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Drawing the Adult Child: US Graphic Memoir and the Anthropologies of Kinship and Personhood

Abstract

This article argues the usefulness of the culturally pervasive and impactful genre of graphic memoir for addressing gaps in the anthropologies of kinship and personhood. It identifies a key figure in some sections of US society: the “adult child”. Adult childness emerges from the graphic memoirs discussed here as when a person finds themselves particularly conscious of *having (or having had) parents*. To the perennially debated question of what connects kin in a US context the article proposes: *the past*. Key facets of US personhood and kinship are founded on the tenet that what happens in the lives of one’s parents and one’s childhood go a long way to explaining who an adult is.

INTRODUCTION

US graphic memoirs and the public culture that surrounds them refract the widely-held tenet that to be an adult who has – or has had – parents is to face a mystifying set of practical, financial, emotional, and ontological challenges. From June to October 2015, Stockbridge Massachusetts’ Norman Rockwell Museum hosted an exhibition entitled “Roz Chast: Cartoon Memoirs”. Chast (b.1954), a *New Yorker* staff cartoonist since the 1970s, has been a distinctive presence in US visual culture for decades. However, the exhibition honored a specific distinction: the publication of *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (2014), Chast’s graphic memoir about her Brooklyn-dwelling parents, George and Elizabeth’s, aging and deaths in the 2000s. Copy from the exhibition’s website emphasized the book’s resonance with broad societal concerns:

While the particulars are Chast-ian in their idiosyncrasies, focusing on an anxious father who had relied heavily on his wife for stability as he slipped into dementia, and a former assistant principal mother whose overbearing personality had sidelined the artist for decades, the themes are universal: adult children accepting a parental role; aging and unstable parents leaving a family home to live within the confines of an institution; dealing with uncomfortable physical intimacies; managing logistics; and hiring strangers to provide the most personal care.

Museum events running in tandem with the exhibition, such as “Aging in America: Attitudes and Access” (September 24 2015), bore out traits often associated with graphic memoir: a focus on intergenerational relationships and a subject matter that resonates with US (and often international) publics. Indeed, the most established graphic memoirists are amongst the US’s foremost public intellectuals. The influence of Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning account of his Polish-Jewish father’s experiences in Auschwitz, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (1991), reaches from the commemorative – it is referenced in Holocaust museums in the US and in Europe – to the morally and literarily instructive – *Maus* is a high school syllabus favorite available in over thirty languages. Spiegelman was entrusted with the 24th September 2001 issue cover of the *New Yorker*, for which he rendered the Twin Towers in black on a black background. An Off-Broadway then Broadway adaptation of MacArthur “Genius” Award recipient Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) was shortlisted for the 2014 Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama Inspired by American History. This was not because it is an obviously “everywoman’s” story of US politics, but because of Bechdel’s poignant rendering of her fairly unusual personal history. Bechdel’s father, a closeted bisexual, died in 1980 by probable suicide, shortly after being asked for a divorce by Bechdel’s mother. Bechdel, born on the other side of Stonewall to her father, had herself come out only weeks before. One need not have read *Fun Home* or Bechdel’s comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* to recognize her name. Film and television critics frequently mention how to “fail the Bechdel Test” is to fail to portray women talking to each other about anything other than a man. *Maus* and *Fun Home* set a precedent for graphic memoir by depicting baby boomers’ relationships with their parents as both contextualized by and constituting how US publics deal with the twentieth century’s “critical events” (Das 1995).

This article has two main aims. The first is to open up a gap in the anthropologies of kinship and personhood by identifying a key figure in some sections of US society: the “adult child”. I argue that “adult childness”, which roughly corresponds with middle age, is not only a chronological age-oriented point in the lifecourse but a construct that speaks to kinship and relatedness’ existential implications. Adult childness emerges from the graphic memoirs discussed here as when a person finds themselves particularly conscious of *having (or having had) parents*. It is the state of having an acute awareness of one’s being a son or a daughter, “even” after passing the typical age at which, in these authors’ communities, one is parented in the sense of being the

responsibility of a parent or guardian. A “child” can be someone who is as yet to advance through puberty or someone who is a son or a daughter but here I look at the latter.

To the perennially debated question of what connects kin in a US context (e.g. Schneider 1968; Weston 1991) the article proposes: the past. I argue that key facets of US personhood and kinship are founded on the tenet that what happens in firstly, the lives of one’s parents and secondly, one’s childhood, go a long way to explaining who an adult is. The second point of the article is to assess graphic memoir as a provocative genre in portraying the adult child. A biography of a parent or parents is also a consideration of how the author “became herself”. Likewise, the graphic memoir is not “only” the story of an author but the story of her parents (cf. Chute 2006, 1013). But form matters. Graphic memoirs are not constrained by the line-after-line layout which comprise even the most imaginative of purely textual literary works; they invite the reader to look at each page or frame both as a whole and to pick out corners of a frame on which to focus. The drawings in graphic memoirs are not “only” illustrations; they too serve to be read. As such, graphic memoir provides an apt alternative to prose-style life histories because they embody the tenet in the contemporary anthropologies of kinship and personhood – but also more generally in US society – that a person’s connections with both kin and with her memories seldom assume a linear form (Carsten 2007).

By exploring both the content and the cultural responses to both Chast’s book and a second recent US illustrated memoir about parental ageing, death, and middle age, Bruce Eric Kaplan’s *I Was a Child: A Memoir* (2015), this article speaks to recent work on literature and visual art’s elucidatory power for anthropologists (Fournier and Nic Craith 2016; Narayan 2012; Wulff 2016). It argues that it is no coincidence that “adult childness” has emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: “the age of memoir” (Zinsser 1998, 3). The connection between memoir and kinship and personhood is clear but the genre’s ubiquity makes it controversial. “That you had parents and a childhood does not of itself qualify you to write a memoir”, wrote critic Neil Genzlinger in a 2011 *New York Times* article titled “The Problem with Memoir”.

Memoir’s usefulness for exploring contemporary “Euro-American” personhood and kinship has been noted before. Janet Carsten, in an essay tellingly entitled “How do we know who we are?” lists “writing memoirs” alongside psychotherapy and genealogical research as evidencing how “Many people in the West apparently find that it takes a considerable amount of work to discover who they are” (Carsten 2007, 47). Rayna Rapp and Faye Ginsburg, surveying texts about parenting children with disabilities, pinpoint

how memoir is *political* because it “enables families to comprehend...this anomalous experience, not only because of the capacity of stories to make meaning, but also because of their dialogical relationships with larger social arenas” (2001: 545). While building on these enquiries, this article asks a previously neglected question: how and why are people likely at certain points in the lifecourse to think through – and try to make sense of – a parent or parents’ biography?

Ideas about “adult childness”, the state of being expounded in the graphic memoirs written of here, are not constrained to, for example, the Norman Rockwell Museum’s Roz Chast exhibition marketing copy. Consider two revealing appearances of the term in a 2016 *New Yorker* article about palliative care: firstly, “Sometimes the adult children of a patient felt angry or guilty that they couldn’t prevent their parent from dying, and so they denied that the whole thing was happening” (MacFarquhar 2016). Secondly, “Sometimes the adult child—more often a daughter—was so entangled in her parent’s misery that it was as though Heather [a hospice nurse] had two patients rather than one. If the mother was anxious or angry about something, the daughter would become even more so, and the situation would escalate.” (ibid.) These reflections refer to aging and death, but they also exhibit the guilt and existential anxiety common to “adult childness”. Discourses about adult children underline the long-term impact of parents’ lives on their children also appear elsewhere in the US public culture. Begin writing “adult child” into the Google search engine and one is met with “adult child of alcoholics”, “adult child of divorce”, and “adult child of emotionally immature parents”.

A focus on memoirs in which adult children unpack relationships with their parents is timely. Roz Chast’s and Bruce Eric Kaplan’s modest but comfortable childhoods in 1960s Brooklyn and New Jersey evoke what Noelle Stout, writing of the current US foreclosure crisis, describes as the “increasing[ly] infeas[ible]... post–World War II American middle-class life projects, long defined by stable employment, homeownership, and higher education” (Stout 2016, 85). Graphic memoirs are apt to tell of this period in US history because hand-drawn illustration affords the subversive depiction of normative consumerist and “homemaking” cultures central to the period (cf. Yates and Hunter 2011), for example, by consciously fetishizing packaging design.

But a note is also important here about how the authors written of in this article have family histories that are at once quite familiar to public culture and at the same time rather specific. They are quite far from being “typical” (whatever that would mean in the context of families and relationships). Unlike many people in the US, they are

homeowners. Further, they tell of homes that are not expected to be multigenerational beyond the inclusion of minors and their parents. It also goes without saying that very many people do not grow up with a parent or parents, but rather, it is hoped, with other adults who care for them.

Demography suggests that an exploration of “adult childness” is overdue. It might, in fact, be the first time such a concept has been able to exist. Merrill Silverstein and Vern Bengston write:

The longevity revolution of the 20th century has enhanced the probability that parents and children cosurvive each other into old and middle age, respectively (Uhlenberg 1980). The increase in the duration of shared lives between adult generations has raised the intriguing possibility that later-life intergenerational relationships will be characterized by greater solidarity as the needs of older parents become more acute. In such a pattern, solidarity *declines* from young adulthood to early middle age as adult children adopt family and work roles that cause them to be more autonomous from their parents but *increases* after middle age as the frailty and dependency of very old parents place children in supportive intergenerational roles. (Silverstein and Bengston 1997, 435. Original emphasis)

This chimes with graphic memoirs that tell of adult children’s renewed closeness with ill or elderly parents, a “snapping back” of the intimacy (Jamieson 1998) missing since they moved away from home on reaching adulthood. Chast and Kaplan’s books show the affective dimensions of these demographic changes, and the obligations that parents and children owe to each other when the latter have grown up (cf. Loizos and Heady 1999). The books tell of a sustained tightening and loosening of ties. Relatedness is not “present” or “absent”. Rather it is felt more intensely at certain points in individuals’ lives than at others.

The article proceeds in three sections. The first outlines what graphic memoirs are and discusses their shared ground with kinship studies. The second section discusses how graphic memoirs visualize the “the doctrine of parental determinism” (Furedi 2008: 64 in Lee 2014: 130) central to Euro-American kinship today and how this is embodied by what one of the authors refers to as “cultural Jewishness”. The third section argues that the “filling in the blanks” (Cannell 2011) often associated with working through the biographies of distant or estranged kin (e.g. Carsten 2000) also applies to people as intimate as parents with whom one has grown up.

GRAPHIC MEMOIR AND KINSHIP: DRAWN TOGETHER BY FACT?

Inspired by Art Spiegelman's contention that "All comic-strip drawings must function as diagrams, simplified picture-words that indicate more than they show" (in Cates 2010, 96) I nominate graphic memoirs as a lens onto how kinship and relatedness can be visualized. An allied concern here is what it means in anthropology and in other sorts of literary and visual media for depictions of relationships to be "factual". Graphic memoirists sometimes deploy research methods familiar to anthropologists because they generate realistic depictions of people and situations (note-taking, recorded interviews, photography, and the collection of material culture are common). More to the point, however, renderings of relationships in graphic memoirs chime with Tanya Luhrmann's description of "hyperreality" (2012, 371) because they are "both more real than everyday reality and in some way fictive" (2012, 371). They are useful for learning about kinship and personhood and, for the concerns of this article, "adult childness", because they depict both events and the author's feelings about them. "Truth" and "fact", then, are evidenced less by the presentation of the past as an objective reality, than by the convincing rendering of how past events shape the author. Hand-drawn images make explicit the contract between author and reader about the unabashed partiality of depictions of "real" people, places, and events (see also Chute and DeKoven 2006, 767)

Graphic memoir can be seen as a subcategory of cartoon and Ritu Gairola Khanduri's (2014) work on the decisive place of political cartoons in India, in addition to high-profile publications *Punch* (UK, 1841-2002) and *Charlie Hebdo* (France, 1970–), position cartooning as a mode that suggestively and subversively refracts current events. Comics, writes Anne Allison, speak to a society's concerns while channelling individual authors' and readers' psyches. In the *anime* and *manga* ubiquitous in Japan, "storytelling relies on tropes other than realism to evoke, escape, comment on, and unsettle that which is familiar" (Allison 2000, 56). Part of *anime* and *manga*'s appeal is their eroticization of "actual" mundane sites and scenarios (schools, workplaces, parks, public transport), visualizing presumably unrealizable and often shocking fantasies that are *distortions* of "real life" rather than "real life itself". This interplay between public selves and individuals' thoughts and desires is complicated further by the actuality that these comics are often read in the public spaces they depict.

There are, in contrast, dangers to overstating the subjective nature of explicitly fact-based comics. In 1991, Art Spiegelman fought the *New York Times*' inclusion of *Maus*

in its Fiction Bestsellers list, writing to the Editor:

The borderland between fiction and nonfiction has been fertile territory for some of the most potent contemporary writing, and it's not as though my passages on how to build a bunker and repair concentration camp boots got the book onto your advice, how-to and miscellaneous list. It's just that I shudder to think how [former Republican Louisiana State Representative and Holocaust denier] David Duke -- if he could read -- would respond to seeing a carefully researched work based closely on my father's memories of life in Hitler's Europe and in the death camps classified as fiction.

This controversy felt out the blurred faultlines between biography, autobiography, history, and literature (cf. Okely and Callaway 1992). It underlined the centrality of personal testimony and intergenerational transmission to how the Holocaust is conceptualized in the US (see Waterston and Ryko-Bauer 2006). But the dispute also reveals graphic memoirs' rich "social lives" (Appadurai 1986). Graphic memoir's ripeness for intertextuality (Kristeva 1986) has manifested itself through memoirs in which authors render themselves creating previously published works and the creation of new texts in the form of author interviews elucidating both political themes on autobiographical details. *Maus'* amenability to cross-referencing was evidenced by *MetaMaus* (2011), which detailed the history of the book including its reception plus interviews with Spiegelman's children. In 2016 the interconnectedness of such texts, and their connections to intergenerational relationships, was underscored by the publication of Nadja Spiegelman (b. 1987), Art Spiegelman's daughter's, own memoir-cum-biography of her mother and her grandmother, *I'm Supposed to Protect You from All This*.

One of graphic memoir's defining characteristics is its focus on complex issues of societal importance and many of these are particularly relevant to kinship and relatedness. Aside from Spiegelman and Bechdel's work, stand-out US examples include married cartoonists Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner's *Our Cancer Year* (1994), about Pekar's lymphoma treatment, Phoebe Potts' IVF autobiography *Good Eggs: A Memoir* (2010), and Lucy Knisley's *Something New: Tales from a Makeshift Bride* (2016). Influential work from outside the US includes French-Iranian Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000) and Swiss Frederik Peeters' *Blue Pills: A Positive Love Story* (2008). Not always, but quite often, a thread that ties these books together is the theme of trauma.

What does it mean to depict "real" kinship and relatedness? The state of the art here argues the political nature of such endeavours. Mary Bouquet writes of the "official"

fiction” (1996, 47) of family trees, the delicate work that they must do knowing which “biological ties” to valorise and which to conceal. Bouquet’s work on family photographs reminds us that while posed group family photographs are often assumed to be taken to mark felicitous occasions, historically “disruption and violence actually encourage people to cling to and/or (re)constitute what they can in the way of tangible evidence of meaningful relations” (2000, 14). “Traditional” images of kinship, in other words, are stills from a mobile set of relations, but from observing an image alone, one can be quite wrong about what the fleshed out, “moving parts” version of an image would depict. Writing about one’s family invites the artist and the reader of graphic memoirs to embrace the partialness of the graphic memoir. This partialness does not seek to hide the difficulty of being a relative that is also well-documented by the ethnographic record (e.g. Trawick 1990). Rather, it offers up these subjective accounts of “real” relationships for discussion.

CHILDREN BECOME ADULT CHILDREN

Without the fame of Spiegelman or Bechdel, Chast and Kaplan (b. 1964, sometimes “BEK”) are well-known within some milieux because they are regular contributors to the *New Yorker*. Kaplan is also known for his work as a television writer and producer on television series *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), and *Girls* (2012-2017). Each of their books addressed in this essay is concerned with the author’s now deceased parents: their relationships with them in life and death, along with imaginations of their lives before parenthood. Both books describe growing up in middle-class Jewish families in the mid-twentieth century East Coast of the United States. Both books play upon the amenability of homes, things, and food for telling stories (cf. Hoskins 1998; Kopytoff 1986). For many years, Chast has been celebrated for her irreverent take on material culture. Her first *New Yorker* cartoon, “Little Things” (1978) depicted made up, strangely-shaped objects with names that could almost be real: “chent”, “spak”, “kabe”, “tiv”. In her memoir, however, things are swollen with histories and constitute pathways to understanding the intergenerational transmission of memories, money, and class-based alliances, against a backdrop of the privileged “blessing and curse” of twentieth century “consumer madness”.

Chast uses handwritten words and pictures, deploying “autography”, a device considered to enhance the autobiographical feeling of the text (Chute and DeKoven 2006, 767). Kaplan, however, integrates faux-naïve drawings with typed script, the

appearance of the latter being quite unusual in graphic memoir. Chast's autographic words show her intimacy with her (and her parents') story. In Kaplan's book, the switching of turns between "adult" typescript and "childish" drawing relates how memories from childhood "pop up" in adults' thoughts. Mary Karr begins her 2015 book *The Art of Memoir* with an epigraph from Louise Gluck's *Nostos*: "*We look at the world once, in childhood. The rest is memory.*" (Karr 2015, 1. Original emphasis).

Graphic memoirs loop back and forth between the authorial present and recollected pasts – especially pasts "created" during childhood. Much of the pathos in both *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* and *I Was A Child* derives from the juxtaposition of the author as a child with middle-aged parents and the author as a middle-aged person with parents who are elderly or deceased. Chast recounts her attempt to rouse her by then elderly parents George and Elizabeth to discuss their feelings about aging and death. Chast asks her parents, "So...do you guys ever think about...THINGS?... PLANS. I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU GUYS WANT! Let's say something HAPPENED. Thwarted, Chast retreats: "You know what? Forget it. Never mind. Que sera, SERA" (2014, 3).

≤IMAGE 1 HERE≥

This scene is preceded by a black and white photograph of Chast as an infant, sitting between her parents on a flocked-leather sofa. (The interspersions of etched pages with family photographs is a common device in graphic memoir). George and Elizabeth are smiling in their late 1950s clothing. "Young Roz Chast" – for she is now a protagonist in adult Roz Chast's graphic memoir – sits before a *Babar the Elephant* book. The stitching that divides the double-paged spread has to its left the photograph of the three Chasts and, to its right, the conversation about death that took place decades later. Both the photograph that goes back into Chast family history and the scene from only a few years prior to the book's publication, before Chast's parents fell ill and had to move into sheltered accommodation, pose a question common to the beginnings of many US graphic memoirs that are concerned with reproduction, the lifecourse, families, and relationships: "how might I make sense of the actuality that this is me and that was me too?"

In texts such as Chast's, childhood photographs of authors with their parents are presented as evidence that their parents created the author. What precisely the places of sexual procreation, "biology", and "blood" are in kinship is of perennial anthropological interest (Schneider 1968; Carsten 1995; Weston 1991; Dow 2016). However, a distinctive

thread running between graphic memoirs is the idea that parents create their children not – or at least, not *only* – in the sense of having (where applicable) conceived, gestated, and birthed them. Much more prominent is the notion that parents create their children because childhood experiences form adult selves.

Graphic-memoirs-cum-parental-biographies put the past rather than substance as the nucleus of relatedness between adult children and their parents. As such, *history* generates the ethical and intellectual imperative to try to maintain cordial relations with one's parents – regardless, it seems, of whether they are dead or still living (cf. Cannell 2011). As is also a key trope in contemporary kinship studies, a foundational thought in graphic memoirs is that ambivalence is an inherent part of family life (Peletz 2001). Consideration of parents' pasts does not promise harmony but rather that it makes it easier to be patient, to excuse them for some of their shortcomings. Often, graphic memoirs grapple with how disappointing parenting or confusing personalities might be forgiven if one considers the time and place into which the author's parents were born. Chast makes sense of her rocky relationship with her parents by recounting how

I was quite aware that my parents had had tough lives – way tougher than mine. I had heard the stories my whole life – about how their parents had come over from Russia at the turn of the century with NOTHING...Between their one-bad-thing-after-another lives and the Depression, World War II, and the Holocaust, in which they'd both lost family – it was amazing that they weren't crazier than they were. (2014, 6).

Here Chast presents herself as a baby boomer who, as is the received notion of the US post-war generation, was born into a lineage of suffering that, as far as acute hardship goes, stopped with Chast's generation (cf. Ortner 1998). By suggesting that her parents might have been “[even] crazier’ given their own and their families” experiences, Chast makes a connection between people's pasts in the form of decisive socio-political upheaval, and the way people are in the present.

The tenet that childhood experiences make adult dispositions seems widespread amongst those who grew up in the US from the mid-twentieth century onwards. In *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58* (2003), Sherry Ortner analyzes her high school classmates' narrations of life after graduation. What is striking, writes Ortner in a section entitled “Behind Closed Doors” (33), is the way in which informants describe successes and failures as tethered to “early family life”:

The informants often implied or stated that if these things had not happened, they might have achieved much more in life...The significant memory question here is the linkages: the fact that these stories were told in a particular discursive context, namely, as explaining later success and failure. There was no question that my informants felt that their family situations – the amounts and kinds of emotional support, on the one hand, and the amounts and kinds of social and psychological disruptions, on the other – made an enormous difference in their lives (33).

What I particularly want to draw attention to are the posited narrative “linkages” between childhood and adulthood. No smooth causal relationships can be deciphered. Financial insecurity in childhood can engender a “drive to succeed”, and adult low self-confidence alike. One adult can use traumatic memories of quarreling parents to argue the importance of family life. For another, these memories testify why it is important not to focus on what could end up being only a fitfully fulfilling personal life to the detriment of, for example, satisfying work outside of the home.

As graphic memoirs would support, narrative “linkages” need to be situated against twentieth century US history. Ortner’s informants’ parents belonged to a generation under specific pressure to lead lives of post-war prosperity. This context brought with it pressures to be “normal” (2003, 33) in gender, sexuality, and division of labor both in and outside the home. The upshot was, of course, that this “discourse of normal” (2002), as Krisztina Fehérváry puts it when discussing postsocialist Hungary, often cultivated stressful family dynamics. The burdensome quest for “calm” and “not making a fuss” in the war generation was recognized by their baby boomer children. For Chast, it inspired her book title.

The memoir boom (graphic and otherwise) has happened at much the same time as the rise of “parenting culture” (Lee et al: 2014), a subcategory of which yields to what Frank Furedi calls “the doctrine of parental determinism” (Furedi 2008, 64 in Lee 2014, 130). As Lee writes of the censure that surrounds drinking during pregnancy in the UK, the more the notion of parental determinism is taken for granted, the “further back” in the relationship between parent and child becomes a subject of scrutiny:

the message to mothers (and also fathers) is that the health, welfare, and success (or lack of it) of their children can be directly attributed to the decisions they make about matters like feeding their children; ‘parenting’, parents are told, is both the hardest and most important job in the world.

Tomorrow depends on it. (Lee 2014, 2).

When it comes to exploring notions of how one's upbringing impacts upon one's adult personhood, Chast's manner of drawing herself as a child is suggestive. Chast draws her face as a child, as a baby even, as very similar to that of her adult face. The evasion of a generic "babyish" look in favor of Chast's adult face swathed in a baby bonnet and appearing comically anxious and annoyed thwarts received notions about childhood as a time of "carefree abandon". Most significant, however, is the shift that Chast pays to depicting her childhood self as a continuation of her adult self. This baby, the drawing emphasizes, "was her all along". And, as a child, Chast resembles her parents facially not only, it is implied, "because of genes" but because she has already "inherited" (a notion more often associated with the passing on of biogenetic materials, e.g. Shaw and Hurst 2008) their neuroses through spending time with them.

≤IMAGE 2 HERE≥

Graphic memoirists' parents have, in turn, been formed by *their* own pasts and graphic memoirs demonstrate the ways in which to write a memoir or autobiography is also to write a collection of biographical accounts, often going back several generations. Resembling a Matryoshka or "nesting" doll: the part of the biggest doll (ego) that is occupied by a forebear is smaller and smaller the further in the past they were born. In *Maus*, the Holocaust is, Vladek, Spiegelman's father's story. Vladek is a Polish Jew and Auschwitz survivor born in 1906, while Spiegelman is a New York-born baby boomer. However, in having had a monumental influence on Spiegelman's father's life, the Holocaust helped constitute Spiegelman's childhood, coming of age, and his adult personhood. The Holocaust is "his story" too. This chimes with anthropological work that uses the lens of "intergenerational transmission" to explore how multigenerational families are impacted by the Holocaust (e.g. Feldman 2010). Elsewhere in the graphic memoir canon, the theme of parents influencing who their children grow up to be is writ large not through the lens of the Holocaust but through Freudian thought: a key protagonist in Alison Bechdel's 2012 sequel to *Fun Home*, *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* is Donald Winnicott, the English pediatrician and psychoanalyst who pioneered the theory of the "good enough mother".

Graphic memoirs that are about the past and "adult childness" are premised on the idea that children deal with difficult information differently from adults. Children, it follows, are often shielded from tragic family histories that are either "too upsetting" or "beyond their comprehension". The first page of *Maus* shows the impact of memories

upon parent-child relationships to inform both how parents treat their children and how adults reflect on their childhoods. In “Rego Park, N.Y. c. 1958”, young Art Spiegelman, rendered as a mouse, explains to Vladek, his father, why he is crying:

Young Art: I-I FELL, AND MY FRIENDS SKATED AWAY WITHOUT ME.

Vladek: FRIENDS? YOUR FRIENDS?... IF YOU LOCK THEM TOGETHER IN A ROOM WITH NO FOOD FOR A WEEK.. **THEN** YOU COULD SEE WHAT IT IS, FRIENDS! ... (Spiegelman 2003, 5-6).

One does not need to look far to work out the allusion. The page facing this epigraph depicts the “Hitler Cat” and swastika. Another “clue” comes from Vladek’s perhaps Polish-Yiddish-inflected English.

The question of how specific these interpretations of experiences are to people who grew up in Jewish-American families has arisen in the publicity surrounding Kaplan’s *I Was a Child*. Consider Kaplan’s discussion on National Public Radio’s (NPR) *Fresh Air* programme, with interviewer Terry Gross,

KAPLAN:...I know my father wanted to be a successful novelist or television writer or playwright, and he ended up being a textbook editor. So I know, you know, he had a part of him that had wanted to be something more than he was professionally. In terms of my mother, I think this might be a cultural Jewish thing, which I’m sure my father had also. I don’t remember her wanting – knowing that she wanted more than she had in – but I do feel there was this feeling of deprivation and don’t ask for too much or it’ll be taken away from you. Is that a culturally Jewish thing?

GROSS: I think it is. I really think it is. And I think a combination of, like, the Holocaust and the Depression...

KAPLAN: Oh, yeah, right.

GROSS: Made a lot of adults - and with the Holocaust, particularly Jewish adults - think, you know, work hard for a good outcome, but don’t expect it. Expect things to turn out bad 'cause that way, when they do turn out bad or if they do turn out bad, you won’t be disappointed because...

KAPLAN: That’s definitely it.

GROSS: Things usually work out bad [laughter]. Yeah.

Gross and Kaplan’s consensus that there is something “culturally Jewish” about Kaplan’s parents’ pessimism is less important than the way in which they situate the past as

creating persons, who, in turn demonstrate this way of being to their children. In this sense, it is not only *people* who raise children, but socio-political and economic events.

The question of how cartooning relates to Judaism in America has been posed in pithily-titled volumes such as Arie Kaplan's *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comics* (2010). A considerable number of Jewish people worked in comics in the mid-twentieth century, when other "more highbrow" media was closed off to them (see Royal 2011). Other work unpacks "subtle Jewish signifiers in comic-book characters such as Captain America and Superman" (A. Kaplan 2010: xv). Consonant to this article's focus on intergenerational relationships, Arie Kaplan (no relation to Bruce Eric Kaplan) posits that "Like many narratives about the Jewish people, this is a story of a tradition. A tradition that was handed down from one generation to the next" (2010: xiv).

Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant? and *I Was A Child* appear on the Jewish Book Council's page "Graphic Novels and Comics from a Jewish Perspective" although neither of their authors explicitly refers to Judaism as a key point of identification. More pertinent than religious devotion itself are graphic memoir's elucidations of the relationships between narrative, memory, and family. In 2015 the University of Washington ran a course out of the Stroum Center for Jewish Studies titled "Graphic Novels and Jewish Memory". Online, Tamar Benzikry, the course's organizer, described the medium's aptness for exploring memory:

The scholar Scott McCloud... describes comics as the only art form in which the past, present, and future are visible simultaneously.

....

This relates so much to Judaism and memory: Judaism is rooted in narrative, with ritual and learning operating as an ongoing narrative in which the past deeply informs the present, and the present informs, interprets, and recasts the past as relevant.

The cultural impact of discussions of how the Holocaust and hardships such as prior migrations from Europe have played out long-term in Jewish-American families mean that the notion that a family's past influences both intergenerational relationships and the ways in which people are understood to inherit trauma has been influential across ethnic groups in the US. The theme of commemorating kin by *making them visible* in an uncommonly literal manner arises in the publicity for *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* A 2014 newyorker.com video titled "At home with Roz Chast" shows Chast with a rug made in tribute to her father's breakfasts "that would go on for hours. And it's

my dad, it's my dad, and I guess it's a way of remembering him too". Chast has crafted a likeness of George Chast with many pots and plates before him. A border exalts his favorite foods. Some of these evoke his Russian-American Jewish and New Yorker backgrounds: "GEFILTE", "BORSCHT", "LOX". Others speak to individual proclivities: it is unsurprising to find "BANANA" on the rug, when George is quoted in his daughter's book as dubbing it "nature's perfect food". Chast's rendering of her father's favorite foods in an outsized rug is subversive because the most comparable category of textile – tapestry – is associated with commemorating events from "the 'big screen of history'" (Weston 1991, 29): not breakfasts, but battles.

In contrast, mealtimes at "the Place", Chast's parents' sheltered accommodation, are awkward because her parents no longer have control over what or with whom they eat. People with ill and elderly parents confront a notion that is anathema to middle-class US culture: that food that is above all else a vessel for calories. Chast's cartoon of a supermarket shows "The Depressing Aisle" and "The Shelf of Tears", featuring "Liqui-Food" (chocolate and vanilla flavors): tagline "for when you're done with food" (2014, 174). Adults thinking about their youth analyze memories of meals in order to make sense of their current or remembered relationships. But some adult children must care for their parents by providing them with food in a manner that they perceive as inverting the parent-child relationship. Peter Loizos and Patrick Heady eloquently propose that "Kinship can be thought of in terms of moral obligations and rights. Some of the most important proceed downward from parent to child and, *subsequently, upward from child to parent. Who must feed whom?*" (1999, 5. Added emphasis.)

≤IMAGE 3 HERE≥

KNOWN KIN AND "FILLING IN THE BLANKS"

The parental biographies rendered in graphic memoirs diverge from much genealogical work because they explore the stories of intimates: kin with whom authors had lived and, as is given much weight in US culture, "grown up with". This departs from work on kinship and personhood in which the phrase "family history" sparks images of relatives who are quite distant, either by generation or through estrangement. The English amateur genealogists about whom Fenella Cannell (2011) writes, for example, largely piece together information about ancestors who died before they were born or about whom they possess at most quite blurred childhood memories. Janet Carsten's work on the meaning of "knowing where you've come from" (2000) in Scottish adoption

reunions unpacks how informants learn about their biological parents having not met them previously.

In graphic memoir as in anthropology, the house is a key locus of intimacy and history (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Bahloul 1996). But one of the aspects of kinship that graphic memoirs makes most poignantly visible is the notion that confusion can “even” creep into relationships with kin whom one has seen everyday for decades. This insight is amplified by the wild pertinence of graphic memoirs’ process and form to their subject matter. When literary critic Judith Thurman, writing a *New Yorker* profile, observed Alison Bechdel at her desk preparing to fill in details of her story, she was struck by how “The architecture of the blank pages is distinctly house-like. Its square or rectangular frames, of different dimensions, are walled off by gutters, the white spaces between them; they are stacked vertically, like stories, but entered horizontally, like rooms” (2012). Intimate spaces, like close relationships, harbor nagging ellipses.

The questions one seeks to ask a parent may not come to mind until they are dead. Cannell’s thoughts on amateur genealogists also apply to adult children’s relationships with deceased parents as expressed in graphic memoir:

one of the consistent effects of hobby genealogy is that it reconnects the living to their dead as kin. Or, to put it in more Schneiderian terms, in the enormous popularity of genealogy as a pastime, one sees a great number of people at work, deliberately enlivening their sense of the dead as ‘persons’, and thus overcoming ‘distance’ and activating relatedness (2011, 465).

By making visible the ellipses in parents’ biographies, graphic memoirists show that death forecloses the possibility of receiving certain types of information. Kaplan, writing about a period in his childhood during which his father worked from home recalls: “My father hated a woman named Regina Schnitzer. No one knew why, not even him” (2015, 128) – a humorous fragment eavesdropping that, in the impossibility of Kaplan finding out the reason for this hatred, shows that when people die some of their biography dies with them.

Graphic memoirs also suggest that an important facet of adult childness is coming to perceive one’s parents as “more than” one’s parents. A recurrent trope in graphic memoirs is the parent whose professional aspirations were thwarted because they jarred with the social mores of the period. Kaplan depicts his success as a TV writer and cartoonist as the culmination of multigenerational family destiny:

We [Kaplan and his brothers] were told that my father wanted to be a short

story writer or a novelist or a TV writer, but he had to give up his writing career for something more steady once he had a family. There was a box of his old writing in the attic. One piece was an unpublished short story about a man and a woman who fall in love when the woman's platypus escapes and the man finds it. (2015, 14).

≤IMAGE 4 HERE≥

The “old writing in the attic” conforms to an image common in graphic memoirs of biographical blanks being filled in or hunches being fleshed out by material culture stored away in the recesses of family homes. It is simultaneously joyous and melancholic that Kaplan's father's unrealized aspiration of becoming a professional writer is *written about* (and published) by his son.

While it is quite common in the US to hear of parents “living vicariously through their children”, what comes to the fore in these tales of middle-class mid-twentieth century East Coast North America is parents' anxiety about their children's prospects if they do not attain “stable” careers. Kaplan's parents told him he needed “something to fall back on” (2015, 168). (They were referring to college computer classes). Kaplan writes:

Neither of my parents believed it was possible to get what you want. I had some painful conversation about doing something impractical with my life when I finally screamed, “If one person in the world is doing that job, why can't I be that person?” (2015, 171)

That some generations more than others are encouraged to be aspirational in their professional choices is not only cast as a contrast between Kaplan as a baby boomer and his war generation parents. Kaplan writes, “Many years later, my children's preschool teacher told me that the main thing you should tell your children is that you can do it.” (2015, 171)

Graphic memoirs are both works of art and descriptions of the process of becoming an artist. Accounts of *who artists are* often recount the contrasting talents and fortunes of successive generations of kin. Howard Becker, in *Art Worlds*, describes how a musical “maverick” “received... training from his father, a professional musician in Danbury, Connecticut. But his father, more adventurous if less successful than [his son's other mentor] Parker, had also taught his son to experiment (with polytonality, for example) in ways then uncommon” (Becker 1982, 233). Artists' engagements with their art and their parents are frequently symbiotic. Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is marketed as

primarily “about” Bechdel’s relationship with her father but Bechdel has cast *Fun Home* as above all else a *Künstlerroman* (Chute 2010, 171). Chast details her initial “guilt” at employing Goodie, a Jamaica-born careworker and “a lovely stranger” (183), to look after her mother while Chast works. Chast writes “And once again, one of society’s least-wanted jobs was being done by a minority woman. I felt guilty about this, too...” (184). ≤IMAGE 5 HERE ≥

Sometimes *readers* help graphic memoirists “fill in the blanks” (Cannell 2011). Chast describes the questions surrounding what her mother called “that mess”: the birth and death of a baby girl before Chast was born. Chast’s parents had never told her where the baby was buried. In the summer of 2016, readers of the *New Yorker* who were fans of Chast’s book and those who had not read it alike were met, online and in print, with a strip titled “Epilogue”. A reader had got in touch urging Chast to solve “the mystery” of where her sister was buried via “findagrave.com”. Chast locates the grave in Queens, New York, along with kin whom she was not looking for: her maternal grandparents. Chast takes her parents’ “cremains”, which she had been storing in her closet, to the cemetery. Travelling to Queens, Chast “was tempted to say to my fellow L-train passengers, “Guess what – or **WHO** – is in this bag?””. “It was time to say goodbye”, she writes.

Graphic memoirs follow what is in some cultural contexts a resonant trope that it is the “natural order of things” for the deceased’s homes to be cleared out by their adult children. The *New York Times* has commented on the *innovation* required of “childless” or “childfree” people working out “what to do with their estates” (Ellin 2014). However, the trope of the adult child clearing out their parents’ or parent’s home is not only a story about intergenerational intimacy but about personal privacy. Uncertainty about what a person’s possessions might reveal supposes that because children are the deceased’s “closest” relatives, they are the most appropriate people to receive the information such objects provide. But it is also understood that there are personal aspects of people’s lives about which even adult children would better be ignorant. Chast describes how, in contrast with some children she grew up with, she had not “explored” whenever [her] parents were out” (2014, 108). For other graphic memoirists things found in houses jar with preexisting notions about “who elder kin are”. US graphic memoirist Lucy Knisley (b. 1985) remembers how “I discovered my grandpa’s collection of Playboys! I spent hours in his study, poring over every issue in total fascination. I’ll admit, it altered my perception of my grandpa a bit...” (2015, 55).

Sound intergenerational bonds are not necessarily built on ceaseless revelation. As Lynn Jamieson, in her work on “intimacy” as a paradigm in contemporary Euro-American kinship, writes “studies suggest that a good relationship between parents and their growing-up children requires increasing silence on the part of parents rather than intense dialogue of mutual disclosure” (1999, 489). Surprising material culture may not make an adult child feel they are working towards a more complete idea of who their kin is or was. Instead, material revelations might destabilize previous certainties.

CONCLUSION

Is it possible to be “especially related” to one’s parents at a certain point in adulthood? The word “child” can denote both a person who is yet to come of age and *a son or daughter of any age*. I have described a phenomenon that pertains to the latter but it is plainly the case that, at least in a US context, evocations of one’s childhood are central to how a person constructs their adult personhood. The “adult child” is *already* a figure in certain sections of US public culture, and one who, when identified and named, makes plain the actuality that, in the US as in many other places, it is *the past* that connects kin (cf. Schneider 1968).

Great weight is given in *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* and *I Was a Child* to the idea that a definitive scene of adult childness is clearing out deceased parents’ possessions. Chast writes, reminding us that post-war consumerism is a central part of her coming of age and her parents’ domestic arrangements:

It’s no accident that most ads are pitched to people in their 20s and 30s. Not only are they so much cuter than their elders...but they are less likely to have gone through the transformative process of cleaning out their deceased parents’ stuff. Once you go through that, you can never look at **YOUR** stuff in the same way. You start to you at your stuff a little *postmortemistically*. (Chast 2014: 122).

And Kaplan recalls of his father:

I kept thinking, *He has this time here at the end and could have some kind of purpose. Why doesn’t he want to be in charge of getting rid of all his things?* He could go through everything he had accumulated over the years and let it go. It seemed like a very profound opportunity. But he wasn’t interested.

I couldn't understand it. Ever since I was little, I have always made sure to do one thing—clean up my mess. Nothing gives me more pleasure than putting things back to how they were.

I have always wanted to get rid of all traces of my being here. (Kaplan 2015: 190-191. Original emphasis).

Kaplan and Chast's parents' had taken the middle-class US virtue of thrift (Herrmann 1997; Yates and Hunter 2011) too far by inexpertly repairing goods and hoarding useless items bought on sale, or rather, had experienced the particularly *voluminous* acquisition that occurs when regimes of thrift and consumerism overlap. "Clearing out" included "rescu[ing]" (Chast 2014, 119) sentimental items and assuming responsibility for bureaucratic "inalienable objects" (Weiner 1985) such as "banking, tax, and insurance things" (Chast 2014, 106). In these and similar passages, one is reminded that while it would be impossible to say just how widely resonant this is within a country as remarkably large and diverse as the US (let alone beyond it), one of the things this tiny "sample" of East Coast, middle-class autobiographers and their families show is the way in which relative material privilege might not define how people experience familial misunderstanding and mourning, but it nonetheless influences how it plays out. What comes to the fore more generally, in contrast, is how adult childness comprises a mixture of the practical and economic challenges that are surely always central to kinship and, overlapping with these, something more ruminative: being stopped in one's tracks and forced to reflect on a parent's life and one's own, and on *life itself*. One's relationships with one's parents, is "the story of one's life" not only because of procreative or genetic connections this might involve but because *the relationship* is a narrative arc through which to explain one's coming of age. In addition, the death of one's parents is, *if one is lucky*, the most traumatic event in a person's biography.

That many people worry about being "burdens" (Kavedžija 2016, 221; Cohen 1994: 141) on their adult children is a poignantly recurrent theme in anthropological work on aging. Such literature's convincing argument of the necessity of capturing emic understandings of aging, thus avoiding the "othering" of older people, is tangential to my point. Rather, what has been shown is that parents *do* burden their children but not quite in the way these sources suggest. Aside from sheltered accommodation bills and time spent at bedsides, a key "burden", and one which seems if not quite desirable then still not inherently negative, concerns the sheer jolt of recognition of having parents, having

to confront what one knows and does not know about them, and wondering what this means for one's own personhood.

Chast's and Kaplan's books are understood to provide succor for readers struggling with the most profound challenges of "adult childness". Chast's 2014 National Public Radio interview precipitated online comments from listeners, one of whom remarks:

Caring for the elderly can have no solution that is not heart breaking...My father died from Alzheimer's. I don't think a single day passed that he didn't ask me for pills, lots of them and strong ones. When he finally passed *I felt guilty over my sense of relief.*

Graphic memoir travels unusually well. Widely-resonant subject matters coupled with pages and frames that can be easily disseminated online, mean that one need not have read a graphic memoir in order to be affected by it. The admission of guilt in the commenter's words shows the revelatory aspect of this experience. While one could write a memoir at any age, the death of one's parents suggests a turning point in one's life. This article has been a call for greater attention to the interconnections between existential questions and kinship obligation at discrete moments in the lifecourse. Anthropological work on adoption reunions (Carsten 2000) and amateur genealogy (Cannell 2011) has demonstrated informants' urges to learn more about relatives. However, such discovery can be both informed by and inform the notion that, in some Euro-American contexts, questions of "who one is" and "who one's kin are (or were)" particularly overlap in middle-age.

This article has argued that graphic memoirs render observable a key tension in certain contemporary US appraisals of kinship and personhood. There is a unidirectional flow between what parents do and what their children are like (Lee 2014) but the ways in which this appears apparent to an adult child are anything but linear. That this might be imagined as a straight line, perhaps even an arrow on the one hand, and a series of "flashes" of recognition – some big, some small – on the other, testifies to the "graphicness" of kinship and personhood. Graphic memoir particularly evokes "the new kinship studies" (e.g. Strathern 1992; Carsten 2004; Weston 1991; cf. Schneider 1968), which center on ethnographies of "the everyday", interspersed with analyses of the unpredictable reverberations of "critical events" (Das 1995) through lifecourses but also over generations. Making sense of what one does and does not know about kin is not only laborious, it is personhood-shifting. Being blocked or confused in one's search for

information about one's parents nonetheless generates greater knowledge of oneself. In order to see how graphic memoir depicts the unashamedly difficult work one generation does *reaching back* to the previous one in in the hope of understanding the past consider Kaplan's dedication in *I Was A Child*: "This book is for my parents, who tried".

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