Autoethnography and the Graphic Novel

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To my stepmother, Ray, for giving me my first graphic novel. I could never thank you enough.

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By

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The aim of this paper is to analyze autobiographical graphic novels through a lens of autoethnography, and through this analysis make a case for various graphic novels as ethnographic texts while also gaining an understanding of how the graphic novel format is valuable to ethnographic research. I supplement my argument with my own autoethnographic comic series, which I analyze using concepts from memory and ordinary life studies in anthropology. In writing this paper I hope to contribute to the ongoing discussion regarding alternative methods of conducting and representing ethnographic research, while adding to the already existing field of comics scholarship.

Introduction

I can recall the summer before I started middle school, when my stepmother gifted me a copy of Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical work entitled *Persepolis*, a book I might never have picked up on my own. Little did she know what an impact that gift would have on me. it opened doors to thoughts and feelings I had not yet considered. For the first time in my life foreign worlds felt digestible to me. I understood Marjane's world and I sympathized with her while also gaining a new knowledge of a place and people entirely unfamiliar to me previously. I have *Persepolis* to thank for much of my personal growth, it is a story I frequently find myself returning to throughout the years since I first read it. I have been a fan of fiction works my entire life, from novels to comics, manga, and videogames; however, *Persepolis* opened my eyes to works of non-fiction as well, autobiographical pieces in particular. It would be many years before I found other graphic novels that could compare to *Persepolis*, but Satrapi's words and drawings have always been meaningful points of return for me.

Persepolis was not just a story for me to absorb and move past as I did with many other books. It stuck with me, informed me of a world and politics I had no conception of otherwise, it made me empathize with someone I did not know in a way that left me in tears. It left me thinking for hours on end, I would return to it at different points in my adolescence as a source of inspiration, hope, and advice. In my studying and reflection of *Persepolis* I have come to inquire about the role that comics, manga, and graphic novels (and other forms of sequential visual storytelling such as zines and other self-published materials) can play in the world of anthropology and the study of ourselves. How can comics be used as a tool by which we can further investigate the worlds around us? The realities we try to describe can be communicated so differently through comics and

visuals, it is only natural to believe the mode of autobiographical (and other) comic making should provide a novel way of reading, writing, and experiencing ethnographic research.

I argue that *Persepolis*, as well as many comics and graphic novels of a similar nature, can be read not only through the lens of autobiography, but also as ethnographic. The purpose of my reading autobiographical comics as autoethnographies is to further understand how the author makes use of visual elements to describe the world around them, how this may speak to larger ideas and goals of the text, as well as constructing a literal illustration of the author's reality. What makes the autoethnographic fascinating is the elevated importance of the seemingly mundane and ordinary, the parts of life we rarely think to analyze. These mundanities are attuned to in personal narratives, specifically visual ones such as autobiographical comics, by existing in the minutiae of the author's ordinary life.

When Art Spigelman writes of his father's experiences as a Holocaust survivor in *Maus*, he actively makes the choice to include the moments in which he meets with his father to get the details of the story. Many of these scenes involve Art pushing his father to tell the story in a linear way, urging him to stay on topic, and occasionally arguing about finances and other unrelated things simply because the conversation led there(Spiegelman 1980). Spiegelman's frustration with his father, as well as his love, admiration, and often anger are

central to the narrative of *Maus.* In that sense, *Maus* is not just a biographical narrative about Vladek Spiegelman but rather an autobiographical story about the author, which includes his relationship to his father. *Maus*'s dedication to an accurate re-telling, not of Vladek's life, but of the son's experience with putting together all the fragments that Vladek gave him, as well as his own introspection on his father's life and the process of writing about it makes *Maus* a solid example of autoethnographic writing.

Through my analysis of various autobiographical comics, graphic novels, and self-published comic materials I will apply a lens of autoethnography for the purpose of gaining a new understanding and varied reading of the text. By viewing these texts through the lens of autoethnography rather than simply autobiographical, I will complicate their meanings and overall contributions to the genre of autobiographies, while also challenging the modes through which ethnographies can be written. This added filter of autoethnography serves the purpose of allowing us the opportunity to investigate deeper meanings of what is constructed within these graphic novels, it allows us to look at the sense of the ordinary that gets constructed throughout the narrative, the representations of boredom and the use of memory. By applying this lens we can make new takeaways about the broader cultural meanings and devices that form these comics and graphic novels.

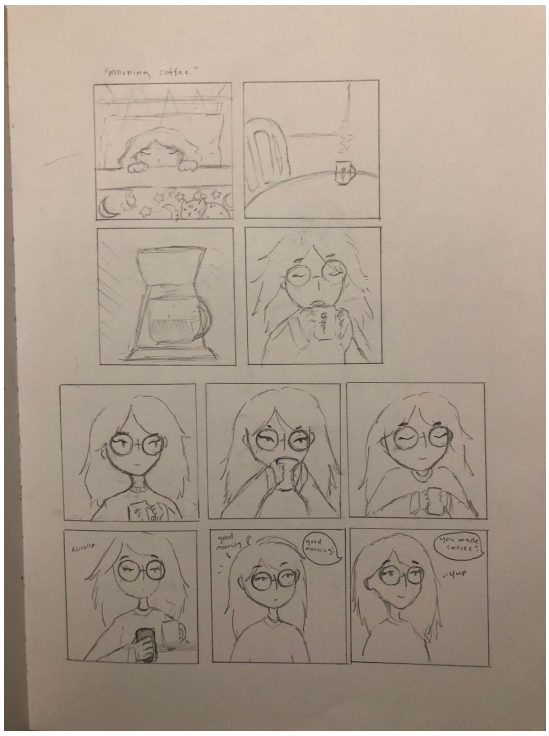
My goal is not to define terms as rigid structures in this thesis, but rather to understand the flexibility in the meanings of words like ethnography, autoethnography, and so on. Rather than explicitly tell you what I believe these terms to mean, I would rather offer a general idea of their meaning that makes room for us to evaluate the texts in question through a new lens. Rather than assuming there is one correct meaning of autoethnography, I suggest a reading of autobiographical graphic novels that uses elements of autoethnography as understood by me, for the purpose of gaining a nuanced reading of graphic memoirs such as *Perseopolis* and *Maus*.

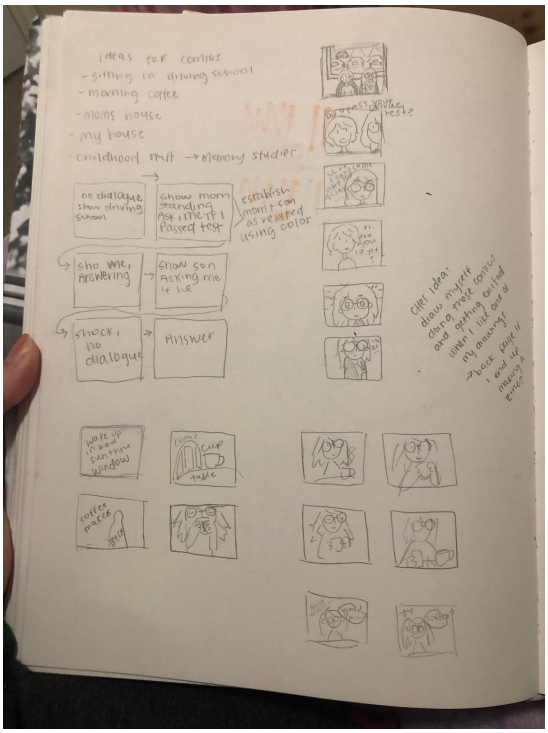
When I talk about the ethnographic, and the production of research that is uniquely characterized by the ethnographic, I speak to a more contemporary reading of the term. Georgia Wall writes that ethnography can be understood as a “necessarily subjective perspective, conditioned by the viewpoint of the person or people writing. It is therefore a search for meaning in context, rather than objective or generalizable truths...” (Wall, 2018) Meaning that the purpose of ethnography is not to understand a fundamental truth about a people, but rather to weave together a meaning defined by particular moments in a particular context through the eyes of one (or several) people who cannot be removed from their own realities. In an interview with Marion Demossier and Margaret Hills de Zarate, Wall establishes the complex ways ethnography can change and evolve, how it complicates what constitutes research data and how its methods are in a

constant state of flux as related to the given context. Whether it be in the field or in the writing process, ethnography is a matter of dealing with people, both the subjects of the research as well as the researcher themself (Wall, 2018). Ethnography can take many shapes and forms, while historically being focused on identifying the “other” from a Western perspective, contemporary anthropologists from all backgrounds sometimes engage in studying their own communities, or even themselves in their work. Essential to ethnography is the constant attunement to one’s own positionality in the context of the field, the practice of reflexivity. In order to write about a world, one must identify their own positionality, preconceived notions, biases, and relationship to the context.

Traditionally, ethnographies have been products of the written word, but over time have come to include photographic images, documentary videos, and in the present moment even sketches and comics ranging from doodles in the ethnographer’s field notes to fully fledged comic-book form ethnographies such as *Public Space, Information, Accessibility,Technology, and diversity at Oslo University* (Bartoszko, 2011). The autoethnographic is particularly fascinating due to its usage of the ethnographic form to examine one’s own positionality and lived experience from the unique perspective of the self, to expand on a world one inhabits with the same depth and care that is applied to writing about “the other.” In viewing autobiographies through the lens of autoethnographies, we can further investigate their importance in both the world of comics as well as anthropology.

I will supplement my analysis of comic-autoethnographies by attempting to engage in a personal autoethnographic practice myself. I will use the comic format as a mode through which I explore my own ethnographic reality. When I talk about ethnographic reality as opposed to simply saying my own reality, I mean to speak of ethnography in light of my analysis of the text I discuss in this thesis. I refer to my personal comics as ethnographic in the same sense that I am viewing *Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *Fun Home* as ethnographic. I wish to push the definition of what can be ethnographic by taking inspiration in my comics from the aforementioned graphic novels (among others) as well as more unconventional ethnographic writing such as Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*, I will explore ordinariness, memory, and ethnography of the self by producing small, four to ten panel comics depicting my day to day life. The goal of this practice is to exemplify the concept of comic making with an autoethnographic intention in mind, to showcase how the ordinary can be conceptualized visually and become part of the ethnographic methodology and form.





The methodology behind my comics is, in essence, a practice of capturing the moments of my everyday existence that I do not frequently attune myself to, and taking time to sketch them out as a mode of autoethnography, a reflection of my own world. In the crafting of my comics I did what came naturally to me as someone who has been reading them for years. I drew them traditionally, in my sketchbook with pencil as the ideas came to me. Many began as rough sketches and were then redrawn to something more “concrete.” From there, I took photos of the sketches and used Adobe Illustrator to line and color them. This process, while painstakingly slow, allowed for me to reflect further upon the comics I had made. Spending hours coloring and detailing my sketches allowed me to flesh

them out to the fullest extent, to really think and consider how I am representing a reality known only to myself. How can I establish my reality to others in a way that is meaningful? That captures both the ordinary and the seemingly unordinary of my daily routine? How can I reach people with my comics in the same way that the works of Art Spiegelman and Marjane Satrapi reached me? How can I make my personal ordinary into something worthy of the reader's consideration? These questions were central to my personal project, as my goal was to draw with an autoethnographic intention in order to further understand my argument with regards to the graphic novels I have spent time reading and analyzing.

I use drawing as a mode of understanding, of experimenting with autoethnography, capturing the ordinary, and engaging with my own reading of the works of other graphic novelists. The form of my comics is similar to both Kathleen's Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* in which she captures the "ordinary" in a series of meaningful vignettes as well as the short format comics I grew up reading. I hope to communicate a certain affect with each comic, to paint a picture of my ordinary world that is intriguing and sometimes humorous.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into the following sections: comics in the context of anthropology, defining and understanding autoethnography, the theories of ordinary life and memory studies, and a look at my own experimental autoethnography. In reading this thesis it is important to understand some key

concepts like: ethnography, autobiography, autoethnography, as well as theories of everyday life. I will expand on these topics by using examples from graphic novels (though none are self described autoethnographies) and other texts to illustrate the role they play in the overall narrative. Finally, in the conclusion of this thesis I will be connecting my own autoethnographic practice to the work I have done in analyzing the works of Alison Bechdel, Art Spigelman, Marjane Satrapi, and Guy Delisle, with influence from scholars in the fields of ordinary life and memory studies.

In order to frame our discussion I begin with a brief overview of what role comics play in academia and scholarship more broadly, and then hone in on how anthropology has adapted comics in the practice of ethnographic research, with further elaboration on ongoing projects such as the University of Toronto Press: EthnoGRAPHIC series and their first published graphic novel ethnography *Lissa* by Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye. I will also examine the broader discourse of field sketching as a means to expand the ways in which we conduct research and relay information, as well as how anthropologists such as Michael Taussig have used this method to acquire novel insights into ethnographic fieldwork practice.

From there I will delve into the term “autoethnography” and how I will be using it to reframe autobiographical texts. Through the initial examination of the term and its history in the discourse of anthropology I establish a flexible

understanding of autoethnography with regards to the text being examined. By using the filter of autoethnography to view graphic novels I will elaborate on how this reading allows us to dig deeper into the nuances of books like *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel and *Spinning* by Tillie Walden. These particular examples help to illustrate the usefulness of the authors control over a perceived reality and their establishment of a stylized landscape which further constructs their perception of the ordinary.

The aim of the following section regarding ordinary life studies is to tie in theory with the work being done in autobiographical (and as we are calling them, autoethnographic) graphic novels. By looking at the writing of Ben Highmore and Kathleen Stewart we can establish a sense of what the ordinary looks and feels like in varying contexts, including Guy Delisle's *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea*. The establishment of a personal ordinary, like Delisle's construction of Pyongyang, North Korea, and how boredom is represented in his world. Tying in concepts from the former section about the stylized landscape as a tool for establishing an ethnographic reality, I will look at the version of North Korea that Delisle offers the reader through the lens of the autoethnographic. With a further understanding of how viewing these texts through this lens can provide deeper meaning and theoretical importance to the work that is already being done in the telling of a personal narrative, I emphasize the unique role that the comic or graphic novel can play in an autoethnographic narrative.

Taking a look at Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* I provide an understanding of the role of memory (as practice and theory) in the crafting of the autoethnographic, with influence of our culturally defined sense of the ordinary as well as how memory influences the establishment of an individual ethnographic reality. Each of these aforementioned texts is unique in its ethnographic value, with Barry's work emphasizing how memory and reflection on the past is essential in the understanding of her personal "demons," while Spigelman exercises reflexive practice in his re-telling of his father's experiences. *Persepolis* creates a relatable and universal childhood while also honing in on what makes her world unique to her, establishing an ordinary that necessitates the reader come to terms with Satrapi's ethnographic reality.

In the following section I examine my own experimental autoethnographic comic strips with the analysis of the aforementioned texts in mind. I will evaluate how what I have established about preexisting works comes to play in my own autoethnographic practice. What can be gleaned from the format I chose, the value of smaller scale comics rather than a longer-form personal narrative, and how this relates to both ordinary life and memory studies as well as the application of the autoethnographic lens will all be addressed with regards to my personal comics.

I will conclude by addressing the analysis of the chosen graphic novels with regards to my experimental autoethnography and the greater cultural meanings provided by this practice and overall discussion of comics as a point of ethnographic interest.

Comics in the Context of Anthropology

Along with the push for graphic novels and comic books to be accepted as a respectable form of writing in academic spaces, there has also been a movement to engage in comics and field sketching for the purpose of exploring new methods of ethnographic writing more broadly (Brackenbury 2015). Scott Smith writes extensively on the role of comics in scholarship in his essay entitled “Who gets to speak? The making of comics scholarship” in the *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*. Smith writes that, although fans, journalists, and other non-academics had been writing and engaging with comics as a scholarly material since the 1970s, academia did not catch up until the popularization of the graphic novel in the 1990s, with the publication of Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, Alan Moore and David Gibbon’s *Watchmen*, and the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. (Smith 2015) Though Smith pushes back on Graphic Novels being of inherently more literary value (as all of the aforementioned graphic novels were serialized prior to their publication as full-length books) the longer format is undoubtedly tied to the establishment of these stories as literature (Smith 2015).

The establishment of a field of academic study and theory dedicated to understanding comics, heavily bolstered by the writings (and comics) of Scott McCloud and Will Eisner, has now opened the door for comics and other forms of art to be present in ethnographic research and writing. The central ideas behind using sketches, artwork, comics, and graphic novels to present ethnographic research is rooted in a desire to engage in new and more progressive forms of representation of the field and its subjects, as well as to communicate the research in a more accessible format (Brackenbury 2015). The editor of the EthnoGRAPHIC series writes:

> What was happening in anthropology was an attempt to capture the complex nuances of what was going on in the field. It wasn't about empirically deciphering patterns and principles, but what Michael D. Jackson described as "a fascination for the mysterious, emergent, and conflicted character of all human relationships."
> It wasn't a huge leap then to put these two developments together. The way comics lent itself to both narrative AND a kind of visceral relaying of the more affective elements of ethnographic research made for a good fit. Add to that the feedback I had gathered from instructors about students' resistance to reading regular ethnographies (no matter how well written) and their desire for more visual material, and this all seemed like such a great idea I wondered why no one had thought of it! (Brackenbury 2015)

The growing interest in graphic novels as a form of literature since the publication of Art Spigelman's *Maus* has since led to increased popularity of the genre as a whole, in both academic spaces and beyond. *Maus* is cited as a turning point in the literary value of comics in both the University of Toronto Press ethnoGRAPHIC series, as well as in the *Graphic Medicine Manifesto* (Czerwiec

et. al 2015), a project dedicated to using the graphic novel format to “reflect and change cultural perceptions of medicine, relating the subjective patient/carer/provider experience, enabling discussion of difficult subjects, [and] helping other sufferers or carers.” (Ian Williams via Graphic Medicine.org 2007) Projects such as these illustrate this new found role of comic-making in research and research presentation, both in anthropology and related fields.

Michael Taussig has written extensively on the role of diary keeping and field sketching in his ethnographic research. He describes a mode of understanding an ethnographic context by way of keeping diaries and journals, with sketches and doodles alongside his own writings. He describes this mode as particularly useful during his stay in Columbia when paramilitary groups were actively killing civilians where he was staying. Taussig notes that “...I found the diary form congenial to getting the word out about the paras, and getting it out in such a way that the phenomena in question were not so much explained (away) but sat there in their rawness, as mediated truth.”(Taussig 2003) He describes this particular moment in Columbia through his own experiences, his own sense of reality and the world, irreducibly entangling his own experiences with those of others, including interviews and ethnographic research.

Both the Center for Imaginative Ethnography as well as the Journal of American Anthropology have published blog series dedicated to smaller scale practices of comic ethnographies, some of which include detailed outlines and

histories of NAGPRA and related archeological work (Atalay et. al. 2019), Grecian food banks (Theodossopoulos 2016), and the lives of Fillippino caregivers (Balmes 2019). Many of the aforementioned blog post series were also used as tools of ethnographic writing practice in the classroom, allowing students to engage in a new form of ethnographic representation. Similarly, the University of Toronto Press has published a blog series correlated with their EthnoGRAPHIC project. All of these articles point to the benefits of working in a comic format, primarily rooted in new modes of collaboration with interlocutors in the field, new forms of representation, and new ways of attuning to one's surroundings when using drawing as a notetaking methodology.

The University of Toronto Press has published three graphic novels in their EthnoGraphic series, which utilizes the graphic novel form as a way to present ethnographic research. The growing desire for more imaginative and collaborative (Brackenbury 2015) ethnographic research is at the heart of this project, and the cited goals are to "create scholarly informed narratives that are accessible, open-ended, aesthetically rich, and that foster greater cross-cultural understanding." In a blog post made by the editor of the series, the goals of the project with regards to ethnographic and anthropology are rooted in 1. A desire to address issues in the field related to representation, collaboration, and participant observation among others as well as more direct involvement of the research participants in the writing process, 2. To build understanding across cultural,

ideological, class, and disciplinary divides, 3. To bring contemporary anthropological research to a broader audience, with an emphasis on students, and 4. To create a space of collaboration among anthropologists, artists, and anthropologist artists. (Brackenbury 2017) The series currently has three published works, the first of which is a collaborative book entitled *Lissa* by Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye, illustrated by Sarula Bao and Caroline Brewer with lettering by Marc Parenteau.

The book is a work of fiction based on the research of two anthropologists working in different sites: Sherine Hamdy in Egypt and Coleman Nye in the United States. Their research was tied to the relationship between social contexts and medical decision making and motivation. They compared stories from their research, Hamdy's story of a young woman suffering from kidney failure in Egypt who refused to accept a kidney transfer operation, and Nye's recounting of young women in the Netherlands response to testing positive for cancer causing gene mutations, which became the foundation for *Lissa*'s narrative and the inspiration for the two main characters Layla and Anna. The author's goal was not to simply state that their responses are different due to the cultural background of the characters alone, for fear of relying on orientalist stereotypes of Egypt and Muslim populations more broadly. So instead, they place emphasis on the question of decision making with regards to the disparity between the doctor and the patient. Hamdy explains that the medical issues

experienced by the girls lie within their connection to other people, not just the person whose body is affected. Layla's father, who is experiencing kidney failure refuses to accept a kidney out of fear for the other person, as well as the debt it may bring to his family. Anna, on the other hand, is driven by the loss of her mother to the same illness, whose loss she has never been able to stop grieving. (Hamdy et. al., 2017)

Lissa follows the story of two young girls, one American and the other Egyptian, who spent a majority of their childhood together in Egypt. At the center of the story is a message about the realities of medical institutions, healthcare, and revolution. The narrative follows Anna as she loses her mother to breast cancer as a child and grows up only to find out she carries the same genetic disposition to the illness. Anna deals with the trauma of this realization, and after months of research comes to the conclusion that she must take preventative action and have a double mastectomy. Across the world, revolution is brewing in Egypt and Layla is a young medical student who has recently found out her father is suffering from kidney failure. Layla's perception of medical justice is heavily focused on tradition, politics, and accessibility. Her father needs a new kidney, but refuses to accept one from his family for reasons rooted not only in religious beliefs, but also for fear of the well-being of his family both medically and monetarily. Beyond this, her brother Ahmad desperately hopes to give his father his kidney but cannot because he has tested positive for Hepatitis C,

although Abu Hassan (their father) has refused to accept his kidney regardless. Layla and Anna are reunited over the worsening state of her father, but the two quarrel when Layla realizes that Anna wants to have preventative surgery despite being healthy. “Here we don’t have medicine. There, you have too much! We’re fighting everyday just to get treatments for what we have *now*, let alone what we might get in the future!” (Hamdy et. al. 2017, 119) The two do not understand each other, and this struggle is illustrated throughout the book in the various instances of medical injustice presented.

Layla becomes a doctor during the revolution, treating protestors who are dying on the frontlines, with Anna rushing out to deliver her supplies amidst all the chaos. Ahmad loses his eye over the course of the revolution, bringing the family even more tragedy and sorrow. When Anna decides to go through with her surgery, she returns to Egypt without telling Layla about it. When Layla happens to glance at Anna in the shower she notices her scars and assumes Anna had gotten breast cancer afterall. Layla is guilty over her former disagreement with her friend, but once she realizes Anna was always healthy she does not know what to think. The two of them may never really understand each other’s motivations and relationship with medicine, as they are rooted to both complex cultural notions but also their individual ties to other people in their lives, but they come to understand one another through the needs of the revolution. Anna understands Layla’s passion, and rather than trying to dissuade her from going to

the frontlines, she begins to offer her aid as well, despite being in the recovery process.

What is fascinating about *Lissa*, is its ability to communicate complex anthropological theory regarding our culturally coded understandings of healthcare and the medical industrial complex in an accessible format that is not only excellent in its storytelling, but beautifully and intentionally illustrated. *Lissa* deals with the issue of difference in motivation by positioning its two protagonists in parallel situations in order to emphasize how varied healthcare and our responses to our medical needs are. The author does not have to explicitly state this phenomena, rather it is illustrated by the character's interactions, the situations they encounter, and their dialogue or lack thereof. Anna and Layla approach their respective medical issues differently, and are often at odds with one another despite facing similar contradictions. *Lissa* tells a personal story, it captures the ordinary anxieties of illness and medicine in a truly thought provoking way, while also framing the story in the context of the Egyptian revolution in the same way that *Persepolis* uses a historical framework to elaborate on Satrapi's sense of the ordinary and her life growing up in a particular political moment. *Lissa* is the same in that it offers us the structure of a political reality to further examine the disparities in our two protagonists worlds in relation to medical injustice. The book conveys the complexities of our life,

complicated by political realities but not always defined by geographic boundaries.

The author's aim is to capture the essence of what Hamdy refers to as "the social embeddedness of the patient" (Hamdy et. al., 2017, 267). By this she is referring to the social obligations one has when considering medical treatment, as Abu Hassan must think not only of himself before accepting the kidney transplant, but also of his family, the people he loves. He knows the operation will be costly, invasive, and potentially devastating to the family in more ways than one. Though he seems to refuse the surgery on religious grounds, the reasoning goes much deeper, it resides not in Abu Hassan's individual fate but the fate of an entire network of people he cares for. Anna has a similar social pressure on her, as somewhat of a caregiver for her mother she has seen the effects of breast cancer up close, she has witnessed the horror of loss to the disease and wants to prevent it for herself not just for her own sake. The idea of the "individual" is central to the theoretical groundwork that makes up Lissa. The story is less about cultural disparities, and more about the similarities between our medical motivations, that being that they are rooted in our social networks.

Besides the EthnoGraphic series, there have been other published ethnographic works in the form of graphic novels, one such example being *Public Space, Information, Accessibility, Technology, and Diversity at Oslo University* by Aleksandra Bartoszko, a comic ethnography described as a "collection of

ethnographic situations" (Bartoszko 2010). Some of these situations are directly observed by the anthropologists while others are based on stories told by the interlocutors involved in the project. The goal of the piece is to improve the lives of students on campus by stories which can function as points of discussion and growth regards to various forms of discrimination students may face. Interestingly, the authors also note that the use of humor and irony throughout the book was a reflection of their interlocutors' feelings during the course of the interviews held with them, but also functioned as a way to clarify certain situations (Bartoszko 2010). Bartoszko states that "these forms of expression also represent our informants' subjective experiences. They reflect the tone, emotions, and comments that were expressed by the students and employees during our conversations with them." (Bartoszko 2010) In an illustrated format, the use of expressions such as humor or irony in a narrative can be reflected in a visual format such that the reader has a greater connection and understanding of the subject. Similarly, in many of the graphic novels cited in this work, expressions such as these are tools of the author's stylized landscape, and the structure of their storytelling.

On Autoethnography

Autoethnography has been cited as far back as David Hanayo's 1979 ethnographic study on Southern California card rooms (Wolcott 2004), originally used to describe the experience of engaging in an ethnographic study in which

one was a member of the community being studied, but has since come to refer to the process of describing and analyzing one's personal experience as a way to further analyze a broader cultural experience, and to challenge ways of researching and representing others (Ellis et al 2011). I use the word "autoethnography" to describe the comics and graphic novels I examine in this thesis, not just to speak to their nature as a personal narratives, but to offer further insight into the ways in which autobiographical works can relate theory to experience in the same vein that Kathleen Stewart writes in "An Autoethnography of What Happens" (Stewart 2013). Stewart describes autoethnographies as "a way to hone in on the singularities in which things actually take place..."(Stewart 2013, 661) as autobiographical comics often attend to the mundanities of our lives in a way that written biographies do not always do. I do not think there needs to be an explicit distinction between autobiographical and autoethnographic comics, but rather autoethnography is a way through which we can read pre-existing autobiographical narratives and reach new conclusions about the overlap between ethnography and autobiography, thus the "autoethnographic comic" is a way of viewing this overlap.

In autobiographical comics, the artist/author has the ability to use visual as well as textual cues to establish the world in which their narrative exists. The author can carefully curate the backdrop to their stories, emphasize the seemingly unimportant and reframe the story with this new visual framework in

place. Guy Delisle uses visual storytelling in his characterization of his stay in North Korea, his depictions of North Koreans and the cityscape of Pyongyang in his 2004 work *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea.* In this book Delisle documents his two month stay in the capital of North Korea while he works on an animation project at a studio there, with several other foreign animators and various other professionals (Delisle 2004). The greyscale world he creates emphasizes both Delisle's imaginig of Pyongyang during his stay as well as common stereotypes of the country itself and anti-communist propoganda more broadly, such as depicting North Koreans as largely the same in appearance and dress. The Pyongyang he creates is futuristic, cold, and repetitive in its architecture. The streets are often shown to be empty and Delisle frequently depicts himself as alone or accompanied only by his guide and/or translator in wide open spaces.

Personal experience in the graphic novel form can be expressed to their fullest, the re-imagining of a scene that only exists in the memory of the author in the form of a stylized landscape that is often not held to the same level of scrutiny and realism as the written word, which is frequently tied to the "real" or documentary "truth". While the written word is capable of the same freedoms as a comic or drawing, issues arise when this format (and others such as photo or video) is used to make claims about what is true or false. Autoethnographic novels explore the considerable amount of leverage that the writer/artist has.

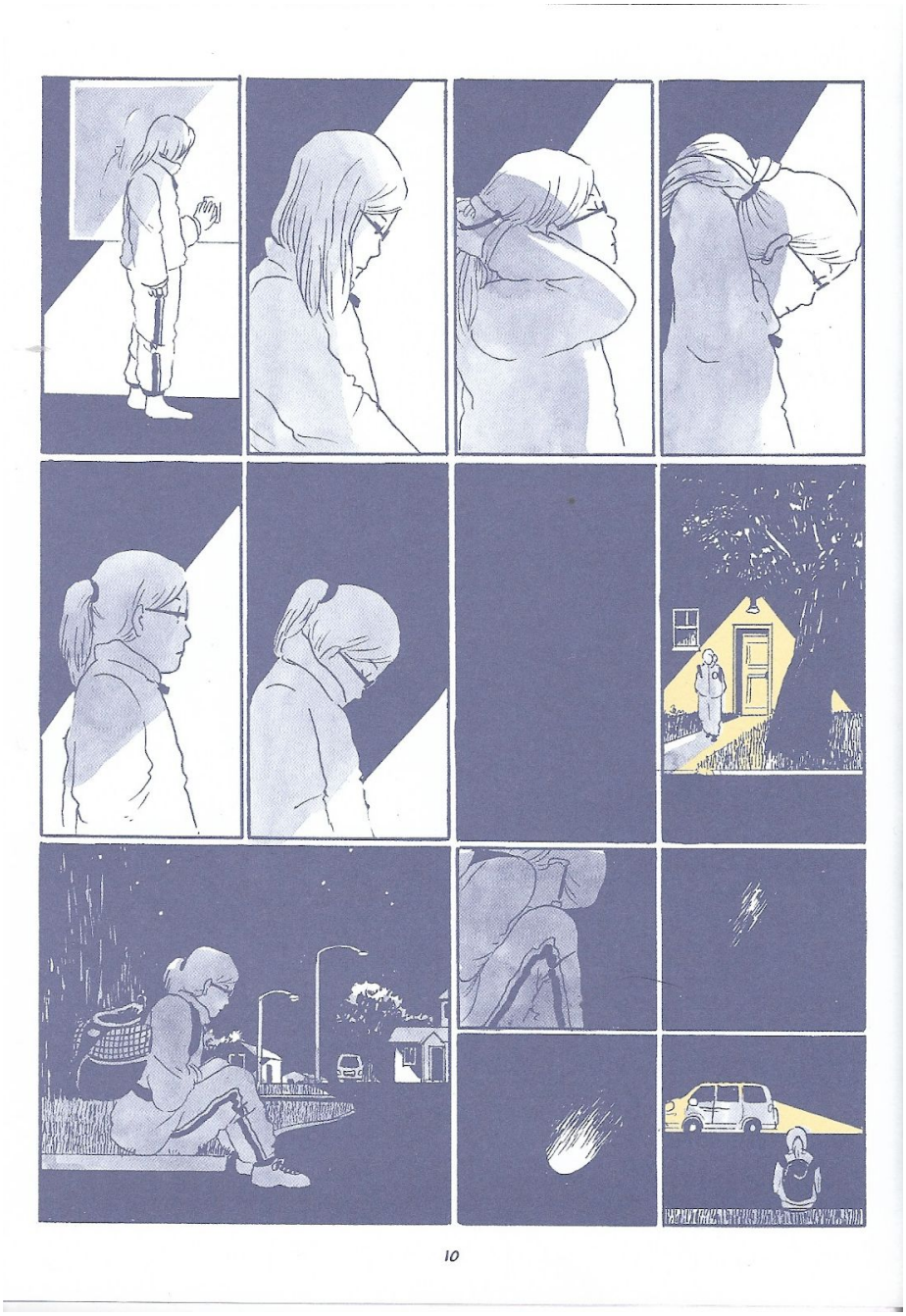
They are allowing us to peek inside a world that is controlled by both the restraints of memory as well as the author's own choices. What to show and how to show it plays out differently in graphic novels because they are able to take a more abstract form. A stylized world can be intentional, driven by childhood memories, meant to evoke a specific tone, or simply a more convenient form of storytelling that forces us to see the big picture rather than focusing too much on the 'reality' that the narrative exists to represent. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* uses its simplified, black and white illustrations to create a sense of relatability and sympathy with the reader. Satrapi's black and white art style recreates her memories in a more "simplified" landscape, placing more emphasis on historical context and offering the reader to seek similarities between themselves and Satrapi despite cultural differences. In contrast, Alison Bechdel invokes a very specific construction of her childhood home in her 2006 graphic novel work *Fun Home*. Bechdel's childhood home is described by her peers as a mansion, a home her father spent much of his life restoring, decorating, and carefully curating to his tastes. This is often written about by Bechdel as a point of contention between her father and the rest of the family, as his aesthetic tastes and obsession with the house's constant upkeep clash with his wife and children's sensibilities. Bechdel creates a detailed reconstruction of her childhood home, complete with the ornate furnishings her father filled it with, as a way to establish both her father's eccentric personality as well as the often tense

atmosphere his eccentricities resulted in. In doing this Bechdel establishes a world, filled with specific objects from her past, relayed to the reader without the convention of photography.

Autoethnography seeks to capture the world of the subject and expand on their lived experiences by means of an ethnographic form of introspection. “Autoethnography, in other words, is the reimagining of the subject-object in scenes of composition of some kind of world, whether that world is a lived identity, a prismatic structure of feeling or thought, a historical present, or the force of potentially animating something…” (Stewart 2013). What I gather from Stewart’s definition here is that autoethnography can function as a way of reframing our individual worlds in a way that is still highly constructed and informed by our individual realities. What we represent when we write of our own world is fascinating because it reflects externally what we experience, it allows us to represent ourselves rather than representing the other. The ways in which we identify ourselves are coded by our cultural backgrounds, and in writing of them we are forced to be reflexive with regards to the world we inhabit. Following Stewart’s line of thought, the richness of the “ordinary” explored in so many autobiographical comics can be expanded upon further by looking at these works from an autoethnographic perspective rather than an ethnographic or biographical perspective on its own. Oftentimes these authors are writing about their day-to-day lives and forming new and concrete ideas about the world they

inhabit through drawing them, stylizing them, and picking out which mundanities are worth exploring in the graphic novel format.

Tillie Walden employs the use of the stylized landscape as a way to depict her coming of age story *Spinning* in a beautiful purple and yellow riso printed comic format. Walden frames the story around her involvement in competitive ice skating from childhood well into her adolescent years. She describes the world around her in the context of a life dominated by ice skating, in which her schedule is constantly oriented around her time spent practicing. What makes this story particularly fascinating is Walden's juxtaposition between scenes of time spent on the ice skating rink and scenes depicting the other particularities of her life and the challenges of growing up. A vast majority of the story is about ice skating, and how this shaped everything else in Walden's life; however, it would be false to say *Spinning* is a story only about ice skating. Rather, ice skating is a discourse Walden employs to make assessments about her childhood, it is the framework she uses to describe her particular 'coming of age.'



When reading *Spinning*, what stood out most to me, when viewing the story through the lens of an autoethnography, was Walden's use of sequences (and sometimes single images that encompass an entire page) with little to no

text present. The larger images are often used to convey a sense of loneliness, of Walden's singular existence within a vast space, such as an ice skating rink or a locker room. The vastness of the world we see Walden inhabit is meant to reflect her internal world, the loneliness we sense throughout her personal narrative. She includes these scenes in order to emphasize what is central to her internal struggle: the feeling of being alone in the world. She uses these specific moments of literal emptiness to compose the world of *Spinning*. Throughout the graphic novel she frequently depicts herself alone, or dealing with the symptomatic loneliness of moving to a new place, having few friends, or being intentionally alienated from one's peers, and sometimes one's own voluntary isolation. The aforementioned sequences are often used to depict scenes that lean heavily into ordinary life studies, they are frequently characterized by ice skating (such as Walden's morning routine before leaving for practice: groggily waking up to the sound of her alarm, pulling on tights, zipping up jacket after jacket to brace herself for the pre-dawn cold, and waiting silently and alone for her carpool to arrive.)

The feeling of loneliness is a key factor in unraveling the themes of *Spinning*. The story starts with Walden arriving to practice, quickly putting on her skates and rushing on to the rink so that she can be alone in the vast, empty space, even if only for a moment. It is here where the importance of the stylized landscape and the author's choice are essential to the crafting of the

autoethnographic novel. We know that, most likely, the ice skating rink that Walden goes to on a daily basis does not sit alone amongst vast, black nothingness, and yet this is how Walden chooses to show it to us. The feeling of being alone is central to her coming of age story, to her growth, and specifically to the story's overall narrative regarding her experience with her sexuality.

Walden uses the autobiographical format as a way to come to terms with the troubling aspects of her youth, her complicated relationship with ice skating and the feelings of alienation produced by its role in her life, the estrangement she feels as a young lesbian, and the truth of why she has spent so much time dedicated to a sport she seems to despise in many ways. Walden writes of her first private skating instructor, Barbara, whom she does not stay in contact with but seems to be longing for. Walden writes "Barbara had been my first coach.

She was the one who held my hand when I first stepped onto the ice. But teaching me to ice skate never meant much to me. I came to her lessons just to be in her arms. As a little kid I was desperate for any affection or attention...and she gave it all to me."(2017) This quote, located in the beginning half of the book, reframes what the reader is seeing when they view Tillie's complex relationship with ice skating. It may never have been a story about ice skating but rather a story about a young girl longing for love and affection, and using her experiences with competitive ice skating as a vehicle to describe it. (Walden 2017)

In the final few pages, Walden quits skating for good. The contrast of the immense pain of leaving something you spent so much time with the newfound freedom of leaving something that placed so many constraints on your life is beautifully depicted in these final moments of the story. We see Walden coming to terms with her decision, crying, skating for the last time, gaining closure and moving on. The book ends with a final memory of childhood, of the early years of her skating career, when the power cuts out at a hotel she was staying at right before a group competition. The chaos of a power outage coupled with a group of children makes for an exciting (and clearly impressionable) atmosphere for Walden. She reflects on this memory as one not of nerves or stress, as many of her skating memories are characterized by, but rather one of joy and fear and excitement all at once. She runs through the hallways with her best friend at the time, screaming at the top of her lungs until she reaches the room she is sharing

with her father. She asks “Are we gonna be ok?” And, silhouetted in the dark by the storm raging outside, he reassures her, “We’ll be fine,” bringing closure to the anxieties explored throughout the course of the book. (Walden 2017)

On Ordinary Life Studies

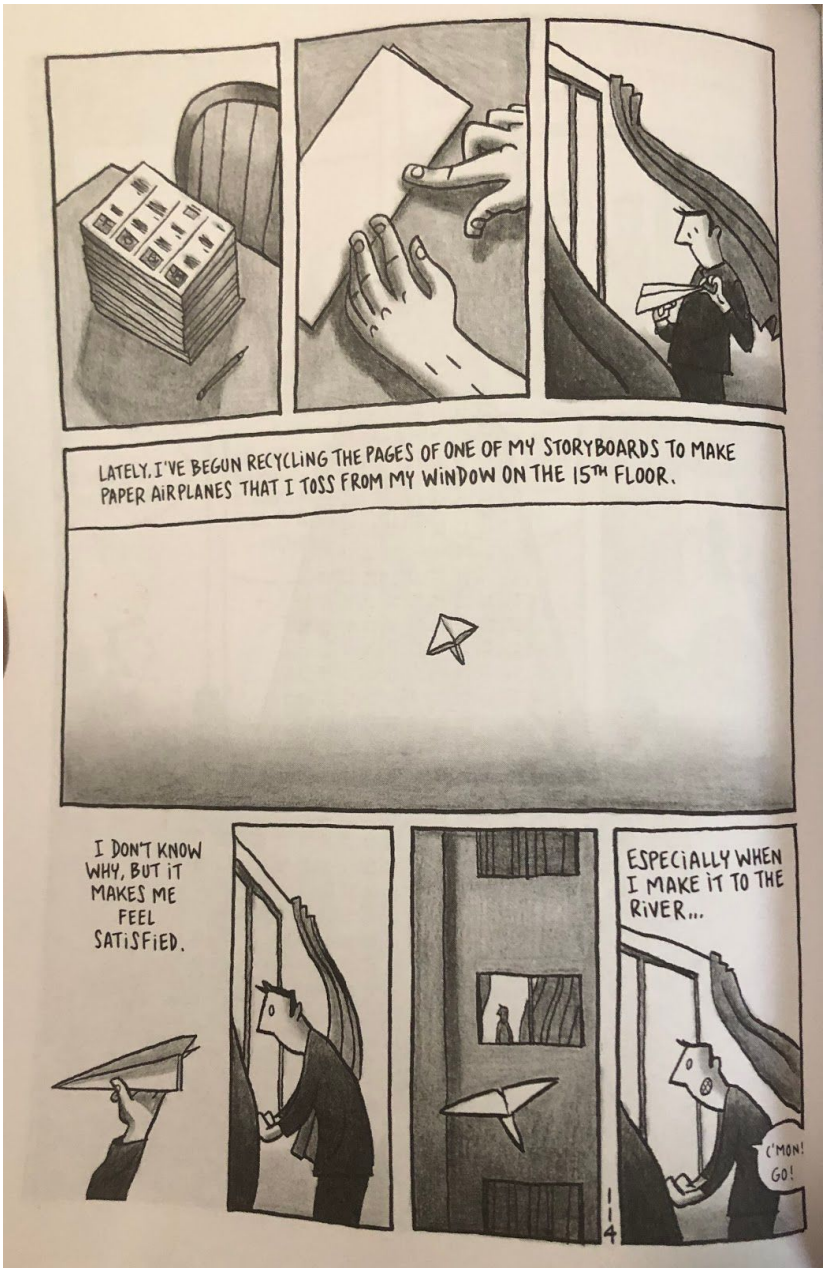
The study of the everyday functions as a way of reading the particularities of our existences as if they can inform the larger picture. Ben Highmore writes in *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*, that what is “ordinary” is characterized by the collective, and when we speak of commonalities we are often really speaking of society; however, he also writes that “Everyday life can both hide and make vivid a range of social differences” (Highmore 2002), stating that the everyday can be a tool used to reject the dominant culture and to “invoked precisely those practices and lives that have been traditionally left out of historical accounts, swept aside by the onslaught of events instigated by elites” (Highmore 2002). The study of everyday life also challenges the way we write about and orient ourselves around theoretical writing, suggesting that theory can be found “in the pages of a novel, in a suggestive passage of description in an autobiography, or in the street games of children…” (Highmore 2002).

Raymond Williams’ argument that what is art and what is ordinary are not antithetical to one another furthers this point, insisting that we are using creativity to make sense of the world around us (Highmore 2011). Artistic and theoretical knowledge can be found in the supposed mundanities of the everyday, in the

poetics of observation and attunement to the margins of what is seen as "eventful" and "special." One goal of everyday life studies is to make meaningful what is overlooked and left behind by a broader cultural analysis, and I argue that autobiographical comics and graphic novels make particular use of the ordinary through visual representations in order to illustrate both a personal narrative as well as the broader worlds they attempt to describe from their respective positionalities (Art Spiegelman's ethnographic approach to his father's lived experiences in the holocaust, Marjane Satrapi's childhood in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, Alison Bechdel's relationship with her father and coming to terms with her identity as a lesbian, and so on).

Guy Delisle's 2004 work *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea* is an autobiographical work about his time in Pyongyang, North Korea. In this time, Delisle encounters people and narratives at odds with the world he comes from. At various points in the story he travels around the city and country, always accompanied by locals assigned to him by the government, though most of his interactions are with other foreigners. The book is fascinating for both its insight into North Korean life (albeit from a highly subjective position) as well as its use of visual cues to establish a very specific notion of North Korea. While reading Pyongyang, what stood out to me was Delisle's ability to capture a feeling of ordinariness and routine while also establishing the unfamiliar. In his depiction of a country mostly unknown to the outside world, he creates a sense for what his

day to day life looks like there in a way that emphasizes his feeling of boredom during his stay. Delisle repeats the same imagery over and over while documenting his stay, from eating at the same restaurants, walking down the same streets, and even repeatedly launching paper airplanes out of his hotel window to see if one would ever fly as far as the river in the distant landscape.

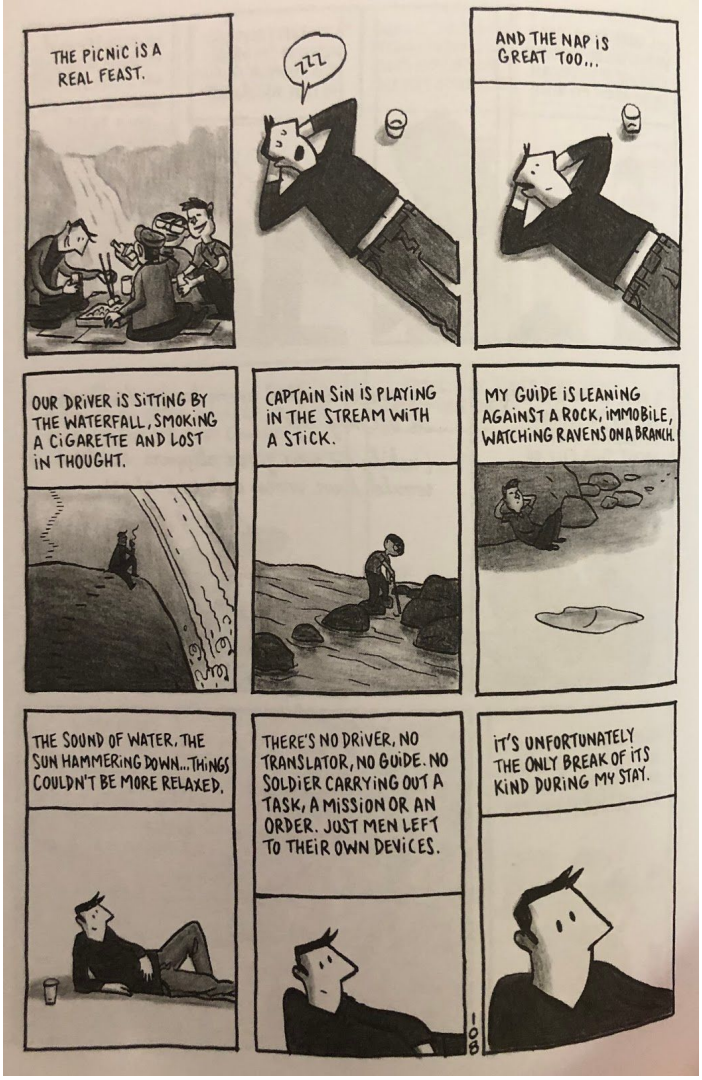


In ordinary life studies there is a particular emphasis on the role of boredom and the experience of the passage of time. Ben Highmore has established the role of boredom in tandem with the passage of time with respect

to workplace routines (Highmore 2011) However, interestingly, Delisle appears to be most bored in the routines he has created between his rigid work schedule. Not only does he emphasize his own routines in order to evoke a sense of boredom, but he also drills into the reader the monotony of the world around him. The sameness of every building he passes through, the portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in every room, and even the seemingly repetitive nature of the museums and cultural sites he visits and the narratives of the films he has the opportunity to see over the course of his visit. As Delisle depicts himself looking out of his office window, as we often see him do throughout the book, there is one instance in which the monotony is broken by a strong wind, scattering animation papers and forcing several individuals on the ground floor to frantically chase after them. This appears to be entertaining to Delisle before he considers that the papers may actually be his own work. When this fear is proved wrong he goes back to enjoying the scene until it dies down and he must return to work. In a landscape as seemingly fascinating to outsiders as North Korea, Delisle's choice to emphasize the mundanities of the world around him are particularly fascinating. (Delisle 2004)

Delisle renders his version of Pyongyang in greyscale (monochrome with a range of greys and blacks) the architecture of his cityscape is sharp, repetitive, and cold. Our only insight into North Korea through Delisle's stylized landscape that is evoking monotony in every sense. Hotel hallways, city streets, stairwells,

roads, and elevators blend together, giving the reader a sense of Pyongyang as highly condensed and interconnected. We see Delisle at work, in his hotel room, and in a car most frequently, and he establishes that his time is mostly spent in routine (work), boredom (hotel), and the in-betweens of travel. Routine and boredom are broken by one rare moment of true relaxation, such as when Deslile, his translator, guide, and driver are killing time after visiting the International Friendship exhibition. They lounge in the countryside, translator prodding at a stone in the river with a stick, the guide studying ravens perched on a tree branch, the driver smoking a cigarette, and Delisle resting alone in the grass. A rare, peaceful kind of boredom that Delisle writes is "... unfortunately the only break of its kind during my stay." (Delisle 2004) The juxtaposition of this moment of what I will call 'peaceful boredom' with the more 'motivated' boredom Delisle expresses while launching his paper planes, or the 'anxious' boredom of counting and categorizing his surroundings creates a fascinating network of ordinary experiences in the course of Delisle's trip.



Boredom in our everyday lives is often difficult to attune to, to capture and characterize, and yet Delisle characterizes an entire nation state with a distinct feeling of boredom, of dullness. Delisle uses boredom to emphasize the passage of time, to accentuate the feeling of nothingness and time spent waiting for action, movement, and genuine intrigue. We express boredom in our lives every day, waiting for time to pass in which something “meaningful” will happen, while

hardly attuning to the unique characteristics of what our boredom looks like and where it comes from. Boredom for me usually looks like scrolling through social media on my smartphone for long stretches of time, but boredom for Delisle looked like staring at empty cityscapes and launching paper planes out into them. Boredom is bookended by moments with a distinct lack of boredom, boredom can feel restless but it can also be comforting. When Delisle sits quietly with his unconventional North Korean friend group, he experiences a comforting boredom, distinct and different from what his day-to-day life looks like. (Delisle 2004)

While the nature of the multiple monotonies Delisle uses to characterize North Korea may be primarily in an effort to critique the communist country as one without interest or diversity (this is most clear in Delisle's depictions of North Korean women and his descriptions of their attire) he also establishes and interesting and personal narrative of boredom. He creates an 'ordinary' practice and routine within a personal story, a more or less 'extraordinary' two months spent in North Korea.

On Memory Studies

Memory is often a key element of autobiography, and thus is often present in autobiographical comics as a tool by which the author illustrates a point, establishes their reality, and in the context of comics, dictates the visual landscape we are presented with. We have no idea how Alison Bechdel's

childhood home really looks, but we have a visual for it thanks to her frequent depicting of it in *Fun Home*. In the same vein, we cannot know for certain that everything in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is perfectly accurate to Vladek's lived experience, but as we watch Art reflect on the pieces of memory he has to work with we are also given insight to how memory and stylization come together to craft the story. Lynda Barry exemplifies this as well in her comic *One! Hundred! Demons!* In which memory and reflection upon memory are essential to her autobiography.

Memory studies have developed as a way in which we use affect as a tool of evoking the past, in opposition to the discourse of history or historical memory. With the rise of memory studies in academia there has also been intense scrutiny of the field, with emphasis on how cultural memory is shaped by the media. With regards to comics, I think narratives such as Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Spiegelman's *Maus* serve as examples as to how memory can be used to convey the personal in the context of larger historical moments, such as the Holocaust in Spiegelman's case and the Iranian Revolution in Satrapi's case. Both of these stories center the author's individual reality and their perception of the world around them, making them a fascinating insight into how history and affective memory come to terms with one another.

In *One! Hundred! Demons!* Lynda Barry illustrates to the reader her childhood 'demons' in the form of several short comics, each named after one of

Barry's 'demons.' The introduction to the book describes Barry's creative process, beginning with her discovery of the Japanese painting exercise known as "One Hundred Demons." She writes that after she began working on the comics, "the demons began to come. They were not the demons she expected...at first they freaked her, but then she started to love watching them come out of her paint brush." (Barry 2002) The introduction ends with Barry encouraging the reader to practice painting their own demons, and follows this up with more detailed instructions on how to do so at the end of the book. What is fascinating about Barry's demons is that each story appears anecdotal and seperate, but all of the seemingly unrelated fragments that she pointpoints from her childhood help the reader construct an identity of the author, characterized by childhood trauma, abusive parents, and growing up in poverty. Although all of Barry's stories appear lighthearted in tone, they often left me with the feeling that Barry's childhood was much darker than the colorful, eclectic and multimedia comics on every page.

Barry establishes an interesting contrast between her demons and the tone of her writing and art style. Each page announcing a new demon is in the form of a mixed media collage, the colors are bright and eye catching, and her simplified cartoonish art style adds humor even in stories with a somewhat darker tone. This contrast is effective in establishing Barry's reflexive process, perhaps

indicative of expelling childhood traumas and anxieties by way of these so-called “demons,” some of which include head lice, hate, cicadas, and dogs.

The demon entitled “Magic Lanterns” follows the author’s thought process as she thinks through objects, toys, and blankets that children build strong attachments to. She reflects on finding a blue stuffed bunny that she imagines as the favorite object of a child, going as far as to take the bunny and leave her name and number with the lost and found, hoping that she will be contacted about the bunny and be able to return it to the child who is, in her mind, missing it. She poses this story of finding the blue stuffed rabbit in order to show the reader how she has coped with the loss of her precious childhood blanket, even depicting a conversation between herself and her mother regarding the loss of the blanket, with her mother dodging the question entirely.

Not all of the demons are strictly related to the author's childhood, as the story related both to her present self while writing *One! Hundred! Demons!* as well as illustrating her past attachment to her favorite childhood object. The demon titled "Dogs" takes a similar narrative form, as the author writes of the dogs she has at the time of writing the book, while also connecting ideas from her childhood to her current treatment of her dogs. She writes about how she often yells at her dogs, something she notes is wrong and advised against by books about caring for dogs. She writes "Dog books give sound advice but they do not mention the two most important things: your dog's history and its nature, and of course, your own. History, as we know, repeats itself. This goes for good as well as bad. I was shouted at a lot...My husband and I have two carefree dogs

that had very good beginnings. Our other dog, Ooola, has a history and a nature which is more like our own." (Barry, 2002) The author interweaves the story of her abused dog's former life and how she came to understand how to effectively communicate with a dog to demonstrate her own healing from an abusive childhood.

Memory is a tool often used in the social sciences as a way of rethinking and unraveling our collective understanding of the past by way of our own memories. Memory, though unreliable in the eyes of objectivity, is frequently used in biographical and autobiographical works, in fact, most of these works rely upon memory in some form or another. Art Spigelman's use of memory in his

work *Maus*, originally serialized from 1980 to 1991, is a retelling of his father's lived experiences in the form of a comic.

Memory is a key point of contention in Art Spiegelman's *Maus,* as he contends with his father's (occasionally faltering) memory of his time spent during the Holocaust. Art often demands a linear story-telling structure from his father, something he expresses guilt over but nonetheless insists upon, despite his father's desire to tell the story in many separated fragments based on whatever comes to mind at the time. Art struggles with the desire to stay faithful to the truth of his father's experiences, while also knowing he will never truly be able to recreate the reality of what happened. He will never be able to fully depict the world his father lived and suffered in, and expresses immense guilt about this while writing and illustrating his graphic novel.

Throughout *Maus*, Art struggles with how he will choose to represent his father as well. When re-telling his father's story, he uses Vladek's voice, presumably verbatim since Art recorded all of their conversations, and has even released these recordings to the public in his follow-up work *MetaMaus*; However, much of the present world that gets described by Art reflects his own feelings towards his father rather than just making Vladek out to be simply an object of the reader's sympathy. Art feels real anger towards his father during much of their conversations, he illustrates many of their arguments, which range from petty disputes to serious, project-halting altercations.

Much of Art's frustration with Vladek is rooted in his resentment towards his father with regards to his mother's death by suicide. One of the most prominent arguments between Art and Vladek centers around Art asking about what his mother's life was like at the Auschwitz concentration camp, since the two had been separated at the time. Vladek only had vague ideas of her time there, but seemed to recall that his wife had written extensively about it. Art fervently searches his father's home for the journals in which his mother documented her time there, only to find out Vladek had destroyed them in a fit of rage. This discovery led to Art's near abandonment of the project in his anger towards his father. He struggles continuously throughout the book to contend with the parts of his father he finds disagreeable, but resolves to include them in the end. Art also makes his process of writing *Maus* central to the story, as he deals with the realities of intergenerational trauma and survivor's guilt while re-telling his father's story.

The inclusion of these self-reflexive and introspective narratives supports the claim that *Maus* goes beyond a biographical re-telling of Vladek's life, but is in fact ethnographic in nature. Art quite literally employs ethnographic strategies through his interviews with Vladek, even going so far as to record them for the sake of transparency and accuracy. At one point, following Vladek's death in the second volume of *Maus*, Art is shown going to visit his therapist, an older Jewish man who had also lived through the holocaust. The inclusion of this scene serves two main purposes: firstly, it gives the reader insight to the emotional strain the project has put on him, and secondly, during the scene we see Art consult with his therapist about what the factories in Auschwitz were like, since he struggled with drawing heavy machinery and no longer had his father to give him feedback

on the illustrations. Art's inclusions of his struggles while writing and illustrating *Maus*, both in terms of his emotions as well as the physical limitations of drawing and re-telling an experience that were not his own contribute to the overall transparency of the work. Art is desperate in his desire to be honest with the reader, and his vulnerability is central to what makes *Maus* a masterpiece, in both the graphic novel genre and literature as a whole.

Art deviates from his father's story throughout the course of *Maus*, not only taking time to describe his interactions with his father while gathering data for the book, but also including conversations with his wife, his therapist, and himself. Beyond these scenes, Art also fixates on his mother, who committed suicide years before he began working on *Maus*. He includes a short comic he had written following his mother's death in the middle of the first volume of *Maus*, functioning as a sort of intermission to the main story and acting as a way to include his mother and her own trauma into the broader themes of the holocaust narrative. Additionally, there are a handful of instances within *Maus* in which Art includes actual photographs of his family, including his younger brother who died during the war. These photographs function as a way to remind the reader of the reality of the story. Although Art depicts his subjects as animals tied to their ethnicity and nationality (ie Jewish people are depicted as mice, Germans as cats, French people as frogs, and so on.) he uses these real photographs to bring us back to reality. The horrifying events recalled in *Maus* were not simply a

story meant to evoke sympathy and tell the story of the Holocaust in a more digestable format, but to remind us of the very real trauma experienced by Art's family, and the impact that this trauma has had on him throughout his life.

By breaking away from the goal of the story, which is seemingly to recount Vladek's life during the war, we are confronted with the complexities that encompass generational trauma, and the importance of documented personal histories as well as the perspective of the person who is inscribing these histories. By way of these reflexive strategies, the story of *Maus* speaks not only to the ethnographic research experience, but also to the introspective attunement to one's own participation in the ethnographic process.

In 2000, Marjane Satrapi published *Persepolis: The story of a Childhood*, introducing young readers around the world to an accessible and honest telling of her life living in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. Satrapi does not shy away from the darker parts of her narrative: the death of her beloved uncle, the horrors she experienced at the hands of the government at the time, and the racism and xenophobia she faced while living away from her home and her parents in Europe. What is fascinating about the world Satrapi illustrates for the reader is rooted in her establishment of the ordinary in her personal life. She establishes a sense of the ordinary out of entirely in-ordinary circumstances. One of the book's most iconic scenes depicts Marjane buying some under-the-table cassette tapes from a street vendor, only to be caught by two older women, members of a

governmental committee called Guardians of the Revolution, who scolded her for various aspects of her clothing and her Michael Jackson button (Satrapi, 2000). This scene is played off as humorous daily life for Satrapi, but at the same time the reader is offered a greater understanding of how strange her world is, and the sense of change that young Marjane has seen in her life. Prior to this scene we see her parents smuggling posters and sneakers back from Istanbul for Marjane, another peculiar insight into something that may have been normal for Iranians, but that readers outside of this political context may have found strange. These stories, pulled from Satrapi's memory, elaborate to us her sense of normal, what events in her life were meaningful enough to be included in her autobiography and in the stylized landscape she establishes for the reader. (Satrapi 2000)

Satrapi uses her personal narrative not only to convey the complex political events happening in Iran during the 1970s and 80s, but to complicate the frameworks regarding Iran frequently presented in the United States and other Western Media. Satrapi is raised in a Marxist family, and she greatly admires her uncle Anoosh, a revolutionary and political prisoner of the Shah's regime. These details are essential in understanding Satrapi's specific relationship with her country and the revolution, as the death of her uncle Anoosh was a key moment in her emotional and political development in the story. Satrapi idolized her uncle due to him being a political prisoner of the Shah's regime, as young Satrapi had a fascination with the revolution as well as the Marxist-Leninst movement many

of her family members engaged in. Anoosh's recounting of her uncle's time spent in prison as well as on the run in the USSR are key moments for young Marjane, as they cement her beliefs and show the reader what her life and perspective on politics were like as she was growing up. Anoosh tells Marjane that it is important that she pay attention to the stories her family tells her "I tell you all this because it is important. Our family memory must not be lost. Even if it's not easy for you, even if you don't understand it all." to which she replies "don't worry, I'll never forget." This is impactful in the overall aim of the book, which is to tell Satrapi's story, which she has now intricately linked with the stories of all her family members and their ties to the political realities happening in Iran.

Anoosh is later executed by the new Islamic Republic in Iran, as with many of the formerly freed political prisoners in post-Shah Iran. The shift to the republic is tumultuous for young Marjane, and we frequently see her dealing with complex emotions brought on by the new Islamist movement as well as the war with Iraq. We watched Marjane's world change right in front of her, as she recounts watching the news with her father, dancing excitedly around her living room with any news of Iranian success; however, we also see her despair when the war becomes closer to her, as she finds out a classmate lost her father in the dispute. Satrapi offers us a unique look into these historical moments by telling her own story and offering memories which she connects to the politics of her country, such as many of her friends, including a boy she had a crush on, moving

abroad during the beginning of the Republic. We see young Marjane crying on her bedroom floor at the news of his family moving away, and despairing even more when the US embassy in Iran is officially closed by the Republic. It is the infusion of history and memory that make Persepolis so effective in its evoking of a world, that world being Marjane Satrapi's vision of her country and her life, as defined by memory and experience.

Memory functions, in the texts I have described here, as a tool through which we can understand not only the events of the subjects life, but also how these events were perceived by the author, and how they hope to convey these moments to the reader. Art Spigelman frames his story through the lens of memory, offering the reader insight into his father's story, even going as far as to write the text verbatim to the recordings taken during his interviews with Vladek. Spigelman is open about the subjectivity of memory in his work, emphasizing the absence of his mother's experiences in the story and often struggling with Vladek during the process of gathering information for the book. Lynda Barry utilizes her personal memories as tools for growth and further expansion upon herself and her lived experiences, while Marjane Satrapi constructs a personal memoir that speaks to the larger political moment she was living in.

A personal Autoethnography

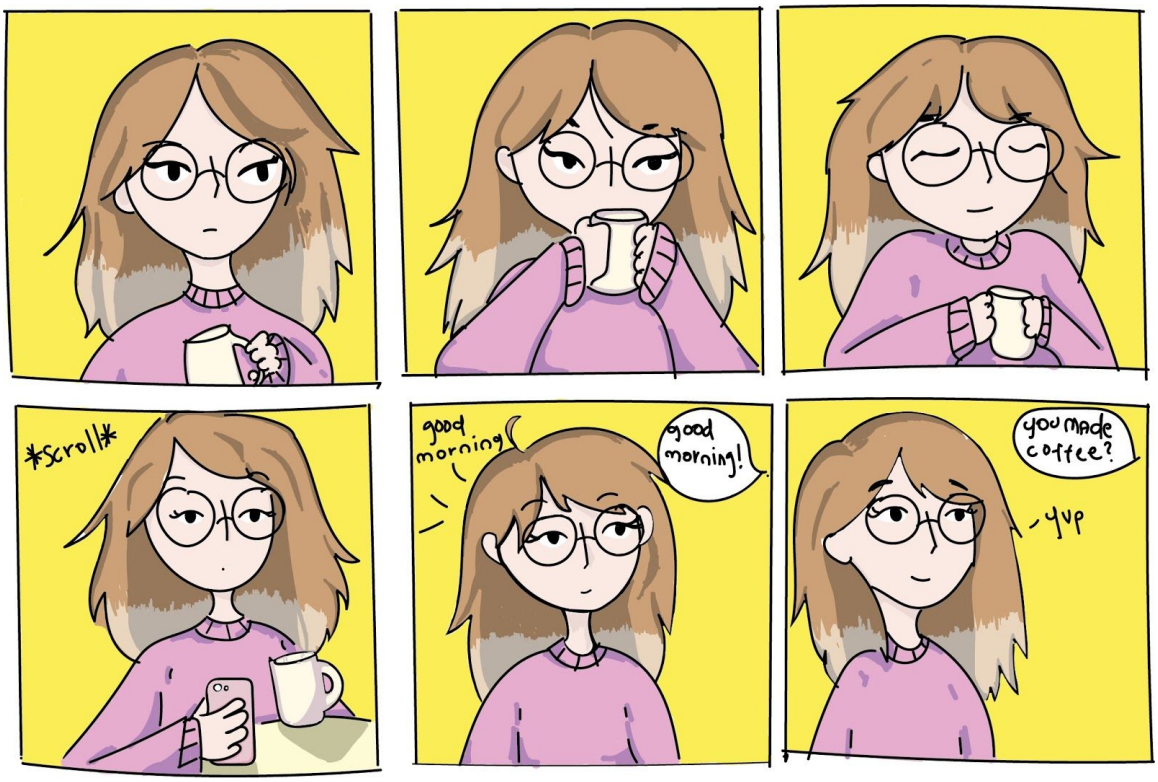
Over the course of my research on the topic of comics in anthropology and autoethnographic writing, I attempted to make several autoethnographic

comics of my own, taking inspiration from ordinary life studies, and Kathleen stewart's *Ordinary Affects* in particular. Structurally, I wanted my comics to feel like vignettes in the same way that the Stewart constructs her writing in Ordinary Affects; However, my inspiration for the format came from comics, graphic novels, and Japanese manga I grew up reading, most of which formulated my understanding of comics as an adult. Short-format stories similar to newspaper comic strips (*Garfield, B.C., the Far Side,* etc.) as well as comedic four-panel manga (*Lucky Star, Azumanga Daioh, k-On!*) were my structural basis. What makes short format comics so interesting to me, as opposed to longer narratives, is their ability to construct a scene and complete a punchline in the span of only four to six panels. I find this format perfect for the construction of the ordinary in my own life, as I often think in these terms to begin with. Much of the ideas I have for my comics stem from encounters and affects that can be neatly and tidily confined in the limitations of a four panel comic. For example, when I began drafting the idea for my first comic, I wanted to capture the feeling of my morning routine in a way that could be understood in four images alone.

I characterize my mornings as a feeling of calm before the stress of the day sets in, and primarily I understand them through the lens of before and after I have coffee. I wanted to convey this feeling as simplistically as possible, to get across the calm, quiet, and solitary experience I have of being the first person awake in the house. I attempted to include as many “real” details as possible without detracting from the feeling of simplicity that I am aiming to convey, the feeling of comfortable loneliness and quiet that is a part of my daily routine. However, a realistic reading of my morning routine alone would not be an honest depiction of my feelings. A good morning, a good hour of drinking coffee alone sets the tone for the rest of my day, and as this all centers around coffee, I chose

to focus on the coffee machine in the second panel, as it is often the primary source of comfort in these moments.

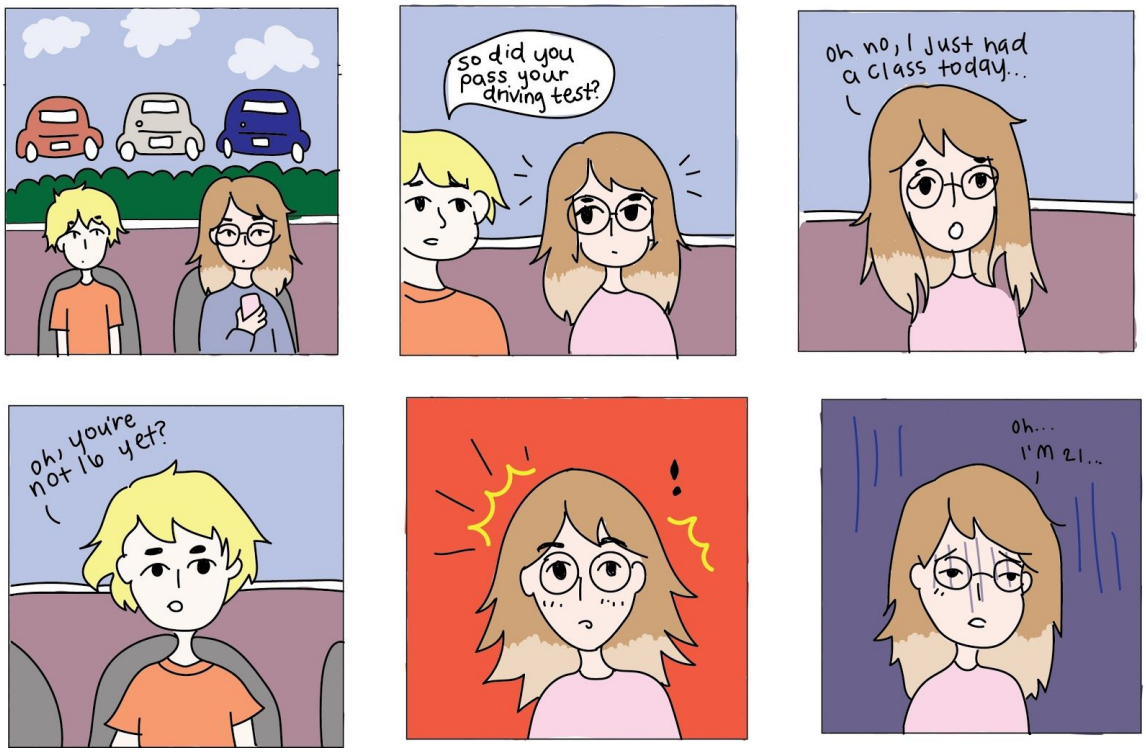
I employed a comedic and stylistic choice in the depiction of the coffee pot (which happens to be the cheapest possible coffee maker available at the grocery store) by illustrating small yellow sparkles around it as the final drops of coffee are filtered into the pot. Though there is nothing particularly extraordinary about brewing a pot of coffee in the morning, there is a sense of comfort in the normalcy of the process that I wish to convey with the illustration. The initial sketch of the comic was far less detailed, it was during the process of lining and coloring the illustration in which I decided to include many of the smaller nuances in order to more accurately construct my world, from the color of the bedsheets, the details on my cat, and the sense of depth on my coffee pot were all ideas that came to me during the process of digitizing my comic. These details pull the comic together, to create a sense of my own stylized landscape, the reality of which is constrained by my own discretion.



The next comic is a scene that takes place shortly after the first one, in which I am sitting alone with my coffee before one of my other roommates wakes up. This moment is essential, as having a little bit of alone time in the morning is my favorite way to start the day. I drink coffee, scroll through twitter, and wait for the company of one of my three roommates. This kind of alone time is especially pivotal in the current climate due to the ongoing quarantine in an effort to stop the spread of COVID19. Alone time is meaningful in all contexts, however, when contextualized by the current crisis it can be especially therapeutic. Since I am often the first person awake in the house, I am also often the first person to brew coffee, and depending on how long it takes for my roommates to wake up there

is usually a bit left over to share. Although the narrative of the comic is simple, similar to the first one it embodies a kind of ordinariness that I find comforting and worth illustrating. It speaks to a routine that I value, that holds a lot of weight for me: that being my daily ritual of drinking coffee and looking at my phone until I have finally determined its time to get to work on the day's tasks.

The structure of this comic is slightly different from the first. I stuck to a plain and consistent yellow background, and each frame has my picture in it, emphasizing that this is time spent alone. The last frame includes another subject, but they are not pictured. This is for two main reasons, the first being that I wanted to illustrate to the viewer the significance of my transition from alone time to time spent socializing, and the second being that this could be one of a number of people, but that it did not matter who so much as the point was to illustrate a change in the environment. This transition is a part of my daily routine, as I often feel like socializing, even with people I live with, is more difficult when not preceded by time alone to think through the rest of the day.



The third comic takes on an entirely different tone than the first two. It steps outside of the routine world I established with my coffee-drinking scene, and represents an experience which I found both humorous and a little humiliating. The scene takes place at my driving school, while I was waiting to be picked up after one of my sessions. I sat in the waiting room, watching and listening as a mother argued with the staff about letting her son take the drivers exam, to which they reminded her that she was still missing some of the essential paperwork. The boy, who I had actually presumed to be my own age turns to me and asks how my driver's test went. After I inform him that I had only come in for a lesson, he asks me if I have not turned sixteen yet. As a twenty-two year old woman this is somewhat mortifying, but also hilarious. I attempted to

illustrate this by utilizing techniques I have learned from reading comics and manga all my life. The surprised, taken-aback frame after having been asked if I am not sixteen yet, followed by the sorrowful response to the question. I use the color yellow with jagged, spikey lines to emphasize the shock of being asked, and long vertical lines drawn in the color blue across my face and the panel to emphasize the shame I felt in that moment, but also to add a level of exaggeration and humor to the scene.

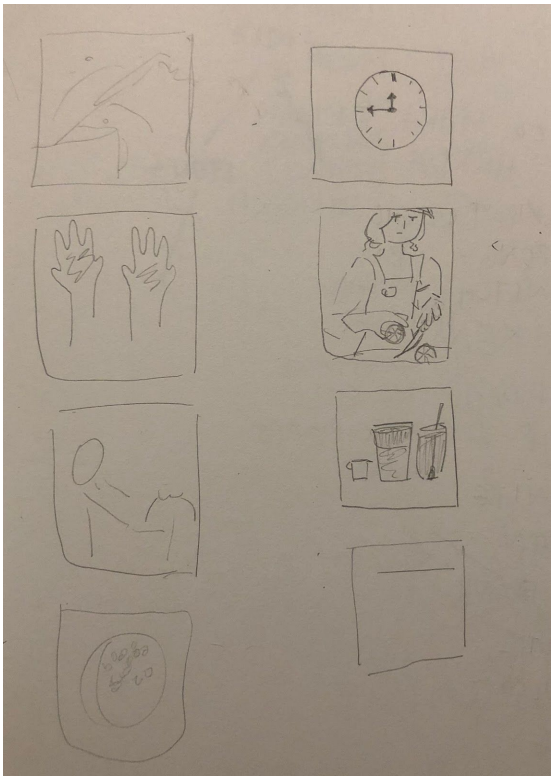
I chose to depict this moment, because it highlights an aspect of my life that is both mundane to me but potentially funny or interesting to others. It would not be outrageous to say that most Americans my age have a driver's license, especially if they were born and raised here, and especially in the state of Texas, where learning to drive during adolescence is highly normalized and encouraged by society. Yet for me this is not the case, making the scene somewhat unique to my experiences and a fruitful look into my sense of the ordinary.

The first three comics were produced traditionally and rendered digitally with color and lineart on Adobe Illustrator, while the last couple of comics I made were only drawn traditionally. I found that coloring the comics was rewarding but time consuming, as I would spend hours working on them, adding new details and fleshing them out to be closer to what I imagined when I originally sketched them. Although coloring the comics digitally was a useful way to find more and more details and concepts to add to the work, I also found it to be distracting

from the aims of my project, that being to capture a wide variety of ideas and scenes. For example, when illustrating the first comic about my morning coffee routine, I spent a lot of time trying to make my coffee maker more “realistic” (within the limitations of my skill and stylistic choices) by adding depth, more shades of color than I originally intended, and finally the gold sparkles at the end were an idea formed in the coloring process. However, in my sketchbook I have many more scenes that I simply did not have time to fully realize in the same format, but I still find to be compelling and interesting in the context of my project. On a similar note, I added depth with color shading in the first two comics rendered digitally, but left it out of the third one because I found it to be just as effective without it.

Among the comics drawn out in my sketchbook and on the margins of my journal were several unfinished comics that nonetheless depict my daily life and habits. In my writing journal I penned an idea for a comic about waiting for the bus, naming each of the four frames individually: line, card, stand, see. Each frame is a step in the process of taking the bus to school or work, with the first being “line” referencing the line to get on the bus early in the morning, the second

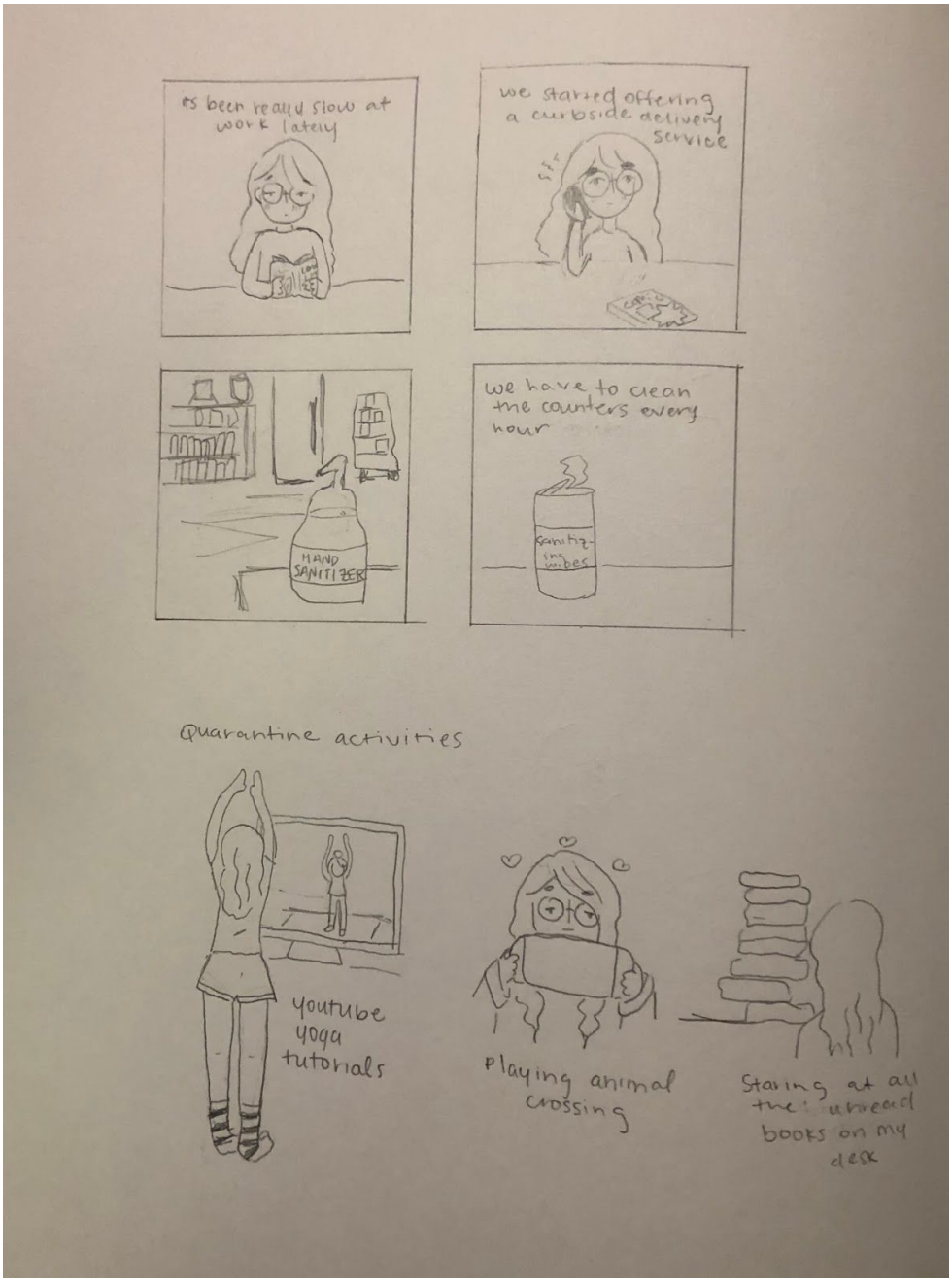
being “card” and depicting a scene of me swiping my student ID/bus pass, the third is “stand” accompanied by a doodle of me and another passenger standing on the bus, and the final panel labeled “see,” specifically referencing the feeling of watching outside the bus window as scenery passes by. This scene is significant to me, as someone who rode the bus nearly every day for most of my college career. Like having my morning coffee, I take a lot of comfort in the routine nature of sitting on the bus and watching the familiar route pass by outside. Although the bus can be anything but relaxing, especially on days like the one sketched in my notebook where it is standing room only, I still consider this form of routine to be familiar, significant and insignificant at the same time. Meaningless in its monotony, but meaningful in its comfort and normalcy.



I sketched some comic ideas related to my time working as a barista in a bakery/boba cafe in early January, these sketches are messy and incomplete, but function as a tool for examining work routines significant to me at the time. The first of the two comics was about cooking boba in the back kitchen, with a focus on the process of cooking, stirring, and the frequent aftermath of getting boiling water splashed onto my hands in the process of washing the boba. The sketches are simplistic and focus more on the material objects involved in the process than myself as the subject. I use one panel to draw my hands, red from the hot water and covered in other work related cuts and burns that were normal at that time. I spent a lot of time while working there thinking about and looking at my hands and the changes I saw in them, and this is likely why I chose to devote a panel to them in the midst of a comic seemingly about the process of cooking boba.

The second comic in this set depicted a specific frustration I often felt when working as a barista. The first panel is a drawing of the clock that sat above where I worked in the back kitchen when brewing tea, cooking boba, and cutting fruit, with the hands indicating it was fifteen minutes until the bakery closed. The second panel depicts me in full uniform cutting grapefruit for one of the more complicated drinks on the menu, followed by the final panel simply showing the ingredients for the same grapefruit drink set out on the counter. This comic

depicted a very specific (and recurring) phenomena that happened at the bakery, in which customers would walk in during the last few minutes before closing and order what all of the baristas considered to be the most frustrating beverage to make, one that required using an entire grapefruit that had to be cut neatly in order to fit inside the cup. I think this comic is insightful, as it speaks to the specific kinds of routines and instances of frustrations experienced by food service workers. To completely understand the comic you would have to know exactly what was going on, but the dull look on my face where I am drawn cutting the grapefruit can easily convey to the viewer the dullness of the work. The clock is meaningful as well, as it is a symbol of the passage of time, the onset of boredom, and the feeling of yearning for those final fifteen minutes of work to be over. Routine, boredom, and monotony in the workplace were things I found fruitful in my examination of the ordinary and the construction of my autoethnographic comics, as they were aspects of my ordinary life that I found myself drawn to recreating in comic format. These often dull and boring and boring moments made up such a significant portion of my time that leaving them out would be counterproductive in the examination of my ordinary life.

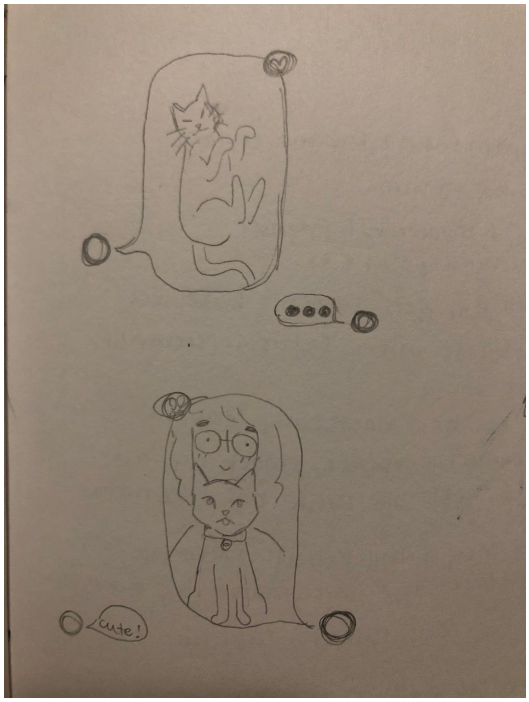


The next three comics were reflections of life since the beginning of the quarantine period in the United States, following the outbreak of COVID19. The first comic is a drawing of me working at my new job at a comic book store, and

depicts the sense of business getting slower and slower as the world changes in response to the pandemic. Being one of the last “non-essential” businesses to close, I was still working up until fairly recently, but most of our days were spent sitting and waiting to get cut due to the lack of customers. I included some commentary in this one, for no particular reason other than it felt right to document in words some of what it felt like to be at work on those days. In the comic I mention three things: that work is slow, that we now offer curbside, and that we clean the counters every hour. I am drawn reading (I read many comics on these slow days) and answering the phone (most people called to ask if we were still open). These moments, similar to my comics from working at the bakery, depict the monotony of work in different ways. On the formerly busy days at the comic book store I found the work to be enjoyable, and even on the slow days there was a feeling of comfort just at being out of the house. What makes this comic interesting, however, is its situatedness in a particular moment in history, that being the global pandemic we are all living through as I am writing this.

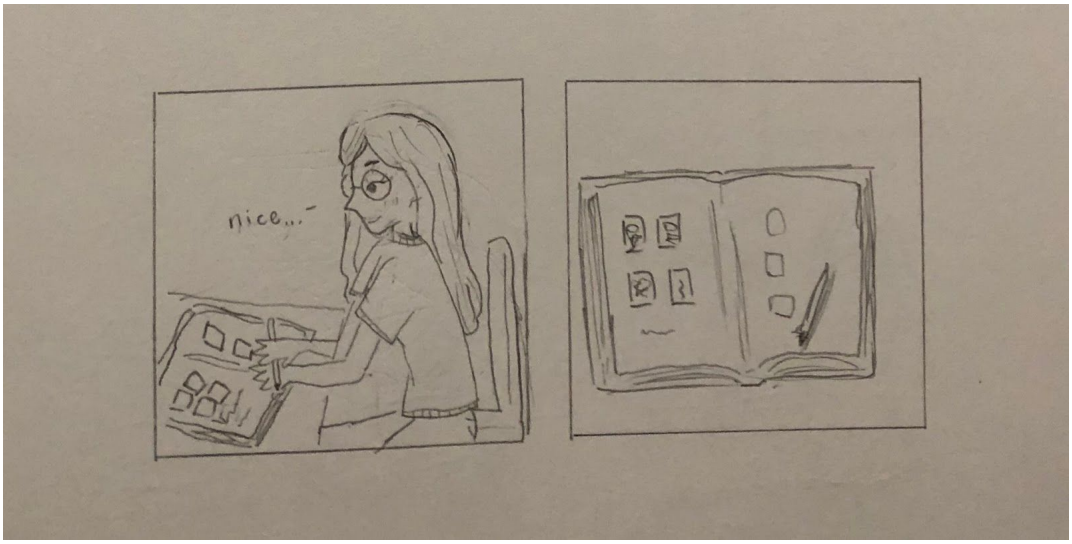
The following comic has no panels drawn to separate the images, but includes three different scenes, connected by the title “quarantine activities.” I noted some of the things I have been doing to keep myself occupied while staying at home, including watching yoga tutorials on youtube, playing video games, and staring at my stack of unread books. These were things unique to

my experience, but also perhaps highly relatable to others. The books can more or less be understood to be code for schoolwork, while the other two activities are hobbies many of my peers have been partaking in during this time. I thought drawing the images as a series, connected by a title with now panels in between would be an interesting visual format. It felt as if I was drawing one cohesive moment, one long day of being stuck inside, rather than a comic with important distinctions and choices being made panel-to-panel.



Similarly, my last COVID related panel depicts a text conversation between my partner and I, quarantined apart from one another we often message each other photos of our cats. This comic is simple, but meaningful in

that it describes a mode of communication that is ordinary to me. In fact, regardless of the quarantine we would be exchanging photos like this of our cats, but they are especially captivating conversations when there is nothing else to do and not much else to talk about. There are no panels in this comic, as I wanted the text message to seem continuous, similar to how text message threads are experienced on the interfaces of our phones, but also to mimic the ideas present in the prior comic about monotony and longevity.



The final comic in my series was made on recommendation from a close friend who would often study and work alongside me while I crafted my comics. The concept is simple, it is two panels depicting me while I draw my comics, with the first panel including a line of dialogue that just says “nice…” to illustrate my satisfaction with a particular drawing. The second panel is just of my open sketchbook, with the hint of comics drawn on the pages. This was inspired

specifically by a moment in which I expressed a lot of happiness at how my drawing of the coffee pot in the first comic came out. The experience of writing, drawing, and constructing the small narrative vignettes of my life is summed up in these two panels alone. There is a certain affective quality to this particular comic, as it encompasses such a small feeling of ordinary joy and satisfaction, in what could be in reference to any of the drawings I have done for this project. This is the comic that tells of my experience working on this project, it is simplistic but speaks to small feelings of joy and comfort that have been expressed in some of the other comics in this series.

In the process of formulating comics and fully realizing them, I experimented with the number of panels as well as the order in which panels can be read. I did this not only as a form of stylistic experimentation, but also as a way to convey the stories in the way I thought of them. When planning my comics I did not think about consistency between them so much as focusing on how the individual narrative would most effectively be represented. For example, in the case of my final few comics related to COVID19 and the quarantine, I felt that they made more sense as one continuous image rather than being separated by lines like in the rest of my comics. This was because the world I was depicting felt monotonous and long, the never-ending days of quarantine. Similar stylistic choices were made in how comics were presented. Some were drawn vertically, others horizontally, and some in sets of four in the shape of a

square. These choices were tied to the narrative, which sometimes felt like a story that needed to be stretched out vertically to imply a passage of time, as in the case of my comics from working at the bakery, and others needed to be in tight square formations to equally distribute the narrative across every panel, like in my comic about working at the bookstore where there was no specific order being established when reading it.

Conclusion

The aim of this project has never been to make concrete statements about comics, but rather to take an experimental lens to some of the biggest names in autobiographical comic and graphic novel making and to see what can be gleaned through understanding them as works of autoethnography, products of ordinary life studies and compilations of affect and memory. In doing this experimental examination of influential works such as *Persepolis*, I have been able to think through what makes them effective pieces of media, and what has driven me to explore them further. With my analysis of books like *Persepolis*, *Maus*, and *Spinning* among others, I hope to further advance the notion that comics can be used as tools of relaying ethnographic research, and that autoethnography can be a fascinating lens through which we can read these texts.

In thinking through existing graphic novel autobiographies, even ones already surrounded by scholarship such as *Persepolis* and *Maus,* I have

furthered my own understanding of these texts, and opened up new possibilities for how they can be read, and what meanings can be derived from them. When Guy Delisle describes his time in North Korea we are given not only a story about his memories, experiences, and perceptions of the country, but also insight into how his personal reality shapes the world he seeks to describe. What makes *Pyongyang* interesting when read through the lens of autobiography is not so much what we learn about North Korea, but rather that we gain insight as to what Delisle wants us to know about North Korea. Autobiographies and personal narratives can be read and understood by many, but what makes their stories interesting lies in the nature of them being unique to the author, colored and coded by an individual realty, a negotiated re-telling of the past.

In the case of works like *Pyongyang*, *Persepolis*, and *Maus* which are influenced heavily by cultural and collective memories of past events, historical moments, and political climates, the position of the author is all the more important in an ethnographic reading of the work. Art Spiegelman being the son of two holocaust survivors, seeking to retell his father's story in the most honest way he can while also attending to the messiness of family and history as well as his own feelings makes for one of the most compelling personal narratives written on the topic. By framing his story through his interviews with his father, switching between his father's story and the scenes of him interviewing his father, or otherwise discussing the topic, we are offered a new kind of insight into

the narrative. The reader begins to understand how the author has coped with his family trauma all his life, the pain his mother's death has on him as he writes his father's story, and the real and valid frustrations he has with his father over the course of the book. These details are meaningful on their own, but also provide a wealth of interest when examined as an autoethnography.

As far as my own experimental comic ethnography, the process of planning and crafting my comics taught me a lot about what I value in my day-to-day life, what interactions, moments, and scenes would be most telling of me and my perception of the ordinary, and what details would be essential in the crafting of my own stylized landscape and ethnographic reality. More than anything, the process of making these comics allowed for me to more closely examine my world, what I value amidst the mundanities of life and work, and the significance of the moments I chose to represent.

My passion for this project has been rooted almost entirely in my love for comics, my love for the field of anthropology and the practice of experimental ethnography. Delving into the anthropological significance of these comics has allowed for me to learn more about the kind of work I hope to see as comics become more and more commonplace in ethnographic research. More than anything else gained from this project, I have an even stronger appreciation for graphic novels, and the depths that are contained in their narratives. With other projects such as the University of Toronto's EthnoGRAPHIC series on the rise, I

have hope that comics will be at the forefront of new and innovative ways of displaying research and communicating ideas in anthropology to a broader audience.

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