauma theorists' (Reiser, 2014: 3), but to show how *Maus* has actively *produced* theorisations of the experiential qualities of trauma (see Gavrilă, 2017). Many other important studies have developed their thought around critical readings of the comic: Sara Horowitz's *Voicing the Void* (1997), Barbie Zelizer's *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (2001), Dora Apel's *Memory Effects* (2002), Amy Hungerford's *The Holocaust of Texts* (2003), and Alison Landberg's *Prosthetic Memory* (2004)—to name only a few. While these works are more explicitly grounded in Holocaust studies, their reach undoubtedly informs critical accounts of trauma as well. If Dominick LaCapra's influential contribution to trauma studies, *Representing the Holocaust* (1994), does not mention Spiegelman's *Maus*, the comic facilitates the conceptual heavy lifting of his other important work, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (1998), a book that in turn paves the way for his later *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001). And of course, *Maus* is at the centre of some of the most important studies attending specifically to the relationship between comics and trauma to date: Katalin Orbán's article, 'Trauma and Visuality' (2007), Hillary Chute's *Disaster Drawn* (2016), Hattie Earle's *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War* (2017), and

Andrés Romero-Jódar's *The Trauma Graphic Novel* (2017).[2] Though this is by no means an exhaustive list, it is surely indicative that feeling our way to analyses of *Maus* yields something close to a literature review on the study of trauma and its contested memorialisation, representation, and documentation.

The discursive elasticity of *Maus*—its spiralling layers of self-reflexivity, its braiding of multiplying and sometimes duplicitous icons, its meshing of forms and genres, and the visceral, embodied response that it continues to elicit from new readers—means that even after all of this generative criticism, it surely still has more to teach us. However, conducting another reading of the comic is not my intention here, nor is it attempted in any of this book's other chapters. Instead, I am more interested, with Laurike in't Veld (2019: 8-15), in the ways in which *Maus* has been written *about*, and the central role it has played in the *production* of those narrative and cultural forms that we now use to discuss, represent, and document trauma.

In its capacity to withstand such a complex matrix of intersecting and counteractive readings, *Maus* has much in common with the concept of trauma itself. The comic has generated such huge shifts in academic scholarship that it arguably functions as what Michel Foucault described, with reference to Marx and Freud, as an 'initiator of discursive practices'; or more succinctly, a 'founder of discursivity' (1979: 25). From this angle, *Maus* might be said to have 'not only made possible a certain number of analogies that could be adopted by future texts', but also 'a certain number of differences'—deviations that function to organise and to reify a tangled yet identifiable web of discursive interactions. Significantly, the above mentioned studies not only read *Maus* for themselves; they also read each others readings, layering their arguments and counter-arguments onto the already vast textual web of a gradually crystallising trauma discourse. This discourse is organised around—

[2] Tatiana Prorokova and Nimrod Tal's 2018 collection of essays, *Cultures of War in Graphic Novels: Violence, Trauma, and Memory*, is perhaps the first book-length study to break this mould. Following their lead, several chapters included in *Documenting Trauma* respond to their call 'to decentre Japan, the United States, France, Belgium, and Britain' in readings of comics, trauma, and war, (Prorokova and Tal, 2018: 5), and this book as a whole reiterates their globalising—recast here as decolonising—impulse.

and sometimes against—Spiegelman's comic, which serves as an over-arching Foucauldian author function, or a kind of authoritative origin story that discursive enunciations must touch on to warrant consideration. When read in this way, *MetaMaus* (2011)—a book that, produced in collaboration with Hillary Chute as its Associate Editor, sought to provide definitive answers on the authorial decisions and artistic choices that went into the making of *Maus*—suggests itself as Spiegelman's disavowal of this author function, one that it is nevertheless now too late to escape.

Spiegelman's impulse to eschew his own author function reiterates his more general and often caustic rejection of accusations that it was in bad taste to make a comic about Auschwitz; as he famously responded, it was Auschwitz itself that was in bad taste. For Christopher Pizzino, Spiegelman's 'levity' here 'is precisely the creator's attempt to witness in a newly responsible, self-aware mode' (2017: n.pag.), a disposition that is clearly achieved in the comic itself through the self-effacing mouse-character of Art. This trickery and delegitimising irreverence persists in *MetaMaus* too, where in the introduction Spiegelman provocatively implies the creation of the comic *itself* as a kind of trauma, one that is, moreover, comparable with the Holocaust that it documents. In the two-page comic that introduces *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman draws his mouse-self wondering through panels, overwhelmed by questions about his practice, and eventually turning to the reader to explain: 'I thought I'd finally try to answer as fully as I could. That way, when asked in the future, maybe I could just say... NEVER AGAIN!' (2011: 9).

Insert Fig.1.1: The two-page comic that introduces *MetaMaus* (Spiegelman, 2011: 8-9).

Lifting two words commonly associated with Holocaust remembrance to describe his relationship with his own comics masterpiece, Spiegelman displays a customary derision that provokes (and thus satirises) those early critics who considered comics too crude a form in which to document the trauma of the Holocaust. Pizzino (2017) even invites us to read Spiegelman's comment—that it was Auschwitz, not his comic, that was in bad taste—in tandem with Adorno's, the

two recognising that even while traumatic events seem to resist cultural representation, they are inevitably still caught up in it. Spiegelman is here staking out the ethical ground underpinning his decision to draw in a documentary form that demands 'attention to history's discursivity'; for as Chute observes, *Maus* is in the end a comic both 'inspired by, and built on, the creation of archives' (2016: 189-191).

Ironically, though seeking to contain the proliferation of discursive negotiations and critical readings of *Maus*, *MetaMaus* has instead served only to fuel them. The book is a self-professed archive, a meta-documentation of the documentary processes that went into the original comic, and that grants readers access to Spiegelman's 'rat's nest of files, archives, artwork, notebooks, journals, and dirty laundry' (2011: 6). Here again, Spiegelman's trickery resurfaces: as Chute points out, *MetaMaus* begins with Spiegelman's discovery of the 'forbidden bookshelf', where he discovers 'mostly Polish, Yiddish, and Ukrainian small-press pamphlets by survivors that bore witness to experiences of regular people in the war' (2016: 163-164). The 'rat's nest' then is the proliferation of Jewish materials of witness, reinscribed via Spiegelman's animal metaphor as a 'a rethinking of what counts as an archive, and, by extension, what counts as history' (Friedman, 2012: 277; see also Chute, 2016: 193-194). Both *Maus* and *MetaMaus* are genealogies in the Foucauldian sense: 'meticulous, and patiently documentary', operating 'on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times' (Foucault, 1971: 76).

Spiegelman's introduction to *MetaMaus* begins with a well-known image (see Fig.1.1). Art's iconic mouse-self dominates most of the panel. He is holding a 'realistic' rat in his hands, offering it out of the page and up to the reader, while Mickey Mouse's iconic face looms ominously over his shoulder. For Michael Rothberg, this image captures simultaneously the three sometimes contradictory demands made by Holocaust representation and, by extension, the representation of other traumatic events: 'a demand for documentation, a demand for reflection on the formal limits of representation, and a demand for the risky public circulation of discourses on the events' (2000: 7). Rothberg emphasises that the task of finding an 'adequate form' with which to reconcile these

tensions is as much the task of historians, literary and cultural critics, and the public, as it is the artist. The phenomenal uptake of *Maus* as a site for thinking through the complexities of representing the Holocaust and other traumatic events thus testifies to the specific formal agilities and reflexivities that make comics so adept at documenting trauma. *Maus* did not after all emerge in a cultural vacuum (see Beaty and Woo, 2016: 18-23), but from vibrant underground and then alternative movements in which many artists were pushing the form to its representational limits (see, for example, Hatfield, 2005). As this book contends, it is in and through these obsessive documentary efforts that comics innovates new ways to negotiate trauma as 'a radical problem for understanding' (Rothberg, 2000: 1).

Contemplating the question of trauma's unrepresentability, Naomi Mandel reframes it, pointing out that speaking of the 'unspeakable' is not in fact an issue of representation, but of *production*: 'The question, how do we speak about the unspeakable? posits the unspeakable as something that must be responded to, reacted to, addressed. But the unspeakable is itself such a response, a reaction, an address, and the agendas and motivations that inform its evocations have yet to receive critical attention' (2006: 5-6). Repositioned in this way, documenting trauma becomes a genealogical undertaking, a process that seeks to feel out the contours of cultural responses and social reactions to trauma, rather than to define or delineate trauma itself. Trauma has a cultural and formal shape—what Ruth Leys calls 'structural repetitions' (2000: 8)—that can be thrown into relief through the processes of documentation, even as such documentary undertakings often contribute in turn to a subsequent (re)shaping of future trauma narratives. If *Maus* functions as the authorial site that, through its multiple readings and re-readings, has in part reified the discursive shape that trauma takes today, it also proves the extent to which comics challenge that shape's rigidity in and through the 'archival' impulse of their form (see Gardner, 2006).

The chapters collected in this book, which collectively document the documentation of trauma in comics, combine to emphasise that graphic narratives do not simply reflect the culturally dominant shape of trauma as it is rendered in often modernist or anti-realist narrative forms; they also invoke

it, play with it, revise it, challenge it, and in their most innovative moments, move beyond it. The most common interrogative strategies identified across this collection's nineteen chapters include: the visual performance of documentary form as it shifts across alternating geo-historical contexts; the redressing of traumatic pasts through the re-evaluation of hegemonic—and often Eurocentric—narrative temporalities and visualities; the affective and felt qualities of traumatic histories as these are inscribed somatically onto individual and social bodies; and the tendency towards the documentation of trauma in journalistic forms and genres, embedded as such reportage practices inevitably are in anxious and frequently contested political conversations around subject and voice, reporter and reported, and perpetrator and victim.

For these reasons, we have organised the book into four sections that are designed to provide readers with a helpful organisational framework: 'Documenting Trauma'; 'Traumatic Pasts'; 'Embodied Histories'; and 'Graphic Reportage'. But as I will emphasise in what remains of this introduction, the chapters also speak to one another along a number of other intersecting critical and analytical vectors. Through these overlapping and sometimes contradictory explorations, the book troubles any simplistic delineation of trauma around a singular thematic or formal trait, instead combining them into a more complex discursive terrain that is as prone to a productive unravelling as it is to any lasting consolidation. Through these amorphous connections the chapters themselves construct a complex genealogical web, eschewing concise and totalising surveys and instead unpicking several new trajectories for further research into the knotted relationship between comics, trauma, and documentary practices.

The Shape of Trauma

For Maaheen Ahmed and Benoît Crucifix (2018: 3), the 'central position' of memory in comics studies—a young, brave, but sometimes insecure field—can be traced back to the overwhelmingly generative and cross-disciplinary reception of *Maus*. To the extent that comics studies is repeatedly

drawn to issues of memory and postmemory, it is perhaps also because of *Maus* that the field finds itself similarly *stuck* to the concept of trauma. However, it is important for us to get the form (comics) and the concept (trauma) the right way around here, the latter not somehow begetting the former, but itself taking shape through its interaction with comics' cultural work. The relationship between comics and trauma is far closer to that of the metaphorical chicken and egg: the two are bound up in one another's genealogies, locked into a mutually constituting and continually symbiotic relationship with no clean beginning or end. *Maus* migrates along the ebbs and flows of multiple academic and cultural movements, generating critical readings that theorise its artistically rendered insights into new and often insightful—and sometimes even reparative—approaches to memory and trauma. But we should not underestimate the extent to which the comic, as well as the readings and theories it has generated, in turn redefines not only how trauma is represented, but what actually is allowed to count as trauma itself.

In this collection's second chapter, Katalin Orbán (Chapter 2) describes this now dominant shape of trauma as a 'trauma aesthetic', identifying the 1995 publication of Binjamin Wilkomirski's fake Holocaust memoir, *Bruchstücke* (*Fragments*), as the logical consequence of trauma's rigid categorisation. Deploying a repertoire of cultural signals that accord neatly with Cathy Caruth's highly influential account of the key features of trauma—its belated experience, its insistent return, its unrepresentable nature (1995: 4-5)—Wilkomirski constructed a fiction that was made 'real' by its translation of these qualities into its aesthetic form. The chicken and the egg become confused here, constituting a cultural feedback loop that sometimes relies on pseudo-scientific conceptions of traumatic experience that are of 'dubious validity' (Leys, 2000: 7). As Alan Gibbs has argued in his forceful refutation of Caruth's 'trauma paradigm', the shape of trauma is actually far more 'diffuse and fractured' (2014: 3) than the model of PTSD, on which the arguments of Caruth and others were predicated (Caruth, 1995; van der Kolk and van der Holt, 1995), initially allowed. The danger, Gibbs contends, is not only that trauma narratives came to be read reductively through the trauma paradigm's 'monolithic and programmatic critical prism', but that this prism itself began 'to influence

the form of cultural products', as writers and artists sought to conform to the parameters of an increasingly 'identifiable "trauma genre"' (2). Importantly, many of the chapters collected in this book show how comics push back against this rigid trauma aesthetic, even while refusing to lose sight of its enduring influence entirely. As Orbán argues here through readings of several recent documentary comics, if the form of graphic narrative at first seems to 'fit' the shape of what has come to be described as the 'Caruthian' model of trauma, artists are now rejecting this paradigm in favour of alternative documentary models.

Yet the temptation to read the formal architecture of comics—which is after all predicated on the recurrent cyclical tension between panel and gutter, presence and absence, seen and unseen, the represented and the omitted—as somehow inherently or paradigmatically 'traumatic' persists. In her reading of the representation of genocide in a range of graphic novels, in't Veld worries that some comics themselves risk uncritically repeating 'academic and cultural discourses around seeing, testimony, and trauma' (191). While aggressive critics of trauma studies such as Wulf Kansteiner unhelpfully do away with the importance of the cultural sphere entirely, his well-known observation—that just 'because trauma is inevitably a problem of representation in memory and communication does not imply the reverse, i.e. that problems of representation are always partaking in the traumatic' (Kansteiner, 2004: 205)—has some purchase here. After all, the analogy between the comics form and what Kansteiner calls the 'cultural trauma metaphor' haunts much-cited statements in analyses of comics and trauma: as Chute contends in *Graphic Women* (2010), the fragmented visual-narrative construction of comics 'mimics' the shape of 'traumatic memory' (4). Elsewhere, Frederik Byrn Køhlert emphasises 'the resonance between comics formalism and theoretical work in trauma' (2015: 124; see also 2019: 64), while Andrés Romero-Jódar discusses graphic novels that 'mimic the forms and symptoms of traumatic neurosis' (2017: 22). Harriet Earle, too, suggests 'that there is an immediate relationship between the comics form and the nature of trauma' (2017: 77), and for Claire Gorrara, 'the page layout of comics demands a cognitive act of connection akin to the psychological need to order memories. Where this is missing or disrupted,

trauma can be inferred or represented' (2018: 113). With these assertions in mind, we need to consider that the theorisation of both trauma and comics has occurred coterminously over the last three or four decades, a historical alignment that suggests the seeming correspondence between the two might, with *Maus* at their centre, have been culturally co-produced. While all of the above-mentioned authors qualify and thoroughly contextualise their statements, there remain uneasy assumptions around the relationship between trauma and comics—assumptions that, because they themselves are historical, demand our constant vigilance.

Chute especially is careful not to read comics as an analogous formal template that always reflects or reiterates a dominant trauma paradigm. As she points out, women's graphic narratives more often than not resist 'the valorization of absence and aporia', asserting instead 'the value of presence, however complex and contingent' (2010: 2). In her later book, *Disaster Drawn* (2016), Chute places further emphasis on comics' refusal of trauma as something indescribable and unrepresentable, drawing on the work of Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, and Keiji Nakazawa, to engage with the fuller complexities of Caruth's trauma model. As Chute argues, these artists actively 'intervene against a culture of invisibility', taking 'the risk of representation' to reveal that trauma 'does not always have to be disappearance; it can be plenitude, an excess of signification' (2016: 5). While of course many comics effectively apply a representational reticence in their dealing with traumatic pasts, in't Veld has more recently identified a number of graphic narratives that instead deploy a 'visual excess of kitsch' to provoke a 'productive interaction with the subject matter' (2018: 19).

In this collection, Eszter Szép (Chapter 14) reads beyond the gutter-panel formula of traumatic representation to show how the Hungarian-born US artist Miriam Katin deploys a range of different strategies—from the unit of the page, to the depiction of the body, to the pictorial qualities of language—to better document the multiple dimensions of traumatic experience. This approach frees her analysis from the constrictions of an unnervingly simplistic one-to-one mapping of the cultural shape of trauma onto the architectural shape of comics. While several of this book's other contributors still insist on trauma's elusive, unrepresentable qualities, and its conceptually sticky relationship with

the gutter, they also identify a range of different aesthetic and formal strategies used by comics to document trauma, showing how 'the crisis of representation caused by trauma generates narrative *possibility* just as much as narrative *impossibility*' (Craps, 2012: 41). For example, in her study of three Indian graphic narratives, E. Dawson Varughese (Chapter 7) hones in on moments of blindness and sight that occur not through the presence-absence movement of the gutter-panel framework, but that are drawn viscerally and visually into the content of the panels themselves. She shows how artistic decisions to eradicate the facial features of characters, and especially their eyes, self-reflexively raise important questions about seeing and witnessing in what is ultimately a visual medium. If the infamous glasses of Joe Sacco's comics avatar have been modelled as something of an archetype for this strategy, it is redeployed and refreshed here in newly iterative ways.

Issues of (in)visibility surface in other metaphoric and notably ghostly ways, haunting the social and individual bodies that are depicted in comics panels themselves. Orbán's reading of Emmanuel Lepage's *Un printemps à Tchernobyl* (2012) (Chapter 2) shows how the radiation in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster functions as an invisible trauma, retaining a spectral quality until it begins to warp the artist's body. Meanwhile, Sarah McNicol (Chapter 5) reads trauma through Avery Gordon's notion of 'social haunting', which emphasises how histories that have previously 'been concealed [are] very much alive and present' (1997: xvi). Working with comics produced in community workshops in northern England, McNicol shows how 'ghostly matters' materialise through the process of narrative drawing. If this process suggests the capacity of the comics form to document ephemeral and spectral traumas, it also alters the readerly relationship with traumatic images and the ways in which these have the capacity both to disrupt and to consolidate the currently accepted shape of trauma (see Baer, 2002).

For Mandel, the figure of the ghost, whether as a visually metaphoric social spectre or visceral materialisation of traumatic haunting, 'challenges the assumption that presence, the present, and re-presentation can be dissociated' (2006: 23). In her analysis of Charlotte Salomon's astonishing *Life? or Theatre?* (1940-1942) as a graphic life narrative, Emma Parker (Chapter 12) reads the image of

the window frame as both a narrative-architectural tool *and* a recurring visual motif. By self-referentially cycling readers back around and through the ghostly shape of the window frame, Salomon activates the gutter-like image to reveal haunting connections between the individual trauma of her mother's suicide and the much larger social trauma of the Nazis' persecution of the Jews. This refraction of a critique of trauma's social qualities through an embodied, (auto)biographical life narrative is a strategy similarly applied in Una's much-celebrated graphic memoir, *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015). As Ana Baeza Ruiz argues in her chapter for this book (Chapter 13), *Becoming Unbecoming* refuses a narrow focus on 'the traditional event-based model of trauma' (Craps, 2012: 4-5), shifting instead to the more sinister and markedly structural indices of a misogynistic social system that produces violence—both directly, through the legitimisation of rape, and indirectly, through violent representations of women—and traumatic experience.

This is not the reductive collapsing of individual into social traumas that Kansteiner so fervently warns against, but the mobilisation of the kinds of multi-scalar movements, of which comics especially are capable (Davies, 2019: 21), toward politically reparative ends. It is important therefore to point out that none of the chapters collected in this book make the ethically dubious claim that 'representations of symptoms of trauma *replicate* such symptoms in the minds of the audience [to] produce a collective trauma' (Kansteiner, 2004: 206, my emphasis). The danger of reading the shape of trauma into (or out of) the shape of the comics page resides in the implied suggestion that models of cultural trauma somehow come close to, or even exactly *repeat*, the actual experience of the psychological trauma they set out to document. If comics artists, along with literary writers and cultural critics, might have 'helped to shape' the cultural frameworks we now use to recognise and to decode 'the nature of psychological trauma' (Tal, 1996: n.pag.), this corner of the trauma knot is most in need of untangling. As Jeffrey Alexander points out, 'literary interpretation, with its hermeneutic approach to symbolic patterns, has been offered as a kind of academic counterpart to the psychoanalytic intervention', even while 'the major theoretical and empirical statements of the psychoanalytic version of lay trauma theory have been produced by scholars in the various disciplines

of the humanities' themselves (2012: 11). The *representation* of trauma—in literary texts, psychoanalytic theories, and cultural forms—has come to mould trauma into a specific and, though still somewhat elastic, increasingly exclusive shape. It is to no small extent the insistence on the term 'representation' that makes for so much trouble here. While this book's decision to swap it out for a different verb—'to document'—is inspired by the archival strategies so often used in comics themselves, this terminological shift helps its contributors to unpick this most claustrophobic of discursive loops, and to navigate a range of different routes through it.

It is important to acknowledge that, while they often take the 'risk of representation', comics' occasional resistance to the direct depiction of a traumatic event remains a crucial component of their ethically attuned modes of documentation. While resenting the idea that a mere 'representation' might transfer trauma from victim to viewer, Kansteiner is just as worried about the transformation through representation of traumatic events into an 'attractive and pleasurable' entertainment experience (2004: 209). On the one hand, Mark Seltzer has described this contemporary 'fascination' with shocking images of traumatic events as a 'wound culture' (1996: 3), one in which troubling catastrophes that demand public attention, social cognisance, and institutional redress, are unhelpfully recast as spectacles for private consumption; on the other, Susan Sontag's work reminds us that the effects of spectacle need not be 'deadening'—that indeed, they may facilitate a politically and socially productive 'intensity of awareness' (2004: 106). Thus even while retaining a critical reticence toward the seeming correspondence between the form of comics and the shape of trauma, the array of strategies innovated by comics artists to document violent spectacles without overly aestheticising—or worse, commodifying—them, remains a vital resource both for the future theorisation of trauma and the viewing of traumatic events, both within comics studies and beyond.

Negotiating similar complexities in their consideration of the relationship between comics and memory, Ahmed and Crucifix redirect our attention away from 'the innovative ways of representing personal or subjective memories' and towards 'the various roles played by styles and archives in using, forming, and transmitting comics memory' (2018: 3). This collection has not *forgotten* memory

as an important structuring concept in any discussion of trauma; but in its focus on material pasts, physical embodiment, and graphic reportage, it de-centres the much-discussed overlaps of memory studies and comics studies to claim a specific focus on trauma instead. Indeed, the chapters collected here suggest that Ahmed and Crucifix's division might not work for such a sticky concept as trauma. This book's contributors identify many new strategies innovated by comics artists to better negotiate traumatic pasts, but these strategies are themselves often built around meta-visual interrogations of archival practices and genealogical documentation. If Ahmed and Crucifix ask 'What do comics do with, and to, memory, and what does memory do to comics?' (3), this collection asks similar questions of comics and trauma, before triangulating that chicken and that egg—to extend the coarse metaphor—through the methodological and aesthetic qualities of documentary. As Nina Mickwitz has pointed out, in documentary comics 'the performative aspects of production assume a more visible and central role', even as 'the notion of documentary comics necessitates seeing technological specificities as variations within the category of documentary, rather than as boundaries that circumscribe it' (2016: 27-28).

In her chapter for this collection, Mickwitz (Chapter 16) therefore reads across a number of 'refugee comics' to account for the varied approaches, processes, and perspectives that open up—rather than contain—the performative signals of documentary form. She insists that we pay attention to the authorial intentions and publishing contexts of this emerging sub-genre, noting that the astonishing uptake of comics to document refugee narratives is certainly a consequence of now longstanding thematic trends in graphic narratives. If these trends have been consolidated rather neatly into the genres of 'comics journalism' (Worden ed., 2015) and 'autographics' (Whitlock, 2006), Johannes C.P. Schmid (Chapter 18) argues that the two genres are in fact far more enmeshed with one another than their separate categorization might allow. Reading Sarah Glidden's self-professed memoir, *How to Understand Israel in Sixty Days or Less* (2010), against her more recent documentary comic, *Rolling Blackouts* (2016), Schmid explores how such genres are actively *performed* through a range of para-textual and in-textual claims. Cutting across and uniting both

genres is, perhaps most importantly, the figure of the witness, which as *Maus* so amply demonstrated, and as Chute (2016) has since elaborated, remains central to the ever-thickening relationship between comics, trauma, and documentary form.

Witnessing and Working Through

Critiques of event-based models of trauma have been spearheaded by recent efforts to decolonise trauma studies (Gibbs, 2014: 241-242). Taking histories of empire and colonialism into their purview, and melding these more expansive accounts with postcolonial and decolonial analytical perspectives, scholars such as Kalí Tal (1996), Stef Craps (2012), Sonya Andermahr (2016), and many others, have emphasised the Eurocentrism latent in the still hegemonic psychoanalytic models of trauma. Drawing on the work of Franz Fanon, Aimé Cesaire, and Hannah Arendt, this body of work has also challenged the 'aesthetic elitism' of trauma studies that tends to prioritize formal 'aporia' and 'fragmentation', often at the expense of divergent forms that document slower and more structural forms of traumatising violence (see Craps et al., 2015: 919).

In his pathbreaking article 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?', David Lloyd is keen to point out that 'in most colonised societies coercive violence is a constant presence' (2000: 218). Colonialism's traumatic impact occurs not as an instantaneous, catastrophic event (though of course such events did take place), but is rather reproduced through the underlying societal fabric of first colonial and then postcolonial conditions (see Fanon, 2008). Lloyd therefore calls for a focus on instances of 'melancholy survival', or 'forms of *living on* that do not simply preserve belated and dysfunctional practices, but [contain] potentialities for producing and reproducing a life that lies athwart [colonial] modernity' (219). As several commentators have noted, comics, with their dynamic narrative form and tendency to fill in the 'footnotes' of history (Sacco, 2009; Salmi, 2016), constitute a kind of 'postcolonial textuality' (Mehta and Mukherji, 2015: 2). They are poised to document the

enduring survivals that Lloyd argues are needed to produce alternative models not only of trauma, but of recovery as well.

Leila Abdelrazzaq's *Baddawi* (2015), a graphic biography of the author's Palestinian father that documents his displacement during the Nakba of 1948 and his subsequent childhood in a Lebanese refugee camp, engages in exactly such work. In her chapter for this collection, Haya Saud Alfarhan (Chapter 9) reads Abdelrazzaq's comic as a genealogical project that, though composed from abstract forms and stylised images, nevertheless insists on Palestinian history as lived and embodied. At the same time, Alfarhan pursues a critique that recurs throughout this book and that questions dominant conceptions of readerly witnessing in comics. Sidonie Smith and others have convincingly argued that comics present 'boxes of witnessing' that 'intensify the affect of empathetic identification' between comics' readers and the subjects those comics depict (2011: 62; see also Polak, 2017). But Alfarhan remains wary of such claims to empathy and the structural traumas they might obscure. As she contends, *Baddawi* pushes back against depoliticised humanitarian narratives that, in their prioritisation of empathetic—and yet still Eurocentric—readerly responses, tend to smooth over the material violence of colonial history.

This critique leads Alfarhan to formulate an alternative mode of witnessing, one that for Edward Said, writing in his introduction to Sacco's *Palestine*, 'has the power to detain us, to keep us from impatiently wandering off' (2003: v). As Chute has so convincingly shown, comics produce models of witnessing that resist contemporary wound cultures by reintegrating 'an ethics of attention' into the readerly regarding of the pain of others (2016: 50; see also Sontag, 2004). This is an implicated form of witnessing, one that refuses to lose sight of the structural and historical inequalities that continue to perpetuate colonial and postcolonial violence and its traumatic effects. Candida Rifkind picks up on these concerns (Chapter 17), expanding conventional models of readerly witnessing by focusing on comics' documentation of Canadian migrant detention centres and Europe's increasingly militarised border infrastructures. Reading for a range of formal techniques developed by artists such as Tings Chak and Kate Evans, she shows how these comics *implicate* readers in the traumatic

violence of aggressive border regimes and policies of refugee detention. The result is not an accusatory or disciplinary invocation upon the reader, but the cultivation of an 'intimate' witnessing, one that produces a shared affective agency between Western readers and migrant subjects.

This interrogative challenge to the figure of the witness in art—and, relatedly, of art as witness—returns us to this book's unsettling of the now reified trauma paradigm, which rests in turn on models of witnessing perhaps most influentially outlined by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in their landmark study, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992). Theorising 'literature and art as a precocious mode of witnessing', Felman and Laub find themselves drawn to a language of 'frames', 'perception', and the 'nonrepresentational' (xviii-xx), anticipating that tempting alignment of an emerging trauma paradigm with the architecture of the comics form. Chute, in her own engagement with Felman's work, describes this as comics' 'peculiar connection to expressing trauma', returning us through Felman's emphasis on the '*textualisation of the context*' (1992: xv) to Adorno's 'thinking that thinks against itself' (2007: 365) and then back again to draw out her own reading of comics as artistic works that 'write against themselves' (2016: 33-34).

Unpacking and building on these recursive genealogies, this book argues that comics not only thematise and textualise trauma, but actively function as innovative sites wherein increasingly sophisticated models of ethical witnessing are laid out. Ian Hague (Chapter 11), for example, offers an attentive discussion of three specific methods—folding, cutting, and reassembling—that artists have used to demand from readers a participatory, *material* engagement with their documentation of trauma. Importantly, the result is not an uncritical transference of trauma from witness to reader, but rather an interpellation of the reader as an implicated participant in the literal (and yet still metaphoric) construction of trauma's shape. Drawing on Caruth's work allows Hague to configure these readerly activities as tactile metaphors for trauma's somatic manifestations, temporal elongations, and structural repetitions, even as he asserts the comics themselves as generative of new narrative shapes through which trauma might be documented.

Their important work notwithstanding, Felman, Laub, and Caruth have come under scrutiny by efforts to decolonise trauma studies for their lack of substantive gender, race, or class analysis, and for failing to look beyond a 'European tradition' (Tal, 1996: n.pag.). By taking non-European comics into their survey, several chapters in this collection do two things: first, they reveal how an uncritical conformity to a Eurocentric trauma paradigm risks overlooking narratives of traumatic suffering that are documented in other forms that do not *con*form to it (see Craps, 2012: 43; Gibbs, 2014: 246); and second, they insist that we pay increased attention to the ways in which trauma narratives circulate *beyond* national borders, morphing and modulating as they go (Stevens, 2016: 28).

For example, in their reading of three short comics from the graphic anthology *This Side, That Side* (2013), A.P. Payal and Rituparna Sengupta (Chapter 8) explore how a number of writers and artists have used the graphic narrative form to reassess the horrific violence resulting from the 1947 Partition of India, the largest mass migration in recorded history. Honing in on a number of formal techniques and genre-blending strategies, they argue that these comics defy colonialism's enduring artificial borders and still dominant historiographies. The result, they contend, is the creation of a new collective memory culture, one that is able to heal the suppressed social traumas that continue to haunt the postcolonial nation-states of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. Michael Goodrum (Chapter 4), too, unpacks the fraught and often politicised tensions between national traumas, imperialist foreign policies, and circulating cultural narratives that seek to consolidate (yet sometimes inadvertently dislodge) hegemonic power. Focusing on the figure of the zombie, he shows how the undead surface in 1950s US horror comics not only as a racist and orientalist trope in the service of empire, but as a symptom of a larger traumatic guilt that works to undermine the narrative structures enlisted in support of it.

For traumas arising from contexts of colonialism, global labour exploitation, and more recently, climate change, if readers are not necessarily direct perpetrators in a specific catastrophe, they are certainly more than innocent bystanders. As Rothberg argues, witnesses to such phenomena are '*implicated subjects*, beneficiaries of a system that generates dispersed and uneven experiences of

trauma and well-being simultaneously' (2014: xv). Such contexts draw attention to degrees of inaction and structural complicity, forcing the reader-as-witness into a new ethical bind that problematises the simplistic binary of perpetrator and victim. The blurring of these roles is an especially fraught issue in the study and documentation of trauma, even in situations where the boundaries between them appear clearly delineated. While some reject outright the notion that perpetrators of violence can themselves be subject to trauma (Kansteiner, 2004: 194), others insist that the categories of 'victim' and 'traumatised' need to be thoroughly decoupled to avoid an uncritical over-identification of trama 'with innocent victimhood' (Craps et al., 2015: 920). For Gibbs, the unwillingness even to consider instances of 'perpetrator trauma' might itself be a political act of erasure, one that strategically silences questions about the manipulation of collective trauma to justify further cycles of violence (2014: 243). Probing the ethics of these sticky complexities in this volume, Alexandra Lloyd (Chapter 3) surveys several recent German comics that risk social taboos by documenting memories of German suffering during World War II. As her analysis shows, it is the documentary qualities of the comics form that allows these stories to be articulated as 'multidirectional' rather than 'competitive' accounts of suffering and trauma (Rothberg, 2009: 3).

Because this is a book that works hard to foreground the theoretically generative and conceptually *productive* work that graphic narrative does in relation to trauma and its documentation, we have also included three short comics by three rightly celebrated contemporary artists: Nicola Streeten, as well known for her own comics scholarship as she is for her graphic memoir of 'grief and recovery', *Billy, Me, and You* (2011); Una, whose *Becoming Unbecoming* is the subject of Ana Baeza Ruiz's analysis in Chapter 13, and is moreover a formally instructive graphic narrative for many of the comics discussed throughout the book; and Bruce Mutard, whose many graphic novels to date have tackled topics as diverse as imperialism, socialism, sex, and masculinity.

We have positioned these three comics at the end of the book's four main sections, but they are far more than benign reflections or artistic interludes—quite the opposite. All of these artists use their pages to interrogate, self-reflexively, not only what it is to feel or experience trauma, but more

specifically what it is to *document* that trauma in comics. Streeten, in her comic (Chapter 6), reflects on the afterlife of *Billy, Me, and You*, documenting her own attempts to navigate the many traumatic narratives that have been *returned* to her by readers of her graphic memoir since its publication. Meanwhile Una's contribution, 'Crying in the Chapel' (Chapter 10), recounts a singular moment of traumatic breakdown, before rebuilding a narrative of resilience and recovery that conflates the architecture of the comics page with the foundations of the titular chapel in which it takes place. Finally, Mutard's 'First Person Third' (Chapter 15) begins with a reflection on the possible traumas of toxic masculinity, before the narrative disrupts to make readers aware of the perspectival choices—both their limitations and affordances—that underpin his comic's documentary form. In this visually critical work, these artistic contributions interact with and interrogate the chapters, interrupting the academic discourse to insist over and over again on their own productive agency. In so doing, they reiterate the book's overarching contention: that comics, through their documentary efforts, play a central role in moulding the shape trauma takes today.

If for Gillian Whitlock the comics form invites readers 'to see, feel, or think differently in the effort of producing narrative closure' (2006: 977), the chapters and comics collected here are cautious in making such claims, troubling the notion of narrative closure as it has long been said to be contained in the panel-gutter movement. Reading the comics form as a kind of 'working-through' of trauma—which should, as LaCapra contends, remain 'an open, self-questioning process that never attains closure' (2001: xxiii)—many of the chapters here emphasise the futures opened up by graphic narrative, rather than settling on the pasts they close down. This book is concerned with the way in which comics document traumatic pasts, not trauma that *is passed*. In many instances, the traumas documented here are not over, and their (re)narration continues to structure the many political, social, and cultural contexts in which they are found.

With this in mind, it is important to acknowledge that this book does not foreground the process of comics reading and creation as itself a necessarily therapeutic exercise, something that has been suggested elsewhere. Noting the 'connection between graphic representation and therapeutic

practice', Joshua Leone suggests that the reading of war comics might help sufferers of trauma to better 'restructure [their] fragmented time, memory, and narrative' (2017: 244-246). Køhlert, too, argues that comics have a therapeutic capacity, allowing patients to externalise and thus to work through 'visually encoded traumatic memory' (2015: 129) as 'a kind of visual scriptotherapy' (2019: 20). Diederik Oostdijk, in turn, finds the process of working through trauma to be itself inscribed into Miriam Katin's comics, as she attempts to 'draw herself out of it' (2018: 86). There is more work to be done here, and if the questions of art as therapy—and of therapeutic art—are not this book's primary concern, they of course still *stick* to much of its genealogical work. After all, even when working in the more 'cultural' terrain of trauma studies or with the supposedly 'formalistic' surface of the artist's page, it becomes lastingly evident that the impulse to document trauma in comics is driven by a will to futurity—one that seeks to resolve past conflicts, to heal old wounds, and to build toward survival and recovery.

With their tendency to self-reflexivity and their interpellation of the reader as witness, comics are drawn (sometimes compulsively) to the documentation of the processes by which trauma is socially constructed, publicly circulated, and retrospectively experienced—whether by firsthand survivors, secondhand witnesses, or postmemory generations. As the chapters included here collectively show, comics are not formal mirrors that simply reflect dominant symbolic frameworks, established cultural narratives, or psychic symptoms, but are in fact a generative force at the core of trauma itself, moulding and melding it into new shapes. By revealing comics as a form that continually insists on producing new narrative models with which to negotiate, grapple with, and document trauma, this book looks to new ways in which it might be worked through in the future.

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