

Lynn L. Wolff

Autobiographical Graphic Narratives: Writing the Self and Drawing History in Nora Krug

1 Comics: An Inherently Autobiographical Form

Autobiography – encompassing life writing broadly as well as specific genres like autofiction and memoir – is an important area in both the production and reception of comics. The autobiographical dimension of graphic narratives is self-evident, *liegt auf der Hand* [lies on the hand], quite literally, in the sense that the artist's hand is evident in the work itself – from lettering to layout – and sometimes even explicitly depicted in individual panels. In the words of Hillary Chute, one of the foremost comics scholars, “Comics is largely a hand-drawn form that registers the subjective bodily mark on the page; its marks are an index of the body, and its form lends its pages the intimacy of a diary. Comics works are literally manuscripts: they are written by hand” (2011, 112). In her study of autobiographical graphic narratives written by women, Chute formulates this idea more succinctly: “Another feature of the composition of comics, [...] is its *handwriting*, which carries, whether or not the narrative is autobiographical, what we may think of as a trace of autobiography in the mark of its maker” (2010, 10). Even works that do not focus on the life story of the creator may contain explicit reflections on and representations of the self, demonstrating how authors clearly position themselves as artists while also explicitly showing that their works are a construction.

In addition to this broad formal understanding of the comics medium as having an inherently autobiographical dimension, many graphic narratives place a thematic emphasis on exploring individual experience and identity. For Chris Ware, one of the current masters of the comics form, “a preponderance of autobiographical work” seems only natural. He explains: “As cartoonists and comics still attempt to acquaint themselves with not only how to express real human emotion but also try to decide exactly what human emotions are worth expressing, the most facile and immediate way to do it is to write about oneself” (2007, xviii). Indeed, some of the bestselling graphic novels in recent decades have been autobiographical works: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1972, 1980–1991), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000–2003), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), to name but the most prominent examples. These works also demonstrate how autobiographical graphic narratives attract a wider readership that includes individuals who may not read comics on a regular basis.

Within the broad category of autobiographical graphic narratives, the terminology comics creators use to designate their works reveals the diversity of the form. Take, for example, the aforementioned bestsellers: Satrapi uses the concept of *autofiction* to describe her own work, while Bechdel creates a self-referential play-on-words with her subtitle *A Family Tragicomic*.¹ The term *graphic novel* had hardly any currency when *Maus* was published, and Spiegelman, who views his creative products as comics, has outright rejected the label (Schröer 2016, 263). The terms that scholars use to categorize forms of life writing in the comics medium vary as well, including “graphic life narratives” (Chute 2010) or “graphic memoirs” (see, e.g., Schröer 2016). Gillian Whitlock’s term “autographics” (2006; 2020) is a helpful alternative to the label *graphic novels*, which is often of limited usefulness when applied to non-fiction works. While Whitlock coined the term *autographics* specifically for the graphic memoir subgenre of autobiography, the concept promises a broader reach, as will be explored below. Building on such discussions of how to categorize graphic narratives, this chapter examines the affordances of the comics medium with regard to self-representation while also considering the role of readers in engaging with this multimodal form of expression, exploring how the question of gender is relevant to both the production and reception of comics.

2 Autobiography at the Intersection of Comics Studies and Gender Studies

Drawing on the rich history of women’s writing and life writing by women specifically, it is both necessary and fruitful to include gender as a category of analysis when approaching autobiography in comics. In his study of *The Culture of Autobiography* (1993), Robert Folkenflik highlights how autobiography “in its inception came from the margin” (5) – and how women, as socially, economically, and/or politically marginalized subjects, have historically written from the margins. At the same time, Leigh Gilmore’s study *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation* (1994) challenges the ways in which autobiography sustains hegemony, developing the concept of *autobiographics* as a way to respond to more complex understandings of human identity or, in Gilmore’s words, “the range of subjectivities written in relation to, and often in complicated interaction with, one another” (32). As Whitlock has shown, Gilmore’s ideas can be productively drawn

1 Similarly playful is Lynda Barry’s term “autobifictionalography,” which she uses in her “first explicitly autobiographical work,” *One Hundred Demons* (Chute 2010, 108).

out by looking at visual forms of autobiography: “Although Gilmore’s ground-breaking study is not specifically directed to comic autobiography, it introduces a way of thinking about life narrative that focuses on the changing discourses of truth and identity that feature in autobiographical representations of selfhood” (2006, 966). Specifically, the dislocation of “the singleness of the autobiographical subject” (Gilmore 1994, 44) is something that the comics medium both enacts and reflects upon. Echoing Folkenflick’s assertion of the marginal status of autobiography stated above, Michael A. Chaney begins his volume on *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels* (2011) by recalling critiques of autobiography and how the genre was “once dismissed as mawkish, self-indulgent, or marginal to the canon” (4). This is not unlike how comics had to be (and, at times, still have to be) defended as an object of scholarly attention. The third section of Chaney’s volume focuses on feminist contributions to the study of autobiography in comics and visual media, revealing “comics’ potential for visualizing such themes as sexuality and queer identification, female embodiment in the grip of illness and death, and traumatic histories of underrepresented bodies that generally disrupt the conventional hierarchy separating the public and the private” (8). All of these themes can be found in contemporary graphic narratives, though that is not to say that comics by women necessarily showcase such feminist concerns. This chapter aims to further establish the connections between comics, autobiography, and gender.

Comics’ multimodal form offers new ways to explore female subjectivity and to give voice to women’s experiences through word and image. In her book *Why Comics?* (2017), Chute dedicates an entire chapter – “Why Girls?” – to issues of gender and to representations of girls and women in particular. She begins the chapter with a strong assertion: “In the graphic novel world, girls are the new superheroes. They are the action stars, the focal point, the figures whose backstories, ideas, inclinations, struggles, and triumphs are presented with detailed attention in autobiography and fiction alike” (75). In her earlier book, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010), Chute focuses on women creators, calling attention to the fact that there is “a large field of women creating significant graphic narrative work” (1). She continues: “Specifically, there is a new aesthetics emerging around self-representation: contemporary authors, now more than ever, offer powerful nonfiction narratives in comics form. Many, if not most, of these authors are women” (2). The two best-selling authors mentioned above – Satrapi and Bechdel – are featured in Chute’s study, while this chapter examines a new, third example, Nora Krug, whose work *Heimat / Belonging* (2018) demonstrates different ways of representing the self in text and image, while also exploring how individual identity intersects with broader issues of history and politics, national and cultural memory.

3 State of Research and Key Questions

Besides the “preponderance of autobiographical work” that Ware observes in 2007, Chute suggests in 2008 that autobiography is “arguably the dominant mode of current graphic narrative” (456), and an article in the *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction* (2019) establishes the significance of autobiography as a comics genre. Citing Charles Hatfield and Karin Kukkonen, Martin Klepper writes that “autobiography has become ‘a distinct, indeed crucial, genre’ and ‘the most respected genre in comics today’” (441). This development in the production of autobiographical comics has been followed by a burgeoning body of scholarship in this area. In addition to Klepper’s article, other helpful introductions to the genre are available (Schröer 2016²; Böger 2022), and there have been several major monographs as well. Frederik Byrn Køhlert’s 2019 study *Serial Selves: Identity and Representation in Autobiographical Comics* builds on Chute’s abovementioned 2010 book by additionally giving special consideration to creators from marginalized groups. Complementing both Chute’s and Køhlert’s volumes, which feature close readings of a focused selection of texts, Elisabeth El Refaie’s 2012 study examines a corpus of eighty-five works in order “to discern general patterns and trends” in autobiographical comics from North America and Western Europe (6).

Much of the scholarship on autobiographical comics is invested in identifying the particular affordances of life writing in the comics medium. Køhlert outlines some of the key differences as follows:

But where the material and visible self is in literary autobiography abstracted into language, autobiographical comics put the body front and center for the reader to look at, evaluate, and engage with. In comics, the unmarked, universalized, and invisible body becomes an impossibility, and the inclusion of images, therefore, is significant to the political potential of self-representation, as readers (and viewers) are all but forced to visually confront an embodied subjectivity on the page. (Køhlert 2019, 12)

Just as literary autobiography explores aspects of identity and both the power and fallibility of memory, autobiographical comics – through the combination of text and image – further underscore these dimensions by visualizing subjectivity and the process of construction inherent to writing about the self. The gendered dimension of the embodied subject is inextricable from these considerations (Oleszczuk

² Marie Schröer’s excellent overview of autobiographical comics includes an annotated bibliography of foundational works in comics scholarship that deal with the autobiographical dimension of comics. She also formulates a helpful list of guiding questions for analyzing graphic memoirs (2016, 270–271).

2022, 221). Additionally, the comics medium possesses a particular ability to explore questions of truth and authenticity that are essential to autobiography. Graphic memoirs visually display the problems inherent to autobiographical prose fiction – that there is no absolute or ontological equivalence between author and narrator – by depicting the person narrating alongside the narrator’s verbal expressions. The multiple modes of representation in the comics medium thus demand “different strategies of reading and attention,” as Klepper emphasizes in his comparison of comics and autobiographical works in strictly verbal prose (2019, 441). Astrid Böger specifies that comics offers “a more interactive and open-ended reading experience than traditional autobiography allows or even aims for” (2022, 216; see also Knigge 2016, 31–32). Böger furthermore provocatively challenges Scott McCloud’s oft-cited concept of *closure*, pointing out that this is “somewhat counterintuitively termed” as it is meant to indicate the open-endedness of the medium (2022, 204). Elucidating the different reading strategies that autobiographical graphic narratives demand, El Refaie distinguishes between *involvement* (the reader’s active participation in creating meaning) and *affiliation* (the reader’s emotional engagement in the form of identification and/or empathy with either the story or characters) (2012, 179–219). By encouraging a form of engaged reading, autobiographical comics challenge readers to reconsider the boundaries between truth and fiction, reality and representation, reminding them of the many forces that contribute to identity formation.

While this differentiation between the multimodal form of comics and the strictly verbal form of literary autobiography can be helpful, it is also important to recognize their many points of connection. In the words of El Refaie, “the coming together of autobiography and the comics medium has created an opportunity for scholars to reexamine our understanding of both the nature of life writing and the way in which people read comics” (2012, 221). In fact, the connection between autobiography and comics has a long history, in terms of both the forms themselves and the scholarly response to them. Autobiography emerged as an area within comics, specifically within underground comics, in the 1970s, often featuring *antiheroes* and dealing with “the dark side of everyday life or more serious traumas, dysfunctional families, illness, and war” (Schröer 2016, 265 [trans. L. L. W.]). Paving the way for the stand-out example of Spiegelman’s *Maus* were Robert Crumb’s *The Confessions of R. Crumb* (1972) and Justin Green’s *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972) (see Schröer 2016, 265–266; Klepper 2019, 442). Spiegelman himself has said that Green’s work made *Maus* possible (Chute 2016, 160; 2017, 13).³ As

³ Spiegelman’s statement is to be understood not only in a thematic sense, with regard to the content that *Binky Brown* gives verbal and visual voice to, but also in a pragmatic sense, as Green invited Spiegelman to contribute a story to the collection *Funny Aministrals* (1972). That story was

Marie Schröer reminds us, Philippe Lejeune made the connection between autobiography and comics explicit in his 1975 essay on “Autobiography and Literary History,” detailing how both forms had had to struggle to establish their legitimacy within academic circles (Schröer 2016, 267). Furthermore, we should keep in mind both how comics studies has built upon autobiography studies and how autobiography studies and comics studies can mutually inform each other. Folkenflik traces the historical development of autobiography up to “our more self-conscious age,” characterizing the form as one that encourages questions – “about fact and fiction, about the relations of reality and the text, about origins” – and then posing his own questions: “Is autobiography to be found in referentiality, textuality, or social construction? Is there a self in this text? The subject is radically in question” (1993, 12). These questions can be easily adapted to an analysis of autobiographical graphic narratives. Moreover, we can connect Folkenflik’s considerations of self-portraiture “as a kind of autobiography” (12) to current discussions about “life writing in pictures,” as El Refaie subtitles her study of autobiographical comics (2012). Similarly, Whitlock draws out the lines of thought established in Gilmore’s “autobiographics” (1994) for her own concept of “autographics” (2006, 966), as mentioned above. An exploration of the intertextual relationship between these two terms would go beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is worth pointing out the potential of connecting Gilmore’s understanding of autobiography as a “discursive hybrid” (1994, 17) to the hybrid medium of comics, especially with regard to the relationship between word and body (42).

Many of the key research questions posed about autobiographical comics draw on studies of autobiography in prose, but the reverse is also true. Observing the connection between autobiography and the success of graphic narratives, Chaney poses the following questions:

Why are so many of the most-lauded graphic novels autobiographical; and how does this congruence force us to rethink the assumptions of an inherently print-based study of autobiography – its formal modalities, representational practices, and discursive contexts? How, in short, is the illustrated autobiographer-narrator different from those in exclusively written texts? How does the comics form produce new structures for the self to inhabit and through which to be expressed? What new possibilities for autobiography arise in the comics medium? (Chaney 2011, 5–6)

“Spiegelman’s three-page autobiographical piece ‘Maus,’ the prototype and the impetus for the longer *Maus* book, which definitively shifted the public conversation around the possibilities for serious work in the form of comics upon its publication in two book volumes in 1986 and 1991” (Chute 2010, 18).

At stake is not only how identity is explored thematically but also how identity (and subjectivity) is conceptualized and presented through combinations of text and image. How does the medium represent and reflect on the complexity of identity? To what degree is the process of identity formation reflected in the medium, or to what degree do all comics demonstrate self-referentiality? Do we see and, by extension, experience with the subject, or do we observe the subject as it sees and experiences? Schröer reminds us of the doubling of narrator and protagonist in comics and how their representation in word and image do not always correspond to one another, citing the distinction Thierry Groensteen makes between the “*monstrateur*” (“monstrator”), which can be understood as the instance that narrates by showing a body, and the “*récitant*” (“reciter”), which can be understood as the narrative instance that reports by means of a voice (Schröer 2016, 268–269). Böger wraps up this key difference thus: “Unlike a literary autobiography, however, a graphic memoir cannot hide its own subjectivity, not least because the narrator must always be shown, consequently appearing as a character in the story of someone’s life as much as the author remembering and telling it” (2022, 203). In the analysis that follows, we will see how such understandings of autobiographical comics can be played out and productively challenged.

4 (Un-)embodied Subjectivity and Engaged Reading

As highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, comics and life writing go hand-in-hand, manifesting in the physical traces of the creator left in the material work. A form of intimacy exists between the creator and the text, emerging from the physical act of drawing, and the reader is invited into this space of intimacy through an engaged reading practice. Throughout her scholarship, Chute repeatedly returns to the key component of the body, through which the artist’s story flows and to which the reader must attend (2008, 457; 2017, 294). In their excellent article on subjectivity in graphic memoir, Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri emphasize the role that the body plays in the production of subjectivity in graphic narratives: “Graphic memoir often shows the artist at his or her drawing board; this is in fact quickly becoming a recognizable marker of subjectivity in graphic memoir” (2016, 82; see also Schröer’s discussions of “graphic leitmotifs of self-description and writing the self” [2016, 271; trans. L.L.W.]). Here, one might think of the ubiquitous presence of the author avatars as narrators in works like *Maus*, *Fun Home*, or *Persepolis*, to refer once more to the key canonical examples of autobiographical graphic narratives mentioned at the outset of this chapter. In contrast to these works, another bestselling

autobiographical graphic narrative demonstrates the productive tension that can arise from the *absence* of the narrator's body in conjunction with the implicit presence of the author's hand in the constructedness of the illustrated work.

As indicated by its title, Nora Krug's *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home / Heimat: Ein deutsches Familienalbum* (2018), is a work about identity and origins – the complex push and pull of cultural, geographic, and historical forces that make us who we are.⁴ Krug sets the stage for reflections on identity and cultural history by way of her cover image, which is a clear allusion to the nineteenth-century Romantic painting *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* [*Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*] by Caspar David Friedrich. The stance of the female figure on the cover is a mirror image of Friedrich's male wanderer, but her surroundings have been altered from a fog-covered natural landscape to a nondescript village, drawn in childlike outlines. Following the figure's gaze, the reader's eyes settle on an airplane, also drawn in sparse outlines, yet recognizable as a burning Nazi fighter plane plummeting toward the peaceful village below. This ominous detail included on the German cover is absent in both the British and American versions. The cover of the American version is further distinguished by a slight shift in the figure's stance – we see her face in profile, and she does not have the wanderer's hiking stick – with a photorealist background standing in the place of the faux-naïve drawing on the German and British covers.⁵ Krug returns to Friedrich's iconic painting in the body of the work when she addresses the central theme of *Heimat* (Fig. 1). In this key passage, which raises the question of origin and identity, Krug presents the reader with a two-page spread: On the left-hand page, a definition of "Heimat" from the *Brockhaus Enzyklopädie* has been transcribed onto a piece of graph paper that has been placed over a tinted photograph of mountains. On the right-hand page, a visual citation of Friedrich's wanderer has been annotated with the narrator's musings: "How do you know who you are, / if you don't understand where you come from?" ("Wie kann man begreifen, wer man ist, / wenn man nicht

4 Both English- and German-language versions appeared in the same year. Krug first wrote the work in her second language, English, before rewriting it in her first language, German. For a discussion of Krug's work as self-translation and how graphic narratives "translate" the self in metaphorical terms, see Wolff 2025.

5 Krug has said she prefers the cover of the American edition because it incorporates a postcard of the Black Forest – featuring a photograph taken in 1900 before the two world wars – which she found in an antique bookstore in her hometown. Krug did not like the German publisher's suggestion to include a plane on the front cover, but ultimately, she went along with it. She made these comments during a roundtable discussion at the German Studies Association annual conference held in Portland on October 4, 2019. Together with Krug, the participants in the roundtable were Rüdiger Singer, Jan Süsselbeck, and myself.



Fig. 1: Verbalizing and visualizing “Heimat.” Krug, *Belonging*, 30–31.

versteht, woher man kommt?”) (31)⁶ By juxtaposing the semantic and the sublime on these two pages, Krug encourages the reader to compare verbal and visual modes of representation and to consider different ways of knowing.

The German and Anglo-American publishers of Krug’s work have marketed this large-format, richly illustrated book as a memoir. Simon & Schuster (US) describes the book as a “visual memoir – equal parts graphic novel, family scrapbook, and investigative narrative,”⁷ while Penguin (UK) and Random House (Germany) characterize the work as a “graphic memoir.”⁸ However, there are no explicit paratextual markers in the work that designate a particular genre other than the subtitle

6 In the following, I quote from the American English version followed by the German version in parentheses. The order of the pages in both unpaginated versions is identical.

7 See <http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Belonging/Nora-Krug/9781476796628> (accessed July 1, 2022).

8 Both English and German publishers produced short animated advertisements for the book. In the Penguin (UK) video, the work is described as a “graphic memoir exploring cultural identity and guilt,” while the Random House (Germany) video highlights the work as “ein Graphic Memoir; lebendig, wahr und poetisch erzählt” [a graphic memoir; vivid, true and poetically told; trans. L. L. W.] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsE8NmKfPLo> (accessed July 1, 2022); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvKE6ZEZg78> (accessed July 1, 2022).

that refers to it as a “family album.”⁹ The first invitation to read Krug’s work autobiographically comes by way of the front and back endpapers of the book: two-page spreads, labeled “My Mother’s Family / Town of Karlsruhe” (“Die Familie meiner Mutter / Karlsruhe”) and “My Father’s Family / Town of Kilsheim” (“Die Familie meines Vaters / Kilsheim”) respectively. The family members on both the maternal and paternal sides of the family extend back three generations. There is an implied hierarchy in the familial lineage as it is presented here: the maternal grandfather Willi and the paternal uncle Franz Karl are clearly emphasized through their out-sized proportions compared to the other family members, signaling to the reader that these two characters will be the focus of the narrator’s attention. The examples below are drawn from these two main narrative threads. Notably, neither the narrator nor an avatar of Krug is included in these familial mappings, but the deictic personal pronoun “my” indicates Krug’s presence and can be read as signaling an “autobiographical pact,”¹⁰ reinforced by the first-person narrative that follows.

The family lineage as it is mapped out on the books’ endpapers both frames and structures the entire work, which is in essence an investigation of family stories and German history as well as the collective memory important to both. Family members are presented as hybrid figures, reminiscent of a child’s cutout dolls: the heads are black-and-white photographs with slight color accents, which have been combined with cartoonish, hand-drawn bodies. The reappearance of these family photographs within the work establishes a connection to an extratextual reality and thus reinforces the autobiographical mode of storytelling (see the discussion of El Refaie 2010 below). The maternal side of the family is presented in turquoise and cool green tones, the paternal side in magenta and warm salmon tones. The same chartreuse background encircles each of the figures on both sides of the family, and the same handwriting labels each individual by stating their first name, profession, and familial relationship, including dates of birth and death as well, for example, “Franz-Karl (1926–1944) / farmer, my uncle” (“Franz-Karl [1926–1944] / Bauer, mein Onkel”) (back endpapers) and “Willi (1902–1988) / car mechanic, chauffeur, driving teacher, my grandfather” (“Willi [oder Willy] [1902–1988] / Automechaniker, Chauffeur, Fahrlehrer, mein Großvater”) (front endpapers). Krug’s use of complementary

9 The subtitle of the British version more closely corresponds to the German subtitle: “A German Family Album.”

10 “As it seems to be difficult, if not impossible, definitely to decide whether a text is autobiographical or not, the French critic Philippe Lejeune, as early as the 1970s, has suggested that we think of autobiography as based on the idea of an ‘autobiographical pact’. This means that the text offers to the reader a ‘pact’ to read it autobiographically. This ‘pact’ is offered either if the name of the author on the book cover is identical with the narrator’s and the protagonist’s name, or if the subtitle of the book reads ‘Autobiography’, ‘My Life’, etc.” (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2019, 3).

colors to differentiate the two sides of the family serves as an organizing principle throughout the work, thus revealing how color conveys meaning nonverbally. While the narrator is never named directly within the work, the correspondence between her and the author is nevertheless established both visually and verbally through the presentation of official typed documents containing her paternal grandfather's name, Krug, and his signature.

Although placed prominently at the center of the front cover, the narrator is rarely depicted in an embodied form within the pages of the work. Apart from the cover image, the narrator – as a physical presence – appears less than a dozen times in the nearly three hundred pages comprising the work. There are multiple possibilities for self-presentation in autobiographical comics, and the absence of an embodied narrator in *Belonging / Heimat* is one of the salient ways in which Krug pushes back against both current trends in the comics medium and the dominant tropes of graphic memoir.¹¹ Considering this absence in terms of gender, we might ask whether it is a subversive commentary on the omnipresence of the female body in popular culture, or we might ask whether Krug is resisting the overemphasis on her individual experience, in particular as a woman. There are, however, two key moments where the gendered body and history are brought together. In the first chapter, which focuses on the narrator's personal experiences, she recalls,

I learned about the Holocaust in school around the same time that my mother unceremoniously announced to the family over dinner that I had had my first period. / She wanted to do me a favor by acting less prudish than her own parents had, but for me, the idea of being a woman seemed to be as shameful as being a German.

(Von der Ermordung der Juden erfuhr ich in der Schule etwa zu dem Zeitpunkt, als meine Mutter der Familie beim Abendessen feierlich eröffnete, dass ich zum ersten Mal meine Periode gehabt hatte. / Sie wollte mir, indem sie weniger prüde mit diesem Thema umging als ihre eigenen Eltern, einen Gefallen tun, aber für mich war die Tatsache, eine Frau zu sein, ebenso beschämend wie die, Deutsche zu sein.) (Krug 2018 [20])

A similar kind of shame makes her want to hide her German accent, especially when encountering people who identify as Jewish ([35]), as in the final scene of the epilogue. Here, the narrator recounts how her pregnant body is read while riding the subway,

¹¹ Most artists use the affordances of the medium to “represent their physical identities in ways that reflect their innermost sense of self by using a range of symbolic elements and rhetorical tropes to add layers of meaning to their self-portraits” (Forceville, El Refaie, and Meesters 2014, 489). Illustrating this point, Krug described her preference for using landscape as a way to draw her inner self in the work (e.g., [52–53]; [126–127]; [273]; GSA Roundtable, Portland 2019).

A man in a yarmulke standing next to me asks the woman sitting in front of me to offer me her seat, and I thank him, still uncomfortable with my German accent. He can tell by the shape of my belly that something is growing in there, something with no consciousness. Someone with a state of mind as pure and undisturbed as the surface of freshly fallen snow.

(Neben mir steht ein Mann, der eine Kippa trägt, und bittet die Frau, die vor ihm sitzt, mir ihren Platz frei zu machen. Ich danke ihm, noch immer verunsichert wegen meines deutschen Akzents. Er kann an der Form meines Bauchs erkennen, dass dort etwas wächst. Etwas, das noch kein Bewusstsein hat und dessen Geisteszustand so rein und ungebrochen ist wie die Oberfläche frisch gefallenen Schnees.) (Krug 2018 [277])

With these sentences, Krug concludes her epilogue, in which she also reflects on the process of applying for American citizenship and expresses contentment with having delved into her family history. Seen in this light, the graphic memoir can be read as an attempt to clear her own conscience before bringing a new consciousness into the world. The absence of an embodied – that is, visually represented – self, both here and throughout the work as a whole, points to how *Belonging / Heimat* is not so much about Krug's individual experiences as it is about her family's history. Yet, she remains a consistent presence throughout the work in the form of a first-person narrative voice, and her subjectivity is visualized in various nonverbal ways, most prominently in her attempts to imagine the past and the experiences of the family members she never knew.

As a graphic narrative that makes extensive use of material artefacts, *Belonging / Heimat* illustrates the complex relationship between reality and representation on the one hand and the tension between the personal and the historical on the other, all of which make terms like autobiography and even autofiction feel inadequate.¹² As discussed above, Whitlock captures this problem by coining the term *autographics* in order to “draw attention to the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text in this genre of autobiography, and also to the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through comics” (2006, 966). Krug negotiates one important dimension of her subject position – she is a German woman who has been living in the United States for over twenty years – through the inclusion of “German Things” (“Katalog deutscher Dinge”) that she labels as being “From the notebook of a homesick émigré” (“Aus dem Notizbuch einer heimwehkranken Auswanderin”) [5, 32, 66, 82, 107, 199, 205, 278]. These one-page inserts feature aspects of German culture and are threaded throughout the work, creating a textured presentation of the narrator's subjectivity through her individual associations and connections to a broader

¹² *Autofiction* is itself a result of the complex relationship between autobiography and fiction that demonstrates “an urgent need for a third term in order to grasp something that is pressingly at stake in the relation of life and literature” (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2019, 3).

history and cultural discourse. This also brings in the dimension of gender, insofar as the work is at times reminiscent of scrapbooking, a decidedly gendered hobby.

Krug's artistic techniques simultaneously underscore and complicate the important role of material traces and objects in both preserving and activating memory in the work. This can be seen in Krug's use of archival sources from both personal and institutional archives – including bureaucratic forms and newspaper articles, handwritten notes and drawings – in addition to family photographs and found objects. Her complex and colorful method of annotating and manipulating, duplicating and layering material traces reveals that documents are anything but cut-and-dry accounts of historical facts. There are examples of an album within this album ([106]), notes within this collection of facsimile documents ([e.g., 42–49, 133, 187]), and books within the book (images of a reading primer [72] and her grandfather's *Kriegssoldbuch* [108]) – this *mise-en-abyme* of materials mimics the multiple strands the narrator weaves together in telling her family history. These examples illustrate the helpful distinction that El Refaie makes regarding the way that authenticity is established in autobiographical comics: authenticity that is rooted in “picture-immanent features” versus authenticity established through context (2010, 171). Krug demonstrates both modes, integrating material artefacts like photographs and documents that seem to provide proof of their own authenticity, and creating a narrative voice that explicitly thematizes the endeavor in order to tell an authentic story.

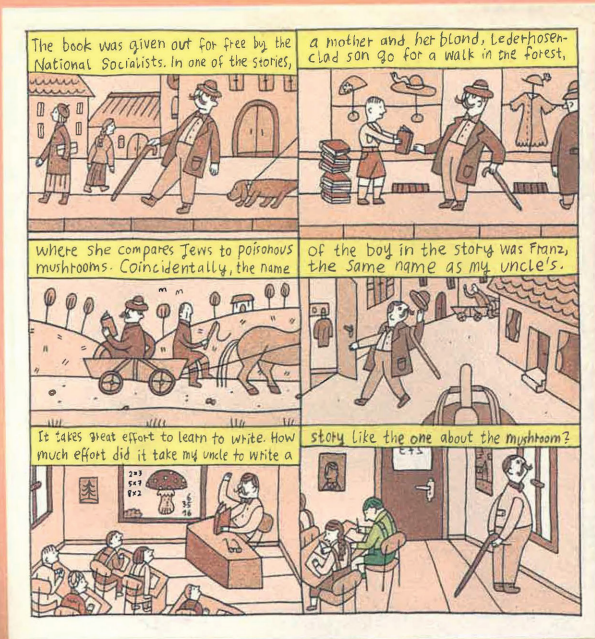
In addition to the integration of visual and physical materials on the one hand and techniques like collage on the other, Krug's work points to and reflects upon itself as a construction through the use of more traditional comics conventions like panels and gutters, speech and thought bubbles. There are more than a dozen instances of the comics mode in *Belonging / Heimat*, and I would like to highlight the way that Krug uses this mode to both explore and conjecture about experiences that are not her own. For instance, Krug reconstructs moments from her grandfather Willi's life in a series of panels that are based on the stories she hears from her mother and her Aunt Karin ([83–84]). While these pages constitute a more straightforward recounting, there are other comics in the work that attempt to reconstruct Willi's experience while also challenging the stories she has been told. Using an old phonebook from 1938 and the map that it contains, she discovers that her grandfather's driving school was located directly across from the synagogue in Karlsruhe. This recognition is juxtaposed with her aunt's contention that people were not political, and that their lack of political interest reflected the clear gender roles of the time: “They had many things to worry about. Women washed their laundry by hand back then! Men were worried about not being able to feed their families. I doubt that he even read the paper” (“Sie hatten ihre eigenen Sorgen. Frauen wuschen damals ihre Wäsche mit der Hand! Männer hatten Angst, ihre Familien



Fig. 2: Interrogating the past in comics. Krug, *Belonging*, 159.

nicht ernähren zu können. Ich bezweifle, dass er überhaupt irgendeine Zeitung las”) ([152]). In a direct challenge to Aunt Karin’s comment, Krug presents a series of four panels that suggest what Willi would have known even without reading the newspaper; specifically that he would have been able to see the burning synagogue from his office window on the night of the Nazi pogrom against the Jews, the so-called *Kristallnacht*, or the aftermath of the destruction the next day ([154]). A subsequent page is framed by the narrator’s fantasy of calling her grandfather under the number she finds in the phonebook to ask him directly, “Where were you the morning of November 10, 1938?” (“Wo warst du am Morgen des 10. November 1938?”), followed by panels that imagine four possible answers he could give (Fig. 2 [159]). On the following page, we read a further question about his possible participation in or resistance to the pogrom, juxtaposed with four anecdotes of individuals who tried to help ([160]). The reader is left to mull over these various possibilities as the narrator continues her research into what Willi did under National Socialism.

Was my uncle's story influenced by THE POISONOUS MUSHROOM,
the 1938 collection of anti-Semitic children's stories?



J: 2⁺ R: 43 Bf: 3 St.

Content: B⁺ Spelling: C⁺ Calligraphy: C

The teacher marked three spelling mistakes and two grammatical mistakes in the mushroom story, gave it a B for its content, and signed it "St."

Fig. 3: Imagining the past in comics. Krug, *Belonging*, 69.

Comics are also used to explore her uncle's past. Following facsimiled excerpts from her uncle's sixth-grade notebook ([58–59, 62–65]), one page of which includes a short essay entitled "The Jew, a poisonous mushroom" ("Der Jude, ein Giftpilz") ([65]), the narrator wonders whether he was influenced by a similarly titled anti-semitic children's book published in 1938. This question is positioned above a six-panel sequence in which the visual track imagines how the uncle's teacher would have come across the book *Der Giftpilz* and brought it into the classroom to further

the children's ideological indoctrination into National Socialism. The verbal track of the six panels briefly recounts the context and content of the children's book, notes the coincidence that the boy in the story has the same name as her uncle, and poses a final question about how hard he must have toiled to write the essay about the poisonous mushroom (Fig. 3 [69]).

It is open to interpretation whether the boy's strain was only physical or also cognitive and emotional. Ultimately the narrator will never know about her uncle's political convictions. Through the contrast between text and image in these comics as well as the contrast between these comics and other artistic modes of representation, Krug is able to show how family stories, village lore, and national and political history are intertwined. The intricately layered images of the graphic narrative reflect the layered nature of history and often present an even more complex story than what the verbal track conveys. These examples demonstrate not only how this work is much more than the sum of its verbal and visual parts but also how the comics medium demands an engaged reading practice consisting of both involvement and affiliation (El Refaie 2012).

The final chapter in Krug's book points directly to the intersection between family stories and history, and the inextricability of the individual from both. The narrator asks, "Who would we be as a family if the war had never happened?" ("Was für eine Familie wären wir, wenn kein Krieg gewesen wäre?") ([271]) Krug places this ultimately unanswerable question on a rather sparsely illustrated page, which stands in stark contrast to the complex construction and dense layering on the preceding pages. She gives her response on a page that similarly lacks any form on illustration beyond the use of two differently colored papers and inks, as if the nearly blank page is meant to underscore the universality of her concluding realization that "I am irrevocably intertwined with people and with places, with stories and with histories" ("dass ich verwickelt bin in einem Netz von Menschen und von Orten, von Geschichten und Geschichte") ([272]). Indeed, are we not all – independent of individual identity, political persuasion, and national background – caught in a web of people and places, stories and histories? In *Belonging / Heimat*, Krug illustrates how images communicate meaning *without* words and how subjectivity can be conveyed without embodiment – and, ultimately, how autobiographical graphic narratives engage the reader in both the story and a broader history.

To conclude, let us return to the role of embodiment for autobiographical graphic narratives. As El Refaie writes,

The notion of embodiment is very relevant to the graphic memoir genre, since producing multiple drawn versions of the self entails an explicit engagement with physicality. In works that deal with adolescence, illness, and/or disability, the bodily aspect of the self is particularly evident. Moreover, comics artists cannot ignore the sociocultural assumptions and values that

render bodies meaningful, for instance, those related to gender, class, ethnicity, age, health/sickness, and beauty/ugliness. (El Refaie 2012, 8)

Krug pushes back against the common tropes in autobiographical graphic narratives – e.g., the drawing hand or the artist at a drawing table – by rarely depicting the narrating protagonist. While the work as a whole does not place any particular emphasis on gender as the dominant factor determining experience, it plays a significant role in key moments. Moreover, by not emphasizing the visual representation of the narrator, the work undermines the omnipresence of the female body in popular culture while resisting the overemphasis on individual, gendered experiences. In the creation of “ein deutsches Familienalbum” (“a German family album”), the subtitle of the German and British English versions, Krug is certainly aiming at a more universal message, one that is neither limited to the realm of autobiography nor exclusively feminist. While the narrator remains largely *unembodied*, Krug’s subjectivity is nevertheless present, visually represented by other means, and she is still able to engage the reader on an emotional level. One might even argue that this gap places higher demands upon the reader, but ultimately with a greater return.

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List of Images

Fig. 1: Krug, Nora. *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home*. New York: Scribner, 2018. 30–31.

Fig. 2: Krug, Nora. *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home*. New York: Scribner, 2018. 159.

Fig. 3: Krug, Nora. *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home*. New York: Scribner, 2018. 69.