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AMERICAN GRAPHICITY:
POSTWAR ETHNIC LITERATURE AND VISUAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

James Baldwin once asserted, "before we can do very much in the way of clear thinking or clear doing as relates to the minorities in this country, we must first crack the American image and find out and deal with what it hides." My dissertation, "American Graphicity: Postwar Ethnic Literature and Visual Culture," takes Baldwin's call to heart by examining ethnic images in postwar American literature, interrogating the ways that texts speak to the faculties of sight and racial perception. This project asks two main questions: how do American writers forge viewpoints on race and ethnicity in light of the concerns of our increasingly visual culture, and how do we see that play out in their literary work? To answer these questions, I turn to authors from the postwar to contemporary period, a time rife with racially charged visual media, from televised footage of the Watts riots of '65 to internet-streamed Black Lives Matter protests, from Walker Evans' startling photographs of poor white tenant farmers to the vibrant wall murals around Los Angeles barrios. I argue that American writers from diverse ethnic groups, including James Agee, the Hernandez brothers, Hunter S. Thompson, Oscar Zeta Acosta, and Art Spiegelman, respond to ethnic visual culture by infusing their work with graphic language and images, rendering unique visions of American ethnicity that must be both read and seen to be fully comprehended.

This project provides a critical reading lens for seeing how ethnic literatures and visual culture are entwined forms of representation: we are consistently prompted to *see* ethnic spaces, communities, and racialized bodies as we read ethnic literature. To demonstrate this visual-reading mode, I examine literary works that exhibit an acute amount of, what I term, *graphicity*; more than strong imagery, graphicity is a literary attribute that emphasizes and employs visuality, visibility, and visual culture in the author's probe of race and ethnicity. It can be read in a range of ways, from a figurative form, such as Agee's poetic visualization of rural whiteness, to the literal incorporation of

visuals, such as photos, illustrations, and comics, as seen in experimental novels like Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973), whose cockroach drawings scattered in its marginalia subvert the marginalization and dehumanization of Chicanx communities. What I find across all objects forthwith is an investment in subjective ethnic visualization; in other words, to various ends, the authors and cartoonists render themselves graphically as ethnic figures and confront, subvert, or consecrate that racial image.

My dissertation uses three case studies of ethnic genres—white, Jewish, and Latinx literature—tracking the ways that historical modes of ethnic visual representation along with personal biographies and politics have influenced the authors' contributions to their respective ethnic genres. In doing so, I analyze how particular literary forms and aesthetic concerns can either buttress or question the integrity of ethnic literatures as we know it. In two chapters my project pairs American voices from the same ethnic background, placing them in unprecedented conversations that illuminate the ethnicity-specific graphicity at work in each text. My first chapter explores the works of two formative white writers, James Agee and Hunter S. Thompson, whose shared interest in visual media (screenwriting and photography, respectively), and whose opposing critical takes on postwar whiteness are largely overlooked in literary criticism. By examining the graphicity inherent in Agee's ethnographic work, in particular his autobiographical novel *A Death in the Family* (1957), I re-read it as a thinly-veiled nostalgic elegy for a diminishing whiteness. In contrast, the psychedelic graphicity of Thompson's writing coupled with Ralph Steadman's illustrations in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) leads me to reconfigure it as a post-racial dystopian narrative, one where, in Thompson's view, the decadent white American swaps their humanity for monstrous forms.

In addition to a historical overview of graphic narratives about the Holocaust, my second chapter concentrates on the comics of renowned Jewish-American cartoonist Art Spiegelman, specifically his masterwork, *Maus* (1986, 1991), along with other comics. The chapter probes comics, the singular medium that most clearly bridges the gap between visual culture and literature, and I examine how Spiegelman deploys the visual-textual nature of comics to capture embodied realities of race and ethnicity. For instance, I analyze the latter's graphic animal conceit—that Jews are mice and Nazis are cats—and I thread it through Spiegelman's ambivalent relationship with his Holocaust-surviving father and his own Jewish-American identity. Ultimately, I read the graphic narratives as a visual and emotional testing of ethnic identification (seen from the outside, felt from the inside) under harrowing historical conditions, such as genocide and terrorism.

My third and last chapter turns to Chicanx literature, comparing the acerbic and visually emphatic *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* by Oscar Zeta Acosta to the Hernandez brothers' decades-spanning comics series, *Love and Rockets* (1981-present). Despite Acosta working exclusively in the novel form and the Hernandezes in comics, a through-line emerges in how the texts' uses of graphicity meticulously recreate the Los Angeles barrios and the plurality of Chicanx peoples that populate them. I argue that Acosta and the Hernandezes spatialize their narratives through graphic writing and image-and-text, respectively, in order to form a more fluid and intersectional vision of Chicanx identity. Barrios act as literary worlds, wherein readers witness multivalent forms of Chicanx bodies and voices. While scholarship has attended to the significance of Acosta's novel to Chicano Movement literature and to *Love and Rockets*' crucial founding of alternative comics, my graphicity-specific analysis bridges the gap between visual culture and Latinx literature.

INTRODUCTION

What Is American Graphicity?

In 1960, James Baldwin was asked to speak on the matter of "minority rights." Addressing a crowd at Kalamazoo College, he said:

> To speak in my own person, as a member of the nation's most oppressed minority, the oldest oppressed minority, I want to suggest most seriously that before we can do very much in the way of clear thinking or clear doing as relates to the minorities in this country, we must first crack the American image and find out and deal with what it hides.[1]

This quote is profound for a number of reasons, especially in its concise triangulation of three crucial discourses central to this dissertation: race, visuality, and literature. First, in terms of racial politics, rather than scrutinizing the conditions and injustices of a particular ethnoracial minority group, Baldwin questions the entire structure—the holistic "American image"—that simultaneously contains all Americans and yet undergirds the classification of American ethnic groups as either majority or as minority.[2] He places his personal identification as a "member of the nation's most oppressed minority" within a seemingly rigid (yet potentially crackable) social matrix, one where particular ethnicity is contingent on the American totality. The suggestion here is that ethnic-specific conditions—be they black, Latinx, or other—should not solely be the purview of its particular community members. Rather, separate ethnic discourses should be seen as threads of the same American tapestry, responsible to one another.

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[1] James Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority: An Address," *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1962), 132. Though the book does not specify, multiple online sources claim that the address occurred in 1960.

[2] I recognize a difference between the ideological concepts of "race" and "ethnicity"; however, depending on context, I also use them interchangeably, and, occasionally, I combine them as "race and ethnicity" or in adjectival form as "ethnoracial." My particular understanding and definition of these terms are discussed in the section, "Race/Ethnicity and the Visual."

Second, "image" is used to invoke the tangible nature of race and ethnicity, that is to say, its concreteness and materiality. In this same address, he posits a related image, the "conqueror-image," which identifies the idealized American as "someone who is kind of a cross between the Teuton and the Celt."[3] Though "outrageous," Baldwin points out that this white-centered image is often asserted as the "national self-image," an image of moral authority, an image that "leaves out of account, of course, most of the people in the country, and most of the facts of life."[4] Despite its claim to represent a national self-image, the conqueror-image represents whiteness as the de facto majority. The conqueror-image does not visualize other races or ethnicities, but rather puts them under erasure—out of sight—thereby disempowering minority communities, cutting them off from claims to national identity.[5] Baldwin understands this formulation of majority as neither a matter of numbers nor power, but rather influence, specifically the ability to dictate what is correctly, both morally and visually, "American." In effect, Baldwin understands the troubling racial politics of his time as one of self-visualization, one that beckons all Americans to undo the influence on them and picture themselves differently, regardless of their ethnicity.[6] Baldwin asks his audience to "crack" the false American image to see what and whom lie hidden underneath, that is, to reveal the "real," holistic American image.[7] Central to the perception of race and ethnicity is what is both seen and hidden, suggesting the potential and failures of visibility when it comes to grasping American identity. While Baldwin spoke in 1960, his view, as represented by President Trump, is sadly relevant today.

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[3] "In Search of a Majority," 131-132.

[4] Ibid., 132.

[5] Baldwin makes this erasure explicit when he says, "The American minorities can be placed on a kind of color wheel. For example, when we think of the American boy, we don't usually think of a Spanish, Turkish, a Greek, or a Mexican type, still less of an Oriental type" (Ibid., 131).

[6] Foreshadowing *Time*'s Person of the Year Award for 2006, which proclaimed "You," or the millions of internet users who generated content, as winner, Baldwin ends his address to Kalamazoo's students by declaring that "this majority is you…The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in" ("In Search of a Majority," 137).

[7] Ibid., 132.

For literature, Baldwin's reference to a crack-able "American image" hinges on a potent combination of text and image, one which alerts readers to two concurrent registers of textuality and visuality, thus providing a model for my dissertation's discursive mode for analyzing visuality in ethnic literature. Baldwin invokes visuality in his discussion of the tempestuous climate of American race relations, claiming that the problem of national self-definition in the U.S. is something that can be "clear" and mediated; that is to say, it can be textually discussed, written about, and, as an image, be visualized and seen. Images are powerful for narrating the way that ethnic groups represent themselves and represent the Other because an act of registering happens at the level of vision and perception. On the other hand, the failure of representation Baldwin identifies is also one of image. Do images reveal or do they occlude? He says that the image gets in the way of a form of representation that lies "hidden" underneath, a discursive, perhaps textual order that tells the reader the multivalent truth of American life. Baldwin describes the things underneath as "a great many unadmitted despairs and confusions, and anguish and unadmitted crimes and failures hide."[8] "Unadmitted" is a particularly striking term, as it suggests that as image fails, so does utterance and textuality fail to account, or "admit," to American "crimes and failures." Visuality and textuality as they pertain to racial political discourse fall short, yet Baldwin understands the need to invoke both.

If there is a false image, what does the right image of American identity look like exactly, and how would one describe it? Baldwin's visual metaphor, the "American image," seemingly both supports and undermines the visual nature of self-identification. It asks the reader to access her own envisioning of American identity, a useful political exercise; yet, it also suggests a layered depth to the image—that it can crack and hide something underneath—which contradicts the flat, two-dimensional plane of the picture. "Crack" is a specific, tactile word to describe an action on an image, while "image" is so open to interpretation. Is the image a photo, a painting, a wanted poster, a virtual projection of the American psyche? Is this a problem of a sloppy metaphor? Is this a failure of language to properly speak about visuality, or, as I think, is this an affirmation about an integral quality of visuality? As visual critics often note, the sight of images communicate presence and absence simultaneously, like a beat or a pulse.[9] For our purposes, this makes visible and invisible to the reader-viewer the conditions of racial and ethnic representation. If the national self-image *presents* as visually white, then the visual erasure of other ethnicities registers to the reader-viewer as *represented* in absentia, but this is a negative image in need of resolution.[10] This reading is meant to point to the fact that, rather than convoluting a message, the combination of image and text employed in Baldwin's address communicates to the reader the unstable, questionable conditions of political representation and racial visibility. The play of visuality and textuality—their semiotic hybridization, tension, and failures—as seen and read here articulates what this dissertation, titled "American Graphicity," identifies and examines in other ethnic literary texts, across multiple ethnic genres and forms.

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[8] "In Search of a Majority," 132.

Last, "American image" is an apposite phrase in light of visual culture's role in relaying the conditions of race relations during Baldwin's period: television coverage of violence against African Americans during the Selma to Montgomery marches and the subsequent riots of 1968 in cities around the country; popular films such as *Blackboard Jungle* and *West Side Story*; posters, magazines, and advertisements targeting people of color; examples as boundless as they are so often troubling.[11] But the "American image" is also perceivable in the momentous turn in literature during the postwar period, through the emergence of a series of identity-based movements, such as the Black Arts and Chicano Movement, and then less politically-inflected genres, like Jewish-American literature. On an ethnic-specific level, the movements worked to dismantle disempowering forms of cultural representation and in their place establish a self-defined culture for their particular ethnic groups. On a national, inter-ethnic level, they asked for greater political influence as equal and complicit members of American society. In other words, these groups were themselves cracking the American image, and replacing it in part with their own. To clarify and extend the visual metaphor of Baldwin's quote, I suggest thinking about the American image as a series of pictures stacked on top of one another, and endless, concatenating scrapbook of ethnoracial snapshots that collectively approach a single, unified American image.

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[9] I take this notion of beats and pulses from Rosalind Krauss's article "The Im/Pulse to See," which expounds on the contingency of vision to the body. In this sense, vision is procedural, bound to temporal experience, which destabilizes the supposed static quality of images. Rosalind Krauss, "The Im/Pulse to See," *Vision and Visuality,* ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 1988), 50-73.
[10] See Johanna Drucker on "visual presence" and "symbolic absence" in "What Is Graphic about Graphic Novels?," *English Language Notes* 46, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2008).

"American Graphicity" triangulates three rich, deeply interrelated discourses: visuality; literature; and race and ethnicity. The central question of this project is, how do American literary figures reconcile their urgent, sociopolitical perspective on race and ethnicity with the pressing concerns of an overwhelming visual culture? This study examines the intersection of race, ethnicity, textuality, and visuality as it occurs in the postwar period of American literature. Specifically, I look at examples of American literature that incorporate notions of vision, visual culture, and of visualizing race and ethnicity in the American landscape. I term this graphic mode of literary practice, *graphicity*. The use of graphicity can range from a figurative graphic mode—that is, a way of placing critical emphasis on visuality but in a strictly textual format—to the experimental incorporation of literal images (photos, illustrations, cartoons). Another important medium that I examine is comics, an art form that most realizes, or mediates, the hybridization of text and image.[12] Unlike the combination of photographs and text in, say, James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), which juxtaposes the visual and the textual but never makes them truly single in form, the medium of comics works through a unique, dialectical language of its own. The boundaries between text and image in my objects can often be sharp and contradictory. Sometimes these boundaries can be non-existent, that is to say, image becomes text, and text becomes image, as is often the case in comics. Across distinct manifestations, the examples I present utilize and reformulate their given form's conventions in order to explore visual, textual, and political representation of race and ethnicity.

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[11] Baldwin references visual media later in this address, calling to attention the sight of angry protestors in the South captured on national television. Interestingly, as a means of blurring lines between ethnic groups, his description of the televisual sight does not specify whether he is referencing the black demonstrators or white, anti-civil rights protestors. While Baldwin clearly demonstrates a penchant for invoking visuality as a means of discussing race relations, he also knows when to effectively not visualize, that is to say, make race invisible. His visual absencing stutters and piques the reader's assumptions over the subject of his remarks.

Despite the always tenuous and evolving nature of academic categorization of ethnic literature genres—such as Chicanx, Jewish, and white literature—I intend not to dismiss them but rather embrace them as discrete structural systems informed by their own particular logic, exigencies, and political perspectives and aims. "American Graphicity" is not comprehensive, but rather an introduction to a graphic mode of reading—that is, reading graphicity—for understanding what makes an ethnic text ethnic. In this sense, I crack the American image by trying to enumerate as much as I can of visuality, race, and ethnicity hidden underneath. Within each genre, I trace its trajectory over time by looking at specific seminal texts and their respective authors from the figuratively cinematic novels of James Agee to Hunter S. Thompson's radically psychedelic Gonzo work complete with Ralph Steadman's classic illustrations, from early twentieth-century Jewish-made comic strips to Art Spiegelman's ground-breaking graphic novels, from Oscar Zeta Acosta's aggressively masculine autobiography to the Hernandez brothers' vibrant, pluralistic comics.

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[12] In reference to the medium of comics, I use the singular form; however, in reference to multiple comics texts, I may also use the plural form, as in, "the many comics of Art Spiegelman."

These three case studies of discrete ethnic genres uncover important through-lines and differences. Through their shared interests in graphicity, each of these authors puts forward a graphic racial image particular to their own identity. They figure themselves, or something approaching their perceived ethnoracial self, but that takes multiple forms. In *Maus,* Art Spiegelman figures himself as a mouse, actualizing negative stereotypes about Jews in order to subvert the very ideological roots of racism. On the other hand, in *A Death in the Family,* James Agee constructs a vision of a lost white community in order to elegize the aesthetic beauty of his childhood. He makes a monument to a crumbling sense of cultural whiteness, lost to the eventualities of cosmopolitan progress. More often than not, however, these authors build the image up in order to scrutinize and occasionally "crack" their racial image. Adding to this project is an examination of form, or of the specifics of how exactly each textual object makes race visible. Considering that the traditional purview of textuality and visuality has belonged to separate disciplines, how does "American Graphicity" account for the multidisciplinary relationship between visuality and literature exhibited by these texts? Finally, while the study of American ethnic literature is a rich, well-established field, how does this project re-imagine the "image" of race, ethnicity, and literature through its discrete examinations of particular texts? Like the subjects of this dissertation, I aim to shine light on the assumptions made about how we understand race, literature, and the visual, largely, in order to complicate and subvert those assumptions.

Race/Ethnicity and the Visual

Visuality and, for that matter, vision, are not stable, "natural" terms, but have always been historically and politically determined concepts. While "vision" suggests a biological or "physical operation" and "visuality" suggests a social practice, Hal Foster claims that these concepts are not opposed to each other, for visuality is bound to the body and to the mind and vision is "social and historical, too."[13] How vision and visuality differ, however, is determined by the social structures—what he calls the "scopic regimes"—that dictate "how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein."[14] Media technologies that form the visual, "the datum of vision," determine what we see, and then how those sights are understood are mediated by established "discursive determinations," be it derived from Enlightenment thinking or postmodernism or a slew of political ideologies and systems.[15] This dissertation follows Foster's definition as well as Nicholas Mirzoeff's definition of visuality, which understands it as evidence of "a specific technique of colonial and imperial practice," which demonstrates "authoritarian control" through the "three component techniques" of "classification, separation, and aesthetics."[16] While I am less interested in strictly following Mirzoeff's genealogy of visuality, these three categories are helpful for understanding that visuality is an instrumental practice for classifying and separating people—individuals and groups—along lines of visual phenotypology.[17]

Historically, the process of othering, or of designating racial difference, was and continues to be made substantive through visuality. As Mirzoeff writes,

> The definition of the Other as wholly different from the Self was, of course, haunted by anxiety that difference was more apparent than real. It was therefore crucial that

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[13] Hal Foster, "Preface," *Vision and Visuality* (New York: New Press, 1988), ix.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Introduction," *The Visual Culture Reader: For Critical Visuality Studies,* 3rd Edition (London: Routledge, 2013), xxx.
[17] Ibid., xxxi.

> difference should not only be known but visible. In the modern period (1750-1945), the pseudo-science of ‘race’ dominated such efforts to visualize difference.[18]

Race as sociological category for differentiating power depends on visuality; however, it also makes sense to say that vision and visuality are practices that help materialize and evince power structures and are, therefore subordinate to those structures, such as those between people of different status—be it class-, race-, gender-, or sexuality-based. Furthermore, W. J. T. Mitchell collapses the boundaries between the discourse of race and the discourse of visuality when he posits:

> We see race as *a medium*, an intervening substance, to take the most literal definition. Race, in other words, is something we *see through*, like a frame, a window, a screen, or a lens, rather than some-thing we *look at*. It is a repertoire of cognitive and conceptual filters through which forms of human otherness are mediated.[19]

Race is not merely a datum of vision; it is not perceived as sole image because of its “inherent,” “physical” visuality. Rather, like visuality itself, race is an aesthetic tool that reveals colonial, imperial, and hegemonic thinking and biases.

Visuality is so fundamental to the social mechanics of race and ethnicity that the emergence of visual culture studies in academia immediately gave rise to the field’s critical study of race.[20] Even before the institutionalizing of the field, twentieth-century black scholars were establishing the language and modes of this discourse, such as found in W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).[21] In Du Bois’s work, the scholar describes the visual condition and conditioning of African Americans in the United States through the now-ubiquitous term "double-consciousness." He writes,

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[18] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure* (London: Routledge, 1995), 17.

[19] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Seeing through Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2012), xii.

[20] Almost all visual studies texts devote large sub-sections to chapters on race and ethnicity. See the multiple editions of Nicholas Mirzoeff-edited *Visual Culture Reader* (1998, 2002, 2013), for example.

[21] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* (New York: Grove Press, 1952); Moore, T. Owens compares the two writers’ perspectives on black “double consciousness in "A Fanonian Perspective on Double Consciousness," *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 6 (2005): 751-62. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40034879.

> a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[22]

Du Bois's theory of "veiled visuality," as Mirzoeff puts it, understands that black visual subjectivity is partially occluded by the hegemonic vision of whiteness. The African American sees himself through his own eyes and, then, through the vision of the white perspective.[23] The racial prism, or medium, between whites and blacks causes a kind of visual obscuring, a play of visibility and invisibility. According to Du Bois, a black person sees through this "veiled visuality," yet cannot be seen, that is to say, is rendered invisible by the white viewer. Du Bois ultimately saw this condition and its discursive recognition as a strength for nationalist understanding and black liberation. He writes, "We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?"[24] African American scholars of the midcentury, including James Baldwin, sustained and elaborated on this racial-visual discourse, opening the door for visual culture-devoted scholars like Michele Wallace, Michael Harris, and many others. The subtext posed here is that American-specific examinations of visuality and race have predominantly dealt with visuality's role in constructing and maintaining racial and racist notions of blackness. Consequently, African-Americans—philosophers, critics, politicians, artists, authors, filmmakers, cartoonists—have largely led the deconstruction of this racial-visual dynamic in academia and in art, especially in the early to mid-twentieth century.

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[22] *The Souls of Black Folk,* 3.

[23] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "On Visuality," *Journal of Visual Culture* 5*,* no. 1 (2006), 70.

[24] Quoted in "On Visuality," 75.

Briefly, I want to touch on the notion of American visual culture, specifically, in terms of its role in constructing and maintaining forms of visual racial representation for African-Americans. Although I do not write about blackness in my three chapters, largely because it has been written about a lot before, the examination of blackness and visual culture establishes crucial notions about American sociopolitics and culture during the postwar period, a time relevant to all the objects I do observe in my chapters.

Visual culture suffuses our every day, from television to the internet to billboards to visual art—all that which demands to be looked at by viewers. In terms of race and ethnicity, visual culture has been instrumental for communicating and circumscribing representations of people of color, which historically privileged the vision of dominant, mostly-white perspectives. The fraught relationship between African-Americans and visual representations of black bodies—minstrel shows, the erotic curiosity over the "Hottentot Venus," Euro-modernist paintings, to name but a few—is one well-documented mode of this symbiotic connection between race and visuality in American history.[25] Michael Harris speaks to the function of this hybridized dialectic between blacks and whites, writing, "Definitions and visual indicators of race were used to form a black-white hierarchical dialectic and that each was dependent on the other to support the whole; but in racial discourse black is the discredited signifier."[26] Blackness, in this arrangement, clearly serves as the repository of negative associations and differences that contrast the positive meanings of whiteness, and we see this in the long history of American visual culture.

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[25] See, for example, David C. Driskell, ed., *African American Visual Aesthetics: A Postmodernist View* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Michele Wallace, *Dark Designs and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2004).

[26] Michael Harris, *Colored Pictures,* 3.

The twentieth century, in particular, saw a shift in the production and reception of racial visual culture along with an astronomical expansion of visual media technologies. To many, images displaced textuality as the dominant form of cultural representation and communication. W. J. T. Mitchell describes this transformation as the "pictorial turn," which he defines as "a postlinguistic, post semiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality."[27] For American minorities, especially African Americans, a weariness towards the visual as well as a lack of access to economic and institutional support has made the project of reversing negative representations a long and difficult one.[28] Yet, the visual technologies of mass media were instrumental in providing visual subjectivity for African Americans and disseminating black-created images and other forms of culture. Many mass images remained derogatory or belittling of African Americans, but in time black artists began to mobilize in greater numbers and generate images of black positivity of their own. Artist Jeff Donaldson recounts,

> If I remember clearly, not until say 1967 did you see black people feature in positive images, on billboards, magazines, in newspapers, movies, or in any visual medium. We [African American artists] painted and sculpted figures because we could not

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[27] W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn," *Picture Theory* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 16.

[28] For the problematic relationship between African American artists and Modernist and Postmodernist institutions see Ann Gibson, "The African American Aesthetic and Postmodernism," *African American Visual Aesthetics: A Postmodernist View,* ed. David C. Driskell, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); David C. Driskell, "Introduction: The Progenitors of a Postmodernist Review of African American Art," *African American Visual Aesthetics: A Postmodernist View,* ed. David C. Driskell, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995). In "Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visuality in African American Culture," Michele Wallace writes, "In the context of mass culture, the image of the black is larger than life. Historically, the body and the face of the black have posed no obstacle whatsoever to an unrelenting and generally contemptuous objectification. And yet, until recently, there has been no position within or outside American visual culture from which one could conceptualize the African American as subject. The prominence of black directors in film finally threatens to change that picture. But the difficulty of the project for black film has to do precisely with history of a mostly invisible black visuality." *Dark Designs and Visual Culture,* 186.

> afford the luxury of losing the opportunity of showing our people at the height of their glory.[29]

A particularly seminal text that displayed an awareness of the power of textuality and visuality—in the form of photography—to communicate a more compassionate view of African Americans was Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), which combined Wright's illuminating and humanizing documentarian prose with the startling Great Depression-era photographs of African Americans living in poverty. Decades later at the height of the Civil Rights Movement and in response to the assassination of Malcolm X, the Black Arts Movement (1965-1975), led by poet-activist Amiri Baraka, arose to conscientiously proliferate politically-charged black poetry, novels, visual arts, and theater in order to more faithfully and respectfully mediate the black experience in the U.S.

Visuality communicates and reinforces the contradistinctions of race relations in the United States, especially but not exclusively between black and white Americans. Michael Harris writes, "We were inscribed and circumscribed by our color—by how we looked! There simply was no way out because blackness, unlike Jewishness or Irishness, is primarily visual."[30] Here it is important clarify that my dissertation is, in part, invested in complicating Michael Harris' point by examining literature that discusses and envisions the visuality of both race and ethnicity. What this implies is that the visualization of race and ethnicity takes many forms through multiple media. While the critical discourses of visuality and other specific racial and ethnic categories are evidently not as large and established as blackness (in terms of race and visuality) in literature, this dissertation examines those objects that triangulate race, visuality, and literature in ethnic-specific ways, including whiteness, Chicanoness, and Jewishness. Though these categories are often muddled by the confusion generated by the different conceptualizations of "race" and "ethnicity" (and for Jewishness, "religion"), this dissertation recognizes an apparent, discrete discourse of visuality within each particular ethnic literary genre.

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[29] Quoted in Harris, *Colored Pictures,* ix.

[30] Ibid., 1. A further point Harris makes about the ramifications of blackness as an imposed, discredited signifier: "Racial oppression and the destructive images that reinforce it have caused what might be called the pathology of oppression to afflict many African Americans. This pathology might in part explain the dysfunctional families, anti-social behavior, domestic violence, and acts of self-hatred occurring in contemporary African American communities. The misrepresentation of black women has had an effect on both black men and women" (143).

Race and ethnicity are two concepts whose unstable nature render their relationship difficult to define. Michael Omi and Howard Winant offer a helpful historical distinction when they describe the twentieth-century propagation of the "ethnicity-paradigm" as a sociological, "insurgent…challenge" to the understanding of race, which was otherwise mired in notions of biology, essentialism, and the natural inferiority of minority races.[31] One associates ethnicity with social groups sharing a common culture and historical background. There is a subjective depth to ethnicity, which depends on discursivity—textual and otherwise—to be ethically represented.[32] On the other hand, race, by definition, is depthless; that is, race is bound to the visual mediation of vision, of color, of phenotypes, of surface cues. Race, along with all its problematic meanings and pseudo-scientific typologies, is a message relayed by the perception of human bodies. This breakdown of concepts suggests a compelling, albeit reductive analogy: race is to visuality what ethnicity is to textuality.

This could be exemplified most literally in the postwar explosion of "ethnic" literary movements. The writers of color from these groups used the conventions of literature (fiction and non-fiction) to represent the otherwise-marginalized views and concerns of their particular groups in respect of the larger American society; simultaneously, they aimed to destabilize the hegemonic construction of the white-centered American literary canon. In effect, they were creating American ethnicity as much as they were shining light on existing ethnic groups. Werner Sollors writes extensively on the role of literature in "inventing" ethnicity, in constructing identity that negates political and social assimilation. He describes how ethnicity is "not a thing but a process—and it requires constant detective work from readers, not a selling on a fixed encyclopedia of supposed cultural essentials."[33] I argue that postwar ethnic literature, especially as part of the political movements of the Sixties, is this phenomenon of "processing" on display. This dissertation is interested in literature that acts as a political assertion of ethnicity in light of the overwhelming visibility of race. However, as I've mentioned, this analogical formation between race, ethnicity, visuality, and textuality is a simplified, idealized one, with plenty of exceptions. Images can be utilized for powerful, constructive political purposes as well (Chicano murals come to mind), and literature can often undermine the complexities of subjectivity. This was the infamous indictment laid by James Baldwin against Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in his seminal essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel."[34] The practices of image and text in literature work both and often simultaneously in tandem and in tension to unfurl this discourse concerning the realities of ethnoracial conditions.

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[31] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 14.

[32] The ethicality of representation hinges on a given society's attitude towards ethnic groups, not to mention the self-perception and -regard of ethnic groups.

"Ethnicity" did not supplant "race" nor the other way around. While ethnicity is grounded in a sociological framework considerate of the political grouping of communities with a shared culture and descent, race remains just as much a determinant of human perceptions and associations. Race and ethnicity are inextricably bound—two sides of the same identitarian coin. Can we say the same for text and image? I argue that text and image—manifesting materially or figuratively—are essential for making and reading ethnic literature. Despite the "pictorial turn," the rise of spectacles, the over-saturation of images in every aspect of life, and other critical emphases placed on visual culture in the postwar period, text in the form of literature remains an equally crucial discursive mode, more than ever in the critical and artistic discussion of race relations and ethnic group formations.

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[33] Werner Sollors, "Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity," *The Invention of Ethnicity,* ed. Werner Sollors, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), xv.

[34] James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955).

What Is Ethnic Literature?

Contemporary scholarship in postwar American literature draws a problematic distinction between the study of "ethnic literature"—discrete categories of literature written by persons of color—and generic American literature. There is a prevailing cultural commonplace that suggests, despite intention or viewpoint, every writer of color is inherently an interlocutor in the discourse of race at large.[35] This is supported by a clearly antiquated double standard, which groups ethnic writers broadly, often glossing over other discursive considerations, and treats white writers with an unparalleled level of nuance. In this scheme, white writers write about the human condition, not (solely) a racial one. Pointing to this is not a move meant to dismiss writers of color who have explicitly taken up the discourse of their respective ethnicity, and who have advocated for self-categorization and –criticism. I do not advocate "colorblindness" or the eradication of categories of ethnic literature. The opposite is true. I reject the notion that the "problem of ethnicity" is a person of color-only problem.

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[35] In addressing the marginalization of African American visual artists' contributions to American art, David C. Driskell raises the concern over criticism of black art by "majority culture writers" and a need to examine the "so-called standards of quality" by which black artistry is judged. He offers an example of the problem: "when a white image is depicted by white artists, mainstream critics and museum curators see it as a universal or genre image, but when a black image is depicted by blacks, it is thought to be ethnic or more threatening than universal." "Introduction: The Progenitors of a Postmodernist Review of African American Art," 11.

"American Graphicity" argues that all literature is ethnic literature. Whether imagined or real, literature graphically presents and symbolically represents figures, bodies, and communities. Literature that explicitly circumvents the descriptions that evoke ethnoracial constructs are arguably few and far between, but, even then, readers must be suspect of such evasion. As Baldwin's "American image" metaphor argues, visual obfuscation can communicate realities as productively as transparent, explicit presentations. On the production side of literature, the American writer is always an ethnic figure, whether they are white, Jewish, or Latinx.[36] These writers are imputing their work with their own visual subjectivity, their own racialized experiences. As I discuss in chapter three, immigrant Jewish comic book writers and artists of the war and postwar period incorporated Jewish-specific anxieties and self-projections into their creation of superheroes; however, this coded information was belied by the all-American (white) figural presentation of these superhero characters.[37] Nevertheless, texts can vary in their engagement and approach to ethnoracial discourses, and this dissertation examines texts that offer subjective approaches to visualizing ethnic-specific realities.

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[36] To be clear, these ethnoracial categories are not meant to be mutually exclusive. The conversation about whether "Latinx" is an ethnic category distinct from the categories of racial color complicates the lines between ethnic literary genres; after all, the Afro-Latinx experience can often be quite distinct from the white Latinx experience. Furthermore, none of these designations are fixed neither. Consider, for example, the transformation of Jewish people in the United States from distinctly ethnic Other to white. I include discussions of these blurry boundaries in my chapters on Chicanx and Jewish literature. For more on this topic, see Karen Brodkin's *How Jews Became White Folk and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1998).

[37] The most cited case in this discussion about superhero comics and their Jewish creators is Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel's creation of Superman (1938). For more on Jews and superhero comics, see Harry Brod, *Superman Is Jewish? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* (Free Press: New York, 2012). For more on Jews and Comics, see Paul Buhle, ed., *Jews and American Popular Culture* (Westport, Ct: Praeger Publishers, 2007) and *Jews and American Comics: An Illustrated History of An American Art Form* (New York: New Press, 2008); Arie Kaplan, *Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic* Books (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008); Harvey Pekar and Paul Buhle, eds., *Yiddishkeit: Jewish Vernacular & The New Land* (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2011).

The current schematic for classifying ethnic literature commonly suggests that white writers in the Postwar were not concerned with their ethnic identities, not nearly to the extent of black, Chicanx, Jewish, and other writers. This is contested in my chapter. It takes a fresh approach to a set of classic American novels, reframing them as examples of postwar white literature. Despite their tonal and thematic differences, the texts I examine display a unique concern with seeing whiteness as a problematic ethnic category, replete with the existential, political crises associated with other identitarian movements. The chapter begins with a discussion of novelist, poet, film critic, and journalist, James Agee, who most famously combined his prose with Walker Evans's photography for their influential study of poor, white rural farmers of the South, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). However, I focus on his less discussed (academically speaking), semi-autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family* (1957), which recounts the childhood memory of his father's tragic, sudden passing. Faithful to the multi-sensorial realities of memory, Agee experiments in this novel with the conventions of fiction to re-create not only his personal experience but also the bygone conditions of space, time, and people in prewar, white, rural America.

Reading *A Death in the Family* as an early interlocutor in the literary discourse of white identity in the postwar, the chapter then shifts into an examination of a later discursive bookend. Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (published as a novel in 1972), like Agee's work, manipulates the conventions of fiction, incorporating elements of autobiography, journalism, and importantly, the surreal illustrations of Ralph Steadman. However, while Agee uses his visual-literary mode to document a lamentably disappearing image of white America, Thompson's drug-induced visualization of America zeroes in on its white, dystopian underbelly and its moral failures. Critical of the close linkage between class and racial elitism, Thompson represents *all* Americans as Other—as visually devolved monsters. Though neither of these writers nor their examined texts are read as exhibiting a pointed interest in whiteness, the way that the other two ethnic categories (Chicanx and Jewish) of this dissertation are, my reading of graphicity lifts the veil on their ethnoracial perspectives.

Along with the problems of self-identity, these texts are also informed by crises of mediation, concerning the forms of artistic expression themselves. The novel (the traditional, text-based book) has its formal, narratological capabilities, but also its limitations. Similarly, visuality has its positive and negative associations, especially with concern to race and ethnicity. I am interested in works that question these forms of expression as singular, by either exploiting or experimenting with generic literary modes. Why does Oscar Zeta Acosta incorporate images and other visual modes into his Chicano Movement-inspired text, *Revolt of the Cockroach People*? How does this complicate the novel's textuality? I examine the juncture between two important modes of representational crises—a political, identitarian one and an artistic one and I reveal that identity often inspires new modes of artistic expression and, conversely, art forms can be powerful tools for self-discovery.

My second chapter traces the trajectory of Jewish-American representation in the postwar, a time marked by a massive historical makeover. After the horrors and ramifications of the Holocaust were publicly acknowledged, Jewish American immigrants struggled with self-visualization, being assimilated racially by majority whiteness at one end, while also constructing Jewish American-specific ethnicity through their literature at the other end. The chapter locates this Jewish-specific condition within an exploration of the historical connection shared between Jews and the comic medium. I pose the question, can mediums themselves be ethnic? As a visual literary form that Jewish Americans helped to shape, innovate, and popularize, the comic book has proven instrumental in the reflection and cultivation of Jewish identity, which finds no greater example than in Art Spiegelman's seminal graphic novel *Maus* (serialized from1980-1991).

The chapter focuses on Art Spiegelman's visual and textual subjectivity and how it expresses views on Jewish identity in *Maus* and other texts. I argue that Spiegelman and his texts express a uniquely ambivalent perspective about race and ethnicity, which explores the burdened boundary between forced racial classification and personal ethnic identification. Through the unique textual-verbal hybrid form of comics, *Maus* literally depicts race through the visual conceit of animals to represent ethnoracial groups (Jews as mice, Nazis as cats) while also narrativizing the testimony of Spiegelman's father and his surviving of the Holocaust. Spiegelman appropriates and reverses the graphic stereotypes—seen in Third Reich propaganda and popular visual culture alike—informing the animal, "vermin" metaphors long-associated with Jews. *Maus* graphically presents race relentlessly, making the reader aware of the inescapable nature of racism and social injustice, especially during the Holocaust. However, on the textual register, the memoirist, documentarian narrative re-particularizes the story as a distinctly embattled, personal one. The dialectic in this "co-mixing" of artistic forms parallels the ethnoracial burden that informs so much about the way Art Spiegelman views identity.

My final chapter continues to examine the literary potential of comics to make ethnicity visible, but it complicates the medium-specificity of my second chapter by placing the comics medium in direct conversation with the ethnic (text-based) novel. This dialogue reveals a surprising examination of authors who manipulate their own particular chosen art forms in the name of "exposing" ethnic community. Specifically, we turn to the Chicanx community and the unique spatial and identitarian disposition of the Chicanx barrio. Rather than isolating perspectives through a protagonist's visual subjectivity, the texts I examine here employ graphicity in order to manifest a more encompassing, multivalent representation of Chicanx community. The chapter begins with a discussion of Oscar Zeta Acosta, perhaps most famous for being the real-life basis for Hunter S. Thompson's Dr. Gonzo in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, but who was also a lawyer, a Chicano rights activist, and a novelist in his own right. His unreliably-autobiographical novel, *Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973), channels the loose, Gonzo-esque documentary style of Hunter S. Thompson in its graphic recreation of Acosta's experience of the Chicano Movement during the 1960s. Strikingly, it also incorporates non-diegetic, palimpsestic images of cockroaches and Mesoamerican totems throughout the pages of the novel. This text-and-image play serves to undermine the many questionable layers of the story, while also alarming the white and minority readers to their persistent co-existence with abject communities, Chicanxs and cockroaches alike. The chapter then shifts from revolutionary politics to a post-revolutionary Chicanx barrio. The Hernandez brothers' alternative comic book series, *Love and Rockets* (published in multiple comics formats since the 1980s) uses the serialized form of the comics to tell slow, in-depth, often quotidian, telenovela, and fantastical stories about Chicanx who enter and slip-out of barrio spaces. Like Art Spiegelman and *Maus,* the Hernandez brothers absorb and transform their adopted medium, comics. They utilize its ability to visualize across space (the page) and, importantly, across time, through a near-real-time frame in order make present a rich, complex and pluralistic view of the Chicanx barrio. Both texts employ graphicity in order to visualize and subvert essentialist images of a strange, ever-evolving ethnic identity.

Visuality + Textuality = Graphicity

Textuality and visuality are two semiotic orders that are commonly understood in distinction to one another; to put it simply, "written words are assumed to represent language while images are presumed to represent things through different mechanisms of resemblance (icon, index, or symbol)."[38] Textuality commonly remains the purview of literary studies and visuality the purview of media or visual studies, despite the rise of multidisciplinary studies in academia and the ever-growing body of texts on "text-and-image" work, the illuminated manuscript, and comics, to name a few. In cultural studies, textuality and visuality are commonly endowed with distinct representational attributes and limitations, especially in terms of race and ethnicity. Michael Harris argues that images function at a more subliminal and powerful level of racial consciousness, which differs from the faculties of language:

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[38] Johanna Drucker, "What Is Graphic about Graphic Novels?," 41-42.

> Images can affect people in realms just beyond language and below rational consciousness—harmful images imposed from power are more difficult to subvert than language. Language, after all, is available to common folk and often is enlivened with new twists, spins, and value-added meanings in vernacular culture, but images are produced by the few to be consumed but seldom manipulated by the masses.[39]

Literature, in operating at a level that demands more complex, discursive, cognitive engagement, is often used to counter the powerful, negative representations of racial visual culture. There is an empirical basis for an account of this contest—visual culture versus literature—in American cultural history, beginning with former slave accounts in abolitionist publications to the Harlem Renaissance's cementing of African-American literature as a legitimate and greatly influential genre of American literature. Michele Wallace describes how Harlem Renaissance writers overcompensated in their resistance to visual bodily objectification, generating work that emphasized the mind over the body. She describes how black literature desexualized and disembodied its representation of black figurality as a response to "oversexualization of black images in white mass culture. It is an effort, in part, to block the primitivization of the black subject by white critics."[40] However, I argue that this anti-visuality speaks as much to the relationship of textuality and visuality in its mediation of ethnoracial conditions than not.

My dissertation interrogates and re-assesses this conceptual divide between textuality and visuality in relation to race and ethnicity. Ethnic minority literature has to varying degrees addressed the subject of sight and its relative terms—visuality, visibility, surveillance, the gaze. These texts have expressed how the visual is instructive in the formation of not only negative visual representations but also, importantly, visual subjectivity and aesthetic expressions of political rights. From Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) to Toni Morrison's early classic *The Bluest Eye* (1970)*,* two novels concerning the effect of color consciousness and the psychological toil it takes on the black community (especially in women), to Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) to alternative works such as Lance Tooks's graphic novel, *Narcissa* (2002), examples are seemingly endless. Consequently, there is an ever-increasing body of criticism on the relationship between visuality and, in particular, African-American literature. Less established is the intersection of visuality in other specific ethnic literary categories, and, moreover, I can name only a few book-length projects that examines visuality in literature among multiple ethnic and other identitarian categories.[41] My dissertation contributes to this special work and examines ethnic literatures of the United States that "play" with both visuality and textuality in often-formally experimental ways in order to represent subjective, ethnic-specific realities of one's own race.

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[39] *Colored Pictures*, 14-15.

[40] Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," *Dark Designs and Visual Culture*, (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2004), 47.

But what does this play *look* or *read* like exactly? What, specifically, can we determine about how textually and visuality are understood within such texts and literary forms? Known for its singular instantiation of textuality and visuality, comics is experiencing a growing amount of critical and commercial attention. The hybrid medium uses multiple registers of text and image in order to make spatial the movement of time and narration, and this is distinct from what, say, a children's book with supplemental images may do. Comics has often been marginalized and dismissed as a lower form of artistic expression due largely to odd, reductive associations with children's literature and other media that mixes text and image. While the use of text-and-image in comics can often be employed for an ease in communication—as we see in, say, four-panel comic strips or in-flight diagrams that instruct passengers how to put on a floatation vest—comics can also manipulate these registers of signification, creating multiple and possibly conflicting meanings. In her examination of Chris Ware's graphic novel work, Johanna Drucker clarifies that the visual register—what we see, the colors, the panels, the page—is not meant to simply "represent" or supplement a story. The "graphics" of a comic "*are* that world, they do not just present it. The graphic presence is as potent as the symbolic absences."[42] What is presented visually (its visuality) and what is represented symbolically (its textuality) are often not the same thing, and this tension can be productive for imagining concepts that are cognitively complex—that do not register easily in strictly textual or visual terms. Drucker writes, "This tension between the presentational and the representational pushes back on the ideas of linguistic transparence as well as on the idea of self-evident visuality that traditionally separated realms of word and image as sign systems."[43] The implication here is that between the visual and the textual registers—what is presented and represented—are liminal spaces wherein meaning can fail, slip, recoil, or produce new, unexpected meanings.

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[41] Angela Laflen, *Confronting Visuality in Multi-Ethnic Women's Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Laflen largely concentrates on representations of female subjectivity in literature. It has been highly influential to my approach in thinking about visuality and identity in works from multiple ethnic genres.

Roland Barthes recognized this capability in graphic literary forms such as comics in his essay, "Third Meaning." He describes the third meaning as "obtuse meaning," or "the filmic," which is "that in the film which cannot be described, the representation which cannot be represented. The filmic begins only where language and metalanguage end."[44] Though his analytical object is film in this essay, he claims that the third meaning can be seen in art forms like the comic strip, much in the way that Drucker describes. This mode of thinking about textuality and visuality, both in its aptitude for creating new ways of reading and seeing and also dismantling assumptions about images and text, take on profound significance when applied to the discourse of race and ethnicity.

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[42] "What Is Graphic about Graphic Novels?" 45. "Symbolic absence" here refers to the signified of the signifier, the text. Though "absent," the referent is made present by its textual index.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York; Hill and Wang, 1977), 64-65.

Race and ethnicity are simultaneously both presentational and representational. Presentation of race is formed in the graphic order and representation of race is the symbolic, discursive order, communicating ideas about racialized figures. In comics that feature minority characters, for example, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* or Jaime Hernandez's Chicanx neighborhood-focused graphic narratives*,* this visual-textual interplay produces important meanings about race. Despite being about many discourses, temporalities, and spaces beyond Chicanx culture, Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* consistently present race and ethnicity in the figuration of its Chicanx, Latinx, and multiracial characters. Multiple textual and visual registers fold and unfold all the time, as do meanings related to interpersonal, intra-communal relationships, much like they do in lived, quotidian experiences, rendering a world that relays an ethnic reality not well-documented in literature, especially at the time of its inception, 1981.[45]

"American Graphicity" takes this perspective about the relationship between textuality and visuality in graphic literature further, however. I argue that there is a hidden, obtuse meaning in the visuality and textuality of *all* ethnic literature, regardless of form, or literary genre. I am not the first to postulate the idea that all literature is visual, as W. J. T. Mitchell argues that there is no such thing as visual media, because, in fact, all media incorporates the visual. Furthermore, he argues, "There are no purely visual media because there is no such thing as pure visual perception in the first place,"[46] meaning that vision and visuality itself is always inflected and determined by the body, by other senses, and by language and the written word. As the close reading of James Baldwin's "American image" demonstrates, visuality and textuality can work together and against each other even in a strictly non-pictorial-making text. Moreover, visuality and textuality can work in tandem to construct discourses about race and ethnicity that are more than meets the eye.

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[45] For more, see this dissertation's third chapter.

This perception of literature suggests the need for a specific analytical mode for observing race and ethnicity in ethnic literature. My dissertation posits a new, heuristic mode, graphicity. Like Barthes' "filmic," graphicity describes the meaningful order that lies in-between textuality and visuality.[47] The term derives from "graphic" and its etymological Latin root, "graphicus," which has evolved to mean multiple things, including visuality, "relating to drawing and painting" (definition 2); textuality, "of or pertaining to writing" (4a); and also indicative of procedure or schematizing, "Pertaining to the use of diagrams, linear figures, or symbolic curves" (5a). This latter definition signifies how ethnic writers implement the visual and textual in order to solve the problem of how to represent their viewpoints about race.[48] Graphicity is produced out of the productive apposition of these two registers: how they burden, hybridize, and propel meaning.[49] While all literature contains an amount of graphicity, graphicity is both a quantitative and a qualitative metric term, meaning that it identifies the existence of this multimedial discourse in literature as well as measures its intensity. This reflects the other meaning of "graphic," meaning explicit and vivid either textually or visually, and also, its more modern use, indicative of excessive expression to the point of discomfort or even dissonance.[50] I have chosen to examine graphicity in texts with a markedly pointed use of visuality in service of the discourse of race and ethnicity. The visual can be made present in figurative, rhetorical methods (visual metaphor, imagery, discourse of sight), such as how we saw Baldwin's "American image"; it can also be discerned through literal incorporations of images, for example, drawings, sketches, photographs, iconography, or text as a form of image. Therefore, my dissertation identifies racial graphicity in multiple forms and genres, including magazine articles (with illustrations), experimental and "conventional" novels, and comics.

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[46] W. J. T. Mitchell, "There Are No Visual Media," *The Visual Culture Reader: For Critical Visuality Studies,* 3rd Edition (London: Routledge, 2013), 12.

[47] Though, unlike Barthes' "filmic," graphicity can be used to discuss all literary forms—film, the novel, comics—without confusing the reader with its media-specific name.

[48] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "graphic," accessed July 15, 2019, https://oed.com/view/Entry/80829?result=1&rskey=lcfBY5&

[49] This definition aligns with, still, another, ekphratic-like definition, "Producing by words the effect of a picture" (ibid., definition 3).

"American Graphicity" is a three-chapter reading of racial graphicity across multiple ethnic genres, art forms, and post-war times and spaces. It searches for poignant manifestations of racial images and the unique voices that, then, extrapolate, scrutinize, or destroy those ethnoracial constructions. Despite the many particular differences between each and every author, what the study finds is masks, depths, shared anxieties and struggles. As a collectivity of examinations, my dissertation is inspired by the belief that, to speak about the rights and the justice due to minorities in this country, we first have to crack the multiplicity of American images and see what they can tell us about ourselves.

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[50] Ibid. Draft addition from 2002, given the meaning, "Providing or conveying full, unexpurgated detail; expressly stated or represented; explicit, esp. in the depiction of sex or violence."

CHAPTER ONE

Auto-Ethnic Tourism: Seeing Whiteness in James Agee and Hunter S. Thompson

What is white literature? How can we conceive of a postwar history of literature written by white Americans in a form extended to other U.S. ethnic groups, such as African Americans, Latinxs, and Jewish Americans? Who are its predominant figures and what are its canonical texts? What are its formal features, its tropes, and historical trends? What are its politics? That is, what does it have to say about whiteness in the postwar period, when minority groups stormed the political and artistic arenas of the American consciousness, demanding representation of all forms? Finally, why do these questions about white literature feel so problematic, especially in contrast to the established scholarly discourses of ethnic minority literatures in the U.S.? The following chapter aims to address these questions, considering in earnest white literature as a sub-genre of ethnic American literature, while also attending to the underlying sociopolitical and academic tensions that these questions incite.

While absolutely relevant to the modern climate of race discourse, the essence of these questions is far from new, serving as the source for vast iterations of studies of whiteness, from as early as W. E. B. Du Bois's *Darkwater* (1920). Since then, there has been little shortage of discussion of the history of the white race in America, white privilege and white racism, whiteness in media, or literary whiteness.[1] A common conceptual thread in whiteness studies is the social formation of white consciousness vis-a-vis racial others, in particular African Americans. For example, Toni Morrison's important contribution to the discussion of whiteness in literature, *Playing in the Dark,* argues that blackness is an ever-present subject of U.S. literature, and this presence is instrumental to the formation of white American identity—mostly through binary contradistinction. She says about white American writers that their

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[1] See, for example, David R. Roediger,*The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History* (London: Verso, 1992); Theodore Allen's *The Invention of the White Race,* vol. I and II (1994-7); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1998); and Nell Irvin Painter's *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010). For privilege and racism, see Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984); Paula S. Rothenberg, ed., *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other*

> fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this.[2]

Morrison's argument hits upon a critical notion about the logistics of race formation and the interrelation between whites and minorities. The presence of the black persona, in the blackness of her being, obscures the process of how white identity is constructed, rendering the white American as a normative figure and, ultimately, as raceless. As Morrison puts it, "In this country…American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen."[3]

This privilege of "(in)visibility" is a prominent concern of whiteness studies, as texts such as Richard Dyer's *White*, Rothenberg's *Invisible Privilege* or Halley, Eshleman, and Vitaya's *Seeing White: An Introduction to White Privilege and Race* show. Arguably, it is this social power that casts an entire ethnic group and its work—that is, white literature—as racially invisible, as normative, as simply American, rather than one explicitly concerned with its own ethnic and racial condition in the way

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Side of Racism (New York: Worth Publishers, 2016). For whiteness in cinema and visual media, see Daniel Bernardi, ed., *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ:: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1996); and Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997). For an example of whiteness in literature, see Valerie Babb's *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1998).

[2] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 17.

[3] Ibid., 47.

that postwar identitarian movements, such as the Black Arts Movement or the Chicano Movement and their artists, position themselves.[4] However, despite the lack of an explicit political engagement or cultural coalescing, there are certainly modes of discovering self-reflexive ethnic discourses in postwar white literature. Given the right mode of seeing and reading, as Morrison says, it requires hard work *not* to see this.

In this chapter, I take a new approach to a set of classic American texts, reframing them as examples of postwar white literature that are critically invested in the juxtaposition of visual documentation with the ethnographic study of white Americans. Despite their tonal and thematic differences, the texts display a unique concern with seeing and visualizing whiteness as an ethnic category, replete with the existential, political crises associated with other identitarian movements. What does it mean to be ethnically white in the radically changing postwar period? What does a white community look like, and what does that say about white American identity? The privilege of racial invisibility that Toni Morrison criticizes above does seep into these texts, obfuscating to some extent the textual legibility of whiteness; however, through a singular examination of visuality, this chapter identifies the white ethnic discourse hiding in plain sight.

Three of the four texts that I address in this chapter contain or are accompanied by illustrations or photographs, making their interest in visual media explicit, but all four of the texts exhibit a strong proclivity for visuality. James Agee and Hunter S. Thompson employ visuality in order to present graphically the predominantly white spaces they inhabit and the white figures they share an autobiographical linkage with, be it familial or communal. I term this graphic mode of literature, *graphicity,* which I define most plainly as a visual practice that can be discerned in literary works, from figurative forms (visual metaphor, imagery, discourse of visibility) to literal, pictorial forms (use of comics, sketches, photographs, iconography, or text as a form of image). While all literature is arguably imbued with at least some amount of graphicity, I argue in this chapter that James Agee and Hunter S. Thompson utilize graphicity extensively in order to visualize their differing perspectives on white ethnicity during, first, Agee's tumultuous early postwar period and, second, Thompson's culturally radical period after the 1960s.

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[4] Richard Dyer writes, "In Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard…At the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race." "The Matter with Whiteness," *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Racism*, 2nd ed., Paula Rothenberg, ed., (Worth Pub, 2005), 11. For more on the figuration of whiteness and image, consult Dyer's *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation,* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).

James Agee and Hunter S. Thompson on Race

James Agee (1909-1955) and Hunter S. Thompson (1937-2005): two twentieth-century icons of American literature and delegates of two vastly different periods of American history. Agee worked and in ways stood for the tumultuous and transformative years of the pre-, inter-, and immediate postwar years, while Thompson represented the cultural, intra-national, and international war years of the sixties and beyond. The fact that a comparative study of these two figures has yet to be made is a glaring oversight. They were two heterosexual Southern white American males from Knoxville, Tennessee and Louisville, Kentucky, who led intrepid, often self-destructive lives, who were equally invested in documentarian endeavors that shine light on marginalized American peoples, who pushed the boundaries of their literary forms (journalism, fiction, autobiography) in the name of reportage and truth, and who were both exceptionally visual-minded thinkers.

In this chapter I examine this parallel between Agee and Thompson, tracing the way that each writer represents a different perspective on not only race, but their own cultural, or ethnic, makeup in light of the relevant identity politics of their vastly differing historical periods. Specifically, I argue that Agee embodies the beginning book end to a period of identity politics during and after the end of the World War II, when the mobilization of demographic groups, new race relations, and contestations between rural and urban America reach a critical juncture. Because of this contemporaneous, racial anxiety, Agee experiments in his two novels with the conventions of fiction to visually re-create not only his personal memory but also the bygone conditions of space, time, and people in prewar, white, rural America. Representing the closing end of this period is Thompson, who I argue scrutinizes the moral failures of white America in his acerbic critique of the gentry class in "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved (1970), and, then, in his masterwork *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (started as an article in 1971, but published as a novel in 1972). Appropriately, Marianne DeKoven identifies *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as "self-consciously, and by critical consensus, an epitaph for the sixties."[5] However, I extend this "death" conceit by arguing that the novel and Las Vegas, metaphorically speaking, represent a post-apocalyptic landscape, complete with science fiction-like monsters and a surreal wasteland, which I read as a post-racial ethnic community.

Surprisingly, neither author is especially known for their race discourse, despite the fact that many of their works are explicitly concerned with white communities as this chapter will demonstrate. In their pasts, they have both written on race—black and white relations, specifically—in shorter pieces of journalism. In his *Oxford American* magazine article "America! Look at Your Shame!" (1943), Agee shares a very evocative personal anecdote about, first, being overcome with shame and introspection over a photograph of two white "artistic" types helping a bloodied, black male during the Detroit Race Riots of 1943, and, secondly, witnessing white Southern soldiers discriminating against blacks on a Northern city bus and being drawn to silence and impotence. These incidents engender self-reflection on his own ethnic makeup, and they also underscore the thematic resonance of visuality (photograph and memory, respectively) in his writing. The exploration of self-reflexivity and visuality foreshadows the mode of white ethnography that culminates in his two novels, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) and *A Death in the Family* (1957).

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[5] Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004), 86.

While lacking the psychedelia and caustic wit of his later iconic writing, Thompson's "A Southern City with Northern Problems," a *Reporter* magazine article from 1963, also speaks to the duplicitous nature of race politics in Louisville, a city that at the time prided itself on its progressive external appearance, yet made opaque its sinister systematic anti-Blackness. Thompson portrays the positive, progressive-seeming façade of Louisville through a photograph-like description of how one might see the city:

> If you stand at the counter and watch the street you will see off-duty cops and courthouse loafers, visiting farmers with five children and a pregnant wife in the cab of a pickup truck, and a well-fed collection of lawyers and brokers in two-button suits and cordovan shoes. You will also see quite a few Negroes, some of them also wearing business suits and cordovan shoes. Louisville takes pride in its race relations, and the appearance of well-dressed Negroes in the Courthouse-City Hall district does not raise any eyebrows.[6]

Later, however, he clarifies the underlying subtext of the visual he has constructed through his graphic description. He describes the discrepancy between progressive image and racist reality:

> What is apparent in Louisville is that the Negro has won a few crucial battles, but instead of making the breakthrough he expected, he has come up against segregation's second front, where the problems are not mobs and unjust laws but customs and traditions…to this extent, Louisville has integrated itself right out of the South, and now faces problems more like those of a Northern or Midwestern city.[7]

While these examples are some of the few these authors wrote explicitly about race in America, a closer examination of their most iconic works reveal a great *personal* investment in self-identity, race, and more specifically, the graphic representation of ethnicity.

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[6] Hunter S. Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time*, (New York: Summit Book, 1979), 39.

[7] Ibid., 40.

"…And Our Fathers that Begat Us": James Agee's America

The American literary classic, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* which combines James Agee's baroque, poetic prose and Walker Evans's haunting black-and-white photographs, presents a journalistic study of the everyday lives of white, destitute tenant farmers from the American South during the Dust Bowl. In the "Preamble," James Agee makes this evocative claim:

> If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement…A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.[8]

Agee expresses concern over both the efficacy of his own writing and the ability of writing in general to capture the realities he encounters. It occurs to him that the difficulty of writing faithfully about real people lies in capturing existence without the taint of subjective reporting. He writes, "In a novel, a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger."[9] For Agee, his textuality is too aesthetically limited to contain all the ineffable value or "true meaning" he identifies in his real-life subjects. Despite his wish to "do no writing," he seemingly reconciles his qualm over veracity by doubling down through an experimental form of ecstatic writing. Throughout the lengthy, text-heavy book, he relentlessly incorporates plural generic forms of literature, including prose, poetry, objective and subjective forms of journalism, playbills, textbook-style questionnaires, and multiple epigraphs.

As the above passage insinuates, Agee not only has misgivings about the conventions of writing, but he also privileges other forms of media. Of all of these forms of documentation, photography held the greatest attraction to Agee. He writes that the camera is the "central instrument of our time" for its ability to capture the "cruel radiance of what is," rather than the "imagined, the revisive."[10] For Agee, photography is immediate. It allows reality to speak for itself, while, in contrast, the written word must interpret, filter, and therefore "revis[e]" reality. He makes it clear in the preface to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that Evans's photographs are not just illustrations for the text, but are "co-equal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative."[11] Agee's reverence for visuality corresponds with his proclivity towards the sensorial: the tactile ("fragments of cloth"), the olfactory ("phials of odors"), the auditory ("records of speech"), and the gustatory ("plates of food and excrement"), all of which he seemingly considers more truthful to reality than his writing. We could read the profusion of text (over four-hundred pages worth)—set against the sixty or so photographs—as evidence of Agee's artistic insecurity, or at least, his clear respect for visual, tactile media; however, his self-effacing attitude towards his writing is belied by the renowned efficacy of his graphicity, which textually enlivens this sensorial, visual tableau. The reader can understand Agee's self-undermining as the thinly-veiled humility of a writer, but also as a reflection of the discursive negotiation between reality and representation constantly playing out in the work, one which reminds the reader of the complex existence of a real, particular people and setting.

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[8] James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), 10.

[9] *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*., 9.

Agee's continued insistence on the importance of Evan's photography as "co-equal" with his own words makes even more sense in context to his work in the film industry. While he is principally remembered for his contribution to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, during his lifetime, he was celebrated for his work in cinema as a screenwriter and as a pioneering film critic.[12] In fact, Danny Heitman credits Agee as being the first writer to elevate the genre of film criticism to something "intellectually valuable," to a form of art.[13] Agee was quite often expressive about what he saw as a limitless potential in the medium of cinema:

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., xi.

[12] He is credited for co-screenwriting two cinematically significant films from the 1950s: *The African Queen* (1951) and *The Night of the Hunter* (1955).

> Every kind of recognized 'art' has been worked pretty nearly to the limit. Of course, great things will be done in all of them, but, possibly excepting music, I don't see how they can avoid being at least in part imitations. As for the movies, however, their possibilities are infinite.[14]

Whether an innate affinity towards visuality informed his attraction to cinema, or conversely his love of film caused him to "[think] in pictures" or "think of the world cinematically," as Heitman puts it, what remains is an immensely skilled writer who, being reined in by the limitations of his textual medium, was spurred to capture the world as he saw it.[15] Agee experiments with the pliability of form. Instead of shying away from his proclivities for the popular, ephemeral forms of visual culture (e.g., film), he draws it into his writing, generating a graphic form of language. It is the interplay between Agee's textual prowess and his graphic sensibility that typifies the graphicity of his work.[16]

Age uses graphicity politically in order to literally reframe the plight of southern white farmers for the reader. Reading *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, one senses Agee's deep affinity for poor, Southern families. His rhetoric toggles between images (people and scenes) of humble poverty to images that are surprisingly emotionally resonant and spiritually ornate. He sees in the American mundane an ironic beauty, which breaks away from the conventional and stereotypical depiction of the economically downtrodden. This paradoxical characteristic is perfectly encapsulated in his purpose statement for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: "The effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense. More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity."[17] To reduce the text's subjects and their condition to "a piece of the body torn out by the roots" is not just poetically and graphically charged, it strives to emulate a "portion of unimagined existence" and pain. To render the featured destitute families as something as lofty as divinity may seem hyperbolic, but it reveals Agee's reverence and intimacy for the people that make up his subject matter. While he suggests here that his project is largely ethnographic in nature ("techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis…"), his call to "defend" strongly suggests a political angle and a compromised objectivity—just another instructive contradiction at play.[18]

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[13] Danny Heitman, "Let Us Now Praise James Agee," *Humanities* 33, no. 4, (2012). Accessed on February 14, 2015. https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2012/julyaugust/feature/let-us-now-praise-james-agee. The article describes how, after Agee's untimely death in 1955, fans of his film criticism "immediately began clamoring for a book that would preserve his best reviews within covers." *Agee on Film* was released in 1958 and has gone through multiple printings and editions.

[14] Quoted in "Let Us Now Praise James Agee."

[15] Ibid.

[16] In her essay, "Animating the Gudgers: On the Problems of a Cinematic Aesthetic in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Caroline Blinder describes how Agee was as much motivated by the limitations of photography as he was inspired by its documentative properties. In fact, he compensated for those limitations by enacting a literary cinematic mode that seemingly "animated" his white tenant farmer subjects formally and, also, in "a spiritual and sacred sense" (146). *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on* Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, ed. Caroline Binder (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

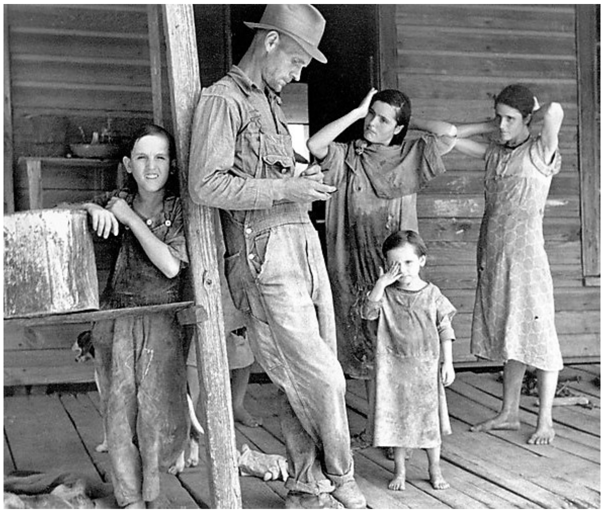

Figure 1. A Walker Evans' photograph of a white tenant family. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* 1941.

His affinity for white, destitute tenant farmers could be explained by the fact that Agee, born in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1909, was very much a product of this kind of white, small-town

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[17] *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, x.

[18] William Stott explores the intensity of James Agee's injected subjectivity in his important critical work on documentary literature, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986). He writes about Agee, "he *wanted* to shock, wanted to do violence…Agee felt the way to shake the reader into awareness was to cheat his expectations by violating as many canons of documentary reportage as possible" (265).

America. The project of *Famous Men* suggests a deeper autobiographical concern, one of self-discovery and identitarian salvation, which begs the question, to what extent is Agee overdetermining these subjects, injecting his own biography and ethnic self-interest into the story of rural tenant farmers? Is this a project about ethnographic documentation or about personal recollection and interrogation? While the disparity between his class position and that of his subjects marks their immediate difference, Agee is also deeply cognizant about their racial proximity, about their ethnic entanglement. Agee's concerns over subjectivity in depictions of destitute whites is more than just about journalistic integrity; it is about the value of self-identification, which anticipates the work of his other masterpiece.

While the subjective certainly seeps into *Famous Men,* Agee's concern for emotional veracity, his graphic sensibility to reproduce vision and memory, and his invested focus on community is only fully realized in his Pulitzer-prize winning, autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family*. The project can be understood as a formal inversion of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.*[19] Where the ethnographic project doubled down on the subjective perspective, citing the inextricability of the subjective perspective from the journalist, Agee takes an objective approach to personal memory in *A Death in the Family.* He asserts that, in writing the autobiography, he wants to avoid invention, or creative fabrication, and rely solely on the precision of memory's images and words: "Although my remembrance of the matters which will be told of in the following pages is fragmentary, I have thought it best to invent nothing," and in letters to friends and family, he contemplates whether he should ask for assistance from others to fill in gaps in his memory.[20] As it turns out, under the exigencies of novel writing, he does fabricate certain elements of the novel and he also requested help from relatives; however, Agee sees this as a means to an end: "In most novels, properly enough, remembrance serves invention. In this volume, invention has served remembrance."[21] In allowing memory to play much like a film before his eyes, Agee revivifies not only his personal experience but also the remembered conditions of a place, a time, and a people in prewar America. In telling a story about his own formation, he is also invested in bringing to light the world of his ethnic community: white American southerners. In the rest of this section, I will present an in-depth reading of this novel, examining the ways that it serves as an early model of white postwar literature invested in seeing—or in this particular case, re-seeing—a lost white American community.

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[19] Or at the very least, the two are twins, the latter a thematic sequel of the former. Consider the complete biblical verse which is the source for the title of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: "Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us." Agee's biblical allusion associates the ethnographic project of *Famous Men* with "our fathers"; that is, with communal affinity and the concerns of national, ethnic and self-identity. Secondly, in a way, the title foreshadows *A Death in the Family*, which intensifies its concern with fathers, as the preamble section quoted below makes clear. While this later text is autobiographical, my reading of the text posits that it is as much concerned with racial, ethnic identities.

A Death in the Family opens with a stand-alone section that precedes the narrative proper.[22] "Knoxville: Summer, 1915" is a five-page sketch of a typical summer evening in the life of the narrator, ostensibly Rufus, James Agee's six-year-old autobiographical counterpart.[23] However, the poetic language betrays James Agee's retrospective voice, as the reader is visually immersed in what reads like memory. Agee is at his most lyrical here, with free-flowing, dreamy yet cinematic sentences that describe a Knoxville neighborhood ("a little mixed sort of block, fairly solidly lower middle class, with one or two just apiece on either side of that") and their habitual post-supper gatherings. Like a director, Agee turns the figurative camera from the large scale towards the particular subjects of interest. "It is not of the games children play in the evening that I want to speak now," Agee clarifies to the reader, "it is of a contemporaneous atmosphere that has little to do with them: that of the fathers of families, each in his space of lawn, his shirt fishlike pale in the unnatural light and his face nearly anonymous, hosing their lawns."[24] He describes the chorus of patriarchs, seemingly homogenous and interchangeable, as living archetypes of the American father. This leads to the sketch's denouement: the child-narrator lies peacefully on a quilt with his family members. He prays to God to protect them, and in a final lamentation, says, "those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever, but will not ever tell me who I am."[25]

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[20] James Agee, "Agee's Memory of his Father's Accident and the Day Before," *The Works of James Agee,* ed. Michael A. Lofaro, vol. 1, *A Death in the Family* (Knoxville, TN: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2007), 569.

[21] Ibid.

[22] *A Death in the Family* was near completion when James Agee died suddenly on May 16, 1955. His editor, David McDowell, edited the manuscript and released the copy that has remained the definitive version since 1958. The "Note on the Text" accompanying the novel explains that sections of the work were included where no instruction left by Agee explained to do so, including "Knoxville: Summer, 1915." However, it also explained that "the editors would certainly have urged him to include it in the final draft" (*A Death in the Family,* vi). In 2007, Agee scholar Michael Lofaro released, as a part of a ten-volume collection of Agee's work, a restorative version of *A Death in the Family*, which he describes as a correction to the many erroneous manipulations of the text by McDowell and his staff. While I recognize and respect the claims made by Lofaro against the original published version of the text, I have chosen to use the version that has been considered the only one for more than half a century. James Agee, *The Works of James Agee,* vol. 1, *A Death in the Family: A Restoration of the Author's Text*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro (Knoxville, TN: Univ. Of Tennessee, 2007).

[23] Rufus is James Agee's middle name. His father, Hugh James Agee, went by Jay, as he does in the novel as well.

This enigmatic parable masterfully establishes some of the most important thematic and formal components that Agee will engage with in the novel. It is at once a memory—personalized by his rich, poetic touches—and, yet, also an ethnography of a closed, ethnic "lower middle class" community. It is simultaneously about his particular father, whose sudden, tragic death is referenced in the novel's title, and all American fathers, symbols of white ancestral masculinity. His language situates the reader in a visually vivid-yet-mundane environment, cataloging the minutest detail; yet, its mystical abstraction envelops the reader in its spiritual, elegiac quality.[26] And, as the sketch ends, he alludes in imperfect terms that this work comes down to a crisis of identity. The contracting and expanding examination of archetypal white fathers, of his ethnic community, and finally, the particularities of his experience serves to answer the complex question of "who I am" that motivates the rest of the narrative. In this early moment of the novel, Agee anticipates the futility of the project: that memory recreated, even with the most masterful, graphic attention to detail, "will not, not now, not ever, but will not ever tell me who I am." His elegiac recognition of that lost ethnic world and what that means for his own search for personal, ethnic identity is the true "death" of the novel.

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[24] James Agee. *A Death in the Family* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 4.
[25] Ibid., 7.
[26] He injects into the scene timeless Christian overtones, such as the "fishlike" shirts, the watering of lawns, the harmony of the patriarchal chorus.

In the novel, Agee narrates a set of traumatic pasts, both personal and communal. His own, concerning his father's death, is clear. But in telling this tragic story, he also recreates a world of others—a place and a people long gone since the time of his writing. Thus, *A Death in the Family* serves as Agee's elegy for a father taken too soon, a family overcome by grief, and a distinct community—white and working-class in nature—threatened by the march of twentieth-century progress. Agee painstakingly reconstructs his memories into a literary form, participating in what I call *auto-ethnic tourism,* a type of subgenre which combines ethnographic documentation and fiction, and which Agee and Hunter S. Thompson employ. Instead of exploring far-off lands populated with exotic others, auto-ethnic tourism entails a narrative return to sites of personal and ethnic history. In Agee's case, this return serves to process his emotional connection to this formative and space- and time-specific moment in his life. Moreover, auto-ethnic tourism is a form of literary world-making; both Agee and Thompson revel in their artistic prowess to make the worlds they inhabit visible and visceral, so that the experience of tourism becomes the reader's as well.

Despite the tragedy at the heart of the novel, the narrative is strangely simple, plot-wise, which serves the sensual function of auto-ethnic tourism. Similar to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the autobiography fixates on the prosaicness of everyday American life: in visits to the local movie theater, in the morning routine of breakfast, in drives to and from the city, in the wait for a loved one to return home, in the technical issues of putting together a funeral (like choosing the right priest). The artistic focus of the novel, as per Agee's style, is in its graphic illustration of the beauty and deep emotions of these simple moments. The novel revolves around "set-pieces,"[27] relatively drawn out scenes of immensely vivid description that reveal important tensions and meditations, not unlike "Knoxville: Summer, 1915." In these set-pieces, Agee's graphicity creates for the reader an immersive experience, one which beckons the senses, in particular, vision. In this way, set-pieces are central to Agee's form of auto-ethnic tourism.

In addition, vision is a diegetic motif that is crucial to the story. The reader often sees through the characters; in particular, Rufus's childish vision plays a pivotal role in drawing out the curiosity of emotionally complex and visually unique moments. For example, in one of the most important early set-pieces, father and son walk home through town. As they rest on a rock overlooking North Knoxville, Rufus meditates on the bond and mutual care the two share, a bond neither "concealed nor revealed."[28] Agee, through Rufus, describes how this ineffable knowledge could not be put in textual terms: "He knew these things very distinctly, but not, of course, in any such way as we have of suggesting them in words. There were no words, or even ideas, or formed emotions, of the kind that have been suggested here, no more in the man than in the boy child."[29] Two registers manifest here: Agee's own text, which succeeds to "suggest" ideas and emotions about the scene to the reader, and the emotionally graphic scene of the father and son. The two characters' language fails to express the ineffable bond between them, just as Agee describes his own textuality failing him in the "Preamble" to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. This nebulous knowledge shared between the two can only be perceived through the graphic tableau of the scene, and it can only be felt through the correspondence between visual sensuality and emotion. He continues:

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[27] "Set-pieces" is a more common term in film than in literary production or criticism, but its usage in the case of the cinematically-minded Agee is not unintentional on my part.

[28] *A Death in the Family,* 19.

[29] Ibid.

> These realizations moved clearly through the senses, the memory, the feelings, the mere feeling of the place they paused at, about a quarter of a mile from home, on a rock under a stray tree that grown in the city, their feet on undomesticated clay, facing north through the night over the Southern Railway tracks and over North Knoxville, towards the deeply folded small mountains and the Powell River Valley, and above them, the trembling lanterns of the universe, seeming so near, so intimate, that when air stirred the leaves and their hair, it seemed to be the breathing, the whispering of the stars.[30]

This scene illustrates the interconnected relationship between visuality, community ("the place they paused"), and the creation of formative memory. The language of Agee's memories is made of images of what he has seen and remembers from being a boy; therefore, Agee communicates his narrative most effectively through a graphic mode. Throughout the novel, Agee reconstructs spatialized memories (the set-pieces) through graphicity. In this scene, Agee tethers the memory to proximate rocks, to underlying clay, to the sight they faced to the north, and then to explicit geographical space, "North Knoxville," "Powell River Valley." Yet, these set-pieces also serve as sites for his own psychic exploration of his loss, for the emotion seen, felt, but left unsaid. Personal loss and the spectacle of the community's parochiality are fused to each other in memory, and it's the neither "concealed nor revealed" beauty of the latter that magnifies the tragedy of an otherwise nameless, rural, American death.

Agee develops one particular visual motif throughout the novel: the reiterated image of the father Jay's body and face. Jay's recurring countenance speaks to the symbolic power of the novel's white father image. The previously mentioned scene between father and son describes how Rufus continuously notices the subtle gestures of his father's face: "not smiling, but with his eyes more calm and grave and his mouth strong and more quiet, than Rufus had ever seen his eyes and his mouth."[31] After word of Jay's automobile accident and death, characters repeatedly make note of how Jay—his body and face—looked: "There wasn't a mark on his body. Just that little cut on the chin…He had the most magnificent physique I've ever seen in a human being."[32] During the funeral, the children are told to say their goodbyes to Jay's lifeless, "blue" face and body on display, and, in the final moment of the novel, Rufus's uncle Andrew insists on the two children witnessing the carrying of their father's coffin, even if from afar. The uncanny nature of Jay's visage plays with the notions of the thin, visual line between life and death. Words are displaced in favor of vision (of external facial gestures, for example) in the making of memory; however, these scenes insist on more than the creation of memory, but the searing of image onto the characters' minds. As Rufus's uncle Andrew understands that seeing Jay's coffin will help the children in the processing of Jay's death, so too does the re-making of the visual memories help Agee to make sense of his formative past. I argue that this ameliorative effect is what motivates the auto-ethnic tourism of the work: the more sensually real, the more effective the processing of loss goes.

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[30] Ibid.

The semi-autobiographical (or roman a clef) form of the novel engenders a larger perspectival scope than the strict memoir could. In this work, then, Agee contemplates mutual, communal experiences, which explains why the title of the novel is so generic.[33] This link between personal and communal experience is reinforced by the relentless focus on visualizing his community. Agee revels in the descriptions and the exploration—that is, the auto-ethnic tourism—

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[31] Ibid., 20.

[32] Ibid., 157.

[33] In a letter to a friend, Agee's mother expresses how thrilled she is that Agee's manuscript for *A Death in the Family* is being published, while also praising his son's ability to make the personal tragedy something universal: "It is a marvellous [sic] mixture of these elements, and I recognize it as a *great and really universal elegy*—since all of it is the essence of *all* deaths—among mankind." "Letter from Agee's Mother [Mrs. Erskine (Laura Tyler Agee) Wright] Concerning *A Death in the Family*," *A Death in the Family: A Restoration of the Author's Text,* 577, emphasis added.

of these nostalgia-inducing places and the people that are a part of them. The set-pieces and the graphic language used to describe them immerse the reader into this time-forgotten world. A not very plot-rich, but visually lingering moment in the story is found in "chapter three" (Part I), when Agee painstakingly describes what Jay is seeing as he is driving in the middle of the night to check on a potential emergency at his father's house. Jay and the readers see "the L&N yards lay along his left, faint skeins of steel blocked shadows, little spumes of steam; he saw and heard the flickering shift of a signal,"[34] and as he proceeds, he begins to leave behind the sights of the city in favor of "semi-rurality," "mean little homes…mean little pieces of ill-cultivated land behind them."[35] Finally as he reaches the countryside, Agee illustrates the connection between the personal and the communal: "The cabins looked different to him, a little older and poorer a simpler, a little more homelike."[36] This comfort in the homelike landscape parallels Agee's visual reconstruction of North Knoxville that occurs throughout the novel. Such attention to detail exploits more than ethnic community but also the appeal of humble poverty. In this crucial way, class and race are linked in Agee's exploration of ethnic belonging.

As the "ethnic" part of auto-ethnic tourism implies, people are an important element of the world that Agee is exploring. The people are explicitly white, southern, and working class (if not poor). Tellingly, the scene following the dreamy archetype of fathers spraying their lawns, begins with an example of communal bonding, as Jay and Rufus go to a movie theater to watch a Charlie Chaplin film after supper. Rufus describes a "contagion of laughter" that sweeps through the audience and overcomes him as Agee recounts in great, vivid detail a comical scene from a short starring Chaplin's Tramp character.[37] Afterwards, as they stroll through the city, Rufus and his father notice the townspeople's familiar yet strange faces. In a bar, they encounter "a long row of huge bristling and bearded red faces," and Jay introduces Rufus proudly to the strangers, "That's my boy."[38] The people of the novel are familiar and simultaneously strange. Their shared customs signal their communal bond, and the graphic language describes how they are also of the same ethnicity and race: "Gay Street was full of absorbed faces; many of the store windows were still alight. Plaster people, in ennobled postures, stiffly wore untouchably new clothes."[39] "Plaster people" works in a few senses here: literally, it describes mannequins seen through display windows; however, it can also describe the bodily stiffness of the modest, reserved people walking the street. In this reading, "plaster people" communicates how these people are frozen in time and in memory, pure and ideal, signaled by their "untouchable new clothes"; and, finally, it insinuates the plaster-like whiteness of the community. Whiteness here, like in so many texts that avoid the categorization of ethnic, is not a marker of racial exclusion, per se, but as Agee is so invested in the graphic recreation of this temporality, it is reflective of an "ennobled" white cultural ethnic bond.

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[34] *A Death in the Family.*, 41.
[35] Ibid., 42.
[36] *A Death in the Family.*, 45-46.

Unlike "social problem" novels, such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which squarely explore racial relations and sociopolitical tensions, *A Death in the family* is mostly devoid of that type of discourse. The novel is interested in painting an elegiac still-life of a homogenous, close-knit environment of working class, white American southerners. However, in one brief but profound scene the novel does take on race relations, fixating on the literal, visual markers of race and the social tensions that arise because of them. In a flashback, Agee describes a younger Rufus being cared for by an old family friend. Rufus is stunned: "And then one day without warning the biggest woman he had ever seen shining deep black and all in magnificent white with bright gold spectacles and a strong smile like that of his Aunt Hannah, entered the house."[40] Her face and her smell trigger his latent memory, causing a swelling of emotion, "a glisten of gold and a warm movement of affection."[41] Agee uses Rufus's innocence to relay a blunt, immediate, and visual impression of Victoria without the reservations of political correctness. This becomes a problem when, despite being warned by his mother of commenting to Victoria about her pleasant smell or her "spic and span" cleanliness,[42] Rufus asks why her skin is "so dark," and if that's why she is "colored."[43] After a temporary awkwardness between the two, Victoria explains to Rufus the impropriety of uttering such observations; she acknowledges his innocence, but she explains that other "colored people" would be offended. Rufus's shame and profuse, emotional apology marks another learning moment for Rufus, and it also signals another moment of how memory is built on the visual (in this case, color and race) and environment (communal relations). Rather than setting the tone of racial harmony, this isolated scene serves to rather acknowledge the social realities that the southern community faces, while, importantly, also affirming that this inter-racial relationality is not what the novel is concerned with. Agee employs a similar tactic in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* when, early in the book, he recounts how a local, tone-deaf diplomat stops a group of black musicians in order to perform for them, which they do, begrudgingly, and to the annoyance of Agee and Evans. It is a moment that signals what the work is not about, while acknowledging the social realities of the environment. That book explicitly acknowledges its focus: "the nominal subject is North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative *white tenant*

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[37] Ibid., 13. Oddly, the scene doesn't correspond with any known Chaplin film. Some have speculated that the scene in question is an amalgamation of two other famous Chaplin scenes. I wonder whether he simply recalled seeing the scene as he reproduces it here, and is privileging the truth of memory over empirical truth.

[38] Ibid., 15.

[39] *A Death in the Family*, 14.

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[40] Ibid., 95-96.
[41] *A Death in the Family,* 96.
[42] Ibid., 97.
[43] Ibid., 98-99.

families."[44] *A Death in the Family* only implicitly, through what is seen and described in its graphic language, signals this focus. In this study of this particular community, race still serves as a tool of tension and cultural antagonism. In a particularly stark scene, Agee describes how the wide-eyed Rufus is teased by local school children passing by his home on their way to school for having a "nigger's name."[45] The moment represents how the modes of communal ostracism revolve around the marks of race, even within a racially homogenous group.

A particular flashback moment encapsulates the themes of ethnic history and personal identity. It relates a car trip to visit Rufus's great-great-grandmother in rural Tennessee. As they travel, the condition of the pavement increasingly deteriorates as the wildness of the land takes hold, reflecting its literal and metaphorical significance as an untouched space far away from urban modernity. Along the way, Jay, his brother Ralph, and Mary discuss with amazement the fact that their great-grandmother is "a hundred and three or hundred and four" years old. They muse over the "things she must have seen…Indians. Wild animals…I mean *man*-eaters, Jay. Bears, and wildcats—terrible things"; they especially marvel over how "she's almost as old as the country," as in the nation—"Abraham Lincoln was just two years old."[46] The spatial distance amplified by the lengthy, immersive descriptions and the discussion of national history signal that this trip is one of space *and* time; it is an auto-ethnic tour within an auto-ethnic tour. Here, Agee recreates a scenic memory of a mythic America, a magnified version of the nostalgia trip informing the greater novel. The inclusion of this non-chronological, flashback scene into a narrative already about Agee's past serves to signal the spatial and temporal removes between generations: as the author Agee laments the spatiotemporal distance between he and the novel's main period (1915), he also signals the rift between the 1910s's Agee family and their American ancestors. Agee in this literary move describes the universal, circular pattern of nostalgia: every generation looks back, lamenting with deference the people and customs under the threat of progress.

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[44] *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* x, emphasis mine.

[45] *A Death in the Family*, 197.

[46] Ibid., 209-210.

The ensuing scene where Rufus introduces himself to the ancient American matriarch, his great-great-grandmother, captures the double-edged condition of an inherited ethnic history. When the two come face to face, Agee provides a lengthy but beautiful description of the microscopic world Rufus sees in her eyes:

> They were just colors: seen close as this, there was a color through a dot at the middle, dim as blue-black oil, and then a circle of blue so pale it was almost white, that looked like glass, smashed into a thousand dimly sparkling pieces, smashed and infinitely old and patient, and then a ring of dark blue, so fine and sharp no needle could have drawn it, and then a clotted yellow full of tiny squiggles of blood, and then a wrong-size furl of red-bronze, and little black lashes. Vague light sparkled in the crackled blue of the eye like some kind of remote ancestor's anger, and the sadness of time dwelt in the blue-breathing, oily center, lost and alone and far away, deeper than the deepest well.[47]

Agee navigates the tourist-reader through the dynamic and colorful geography of her eyes, which parallels how Agee describes the roughening terrain of the road the deeper into the Tennessee wilderness the characters went. Her eyes, wherein time has been spatialized, reflect the lament of time's passing, the angry hardness of rural, poor existence, but also the familial connection shared between this ancestor and Rufus. The eyes, literally in this scene, allows for a deeper sense of recognition: one of a linked familial and national bond, and one of self-recognition—that is, the personal identity that seemingly eludes Agee.

Yet the scene climaxes with befittingly cruel irony. Rufus succumbs to the beautiful connection between them, "as abruptly as if the two different faces had been joined without transition in a strip of moving-picture film, she was not serious any more but smiling so hard that her chin and her nose almost touched and her deep little eyes giggled for joy," and he embraces her with a hug and kiss.[48] However, the reader then finds that the matriarch has soiled herself, unbeknownst to the perplexed Rufus. Agee's cinema-vernacular use of spliced "moving-picture film" to describe the embrace has two possible significances: there is between these two generations an apparent connection that overcomes their generational differences and binds them in ethnic, familial history, or, considering the undermining moment of incontinence, this connection is merely a trick of the camera and good editing—that is, a construct of the mind's eye. Rufus and by extension Agee want to see depth where there is only a decrepit old woman. The warm nostalgia of memory—memories of family and of an ethnic legacy alike—complements, like a double-edged sword, the tragedy of the realization that this fleeting American landscape is already gone. This act of tainted nostalgia echoes into the future of 1915, which, like an act of dramatic irony, the reader acknowledges is also already gone. We circle to the very start of the text, and recognize the line "those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever, but will not ever tell me who I am" as a foreshadow to the impossible journey to an ethnic white past from the complex vantage of a postwar, pluralist reality.

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[47] *A Death in the Family*, 216.

A Nation of "Dumb Beasts": Hunter S. Thompson's America

Almost ten years separate James Agee's last work, *A Death in the Family*, from journalist and novelist, Hunter S. Thompson's first published book, *Hell's Angels*: *A Strange and Terrible Saga* (1967)—the former, a dreamy epitaph for a bygone era, the latter, a feverish doomsday proclamation. Only a decade, and yet, the world had changed as vastly as the ostensible differences between these two profound American writers. I have already discussed the ways in which Agee yearned to return to a past private and ethnic homeland, and in so doing, reveals the beauty and fierce tragedy found in the simplest of American living. In the following section, I will demonstrate how Thompson looks for no such things, spurning the past, searching instead for immediate experiences and drug-fueled epiphanies. Where Agee turned to the past to refuse his fears of the present, Thompson faces these same fears head on with manic cynicism and an acerbic wit. Thompson reflects on himself, "Most smart people tend to feel queasy when the conversation turns to things like certain death' and 'total failure' and the idea of a 'doomed generation.' But not me. I am comfortable with those themes."[49] Yet however disparate these two authors appear, they share some illuminating similarities. Agee and Thompson were raised in Knoxville, Tennessee and Louisville, Kentucky, respectively—middling metropolises at the foot of the Appalachia. Both authors share a deep affinity for visual culture. Agee drew inspiration from cinema, while Thompson had a life-long affair with the practice of photography. In fact, his only authorized biography and his last work before his suicide in 2005 was a well-received curated collection of his photographs called *Gonzo* (2006). In addition, both share a journalistic eye for documenting distinct forms of American life—lives that often reflect their own identities—while exhibiting an inclination for genre-dismantling experimentation. This unique combination fuels their shared generic style of auto-ethnic tourism. This section explores how Hunter S. Thompson, in his peculiarly graphic way, takes up the identitarian, racial problems of his generation.

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[48] *A Death in the Family*, 217.

Popular readings of Thompson often cast him as an iconoclast or as a countercultural icon, working in the fringes of society, away from the purview of the mainstream.[50] Books like *Hell's*

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[49] Quoted in the biographical preface to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas and Other American Stories* (New York: Modern Library, 1996), vii.

[50] The biographical preface of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* dubs him the "living historian of the counterculture" (v). For a more in-depth look at Hunter S. Thompson's role in the American counterculture of the 1960s, see Peter O. Whitner and Bruce VanWyngarden, *Aquarius Revisited: Seven Who Created the Sixties Counterculture that Changed America* (New York: Citadel Press, 2000).

Angels have certainly contributed to this reputation. The non-fiction novel chronicles his year-long experience living with a chapter of the Hells Angels (sic), a notorious and cryptic motorcycle gang based out of California. Despite his questionable subjects and unorthodox behavior, Thompson, throughout his compendium of work, voices a clear concern for American society—mainstreamers and outliers included. His dark humor and aggressive criticism are often taken as the point of his literary exercise—thus frequently overshadowing how these same rhetorical techniques attest to his investment in American politics and culture.

Thompson's dedication to questioning and challenging American culture comes through in the mechanics of his iconic approach to reportage, Gonzo journalism. As William Stephenson keenly puts it in his in-depth analysis of Thompson, *Gonzo Republic: Hunter S. Thompson's America,* "Thompson's awareness of the fractures in America's national facade is evident not only in the content of his political writing, but also in the fragments, gaps and associative leaps of his Gonzo prose."[51] The Gonzo style is defined by how it perverts journalistic conventions: Thompson abandons objectivity wholly and takes the subjective impulses of the contemporaneous New Journalism genre to its ultimate extreme.[52] Thompson completely immerses himself into his assignments to the point that he allows his perspective to distort all objectivity, truth, and reality—favoring instead wanton disruption and experience for experience sake.[53] Furthermore, his perspective is often distorted by rampant drug use; this fact adds a psychotropic and paranoiac quality that filters reality in visually charged ways. Thompson is equally interested in inverting and reversing his journalistic gaze, holding a funhouse mirror to both himself and his audience, in order to reveal monstrous forms of hypocrisy. The horror that he searches for, assignment after assignment, ultimately speaks to his own self-perception *and* to the general, chronic malaise of the American spirit.

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[51] William Stephenson, *Gonzo Republic: Hunter S. Thompson's America* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 32-33.

[52] For more on Hunter S. Thompson's role in subverting mainstream journalism and the rise of alternative press forms, see John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).

[53] In an NPR interview for an article remembering Thompson's iconic article, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," illustrator and oft-collaborator Ralph Steadman says of their methodology, "Thompson becomes a part of the story, and that's what always happened with us…We sort of melded together." NPR Staff, "A 'Decadent and Depraved' Derby with Hunter S. Thompson," *All Things Considered,* May 4, 2013, http://www.npr.org/2013/05/04/180907071/a-decadent-and-depraved-derby-with-hunter-s-thompson.

This contradiction—the hypocritical duality of American identity—is a concentrated theme of Thompson's breakout essay, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved" (1970), which introduced Thompson's Gonzo style to the world. In the article that first appeared in *Scanlan's Monthly*, Thompson covers the Kentucky Derby, a long-established Louisville tradition known as much for its aristocratic ostentatiousness as its championship horseracing. Assigned to accompany him is English-born illustrator, Ralph Steadman. This marks the first of many collaborations between the two life-long friends. In true Gonzo fashion, Thompson and Steadman's initial tensions (fueled by both work and drink) become the primary subjects of the piece. In "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," much like in his other classic text *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,* Thompson abandons the sports story for what he believes to be a far more interesting angle. As he puts it, "Unlike most of the others in the press box, we didn't give a hoot in hell what was happening on the track. We had come there to watch the real beasts perform."[54] The real beasts in question are the spectators, the "decadent and depraved." Thompson presents a graphic and hyper-stylized ethnography of this community. However, in accordance with his Gonzo style, he accounts for this study through his own subjective experiences, which create a tension between the particular othering of his subjects and how that reflects himself.

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[54] Hunter S. Thompson, "Director's Cut: The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," edited by Michael Maccambridge for *Grantland.com,* May 3, 2013, http://grantland.com/features/looking-back-hunter-s-thompson-classic-story-kentucky-derby/. The article may be found in multiple sources online. I chose to use Grantland.com's "director's cut" version as it includes interesting footnotes about the making of the piece, and corroborates some of the more bewildering details, too.

Visuality plays a central function in the piece. This visual compulsion takes two distinct yet interrelated artistic forms: Ralph Steadman's grotesquely expressive illustrations and a type of graphicity akin to James Agee's style. Due to their journalistic backgrounds, Agee and Thompson are keen observers. They see and document, but they also commingle these reports with subjective interpretation, which, in both cases, can be quite extreme. In "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," Thompson's ethnographic study manifests as an explicit quest to capture the dark platonic archetype of the Derby attendee, "the real beast," for Steadman to illustrate.

The essay documents Thompson and Steadman's quest around Churchill Downs to find the right representative face. Steadman, years later, reflects in an interview, "We went into the inner field first, and just to look at the people. We were really looking for odd faces, people that were kind of weird, you know? That seemed to become our real purpose."[55] This makes explicit the visual facet of the ethnographical work at play. Thompson and Steadman understand the bestiality of the ethnic figure as something visually significant and made readable on the racial face. Thompson writes,

> [Steadman] had done a few good sketches but so far we hadn't seen that special kind of face that I felt we would need for the lead drawing. It was a face I'd seen a thousand times at every Derby I'd ever been to. I saw it, in my head, as the mask of the whiskey gentry — a pretentious mix of booze, failed dreams and a terminal identity crisis; the inevitable result of too much inbreeding in a closed and ignorant culture.[56]

To Thompson, the attendees are not randomly or loosely gathered, but are a part of a self-enclosed community, replete with their own genealogical lineage and irrational values. They function as a culture and a race, one with its own morphological markers, which beckons Thompson to go on his ethnic tour. It is interesting to note how Thompson's moral perspective is able to transform the un-seeable into vision. He can see the mask as a mix of booze (if he is referring to drinks being held), "failed dreams" and a "terminal identity crisis," even though these are not visual cues in the traditional sense, yet this is the extent of his penetrating subjective reporting and moralizing imagination. In a later rant, Thompson does describe the objective look of the "whiskey gentry"—"pink faces with stylish Southern sag, old Ivy styles, seersucker coats and buttondown collars."[57] This quickly turns into a damning psychoanalytical sketch, imagining the miserable and uninspired lives of the people with increasing speculation:

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[55] "NPR Interview," not paginated.

[56] "The Kentucky Derby."

> Not much energy in these faces, not much *curiosity*. Suffering in silence, nowhere to go after thirty in this life, just hang on and humor the children…The grim reaper comes early in this league…banshees on the lawn at night, screaming out there beside that little iron nigger in jockey clothes. Maybe he's the one who's screaming.[58]

His descriptions ("pink faces") are inextricably coupled to his subjective interpretations and the negative white stereotypes they conjure. The ethnic ugliness he demonstrates is made even more visceral as it is juxtaposed to the historical legacy of the "iron nigger" statue, a dehumanizing caricature of blackness in America. Though Thompson never makes this racial discourse explicit as one may find in literature traditionally considered "ethnic," the graphicity in display in this scene and throughout the essay marks gentry whiteness as substantial to the moral indictment at the heart of Thompson's auto-ethnographic tour.

Ralph Steadman's illustrations play an important visual counterpart to the Gonzo style ethnography. They visualize the imagined horrors perceived by Thompson's text. Their reality is made horrifically clear for the reader-viewer to perceive in a similar form to Agee's graphicity but to different aims. One striking illustration (figure 2), from a number that Steadman created for his first collaboration with Thompson, is of an unidentified Derby attendee, older, white, and male. His plain white suit sags and slouches on his uneven shoulders and rotund body. His face is grotesque. An uneven smile looks ominous under a blackened, bulbous, and pock-marked nose (visual sign of a heavy-drinker); his swirled face's color palette is pink and purple, and black stitch-like lines mark his old age. The sharply designed binoculars hanging around his neck visually oppose the rotund, lumpiness of his face and body. The poignant symbolism of the binoculars is clear. They mark the rich, white man as a privileged spectator of the sport. He is there to observe; however, his unflattering portrait inverts this power dynamic, signaling his ethnographic objectification through the critical sight of Thompson and Steadman.

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[57] Ibid.

[58] "The Kentucky Derby."

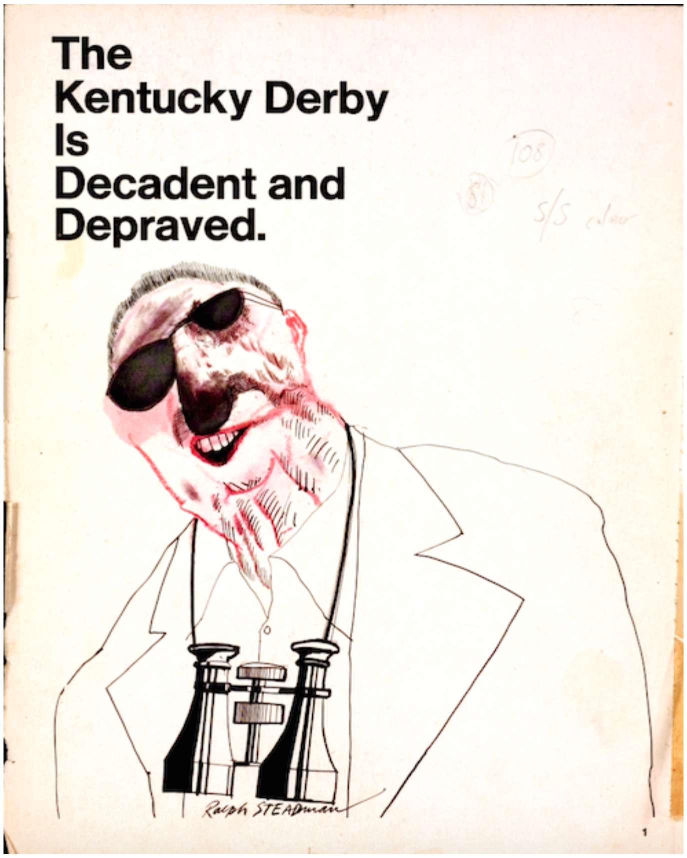
The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved.
108
81
S/S color
Ralph STEADMAN
1

Figure 2. Illustration of white Kentucky Derby attendee. From a Juxtapoz.com gallery of Steadman's artwork. Ralph Steadman, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," 1970.

The other images, drawing from other scenes from the Derby day, follow the same style, depicting bettors gathered around a table and the crowning of the winning horse (figure 3). What would otherwise be boisterous celebrations become nightmares filled with uncanny visible villains. Through collaboration, Steadman and Thompson destroy subtlety in favor of unabashed visual clarity, and what they see is absolutely damning.

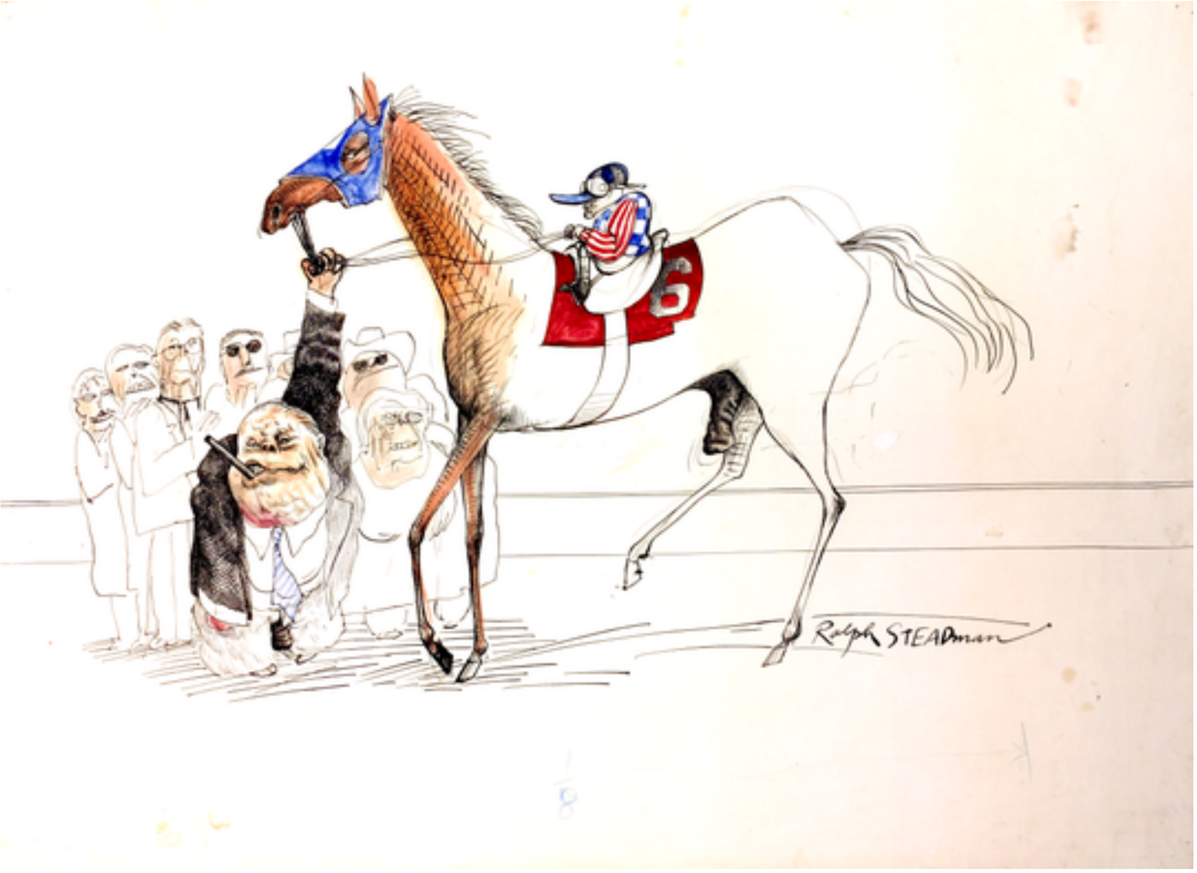

Figure 3. Illustration depicting rich, white Derby attendees surrounding champion horse. Ralph Steadman, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," 1970.

This essay functions as a critical inversion of that backwards-looking nostalgia which typifies James Agee. In describing a drunken Derby attendee, Thompson writes: "He had…come here once again to make a 19th century ass of himself in the midst of some jaded, atavistic freakout with nothing to recommend it except a very saleable 'tradition.'"[59] Thompson's criticism is squarely tied to the ostentatious displays of wealth—the decadence and its depravity—rather than the economic or moral humility of his subjects, something characteristic of Agee's atavism. Nevertheless, Thompson reveals the debauchery in the proceedings, which in its self-indulgence, stands in contradistinction to the racial tempo of the rest of the country. Thompson, in passing, makes reference to reading in the morning newspaper about civil rights marches, fears of "[black] panther protests," student unrest on campuses, "GI's in Cambodia."[60] He adds as well that "there was no mention of any protest action at a small Ohio school called Kent State," a suggestive nod to the Kent State Massacre that occurs on the very same day as the Derby.[61] The juxtaposition of this ominous political narrative and the narrative of the decadent derby shine light on the extreme faces of American identity—schizophrenic, but united as one. On the other hand, it also alerts us to differing modes of spectacality: the display of violent horror at Kent was made absolutely transparent by visual culture, in particular, John Filo's Pulitzer Prize–winning photograph of Mary Ann Vecchio draped over a murdered student; what Thompson and Steadman reveal in their work is the hidden visual register underneath the opulent display of wealth and "atavistic" prestige, wherein we find the racial, classist otherness of this ethnic breed.

Certainly, Thompson says enough to situate the community, the Kentucky Derby folk, as being of their own breed—as an ethnicity or even race unto their own. One of the more striking ethnographic moments is when Thompson juxtaposes the intelligent breeding of horses versus the ignorant in-breeding of Southern gentry:

> The breeding of humans is not so wisely supervised, particularly in a narrow Southern society where the closest kind of inbreeding is not only stylish and acceptable, but far more convenient — to the parents — than setting their offspring

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[59] "The Kentucky Derby."

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

> free to find their own mates, for their own reasons and their own ways. ('Goddam, did you hear about Smitty's daughter? She went crazy in Boston last week and married a nigger!').[62]

A large part of Thompson's condemnation of the whiskey gentry is its own hypocritical, vainglorious ethnic exclusivity, represented by both the mock racist aside in the quote, and, moreover, the opulent pageantry of the Derby itself. However, an important layer to the piece concerns Thompson's own background, considering that he, too, is from Louisville and he too has attended the Kentucky Derby in years passed.

Rather than being as diametrically opposed to the Derby community as his condemning criticism would have one believe, his self-identity is absolutely wrapped up in the geography and community, as is his contemptible nature.[63] What the article quickly reveals is that the tourism at hand is also a type of self-explorative, auto-ethnic tourism, relating Thompson's bond to this ethnic enclave; therefore, the criticism towards its subjects is also directed toward himself. After all, his drunken debauchery and violent aggression is also on display in the article. For example, he is constantly daydreaming of macing people, which he ends up doing in a crowded restaurant. His local connection is clearest when he warns Steadman, an Englishman, to "just keep in mind for the next few days that we're in Louisville, Kentucky. Not London. Not even New York. This is a weird place."[64] In a later scene when he and Steadman have an exchange about the rudeness of Steadman's habit of drawing people (grotesquely) in their presence, Thompson says, "Fuck England…This is Middle America. These people regard what you're doing to them as a brutal, bilious insult." Bit by bit, throughout the essay, Thompson discreetly lets on his, albeit problematic, attachment to Louisville. For example, he recounts how he finds Steadman drawing a crude, stupidly drunk man and he is reveling in his caricature of the man, and Thompson reveals that he went to school with the once-admirable loser. Later, Thompson describes how in their last lucid conversation before they both "went to pieces," the two talked generically about "America, the South, England." Triggering something within him, this conversation transitions into a confession about why he implodes by the end of the trip: "the main problem was my prior attachment to Louisville, which naturally led to meetings with old friends, relatives, etc., many of whom were in the process of falling apart, going mad, plotting divorces, cracking up under the strain of terrible debts or recovering from bad accidents."[65] What this describes is a community struggling with transition, overly attached to an outdated ethnic culture, and under-prepared for the problems of progress; however, unlike Agee, Thompson's concern manifests as pure comical ire.

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Steadman recalls what Thompson said to him upon their first meeting: "I see you drink. Would you like to have another beer and sit for a minute and talk about things? It's a strange assignment, because I've come back home and I'm feeling a bit weird being here." This is from a footnote in Grantland.com's "Director's Cut," edited by Michael MacCambridge. The web address can be found in footnote 4.

[64] "The Kentucky Derby."

His ethnic bond to the location is ultimately made fully graphic at the climax of the essay, when Thompson, nursing an intense hangover, is awakened by Steadman on the day they are to leave. He writes,

> My eyes had finally opened enough for me to focus on the mirror across the room and I was stunned at the shock of recognition. For a confused instant I thought that Ralph had brought somebody with him — a model for that one special face we'd been looking for. There he was, by God — a puffy, drink-ravaged, disease-ridden caricature … like an awful cartoon version of an old snapshot in some once-proud mother's family photo album. It was the face we'd been looking for — and it was, of course, my own. Horrible, horrible …[66]

This poignant, punchline moment collapses the two narrative threads concerning his trouble with his self-identity and his ethnographic assignment. The vision of his own face at its absolute lowest, most decrepit point reinforces his kinship with Louisville and his ethnic community. And to truly cement this point, Thompson ends the essay with him unwarrantedly haranguing Steadman, kicking him out of his car, and screaming, among other expletives, "If I weren't sick I'd kick your ass all the way to Bowling Green — you scumsucking foreign geek. Mace is too good for you…We can do without your kind in Kentucky."[67] As Thompson succumbs to and owns his problematic identity, he falls into his nativism and wields it to ostracize an actual outsider, thus reinforcing the racial and class distinction that propelled Thompson's criticism from the very beginning. Because of their shared ethnic culture, the white horror he saw in the "decadent and depraved" was as much his own.

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[65] Ibid.

[66] "The Kentucky Derby."

A year after writing "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," Hunter S. Thompson accepted an assignment to cover a desert motorcycle race, the Mint 400, in Las Vegas, Nevada. Much like with his earlier piece, Thompson foregoes the sports story to follow his own impulses, leading him to turn the original assignment into a full-blown novel, his most iconic work and an American classic, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971). The novel is a semi-autobiographical account of his (as Raoul Duke) and his attorney Dr. Gonzo's experience in Las Vegas, reporting (or rather neglecting to report) on the race as well as the National District Attorneys Association's Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, all the while traversing the splendors of the city—that is, driving around in giant, expensive American cars, consuming copious amounts of drugs, and harassing the tourists and locals. It is a funhouse mirror take on James Agee's form of auto-ethnic tourism. In this book, Thompson embraces and expands on his Gonzo writing style (aptly, considering the reputation he gained from his well-received Kentucky Derby essay). The stories are more graphic, with a greater focus on his subjective, visual experiences and a fluidity between fact and fiction. His behavior is at its most depraved, with rampant drug consumption and violent disregard for person or property, among other felonious actions. Finally, his purview expands beyond the enclave of the American South, ruminating rather on the palpable and vivid demise of the young and hopeful culture of his American generation, a demise that he sees as leading to the nation-wide destruction of America, the freaks and the mainstream included. These ruminations manifest as a quest to locate the "American Dream" in the "savage" world of Las Vegas, and in this way, appropriate to auto-ethnic tourism, the journey is both a literal and self-introspective one.

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[67] Ibid.

Formally and thematically, there are two distinct threads at work, each bound by a distinctive timeframe. The more rampant is Thompson's account of his and Dr. Gonzo's immediate experiences in Las Vegas, and the other concerns lucid reflection on the counterculture community, its high-point and its apparent demise. In this way, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* reads like a post-apocalyptic narrative. Due to a cultural fallout, Las Vegas becomes home to a civilization made primitive once again. Thompson repeatedly refers to the city's mentality as backwards, or "atavistic," yet it's fantastical, playground-like properties make it also otherworldly, futuristic even.[68] The disorder of the novel reflects the chaotic juncture of American culture that Thompson is trying to navigate. In one of the most visually poignant moments of the novel, Thompson reveals the dichotomy between this temporal frame and the present—that is, the high crest of the countercultural movement and, the present, its death. He recalls the sense of community, of being part of the same collective, of "being absolutely certain that no matter which way I went I would come to a place where people were just as high and wild as I was…There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was *right*, that we were winning."[69] He describes the moment as being at the peak of an era, a culmination of free expression and innocence. However, like all crests, they eventually fall: "Less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look

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[68] Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing,* 173.

[69] Ibid., 67-68, his emphasis.

West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost *see* the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back."[70] Yet, in the novel, Thompson is always brought back to the perils and newness of the present. He writes after a particularly long and thoughtful thread looking back at the heyday of the counterculture: "Ah; this terrible gibberish. Grim memories and bad flashbacks, looming up through the time/fog of Stanyan Street…no solace for refugees, no point in looking back. The question, as always, is *now*…?"[71] Like James Agee, Thompson is a survivor, a "refugee," in a liminal state, burdened by the prospects of the future and remorse for the past; however, unlike Agee, his journalistic eye turns toward the nightmarish "now" of America. Hunter S. Thompson accounts for the present through a Gonzo style ethnography of Las Vegas—its people, its customs and behaviors. For readers, this is most perceivable through a combination of Thompson's graphicity and Ralph Steadman's evocative illustrations.

Like in "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," visuality plays a crucial part in the author's exploration of the landscape. Again, Thompson immerses himself into the world of Las Vegas, and his language reflects the vividness and affective sensuality of the experience. The work collates a series of images, visions, hallucinations, which proffer humor, an acerbic tone, and the renunciation of all mankind. The reader sees hell-spawned bats descending onto a long, red convertible, we see a suicidal and murderous beast sloshing in his own filth to the tune of "White Rabbit," we see blood-soaked rugs, and ravenous dinosaurs biting off the limbs of martini-swilling tourists at adjacent barstools, apes performing amidst drunken casino-goers, and Nixon on television. However, a large change from the previous assignment is that Thompson now incorporates a vastly new mode of seeing. His sight and perception are altered by the bevy of drugs he and Dr. Gonzo consume. The novel opens with a description of Thompson on two simultaneous trips: a literal one in the car "somewhere around Barstow," and a drug-induced one, as he describes the horror of seeing "the sky full of what looked like huge bats"[72] This opening forefronts the two visual registers that occur throughout the text: the highly subjective one displayed by Raoul Duke's inner monologue and his interactions with Dr. Gonzo while under the influence; the other an ostensible record of objective reality. However, to deconstruct the use of the two registers often proves difficult if not impossible. This is true even for the characters, as much of their experiences are based on questionable distinctions between fact and fiction.

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[70] Ibid., 68.
[71] Ibid., 180.

The process of seeing is well-captured in a scene in which Duke describes how one drug is more appropriate than another for a given situation, in this case, the National D.A.'s convention. He explains, "There were faces and bodies in that group who would have been absolutely unendurable on acid...[it] would not be emotionally acceptable. The brain would reject it…There was simply no call, at this conference, for anything but a massive consumption of Downers."[73] The consumption of drugs is corrective for Thompson, a way to perceive the world as he wants to. The irony of this, of course, is that so much of the novel is concerned with the arresting paranoia formed by their use of drugs. A common comical trope is to have one or both of Raoul and Gonzo misinterpret situations, jumping to insane conclusions about the malevolence of others: "How did we get mixed up with that gang of psychotic bigots? Let's get the fuck out of this town. Those scumbags were trying to kill us!"[74] What they paint as medicinal is as much self-destructive. As their perspectives are exaggerated by the power of psychotropics, their inherent skepticism becomes amplified, seeing the world as an utter nightmare, which prompts them to take more drugs. This downward spiral of medicating and re-medicating and seeing and re-seeing fuel the farcical nature of the novel, yet, even through the lens of humor and psychotropics, Thompson reveals an earnest struggle of for both personal and national salvation.

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[72] *Fear and Loathing*, 3.

[73] Ibid., 143-144.

[74] *Fear and Loathing*, 34.

Thompson makes references to the racial and ethnic distinctions between people in the novel. He calls attention to his whiteness and the whiteness of the people he encounters a number of times, especially in contradistinction to Dr. Gonzo's racial makeup—sometimes-Samoan, Hispanic, or non-white person.[75] Early on he introduces Dr. Gonzo to a hitchhiker: "I want you to understand that this man at the wheel is my *attorney!* He's not just some dingbat I found on the Strip. Shit, *look* at him! He doesn't look like you or me, right? That's because he's a foreigner. I think he's probably Samoan. But it doesn't matter, does it? Are you prejudiced?... Because in spite of his race, this man is extremely valuable to me."[76] The abrasive racism of the comments are filtered by the ironic humor accompanying them, which parodies both white racism and the white liberal guilt of being labeled racist (the hitchhiker replies to the question, "Oh, hell *no*!"). The hostile camaraderie between Duke and Gonzo often resort to both men making claims about their behavior due to race. Duke makes light of their situation by pointing out how white-run sports magazines were paying for their expenses, and says to Dr. Gonzo, "You Samoans are all the same…You have no faith in the essential decency of the white man's culture…This is the American dream in action!"[77] For Thompson, the "American Dream" is linked to the privileges of white culture, which he literally essentializes as "decen[t]." Furthermore, he describes this linkage as outside the essentialized ignorance of the other, embodied by the non-Samoan ethnic Other, Dr. Gonzo. The ironic racism also goes the other way. Dr. Gonzo repeatedly uses terms like "bigot" or "honkies," interpreting (occasionally correctly) animosity towards him as being a sign of white people's racism. The comedy of the race discourse only serves to demonstrate the personal ugliness and anger of the different characters, but also the political climate of the moment, the book being published during the peak of many civil rights movements and interracial unrest of the time.

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[75] The real-life counterpart of the character is Chicano lawyer, political activist, and novelist Oscar Zeta Acosta, who is featured heavily in this dissertation's third chapter.
[76] Ibid., 7-8.
[77] Ibid., 11.

Thompson's racial play highlights the arbitrariness of these tensions, but, more importantly, his personal philosophy on racial difference. In tracing the prolific career of Hunter S. Thompson, William Stephenson ascertains that, above all, Thompson is heavily motivated by a classical humanist belief in self-determination—that is, individuality—and moral righteousness at all cost, which repeatedly pits him against institutional and governmental subjugation. As a result, his work, according to Stephenson, tends to undermine or downplay the centralized role of racial difference in favor of personal fortitude. Stephenson writes,

> Thompson's individualist focus on the alienation of the protagonist led his work to appear to marginalize race by framing the colonial encounter as a backdrop to the subjective experience of a white male… However, rather than ignoring race, Thompson was treating it as one important factor among others in the formation of subjectivity: or in his terms, of what makes someone human.[78]

We see this identitarian complexity in the way that race and ethnicity is conflated with class in "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," though, I argue that race is far from marginalized in that text. In *Fear and Loathing,* the clearest glaring example of Thompson parodying the solemn discourse of race is by casting the Chicano Oscar Zeta Acosta as a Samoan, the ethnic reality being understood by Thompson as mutable and, ultimately, inconsequential. However, this mutability and inconsequentiality could be understood as a sarcastic affirmation of white self-centeredness; Stephenson mostly asserts this when he writes, "the attorney's race works as a device to throw Anglo culture into relief…By making Gonzo an outsider, Duke can throw all sorts of supposedly informative explanations of US culture at him, which they both know are satirical asides."[79] In lieu of crediting biological difference, Thompson resorts to reporting on the integral, humanistic comparatives and differences in people; this is why in many ways he sees himself as equally oppressed and empathetic to the plight of people of color, as displayed in his relationship with Dr. Gonzo. Stephenson writers, "Early in his career, he evolved a theory that *any* downtrodden person, regardless of race, could be classified a 'Nigger': despite the offensiveness of the word, he intended not as an insult, but as a recognition of marginalization."[80] He also describes how later in his life, when he runs for sheriff of Pitkin County, Colorado, he chooses as his symbol (always visually-minded), a raised, clenched fist, a clear appropriation of the Black Power movement.[81] Due to the pessimistic, self-critical nature of *Fear and Loathing,* however, Thompson's reading of "what makes someone human" devolves along with its subject matter, the post-Sixties, American public. This drastic shift in racial discourse becomes clearest once again in the experimental visuality—figurative and formal—of the novel.

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[78] *Gonzo Republic,* 126.

[79] Ibid., 139.

The central objects of visual scrutiny in the novel are the people that populate Las Vegas. Like in "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," Thompson again concentrates on the people's face, bodies, and gestures. Yet in this novel, what was once grotesque transforms into the truly monstrous. A particularly memorable scene of this occurs when they first check into their Vegas hotel. Raoul is completely overtaken by the effects of the drug, and it manifests as a horrific spectacle: "Terrible things were happening all around us. Right next to me a huge reptile was gnawing on a woman's neck, the carpet was a blood-soaked sponge—impossible to walk on it, no footing at all."[82] In a later moment, he calls the same people, "pterodactyls."[83] Arguably, this hallucination can be viewed as a side effect of the drugs, but it also correlates with how a more lucid Duke judges them: "Who are these people? These faces! Where do they come from? They look like caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas. But they're *real.* And, sweet Jesus, there are a *lot* of them…Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino."[84] That they appear as primordial beings (lizards, dinosaurs, birds) signify how inhuman the people have become in their quest for the capitalistic, post-apocalyptic "American Dream."

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[80] Ibid., 125.
[81] In *Fear and Loathing*, he even identifies himself as feeling like Shakespeare's Othello, which I read with no irony.
[82] *Fear and Loathing,* 24.
[83] Ibid., 27.

Ralph Steadman collaborates again with Thompson on this project (although, not as a character within the narrative), providing his most iconic work ever. As before, the subject of Steadman's illustrations are the people that Thompson encounters. Stylistically, however, he leaves whatever traces of realism behind, emphasizing the utter monstrosity that Thompson perceives. Steadman transforms the people into anthropomorphic animals and monsters, projecting their inner demons onto their visages. Figure 4, which is a depiction of the bloody hotel bar scene mentioned above, shows an example of anthropomorphized animals.[85] The images are nothing short of terrifying, combining wiry and swift lines with blood-like splatters of black ink. Steadman also depicts the many forms that Duke and Dr. Gonzo take as well, distorting faces and providing violent monstrous visages to the men. In this way, Steadman exteriorizes and maps the two characters' mental and moral distortion onto their bodies and faces. An interesting quality of the illustrations depicting Duke and Gonzo is how they often look directly at the viewer, as if embracing the voyeurism. Considering the importance that looking plays in Thompson's journalistic, ethnographic work, Steadman is here hitting on the circularity of Thompson's sight: as he looks out onto the crowds and the reader, he is also being looked at, as to suggest the universal gruesomeness afflicting all Americans.

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[84] Ibid., 57.

[85] The idea of anthropomorphized animals representing raciality reoccurs in my other two chapters, but especially in my discussion of the visual anima conceit of Art Spiegelman's *Maus.* The graphic narrative specializes in critiquing the social dehumanization of particular races, especially Jews during the Holocaust, even as it re-inscribes those racist tropes; however, *Fear and Loathing* gleefully represents humans as bestial in order to critique all humans, regardless of race, as beyond hope and humanity.

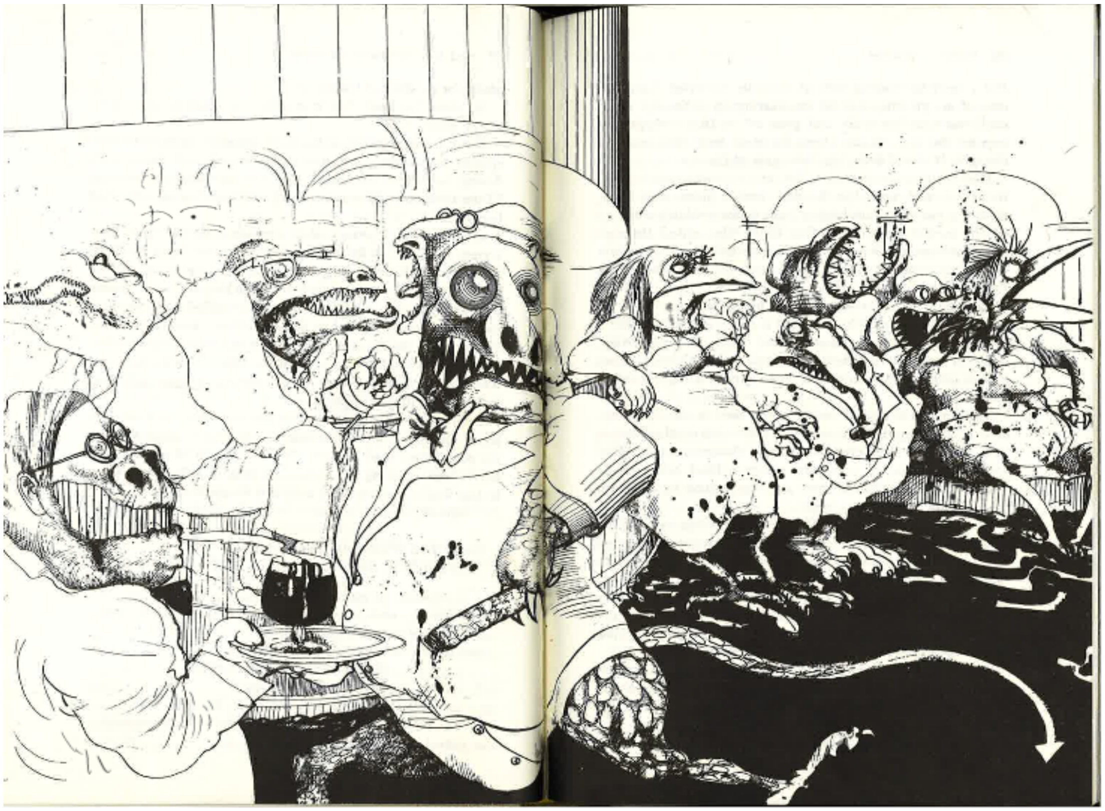

Figure 4. Menagerie of beasts at the Las Vegas hotel bar. Ralph Steadman and Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,* 1971.

In *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People,* a book that performs an interstitial cultural analysis of race and class behind the assumptions and realities associated with whiteness, John Hartigan Jr. examines how the white underclass of cities were often represented in media as separate from prosperous whites, and often made into figurative monsters. He writes, "Representations of this population as alternately real subjects and imagined grotesque terrors, rendered in depictions that purposefully resist making clear distinctions between one or the other, are fundamental to the popularity of inner-city scene in newscast, reality shows, and fictive media such as film and novels."[86] His provoking study of this social scientific phenomenon has him look at Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* which, in playing out the fears of the well-to-do, reading-class English, literally excises the moral vacuity within the white, intellectual Dr. Jekyll in the form of the monstrous, lascivious Mr. Hyde, who frolics amongst the wicked poor of urban London society. Hartigan points to how the visual registers of race and class play a crucial part of this science fiction allegory: when Dr. Jekyll transforms into the brute, "'professional' is viscerally with the 'lean, corded, knuckly' hand of a member of the low class, a difference underscored and paralleled by the colored distinction of 'white and comely' with Hyde's 'dusky pallor.'"[87] Thompson's depiction of himself and other characters as monstrous aligns well with this kind of sociological assessments done to urban, poor whites. However, an important difference is that Thompson's monstrous representation of Las Vegas, post-Sixties Americans, and himself is not meant to mark ethnic or class difference; rather, visuality—at once, skewed by drugs and illuminated by introspection—flattens racial difference.

Where Thompson traces and exploits the visible binaries of race and class in his study of the gentry behind the Kentucky Derby, ultimately concluding that his investigation is flawed by the fact that he himself is the representative face of the "decadent and depraved," *Fear and Loathing* forefronts from the very beginning the illusion of binaries. Despite the abrasive othering of people occurring throughout the novel, there is no us or them in Las Vegas when it comes to the figurative-cum-literal bestial nature of the people. In going to Las Vegas, he enters a visible concentration of the nation, where all Americans reveal themselves as the lost beasts that they are, and the novel acknowledges from the get-go that its two main characters are no different. As Marianne DeKoven explains, "The fear and loathing, increasingly are not *of* Las Vegas itself but of the countercultural self *as* Las Vegas, reflected precisely *in* Las Vegas, rather than as stranded, outcast, or alien there."[88] The novel begins with the epigraph, "He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man." As Stephenson points out, this transformation is made clear in Duke's lucid reflection, "Had we deteriorated to the level of dumb beasts?" while he psychologically tortured the two companion's fearful hitchhiker.[89] This rhetorical question serves in a way as the foundational question of the text. Thompson earnestly ethnographizes the ontological nature of dumb beasts amidst the ghoulish spectacle of Las Vegas. Whatever racial or ethnic differences Thompson perceives, these biological or cultural markers are lost to the graphic horror of their monstrosity. Take, for consideration, Steadman's representation of the scene wherein Duke hallucinates a fearful gathering of feeding monsters in the middle of a casino bar floor (figure 4). Steadman cleverly represents each person as a different species (apes, pterodactyls, elephants, and lizards), yet the beasts are ferocious and uncanny all the same, supplanting their biological diversity. This is the dark twist of Thompson's mode of (auto-)ethnography: in objectifying its subjects, in describing its most deplorable behaviors and conditions, Thompson is also exploding the discourse of national and ethnic community.

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[86] John Hartigan, Jr., *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 34. For more on the "boundaries of whiteness," as determined by issues of class, see Matt Wray's *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2006).
[87] Ibid., 46.

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[88] *Utopia Limited,* 87. Marianne DeKoven says about Las Vegas as symbol in the novel, "Even as Thompson insists on the status of Las Vegas as anathema to and graveyard of the sixties and object of fear and loathing, Las Vegas is also depicted in *Fear and Loathing*, particularly in part 2, as the most appropriate setting for and even reflection of, the destruction and self-immolation of the radical counterculture in the late sixties" (87).

[89] *Fear and Loathing,* 8.

James Agee and Hunter S. Thompson confront the American image (or the "American dream") as it pertains to their unstable, problematized self-identities. While these identities are inflected by multiple considerations, including class, gender, and politics, this chapter explores the racial and ethnic dimensions of their respective texts. As examples of postwar literature before and after the culturally explosive 1960s, Agee and Thompson's texts document multiple realities and temporalities concerning certain cultures and communities, in other words, with the particularities of the white ethnicity. On one hand, their journalistic bent enables them to report on these worlds with a certain amount of graphic realism and "objectivity"; yet, on the other hand, the closer we look at *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, A Death in the Family,* "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,* the more we can glean about James Agee and Hunter S. Thompson. What we find is an investment in auto-ethnic tourism, one which visualizes people and places in order to answer questions about personal ethnic identity. In James Agee, we find an author that reverts his gaze towards his past, and in doing so, imagines a world marked by loss. His elegiac lament in *A Death in the Family* is double: once for his father figure, Jay, and then once more for what his father represents, a poor, rural, simple and white way of life that no longer feels connected to his cosmopolitan present. His particular use of graphicity—the way that he visualizes race and ethnicity in his narrative—exposes the reader to an approximation of this lost world, even as it confirms its passing. As for Hunter S. Thompson, we are first confronted by an image of utter moral abjection in the form of his "whiskey gentry," a figuration of whiteness that is geographically, economically, and culturally distinct. The grand, ironic reveal of "The Kentucky Derby" offers us a visualization of that racial figure, a violent and near-monstrous face, but it turns out to be Thompson's own. Through the graphicity of this article supplemented by Ralph Steadman's illustrations, the reader sees a version of whiteness marked not by loss but by moral failure. His later masterwork, *Fear and Loathing,* reveals a different form of racial graphicity, one centered on the deconstruction and dehumanization of America’s plural ethnic population, all concentrated in that symbol of capitalistic excess and moral wasteland, Las Vegas. The reader sees visualized an American populace made up of monsters, wherein the concerns of identity politics, so central to the discourse of the 1960s, is made moot.

CHAPTER TWO

"Comix, Jews, 'n Art—Dun't Esk": Art Spiegelman and the Jewishness of American Comics

In late 2005, *Masters of American Comics,* an exhibit staged by the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) of Los Angeles and the Hammer Museum prepared to travel to the East Coast. The largest ever presented, the show had established "a canon of fifteen of the most influential artists working in the medium throughout the 20th century," from pioneers of the form like Winsor McCay and George Herriman, to late-century underground and alternative luminaries, like R. Crumb, Chris Ware, and Art Spiegelman.[1] Yet as plans were drawn, Art Spiegelman discovered that the exhibition was intended to be split up, with the comic strip work exhibited at the Newark Museum and the comic book and graphic novel work shown separately at Manhattan's Jewish Museum. That was all Spiegelman needed to know in order to change his mind. He withdrew his work entirely.

Spiegelman, a Jewish-American cartoonist, had made his mark with *Maus* (1986) and *Maus II* (1991), a two-volume graphic narrative about the Holocaust that would ultimately earn him the Pulitzer prize in 1992. His concern with the show's move, he later explained in a letter to the museum directors, was that the "aesthetic and curatorial choices…would be distorted into becoming a provincial show about the ethnography of comics."[2] Acknowledging that comic books, as opposed to early newspaper comic strips, were "largely a Jewish creation," Spiegelman feared that the choice to stage the show's comic book collection at the Jewish Museum would inappropriately conflate the art form with Jewish ethnicity, a "subtext that was invisible at MOCA"[3]:

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[1] *Masters of American Comics,* exhibition organized by the Hammer Museum, November 20, 2005 to March 12, 2006. https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2005/masters-of-american-comics. The exhibition is certainly diverse in period and style; however, of the fifteen cartoonists, none were women or (sidestepping the uncertain ethnic makeup of George Herriman) cartoonists of color.

[2] Art Spiegelman, *MetaMaus,* Ed. Hillary Chute (New York: Pantheon, 2011), 125-126.

> I understand that only four of the seven artists in the Jewish Museum's portion of the show are card-carrying Jews…and that I'm the only one still living who carries that card. But since *Maus* looms so large in the public's perception of the comic book's recent apotheosis, the subject of the Holocaust can trump considerations of form in this museum's context. The statement intended by the Masters show, an exhibit formed to postulate that comics can actually be some sort of…Art, would be undermined by presenting the medium as some sort of "ethnic" phenomenon.[4]

Spiegelman's skepticism is clear here. The scare quotes in "'ethnic' phenomenon" and the use of "provincial" show him to be deeply ambivalent about connecting Jewish-American ethnicity—and by association, the Holocaust—with the art form of comics. Why would Spiegelman, whose milestone work *Maus* stands as the "apotheosis" of both Jewish storytelling and the comic book form, react so strongly to the Jewish Museum's ethnic argument? Where is this coming from?

He is troubled by more than just an exhibition's logistical problems. As this chapter will explore, Spiegelman's particular sensitivity to the many complex problems of "ethnicity" are nothing new for the artist. In fact, Spiegelman has frequently interrogated his own ambivalence towards Jewishness, and more broadly, ethnicity, in his works—a problem he recognizes in the racial character of historical atrocities like the September 11th terrorist attacks, systematic racism in the United States, and the Holocaust.

In my other two chapters, I examine canonical literary texts from different ethnic genres of the postwar U.S. (white literature and Chicanx literature), positing new heuristic approaches to ethnicity by scrutinizing how texts use graphicity. Graphicity, as I define it, is a metric of the visual traced in literature through figurative practices (visual metaphor, imagery, discourse of sight) and literal practices (use of drawings, sketches, photographs, iconography, or text as a form of image). In this chapter, I concentrate on Art Spiegelman, a not only a figurehead for the aesthetic prowess of American comics in the contemporary period but also one of the most important literary figures closely (albeit reluctantly) associated with the discourse of Jewish ethnicity in the same period. Art Spiegelman's literature frequently implicates ethnicity with form into a special relationship that raises profound questions: how has comics been used to tell ethnic narratives? And, conversely, what would it mean for a particular text to have an ethnicity? What about an entire art form? Ultimately, I will show that American comics and ethnic identity, especially Jewish-American identity, are inextricably linked—a genealogy that Art Spiegelman is particularly committed to telling through his comics. I will examine how he engages with the long, ethnically inflected history of comics and how he revitalizes the medium to best render his and his father's personal narratives as survivors, as family, and as Jews.

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[3] Ibid., 126.

[4] Ibid., 126. This provided selection is an excerpt of a longer excerpt that Spiegelman reproduces in his work *MetaMaus* of the original letter. Spiegelman goes on to propose an alternative curatorial arrangement, in which the comic strip cartoonists of the earlier period would be shown alongside the comic book artists of the contemporary period—a way to foreground the developments of the art form over time. After the directors showed no interest in altering their plan, Spiegelman withdrew from the show, in his words, "trying to just bite my tongue and not curse too loudly about a significant exhibit that had devolved into a confused mess" (127).

This cultural-aesthetic relationship between identity and comics is not relevant only to Spiegelman's art. Taking a step back, I will reveal how the cartoonist's builds a profound ambivalence towards ethnicity into his writing and comics, largely motivated by the apposition of, on one side, Jewish self-identification and, on the other side, external, cultural, and sometimes involuntary Jewish identification. Against the backdrop of the Holocaust and other corresponding traumas, Spiegelman scrutinizes how the rhetoric of race and ethnicity always carries motifs of an often-dangerous tribalism, an ingrained ideology that turns Jews like his parents into both victims and participants.

Formally, the graphicity of Spiegelman's comics make visible the optics of politicized ethnic categories, as we see in *Maus*'s animal conceit. Different races and nationalities are represented visually as a politically-coded menagerie of animals—Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, Poles as pigs. But Spiegelman's comics also make graphic how those often-imperceptible ethnic faults lines are tested and torn open by conflict and violence. In his later graphic narrative, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Spiegelman reflects on his experiences living through the September 11th attacks as a New Yorker and how that cosmopolitan identity would come to clearly contradict the larger war-crazed American reaction that rose to claim immediate ownership over the attacks.

While never fully comfortable with the monolithic conjectures of a Jewish-American identity, Spiegelman also reveals an evolving sense of appreciation for an immigrant's medium, for telling ethnic stories, and for turning comics into a means for standing up to the universal injustices of racism, especially at the time of this chapter's writing, when anti-Semitism both at home and abroad has reared its ugly head in shocking and all-too-familiar ways.

The Ethnicity of Art Spiegelman: A Background

To begin to understand Spiegelman's seemingly drastic reaction to learning how his pieces would be shown at the Jewish Museum, we should first look at how comics have been historically marginalized as an art form. Generally speaking, before the publication of *Maus I* and *II*, art critics had either mischaracterized comics as merely a genre or dismissed the medium outright. The latter was not uncommon, as many guardians of so-called high art continued to associate comics with pulp fiction and other ephemeral pop forms deemed low and valueless.[5] For years after *Maus,* serious scholarship on comics work continued to narrowly focus on the cultural, identitarian, and contextual aspects of comics—for example, representations of gender roles in superhero comics or the development of teen culture after World War II—while undervaluing the art form's rather singular aesthetics. In this light, it is no wonder that Spiegelman would be so sensitive to the changes in his show. This is why Spiegelman specifically calls attention to how critics had finally begun to see comics as "some sort of…Art." Throughout his career he has worked to legitimize the form in the eyes of high culture—to show, through his works, how the art form could be serious art, subject matter aside.

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[5] In response to The Museum of Modern Art's 1990 "High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture" show, which, according to Spiegelman, purportedly attempted to "grapple with the then-starting-to-be-fashionable issue of how the popular arts interacted with the more rarefied ones" but, in actuality, "squandered the opportunity, merely ratifying the museum's long-held tastes and hierarchical predispositions" (*MetaMaus* 203), he proposed a "Low/low" show. At the show, comics would be displayed on their own—not as work attempting to be painting, but rather a formidable and self-contained medium of its own. Many attempts and many years later, this would lead to the development of the *Masters of American Comics* show.

But Spiegelman's displeasure is not only about defending comics as real art. His uneasy relationship to his own Jewishness is a recurring theme throughout his career, deeply rooted in troubled familial and personal experiences. Art Spiegelman was born in Stockholm, Sweden three years after the liberation of Auschwitz, the location of his Jewish-Polish parents' interment and most of his extended family's death. In 1951, his family immigrated to the United States, settling in Rego Park, New York, where he was raised culturally Jewish but more or less detached from religious Judaism.[6] On more than one occasion he has self-identified merely as a "rootless cosmopolitan"

Spiegelman also wrote a scathing review (in comics form) of the High/Low show for *Artforum*. In a thoroughly clever move, the comic-review begins with a panel which *re*-appropriates a comics-appropriating Lichtenstein painting, with the dialogue balloon refilled with a histrionic address to the painter: "Oh, Roy, your dead high art is built on **dead** low art!...The **real** political, sexual and formal energy in **living** popular culture passes you by. Maybe **that's** –sob—why you're championed by museums**!**" (MetaMaus, 202, bold in original).

[6] It's important to differentiate religious Judaism and Jewishness by culture, though the two categories of identity often are conflated or confused. On the matter of religion, specifically, he says, "The relationship is fraught…I don't know how to take solace in religion…Do I find religion like you're supposed to at the end of your life? …About the only thing I could find to take solace in was the church of the absurd, the existential. … I can't find it in Jewishness." There is an odd slippage here between religious Judaism and ethnic "Jewishness"—while he does not identify as religious, his language here and elsewhere, as I will show in this section, suggests his strong ambivalence to cultural Jewishness. Quoted in Jill Radsken, "Fathers, killers, God, and 'Maus,'" *The Harvard Gazette,* September 29, 2017. https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/09/maus-author-art-spiegelman-talks-art-and-existence-at-harvard/

rather than applying any national or cultural label.[7] He has also described how, as a child, he used comics to distance himself from his parents: "It was my assimilation into the American culture in ways that were closed to my parents, and it gave me a zone of safety from them, in that sense. Doing *Maus* in cartoon form was probably abetted by the fact that I knew it would be opaque to [my father] Vladek."[8] The irony here is that despite the well-documented Jewish-American roots of the comics form, especially those he would have been reading as a child in the 1950s, Spiegelman understood comics as being an opposing symbol to his parents and their sobering European-Jewish history, that is to say, a detached, formative expression of American culture.

It no surprise then that when Spiegelman entered the "underground comix" scene in the 1960s, his first pieces were particularly interested in the technical and formalist properties of comics rather than exploring themes of ethnic identity—something that, as a practice, he had already drawn largely negative associations.[9] He explains irreverently,

> My research and work wasn't propelled by any interest in Judaism or Jewishness. If anything, I shared an ambient '60s countercultural disdain for that sort of stuff. In fact, from what fairly little I knew of what had happened to my parents and their family, their friends and their world, all I could figure was that being Jewish wasn't an especially good idea.[10]

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[7] Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers,* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 4. "Rootless cosmopolitanism" is a term coined by Stalin to criticize Russian Jews who did not show political allegiance to the state, and was used during the Soviet anti-Semitic campaign after World War II. Here, Spiegelman, fully aware of the ethnic connotations behind the term, is subverting the term in his typical ironic manner. He proudly binds himself to the psychic conditions of diasporic Jews, rather than a specific nationalist or religious type of Jewish identity.

In "Co-Mix 101," a tribute to Charles Schulz, Spiegelman writes, "Well, I'm not religious like you…but I do identify with the alienated diaspora culture of Kafka and Freud…What Stalin pejoratively called rootless cosmopolitanism…" (78). Art Spiegelman, "COMIX 101," *The New Yorker*, February 14, 2000.

[8] *MetaMaus,* 37.

[9] His book *Breakdowns* collects many of his earliest comics and attests to his penchant for provocative, psychedelic, and heavily experimental cartooning. Art Spiegelman, *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@[squiggle][star]!* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008).

[10] Art Spiegelman, "Looney Tunes, Zionism and the Jewish Question," Originally published in *The Village Voice* (1989), *MetaMaus* DVD *supplement.*

Again, Spiegelman understood American subculture as indifferent (and, therefore, oppositional) to concerns about identity politics and historical traumas. This quote also demonstrates his wry understanding of self-determination in the actuation of ethnic identity: if given a choice, being Jewish was something he would rather not participate in, given the ethnicity's traumatic historical past and anti-Semitism in general.[11]

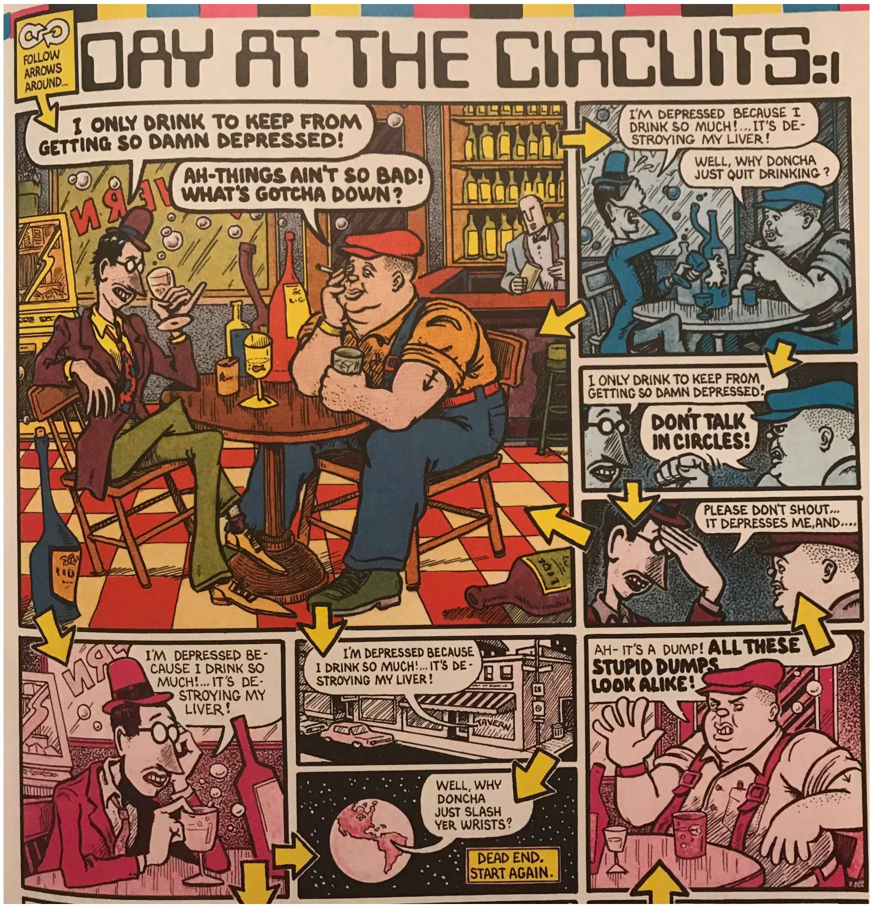
DAY AT THE CIRCUITS:1
FOLLOW ARROWS AROUND...
I ONLY DRINK TO KEEP FROM GETTING SO DAMN DEPRESSED!
AH-THINGS AIN'T SO BAD! WHAT'S GOTCHA DOWN?
I'M DEPRESSED BECAUSE I DRINK SO MUCH!...IT'S DE-STROYING MY LIVER!
WELL, WHY DONCHA JUST QUIT DRINKING?
I ONLY DRINK TO KEEP FROM GETTING SO DAMN DEPRESSED!
DON'T TALK IN CIRCLES!
PLEASE DON'T SHOUT... IT DEPRESSES ME, AND...
I'M DEPRESSED BE-CAUSE I DRINK SO MUCH!... IT'S DE-STROYING MY LIVER!
I'M DEPRESSED BECAUSE I DRINK SO MUCH!... IT'S DE-STROYING MY LIVER!
TAVERN
WELL, WHY DONCHA JUST SLASH YER WRISTS?
DEAD END. START AGAIN.
AH- IT'S A DUMP! ALL THESE STUPID DUMPS LOOK ALIKE!

Figure 5. Excerpt from one of Spiegelman's early experimental underground comics. Art Spiegelman, "Day at the Circuits," *Breakdowns,* 2008.

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[11] This electivity of ethnicity also hints at another aspect central to the discourse of Jewish-American ethnicity: assimilation into whiteness. While Spiegelman does not make it explicit, the subtext of his quote could be read as virtual assimilation into a raceless homogenization that is often linked to how whiteness is normalized, or made non-ethnic. I will discuss the idea of Jews-as-white and racial passing during my close-reading of *Maus.*

Even his remarks since the publication of *Maus* highlight this point. He has always tried to keep a tenuous bond to other children of Holocaust survivors and to his Jewish identity:

> The work seems to have found itself useful to other people in my situation, meaning children of survivors (even though I resist terribly being part of any group other than 'cartoonists') … For some other children of survivors, *Maus* in a sense offered permission to reconfigure their own thoughts about what they'd gone through…. That was OK! On the other hand, I didn't want to be contained in the notion of a Jewish-American artist, and all of these hyphens are issues.[12]

While acknowledging that he has shared unique experiences with other children of survivors and recognizing how they have used *Maus* as an apparatus to "reconfigure their own thoughts," Spiegelman still seemingly repudiates label "Jewish-American." In his 2018 lecture "Comix, Jews 'n Art—Dun't Esk,"[13] Spiegelman sees the label of "cartoonist" as simply interchangeable with his Jewish identity, the former being his preferred eponym: "Ultimately, I identify most as a cartoonist-American rather than a Jewish-American."[14] He views the Jewish-American designation as a category of identity politics, something imposed upon him and to be resisted. The problem, he says, are "*all of these* hyphens" (my emphasis). Spiegelman wants only to defer to art, specifically, comics, as his chosen, valid form. The flip side, of course, is a hyphenated identity which regrettably leads to "issues," which is to say, the real possibility of one racial group committing genocide against another. In the simplest sense, art to Spiegelman enacts a kind of metaphysical transformation were self-expression becomes self-creation. His Jewish-American identity, on the other hand, is only a marker that "contains" him—a four-sided panel that boxes him in.

In recent years, Spiegelman has softened slightly on his rhetoric of what it means to be Jewish for himself and others, clarifying why elective identification and identity politics continue to be such a point of contention for him. In a 2013 interview with *Tablet Magazine*, Spiegelman spoke about how Jewish identity, especially in the United States, has become inextricably tied to the Holocaust. In this interview, and at many other occasions, he complains that "the Holocaust trumps art every time," explaining how,

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[12] *MetaMaus,* 103.

[13] The namesake for this chapter, which I will discuss in further detail later.

[14] Jarett Theberge, "Pulitzer Prize winning author Art Spiegelman discusses comics and identity," *Kentwired.com,* March 17, 2018, http://www.kentwired.com/latest_updates/article_d27b341a-2216-11e8-bfa7-5b63dd8b25b3.html.

> It's interesting to see the American Jewish community choose "remembering the Holocaust" as the touchstone for its sense of communal purpose. American Jews are people who remember the gas chambers in Auschwitz. … We are here to carry on the traditions of the Marx Brothers and Harvey Kurtzman, as far as I'm concerned.[15]

Spiegelman laments the attention placed on the "terrible experiences" of his parents and his sole-surviving grandparent, whose trauma certainly marked him and his connection to Jewishness. "The aftershock of those terrible experiences was definitely passed on to me and kids in my generation, even if it was outside our full awareness."[16] Spiegelman recognizes that there is a burden in the duty of remembering. Even after he has willfully committed his family's trauma to art with *Maus,* Spiegelman still objects to having the memory erase decades of tradition—let alone centuries. However, remembering the Holocaust as a point of communal ethnic identification is troubling for Spiegelman. He prefers to hitch his own ethnic sense of purpose to Jewish artists and comedians, such as the Marx Brothers and influential cartoonist, Harvey Kurtzman.

It is hard not to blame Spiegelman. Between his family's memory and the comic that he made about it, the Holocaust has both turned him into a celebrity while reducing him to a flattened emblem of Jewishness in the process. His ambivalence toward the burden of ethnicity is something he has thematically explored repeatedly. Even one of his earliest autobiographical works, "Prisoner from Hell Planet," poses these same questions. In it, Spiegelman recounts his strained relationship with his Holocaust-surviving mother Anja, who commits suicide while Art is himself recovering from depression in a mental hospital. Presented in a nightmarish German Expressionist style, Spiegelman's comic depicts Art wearing Auschwitz camp pajamas throughout the piece—a symbol that connects the interment his parents faced with his own continued captivity to that trauma. After *Maus,* Spiegelman drew a comic vignette about passing down to his son the burden of Holocaust remembrance, personified as a monster wrapped in a birthday box.[17]

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[15] David Samuels, "Q&A WITH ART SPIEGELMAN, CREATOR OF 'MAUS.'" *Tabletmag.com,* November 17, 2013. Https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/152310/art-spiegelman-jewish-museum.

[16] Ibid.

In the same *Tablet Magazine* interview, Spiegelman denounces how victimizing identity politics often forge identities centered upon trauma, a practice that ironically reproduces the same type of tribalism that informed the Holocaust. He points to the Israel-Palestinian conflict as proof. For Spiegelman, some Israelis and American Jews cling tightly to the Holocaust as a moral license with which they can vilify and oppress the Palestinian community. Spiegelman sees a crucial slippage that occurs in the burden between ethnic specificity in art and universalist notions of oppression and social justice. When speaking about Jews and the Holocaust two antithetical results follow: "One is potentially useful because it increases one's empathy factor, and one is dangerous because it increases the ways in which you defend your little corner of the DNA empire from all others."[18] There is a tremendous burden in belonging to and being excluded from certain racial groups, or "DNA empires," one which fissures easy notions of good and bad, right and wrong—this fissuring is played out throughout *Maus* and other works.

In this chapter, I am not critiquing Spiegelman's personal aversion towards ethnicity or his uneasiness with the entanglement of ethnicity and the comics form. I heartily agree that the medium of comics allows for boundless breadth and quality of self-expression, especially in our text-and-image-laden society. And I agree that an art medium can certainly transcend its cultural origins and can be appropriated by all sorts of artists—this is what comics do so well. However, I argue that Spiegelman's ambivalence downplays—intentionally or not—the profound knowledge that his comics reveal regarding the relationship between ethnicity and comics.

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[17] Ultimately, the overwhelming critical response to Maus by the public has created a new burden for Spiegelman, "I've now drawn it 15 different ways—the giant 500-pound mouse chasing me through a cave, the monument to my father that casts a shadow over my life right now. I've made something that clearly became a touchstone for people. And the Holocaust trumps art every time" ("Q&A WITH ART").

[18] Ibid.

The formal characteristics of comics—its visual-textual hybrid mode, its cartoon language, and its attention to representation—are not only applied but amplified in ethnic graphic narratives, that is, narratives in which ethnic and racial themes are particularly important. In its capacity to textually *and* graphically presence, stylize, and differentiate people through the interpretive mind and hand of the cartoonist, comics can aptly mediate the intricate complexities and ambivalent positions the discourse of race and ethnicity engender, as Spiegelman's *Maus* and other works do.

As in the other chapters of this dissertation, this chapter explores how Spiegelman manipulates the formal properties of his chosen medium in order to speak on Jewishness. However, this is what makes his work, in particular, *Maus*, such a provocative text to consider in light of my focus on ethnicity and graphicity. Unlike the implicit (perhaps unintentional) whiteness we see in the first chapter, or the brazen, expansive expression of Chicanoness we see in the following chapter, this chapter considers an ambivalent view of ethnicity. What happens when race and ethnicity is treated as incidental, or problematic, or divisive? What do race and ethnicity *look like* in this situation? Specifically, how is comics utilized to form such a perspective? *Maus* is a work that simultaneously eludes and alludes to its own Jewishness. It, like its characters Art and Vladek, attempts to escape the respective problems of race and ethnicity through Spiegelman's claim to a universal audience,[19] by Vladek's literal escape from Nazi Europe, and by Art's ambivalent relationship with his father. On the other hand, *Maus* also fully exposes its Jewishness, too. It is not only a personal memoir about the Holocaust, as it engages in an illuminating racial graphicity, specifically, through its animal conceit. The conceit allows Spiegelman to confront the taxonomical racial stereotyping so typical of historical anti-Semitic representations. By making these stereotypes completely literal, he not only signals the cartoonish absurdity of ethnic subjugation, but also tests the parameters and logic of ethnic affinities all together.

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[19] Rather than an ethno-specific one, a discourse that this chapter will explore later.

Finally, I am not claiming that Spiegelman works in a void, removed from other ethnic graphic narratives, or, worse, that he is a proprietary voice of Jewish or Jewish-American comics. That would defeat the argument entirely. In fact, it is essential to understand the lineage of Jewish comics in order to fully appreciate how Spiegelman departs in his particular exploration of race and ethnicity. On one hand, he is responsible, as interviewer David Samuels puts it, for "open[ing] the floodgates" for representations of the Holocaust among postwar Jewish writers and artists. He explains that Spiegelman "let out of the box" the energy of the Holocaust whose repression informed the "genius" Jewish-American literature of writers like Phillip Roth, Joseph Heller, and Saul Bellow, which one could "look in vain for any mention of the Holocaust" and not find it.[20] In terms of graphicity, Spiegelman is arguably responsible for unboxing the Holocaust's psychic and visual scars alike and then re-boxing them into comics panels—a kind of transfiguration that proves how comics can so aptly visualize the complexities of racial traumas. The next section will delve into the literary history of ethnic comics and specifically explore the Jewishness of comics, a legacy by which Art Spiegelman is informed and to which he contributes.

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[20] "Q&A WITH ART SPIEGELMAN."

The Jewishness of American Comics

Comics have had a long, spirited relationship with ethnic subject matter, at times through politically-neutral themes,[21] in derogatory racial representations, or in self-representations of culture (as in works like the Hernandez brothers' *Love and Rockets,* which is invested in the authentic representation of Chicanx lives, a subject of my third chapter). Caricature and stereotyping are inherent to the medium, something voiced universally by theorists and practitioners alike. Reductive mediations of traits and identities are essential to a comics' effectiveness. But as this "accursed necessity," as Will Eisner calls it, works through the discourse of race, ethnicity, and other ideological concerns, the comic stereotype always risks taking on an unconscious or purposefully negative tenor.[22] Derek Parker Royal writes, "In comics and graphic art there is always the all-too-real danger of negative stereotype and caricature, which strips others of any unique identity and dehumanizes by means of reductive iconography—the big noses, the bug eyes, the buck teeth, and the generally deformed features that have historically composed our visual discourse on the Other."[23]

Art Spiegelman has been fully aware of this conundrum, and, as I will show, exploits it through his representation of ethnoracial groups in *Maus.* In his article, "Drawing Blood," written in response to the Danish Muhammed-cartoon controversy (but before the later *Charlie Hebdo* shootings), Spiegelman draws a historical and aesthetic relationship between cartoon language, which "makes use of the discredited pseudo-scientific principles of physiognomy to portray character through a few physical attributes and facial expressions," and how this visual language has been exploited to critique, insult, and vilify cultural groups from the 19th century to the present.[24] As testament, he offers an accompanying illustration to the article, an "equal-opportunity" drawing that catalogues derogatory stereotypical images of African Americans, Mexicans, American Indians, and Chinese, among others.

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[21] I hesitate to claim that a text can represent ethnic subject matter and also be apolitical; however, it makes sense to me to include a third category between self-representational ethnic comics and derogatory, racist forms of representation (as in The Third Reich's anti-Semitic propaganda or in the perhaps-less-purposefully-yet-highly-problematic representations of non-Europeans in Hergé's *The Adventures of Tin Tin* series, just to name two examples).

[22] Will Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Storytelling,* (Tamarac, FL: Poor House Press, 1996), 17.

[23] Derek Parker Royal, "Introduction: Coloring America: Multi-Ethnic Engagements with Graphic Narrative," *MELUS* 32, no. 3, (Fall, 2007), 8.

The history of comics can be told, in part, through the history of visual-textual representations of Jews—by Gentiles and Jews alike. Fredrik Strömberg's visual study *Jewish Images in the Comics* chronicles the different forms that these representations have taken.[25] Unsurprisingly, many resort to comical or plainly derisive tropes and exaggerated stereotypes—whether the cartoonists were intentionally anti-Semitic or not. The most obvious depiction of the Jewish figure is a man in a beard and with a long, hook nose. In his article, "Little Orphan Annie's Eyeballs," Art Spiegelman recounts his experience with this racist trope: "I remember looking at old cartooning books when I was a kid and learning that a Jew had a hooked line for a nose and large animated hands."[26] In the period leading up to World War II, one of the most common anti-Semitic cartoon tropes was the rendering of the Jew with rat-like qualities, if not representing them completely as rats or similar "verminous" creatures. This derogatory association would eventually become Spiegelman's figurative and visual inspiration for *Maus*. Despite comics' reputation as ephemeral art, they have had a profound role in spreading connotative images of ethnicity—especially in disseminating Jewish-American culture for and by Jews.

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[24] Art Spiegelman, "Drawing Blood: Outrageous Cartoons and the Art of Outrage," *Harper's Magazine,* (June 2006), 45.
[25] Fredrik Strömberg, *Jewish Images in the Comics: A Visual History,* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2012).
[26] Art Spiegelman, "Little Orphan Annie's Eyeballs," *The Nation*, January 17, 1994. *The Complete MAUS: A Survivor's Tale*, CD-ROM (New York: Voyager, 1994) 2.

Cultural criticism is still growing on the connections between Jewish-Americans and the field of comics (comic strips, comic books, and graphic narratives).[27] But general understanding acknowledges three important historical periods: the first where Yiddish comics strips served the Yiddish-speaking community, then the rise of the comic book and its largely Jewish-American progenitors, and finally the contemporary period, wherein Jewish cartoonists at in the United States and abroad represented the Jewish condition in multiple, mainstream comics forms, including autobiographical graphic narratives such as *Maus*.

For Jewish Americans, the comics industry was instrumental in offering artistic and economic opportunity. This is ironic considering how Jewish immigrants were historically marginalized and oppressed, especially by the anti-Semitism that infected publishing houses and presses (among many other locations) in the United States in the early 20th century. The association began when newspaper comic strips first became popularized in the mainstream. Jewish-serving newspapers followed suit, creating Yiddish-language versions, such as Samuel Zagat's comical strip series "Gimpl Binish, the Matchmaker" in *di Varhayt* and the cartoons of Lola (aka Leon Israel) for *Groyser Kundes*. The Yiddish language was particularly well-suited for the comics medium—a seemingly fated confluence of two comparable media. As Paul Buhle explains,

> [H]ostility toward the comic strip ran parallel, during a crucial phase, to the contempt of Jewish elites for Yiddish: disdain for the comic strip as a "bastard form" merging picture and word was not so far from the charge of *jhargon*, a language neither Hebrew nor German nor Russian but something in between, leveled against Yiddish.[28]

Both the Yiddish language and comics—a language of seeing and thinking—were born out of hybridization, or "bastard[ization]." Unlike un-"vulgar" artistic forms, comics merged image and text to form a new, unregulated semiotic language that emphasized a democratic mode of communication, much like Yiddish, which was the lingua franca of diasporic Jewish immigrants who spoke and wrote in multiple languages. The similarities continue. Yiddish and comics were both deigned subversive forms of expression—both meant for "low" class and political humor, or "the articulation of resentment by the dispossessed against the elite," as Buhle argues.[29]

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[27] See footnote 36 of my introduction for a list of cross-referenced book titles.

[28] Paul Buhle, ed., *Jews and American Comics: An Illustrated History of An American Art Form*, (New York: New Press, 2008), 5.

The connections are not only obvious to academics. Art Spiegelman, a prodigious historian of comics himself, has spent the last few years articulating the connection between Yiddish and early comics in lectures like "Comix, Jews, 'n Art—Dun't Esk" and "Comics is the Yiddish of Art." He argues that the inborn vulgarity of Yiddish allowed comics to be more "poignant…It allows it to be supple, to speak with a real voice."[30] Unburdened by the rigidity of decorum, Yiddish and comics speak to an organic, grounded reality, especially for those that struggle to be heard.

By the postwar, as Jews in the U.S. experienced unforeseen economic opportunities in the mainstream, they began their steady march towards racial and ethnic assimilation into whiteness.[31] Jewish culture also experienced a *yiddishkayt* turn, where Jewish culture became both secularized and modernized.[32] At this time, Jewish artists, writers, and publishers found a central place in the comic book world. As Buhle writes, "nowhere but Hollywood, and mainly behind-the-camera Hollywood, was the Jewish role so influential in a major form of popular art."[33] This niche entrance into the mainstream served immigrant Italians and Jews well.

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[29] Ibid., 6.

[30] Yael M. Saiger, "Pulitzer Author Art Spiegelman Lectures on Comics and Judaism," *The Crimson,* September 25, 2017, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2017/9/25/art-spiegelman-comics/

[31] For more on Jews and whiteness in the United States, see Karen Brodkin's *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About America* (1998).

[32] For more on Yiddishkayt, I recommend the comics-heavy book *Yiddishkeit: Jewish Vernacular & the New Land* (2011), a collaboration of cartoonist Harvey Pekar and scholar Paul Buhle.

[33] Buhle, 9.

This was a similar story for the comic book world, which began as a niche industry on the lower rungs of publishing before finding major commercial success. And "poor Jews from immigrant backgrounds," still blocked from mainstream publishing houses, "ended up finding their way into this ragged end of publishing, what we might call rag, or *schmate,* publishing…meaning, literally, a throwaway piece of cloth and, by extension, a junk, throwaway publication."[34] True to form, Jews became a presence in the pseudo-mainstream while also suffering from a kind of ethnic invisibility, too—marginalized almost literally. Eventually these openly Jewish themes in Yiddish comic strips receded, as comics became more racially obscure, contextually speaking. Jewish writers and artists sought to engage in mainstream white culture, penning ideal representations of white forms in superhero comics and similar adventure stories.[35] These Jewish artists were also obscuring their own Jewishness at the same time by anglifying their names—Jacob Kurtzberg became Jack Kirby, co-creator of Captain America, and Robert Khan became Bob Kane, co-creator of Batman, for example. They passed this way to protect themselves from discrimination—both ethnic and aesthetic.[36]

Despite this sense of invisibility, scholars have come to recognize the ways that midcentury Jewish-American-made comic books responded to social anxieties, fears, and anger about World War II, the Holocaust, and rampant anti-Semitism in general. In 1965, cartoonist and scholar Jules Feiffer wrote about superhero comics and their ethnic roots, exploring how Superman, the exemplary, titular figure of superhero comics embodied the thinly-veiled self-conscious projections and desires of its two Jewish-American immigrant creators, Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel.[37] Superman, a black-haired refugee from a dying race of people, lands in middle-America, anglifies his name, and becomes the world's ultimate defender against social injustice; as Harry Brod writes, "It is the combination of Superman's invincibleness and the nebbish-like characterization of Clark Kent that makes Superman such a Jewish character."[38] These two contrasting identities—the former born out of the need to counter stereotypes about Jewish men's inferior masculinity and the latter an avatar of that very stereotype—"are deeply engrained in Jewish culture."[39]

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[34] Harry Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?,* 2.

[35] Buhle writes, "Amazingly enough, even as *Mad* magazine, with its barely disguised Jewishness, advanced during the 1950s, the funny pages of American papers were still a *Judenrein*, a Jewless world, with the square-jawed Anglo-Saxon males and dainty females of Steve Canyon's domain arguably the most WASPish of all" (28).

[36] In his autobiography, the prolific superhero creator Stan Lee (né Stanley Lieber) says he changed his own name in order to disassociate his comics work from his more serious literary work that he eventually wanted to do.

In his lectures, Spiegelman discusses another important genre of the midcentury, horror comics, and the way that they also distilled allegorically the horror felt by the Holocaust as "in the aftermath of the war, there was no room for the Holocaust in popular culture." Spiegelman says, "The horror comics were bringing to a secular war what had happened and been repressed 10 years before."[40] Spiegelman goes on to explain that comics have an "honesty and simplicity" that allowed cartoonists to project their troubled emotions onto cartooned faces.[41] Eventually horror comics would succumb to the moral black of their own profession under the Comics Code Authority (CCA), a self-regulated censorship of comic material deemed too sexually or violently graphic and therefore socially corruptive.

This censorship gave way to the highly influential satirical comics magazines of the 1950s, in particular, *MAD*. The brainchild of Jewish cartoonist Harvey Kurtzman's, *MAD* was particularly important for its powerful influence on the humor and intellectual style of the countercultural movement that would follow. This was especially true for a young Art Spiegelman. As Hillary Chute and Emmy Waldman point out, "Harvey Kurtzman's MAD was religion for young Spiegelman. One of Spiegelman's autobiographical strips has the irreverent, tongue-in-cheek punchline: 'I studied MAD the way some kids studied the Talmud.'"[42] Spiegelman is alluding to a tension between his Americanenss and his Jewishness. Therefore, when he describes how comics were a gateway for assimilating into American culture, he also belies how much that American identity—for him and other comic books readers—was implicitly informed by a Jewish sensibility born out of the Jewish-specific political landscape of the early to mid-century period.

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[37] Jules Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2003).
[38] *Superman Is Jewish?*, 10.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Saiger, "Pulitzer Author."
[41] Ibid.

In the 1970s, the underground comix movement with the iconoclasm and irreverence had marked a new period for the medium.[43] Jewish cartoonists, such as Art Spiegelman and later Harvey Pekar, began to recover the Jewishness of their work, rendering Jewish culture and biographical representation freely, incisively, and with great success. For example, the very first work marketed as a "graphic novel" was Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978), a collection of comics stories capturing the slice-of-life experiences of Jewish New Yorkers living in a tenement building. While Art Spiegelman characterized the '60s counterculture as being disdainful of discussing ethnicity,[44] the 1970s iterations of countercultural, or "underground," comics began to incorporate themes relating to the Jewish-American experience in the works of Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Trina Robbins, R. Crumb, and Harvey Pekar. In addition to the transcendent commercial success of Spiegelman's *Maus* many other cartoonists have continued to find success in representing the Jewish-American experience, perhaps, none more successfully than Ben Katchor, whose long-running, Yiddish-inflected comic strip series *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer* remains particular noteworthy.

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[42] Hillary Chute and Emmy Waldman, "Jewish Creators, Resonant Themes: Comics as Midrash," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin,* (Autumn/Winter 2018), https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/autumnwinter2018/jewish-creators-resonant-themes-comics-midrash.

[43] The "Underground Comix" Movement describes a period of cartooning that began in the 1960s and ended in the late 1970s characterized by its expression of counter-cultural and anti-censorship sentiment. Appropriating the now-sanitized medium of their youth, cartoonists of all levels of expertise self-published their comics on a variety of adult-oriented subjects, including pornography, the Vietnam War, drugs and psychedelia, music, art, feminism, autobiography, and other anti-establishment concerns. For more on this highly influential art movement, see Patrick Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution, 1963-1975* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2002).

[44] See footnote 11.

By the end of the century, this ethnic-literary history took enormous strides with Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000). The novel's Jewish-American narrative relates most of the twentieth century history of American comics, telling the story of two Jewish cousins who become partners—Sam Clay, a New York-born aspiring writer, and, Joe Kavalier, a talented artist and a European Jew displaced from his home and family by the looming Nazi threat. Together they join the booming comic book industry, while navigating bewildering metropolitan America during World War II. While the characters are fictional, the novel takes painstaking care to recreate the environment and peoples of the comic book industry of the time, through dense historical exposition, allusions, and references. In so doing, Chabon's novel is itself an almost-academic study of the Jewishness of American comics in ways that help to set-up important through-lines for my reading of Art Spiegelman's work.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay repeatedly posits how not only the superhero genre but the comics form expresses both personal and community-oriented anxieties of two Jewish men. Throughout the novel, Chabon draws parallels between Kavalier's powerless hatred of Hitler and how he aesthetically mediates said-anxieties. For example, while Kavalier's illustrations are described as chaotic and as baroque as a battlefield, his superhero avatar, The Escapist, beats up Hitler and other fascist villains. And when their comic begins to feel futile against the terrifying tide of the Holocaust, Kavalier resorts to technical experimentation as a means of transmuting his guilt. After watching Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, Kavalier is inspired to push his aesthetic boundaries:

> All of the dissatisfactions he had felt in his practice of the art form he had stumbled across within a week of his arrival in America, the cheap conventions, the low expectations among publishers, readers, parents, and educators, the spatial constraints that he had been struggling against in the pages of *Luna Moth*, seemed

> capable of being completely overcome, exceeded, and escaped. The Amazing Cavalieri was going to break free, forever, of the nine little boxes.[45]

In this respect, escape is figured both as physical escape and as formal liberty, linking artistic expression to social action. Chabon demonstrates how the comic form and its culture share an important connection to real world concerns, despite its under-valuation. The novel argues that the problems largely derived from ethnicity can be explicitly addressed and overcome by something as "trivial" as superhero comics—sometimes as the only and the most powerful way. In this way, the novel subverts the negative connotations associated with "escapism" and popular genre literature and illustrates their political power, rescuing a swath of Jewish-American cartoonists from obscurity in the process.

Another way of looking at the novel's approach to narrativizing literary and political U.S. history is to consider the trope of masking, which figures as largely in the novel as it does in *Maus*. In the novel, the characters themselves go through transformations, adopting identities in order to suit their personal needs and desires. Sammy Clay concentrates his masking in the novel-spanning storyline concerning his homosexuality, which, during the spanning timeline of the novel was dangerously illicit, as the novel shows. The novel ends with Sammy dropping the protective veil of being a suburban family man archetype, a role he assumed when Kavalier left his pregnant girlfriend Rosa during the height of the war. For Joe Kavalier, his masks took many forms: a magician, an escapist, as comics cartoonist, a graphic novelist, as a soldier, and even as a death-defying superhero. Despite the negative associations of "escape" and "masking," commonly seen as being evasive and uncourageous, the novel offers a different perspective. Rather, masking is portrayed as a viable form of processing trauma and a form of proactive work in the face of history's impossible antagonism. What the novel does exceptionally well is dramatize in novel form an important attribute of comics, which is its ability to graphically presence what is difficult to make apparent: the hidden, inescapable traumas masked by social customs and traditions, by ethnic antagonism, and by the limitations of the self. As Clay and Kavalier don masks in order to reveal to themselves self-truths, so, too, do comics like the fictional Escapist book mask and reveal the otherwise hidden truths about Jewish-American strength and anxiety.

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[45] Michael Chabon, *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay,* (New York: Random House, 2012), 361.

The medium of comics exposes the reader to a profound discourse of presence and absence; that is, what we see and what we do not see in that seeing. This quality takes on profound meaning in the venue of ethnicity and race discourse, where the visual and textual tracks work with and against each other to tell readers about distinct ethnic lives. How do we see and not see Jewishness in the Escapist or in Superman? How do we see Jewishness in *Maus'* simplified mouse masks, and what are the limitations to that seeing? As Michael Chabon's novel has done, it is important here to contemplate the ways that race and ethnicity are uniquely figured into comics and, in turn, what that reveals about the medium and ethnicity. The next section will focus on a close-reading of Art Spiegelman's work, identifying and analyzing how Jewish identity is made present graphically and how it is also scrutinized, manipulated, and questioned.

Dangerous Exposure: **Maus** *and Race*

Maus is perhaps most famous (and in some circles, controversial) for its representation of Jews and other races as animals. Despite this fantastical visual element, the narrative itself plays out in a largely realistic, autobiographical manner. The text switches between multiple biographical tracks organically, one concerning the character Art (sometimes "Artie") Spiegelman's relationship with his father Vladek. Art interviews him for the *Maus* project in the "present" moment, what I call "Art's story." Another track has the comic slip into visualizations of Vladek's long, harrowing experiences during the Holocaust, "Vladek's story."[46] A final biographical timeframe, shown in *Maus II*, concerns the period after *Maus I* has been published (with much critical and financial success) and after the death of his father.[47] Nevertheless, in all the visualized worlds, characters are represented as racially-coded animals: Jews are represented as mice, Nazis and Germans as cats, Polish people as pigs, Americans as dogs, Swedish people as reindeer, and so forth. Unlike allegorical narratives, such as fables, which use animals anthropomorphically in order to tell human stories, the characters understand themselves as humans. Unlike the bestial images in Hunter St. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which are used to signal mass moral dehumanization, the use of animals in *Maus* is a completely visual trope.[48] This visual play, or racial graphicity, tackles head-on ethical concerns of racial representation and stereotypes. It places pressure on the social understandings that inform the constructs of race, and specifically, the anti-Semitic prejudice that informs the Holocaust.

My discussion of *Maus* is divided into two distinct yet interrelated concerns regarding race and ethnicity in the text. This following section examines the logic of the metaphorical, visual conceit of animals as race groups in *Maus*, marking moments in the comic book when the conceit is particularly emphasized, or when Spiegelman tests and even ruptures the conceit in order to test its vulnerability. Ultimately, Spiegelman exploits the very language and logic of comics to show, on a visual and cognitive level, how the conceit—figuratively rooted in real demarcations of racism—is suspect and dangerous.

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[46] This historical track, what I call "Vladek's story," is periodically framed, narrated, and interrupted by the older Vladek's testimony, so that the two historical tracks often appear simultaneously on the page. I will elaborate on this comics-specific formal quality in the next section of my discussion of *Maus*.

[47] *Maus* was published in two volumes (1986 and 1991); however, it was also released serially as an insert in Art Spiegelman and François Mouly's *Raw,* an iconic comics anthology magazine that ran from 1980 to 1991. Thus, *Maus II* is able to respond to the critical splash that the first volume made.

[48] See Chapter One for more on the Thompson and Ralph Steadman's bestial images.

As opposed to the examination of *Maus*'s visual interracial taxonomy, the next section examines how *Maus* interrogates the dynamics of intra-ethnic community during times of traumatic disaster. Disasters, like the Holocaust and like the September 11th attacks pit the concerns of individuals against the political coherence of ethnic grouping. This section tracks the varied tensions arising from ethnic associations, such as religious and racial persecution, and how that places pressure on the stability of Art Spiegelman's ethnic identity.

* * *

Each volume of *Maus* begins with an epigraph. The first volume (1986) contains the short, ominous quote attributed to Hitler, "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human."[49] The second volume (1991) contains this far-more bombastic yet equally demeaning epigraph attributed to a German newspaper article from the mid-1930s,

> Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed…Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honorable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal…Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross![50]

Both quotes clearly aim to dehumanize the Jewish race. The first epigraph mechanically delineates the line between the Jewish race and, ostensibly, all other races (racialism), while also marking Jews as subhuman (racism).[51] The latter links the idealizing of the American cartoon hero, Mickey Mouse, as a sign of pro-Jewish propaganda. It begins by assuming that the mouse, the "vermin," references Jews, evincing a long-propagated characterization (or caricature) of Jews, which has been disseminated in literature, and very often, as visual propaganda, such as pamphlets, political cartoons, and other such comics-related work. *Maus* is set within this ideological and aesthetic space of visual culture concerned with race and ethnicity. Other (text-based) authors could circumvent the problematization of caricature and stereotype in terms of ethnic representation by underplaying the register of visuality altogether; however, as I have mentioned, cartoonists do not have the same privilege. Spiegelman does the opposite of circumvention in *Maus*, by embracing the derogatory visual metaphorical association between Jews and mice. In a recent speech, he said on the matter,

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[49] Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History,* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 4.

[50] Art Spiegelman, *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began,* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 3.

[51] I use the term "racialism" here in order to differentiate between the belief in racial categories and "racism," prejudices and discrimination against particular races. However, I am fully aware and sensitive to lines of thinking that understand racialism—the belief in races—as inherently racist, and *Maus* certainly contributes to the blurring of this line. Inherently in the designation of certain animals to certain races there is a value judgment born from stereotypes that cannot be extricated: mice as meek prey, cats as vicious predators.

> Every ethnic group has had its most vile representations in comics form, and it's interesting that everybody recognizes them, its built into our language, and it means that it's a lot of work to subvert them, but one must subvert them, not suppress them…those pejoratives have to be worked through and not shamed out of existence, to talk to the important and profound changes that we are living through now, and that one as a cartoonist has to learn to subvert those clichés.[52]

The author is aware of not only the iconography of race and ethnicity that infect visual culture, but also the problematic history of racial stereotypes in the very medium he lauds. *Maus* serves as a battle site for negotiating medium and subject on these grounds. Spiegelman, by engaging with and reproducing the problematic elements of visual racial codifications, challenges the viewer with these problematic animal images, especially as the narrative unfolds with its traumatic, historically-charged and very human story. Spiegelman writes,

> My anthropomorphized mice carry trace elements of Fips' anti-semitic (sic) Jew-as-rat…but by being particularized they are invested with personhood: they stand upright and affirm their humanity. Cartoons personalize. They give specific form to stereotypes. In *Maus*, the mouse heads are masks, virtually blank, like Little Orphan Annie's eyeballs, a white screen the reader can project on."[53]

"Mask," which Art Spiegelman uses here and elsewhere to describe *Maus'*s animal conceit, is a critical word for understanding the logic of race and ethnicity in this text. Masks signify a demarcated line between the person, "the human," and the external appearance, "the [animal] mask." In other words, as the masks act as visual projections that materialize social prejudices and stereotypes, they also act as a challenge to empathize with the real people behind the masks, to "subvert" the masks that have been forcibly thrust upon them—to particularize against a sea of monolithic ethnic anonymity.

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[52] Art Spiegelman, "Art Spiegelman Accepts 2018 Edward MacDowell Medal," speech, August 12, 2018, MacDowell Colony, https://www.macdowellcolony.org/event-detail-2018-medal-day.
[53] "Little Orphan," 2.

This last point is a crucial one with regards to the way race and ethnicity function in *Maus*. Racial identification occurs most often on a superficial, visual level, which is why comics is such an apt medium to explore this visual-verbal tension. As the narrative unfolds, and the reader become familiar with the cast of characters and particularization is achieved, the graphicity of race remains constantly apparent in the visage of animal masks. Though there are occasional ruptures, as I will explore, there is generally no magical transformation that relents from the discourse of race that the animal conceit represents. The discourse of race and ethnicity are ever-present, which distresses the reading experience and one's wish to see past shallow racial masking. *Maus* confirms that the visuality of race cannot be extricated from the interiority of ethnicity, that the two constructs occur simultaneously, just as text and image sidle along each other in comics.

Furthermore, how Spiegelman specifically renders animal masks lends to this monolithic understanding of racialism. The Jewish characters are drawn particularly simplified with triangle shaped heads, nub-like ears, and black dot-eyes, making the characters particularly difficult to distinguish from other members of the same animal-racial group. Only textual cues of description and dialogue and particular visual clues, including gendered clothing, help the reader distinguish between mice characters. On the other hand, Spiegelman does not go as far as divorcing the human aspect of the animal conceit by making his characters too animal-like. He uses detail sparingly, mainly for backgrounds and settings, opting to keep the characters' appearances cartoon-like and, in effect, approachable. As Spiegelman says above, the masks are "virtually blank…a white screen the reader can project on."[54] In his seminal comics theory text, *Understanding Comics,* Scott McCloud describes how this simplification-as-universal effect allows the reader to identify with characters, and, inversely, over-particularization, visually speaking, detracts from this effect, creating reader objectification and emotional distance.[55] *Maus* is continuously negotiating with the reader's impossible desire for identifying with particular characters—to in effect understand what it was like to be a Jew during the Holocaust—and their exposure to its extremely loaded, deindividuated coding of race. Rather than feeding the reader another Holocaust memoir that creates an easy space for objectification through a particularizing visual style, *Maus* demands that the reader reconcile (if possible) the unthinkable graphic atrocity of the Holocaust with approachable mouse characters who also mediate the troubling logic of anonymizing racialist and racist ideology—a complex cognitive demand!

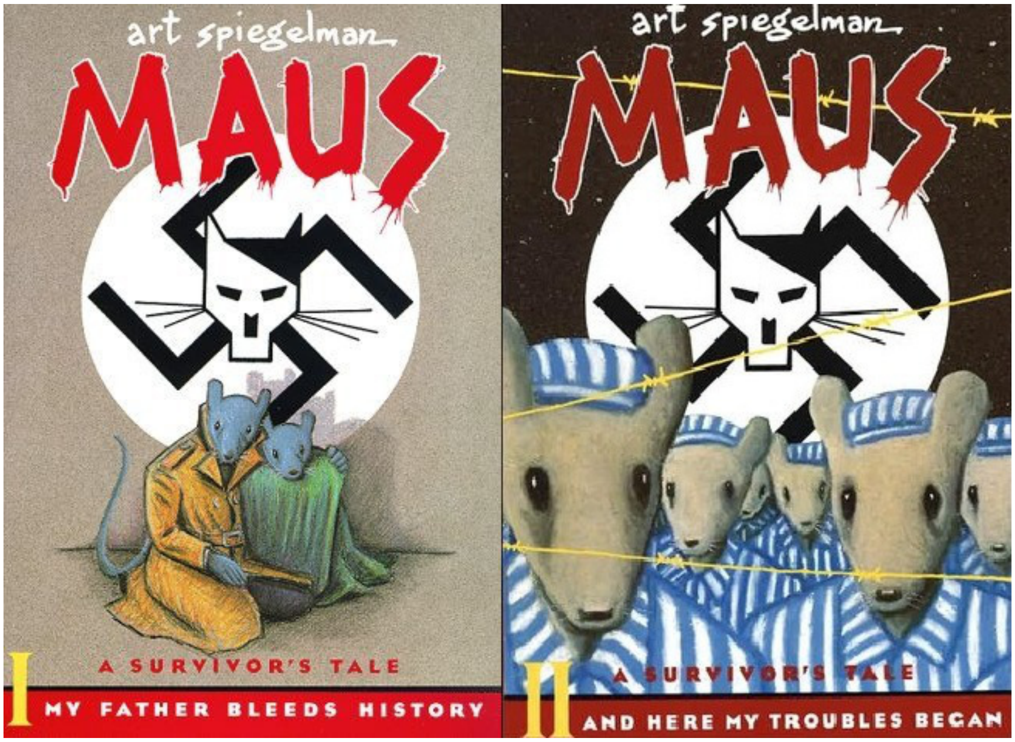

Figure 6. A side-by-side of the covers of *Maus I* and *Maus II.* Art Spiegelman, *Maus,* 1991.

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[54] Ibid.

[55] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 42.

This becomes particularly challenging in moments when visual cues are diminished and Jewish bodies are amassed, that is, during the concentration camp scenes. We see this transformation occur between the covers of *Maus I* and *II* (figure 6)*:* the first volume shows Vladek and Art's mother Anja crouched in hiding from the spotlight created by a swastika with Hitler-as-cat in the center. Anja and Vladek are distinguishable by size and by clothing only. On the cover of *Maus II,* the two characters are replaced by a tight group of mice shown chest up set behind yellow barbwire. No visual cues help distinguish between the six mice shown. They all wear the standard striped camp uniform and cap, and, while their under-eyes show the sadly recognizable concavity of trauma, the faces of the mice remain eerily affectless. The graphicity of the image manages to fully effect the monolithic, racialist thinking that motivated Nazism's ideology, which not only dehumanizes an entire race of people but also anonymizes their particular identities, turning them into interchangeable, indistinct bodies.

The concept of "masks" in *Maus* burdens and informs the relationship between race and ethnicity. The animal masks project the viewpoint of racial prejudice onto ethnic groups, signaling a profound power dynamic between who gets to will ethnic identification. Spiegelman, reflecting on how race is an involuntary condition rather than an elective affinity, writes,

> One thing that fascinated me, and it was a horrible fascination that I suspect I share with many non-religious Jews, was the fact that the people sent to their slaughter as Jews didn't necessarily identify themselves as/with Jews: it was up to the Nazis to decide who was a Jew. As Sartre pointed out in *Antisemite and Jew*, a Jew is someone whom others call a Jew.[56]

Regardless of whether one identifies as a practicing, religious Jew, the ultimate arbiter of Jewishness comes from outside the ethnic group, which is a tremendously disempowering notion for Spiegelman.

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[56] "Looney Tunes," 4.

Adding to this overarching, inescapable visual conceit of the animal masks are moments when the narrative dramatizes the Sartrean notion that "a Jew is someone whom others a call a Jew," while exposing the questionable logic of imposing racial thinking. In *Maus II,* at the point in the narrative that Vladek is being interned in Auschwitz, Vladek recounts an anecdote about a particular inmate who complains to the Nazi guards that he is being erroneously held, claiming that he in fact doesn't belong with all "these Yids and Polacks," that he is German (figure 7). In the middle of the page two similar-sized and -shaped panels are juxtaposed, the panel on the left showing the pleading prisoner as a mouse. When Art interjects the narrative in the present, asking Vladek whether the man was actually German, the same image as the left panel is reproduced behind him. The pleading mouse has become a pleading German cat, a visual projection of Art's imagination (as the man hovers over and behind Art), which is rendered through haze-creating hatched lines, reflecting Art's unsureness. The visual transformation demonstrates the fluidity of ethnicity, underscoring the ignorance and arbitrariness of the vilification of an ethnic other. Vladek responds to Art's question, "Who knows, it **was** German prisoners also…but for the Germans this guy was **Jewish**!"[57] The next panel depicts the pleading prisoner being stomped to death by a Nazi guard with an all-consuming shadow that shrouds the prisoner, who lies mostly off-screen, except for an outreaching arm and what appears to be the triangular snout of a mouse. While the reality of the memory stayed troublingly ambiguous in the mind of Vladek and, therefore, in the mind of the character Art, the cartoonist Spiegelman utilizes comics' visual properties to declaratively collapse the line between race and ethnicity. The transformation of a real human into, first, the drawing of a mouse to then a cat and then back to a mouse forces the reader to confront the logic (or lack thereof) of Nazi bigotry displayed in that anecdote. Despite his objections, the prisoner dies a mouse, because, as Spiegelman asserts, the designation of Jewish is something imposed from the outside.

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[57] *Maus II,* 50. Bolding appears in the original textboxes.

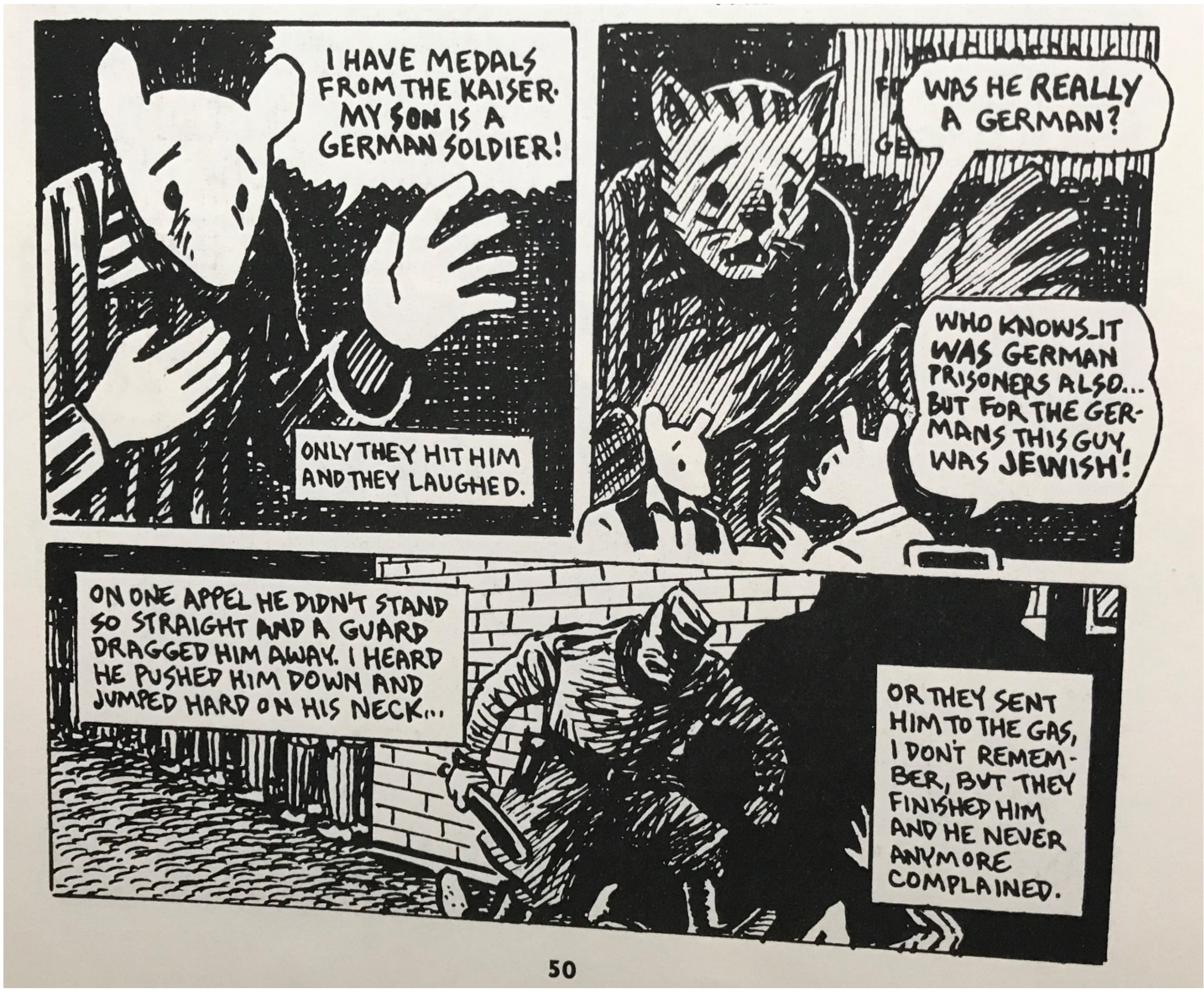
I HAVE MEDALS FROM THE KAISER. MY SON IS A GERMAN SOLDIER!
ONLY THEY HIT HIM AND THEY LAUGHED.
WAS HE REALLY A GERMAN?
WHO KNOWS_IT WAS GERMAN PRISONERS ALSO... BUT FOR THE GERMANS THIS GUY WAS JEWISH!
ON ONE APPEL HE DIDN'T STAND SO STRAIGHT AND A GUARD DRAGGED HIM AWAY. I HEARD HE PUSHED HIM DOWN AND JUMPED HARD ON HIS NECK...
OR THEY SENT HIM TO THE GAS, I DON'T REMEMBER, BUT THEY FINISHED HIM AND HE NEVER ANYMORE COMPLAINED.
50

Figure 7. Panels capturing the uncertain visual-racial identity of a murdered Holocaust victim. Art Spiegelman, *Maus II,* 1991.

Though the imposing danger of racialization is consistently visualized through the iconography of animals in the text, *Maus* is marked by intermittent moments that graphically dramatize the logic of how race and ethnicity work in visual terms, including the very real condition of racial “passing.” In *Maus I,* Vladek and Anja find themselves on the occupied streets of Poland

and in desperate need of cover. Spiegelman depicts how the two present themselves as Polish by donning pig masks over their own mouse masks. This artifice is visually signaled to the reader with a rendering of a more literal-looking mask, a pig face that covers only half the head and which is tied behind the head with string. This visual play with masks represents racial passing, the idea that a member of one racial group is accepted as belonging to another racial group. In this scene, the two hope to not be identified as Jewish by their exterior appearances in the eyes of the Polish citizens and gestapo. The scene highlights how this is more difficult for Anja than Vladek, for with her physical appearance—that is, her Jewish features—“you could see more easy she was Jewish.”[58] To communicate this vulnerability, Spiegelman, as an unspoken visual cue, depicts Anja as having a long rat-like tail coming out her clothes, a feature that Vladek does not share (figure 8). *Maus* represents this moment of faltering logic—masks on masks—by amending its own metaphorical conceit, showing both the power of comics to visualize invisible concepts but also materialize the absurdity of the real-word referent. Does the fact that the pig mask actually looks like a mask (string and all) compared to the way that the “real” mouse masks do not say

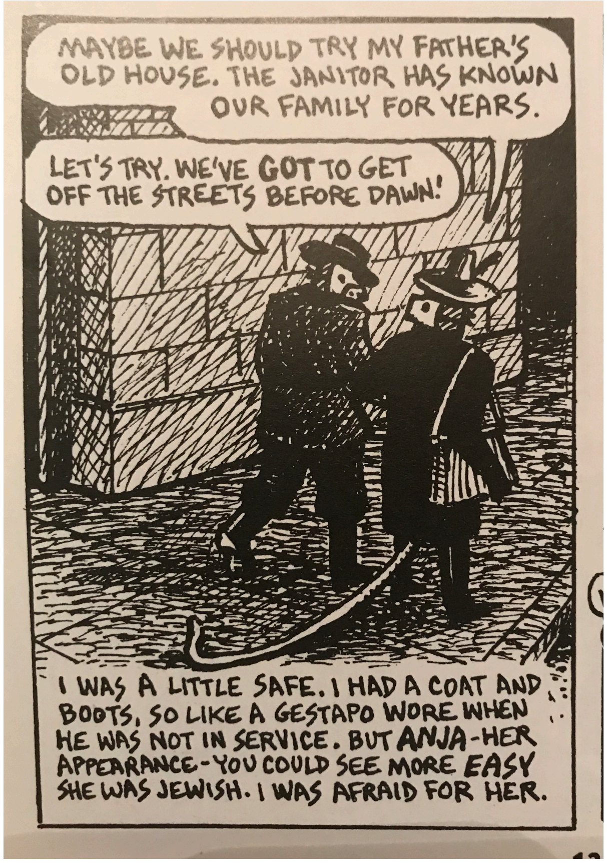
MAYBE WE SHOULD TRY MY FATHER'S OLD HOUSE. THE JANITOR HAS KNOWN OUR FAMILY FOR YEARS.
LET'S TRY. WE'VE GOT TO GET OFF THE STREETS BEFORE DAWN!
I WAS A LITTLE SAFE. I HAD A COAT AND BOOTS, SO LIKE A GESTAPO WORE WHEN HE WAS NOT IN SERVICE. BUT ANJA-HER APPEARANCE-YOU COULD SEE MORE EASY SHE WAS JEWISH. I WAS AFRAID FOR HER.

Figure 8. Panel depicting Vladek and Anja (with visible tail) incognito. Art Spiegelman, *Maus I,* 1986.

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[58] *Maus I,* 136.

something about the authenticity of racialism? Rather than confirming the integrity of the racial animal conceit, I argue that this instability of *Maus*'s own metaphorical logic serves to graphically represent the fractious instability of systemic racialism and racism.

An irony that shadows over *Maus*'s racial graphicity is the current discourse of Jewishness vis-à-vis whiteness. As Karen Brodkin points to in American history, current dominant classifications of Jews fluctuate between an assignment of whiteness and "at other times…an off-white-race for Jews to inhabit."[59] She describes this condition as a "double vision that comes from racial middleness," one dictated by their relationship to whiteness on one hand (marginalization) and blackness on the other (white assimilation).[60] Spiegelman himself has spoken on the subject of Jewish assimilation, stating that, "In the present moment, I feel that we Jews have been made officially white, or at least off-white. With so many darker colors on the frontlines today, it's hard for me to think of myself as among those most likely to be yanked out and whipped into a prison cell."[61] While current political conditions are arguably quite different than they were during World War II, it is interesting to think about how *Maus,* through racial graphicity, enacts raciality for reader perception. While Vladek's testimonial speaks to the questionability of being identified as belonging, of being visually recognized as a particular race, *Maus* flattens this graphic experience and makes it clear to all who is Jew and who is not.

Maus recognizes that the racial identities behind the fake masks have all-too-real consequences, which perhaps explains why they appear more real and stable. A related scene later on poignantly depicts the consequence and terror of being identified as a racial other. Vladek recounts how, while donning his Polish disguise, he is identified by a band of Polish children as a Jew. The terrified faces of the children contrast the mortified, alerted face of Vladek seen over his pig mask. In the second row of panels, Spiegelman wedges the present Vladek, who, in a grimace, explains that "Mothers always told so: 'Be careful! A Jew will catch you to eat you!'…so they taught their children," between the threatening children and their suspicious parents.[62] The fact that the Polish parents and children expressed fear while Art attempted to swallow his own, shows the impenetrable barrier between empathy and prejudice that racism produces. This kind of Holocaust-era terror is opposed in *Maus* by this Jews-as-white racial blurriness of the present, especially in the scene that opens *Maus II.* Art contemplates how to properly racialize, or "how to draw," his wife, Françoise, who is a white French woman that also happens to be a Jewish convert.[63] Art finally settles on Jewish mouse after much haggling between Françoise and him, but not without contemplating the racial stereotypes that might best fit her complex identity: bunny rabbits are "too sweet and gentle. I mean the French in general. Let's not forget the centuries of Anti-Semitism."[64] This metafictional reveals at once the essentializing logic of racialization, locking in an entire nationality with a species, which Spiegelman must commit to in order to subvert, as I have discussed. Secondly, it also stands in stark contradistinction to the harrowing imposition of Jewishness that victimized Art's parents only decades before. The jovial scene between Art and Françoise underscores the transmutability of race and consequence, even while attempting to reinforce racial taxonomies.

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[59] Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What Says about Race in America,* 1.

[60] Ibid., 1-2.

[61] Claudia Dreifus, "'Drawing Is Always a Struggle': An Interview with Art Spiegelman," *The New York Review of Books,* April 13, 2018, https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/04/13/drawing-is-always-a-struggle-an-interview-with-art-spiegelman/.

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[62] *Maus I,* 149. Spiegelman says that "The anecdote where Vladek is almost caught by Polish children calling him a Jew when he was in hiding was a source of nightmares for me…It was vivid for me even before I drew it—one of those places where I could enter into Vladek's story and feel it viscerally. The vulnerability of being the other, that made even little children lethally dangerous" (*MetaMaus,* 28).

[63] *Maus II,* 11.

[64] *Maus II,* 11.

While the issues of racialism, self-imposed or otherwise, and passing, and other concepts that question the nature of race and ethnicity are graphically represented in *Maus,* Spiegelman poignantly inserts ruptures that seemingly subvert the conceit of racial masks altogether. These ruptures alert the reader to the authenticity, the human referents, of the narrative behind the figurative artifice of the comic artform. We see this in brief moments, for example, when hiding in a storage locker, Anja and Vladek find rats—real animal rats—scurrying in the dark (figure 9). While in one panel, Vladek comforts Anja by saying that they're "just mice," the panel to the right shows the older Vladek explaining to Art that they were in fact rats. In between these two panels, in lieu of the white gutters that usually separate panels, lies a rat rendered dark and menacing. This image of the more-realistically drawn and sized rat, foregrounding the other panels, serves to contrast the figurative mice of the narrative, in order to signal to the reader that, in fact, Vladek and Anja were real people regardless of their figurative animal appearances. Rather than circumvent this undermining to the overarching metaphor, Spiegelman willfully includes this rupture.

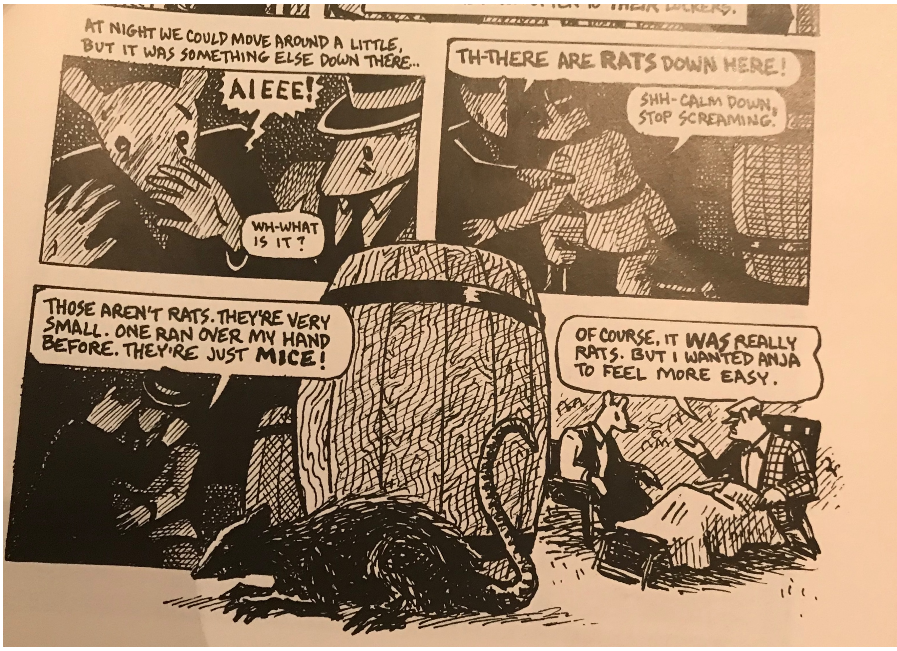
AT NIGHT WE COULD MOVE AROUND A LITTLE, BUT IT WAS SOMETHING ELSE DOWN THERE...
AIEEE!
WH-WHAT IS IT?
TH-THERE ARE RATS DOWN HERE!
SHH-CALM DOWN, STOP SCREAMING.
THOSE AREN'T RATS. THEY'RE VERY SMALL. ONE RAN OVER MY HAND BEFORE. THEY'RE JUST MICE!
OF COURSE, IT WAS REALLY RATS. BUT I WANTED ANJA TO FEEL MORE EASY.

Figure 9. Panels depicting Vladek and Anja confronting a rat. Art Spiegelman, *Maus I,* 1986.

Spiegelman also injects into the book aesthetic ruptures that turn the reader's attention to intertextual and visual referents that evoke a related but exterior space outside of the narrative proper. He reproduces in full his underground comix-era work, "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" (1972), which is drawn in a distinct, German Expressionism-inspired woodcut style. While it is also a comic, "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" depicts the various characters of *Maus* as visibly human, and, thus, upsets the relationship established between the reader and the mouse characters. The comic-within-the-comic alerts the reader to a world outside of *Maus*'s narratological and aesthetic system, one which also enforces a distinct perspective. Despite the fact that both texts are written and drawn by Art Spiegelman, "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" communicates a distinct point-of-view and tone that centralizes Art in a way that *Maus* does not. Similarly, near the end of the graphic narrative, as Vladek closes his Holocaust story, Spiegelman doubles down on the ruptures and reproduces an actual photograph of Vladek dressed up in a camp uniform. He explains that, after being liberated, he found a photo place which made "souvenir photos," ostensibly a memento for the period. The photo shows a young, handsome Vladek in a panel frame atilt against the panels of the past and the panels of the present (figure 10). Narratively, the photograph illustrates a kind of paradoxical absurdity at the heart of *Maus*: a photographic portrait of a slightly smiling and proud Vladek in his camp uniform suggests a desire to remember, while the traumatic aura of the photograph, the uniform, and Vladek's hesitation to tell his story demonstrated throughout the book suggests the pain of memory. Aesthetically, these two examples of rupturing emphasize the negotiation between ethnic anonymity and the particular individual. The visual particularity of the photograph completes the destruction of the animal conceit*,* as the reader becomes fully aware of the particularity of a human that was only partially-made particular through the negotiation of text and image. The reader is finally asked to reconcile the singular autobiographical reality that informs a text invested in exploring and critiquing the system ideologies of race, of ethnic communities, and global history. As the next section of discussion of *Maus* suggests, this is not a foregone conclusion; rather, this is an enterprise that Art Spiegelman sets for himself, as he struggles to negotiate his own particularity in the face of familial conflict and ethnic disaster.

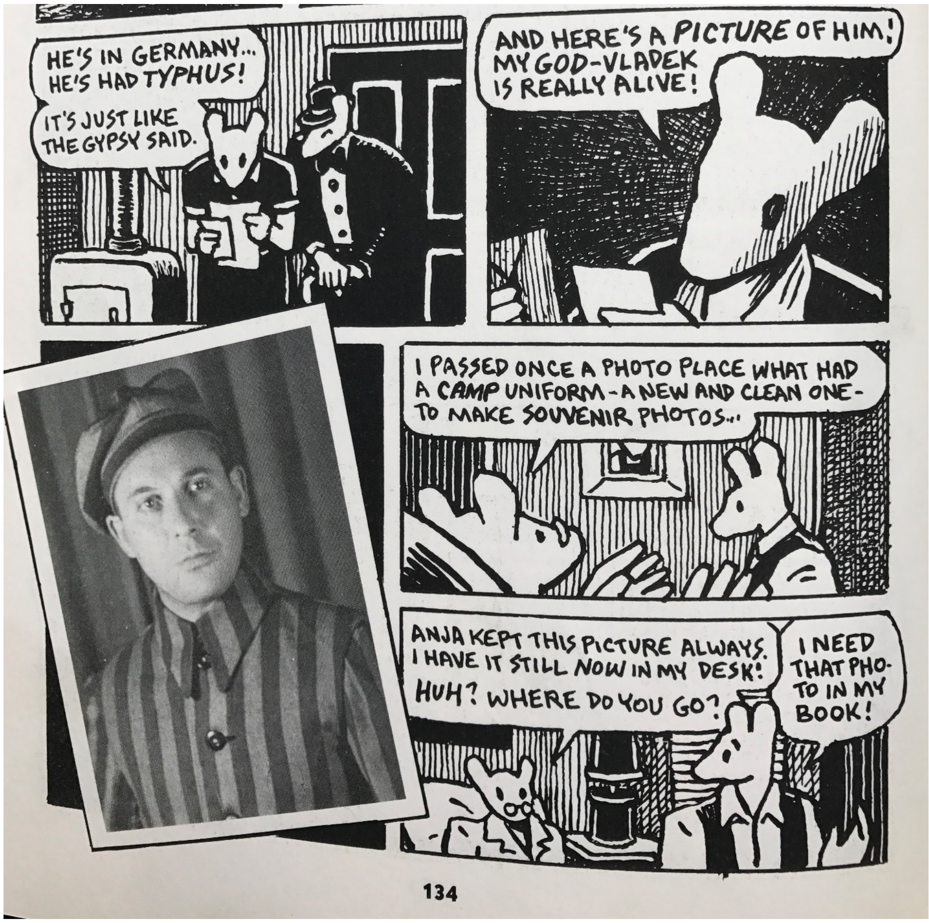
HE'S IN GERMANY... HE'S HAD TYPHUS!
IT'S JUST LIKE THE GYPSY SAID.
AND HERE'S A PICTURE OF HIM! MY GOD-VLADEK IS REALLY ALIVE!
I PASSED ONCE A PHOTO PLACE WHAT HAD A CAMP UNIFORM - A NEW AND CLEAN ONE - TO MAKE SOUVENIR PHOTOS...
ANJA KEPT THIS PICTURE ALWAYS. I HAVE IT STILL NOW IN MY DESK! HUH? WHERE DO YOU GO?
I NEED THAT PHOTO IN MY BOOK!
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Figure 10. A photograph of the real Vladek inserted into the graphic narrative. Art Spiegelman, *Maus II,* 1991.

Disaster, Ethnicity, and Art

In the creation of *Maus,* Art Spiegelman struggled with how to represent the specifics of his family's history, and, by extension, the Holocaust. When Spiegelman first approached the subject of his parents'—Vladek and Anja's—experience of surviving the Holocaust in Europe in the three-page "Maus" (1972), published in the underground comic *Funny Aminals*, he obscured the historical referents (though its implicitness is fairly transparent), using "Die Katzen" for the Nazi cats and "mice" for the Jewish mice. At first, this "cat and mouse" dynamic, which he described as "a clean universalist metaphor of oppressor and oppressed," appealed to his wish to tell a non-ethnicity-specific story with wide reader appeal.[65] Returning to the same conceit for the longer form *Maus* a few years later, he explains that though he was

> intent on creating the Great American Comic Book Novel, [he] quickly found…that [he] couldn't legitimately narrate the specifics of what happened to [his] family without referring to their Jewishness, that it was intrinsic to what happened to them, that the only road to the universal lay in the specifics, that [he] was going to have to settle for going after the Great Jewish-American Comic Book Novel, and that, somehow, doing *Maus* involved coming out of the closet as a Jew.[66]

Spiegelman, ironically or not, bemoans having to incorporate ethnic-specific characteristics about his personal life and his parents' in order to properly tell the story of *Maus*, and in doing so, feels he lost out on writing the ethnically-unqualified "Great American Comic Book Novel." In many ways, this perceived requirement typifies the condition of the ethnic writer in American literature; she or he is tethered to their marginalized ethnic group and their accomplishments are qualified as so. The artist of color must often juggle between representative roles of the universal human condition, of their specific community or ethnic identity, and of themselves (claims to personal experience and perspective). In putting aside his early aversion to Jewishness as an art subject and "coming out" as Jewish, he is able to "legitimately" mediate his parents' experience and his own. This is how the project arrives at the richly developed discourse of racialism and racism in comics form that was the focus of this chapter's previous section. For Spiegelman it is crucial he acknowledge the ethnic truth of his family's narrative, that, largely, their collective story is one of oppression at the hand of atrocious prejudice, and therefore, for Spiegelman, *Maus* must not whitewash this inextricable bond between ethnicity and familial particularity; however, equally important to the project of *Maus* is an honest representation of this multilayered struggle. If it all boils down to a contest of Nazi cats and Jewish mice, that does not mean that Art Spiegelman—a son of Holocaust survivors, a Swedish-born-immigrant, a comics-loving New Yorker—has to be okay with that binary. As he has exhibited in the many-cited conversations throughout his career, Spiegelman in *Maus* courses between the spectrum of, what I call, abstraction and individuation that occur in the discourse of ethnicity and race. On one layer of *Maus*'s discourse, Jews are treated as a monolithic community and their shared concerns as one—certainly, this is the way that Nazis perceived them and the basis for this chapter's discussion of *Maus*'s visual animal conceit. On the other hand, Spiegelman must reconcile this abstracted envisioning with the particularities of his father and of himself, two individuals forever linked by history but that also relate to that history quite differently. While Vladek's story is one that microcosmically represents a thoroughly Jewish Holocaust-survivor narrative, Art's story is one about the struggle to connect with his father and with his Jewishness. In other words, *Maus* explores the problems that occur between individual and ethno-communal experiences. What we see in *Maus* through the prismatic registers of comics is an exhibition of a Jewish-American son navigating the often-traumatic burden of such a historically-marked identity, or, to put it differently, navigating the interstitial gulfs between son and artist, between Jewish and ethnically-transcendent.

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[65] "Looney Tunes," 3.

[66] Ibid.

Ethnic community is tested against the concerns of the individual in *Maus*, and that conflict is often represented in *Maus* in how Jewish characters are shown to relate with each other, contextually and visually speaking. For example, a scene from *Maus I* where the ghettoizing of Jews in Poland begins reveals the way that comics can represent, simultaneously, the literal destruction of Jews as a group and the memorialization of particular individuals. In the chapter "The Noose Tightens," Nazis hang four friends of Vladek suspected of dealing in goods without permission and display their corpses for the Jewish ghetto to see. Spiegelman, exploiting the power of comics, composes separate panels to allude to the way that the threats of the Nazis begin to seep into the purview of Vladek and Anja's family (figure 11). The middle panel with the hanging mice is overlaid with a panel showing Vladek, Anja, and her father. The overlay causes Anja's father to assume the upper torso of the hanging mice hidden by the panel—his lowered head even duplicates the partially exposed face of the hanging man. Despite the geographical and temporal distinction between the hanging scene and the domestic familial scene, the panel juxtaposition creates virtual proximity. It foreshadows Anja's father's eventual death in Auschwitz, and it alludes to the way that Nazi violence has begun to invade the space of their relatively safer home. Furthermore, the hanging men, while all donning the anonymous Jewish mice masks and wearing roughly the same suit (minus one gray suited mouse), face in different directions as they hang, marking them simultaneously as a unit and as individuals. Spiegelman signals the depersonalizing nature of Nazi oppression towards Jews while also bearing in mind the individuals behind the masks. In the bottom panels of the page, the images focus on the dangling, lifeless feet of the four men. The corporality of the image shows the way that Jewish bodies are so easily objectified and desecrated, stripped of their humanity (literally); however, the text below it, Vladek's testimony to his relationship with the men he names, creates a dynamic contrast with the images. Hillary Chute notes how the two bottom panels of the scene, depicting the dangling feet, create "literal footnotes" for the reader: while the gutter of the panel "disarticulates" body parts, the text of the bottom panels reveals specific facts about the hanged, who they were, what they did in life, and how they related to Vladek.[67] In effect, Spiegelman visually enacts both the Nazi rationale of Jewish dehumanization and a subversion of that dehumanization, a visual and textual signal of Jewish individualistic humanity.

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[67] Hillary Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 179.

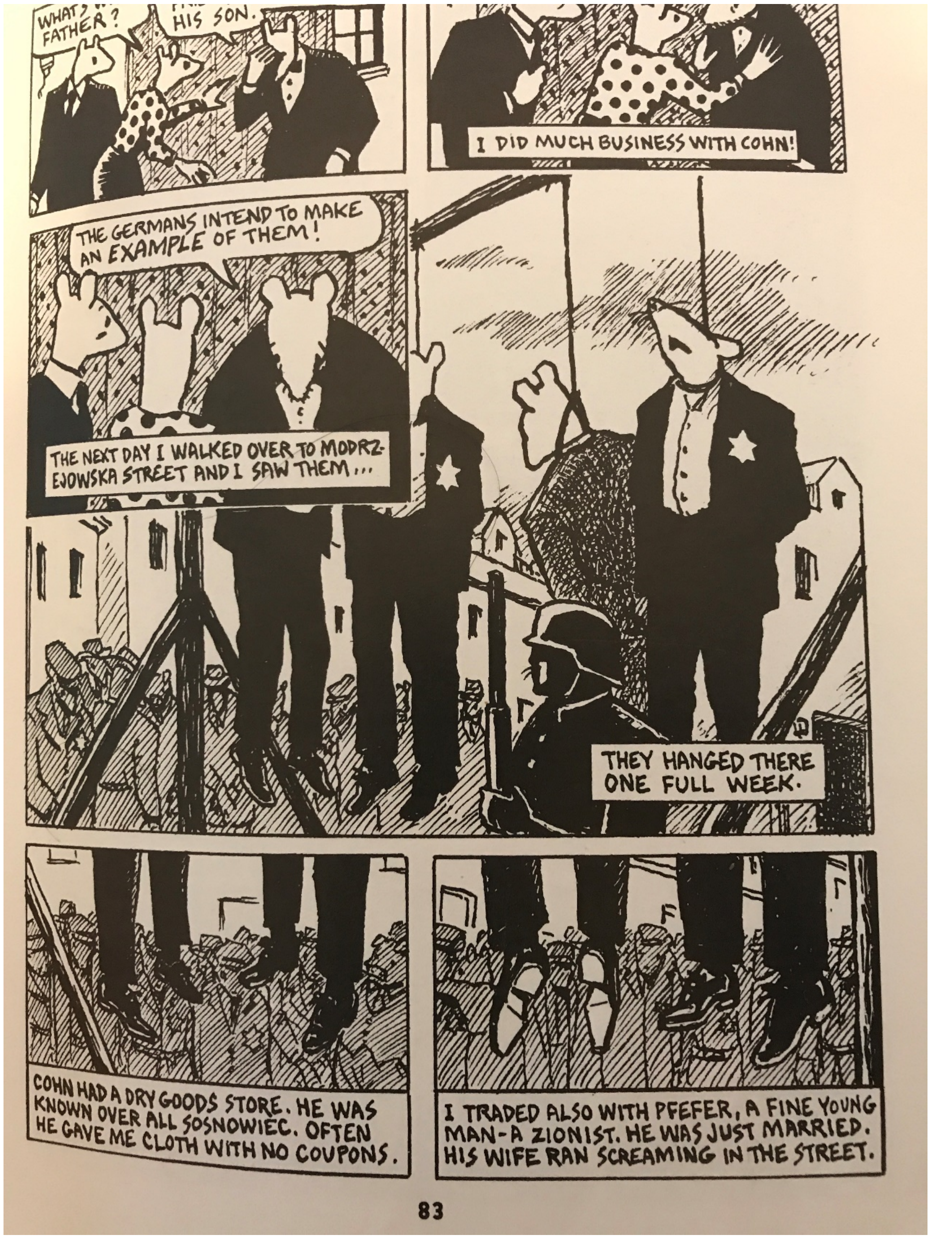
WHAT'S FATHER?
HIS SON.
I DID MUCH BUSINESS WITH COHN!
THE GERMANS INTEND TO MAKE AN EXAMPLE OF THEM!
THE NEXT DAY I WALKED OVER TO MODRZEJOWSKA STREET AND I SAW THEM...
THEY HANGED THERE ONE FULL WEEK.
COHN HAD A DRY GOODS STORE. HE WAS KNOWN OVER ALL SOSNOWIEC. OFTEN HE GAVE ME CLOTH WITH NO COUPONS.
I TRADED ALSO WITH PFEFER, A FINE YOUNG MAN - A ZIONIST. HE WAS JUST MARRIED. HIS WIFE RAN SCREAMING IN THE STREET.
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Figure 11. Panels depicting Anja's family and multiple hanged mice. Art Spiegelman, *Maus I,* 1986.

While the visual iconography of animal masks suggests a racial-based tension between Nazis and mice, and, arguably, mice and other animal races, the narrative portion of the comic—how people act and speak—mediates the interpersonal and intra-ethnic complexity of the Jewish community. This is not only limited to the struggles between father and son, but between Jew and Jew, a tension exacerbated by the atrocious reality of the Holocaust. In fact, the book prompts this discourse by opening with a brief two-page prologue, recounting an anecdote in Art's childhood. When Art cries to his father that his friends had abandoned him, the anecdote culminates with Vladek providing an ominous lesson to his son (figure 12). In the bottom three panels of the page, beginning with a zoom on Vladek and ending with a pulled-out, hovering perspective, Vladek says to Art, "Friends? Your friends? ...If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week…then you could see what it is, friends!"[68] The prologue sets the tone for the harrowing narrative that follows, but it also sets up the important issue of the individual versus the community, be it familial or ethnic. Throughout the work, Vladek repeatedly describes how the suffering at the hands of the Nazi reign caused friends, families, and strangers to turn against each other; at one point, he exclaims, "At that time it **wasn't** anymore families. It was everybody for **himself**!"[69] The ethnicity-derived disaster of the Holocaust, specifically, fractured the bonds of ethnicity and even family, reorganizing the priorities and affinities one holds for granted. While this exclamation is posed as a cautionary tale for young Art to resist over-relying on people for friendship, it also communicates a gulf of experience between Vladek and Art. The young Art is pictured wide-eyed and speechless at Vladek after this, and the final panel shot zooms out, signaling the gravity of this largely insurmountable chasm between father and son. As the opening to the book, this scene undermines the ethnic, communal coherence that the animal masks suggest, setting up this integral conflict between individual and community and between individual and individual.

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[68] *Maus I,* 6.

[69] *Maus I,* 114.

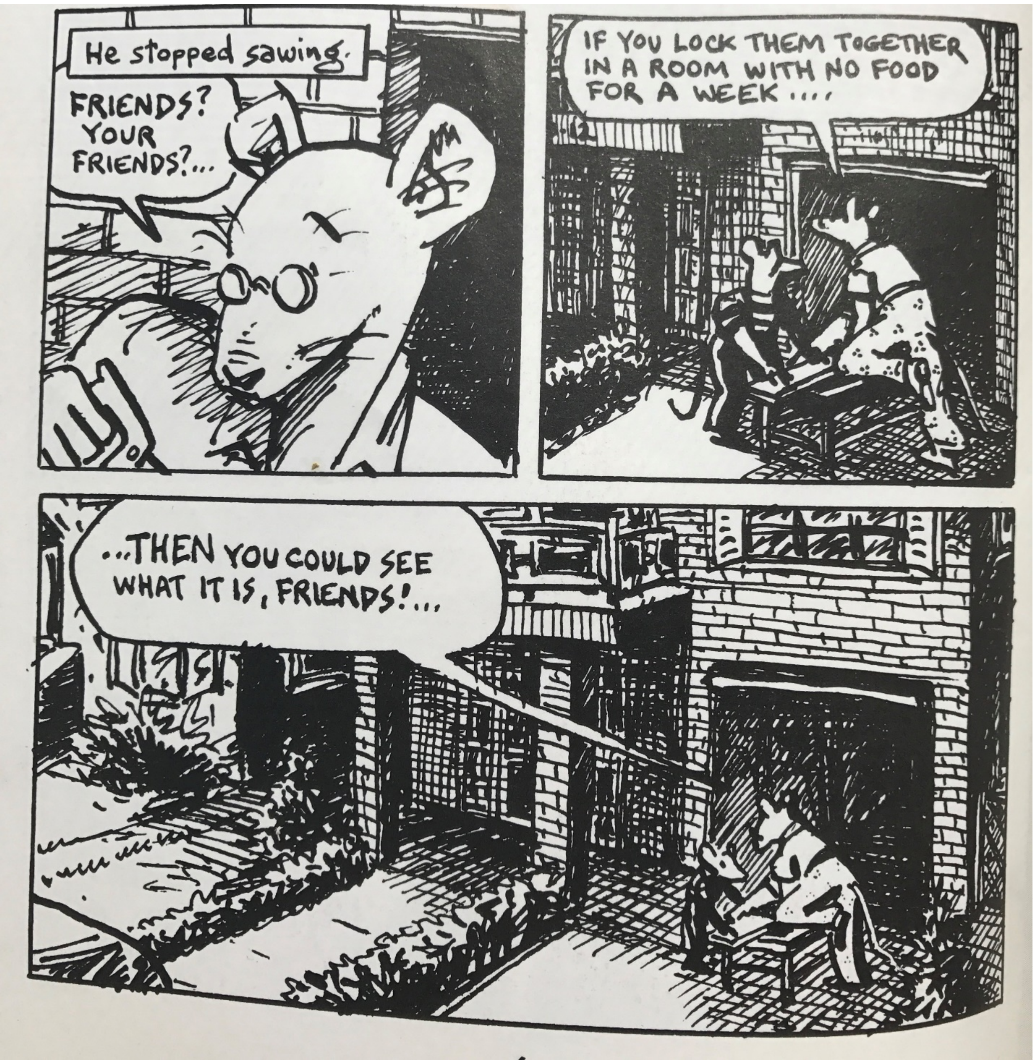
He stopped sawing.
FRIENDS? YOUR FRIENDS?...
IF YOU LOCK THEM TOGETHER IN A ROOM WITH NO FOOD FOR A WEEK....
...THEN YOU COULD SEE WHAT IT IS, FRIENDS!...

Figure 12. Panels depicting Vladek counseling a young Artie. Art Spiegelman, *Maus I,* 1986.

As the narrative delves deeper into the social dissolution of universal and ethnic community that the Holocaust represented, Spiegelman elaborates on the way the Jewish ethnicity is tested, as seen through the eyes of Vladek Spiegelman. While the oppression of Jews from the outside-in by Nazis and other sympathizers, including Polish nationals, is made abundantly clear throughout the book, *Maus* punctuates the narrative with tensions from within the community. In the chapter "Mouse Holes," a fellow ghetto Jew, hoping to sidle up with the gestapo after the dissolution of the ghetto, betrays Vladek's trust and his family's hiding place. A few pages later, Vladek remembers the final outcome of the man who informed on his family; he had been shot dead, arranged by a cousin of Vladek, Haskel, and since Vladek had gotten an odd job as undertaker, he buried him. Evocatively, in the recreation of this scene of poetic justice, Spiegelman has Vladek revealing the informer's strikingly tortured face and saying, "Hey! This is the rat that turned my family over to the gestapo."[70] Both the visual of the dead mouse and the use of "rat" contorts the identity of the betrayer, signaling a kind of severing from the Jewish community. Sandwiched in between these two scenes is an important moment when Art interrupts Vladek's telling of how he bribed his cousin Jakov and Haskel for help after they were captured by the gestapo. Art asks, "Wouldn't they have helped you even if you couldn't pay? II mean, you were from the same family…," to which Vladek retorts, "HAH! You don't understand…At that time it **wasn't** anymore families. It was everybody to take care form **himself**!"[71] While other scenes in *Maus* counter this particular type of intra-ethnic dissolution, showing fellow ethnic community member being helpful and self-sacrificial, the punctuation of the narrative with both of these types of Jewish representation upend the reductive racialization evoked by the animal masks. Particular acts speak to individual desperation, immorality, selfishness, and selflessness as well.

As a character, Vladek is shown by Spiegelman to problematize this subversion of the generalizations made about Jews. In particular, his frugality and conniving resourcefulness ventures into confirming problematic Jewish stereotypes. Many of the chapters open with anecdotal vignettes that show the troubled relationship between Art and Vladek, but also reveal the cranky personality of Vladek, distinct from the Vladek of the past, yet clearly marked by the horrifying experience. Nevertheless, Spiegelman includes, in a scene from the 1970s, Vladek being openly racist towards an African American hitchhiker, who is represented as a black dog. Françoise voices the clear impropriety and hypocrisy of Vladek's hostile racism, yelling, "That's **outrageous**! How can you, of all people, be such a racist! You talk about blacks the way the Nazis talked about the Jews!," to which the indignant Vladek replies, "ACH!..I thought really you are more smart than this, Françoise…It's not even to compare. The shvartsers and the Jews!"[72] Despite the confirmation that this scene gives to terribly reductive stereotypes about ethnic groups, Spiegelman is bound to the authenticity of the complexity of individual human behavior. Vladek is at once a resourceful person whose ingenuity, as scene after scene shows, was instrumental for the survival of him and Anja and, therefore, the birth of Art Spiegelman; on the other hand, the frugality and enclosed sense of identity which blocks him from finding common ground between the experience of Jews in Europe and African Americans in the United States problematizes his character and the *Maus*'s desire to subvert stereotypes. Episodes like this blur the easy lines between victim and oppressor, Jews and Gentiles, person and community, and, also the mentality and experience between father and son.

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[70] *Maus I*, 117.
[71] Ibid., 114.

Art Spiegelman's self-representation, in the important chapter, "Time Flies," from *Maus II* concentrates and unfolds the narrative tension between the self and the ethnic discourse of *Maus*. Set in the period after *Maus I* has been published to widespread acclaim, Spiegelman addresses the viewer and reveals his reactions to his sudden fame, to the death of his father (which occurred between *Maus I* and *II*), and to the seemingly-impossible prospect of continuing such an emotionally, artistically taxing project. It is a poignant moment, which stands apart from the rest of the book. Spiegelman communicates the deep registers of his personal experience and his ethnic identity. As he says in *MetaMaus*,

> I had to put on a mouse head to enter into my father's story. It was only over time that I discovered the implications of that. And I elaborated the image further as the author's 'photo' at the back of many editions of the book. It was my intensive rethinking of how to get back into volume two, into a story that I was trying to evade—that is, how to inhabit the oxymoron of presenting life in a death camp—

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[72] Ibid., 99.

> that made me understand I had to fully acknowledge myself as the author wrestling with making a book. It became useful to indicate that, hey, you know what, there are human faces under these mouse heads, on the analyst's couch, grappling with my father's legacy.[73]

Returning to this chapter's discussion of animal masks, this scene reinscribes the doubling effect that the masks represent. Art visualizes the dynamic between the ethnic visage, between characters as projections of expectations and stereotypes—as avatars of racial codes, in effect—and the individuals inside the masks. However, unlike the other uses of the masks, Spiegelman pictures the characters in this timeframe as wearing literal masks, strung and tied behind their heads. The visual of realistic masks here suggests the interstitiality of Spiegelman's perspective at this moment; for Spiegelman, as a "rootless cosmopolitan," as a Swedish-born immigrant, as a New Yorker, his relationship with his own Jewish identity is visualized as being voluntary. As he can "put on a mouse head" to enter grapple with his "father's legacy," he, ostensibly, understands that he has the power to remove his mouse head in a way that, perhaps, his father could not. Part of the burden of being a survivor's son, in this respect, is whether Spiegelman feels that he should, beyond trying to understand his father. It is a question that is explored in *Maus,* but is not settled here. As the framing of this chapter has shown, it is a process that remains ongoing. The power to question, to remain unsettled, in any case represents a gift and a burden.

To wit, Art Spiegelman explores similar questions in a later text, *In the Shadow of No Towers,* which was written in response to New York's September 11th terrorist attacks. The narrative traces Spiegelman's reactions to the visceral experience of being proximate to the bombings, his daughter attending school near Ground Zero at the time, and, as days and week pass, his reactions to national responses, especially in light of anti-Arabic sentiments being levied by non-New Yorker Americans. The book becomes a derision towards the hawkish administration of President George Bush, who

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[73] *MetaMaus,* 149.

Spiegelman finds to be a radically corrupt opportunist. The experience has Spiegelman contend with his sense of identity once again, this time, not as an ethnic Jew but as an American. The point of contention is whether he can be pro-New York and pro-American, the narrative then creating a pivotal line between those two identities.

Both *Maus* and *In the Shadow of No Towers* serve as battlegrounds for Art Spiegelman's exploration of his complex, multilayered identity. They also point to disparate but conceptually related themes of power dynamics, of oppressors and the oppressed, of those that inflict violence and those that bear the brunt of that violence. In essence, aside from their ethnic or nationalistic nuances that occur within himself, they are very much related by Spiegelman's desire to exhibit universal human conditions to a larger audience. He contemplates about the idea being proffered after the Holocaust, that "After Auschwitz we are all Jews," writing,

> Although I suspect that this was said more to rally sympathy for Jews than as a cry of unity with, say, Soviet Communists, I agree totally. It is a profound statement. The Holocaust ought to have convinced the world that it must embrace the Diaspora Jew—that it must acknowledge, indeed, that it has become the Diaspora Jew.[74]

Whether this has become the lesson for everyone is very much up for debate, especially considering how much Spiegelman feels that other Jews in the world have missed that lesson, in particular, Israelis. In the same interview, he describes the "romantic image of the Jew," which "is not the khaki-shorts Sabra conqueror planting trees in the desert with a rifle on his shoulder," that is, an Israeli Jew, "but the pale, marginal, cosmopolitan, alienated, half-assimilated, international stateless outsider Jew, existentially poised for flight with no place to run, eager for social justice since that might make the world a safer place for him to live, with nothing but his culture to hang on to."[75] This idealized image of a Jew, for Spiegelman, recognizes the complex identitarian mix of the struggle from oppression that is used to form culture but also the unbounded freedom from particular national, ethnic, or cultural stability. It is an ethnic identity that remains fluid, reacting to the political conditions it finds itself in.

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[74] "Looney Tunes," 5.

[75] Ibid.

A testament to the indomitable nature of the fascist concepts that motivated the Holocaust, and a testament to how the need for the subversion of such thinking continues to be gained by the reading and canonization of *Maus* occurred very recently in time, during a second-season episode of *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian show about a totalitarian patriarchal society that subjugates women. In the episode, we see a female character reading an inspirational, illicit text, which a screenshot of the scene reveals to be *Maus*—a cross-identitarian symbol of resistance (figure 13). Not despite its ethnic-specificity but because of it, *Maus* remains a symbol of the fight against fascism, against oppression—whether it be the anti-Semitic oppression that has reignited since the election of President Trump or the disconcerting rise of violence and laws against the protection of women, as seen in the television show and on Capitol Hill.

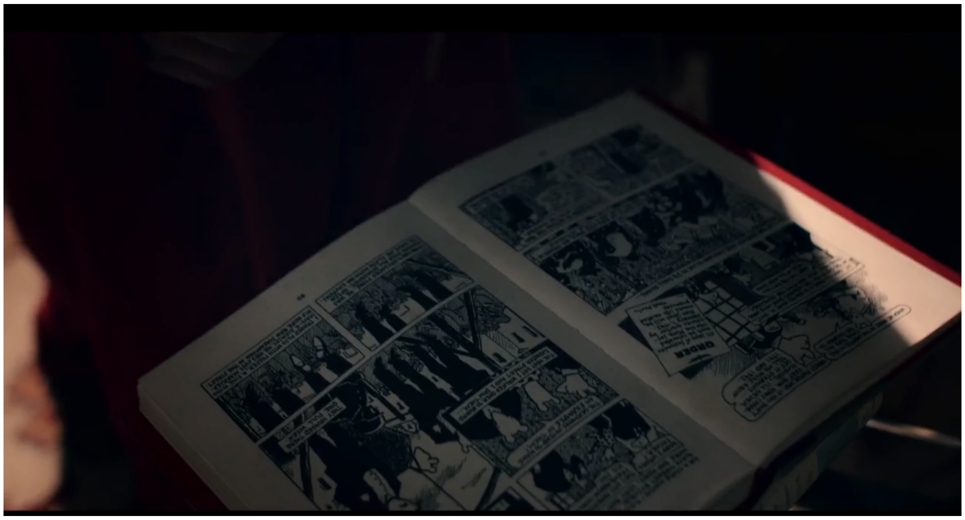

Figure 13. A screenshot of *The Handmaid's Tale* catches a visual reference to *Maus.* From a second-season episode. Photo courtesy of Hillary Chute.

Conclusion

The faithful representation of his father Vladek's Holocaust testimony into a novel art form is certainly a crucial part of *Maus*'s success; however, the way Spiegelman attempts to bridge the gulfs of his own ambivalent emotions and the Holocaust's incomprehensible realities that we see in the narrative—wherein Art Spiegelman the character and Art Spiegelman the cartoonist attempt to make sense, to *envision* the unimaginable, to *tell* the unspeakable, to *reveal* the invisible—are what make *Maus* stand out as a work of art. The graphic narrative depicts not only the painstaking struggles of a son identifying with his Jewish father in the 1970s and the near-impossible-to-imagine horrors of the Holocaust in the 1930s and '40s but also the struggles of an artist trying to transmute and compartmentalize those realities in a comic book.

As familial, psychological, and ethno-historical revelation is paramount to Spiegelman's project, so too is revelation—the ability for viewers to witness in multiple registers—foundational to the medium of comics.[76] In the most apparent sense, this means the visual component of comics that differentiates it from other literary or aesthetic forms. The viewer literally sees images, and these images coordinate on the unit of the page to narrativize, to show the passing of narratological information. As Spiegelman and theorists of comics often underscore, comics is time spatialized, meaning that viewers perceive the developments of the story only through the concerted effort of reading from image to image. As a hybrid of images *and* text, however, the comics form creates meaning in multiple, synchronous registers—the textual, the visual, the combination of the two, and through dialogue.[77] Spiegelman says about *Maus*, "I'm *literally* giving a form to my father's words and narrative…and that form for me has to do with panel size, panel rhythms, and visual structures of the page."[78] The cartoonist Art Spiegelman's literal processing of Vladek's story into comics form is doubly represented in the narrative itself, in the representation of Artie Spiegelman researching, interviewing Vladek, and making the comic. The comics form enables Spiegelman to process and explore his father's story, and also the story of his relationship with his father, all done with an amount of accuracy and attentiveness necessary to faithfully process its multiple temporal and psychic particularities. As Spiegelman explains, comics "are about time being made manifest spatially, in that you've got all these different chunks of time—each box being a different moment in time—and you see them all at once. As a result you're always, in comics, being made aware of different times inhabiting the same space."[79] This ability of comics is made quite literal in the multigenerational story of *Maus,* shifting between not only incremental moments, but from radically different historical moments and geographical locations. Moreover, his father's particularly Jewish story informs the nature of *Maus* and, in general, Spiegelman's style. An elaboration of this occurs in a short comic vignette called "Packing," where Spiegelman tells an anecdote about how his father taught him the importance of packing a suitcase properly. Spiegelman draws himself as a child, disinterested in his father and focused on "learning how to draw Tubby," a comic book character, which exasperates his father, who yells at his son, "It's important to know how to pack! Many times I had to run with only what I can carry! You have to use what little space you have to pack inside everything what you can!"[80] The young Art Spiegelman (transformed into Tubby) turns directly to

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[76] The definition of comics, like many other artistic, formal terms, is a difficult one to cement. They range from "sequential art" to the deliberately overdetermined definition from Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9).

[77] Hybrid is perhaps a problematic term, considering that hybridization entails a synthetic transformation of its original elements. In comics, text and image can work in concert with each

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other, or an author can privilege one over the other, and, occasionally, they can be used against each other.

[78] Hillary Chute, "'The Shadow of a Past Time': History and Graphic Representation in *Maus,*" *Twentieth-Century Literature* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2006), 200.

[79] Ibid., 201-202.

[80] Art Spiegelman, "Packing," *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008).

the reader and exclaims, “This was the best advice I’ve ever gotten as a cartoonist!” The unspoken specter that looms over the scene is the traumatic memory of the Holocaust, the ethnic-specific experience that taught Vladek the importance of efficient escaping. This memory is communicated quite effectively visually when Vladek smacks the comic book out of young Art’s hands, revealing the small blank ink of his concentration camp number tattoo. In this work, a lesson about the medium of comics is causally linked to traumatic Jewish history and its own lessons, so that, despite Spiegelman’s ambivalence towards Jewish subject matter this chapter explored earlier, Spiegelman’s understanding of the aesthetics of comics is bound to Jewishness. In other words, despite the bespoken wish to disavow particular aspects of Jewish culture, especially its insurmountable focus on the Holocaust as the central marker of identity, his own passion for comics, both formally and historically, cannot be extricated from its Jewishness. As he learned about in the making of *Maus,* it is important to the authenticity of the artwork that he engage with the Jewishness of his father and mother’s experiences and, as this chapter has aimed to prove, the Jewishness of his own.

CHAPTER THREE

Chicanx World-Making in Oscar Z. Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* and the Hernandez Brothers' *Love and Rockets*

Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973) has long been recognized as a formative underground history of the Chicano Movement during the late-1960s.[1] Scholars have fixated on the novel's caustic tone and its boorish, self-mythologizing narrator, Buffalo Z. Brown, in an effort to explore the text's subversive representation of ethnic revolution.[2] Categorizable as autobiography, ethnography, historical fiction, and gonzo journalism, (and not fitting cleanly in any of these categories), the novel is, overall, a rich source for thinking about the representation of ethnicity in postwar American literature. Scholarship, however, has largely overlooked the novel's other generic innovation: the extensive *graphicity* that Acosta utilizes to make his marginalized community—his barrio—present and visible to a wider American readership. Graphicity, as I define it, is a metric of visuality and visual practices that can be discerned in works of literature, from the figurative (visual metaphor, imagery, discourse of visibility) to the literal (use of comics, sketches, photographs, iconography, or text as a form of image). While all literature is arguably imbued with graphicity, the texts that I am interested in, here in this chapter and more broadly in my dissertation, incorporate *racial graphicity* into their textual exploration of race and ethnicity in American culture. They visualize the figure, or image, of specific races and contend with what those images mean to them and to their ethnic communities.

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[1] In his recent study of the cultural formation of Chicanx identity during Chicano Movement, Randy J. Ontiveros cites Acosta's novels as crucial literary representations that "helped preserve public memory" of the movement; he writes, "The singular lyricism of these books makes them useful touchstones for thinking about the many dimensions of the Chicano movement." *In the Spirit of a New People: The Cultural Politics of the Chicano Movement* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2014), footnote 75, 201.

Adding another layer of complication, *The Revolt* remains a highly polemical staple (and refuse) of Chicanx literature canon due to its brazen display of chauvinist and homophobic machismo and its flippant celebration of drugs, violence, and sexual exploitation. For more on the novel's controversial nature, see Paul Guajardo, *Chicano Controversy: Oscar Acosta and Richard Rodriguez*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

[2] Though *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* is arguably best understood as a roman à clef told in the first person, most if not all of the characters refer to Acosta's literary counterpart as Brown or Z. or Buffalo or a combination of those names. In this essay, I will hereafter use Acosta to refer to the author and Brown to refer to the novel's narrator-figure.

In *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, Acosta uses graphicity—specifically, visual language, visual culture references, and illustrations—to shine light on the spectacles endemic to revolutionary Chicanx politics.[3] The reader not only reads about the Chicano Movement of the 1960s, they witness it through the vivid mediation of Brown's documentarian-like sight. More precisely, readers see the Chicanx experience in the novel's attention to what I call *communal spectacle,* which appears in the form of school walkouts ("blow outs"), political rallies and marches, courtroom melodrama, wild parties, and even a police autopsy that reads more like performance art. The term spectacle alerts us both to the formal nature of the text—how it expects us to "spectate" or look—and it also recognizes Acosta's interest in the way that the Chicano Movement manifests itself through "spectaculum," or public show. Spectacle informs the way that we textually perceive the Chicanx experience at this import historical juncture and the way that this revolutionary moment locates itself within the parameters of the Chicanx barrio.

With these questions regarding the properties and borders of text, image, and the themes of Chicanx representation in mind, this chapter also contends that *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* shares a very strong and unrecognized bond with a comics series that would first appear eight years later: Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* (1981).[4] Like Acosta's book, *Love and Rockets* is nearly exclusively devoted to the graphic and narratological exploration of Latinx spaces—barrios and pueblos—and the ethnic community that occupies them. The decades-spanning series has long been celebrated for its masterful world-making and its fleshed-out, diverse cast of characters, most of whom embody marginalized ethnic and cultural identities, including but not limited to indigenous people ("indios"); gang members ("cholos"); and punk-rock lesbians. By world-making, I speak specifically of two fictional worlds, Gilbert Hernandez's Latin American village, Palomar, and Jaime's HOPPERS 13, a Los Angeles suburb also known as Barrio Huerta. Stories set in these barrios deal with the interpersonal conflicts and friendships that typify working-class communities, but the Hernandezes' ability to tell these quotidian stories with such a fleshy and intricate Chicanx realism—resulting from an extensive and acute attention to culture, language, and visual representation—has rightfully made it a groundbreaking American comic and work of ethnic literature.

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[3] I toggle between identifying terms for Latinx groups throughout the chapter as I see appropriate. "Latinx(s)" denotes people from or descendants of people from Latin America, and Chicanx(s) denotes more specifically U.S.-born people of Mexican descent. However, I maintain the gender specificity of proper nouns or historical terms found in the novel or when I am directly citing the text, for instance, "Chicano Moratorium" (a historical event) and "Chicano Militants" (a Chicanx rights group from that period).

One of the common aims observable in both *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* and *Love and Rockets* is the desire to disrupt the social and literary marginalization afflicting the Chicanx community. As such, these separate visual projects share the political exigency undergirding the Chicano Movement: to upend the ironic social invisibility of a community that was (and remains) extremely visible, geographically established, and prone to public spectacle and expression, especially by its, if not revolutionary, certainly flamboyantly exhibitionist youths. An overview of Chicanx literature that preceded Chicano Movement literature touches on this irony and the impetus for literary intervention: "[Chicanos] have…been called 'the invisible minority,' 'the forgotten people,' or 'the silent minority' and have largely been regarded as 'strangers in their own land.' It is no surprise that the literary records of these people have been obscured, silenced or forgotten."[5] These two texts offer innovative literary exposure through which to see (and not only imagine) spatial and identitarian formations of Chicanx community. However, a crucial difference in temporality sets *The Revolt* in the political hotbed of the Chicano Movement, while "Locas" is set in a post-Movement period of Chicanx politics. While the representation of postwar ethnic activism that typified the late 1960s and early 1970s greatly contrasts the deceptive peace of the early Reagan years, my analysis of the two texts reveals a comparable visual ethnographic study of Chicanx communities in flux.

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[4] The series also benefits from the occasional contributions of a third Hernandez brother, Mario.

Both works stress the importance of Chicanx barrios in the formation and maintenance of Chicanx identity in the U.S. They also crucially demonstrate the aesthetic and political capabilities of their respective literary forms—the novel and comics, respectively—to graphically envision, presence, and deconstruct ethnic community-worlds.[6] Barrios are material forms of demarcating ethnicity in terms of race and communities. They are boundaries that reinforce an ethnic group's specificity, or identity, and also their psychic and geographic marginalization from hegemonic orders of society. What is consistent in these texts is the way that spaces marked as ethnic, here, "barrios," are constructed as systems of identity. They are configured as having their own identity—a spirit or personality that often stands in contradistinction to surrounding localities—and have the power to cultivate and reinforce the identities, especially ethnically, of its people. For example, Jaime's Barrio Huerta and Acosta's neighborhood Tooner Flats function as democratic and self-enclosed spaces, each one harboring a networked multiplicity of Chicanx character types. To this end, the

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[5] Annie O. Esturoy and José Antonio Gurpegui, "Chicano Literature: Introduction and Bibliography." *American Studies International*, Vol 28, No. 1 (April 1990), pp. 48-82.

[6] I think of community as an ethno-sociological term that refers to both locality and culture-sharing people, and I understand this linkage as an inextricable one. World-making as it's used in discussions of literature (especially science-fiction and other genre fiction), works as a term in the same way; therefore, in linking the sociological and the literary, I use "world" and "community" interchangeably throughout the paper.

Hernandezes and Acosta employ what I call "graphic worldmaking." That is, they use graphicity to visualize and make present Chicanx communities, more specifically Los Angeles's Chicanx barrios, in forms that their given media allow. This graphic worldmaking entails a focus on rendering space, delineating the literal borders and ethnographic markers that define the Chicanx communities. These visualized communal spaces are populated by a mix of groups and a stable of main characters, and the representation of intricate networking of said groups and characters are developed over time.

In line with this location specificity, my analysis will focus on the graphic representations of Los Angeles-based Chicanx barrios in Acosta's novel and, with regard to the *Love and Rockets* series, I will focus on Jaime's "Locas" storyline, which is set primarily in a suburban barrio of Los Angeles, loosely based on the Hernandez's hometown of Oxnard, California. While, on one hand, Acosta and Hernandez choosing Los Angeles as setting is likely motivated by their personal autobiographies, it is arguable that, as the paragon of postmodernity, Los Angeles suits the texts' interest in complex Mexican and Chicanx cultural history, tensely overlapping ethnic and subcultural relations, and a near constant sense of political instability.[7]

In both texts, the representation of ethnic community is complicated by the representation of the community member. While the texts democratize the literary representation of Chicanx people through their focus on visualizing communities, they also accentuate the unstable relationship between individual figures and community within these barrio-worlds, scrutinizing the essentialism of ethnic identity. Further underscoring the similar projects between Acosta and Jaime Hernandez's texts, each text exhibits decentralized, multifocal perspectives of communities and, within those communities, strange or radical characters. Identified and identifying as Chicanx, these radical characters disrupt orthodox definitions of Chicanx identity, reflecting the instability of the markers of identity and community, especially during volatile historical moments. In *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, Buffalo Brown makes important distinctions between different community sets—not only between Chicanxs and non-Chicanxs, but within the Chicanx community. In the novel, Brown, reflecting his uneasy relationship with his ethnic identity, prefers to associate with Chicano Militants, "vatos locos" (gang members)*,* and like-minded social outcasts among an already marginalized Chicanx community. After discussing the construction of community through the novel's graphicity, this chapter reveals how Acosta pushes back on essentialist notions of Chicanx identity, or ethnic identity for that matter. Through its incorporation of illustrations of cockroaches at the margins and negative space of its pages, *The Revolt*, I argue, amplifies and complicates the reader's reception of ethnic community spectacle, mirroring the inherent complexities Acosta reads into Chicanx identity. Formally, this graphically-charged project tests its medial limitations as a text-based novel, underscoring the author's aesthetic and political desire to make the invisible Chicanx community visible.

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[7] Edward Soja discusses the postmodern spatial theory of Los Angeles extensively in *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

In his HOPPERS 13 world*,* Jaime Hernandez focuses his attention on subcultures like cholos and punk rockers, yet, through the pursuance of emotional exposure in its characters, reveals a general property of strangeness in nearly everyone, regardless of their subcultural ties.[8] Nevertheless, Hernandez's barrio-world thrives on exposing unexpected people and sights/sites endemic to ethnic strangeness, such as punk clubs, *lucha libre* fights, house parties, and haunted houses. Through the merging of established techniques of the comics form and groundbreaking innovations of said-form, Jaime Hernandez synthesizes a world that is deeply invested in grouping, culturing, and identity, unfolding in multilayered ways, as I will show. These texts push this democratic and diffused Chicanx representation to its limits by committing readers to witness strangeness—otherness, alterity, subculture—in their approach to locating the contours of ethnic community and identity within Los Angeles barrios.

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[8] I can find only one other article that makes mention of both *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* and *Love and Rockets,* albeit briefly*;* it examines the figure of the "vato loco" as a complex but redeemable character. James Smethurt, "The Figure of the Vato Loco and the Representation of Ethnicity in the Narratives of Oscar Z. Acosta," *MELUS* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1995), https://www.jstor.org/stable/467626.

An important final consideration girding this chapter is the media-specificity of the two texts, and how both authors exploit and experiment with their given media. While my comparative analysis of a text-based novel and a comics series may suggest a strict differentiation between forms, my interrogation of how graphicity is employed suggests an important blurring that reconsiders the literariness of the comic book series and the comic-ness of the novel. In doing so, I hold up Acosta's under-appreciated second novel, *The Revolt*, as the formally and thematically experimental proto-comic that it is, and conversely, providing more literary treatment to *Love and Rockets*, which continues to be academically underexamined largely due to its imposing size and span, its penchant for experimentation, generic pastiche, as well as its boastful indifference to narratological consistency. Ultimately, to think of these two texts side-by-side burdens the Chicanx Literature canon to rethink itself in light of thematic, formal, and political through-lines.

Envisioning Space, Spectacle, and Chicanx Identity

Before examining the ways that Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* envisions community through the graphic spectacles of place and people, it is important to consider the role that Los Angeles plays as setting. The novel tells the story of Buffalo Zeta Brown, a reluctant activist torn between selfish (literary and sexual) aspirations and a call to participate in a localized movement for the Chicano community of Los Angeles and, more broadly, for the "cockroaches" of the world. While scholarship has established this reading already, much less has been said about how the novel is framed geographically. Acosta makes it clear that Brown is drawn to the movement largely because of his move from northern California to Los Angeles. The opening of the novel's second chapter, which flashes back to how Brown first gets involved with the Chicano Movement, establishes a crucial dichotomy in Brown's mentality before arriving in Los Angeles and after:

> When I first arrived in Los Angeles in January, '68, I had no intention of practicing law or pitting myself against anything. I was only anxious to find 'THE STORY' and write 'THE BOOK' so that I could split to the lands of peace and quiet where people played volleyball, sucked smoke and chased after cool blondes.[9]

Los Angeles is at first a means to hedonistic, self-serving ends; however, through exposure to the Chicano Movement rhetoric, Brown rapidly begins the process of becoming communally and ethnically initiated, very much to his surprise and vexation. After debating his cousin Manuel on the merits of Chicanx activism, Brown expresses to himself, "My own arguments to Manuel have impressed me. If I didn't give a shit, why was I bothering to argue? My first few hours in Los Angeles seem to point me in a certain direction."[10] Brown credits Los Angeles as the trigger that produces a crucial existential shift in his character, from selfishness to, if not selflessness, at least communal engagement and ethnic camaraderie. In the same scene, Brown ponders intensely over this transformation: "Politically I believe in absolutely nothing. I wouldn't lift a finger to fight anyone…I have never really thought about hostility and groups. Now as I lie in the creaky bed, I begin to realize that a bit of my life is catching up with me," the bit of life referencing his ethnoracial roots.[11] Despite not being from Los Angeles himself, Brown sees in Los Angeles a community that reflects the burdens of ethnicity, of Chicanoness, that he is compelled to stand up for in "hostile," revolutionary ways.

For Brown, Los Angeles is a space that provides the familiarity of Mexican-American culture, yet is dynamic and different enough (from himself) in its political temperament, demographics, and as a crucial hub for the growing Chicano Movement to warrant literary and political exploration. He clarifies as much when he describes the difference between "city Chicanos" and "country Chicanos." City Chicanos "have a misconception of gringos that we farmworkers could never have. They don't quite realize they have an enemy while, in the country, the Chicano knows from birth he is a lowdown cockroach."[12] This distinction, marked by what can either be interpreted as the city Chicano's lack of self-awareness or their willingness to question social power dynamics, both attracts and repels Brown. Acosta presents Brown as a character simultaneously belonging to the Los Angeles Chicanx community and apart from it, a condition that parallels his troubled balance of roles within the community—one as activist in the Chicano Movement and the other as a gonzo journalist, someone bent on finding "THE STORY" and the consequent prestige.[13] The novel shows Brown toggling between these positions of identification, never truly settling on a clear choice. Whether he is motivated by a call to chronicle the revolutionary cause from the inside (as activist) or from the outside (as journalist) remains unsettled; however, what is consistent in Acosta's representation is that Brown is an invested witness to this strange yet alluring world.

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[9] Oscar Zeta Acosta, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 22.

[10] Ibid, 28.

[11] Ibid, 28-29.

In his mode of gonzo journalism, which is a subgenre of journalism that, through caustic wit and self-parody, scrutinizes the subjective and questionable perspective of the journalist as much as the events it attempts to document,[14] Acosta takes great pains to graphically and relentlessly document Los Angeles, albeit represented at first as a disgusting netherworld full of repulsive people, as one sees in his first impression:

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[12] Ibid, 67.

[13] Tellingly, Brown's first instinct after participating in the St Basil protest, which Acosta graphically describes in chapter one, is to call his journalism contact Stonewall, the fictional name for Acosta's real-life colleague, Hunter S. Thompson. Despite the display of earnest leadership, Brown reverts in this moment to his self-serving mentality, saying to Stonewall, "I've got us a big [story]" (20). However, an important distinction between the two characters is made at this moment when Stonewall chastises Brown for participating in the riot; Thompson is foremost a journalist, while Brown cannot distinguish himself between his roles as community and as a journalist.

[14] Gonzo journalism has been largely attributed to Oscar Zeta Acosta's friend, colleague, and occasional-nemesis Hunter S. Thompson, who was featured in my chapter on whiteness. However, recent scholarship has questioned this attribution of origin of the genre, citing intervention by Thompson, publishers, and scholars to de-emphasize Acosta's contribution. See Alison Fagan for

> After checking into the Belmont at Third and Hill, I walked the streets until dark to shake the cramping bus ride from my bones. But already my bones have told me that I have come to the most detestable city on earth. They have carried me through the filthy air of a broken city filled with battered losers. Winos in tennies, skinny fags in tight pants and whores in purple skirts all ignore the world beyond the local bar, care about nothing except where the booze comes cheapest or the latest score on the radio. Where I am, the buildings are crumbling to pieces. The paint is cracked and falling to the streets covered with green and brown phlegm, with eyeless souls who scuttle between tall buildings hoping to find a bed, a bottle, a joint, a broad or even a loaf of bread. Streets filled with dark people, hunchbacked hobos, bums out of work, garbage of yesterday and tomorrow; with black men and women in bright garish clothes, brown men with mustaches to boost themselves up a notch, coffee-drinking people, wine-sipping sods who haven't had more than five bucks at a time since the last war.[15]

In this anthropological-like first encounter, Acosta provides a visual ethnographic account of Los Angeles that paints it as a spectacle of alterity ("losers," "winos," "skinny fags," "whores"), and of ethnic otherness ("dark people, "black men and women, "brown men"). The scene teems with graphicity, constructing a near-supernatural world to enfold the reader. Acosta uses specific street names and then spatial descriptions (street, bars, building, rooms) in order to form a three-dimensional image that stands in opposition to his comfort, his hedonistic desires, and ostensibly to the reader's relatively less "detestable" world. However, as Acosta's description presents the environment as repulsively welcoming of vermin and pests like cockroaches ("eyeless souls who scuttle"), one detects in the same scene a subliminal tone of attraction for this new world.

The reader sees Brown's initiation into this seedy world as Brown lies in his Los Angeles hotel bed:

> All of a sudden I feel a tingle on my right thigh…Tense and gritting my teeth, I shut my eyes hard waiting for the beast to move again. It is about three inches from my

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more on this interesting genealogy: "'La via es el honor y el recuerdo': Oscar Zeta Acosta's Paratextual Struggle for Survival," *College Literature* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2016).

[15] Ibid., 22-23.

> balls, but either my sex doesn't appeal to him or he just isn't hungry. The next thing I know it has crawled over my bulging muscular ass and disappeared into the bed and the night.[16]

Registering this oddly-sexually-charged act as a cockroach's, Brown begins to sing "La cucaracha," an "old [Mexican] revolutionary song," which puts him to sleep.[17] The act of sleeping with cockroaches simulates a metaphorical consummation, one that signifies Brown's descending path towards community integration. There he finds camaraderie amongst like-natured marginalized and undesirable community members symbolized by the cockroaches. While the initiation scene exudes a high level of graphic repulsion, it also ambivalently presents a humorous sense of attraction, a troubling and often-confusing double-speak that typifies Acosta's gonzo mode of graphicity. In Brown, Acosta forms a simultaneous perspective of Los Angeles as a space of ethno-communal familiarity and defamiliarity, which underscores the novel's view of ethnicity as an ongoing, unfixed process. This graphic moment metaphorically triangulates space (Los Angeles), strangeness (cockroach), and ethnicity (Chicanx), which propels the rest of the novel's interest in exploring and projecting the spectacle of Chicanx community and identity.

The novel further cements the importance of proximity for the themes of community and ethnic self-identification in moments marked by geographical absence or departure. At the most climactic moment of the novel, Brown is seemingly absent from the revolutionary action, as he indulges in his vices in Mexico. He misses the Chicano Moratorium, perhaps the most important event of the Chicano Movement, when a peaceful anti-Vietnam march through the streets of Los Angeles turned into a violent, deadly clash between protestors and the police. However, the novel tellingly departs from known historical facts: in reality, Oscar Acosta was present during the Moratorium. He chooses to represent his literary counterpart Brown leaving Los Angeles for self-serving purposes, in effect betraying the cause and its members.[18] Choosing narratological integrity over fact, Acosta underscores how communal intimacy necessitates being physically present in Los Angeles and active in the revolution. As a final point that closes off the outer framing of the narrative proper, the novel ends when Acosta, too exhausted by the demands of cockroach activism, decides to leave Los Angeles and write, presumably, this novel. Brown at first frames this as a partially selfless act, even pointing to the fact that the death of Zanzibar, an important Chicanx journalist killed by the cops during the Moratorium,[19] leaves open the role for a literary voice to "get us back our land"[20]; however, Acosta unsettles this selfless take when Brown explains that the community perceives his choice to leave and write as a selfish betrayal of the community, "The book offer has made me enemies. That I would think to make money off the struggle for freedom of the Cockroaches has made some people whisper traitor, *vendido, tío taco,* uncle tom (sic) and a capitalist pig to boot."[21] In typical fashion of the novel, Acosta paints Brown as a convoluted and unsettled character, whose semblance of transformation as community activist is ultimately read as questionable and provisional. The ending clarifies this dichotomous choice between community and the self, when on the last page he explains his need to leave: "Hell, when I split the Chicanos, like I told Gilbert: 'I'm going to write my memoirs before I go totally crazy. Or totally underground.'"[22]

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[16] Ibid., 23.
[17] Ibid., 23.

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[18] John Alba Cutler, *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature,* (Oxford Univ Press, 2015), 189. This "fictionalization" that Acosta injects into his historicization of a crucial event in Chicanx history, Cutler argues, links to "Brown's anxiety about authenticity, suggesting that authenticity is constituted through performance rather than inhering to an essential identity" (191). Performance necessitates being there spatially, which, because Brown is not, throws his character's authentic ownership of ethnic identity into question.

[19] This is a reference to the real-life death of Chicanx journalist and activist Ruben Salazar ("Zanzibar"), killed when a tear-gas projectile was shot into a bar by a sheriff's deputy. No criminal charges were filed, despite community outrage and rampant theories about Salazar's death being intentional.

[20] *The Revolt*, 230.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., 258. I read the use of "underground" in multiple, conflicting ways. The most salient meaning relates to Brown's need to distance himself from the direct engagement demanded by community

Preserving himself from death or madness, Brown cuts himself off from the demands of community and chooses to leave "for the bright lights and white women of San Francisco," a line that literally points to a severing of Chicanx unity in favor of white fetishism and the self-gratification that embodies. Thus, the project of ethnic engagement and communal materialization is framed at the two ends of the novel as dependent on being proximate to the barrio of Tooner Flats, and more generally Los Angeles.

Within this marked Chicanx space of Los Angeles, Acosta renders community through a continuous string of moments of graphic spectacle, a term I use in reference to the novel's visual-literary form *graphicity*. Acosta forms his narrative around visualizing spectacles of community exhibitionism: marches, walkouts, courtroom scenes, a celebrity-filled rally, and violent explosions of pipe bombs. What is literally *embodied* in these graphic representational moments is a united contingent—Chicanx community members—squaring off against oppositional forces in the name of ethnic nationalist uplift. Formally, Acosta utilizes graphic language to materialize these spectacles in literary modes, emphasizing the sensorial experience of righteous, youthful militant activism and ethnic solidarity. Despite the centrality of Brown's narratological perspective, which filters these spectacles, Acosta's language shines light on the unruly, amorphous flow of community. In fact, the very first lines of the novel centralize the militant Chicanx community during the St. Basil protest: "It is Christmas Eve in the year of Huitzilopochtli, 1969. Three hundred Chicanos have gathered in front of St. Basil's Roman Catholic Church. Three hundred brown-eyed children of the sun have

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action; however, I can also read this as a play on being six-feet underground, as in dead. Considering that Acosta would disappear (and be presumed dead) only a few years after the publishing of the novel, this is rather prescient, or a show of self-awareness concerning the endgame of his reckless behavior. Finally, supporting the cyclical frame of the narrative—one that opens and closes on Brown's ethnically-averse individuality—perhaps Acosta is alluding to the denouement of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, drawing a parallel between Brown and its narrator, driven underground to only reemerge once he is ready to deal with the prejudices of American society.

come to drive the money-changers out of the richest temple in Los Angeles."[23] Brown merges the two sides of community—people and place—when he writes, "the personalized checkbooks now sit on the pews of St. Basil's under siege by a gang of cockroaches from east of the Los Angeles River, from a 'Mexican-American' barrio there called Tooner Flats,"[24] and he repeatedly calls attention to visions of the unified Chicanx community, using graphic language that alerts the reader's sight, "Through the glass we see the Cockroaches outside: faces in a sea of molasses. Teeth and bright colored clothes. The Chicanos are a beautiful people. Brown soft skin, purple lips and zoftig chests."[25] Brown seemingly takes descriptive language usually used to sexually objectify (Chicana) women and uses it to describe the entire people, a move that heightens the sense of ethnic unity on display, all while alerting the reader to Brown's brimming self-interests, in particular, sexual interests, which, as I have argued, are never truly out of the picture.

While not all the scenes of the novel concern these punctuated community spectacles, even moments that focus on particular individuals refer back to Brown's devotion to the aesthetic spectacality of Chicanx culture. Brown's self-indulgent interests and his interest in Chicanx community are bound sexually and psychologically, as he understands, ultimately, that his past troubles surrounding relationships with Mexican women is largely tied to his uneasiness with his Chicanx identity, and vice versa. At one point he recounts how, in his earliest act of resistance, he had organized a protest against a transparently racist administrative decision to separate white girls from Mexican boys at the school graduation, a decision that Brown personally took hard since he was set to march with his white crush; however, Brown's protest prompted a backlash against the Mexican girls, who felt that they were being rejected by Mexican men like Brown. Acosta writes,

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[23] *The Revolt*, 11.
[24] Ibid., 12.
[25] *The Revolt*, 14.

> The Mexican girls never spoke to me again…they never forgave me my rejection. I learned how to French kiss when Madeline, a little Dutch girl, stuck her tongue down my throat….My first and last trueloves were both pig-tailed belles, and the pattern stuck with me. So what is it? ...Am I ashamed of my race?[26]

Brown makes it clear that his disillusionment with Chicanx culture is tied to this mutually exclusive choice between self-gratifying individualism and ethnic camaraderie, one which Brown tries to resolve throughout the novel. When Brown divulges an exaggeratedly graphic description of the figural appearances of the Chicanas that populate the novel, including his own sister ("Now she is twenty-five and filled out"),[27] the suggestion is that his sexual gratification and his fulfillment as a Chicanx community leader is one and the same. Brown understands aesthetic appreciation—of all Chicanxs and of particular women—as tantamount to an appreciation or allegiance to Chicanx culture.

Along with positive forms of community exhibitionism like parades and marches, spectacle often takes the form of violence in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*. We see an important spectacle of anti-Chicanx violence, and a crucial example of graphicity at play, during the autopsy of Robert Fernandez. Brown investigates the questionable death of the local Chicano and vato loco, Fernandez, at the hands of the Los Angeles police, which spurns a call for a widely-publicized and closely-watched autopsy that Brown oversees. Acosta frames the autopsy as a graphic, mediated spectacle for the reader, as he preempts the scene by saying, "The week after McIntyre got the ax, I first encountered death as a world of art"[28]; he also describes the supervising doctor Naguchi as "better than [Hollywood director] Cecil B. DeMille" in his ostentatious production.[29] Acosta turns the spotlight onto the artifice of politics, specifically, the aesthetic layer of politics that promotes spectacle as a viable method of social intervention. Acosta craftily alerts the reader to the scene's intensely visual mode, asking himself, and, in effect, the reader to "look at it!" and "open your eyes" and "don't turn away from it, goddamnit!"[30] The image constructed in the morgue is characterized as both arresting and repulsive to Brown, "I cannot look away from the dead cunts, the frizzled balls, the lumps of tit, the fat asses of white meat."[31] As "the meat," or the organs, are exhumed from Fernandez's open body, Brown comments, "There is no blood, no gory scene. All is cold and dry."[32] The scene is both clinical and surreal in its description, and, as the scene progresses, it becomes clear that this objectification of a dead person's remains is meant to point to the fantastical abstraction, or dehumanization, of the dead Chicano.

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[26] *The Revolt*, 31.
[27] Ibid., 24.
[28] Ibid., 89.
[29] *The Revolt*, 98.

Unlike the celebratory undertone of the protests or battle scenes, this spectacle registers as a tragic materialization of the way that brown bodies are deemed disposable and unworthy of social justice. Before the autopsy begins, Brown devotes much graphicity to describing the humanity of Fernandez, his very local upbringing and the literal marks (tattoos and graffiti) that that ethnographic history incurred.[33] Acosta connects Fernandez's murder (police dubiously claim he

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[30] Ibid., 99.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., 100.

[33] The following excerpt devotes an extended view of Robert Fernandez's life, tracing the researched ethnographic experience of Fernandez but also similar vato locos of the Tooner Flats area, the neighborhood of particular focus in this chapter. I reproduce it here so as to show the importance that Acosta places on exposing the reader to community (people and place), a view that counterbalances the dehumanization of the autopsy scene:

> "Robert was seventeen when the weight of his hundred and eighty pounds snapped the bones and nerves of his fat brown neck. He, too, lived in Tooner Flats, a neighborhood of shacks and clotheslines and dirty back yard. At every other corner, street lights hang high on telephone poles and cast dim yellow glows. Skinny dogs and wormy cats sniff garbage cans in the alleys. Tooner Flats is the area of gangs who spend their last dime on short dogs of T-Bird wine, where the average kid has eight years of school. Everybody there gets some kind of welfare."
>
> "You learn about life from the toughest guy in the neighborhood. You smoke your first joint in an alley at the age of ten; you take your first hit of *carga* before you get laid; and you learn how to make your mark on the wall before you

killed himself under their custody) to a generic communal conflict between vatos and the police, in effect, mythologizing the struggle as between opposing tribes with conflicting claims over land, "The *vato loco* has been fighting with the pig since the Anglos stole his land in the last century. He will continue to fight until he is exterminated."[34] However, the autopsy spectacle divorces the human pathos from the aesthetics, or "world of art," of death. The scene registers as a Kafkaesque transformation of Fernandez's body from one of a human—"I see the tattoo on his right arm… God Almighty! A red heart with blue arrows of love and the word 'Mother.'…A regular vato loco. A real pachuco, ese"[35]—to one that mimics the dissection of something other than human, an insect, a connection which Acosta makes explicit when he declares that the body is no longer Robert and that he is "just another expendable Cockroach."[36] Ultimately, the autopsy scene problematizes the ethics of public, violent spectacle; Brown laments the human sacrifice that is made through the mutilation of Robert Fernandez's Chicanx body in order to bring wider public attention to rampant injustice towards Chicanxs by police and American society in general.

This moral decision is placed squarely in the hands of Brown as he is literally asked to "direct" the production of the autopsy, "They want *me,* a Chicano lawyer, to tell them where to begin. They want *me* to direct them. It is too fantastic to take seriously,"[37] which he clumsily and

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> learn how to write. Your friends how you to be a *vato loco*, a crazy guy, and they call you '*ese*,' or '*vato*,' or 'man.' And when you prove you can take it, that you don't cop to nothing even if it means getting your ass whipped by some other hang or the cops, then you are allowed to put you mark, your initial, your sign, your badge, your *placa* on your turf with the name or initial of your gang: White Fence, Quatro Flats, Barrio Nuevo, The Jokers, The Bachelors, or what have you. You write it big and fancy, scroll-like, *cholo* print. Graffiti on all the stores, all the garages, everywhere that you control or claim. It's like the pissing of a dog on the post. And underneath your placa, you always put C/S. '*Con Safos,*' that is: *Up yours if you don't like it, ese!"* (*The Revolt,* 91)

[34] Ibid., 91.
[35] Ibid., 104.
[36] *The Revolt*, 104.
[37] Emphasis his, ibid., 101.

graphically does, “Cut here. Slice there. Here. There. Cut, cut, cut. Slice, slice, slice! And into the jar. Soon we have a whole row of jars with little pieces of meat.”[38] The language used to capture the horrifying act of body mutilation evokes the language of cinematic production (“cut”), evincing the contrived aesthetic value of the autopsy and placing that in tension with the devaluation of human integrity. The moral dilemma of the autopsy is cemented most clearly in the last lines of the chapter: “Forgive me, Robert, for the sake of the living brown. Forgive and forgive me and forgive me…. For the rest of my born days, I will suffer the knowledge of your death and your second death…. Goodbye, ese. Viva la Raza!”[39] While morally perturbed by the scene, Brown acknowledges the power of graphic spectacle as serving the cause; however, later Acosta reveals that the findings of the autopsy were inconclusive and that no actual justice served—a final insult to the memory and dignity of Fernandez and the Chicanx community more generally.

As for examples of spectacle that clearly alert the reader to groups of Chicanxs, the novel begins with the St. Basil’s Church riot, a violent clash between the Chicano militants and the police, and ends with, perhaps the most concentrated form of violent spectacle: terrorism. Fellow Chicano Militants plant a pipe bomb and set it off in the bathroom of the courthouse, where earlier Brown had successfully defended the “Tooner Flats Seven” from “charges of arson, firebombing, inciting a riot and conspiracy.”[40] Though, unlike the preceding spectacles that puts Brown in the middle of action, this explosion tellingly occurs outside of Brown’s view, heard through a radio news bulletin. At the end of the novel, the spectacality of revolution is dwindling down to the point of narratological absence, and, accordingly, so dwindles the sense of urgency that carries Brown’s attention throughout the book. However, it is important to close-read the way that community is envisioned most clearly in the novel.

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[38] Ibid., 102.
[39] Ibid., 104.
[40] Ibid., 209.

A particular passage in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* succinctly triangulates the major interests of my study: graphicity, community, and political spectacle. It is a passage that displays how Oscar Zeta Acosta experiments with the novel form in extensively graphic ways in order to present a panoramic, populated view of a Chicanx space and its community members. The most salient feature of chapter fifteen's opening is its anti-conventional syntax. Rather than providing context to situate the reader, Acosta begins this crucial scene by listing places—streets and corners, restaurants, department stores—marked (to those in the know) specifically as sites iconic to East Los Angeles and to its predominantly Chicano inhabitants:

> Whittier Boulevard—The Strip. Saturday Morning. Mexican restaurants, Adelita's, La Iguana de Oro, The Latin Strip, dime stores, pawn shops, radio and television repair, finance companies, Woolworth's, J.C. Penney, Sears, Jack-In-The-Box, McDonald's, Department of Social Welfare, Hollenbeck Police Station. We cross Atlantic, Olympic, Indiana, Brooklyn, Soto…. (his ellipses) Thousands of faces, posters colored red and green, banners of Brown Eagles, the Azteca black and white and red Thunderbird, LA HUELGA, LUCHA, MAPA, LULAC, BROWN BERETS, CON SAFOS, LA RAZA, COPA, CHICANO LIBERATION FRONT, CMO, MECHA, MALDEF, ACLU, NATIONAL LAWYERS GUILD, CHICANO LAW STUDENTS, EICC, EL TEATRO CAMPESINO, CHICANO DANCE GROUP DE UCLA, SOCO Y ZEYA FOREVER, ROSE CHERNIN, DORTHY HEALEY, NEIL HERRING, FACES OF BROWN, FACES OF LONG HAIR, BOOTS, MARCHING, FISTS SWING, VATOS LOCOS PINTOS CHICANOS HIPPIES COCKROACHES BOOT SHOE HEEL TOE TRAMP TRAMP TRAMP….
>
> We are looking at a color film of the Chicano Moratorium of August 29, 1970.[41]

Acosta only briefly intervenes as a tour guide, signaling where "we cross," until we see political signage, colors of red, green, white, and black, and marchers, "faces of brown," and we hear the swelling sound of people marching. This listing, without the contextualization that typifies conventional narrative, forms a refined textual image for the reader: the mind's eye quickly jumps from person to person, place to place, and sight to sight in our mind much as one would by watching a film reel.

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[41] Ibid., 198.

The graphicity of the text demands more than just reading, but rather a visual engagement with the list: as the fervor of the march swells and the list of sights progresses, the words take on an iconic (as opposed to indexical) quality when Acosta transitions to all-capital letters. The capitalized words simulate a transmediation of banner writing that Zeta is reading off of the film screen ("LA HUELGA, LUCHA, MAPA, LULAC..."), communicating not only the words but the sight of the looming words. Acosta's omitted punctuation, like commas to demarcate between words, also effectively shortens the spacing between the words, contributing to the sense of a unified, fluid assemblage. The combined effect of the graphic imagery and the text-as-image creates a sensation of heightened visuality, like a bombardment of sight speeding across a movie or television screen. An early critic of the novel, Nathan Smith, picks up on the use of "visual montage" and other cinematic devices throughout the novel.[42] Acosta's allusion to the cinematic becomes explicit when he reveals that he is seeing color footage of the Chicano Moratorium march in Los Angeles in a courtroom,[43] which occurred in 1970 and resulted in the arrest and prosecution of a number of Chicanx protestors, all represented by Brown.

The author extends his mediation of the film into graphic prose deeper into the courtroom scene, albeit written not as syntactically distilled as in the first paragraph. In these descriptions Oscar Zeta Acosta uses quick, ecstatic language, simulating the frenzied pace and feeling of the film, which is being used as evidence for the prosecution's case against the young Chicano Militants. Acosta employs film vernacular when he narrates a scene change in the film; he writes, "SLASH! The film is cut to a liquor store on Whittier Boulevard, at the corner of Indiana, two blocks from the park."[44] The pronounced graphicity—both in its attention to visual culture and its articulation of visuality—in this narratively crucial scene demonstrates the importance Acosta places on communicating what Brown as an attorney witnesses in the courtroom. Yet the documentary film also emphasizes, in the most graphic terms possible, what we as readers are meant to witness and retain: a particular place (East Los Angeles), a particular people (Chicanxs), at a particular moment in history (the Chicano Moratorium of August 29, 1970).[45]

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[42] Nathan Smith, "Buffalos and Cockroaches: Acosta's Siege at Aztlán," *Latin American Literary Review* 5, no. 10 (Spring 1977), 86-97.

[43] The scene's allusion to film culture can be guessed at by the screenwriting-like formatting of the very first line: "Whittier Boulevard—The Strip. Saturday morning."

The graphicity of the scene presents a symphonic tableau of an ethnic community: Chicanxs, (some grouped and some individualized), and the barrio, replete with banners, stores, and streets. An unusual aspect of Acosta's narratorial perspective here is its diffused attention, which visualizes many distinct objects, yet these things are also conjoined by a syntactical, visual synchronicity, as a close analysis reveals. Acosta first describes the marchers in generic terms, "thousands of faces," and then particularizes by enumerating the many different ethno-political affiliations he sees, from "LA HUELGA" (a local nickname for the farm workers coalition made famous by César Chávez) to national civil rights organizations like the ACLU to the many militant Chicano organizations that Acosta socializes within the novel. This is followed by more narrowing as he references specific people—"ROSE CHERNIN, DORTHY HEALEY, NEIL HERRING," all well-known radical leftists and civil rights activists—who, I argue, are isolated because they visually and ethnically stand out amongst the many other "faces of brown"; however, as allies and fellow marchers, they are also figuratively and syntactically folded into the collective. Then, Acosta swings back to unifying language, describing the swell of people in metonymic terms: "FACES OF BROWN, FACES OF LONG HAIR, BOOTS, MARCHING, FISTS SWING." As the properties of the people are disembodied, the distinctions between individuals are reduced to the point of anonymity, thus forming the semblance of a united mass—a community.

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[44] Ibid., 199.

[45] John Alba Cutler close-reads this scene and suggests that we can read it as an expression of objectivity reality "more powerful than anything Brown could have narrated from his own perspective"; however, he also points to the way that it alerts the reader to the paradox of the moment. We are being made to see history through the mediation of another's eyes further mediated through the lens of a camera. This meta-documentational quality throws into relief the desire for "authenticity" and the "anxiety" that produces thematically in the novel. *Ends of Assimilation*, 190.

Acosta returns to a breakdown of the different Chicanx types, "VATOS LOCOS PINTOS CHICANOS HIPPIES,"[46] yet his final appellation, "COCKROACHES," which he uses throughout the novel as a comprehensive name for Chicanos as well as any bodies of people made marginalized by social hegemonic forces, seemingly unites the entire assemblage. He does not use commas to separate the different types of Chicanxs, which grammatically conjoins them rather than making them fully distinct from each other. By the end of the paragraph, the particularities of the people are further atomized down to a greater anonymous level, "BOOT SHOE HEEL," until Acosta has the group marching as a harmonious unit, "TRAMP TRAMP TRAMP." The effect of this oscillation is one that presses on the nature of ethnic community, as the section both recognizes the unity of the ethnopolitical collective as well as the multiple factions within them. The visualization of people in Acosta's highly graphic work reveals a dialectic between factions or subcultures and the greater ethnic community, and shows us the author's paradoxical vision of Chicanx during a time of radical cultural change.

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[46] *Vatos locos*, literally "crazy guys," refer to Latino gang members, while pintos are gang member that are heavily tattooed, usually as a result of having spent time in prison. While Chicano here is set amongst different types of Mexican-Americans, it makes sense to consider these types as subsets of Chicanxs who are differentiated here because of their cultural (rather than ethnic) affiliations. To further clarify: a vato loco can be a Chicano, ethnically-speaking, but a Chicano isn't necessarily a vato loco, culturally-speaking.

Preceding Acosta's long listing of Chicanxs and their subcultural affiliates, he dedicates the opening lines to graphically describing the barrio that creates a space for a possible cohesion of these radical forms. From the start, Acosta situates the reader in a markedly ethnic space by specifying the communal importance of Whittier Boulevard as "The Strip," a colloquial name for a stretch of Whittier that has been historically important to the Chicanx community of East Los Angeles.[47] He goes on to describe generic ("Mexican restaurants") and specific ("Adelita's") places seen in the footage, which serves to form a comprehensive image of the community—its needs, vices, and even its enemies (i.e., the Hollenbeck Police Station). These particular places define the ethnic, working-class nature of the locality, while the next line that specifies the streets that "we cross," "Atlantic, Olympic, Indiana, Brooklyn, Soto," serves to define its geographical contours. This prominent expression of spatial and demographic graphicity constructs a view of the world of East Los Angeles Chicanxs and, most importantly, illustrates how Acosta recognizes the powerful and inextricable bond between place and people: Chicanxs do not only live in barrios like Tooner Flats but provide definition to Tooner Flats, and they see it as an obligation to defend their place in order to maintain their identity.

Acosta makes the bond of space to ethnic communities an explicit theme of the novel in the same chapter when, in the midst of watching the footage of the Moratorium demonstration, he flashes back to an earlier march that he participated in and led. He speaks to his fellow demonstrators about the relationship between ethnic maintenance, land, and the greater threat of extermination by U.S. nationalistic forces:

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[47] Consider the ethnic distinction between The Strip described here and the far more nationally recognized and represented Sunset Strip, which is situated in Hollywood and the North Los Angeles region, areas not known for having high concentrations of Chicanos. By calling Whittier "The Strip," the novel centralizes its importance over other strips, further disrupting the focus on popular, white narratives and re-centering attention on Chicanxs.

> We may be the last generation of Chicanos if we don't stop the war. If we don't stop the destruction of our culture, we may not be around for the next century. We are the Viet Cong of America. Tooner Flats is Mylai…Therefore, there is only one issue: LAND. We need to get our own land. We need our own government. We must have our own flag and our own country. Nothing less will save the existence of the Chicanos.[48]

The militant ethnic nationalism of this passage illustrates the centrality of Chicanismo to the novel[49]; however, its aggressiveness belies the questions and breakdowns of the integrity of what is deemed Chicanx identity. Even in its arguable marginalization, East Los Angeles finds itself in a revolutionary moment of such a high cultural magnitude that it parallels the contemporaneous but exceedingly more publicized U.S.-Vietnam War, finding kinship between Chicanxs and the fellow globally marginalized, such as the Vietcong of My Lai.[50] Acosta recognizes that that bond of people and place is crucial to the political and cultural maintenance of the community under the duress of the volatile Civil Rights era. This passage also illustrates that, despite the fact that East Los Angeles is situated in the greater Los Angeles and encircled by the geographical and ideological hegemony of the U.S., the world depicted in the novel is self-contained and worthy of wider representation and exploration.

Seeing Cockroaches: The Blurring of Form and Identity

The previous section argued for reading *The Revolt* for its graphic documentation of a dynamic community-scape, or a "barrio world," a unifying system that corrals a community of

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[48] *The Revolt*, 201.

[49] Chicanismo is the ideological principle undergirding the Chicano Movement of the 1960-70s propagated by young Chicanx activists, and, like other ethnic nationalist ideologies, it calls for fair and ethical social treatment, equal political representation, and economic progress for Latinxs in the U.S. For more on Chicanismo, see Ignacio M. García, *Chicanismo: The Forging of a Militant Ethos Among Mexican Americans* (Tucson, AZ: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1997).

[50] He stresses this same expansive definition of cockroaches elsewhere, referring to the Vietnamese as "poor Cockroaches in far-off villages in Vietnam." *Revolt of the Cockroach People,* 13.

Chicanx types under the banner of spatial cohesion and political solidarity. Yet, through the novel's ongoing negotiation between Brown's hedonistic self-determination and his selfless community integration, we are also exposed to a subversion of essentializing nationalism at the heart of the Chicano Movement.[51] A cursory reading of the novel might summarize it as an "us versus them" narrative, one that centralizes a burgeoning, ethnic nationalist definition of Chicanx culture and identity, or "Chicanismo," in light of socio-political marginalization, and, in many respects, this is a reasonable assessment; however, as Brown struggles with the choice of aligning with the Chicanxs and doing what is in his self-interest, the novel thematizes the complex multiplicity of individuals within the parameters of the Chicanx community, many of whom place tremendous pressure on what exactly defines Chicanismo.

Before explicating the way that this subversion is manifested graphically, I want to observe the manifold ways that the cockroach metaphor centralizes the oscillations between solidified nationalist essentialism and a critique of that essentialism. At times, the cockroach metaphor posits an identity much like race and then something beyond race. It is a symbol deeply rooted in a simplistic, binary breakdown of globalist power dynamics: in the world of *The Revolt,* there exist cockroaches and those that exploit, vilify, marginalize, and torture cockroaches. Sometimes, Acosta uses cockroach interchangeably with "Chicano," and at times Brown's designation of cockroach expands to include non-Chicanxs. At one point, he lists the locations of cockroaches around the world: "downtown LA and East LA and downtown Mongolia or Saigon or Haiphong or Quang Tri or Tooner Flats and Lincoln Heights or wherever Cockroaches live," toggling between globally and locally oppressed.[52] In this sense, the cockroach is a loose textual metaphor, encapsulating the subjects of the texts, Chicanxs, as well as other ethnic and national figures. Unlike the visual conceit of animal masks in Art Spiegelman's *Maus,* which I discuss in the second chapter*,* there is no strict taxonomical breakdown of which race or ethnicity is or is not a cockroach in *The Revolt*; however, unlike the use of animal-like monsters in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (subject of my first chapter)*,* the cockroach metaphor does remain specific enough to distinguish between the hegemonic figure and the Other. The racialized image of the cockroach both envelops and resists associations with Chicanxs. This toggling signals that the Chicanx identity itself is not monolithic or essentialist, but dependent on economic conditions, political engagement, and self-identity.

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[51] Several critics, including Michael Hames-Garcia, have argued that the excessive nationalist rhetoric of the novel should be read as satire of Chicanx or identity-based nationalism. See "Dr. Gonzo's Carnival: The Testimonial Satires of Oscar Zeta Acosta," *American Literature* 72 (2000).

The instability of the cockroach metaphor is evinced visually in the novel in two ways. In an earlier scene, which I discussed above, we see cockroaches coursing through Brown's room, crawling over his "bulging muscular ass," which seemingly destabilizes the people-as-cockroaches metaphor of the novel. How can we reconcile real cockroaches with figurative human cockroaches? The pointed inclusion of the insects creates a communal metonym rather than a racial metaphor, as the insects signal the reader's exposure to the (dirty) milieu of racial otherness. While I argue before that we could read this scene as a figurative consummation ritual between man and insect, the image of cockroach puts a strain between whether someone is strictly cockroach or is simply amidst cockroaches. The significance of this distinction here is that Acosta is pointing to the choice of identity, how one chooses to see themselves, to what length he and others choose to commit to a cause.

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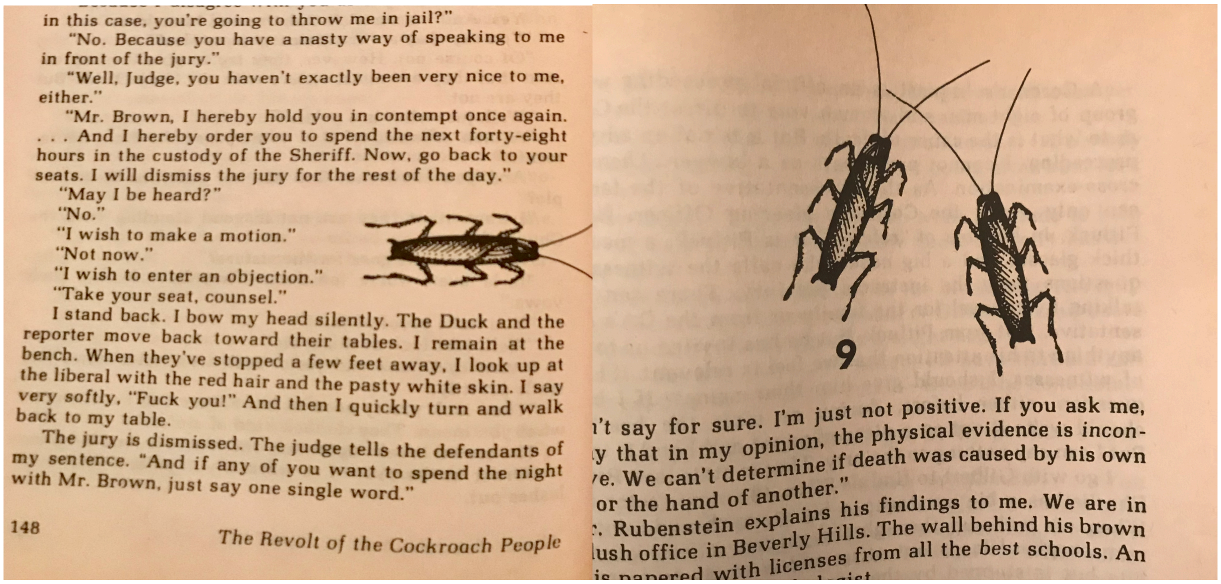
[52] Ibid., 70. The far east locations metonymically refer to the exploited, victimized peoples of the Cold War, specifically, the Vietnam War, raging at the writing of this novel. The comical and purposeful confusion of "downtown Mongolia" evinces the looseness of the designation, cockroach.

Despite the novel's cockroach motif only being figurative in the narrative—that is, there are no actual insects revolting—the novel contains an extra-diegetic, or "paratextual," visual feature that elevates and complicates the cockroach metaphor. From the dedication page on, the reader finds hand-drawn illustrations of cockroaches crawling through the pages, or rather, on the pages, as palimpsest (figure 14). The illustrations are figured in a way that suggests the cockroaches are actually crawling on the pages. They are inserted in the white spaces and margins of the text, but they do not serve any diegetic purpose, as do, say, the photographs and drawings found in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* or in the image-and-text hybridity found in comics. However, in the juxtaposition between image and text connected through the conceit of the cockroach, we find, in essence, a double register—one within the narrative and one outside of it. Like in comics, multiple narrative tracks run simultaneously by way of images and by way of the text (and within the text, we might find on a single page, narrative boxes, dialogue, thought bubbles, and signage as expression of sounds). Unlike text-only literature, the spatialized narrativity of comics allows the viewer-reader to see the hybridized visual and textual registers simultaneously. These registers, or tracks, work either in tandem or in conflict with each other to communicate often complex and multiple meanings, as my analysis of Jaime Hernandez's contribution to *Love and Rockets* will later show.



in this case, you're going to throw me in jail?"

"No. Because you have a nasty way of speaking to me in front of the jury."

"Well, Judge, you haven't exactly been very nice to me, either."

"Mr. Brown, I hereby hold you in contempt once again. . . . And I hereby order you to spend the next forty-eight hours in the custody of the Sheriff. Now, go back to your seats. I will dismiss the jury for the rest of the day."

"May I be heard?"

"No."

"I wish to make a motion."

"Not now."

"I wish to enter an objection."

"Take your seat, counsel."

I stand back. I bow my head silently. The Duck and the reporter move back toward their tables. I remain at the bench. When they've stopped a few feet away, I look up at the liberal with the red hair and the pasty white skin. I say very softly, "Fuck you!" And then I quickly turn and walk back to my table.

The jury is dismissed. The judge tells the defendants of my sentence. "And if any of you want to spend the night with Mr. Brown, just say one single word."

148

The Revolt of the Cockroach People

9

’t say for sure. I'm just not positive. If you ask me,
y that in my opinion, the physical evidence is *incon-*
e. We can't determine if death was caused by his own
or the hand of another."
. Rubenstein explains his findings to me. We are in
lush office in Beverly Hills. The wall behind his brown
is papered with licenses from all the *best* schools. An

Figure 14. Examples of the cockroach illustrations in the margins of the book. Oscar Zeta Acosta, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People,* 1989.

In *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, as the text works to signal and re-frame the strangeness of the Chicanx people through the metaphorical conceit of the cockroach, the visual figuration of the cockroaches intrudes upon the reader's cognitive engagement with the words. Arguably, the illustrated cockroaches communicate to the reader his or her own "encroachment" on the grungy recesses of the barrio-world presented in the novel. In this way one can argue that the images invite the reader into the community, or at least burdens them to consider participation in the Movement. But the images also objectify the people they potentially represent as far as what the narrative tells us, "the cockroach people," and this forms an unsettling reminder of the abjection to which the reader is witness. The novel teases the reader into imagining the Chicanx population as cockroaches: just as they appear along the margins and overlooked white spaces of the text, the Chicanx community is also an ever-visible yet marginalized presence in American society.

This objectification however, could be read as problematic. Allison Fagan has studied the "paratextual" characteristics of this novel, pointing to the novel's outside influences from white-led publishing houses and book designers. Although the inclusion of the cockroach drawings was "blessed" by Acosta, Fagan finds their appearance troubling, largely because it undermines the narrative's interest in upsetting essentialist notions of Chicanx identity.[53] As she writes, "In the process of pasting identical cockroaches into the pages of an ethnic-identified text," the publisher's "design inadvertently singularizes and entirely dehumanizes Acosta's narrative. Reading the images alone, we can construct a narrative of a transformation of Acosta into cockroach: a singular, dehumanized identity."[54] This is a valid point about the images, since the cockroach images could be seen as invalidating the complexity of identity that the narrative works hard to offer. What is a questionable metaphor, as I have explored above, suddenly becomes flattened and potentially too-literal. However, while in total agreement with her assessment of Acosta's view of Chicanx identity as unstable and multivalent, I find that her argument hinges on extrapolating and isolating the images away from the text. I argue that this does a disservice to the multimedial quality of the novel, especially, in terms to how to read the textual and visual image of cockroaches. Read as hybrid, as *proto-comic*, the reader sees a textual and visual tension, one that burdens the reader to consider the metonym and metaphor of the cockroach from multiple angles. Furthermore, this image-and-text play unsettles easy understandings about what Acosta ultimately advocates for: Chicanx identity as singular, united, and empowered through its collectivity, or an assortment of individual identities, loosely and chaotically gathered by spatial, economic, cultural circumstances.

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[53] Allison Fagan, "'La vida es el honor y el recuerdo': Oscar Zeta Acosta's Paratextual Struggle for Survival," 331.
[54] Ibid.

Love and Rockets*: Barrio Comix*

In an interview regarding the Chicanx nature of *Love and Rockets*, Jaime Hernandez said,

> Our Chicano culture is so rich and has so much to offer that I've barely scratched the surface. I want the whole world to experience it. I've made it my job to make everybody understand it without watering it down and without trying to protect the reader's feelings. Whether they understand it or not, the comics aim to communicate a vision of the Chicano community so readers can see what it's really all about.[55]

The Hernandezes use the visual-textual form of comics to "communicate a vision of the Chicano community," yet, I argue, the text's depictions of Chicanx communities often serve to resist easy, reductive ethnic categorization and, in fact, celebrate strangeness as an ethnic virtue. What I mean by strangeness in regards to *Love and Rockets* is the text's humanizing focus on "locas" and "locos," or radical characters; punks, gangbangers, the queer, the destitute, the traumatized eccentric that everyone in the neighborhood suspects is a witch (see figure 15, where we find the character Izzy on the far left, recognizable by her Catholic paraphernalia and her smoky eyes). Strangeness is that which tests and pushes the contours of ethnicity, or at least our assumptions about ethnicity as seen in mass media. As such, much like how we see the visual and textual unfolding of community in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People,* strangeness also refers to the organic interrelationship of particular identities, which come together within the barrio of Jaime's Hoppers 13.

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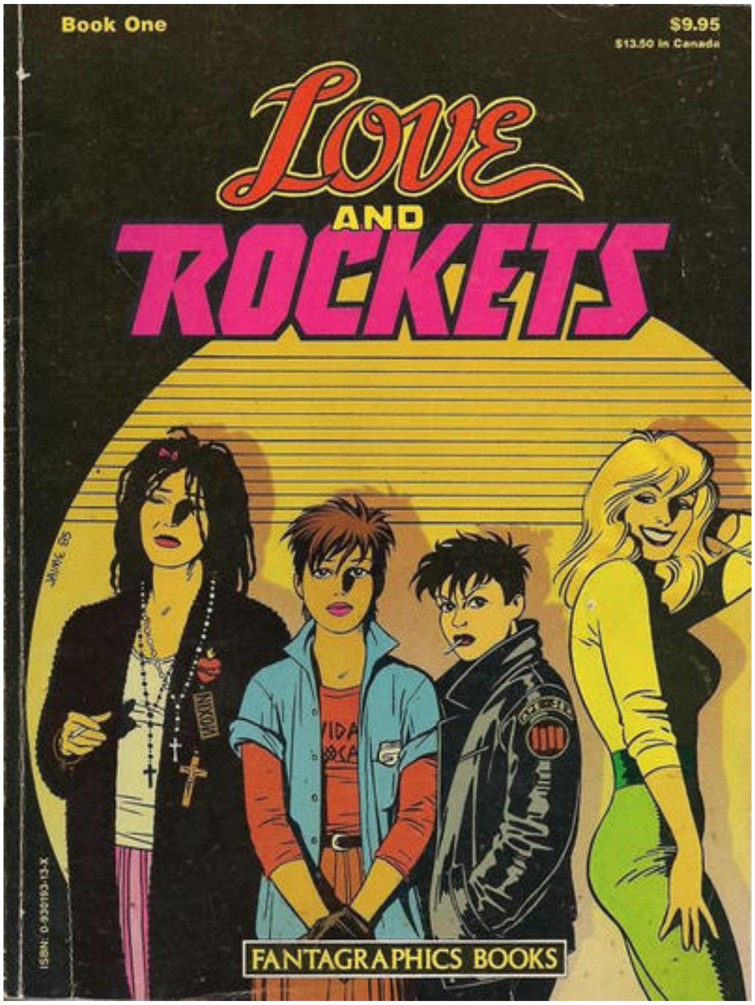
[55] Jaime Hernandez, "Jaime Hernandez of Los Bros Hernandez," interview by Frederick Luis Aldama, *Your Brain on Latino Comics: From Gus Arriola to Los Bros Hernandez* (Austin: University of Texas, 2009), 186.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AND
ROCKETS
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ISBN: 0-930193-13-X

Figure 15: Cover of *Love and Rockets* depicting a lineup of the four protagonists. Jaime Hernandez, *Love and Rockets 1,* 1985.

In *Why Comics?*, Hillary Chute posits that the Hernandez brothers demonstrate "how comics, in its porous, democratic openness, is a mirror of the ongoing vitality of city spaces."[56] I build from this observation to show that *Love and Rockets*, by locating its stories in ethnic communities-turned-comic-worlds, refracts the single discourse of race and ethnicity and disperses it across the many places, residents, and other formal visual-textual registers afforded by the medium. It's a purposefully elusive representation of ethnicity, which unfolds through its multivalent and multivocal focuses. For example, in figure 15, which comes from the first paperback collection of *Love and Rockets*, we see four central characters of Jaime's Locas storyline, all residents of the Hoppers 13 world, and all Chicanas, despite their varying racial coloring and appearances. Rather than centering the discourse on a single body, voice, or storyline, Hernandez populates his world with different typologies of Chicana femininity: Izzy Reubens on the far left is a reformed *chola* turned novelist, who, like the author himself, obsesses over the interpersonal and interdimensional threads that run through and around her eerie Hoppers house; Margarita "Maggie" Chascarrillo, perhaps the most important protagonist of Jaime's world, figures also as the most hybridized figure, too, embedded into the world's multiple milieus, including the L.A. punk scene, the neighborhood cholo scene, and the science fiction scenes of the earlier issues; Hopey Glass, half-Columbian and half-white, is Maggie's best friend, and as the hotheaded, punk-rocking lesbian, is the most resistant to normativity, ethnic or otherwise. And on the far right we find Penny Century, the "blonde bombshell," who, as we see here in the contoured space between her and the rest of the characters, differentiates and estranges herself from the others, obscuring her intentions, true feelings, and ethnic roots, under a bubbly guise of sexuality. Furthermore, the typological work suggested here belies the constant conflicts and contradictions animating their individual storylines, which unsettle the depths of their truly rich, multifaceted identities.

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[56] Hillary L. Chute, "Why Cities?", *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere* (New York: Harper, 2017), 206.

Years after introducing characters, Jaime will often unsettle, or deconstruct, their narrative lives, sowing a richness in their characterization not seen nor understood before. This openness and ability to re-inscribe pasts and presents in characters is one of the particular benefits of the seriality of the comic book series. Therefore, as individuals and as a collective cast, themes of strangeness and elusive ethnography exudes from their complex narrative trajectories, and this is communicated well in this single "line-up" cover (figure 15). This image is rich with meaning, as its police-lineup shot intimates the socially anti-authoritarian spirit running through this strange collection of figures. It positions the reader as an active spectator as well as accuser, objectifying the women, as they themselves return the gaze, daring the reader to make their accusations. The image summarizes the nature of Jaime's Hoppers world: although, the readers witness intimate, emotional, and physical moments—including graphic representations of having sex—in these women's lives, there is always more to tell, more hidden from the readers' eyes.

While the reader's attention is dispersed across the comic's neighborhood construct, or, across the clashing and commingling storylines of Chicana characters—such as Izzy, Maggie, Hopey, and Penny—the Hernandez's continuous discourse of ethnicity is generated in the accumulation of visual and textual information, such as Chicano iconography (like gang tagging and tattoos), in language, in appearances. This Chicano world-making reflects a reality that the Hernandez brothers are devoted to communicating: Chicano communities are not monolithic, but are fluid, intersectional, and eagerly strange.

Part of the challenge of discussing Jaime's Hoppers 13 stories (or Gilbert's comparable Palomar storylines) in any comprehensive way is that, despite mainly centering on a barrio-world with a core set of characters, these characters age in near-real-time, growing and evolving over the series' four decades. The series sees Maggie and Hopey, the two main characters, go from angsty, effervescent punk-rocking teenagers to, in the most recent issues, middle-aged women, haunted and occasionally stunted by their pasts, but propelled by the natural progression of time and its quotidian demands (jobs, romantic relationships, aging).[57] In order to speak specifically of certain characters in the series, then, it is necessary to stipulate time periods, major events, specific appearances; while the core figure remains recognizably similar, important psychic and physical changes do occur to the characters. The multiplicity of embodied temporal forms is viewable in Jaime's cover for the first issue of the second volume of the series (figure 16), an updated copy of figure 15's cover made fifteen years prior. It visualizes chronologically-mixed iterations of Maggie throughout different periods of her life, none definitive, but all contributing to a tapestry of embodied identities. The image depicts Maggie in her first iteration as a science fiction-type mechanic to her de-punked, middle-aged version, not only fluctuating along the way in appearance and weight, but also in attitude and visible self-confidence. These two images corroborate the sense of elusiveness and fluidity of identity as represented in *Love and Rockets*. The first image captures this in its roster of Chicana character types, none of them made to appear "essentially" or stereotypically Chicana, but equally expressive of their unique personalities and styles. The other image isolates its attention on a single figure; however, in its multiple portrayals of Maggie, none are made principal or singularly definitive. Even the Maggie figure that stands seemingly closest to the viewer is off-center, askew. Both space (community) and time destabilize essentialist notions of Chicanoness in Jaime's Hoppers barrio-world.

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[57] In the latest iteration of Jaime's main *Love and Rockets* narrative, Hopey and Maggie, now settled-down, middle-aged women, return to their old neighborhood. Having received rave reviews, and further elaborating on the triangulation of the two main women and their shared community, this new book *Is This How You See Me?* (2019) will have to be incorporated into this chapter in a future draft. Hillary Chute's recent review of the new book points to fascinating revelations about the characters—and the years-spanning narrative, in general: "The book is structured episodically, with

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present-day sequences — in which the two women, in their early 50s, return home, full of self-consciousness — intercut with scenes from the past. While in the table of contents these sections are marked out by year — 1979, 1980 — the story itself seamlessly slides into the past without announcement or warning." A return to the place they once considered "home," and a contrasting and collapsing of two extreme timeframes, the text is a potentially rich source for thinking about the way that identity is fixed and unfixed by considerations of time and space. Hillary Chute, "Comics That Capture the City in All Its Human and Physical Messiness," review of Mark Alan Stamaty's *MacDoodle St.* and Jaime Hernandez's *Is This How You See Me,* Book Review, *New York Times,* June 17, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/17/books/review/comics-that-capture-the-city-in-all-its-human-and-physical-messiness.html.

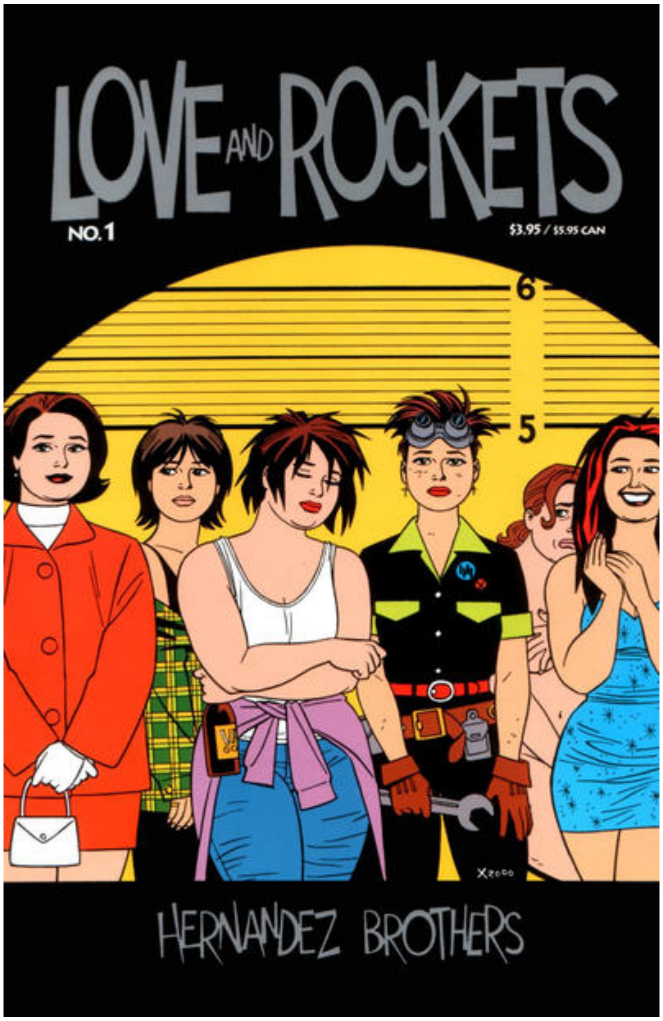

Figure 16. Cover depicting multiple iterations of Maggie over the years. The Hernandez Brothers, *Love and Rockets #1*, 2001.

What remains consistently identifiable, however, is the perceptibility of race and ethnicity that texture the images and texts of the comic. The first iterations of the Locas stories dealt closely with generic fantasy and science fiction elements, incorporating the dialect and aesthetics of classic romance and adventure comics. Maggie was cast as a young Chicana mechanic, who worked on large spaceships by day, and lead a rather ordinary life back in her working-class neighborhood of Hoppers the rest of the time. At this point, the Chicanx quality of the book was interspersed in the details, overlaid onto the characters' life by virtue of their Latinx backgrounds and language. For example, a brief and largely inconsequential conversation amongst characters reveals that Hopey Glass's real first name is Esperanza, which means hope in Spanish, thus organically introducing her Latinx roots.[58] Characters sprinkle their dialogue with Spanish interjections, like "Orale," or, "Kaka," code-switching organically. Extradiegetic details, like title captions, look and read as traditional Chicanx graphics, using Chicano slang like "Locas Tambien" (meaning "crazy as well") which are written in styles reminiscent of Chicano graffiti prevalent in urban cities like Los Angeles. These visual and textual touches coalesce, or hybridize, the language and culture of comics (long-reserved to an overwhelmingly white industry) with Chicanx culture, in effect paralleling the interstitial hybridity of Mexican-Americans (not quite one or the other). And this is a powerful difference to the stereotypes associated with "ethnic literature." As Garcia says about the groundbreaking quality of *Love and Rockets,* the Hernandez brothers "have been able to avoid the 'ghettofication' of their subjects and to create a complex intertextuality" that can only be understood by a select Chicanx figure, who is also culturally invested in the long history of punks and comics and other markers of identity.[59] He goes on, "The Latino/Hispanic reader may not understand everything in their narratives if he/she does not know enough about the American comic book industry to truly grasp their subversion of genres. On the other hand, there are many details that traditional comic readers may miss if they are not familiar with the influences of the Latino heritage and the entire spectrum of the American comic book industry in their work."[60] *Love and Rockets* offers to the wider public an expansion of how literature can be regarded as ethnic, including comics, and how comics can be for more than one type of American.

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[58] Jaime Hernandez, "Locas Tambien" (1981), *Maggie the Mechanic: A Love and Rockets Book,* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2007), 22.

[59] Enrique Garcia, *The Hernandez Brothers: Love, Rockets, and Alternative Comics,* (Pittsburgh: Univ of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 3.

[60] Ibid.

As the science fiction elements gave way to an increasingly down-to-earth, quotidian representation of Hoppers—a predominantly Chicanx, working class neighborhood—the stories dealt more directly with ethnocultural and communal considerations. The Chicanx texture became even more palpable and apparent, registering a Chicanx-focused realism unseen before in American comics, or media for that matter, yet this representation remained accessibly bilingual.[61] A recurrent trope shows neighborhood *cholos*, or gang members, using Chicano slang and Spanglish as they discuss their opinions on, say, Maggie or Izzy, which presents a narratological opportunity to view these characters from a different, external lens. Jaime Hernandez often uses editorial footnotes, which provide a translation for those readers unfamiliar with the dialect. This gesture, while not only being an homage to the old comics trope (as in the use of the "editor's note"), also provides an ethnographic or documentarian realism to the comic. Unlike fantasy comics that translate alien languages from faraway planets, this Chicanx world, replete with graffiti, Spanish-language signage, and *lucha libre* wrestlers, is real—strange, yet vibrantly down-to-earth and made material on page. Contributing to these iconographic and textual references to Chicanx culture are plenty of storylines that directly contend, in bareknuckle and poignant ways, with overt themes traditionally associated with Chicanx culture, such as cholo culture, immigration, and the cultural gulfs between different generations of Mexicans and Chicanxs. For example, the "Death of Speedy Ortiz," one of *Love and Rockets* most esteemed stories, deals with the tragic intersection of teenage love, alienation, and neighborhood gang warfare. Akin to the mode of our spatial and ethnic discourse, critic Christopher Gonzalez also analyzes the literal and metaphorical value of spatiality in this particular comic. He examines the way that territory in this Chicanx town takes on racial, subcultural (gangbanger-related), and corporeal dimensions, as it contemplates what it means to own land, bodies, and the self.[62]

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[61] For more on the importance of *Love and Rockets* to the alternative comics genre, see Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson, MS: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2005).

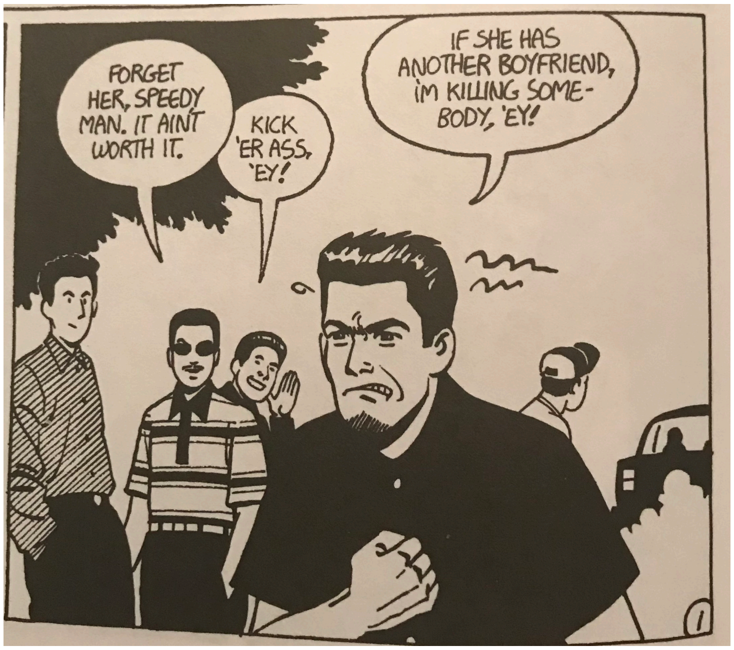
FORGET HER, SPEEDY MAN. IT AINT WORTH IT.
KICK 'ER ASS, 'EY!
IF SHE HAS ANOTHER BOYFRIEND, I'M KILLING SOME-BODY, 'EY!

Figure 17. Panel depicting a disgruntled Speedy and his cholo friends. Jaime Hernandez, "Vida Loca: The Death of the Speedy Ortiz," *The Girl from H.O.P.P.E.R.S.,* 2007.

Embodiment—how characters are visualized and corporealized—is a crucial mode for simultaneously representing and complicating ethnic categorization. Jaime's rendering of embodied Chicanxs profoundly communicates the multivalences of identity, mainly through the characters' culturally evocative appearances. This ranges from Speedy and the local gang members' cholo attire, to Izzy's Catholic crosses and curandera-like appearance. Again, even narratological moments that have little significance in terms of explicit ethnic discourse are textured with the graphics of culture. In figure 18, Izzy's gang tattoo, a left over from her days as a chola, is foregrounded, as she attempts to comfort her close friend and surrogate daughter, Maggie. Her kindness belies and commingles with the menacing look of her tattoo, so that her cultural past and present are registered simultaneously, embodying her strange complexity as effectively as any of her weird storylines. As we see in figure 16, temporalization plays a role in the unfixed evolution of a character's appearance. While some physical features remain consistent, things like haircuts and body weight fluctuate, forming a realistic image of an individual, while also maintaining some of the typological markers of race and ethnicity.

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[62] Christopher González, "Turf, Tags, and Territory: Spatiality in Jaime Hernandez's 'Vida Loca: The Death of Speedy Ortiz,'" *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 7, no. 1 (2013), http://imagetext.english.ufl.edu/archives/v7_1/gonzalez/.

This unfixed feature of *Love and Rockets* really sets the work apart from the comics work that preceded it, and many works that have come after. Series are built around the iconicity of its particular central characters, as this is one of the advantages of comics as a medium. Joe Schuster and Jerry Siegel's character Superman has evolved only incrementally since his introduction in 1938, and the furthering of his narratives have mainly worked to cement the rigidity of his appearance, his personality, and his "code of ethics." While iterations of Superman have played up the changes its writer or artist makes from time to time as sensational, (which is met often with the readership's conservative dismay), the nature of the character hinges on its tried and true static-ness. Jaime Hernandez's characters, on the other hand, change physically and spiritually constantly—and importantly—organically. Evoking a level of realism that is very rare in literature, the characters are a wavering balance of iconicity and anti-iconicity, which makes it such a difficult text to pin down, especially if viewed through the myopic lens of an essentializing race or ethnicity.

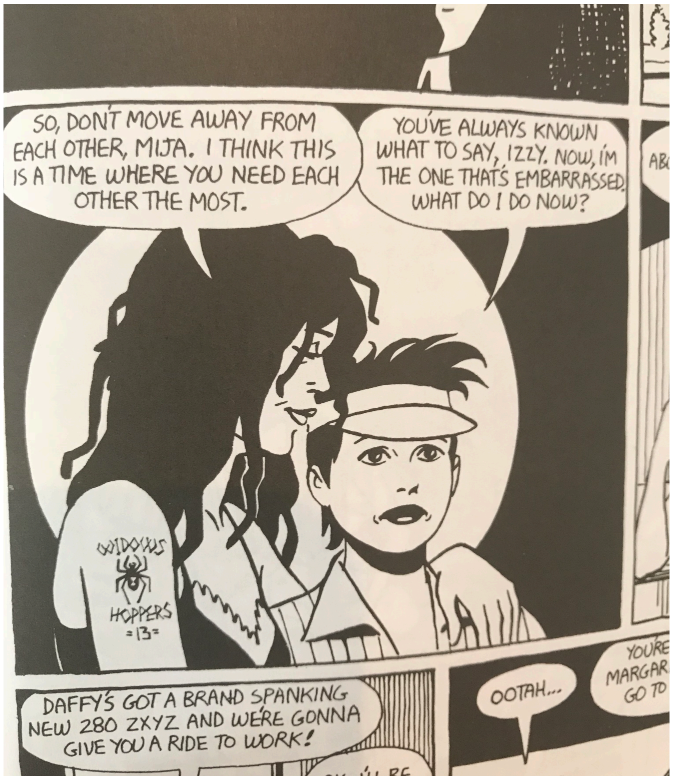
SO, DON'T MOVE AWAY FROM EACH OTHER, MIJA. I THINK THIS IS A TIME WHERE YOU NEED EACH OTHER THE MOST.
YOU'VE ALWAYS KNOWN WHAT TO SAY, IZZY. NOW, I'M THE ONE THAT'S EMBARRASSED. WHAT DO I DO NOW?
AB
WIDOWS
HOPPERS
=13=
DAFFY'S GOT A BRAND SPANKING NEW 280 ZXYZ AND WE'RE GONNA GIVE YOU A RIDE TO WORK!
OOTAH...
YOU'RE
MARGAR
GO TO

Figure 18. Panel depicting Izzy's prominent tattoo. Jaime Hernandez, "Locas," *Maggie the Mechanic: A Love and Rockets Book,* 2007.

Appearances complicate the embodiment of ethnicity in productive ways, especially considering the pronounced representation of the punk scene, a subculture especially important to the main characters, Maggie and Hopey, and rooted in Jaime and Gilbert's own Southern California punk youths. Plenty of stories delve into the girls' socialization in punk circles, their physical presentation as punks, and the upkeep that entails, including side-quests to get radical haircuts, and a storyline about Maggie wanting black leather wrestling boots to compliment her punk aesthetic. Jaime's Hoppers 13 stories are often celebrated for the way that they visualize not only Chicanx culture but also punk culture—two distinctly strange social groups juxtaposed in this comics world in ways unseen before. Maggie and Hopey, as embodied Chicana punks, serve as intermediaries between these social spheres, befriending and nurturing deep interpersonal relationships with both

Chicanxs as well as a multicultural assortment of punk outcasts. The suggestion here is that these spheres are distinct from one another, which certainly supports the claim about the unsettled strangeness of multivalent forms of identification. Maggie and Hopey are Chicanas, even while they identify as punks as well. They racially "pass" in both regards. However, I'd like to complicate this reading and suggest that the way we see punk iconography, such as Black Flag shirts and spiked mohawks, while simultaneously seeing Chicana bodies and hearing the intermixing of Spanish and English, or turning the comics page and witnessing a radically different narrative, dealing with a different valence of identity, serves to enfold these supposedly disparate visual and textual registers. What we see through the world-making of *Love and Rockets* is a re-inscription and expansion of what defines the strange, elusive Chicanx identity, so that punk culture *is* Chicanx culture, at least according to the Hernandez brothers' worldview.

One particular story helps support the interrelationship between Chicanx world-making and the multivalent, strange definitions of communal identity, even as it shows a kind of dismantling of it as well. The graphic novel-length story, "Wigwam Bam," serialized in eight parts from 1990, deals with a falling out between Maggie and Hopey while they are at a party in New York, which is largely spurred on by Hopey's callous reaction to Maggie being made fun of for being Mexican. Maggie, in turn, responds by saying, "Shit, just 'cause you can turn off your 'ethnic' half whenever it's goddamn convenient!" and storms off, effectively disappearing from the storyline a few pages into it.[63] While so much of Jaime's Hoppers 13 world is ordered by the interpersonal and interspatial ties afforded by community, "Wigwam Bam" is a story that dismantles that order, as it is characterized by the absence and longing created by spatial and social estrangement. It is significant that the abandonment of the Hoppers world triggers a confrontation of harsh racial truths for Hopey and

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[63] Jaime Hernandez, "Wigwam Bam," *Perla La Loca,* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2007), 19.

Maggie. In withdrawing from the stability afforded by the enveloping Chicanx world, Maggie and Hopey use the objective distance to assess their past, their waning youth, and their rootless present. The fissures of temporally-fluctuating identity are manifested by embodied identities, by differentiation afforded by colorism and racial passing. While I've been arguing that the comprehensive world system of Jaime's barrio, and by extension, *Love and Rockets,* concretizes a more realistic and encompassing view of Chicanx community and Chicanx identity, even with its elusive and strange characters and milieus, this poignant story underscores how these views of identity are continuously being settled and unsettled, made and remade, celebrated and estranged.

Despite their differences in, arguably, media, art forms, and genres, Jaime Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* and Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* explore this multifocal and fluid vision of Chicanx identity as seen in diverse Los Angeles barrios. The two authors take their respective forms to new lengths. Acosta pushes the boundaries of the novel in favor a decentralized and graphic recreation of a revolutionary and distinctly Chicanx landscape. He puts into question the objectivity of documentation, which typifies his Gonzo mode, in order to explore the contest between personal choice and ethnic communal belonging. And perhaps, most uniquely, his racial graphicity proposes a striking and vacillating image of the "cockroach" figure, while also unsetting that image with the particularities of the Chicanx masses. In so doing, Acosta places tension on monolithic understandings of Chicanx identity.

Unlike Acosta's temporally concentrated examination of the Chicano Movement, Jaime Hernandez observes the drawn-out intimacies of Chicanx everyday life. In *Love and Rockets*, an extensive and multilayered (visually and thematically, speaking) focus on the quotidian unfolds over long spans of time. Taking full advantage of the comic medium's conjoining of text-and-image, Jaime Hernandez figures spatiality (the barrio) and temporality in singular ways in order to capture an image of Chicanx identity that is both apparent and multilayered. The comic burdens (happily) the reader to consider Chicanx identity across not one single panel, but across a multitude of panels, characters, and issues of *Love and Rockets*. In reading the racial and ethnic graphicity of these two texts' barrios, this chapter expands on and explodes our presumptions of Latinx literature, bringing together unforeseen interlocutors and further bridging the gap between ethnic literature and visual culture.

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