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Contemporary Comics by Jewish Women

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Abstract

'Contemporary Comics by Jewish Women' brings together essays, interviews and original artwork by or about Jewish women comics artists. In this Introduction we reflect on our own approach to, and investment in, this project, and in so doing also explain the scope and content of this special issue.

Keywords

Comics; Jewish; Women; Contemporary; Graphic Details; Autobiography

'Contemporary Comics by Jewish Women'

"Graphic Details", *Graphic Me Tales*

For the last five years I have been privileged to travel the world with the exhibition I have co-curated with Michael Kaminer "Graphic Details: Confessional Comics by Jewish Women". I continue to be constantly delighted and surprised by the variety of sites and responses to the work. "Graphic Details" first opened in 2010 at The Cartoon Art Museum in San Francisco, and has introduced me to many aspects of international curatorial practice. I have appreciated the support and ingenuity of venues as they ensure funding for their leg of the journey, I have experienced first hand the power of great art to rewrite people's preconceived notions of comics, and I have visited many fantastic centres of culture around North America.

On a more personal note Graphic Details has been the backdrop to some of the more momentous years of my life, acting as an illustrated guide to (my) life. I presented a reading of "The Star Sapphire" by Sharon Rudahl, featuring her lost engagement ring, in The Gladstone Hotel, Toronto in 2010, when I had just got engaged. In New York in 2011 I talked about an old break up in "Dumped Before Valentine's" just uptown from an earlier romantic disaster. I wrote about Diane Noomin's "Baby Talk: A Tale of 4 Miscarriages" at home in London in 2013 when I suffered my own miscarriage. After the passing of my Grandfather in 2011 and my

Grandmother in 2014 and who were both buried in Bushey Cemetery, immortalised now in Corinne Pearlman's "Losing the Plot", I gained heirlooms not dissimilar to those illustrated in Ilana Zeffren's comic "Under Spagetti's tuna lies a dignified past".

I have only missed visiting two galleries out of seven in the last five years, Oregon Jewish Museum, Portland when I was home with a miscarriage, and Florida Jewish Museum, Miami, when I was just about to give birth. Travelling with a baby would make life much more complicated for quite some time, and I worried I would miss more opportunities to see the show's continuing evolution, so I doubled my efforts to bring "Graphic Details" closer to home. It had been not easy to find a site in London, and over a number of years the proposed show had been rejected from many institutions. 2014 was also difficult time to have an exhibition of artwork by Jewish and Israeli artists, but, just 9 months after I gave birth to Harry, during Israel's Operation Protective Edge, "Graphic Details" opened at Space Station 65, Kennington. After a very successful run at The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum in Ohio State University in 2015, it feels very apt that the next stop for "Graphic Details" is Israel, at The Negev Museum of Art, in 2016. This time Harry accompanied by his sunhat and spade, is determined to join me.

The exhibition has also accompanied my own developing academic career, as I have forged my way through my PhD, learning more about Jewish women and their, often, traumatic autobiographies. One particular highlights was co-chairing the symposium in New York, where many of those papers grew into volume, *Graphic Details: Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews* (2014). I was delighted to

repeat the success of this event in the UK, when I co-chaired the symposium with Heike Bauer on 12 November 2015 at JW3, The Jewish Community Centre for London. We were fortunate to receive funding to bring over a number of the exhibiting artists both for a guided tour of the exhibition and the symposium, including Miriam Katin, Diane Noomin, Laurie Sandell, Ariel Schrag, Ilana Zeffren as well as London-based Corinne Pearlman all of whom presented their work in the morning of the symposium. In the afternoon we heard a series of academic speakers, many of whose papers are included in this volume. In the evening there was a special *Laydeez do Comics* event featuring Sam Cowan, Denise Dorrance, Janis Goodman and myself.

It has been a pleasure to co-edit this special edition with Heike and Andrea as we contribute another resource to the still limited academic archive on Jewish women's comics. As well as articles and interviews, our journal records the talks and events of 14 November in the form of beautiful artwork drawn on and after the day, by other comic artists inspired by the occasion. The symposium was a day described by an attendee as the "most amazing conference[s] I've ever attended [... an] opportunity of talking to so many artists I admire!" and I, mother and curator, *shlepp nuchas*, from the continuing success and impact of "Graphic Details".

Graphic Lives

The essays, interviews and artwork gathered in this special issue are inspired by, and continue, the project of "Graphic Details". I first met Sarah in Montreal, at the

NeMLA (Northeast Modern Language Association) conference 2010 where I was giving a paper on the Nazi attack against the work of Jewish sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld and Sarah had a stall advertising the about-to-open "Graphic Details" exhibition. As a life long comics fan who had grown up, queerly speaking, with Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For*, I was amazed to find such a substantial body of autobiographical comics and graphic narratives by Jewish women – and also that many of them, including Sarah Leavitt, Ariel Schrag and Ilana Zeffren, wrote about their own queer lives. Why did I not know about this work already? The chance meeting in Canada has led me to develop new research on comics by women including in collaboration with Sarah, and, more recently, with Andrea Greenbaum whose expertise in putting together this special issue has been invaluable.

If there is a queer prompt for my research, the question of Jewish identity occupies a more complex role. Unlike Sarah and Andrea I have not been brought up in a Jewish family. Growing up in what was then West Germany in the 1970s and 80s, I used to believe that my own parents had been active in Nazi party, a belief which developed, I now think, because my parents staunchly refused to discuss World War II or the Holocaust. Of course, as many recent graphic memoirs show, the root causes of family secrets and the silences they produce are rarely so straightforward. Even as I worried about my parents' Nazi past, I knew that both of them were born in the thirties, and that they had not even been close to reaching their teens by the time the war ended. I was also dimly aware that their own families had been uprooted, and that my mother's family had suffered many traumas during the war years. Yet the unwillingness of my parents to discuss the past outweighed all other facts. I

remained convinced that they had been involved in some real, if ill-defined way, in the Nazi regime. Only quite recently did I come to understand that it was family secrets that had made them so tongue-tied (and sometimes angry and ashamed). My father, brought up in a conservative Catholic environment, struggled with the upset he felt at being an illegitimate child, which was further exacerbated by the rumors that his grandfather had been an itinerant worker from the Mediterranean or North Africa. My mother, who rejected her East Prussian background and assimilated, at least in terms of language, fully into southern village life, nevertheless remained an 'incomer', haunted by the disappearance of her father who went missing in the 1940s. Grandfather Kirstein has never been found. But when I was in my twenties, a visiting cousin of my mother's told us that she had found Jewish ancestry in the Kirstein family history. My mother denied any connections. But a Jewish family background would certainly help to explain why words such as *meshuggah* still pepper her hard-won southern German dialect – although given that the Baltic states were a melting pot of languages, it is hard to know if her use of Yiddish words is significant or not. It might ultimately not be possible to solve the riddle of her – my – family history from the fragments and often contradictory accounts that still exist. But what I have learned from the graphic (family) histories I read in the last years is that allowing multiple stories to stand can be just as important as being able to draw the line under certain events.

The multiplicity of voices is important also in the discussion of comics by Jewish women. Many debates about Jewishness in the twenty-first century – including in this issue - centre on issues of Zionism and/or Israel. Andrea Greenbaum, for

example, informed by her experiences of the rise in anti-Semitism in relation to the BDS Movement, makes a passionate case in this Introduction for understanding the *consciousness* of Zionism as an analytical and political tool. For me Zionism in the present day cannot be thought without also thinking about the role it played in the colonization of Palestine and Israeli state violence. To be clear, this is not an argument against the existence of Israel, but 'for solidarity that is against all forms of subjugation' (Butler in *Truthout*, 2014). According to Judith Butler, finding ways of relating to one another is a necessary precondition for social transformation (Butler, *Parting Ways*, 2013: 5-7). By examining the creative and critical contribution of comics by and about Jewish women, this Special Issue provides a range of perspectives on the many ways in which Jewishness connects individual and collective identities, both in overt and more covert ways.

'Contemporary Comics by Jewish Women' brings together essays on artists as diverse as Aline Kominsky Crumb, Sarah Glidden, Liana Finck, Mira Friedman, Miriam Libicki, and Anya Ulinich. It further includes interviews with Sarah Leavitt and Ariel Schrag and original artwork by Sam Cowan, Rachael House, Corinne Pearlman, Keara Stewart and Sarah Lightman herself. If there are many themes addressed in this diverse body of work one shared concern that emerges is the documentation of the Jewish past and present including in terms of the anxieties that surround the category of 'confession', as illustrated by Rachael House, Artist and co-Director of Space Station 65, and in relation to the "Graphic Details" symposium, drawn here by Sam Cowan and Keara Stewart. Where Sarah Lightman's deeply personal drawings reflect on the birth of her child, the essay by Dana Mihăilescu (on Finck) examines

the history and affective presence of the Eastern European *shtetl*. Both Brauner (on Ulinich) and Precup (on Kominsky Crumb) explore issues relating to contemporary Jewish life and culture in North America, the locale that also frames the interviews with Leavitt and Schrag. Nina Fischer (on Glidden, Friedman and Libicki), Laini Kavaloski (on Libicki) and Corinne Pearlman in turn are all concerned with the difficult realities of present-day Israel. Where Kavaloski examines the view from inside the Israeli army, Fischer's study of Jerusalem considers how the Othering of Arab existence in the city can make Palestinian suffering inapprehensible, while Pearlman reflects on the ethics of exhibiting her work in Israel.

The comics by the Jewish women gathered here thus reflect on the contingencies of gender, identity, and the experiential dimensions of history, politics and everyday life. They also make an important cultural intervention. For despite the recent successes of women comics artists – and the rise in women's comics scholarship notwithstanding – women are still all too often pushed to the margins of the comics industry and comics scholarship. So for me perhaps the greatest aim of this project is that it challenges the prevalent misconception that comics are the business of men: by insisting on a Jewish women's presence, the essays and artists included in this Special Issue also redraw the boundaries of contemporary comics culture, and thus let us look forward to the future.

Finding the *Afikomen*: Comics and Jewish Identity

My mother used to keep Molotov cocktails in her bedroom closet, the way some women stash boxes of shoes, or old beaded purses. They weren't exactly Molotov cocktails, at least not yet—the gasoline and rag wicks need to be assembled, but the cases and cases of empty Coke bottles were lined up, like soldiers in formation, at the ready. My mother, Elizabeth, was a member of the JDL—the Jewish Defense League, the grassroots, militant organization, whose logo was symbolized by a fist through a Jewish star. In the late 60's, the JDL was led by the handsome, charismatic, and radical Meir Kahane. The JDL's philosophy was simple: protect Jews from Anti-Semitism by whatever means necessary. Before the JDL was declared a hate group by the FBI; before they firebombed a hall where the Soviet State Symphony Orchestra was performing; before Kahane moved to Israel, became head of the notorious Kach, and before their racist anti-Arab rhetoric dismantled their organization, their original grassroots activism was noble: protect the "little" Jews in their neighborhoods from daily harassment. So, elderly Jews who were getting mugged in Bedford Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, New York, were now being escorted by JDL members to the grocery store; Jewish teens who were harassed, called "dirty Jew" and "kike," when they walked along the street wearing their *kippot*, were signed up for self-defense classes; Soviet Jews, who were prohibited from emigrating to Israel, became the movement's *raison d'être*, sparking major protests at the Soviet embassy, urging them to "Let My People Go."

In the spirit of confessional disclosure, I have Meir Kahane to thank for my Jewish education. As a widowed, single-mother, my mom couldn't afford the tuition at my Jewish Day school, Chaim Nachman Bialk (named after Israel's national poet), and it

was Kahane who went with my mother to appear before the school's scholarship committee, making a passionate plea about the obligation to educate a fellow Jew. He was a rock star and was able to persuade the committee to reduce the tuition, which resulted in securing me nine years of a Hebrew Day-School education. Kahane inscribed a copy of his book, *Never Again*, to my mother. It reads: "In every generation there is a few who understand. Never forget." And, for even secular, assimilated Jews, this specter of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust remain in the comic narratives explored in this special issue.

Sarah, Heike, and I bring up our own brief narratives about personal Jewish identity because, as "Graphic Details" articulates, Jewish women's comic narratives have not been part of the comic canon, and its absence, either through academic neglect or intentional political erasure (as Sarah notes), means a piece of the puzzle is missing. Jewish identity, as the writers in this special issue illustrate, is a complex cultural, political, and religious web, and the comic authors showcased in these essays struggle with claiming and disavowing association--sometimes simultaneously. As Laini Kavaloski writes in her contribution to this issue in "Contested Spaces in Graphic Narrative: Exploring Homeland through Miriam Libicki's *Jobnik!: An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army*, "The narrative layering techniques in this first introduction to Miriam's personal and nationalist identity is telling for the rest of the text, not only because it represents her intimate encounters within the context of the Israeli military, but because it demonstrates a rendering of identity connected to specific historical moments of collective cultural memory." This

wrestling with “collective cultural memory” radiates thematically throughout this special issue.

According to a report released by Tel Aviv University's Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry, in cooperation with the European Jewish Congress, 2012 saw an upsurge of anti-Semitic attacks. The report stated: “Following a two-year decline in the figures, the annual report on worldwide anti-Semitic incidents recorded 686 attacks in 34 countries, ranging from physical violence to vandalism of synagogue and cemeteries, compared to 526 in 2011” (European Jewish Congress). As Sarah notes, these attacks reached a fevered pitch during Israel's Operation Protective Shield in 2014. Moreover, many of the comic authors in this issue address Zionism, and not in the predictable binary narrative of Oppressor/Victim, but rather the *consciousness* of Zionism, the historical, political reality, as a marker of both identity and conflict. It seems to us that such a “rhetoric of disaster” to use Michael Bernard-Donals' term, determines not simply our analysis of past Jewish historiography and consciousness, but in the age of anti-Israel sentiment equally forces Jewish consciousness to hide, seek respite in safer confines, and continues to perpetuate not just the narratives of the past, but perpetually creates a value system steeped in apology and denial, or worse—silence. In comics (and in other forms of popular literature) this identity crisis manifests itself as the quintessential self-hating, neurotic Jew, a point explored in this issue by Mihaela Precup in “‘That Medieval Eastern-European Shtetl Family of Yours’: Negotiating Jewishness in Aline Kominsky Crumb's *Need More Love* (2007).” Regarding Kominsky Crumb: “She does not deny the experience of Jewishness and Jewish identity but goes after a type of

performative Jewishness (here typically American) that stands in, as a symptom, of an internalized sense of inadequacy that has socio-political roots in the fertile ground of oppression and that is allowed to express itself only through self loathing” (Clementi 2013: 20). We are caught in the barbed wire of *kategoria*, accusatory rhetoric, side-stepping, delicately, around the landmines of academic boycotts against Israel, the proliferation of anti-Israel student organizations, and, of course, the rampant call for boycotts against Israeli commerce. What is perhaps most alarming is that these calls are coming from institutions that we admire, institutions, in fact, where many of us labour. The ethics of academic boycotts and the hypocrisy associated with the delegitimization campaign that is ostensibly directed at Israel, but as all Jews are aware, has repercussions beyond those geographic borders, since Jewish cultural and religious identity is inextricably tied to the State of Israel. While the complexity of this issue is beyond the scope of this collection, it is enough to say that these campaigns reverberate through our academies, our disciplines, and in our art and literature.

As scholars, we are left seeking the *Afikomen*, the broken piece of matzoh that we consume at the Passover *Seder*, the essential piece without which the *Seder* cannot be completed. Those of us engaged in exploring Jewish women’s confessional comics are charged with finding the piece that brings us to the table, performing a legerdemain, a sleight of hand, working to make whole what has been broken—indeed, through *Tikkun Olam*, we have a shared responsibility to heal the world through art and language and humour.

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