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Complicating the Narrative: Representation, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Witnessing

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Complicating the Narrative: Representation, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Witnessing

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Abstract: *Refugee and forced migrant issues have emerged as part of the nation's consciousness with the rising number of asylum seekers arriving in European countries, the uncertainty over the position of undocumented migrants in the United States, and the increase in asylum seekers crossing the United States-Canada border. The limited space and opportunity refugees and forced migrants have to represent themselves can lead to generalizations and over-simplified narratives about their lived experiences (O'Neill, 2008). Focusing on Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi (2003), this paper examines how graphic narratives written by forced migrants can complicate generalizations and act as a witness to their experiences. Simon's (2005, 2014) writing frames my thinking on witnessing and Hall's (1997a, 1997b; Jhally, 2014) ideas of representation, meaning, and power frame how I think about the representation of forced migrants. I explore the following questions in this paper: How does Persepolis bear witness to the complexity of Satrapi's experiences of forced migration? What might a possible response to this work of witness look like?*

Keywords: forced migrants, graphic narrative, witnessing

Introduction

Refugee and forced migrant issues have emerged as part of the nation's consciousness with the rising number of asylum seekers arriving in European countries, the uncertainty over the position of undocumented migrants in the United States, and the increase in asylum seekers crossing the United States-Canada border. Although the reception to refugee and forced migrant issues in Canada has been generally positive, one common narrative that still exists, both within and outside of Canada, is that refugees and forced migrants pose a threat to receiving countries (Castles, 2003). The limited space and opportunity for refugees and forced migrants to represent themselves means there are few narratives to counter this construction of danger and threat, leading to generalizations and over-simplified narratives about their lived experiences (O'Neill, 2008).

This paper examines how graphic narratives written by forced migrants themselves can complicate these generalizations and act as a witness to their experiences with a focus on *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2003). I explore the following questions: How does

Persepolis bear witness to the complexity of Satrapi's experiences of forced migration? And what might a possible response to this work of witness look like? I argue that the narrative and visual structure of graphic narratives can perform the work of bearing witness to how the everyday and historical intertwine (Chute, 2008). I begin with a short description of how ideas of representation frame my thinking about how meaning is made (Hall, 1997a, 1997b; Jhally, 2014) before moving on to a discussion of how refugees and forced migrants are often constructed as a threat. I then discuss witnessing, focusing on Simon's (2005, 2014) work and a brief introduction to graphic narratives, before ending with an exploration of how *Persepolis* allows Satrapi a space in which to witness her experiences and what kind of acknowledgement or response is possible from the reader.

Representation

Hall (1997b) wrote that the relation between "things," (objects, for example), signs (words, sounds, or images), and language produces meaning, and the process that links the three is representation. Jhally (2014) described an "old view" of representation as something that depicts or stands in for something else, literally a re-presenting of meaning. This contrasts with a "new view," which is more complex—in this view, there are no fixed meanings to an object, image, or event. Additionally, he stated that, in this view, "representation is not *outside* the event, not *after* the event, but *within* the event itself; it is constitutive of it" (Jhally, 2014, 16:29, emphasis in original). Here, representation is part of the meaning-making process as it happens, not something that happens after the event is over.

Representation is also related to the exercise of power, often dependent on false assumptions that a person is a homogeneous representative of a category, such as gender, ethnicity, or nationality (Greene, 1994). Power is not just about economic and physical coercion, but also about the power to represent someone or something in a particular way, and stereotyping is key to this symbolic violence (Hall, 1997a). Jhally (2014) stated that "the *attempt* to fix it is why power intervenes in representation at all...they want, as it were, a relationship between the image and a powerful definition of it to become naturalized so that *that* is the only meaning it can possibly carry" (45:27, emphasis in original). This is what stereotyping is – an attempt to firmly fix meaning in place, to ensure that when someone sees an image of a person or group of people, there is only a limited range of options for who they can be, what they can do, and what their possibilities or constraints are (Jhally, 2014). In the case of refugees and forced migrants, visual representation is essential to forming the stereotype of who they are or what they look like (Wright, 2002). Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison, and Nicholson (2013) emphasized the importance of representation through visual images which,

shape what can and cannot be seen and indirectly, what can and cannot be thought. They influence not only what can be said legitimately in public but also what cannot be said. They help prevent some political positions from being established while leaving open a discursive space that can be occupied by others. (p. 400)

The influence of visual representation in shaping how groups of people are viewed is particularly relevant to marginalized groups who might not be in a position to represent themselves, such as refugees and forced migrants.

Refugees and Forced Migrants

The 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention stated that a person may claim refugee status if they have a,

well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951)

In order to gain recognition as a refugee, a person must demonstrate: 1) that they experienced, or are experiencing, persecution; 2) that their own government cannot or will not protect them from that persecution; and 3) that the persecution they are experiencing is based on one of the protected grounds in the definition of the UNHCR treaty (Forbes Martin, 2004). Voutira and Doná (2007) noted that "'refugee' is a complex category (albeit with a dwindling constituency), which denotes those who undergo forcible uprooting, who lack protection, [and] are stateless" (p. 163). The category "refugee" does not cover all those who have been forced to leave their homes for a variety of reasons— it is a very specific designation given to those who have officially sought asylum. What all forcibly displaced people have in common is that they have been forced to leave their homes and must figure out a way to survive, whether they have official refugee status or not. I use the term refugees and forced migrants to include a wide range of forced migration experiences.

Refugees and Forced Migrants as a Threat

For as long as people have moved from one place to another, there are those who have held suspicion of the stranger and the supposed upheaval that a new person or group of people may cause to the social, political, and economic fabric of a place. In this section, I will outline some of the literature that details how refugees and forced migrants have been

constructed as a threat, both inside and outside of Canada. Specifically, I will detail four different kinds of threats that they supposedly pose: as illegitimate refugee claimants, as terrorists, as involved in illegal activity, and as a threat to social cohesion.

One of the dominant ways in which perceptions of refugees and forced migrants are constructed is as illegitimate, or “bogus.” The assumption here is that many refugee applications are false— they have not been forced to migrate but are faking persecution because they want to exploit the receiving country into accepting them as it is a more desirable place to live (Esses, Veenvliet, Hodson, & Mihic, 2008; Johnson, 2011; Marfleet, 2006). In their study that examined the possible dehumanization of refugees through the news media, Esses, Medianu, and Lawson (2013) found that participants who had read a news editorial describing refugees as bogus queue-jumpers were more likely to dehumanize refugees during their answers to follow-up questions and less likely to hold favourable attitudes towards both refugees and Canada’s refugee policies. The assumptions that accompany the bogus refugee label, including the high cost of employing refugee candidates and their supposed propensity to abuse the welfare system, casts doubt on their legitimacy to live and work in Canada (Jackson & Bauder, 2013). This reinforces assumptions about the “place of refugees” in Canada, including what kind of employment they should have (Jackson & Bauder, 2013, p. 376). To counter this assumption, Marfleet (2006) pointed out the implausibility of thinking that refugees are opportunists who are trying to take advantage of a relaxed system. He wrote, “people do not willingly undertake long and dangerous journeys to unknown or uncertain destinations, abandoning their material, social, cultural and other resources, unless they are under extreme pressure” (p. 14). This complicates the idea that being a forced migrant is a choice that people have made because it will grant them easier access to a more desirable living situation.

Because of this tendency to view refugees and forced migrants as illegitimate, those seeking refuge in Western nations are often viewed with suspicion, feared, or assumed to be a bad influence (Esses, Veenvliet, Hodson, & Mihic, 2008; Marfleet, 2006). A newer discourse of the refugee or forced migrant is that they overlap in perceived origin and ethnicity with the figure of the foreign Islamic terrorist, and that they will bring the instability and disorder from their places of origin to the receiving country (Castles, 2003; Johnson, 2011; Marfleet, 2006). We only have to look at the recent travel ban in the United States to see an example of this thinking in action, but the issue is a global one. In their study of visual dehumanization of refugees in Australian newspapers, Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison, and Nicholson (2013) found that showing images of groups of mostly Arab-looking men on a boat, when writing about refugees, feeds into a “politics of fear” (Furedi, 2005, as cited in Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison, and Nicholson, 2013) that is perceived as a potential threat to Australian identity and stability.

Another kind of threat that refugees and forced migrants supposedly pose is that of being involved in illegal activity. Marfleet (2006) wrote that this is particularly true for those who try to enter a country and then claim asylum— by evading migration controls, having irregular movements, and placing themselves outside of the law, they are viewed as having abandoned their right to asylum. He stated that this is hypocritical, since states are often responsible for setting up the networks that allow people to enter their country illegally. For example, during periods of high demand for labour, governments will often ignore entry restrictions, which encourages vulnerable people to come who are more likely to be exploited. In addition, images that show groups of asylum seekers next to barbed wire or border guards promote themes of illegality and invasion (Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison, & Nicholson, 2013). Along with the media, political responses that portray refugees and asylum seekers as deviant and involved in criminal behaviour prepare the general population to hold these views as well (O’Neill, 2010).

Finally, forced migrants who maintain their own languages and customs, and who live in communities with others from their countries of origin as a way of coping with exclusion and racism, are viewed as a threat to social cohesion (Castles, 2003). With the increase in transnational communities around the world, people are engaging in recurrent cross-border activities at a higher rate than ever before, resulting in multiple affiliations that question the nation-state as the focus of belonging (Castles, 2003). Refugees and forced migrants are positioned as having questionable loyalties, and this makes it seem reasonable to some to close borders in an attempt to control them through what Malkki (1995) called “technologies of power” (p. 512). These supposed threats of illegitimacy, terrorism, participation in illegal activity, and social disruption are some of the factors that can lead to what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) identified as a *single story*.

One of the biggest influencers of public opinion with respect to refugees and forced migrants is the media, which plays a key role in bringing their images into people’s homes (Wright, 2002). By dehumanizing refugees as a group, “the media can strongly influence the public's overall attitudes toward the group as well as support for policies and procedures relevant to the group” (Esses, Veenvliet, Hodson, & Mihic, 2008, p. 21). Even though refugees and forced migrants tend to be viewed more positively in Canada than in many other Western nations, negative portrayals by the media can heavily influence attitudes toward them (Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013). This is particularly true for people of the receiving country who do not have direct contact with them. In their study of how migrants are portrayed in the media in Sweden, Trebbe and Schoenhagen (2011) wrote that

in the absence of direct contacts between [Swedish citizens] and migrants, the media are said to have a key role in building bridges. In the participants’ eyes, simplifying

and superficial articles about migrants therefore endanger the coexistence of [Swedish citizens] and immigrants. (p. 423)

While this study was conducted with migrants, not refugees or forced migrants, I would argue that a similar argument could be made for those who are forcibly displaced or seeking asylum in a third country.

Arriving in a new country and understanding yourself to be perceived as a threat, refugees and forced migrants may feel compelled to perform what Ahmed (2010) described as the “happiness duty,” (p. 130) which is a duty imposed on migrants to describe their arrival as good and not to speak of what is not good. As a would-be citizen, they are bound by the happiness duty not to speak about racism in the present or the unhappiness of colonialism’s history, while also feeling pressure to integrate, which demands that they embrace a common culture that is already given (Ahmed, 2010). Their fixation on unhappiness or injury is read as an obstacle to their own happiness and to the happiness of the next generation and the entire nation (Ahmed, 2010). Extending this thinking to include refugees and forced migrants, I would argue that they are under just as much, if not more, pressure to perform the happiness duty because of the circumstances under which they have arrived— they have been privately sponsored, and supported by, Canadian citizens, or have been *chosen* and sponsored by the government. If they have feelings of unhappiness, their task is to get over it, as if, when they do, the racism, the unhappiness, the exclusion, and the difficulty will disappear (Ahmed, 2010).

But what if they cannot or do not want to get over it? What if they cannot or do not want to forget, even if remembering is painful? How might one interrupt this narrative of refugees and forced migrants as a threat who must perform the happiness duty in order to “correctly” integrate? I argue that Satrapi (2003), in her graphic narrative *Persepolis*, constructs her narrative both visually and textually as an act of witness that refuses to forget and demands that the reader inherit the (at times) difficult narrative that she is offering. Simon’s (2005, 2014) writing helped frame my own thinking about *Persepolis* and in the following section I briefly outline some of his thinking on witnessing and the obligations that it imposes as an ethical concept.

Witnessing

Simon (2014) wrote about witnessing as an ethical concept that is enacted through “one’s relationship with others in ways that make evident that one’s thought and practice has been informed by the living memory of prior testimony” (p. 20). In relation to his work on exhibitions of lynching photographs, he wrote about *transitivity*, and “how exhibitions that offer images and narratives that trace the lives of those who have lived and died in

times and places other than our own, may have some force that enjoins something of our capacities and felt responsibilities” (Simon, 2014, p. 36). Although Simon (2014) wrote about exhibitions that show images of lynching from the past, I think this same thinking can be applied to the narratives of people with forced migrant experience, particularly those that include violence or trauma, because of the similar ways in which both call us to attend to the narratives of others. He also wrote about *transactive memory* and how this can expand the group of people that count for us, facilitating an encounter not just as strangers who might deserve pity or compassion, but as people who tell stories that change our own (Simon, 2005). This is important when thinking about a response to the narratives of people with forced migrant experience— how might we respond to their stories as if those stories might impact our own? Low and Sonntag (2013) wrote that there are two common responses to a story that is significantly different from your own: You either reject it because it is so far outside of your experiences that it is impossible to engage with or you incorporate it into your own story because you think you know how the narrator feels. Powell (2015) related these responses specifically to forced migrants: If they appear too pathetic, it is hard to imagine them as productive citizens. In this response, their narrative is rejected because it is too far outside of common experiences. But if they are not presented as pathetic enough— if they appear too familiar, or if they are not visibly wounded or impoverished— then they might not be considered a “real” refugee. The kind of transitivity that Simon (2014) described might be a way to think beyond those two common responses.

Witnessing to the testimony of others is one way to expand the circle of people who count for us. Simon (2005) wrote that witnessing requires an openness and a reflexivity in one’s encounter with the testimony, accepting that you might have to restructure your understanding of the past, present, and future, as well as altering your priorities and actions. In his later work on the exhibitions of photographs of lynching, he wrote that these images bring traces of the past into the present, creating “a fissure in one’s historical consciousness, one that makes it possible for certain traces of the past to break in and indeterminately alter the present and its future possibilities” (Simon, 2014, p. 204). In looking at narratives, images, or events that are difficult to face, the witness is required to do more than simply look and refuse to look away— otherwise, the act of witness remains impoverished (Simon, 2014). In order to avoid this, he outlined the following obligations of witnessing: 1) to bear the weight of historical events and acknowledge that memories of violence and injustice press down on both the personal and collective sense of humanity; 2) to transport stories of injustice past their original moment of telling to another time and space where they can be seen and heard; and 3) to give testimony to what I have witnessed in the testimony of others (Simon, 2005). Satrapi’s (2003) *Persepolis* contributes to this work

of witnessing, and in the sections that follow, I outline some of the characteristics of graphic narratives that help to do this work.

Graphic Narratives

Definitions

McCloud (1993) defined comics, at least provisionally, as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9). Wolk (2007) cautioned against a definitive definition of comics and argued that the medium moves across any boundary that you might try to draw around it, and “whatever politics are implicit in the definition always boomerang on the definer” (p. 17). Both authors agreed that comics are a medium with their own devices, clichés, ideas and images, and there is a relationship between cartoons (an approach to making pictures) and comics (a medium which often employs that approach) (McCloud, 1993; Wolk, 2007). There does not appear to be a consensus on what to call these illustrated books. While Wolk (2007) used the terms *comics* to refer to the medium because that is what the people who make them use amongst themselves, others (Boatright, 2010; Nabizadeh, 2016; Schneider, 2014) used *graphic novels*, while still others (Chute, 2008, 2010) used *graphic narrative*. I will use the term graphic narrative to describe *Persepolis* because it is a non-fiction narrative using comics as its medium.

Characteristics of Graphic Narratives

One of the most obvious characteristics of graphic narratives is that they combine words and images in the crafting of a narrative. Words and pictures together have historically been considered a diversion or a product of commercialism—we are expected to graduate from picture books to “real” books as we age (McCloud, 1993). However, graphic narratives can offer this combination of text and image in very sophisticated ways. Nabizadeh (2016) wrote that readers must work to interpret written and visual messages simultaneously, and the meaning that is produced depends on the interplay between both modes of communication. Watkins (2012) wrote that the spaces created by the combination of visual and verbal texts require the reader to negotiate both harmonies and tensions that engage personal knowledge, experience, and memory. McCloud (1993) outlined the different ways in which images and text work together to convey meaning. Images can illustrate what the text is saying without adding much to it, and vice versa. They can both convey basically the same message, or one can amplify the other. They can follow entirely different courses without intersecting, work together to convey an idea that neither could do on their own, or create a montage, where the text is an integral part of the image. That

comics can offer “all the potential imagery of film and painting plus the intimacy of the written word” (McCloud, 1993, p. 212) is a big part of the impact they can have on readers.

A second characteristic of graphic narratives is that they, like other kinds of art, require interpretation. When you look at an image in a graphic narrative, you do not see the world or a direct representation of it, but rather, an interpretation of the world, with parts that are exaggerated, adapted, or invented (Wolk, 2007). But what is perhaps unique about the medium of comics is that the immersive experience of reading them is not just about what is visible in their panels, but also what happens between them (Wolk, 2007). Wolk (2007) wrote that, “a lot of the pleasure in reading comics is filling in *all* the blank space beyond each panel, as far as it can go in both space and time, with the drawing on the page as a guide or set of hints” (p. 132, emphasis in original). This is known as closure, where the reader observes parts, but perceives the whole, completing what is incomplete based on their past experiences (McCloud, 1993). The artist makes the reader do some of the imaginative work moving from panel to panel through the narrative, trying to make that work as engaging as possible (Wolk, 2007). McCloud (1993) wrote, “comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (p. 67). This interpretive work means that different readers will experience the works differently, making for potentially interesting and provocative discussions. This medium is unique in both giving so much to its audience while asking them to do much of the interpretive work (McCloud, 1993).

A third characteristic important to graphic narratives is that they can help their creators represent difficult experiences. Chute (2010) suggested that the complex visualizing that graphic narratives demand of readers suggests that we need to re-think the dominant tropes of invisibility and unspeakability characteristic of trauma theory. There is concern that projects that work with people who have experienced violence, or that show violence, are in danger of encouraging voyeurism (Brushwood-Rose & Low, 2014). Brushwood-Rose and Low (2014) wrote about the importance of the *craftedness* of digital stories in their work documenting stories of women impacted by refugee and immigrant experience. They discuss how the craftedness of digital stories emerges, “not as direct or transparent reflections of experience, but as products of a creative and often imaginative process, which involves acts of invention, aesthetic choices and a significant amount of editing” (p. 38). Graphic narratives can do similar work, and while we may think of constructed narratives as “unreal,” they can allow the artist to craft a story that more fully represents her experiences, particularly if those experiences are traumatic or difficult to write about (Brushwood-Rose & Low, 2014).

Finally, graphic narratives tell stories from a particular social or historical perspective (Park, 2016) that can bring counter-narratives to the fore, pushing back against the dominant discourse of those who have historically “won” (Schneider, 2014). The alternative perspective that offers the voice of trauma survivors helps to “redress overdetermined narratives of marginalized subjectivities, including women’s lives” (Nabizadeh, 2016, p. 153). There is a need for these alternative narratives that provide perspective from the point of view of refugees and forced migrants, countering the dominant messages of refugees as a problem or a threat (O’Neill, 2010). Even when narratives of inclusion are told, they often repeat stereotypes and inaccuracies of racialized people, reinforcing the dominant culture as the norm (Subedi, 2013).

All of these characteristics taken together—the combination of words and images, the importance of interpretation, representing difficult experiences, and offering counter-narratives—help to create a piece of work that can bear witness to the author’s experiences. Inspired by Chute’s (2008, 2010) work, and using Simon (2005, 2014) as a guide, in the next section I will detail some of the ways in which *Persepolis* represents an act of witness by Satrapi, and how the reader might respond to or interpret this act.

***Persepolis* as an Act of Witness**

The Complete Persepolis is a graphic narrative written by Marjane Satrapi. It details her time growing up in Iran after the 1979 Revolution, being sent to Austria by her parents at age 14, her return to Iran at age 18 and then leaving Iran again as an adult. It was first available in English as excerpts in *Ms. Magazine* (Chute, 2008), and though it has not been officially translated into Farsi or published in Iran, apparently there is an unauthorized Persian version circulating on the black market (Chute, 2010). *Persepolis* offers an example of how authors of graphic narratives can use their texts to bear witness to their experiences. Given her history, Satrapi fits the description of a forced migrant: She leaves Iran because her parents are concerned for her safety, and that danger is rooted in the state. Importantly, I am not suggesting that her experience is indicative of some kind of *normal* forced migrant experience—as she is privileged in many ways—but I am suggesting that there is no normal forced migrant experience, and that her narrative complicates the very idea that there ever could be.

Persepolis is driven by Satrapi’s experiences, including traumatic ones, and “establishes a temporal structure in which multiple selves exist graphically” (Chute, 2010, p. 140), as both the childhood selves and present-day narrator selves are present on the page. For example, while simultaneously trying to manage her guilt at being relatively safe while her parents were in danger in Iran, and fit in and make new friends in Austria, she denied being Iranian to a boy she met at a party (Satrapi, 2003, p. 195). Satrapi drew her

teenage self, dressed as a punk, looking uncertainly at a boy who asked where she was from. She told him that she was French, and when he remarked that she had “a funny accent for a French girl” (p. 195), she leaves the boy to re-join her friends. In the next panel, she drew herself looking unhappily at the reader while her adult narrator states, “I should say that at the time, Iran was the epitome of evil and to be Iranian was a heavy burden to bear. It was easier to lie than to assume that burden” (Satrapi, 2003, p. 195). Nabizadeh (2016) also identified this as an important moment in the narrative and noted that Satrapi is both a primary witness, observing events first hand, and a secondary witness, “remediating the past through imagined memories” (p. 158). Not only has Satrapi articulated some of the difficulties of being an Iranian teenager in Austria with parents still in Iran, she also engaged the work of memory, which required conversing between different versions of herself (Chute, 2010). The way that graphic narratives appear, crafting words and images together, mimics memory, and part of the way that Satrapi unfolded the procedure of memory is through her monochromatic style, as “the visual emptiness of the simple, ungraded blackness in the frames shows not the scarcity of memory but rather its thickness, its depth; the ‘vacancy’ represents the practice of memory for the author and possibly for the reader” (Chute, 2010, p. 144).

Simon (2005) identified one of the obligations of witnessing as bearing the weight of historical events and understanding that memories press down on both the personal and the collective sense of history. Satrapi’s witnessing blended the personal and the collective, weaving both public and private speech and spaces together (Chute, 2010), while also moving between the everyday and the historical. Chute’s (2010) reading of this work points out some of the key moments where this move occurs. On the very first page of the text, Satrapi (2003) drew herself in her class photo from 1980, as one of a line of girls wearing the veil (p. 3). In this panel, 10-year-old Satrapi is sitting and looking directly at the reader with a slightly downturned mouth, arms folded on the table in front of her. The front part of her hair is visible underneath the veil (p. 3). In a panel directly below this one, she drew people protesting in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and next to that, a teacher handing veils to two girls after it became mandatory to wear them at school (p. 3). Satrapi chose to introduce herself to the reader by making this move from something small and private (a class photo) to something large and political in just one frame, drawing a link between the historical and the personal (Chute, 2008, 2010).

A second example of this same move occurs at a key moment in the narrative two years into the Iran-Iraq War, which Chute (2010) has also identified as an important moment. Upset with her mother for what she thought was her too-strict response to Satrapi skipping school, she goes down to the basement, which she describes as her “hideaway” (Satrapi, 2003, p. 114). Over a series of panels on the next four pages, Satrapi drew her

childhood self as facing and directly speaking to the reader. In this breaking of the fourth wall, she explained that Iraq proposed a peace settlement, but the Iranian government refused it, plunging them deeper into war (Satrapi, 2003, pp. 114-115). She interspersed images of herself, an adolescent girl walking down the basement steps, with images of protest and violence involving both soldiers and civilians (Satrapi, 2003, pp. 114-117)—again blurring the everyday and the historical (Chute, 2010). She finished her discussion of the political events by talking about how those opposed to the regime were arrested and executed. She illustrated this with a group of men and women standing together with their hands handcuffed either in front or behind them, and then in the next panel, standing in a line with blindfolds on, waiting for execution (Satrapi, 2003, p. 117). She connected this to her personal experience by stating, “as for me, I sealed my act of rebellion against my mother’s dictatorship by smoking the cigarette I’d stolen from my uncle two weeks earlier” (Satrapi, 2003, p. 117). This episode concluded with Satrapi, as a child, looking at the reader and stating, “with this first cigarette, I kissed childhood goodbye,” and then Satrapi, as an adult, stating, “now I was a grown-up” (Satrapi, 2003, p. 117). These moves from the personal to the historical, and back again, demonstrate Satrapi’s understanding that she bears the weight of the historical events of her life, and that her memories are important pieces of evidence that work to contest “dominant images and narratives of history, debunking those that are incomplete and those that do the work of elision” (Chute, 2010, p. 136).

Finally, Simon (2005) identified the transportation of stories to another time and location as important to the work of witnessing, and Satrapi has done this by emphasizing that she will not forget her story and experiences, demanding that the reader pay attention and keep the experiences she is writing about alive in their minds through the use of this phrase at important moments in the book (Chute 2008, 2010). In the introduction to the graphic narrative, she wrote that she does not want the Iranian people who died in prison or in the war against Iraq, who suffered under repressive regimes, or who were forced to flee their homes to ever be forgotten (Satrapi, 2003). In another example, during a six page stretch while she prepares to leave Iran for Austria, the words “don’t forget” or “won’t forget” appear five times in relation to her family and friends (Satrapi, 2003, pp.148-153). When her parents tell her that they are sending her to Austria where she will be safe and able to attend a French school, they reassure her that they trust her and that she will be happy there. During this conversation, her father hugs her and says, “Don’t ever forget who you are,” to which she replies, “No. I won’t ever forget” (p. 148). As she prepares to leave, she takes down her posters and invites her friends over. She says to them, “Here. I’m giving you my most precious things, so that you won’t forget me” (p. 149). She spends the night before she leaves with her grandmother, who offers her this advice: “Always keep your

dignity and be true to yourself" (p. 150). The next day, as she is leaving for the airport, her grandmother hugs her and says, "Don't ever forget what I told you" (p. 151). Finally, when her parents say their final goodbyes to her at the airport, they end with "Don't forget who you are and where you come from" (p. 152). Not forgetting is not just about challenging official histories and telling stories that get taken up and told in other locations, but also about bearing witness to how the historical and the everyday intertwine, something Satrapi does throughout the book (Chute 2008, 2010).

Responding to Works of Witness

When confronted with a narrative such as *Persepolis*, how is the reader to respond? While not forgetting is part of the project of witnessing, Simon (2005) wrote that this is not enough on its own, and that working for social transformation is not just about not forgetting the past but remembering it otherwise. He stated,

foundational to the notion of remembering otherwise is not only the adjudication of responsibility and the provision of just reparation; it also includes the production of a historical imaginary within which it is possible to rethink as sensible and justifiable those practices that establish one people's exploitation, dominion, or indifference with regard to others. (p. 9)

At stake here is welcoming the memories of others as a teaching, not just as new information, "but more fundamentally as that which brings me more than I can contain" (Simon, 2005, p. 10). Being brought more than you can contain is not about becoming a symptom of a history you cannot possess, but a condition of possibility for true learning that risks dispossessing you of your certainties (Simon, 2005). It is possible that, reading *Persepolis*, we are brought more than we can contain. Indeed, over half of its chapters contain images of dead bodies and serious violence (Chute, 2010). Reading, hearing, and listening to the narrative is important, but it is not enough. Simon (2005) reminded us that uncovering stories and histories that have been suppressed does not ensure that they will become part of the historical imaginary or communal identity of a people or place. He insisted that exploring alternative possibilities included listening differently, in order to hear in a way that what is heard becomes part of your living memory.

Simon (2014) wrote about remembrance through practices of inheritance, which he described as "a felt sense of obligation to inherit what one has seen and learned so that it becomes a locus of difference in the way one lives one's life" (p. 215). Writing about the exhibitions of lynching photographs mentioned above, Simon (2014) wondered if, through this inheritance that is never fixed, exhibitions could be thought of as a gift that demands a thoughtful response. He listed some practices that can encourage the work of inheritance

within practices of remembrance: 1) emphasizing that historical narratives include inconsistencies and contradictions that are not easily resolved; 2) showing images that are not easily reduced to illustrations of a particular narrative and that provoke surprise, concern, and questions about how to respond; 3) layers of images, text, and recordings so that interaction can happen; and 4) providing access to a variety of responses, as well as providing an opportunity for visitors to add their views to dialogue about the exhibit (Simon, 2014). Satrapi's (2003) narrative is full of contradictions and complexities— she lives a fairly privileged life in Iran yet ends up sleeping on the streets of Austria for two months. She also provided a visual narrative that is unfamiliar to many— a first-hand account of the Iran-Iraq war and how it impacted her and her family. The layering of words and images of the graphic narrative provides the interaction called for in the third condition, and educators can work with their students to respond to it as witnesses themselves, thus participating in Simon's (2005) final obligation of witnessing— giving testimony to my witness of someone else's testimony.

Conclusion

The representations of refugees and forced migrants are key to how policies, which affect them, get written and interpreted (Johnson, 2011). As a medium, the graphic narrative can help to broaden the representational possibilities for refugees and forced migrants to tell a more complex story. It is my hope that the impact of the images and narratives of the lived experience of forced migrants can stimulate the social imagination, opening up the discursive space and encouraging readers to question and complicate mainstream representations of the lived experience of refugees and forced migrants. Satrapi's (2003) call to not forget really stayed with me throughout the narrative, and after. She refused the happiness duty (Ahmed, 2010), and instead insisted on remembering and honouring the complexity of her experiences. While remembrance does not guarantee anything, particularly justice or compassion, "those of us with commitments to the possibility of a more just and equitable society have to face the necessity of remaining hopeful" (Simon, 2014, p. 203). Hope can act as a way to think about a desired future and should not be dismissed as merely a utopian ideal, but instead considered as "affectively driven by a force to thought with the potential to generate critical insight into the complex, often contradictory terms and conditions of everyday life" (Simon, 2014, p. 5). While *Persepolis'* narrative is at times difficult to read and experience, as a practice of remembrance, it does the work of witnessing to Satrapi's experiences and demanding that we witness as well.

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