

PROCESS OF THE GRAPHIC NARRATIVE: *WHITE GUILT*

Alex Theron



Figure 1. Alex Theron, *White Guilt*, unpublished graphic novel. Angry runaway, six-year-old Diana is the opposite of everything a well-behaved Afrikaner girl is supposed to be. She barely listens to adults, runs away often and ignores house rules ... all because she is sitting on a rather large secret.

My auto-ethnographic depiction of identity as a white female South African raised in the apartheid era is illustrated in a graphic novel format in my unpublished novel *White Guilt*. The African Ubuntu tenet, "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am,"¹ has formed the basis for this process. The work was shown as part of my MFA graduating exhibition at the Dunedin School of Art in February 2015.

Drawing on the genre of auto-ethnography, the novel conveys an emotional response through the depiction of personal trauma and cultural liminality and is the medium used to depict my encounters. The self-reflexive process and auto-ethnographic approach I have adopted enable an account of both personal and real events. This approach

is described by Rosemary Hathaway in a discussion of the graphic novel *Maus*: “[It] literally illustrates how power and history work through [ethnographies], in ways their authors cannot fully control.”²

Comics and graphic novels, which are steadily gaining acceptance in the academic world, are nonetheless still in need of theoretical grounding. While academic publishing on comics is on the rise, the most useful recent texts are still, by and large, anthologies or works published outside New Zealand, where the academic study of comics has a more established and serious history.³

What defines a work as a graphic novel? How is a given work interpreted as a graphic novel, and who is ultimately the audience for the work? Graphic novel artist Chris Ware describes comics as “an architecture of visual information that aligns seeing and reading.”⁴ In 1980, Ware’s genre-testing experiments⁵ coincided with explorations by other artists in the field, and in 1995 Art Spiegelman⁶ described the situation of comics as having shifted from the “icon of illiteracy” to the last bastion of literacy, adding that most people don’t possess the “patience to decode comics.”⁷ In a 2004 cover story for the *New York Times Magazine*, “Not Funnies,” Charles McGrath argued that comics are in fact the newest literary genre.⁸

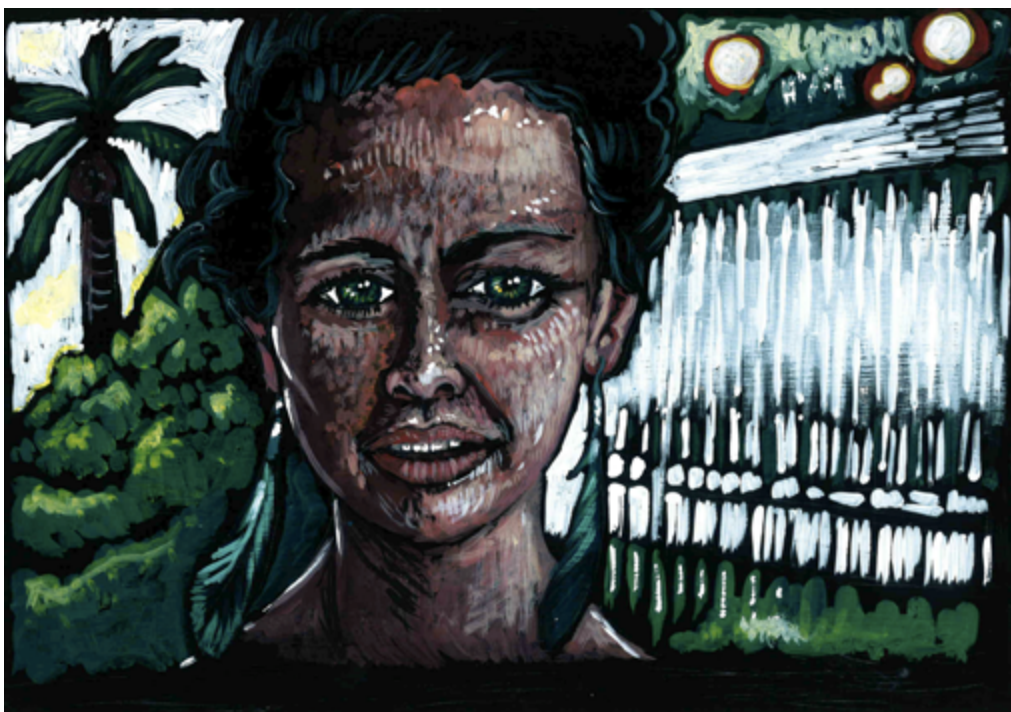


Figure 2. Alex Theron, *White Guilt*, unpublished graphic novel. A good friend of Diana, Karla is a Māori woman battling to raise her children on her own. Karla helps Diana recognise some key issues in her own life.

In her book *Graphic Women*, Hillary Chute asserts that there is no place outside the graphic novel form where a woman can tell her stories truthfully.⁹ On one level, my novel is a pictorial narrative of an Afrikaans girl growing up in South Africa, narrated from an adult perspective. The story deals with events viewed by a wily young girl growing up on a farm outside Pretoria, the legislative capital of apartheid South Africa. Depicting personal trauma and the transitional experience of migration, the narrative is structured around specific events that connect the voices of both child and adult with similar issues in New Zealand, where the adult narrator/protagonist likewise reflects on her childhood. Set in two superficially very different countries, the story examines universal concepts of human and national identity, as well as the plight of a stateless woman, as both a drama and a truthful story.



Figure 3. Alex Theron, *White Guilt*, unpublished graphic novel. Sample page from graphic novel, showing how people lived in South Africa during the apartheid era, and in many cases still do. The story showcases the separation between white and black.



Figure 4. Alex Theron, *White Guilt*, unpublished graphic novel. Introductory page to graphic novel, showing key characters and influential people for Diana ranging from her brother's friend's father (former State President FW de Klerk) to Kiwi friends.

As a painter and filmmaker I focus on narrative, visually projecting my emotions and stories in a process based on chiaroscuro effects. I paint found digital images and have a special interest in family portraits. After painting my subject in large scale, I repaint exact duplicates onto A3, capturing the finer detail required for the novel format. The process is one of retracing and revisiting events, and literally re-picturing these juxtaposed images as part of the graphic novel. Art Spiegelman calls this process “materializing history”¹⁰ and, as Hillary Chute explains, these recollections of life-based narratives are neither cathartic nor didactic, but textual and material. It is through this materiality and textual form that image and text become merged into a single work where narrative has become transformed into art.

In regard to Art Spiegelman's book *Maus*, Chute notes that “The size of an image is constitutive of its meaning, of how it functions.”¹¹ In my novel, the scale and size of a given image indicates the value and importance of the character depicted. As in a film where time is represented in pauses and in long takes over sweeping vistas, the larger the painting, the longer the time I intend the viewer to ponder over the image. However, unlike film this narrative process makes each work a tangible and fixed object in time – something which a painting is able to do.

While creating a book versus a film is an entirely different process from a practitioner's perspective, the actual editing process, narration and construction is very similar. With a graphic novel, the process requires a level of rigid analysis and structure which a single painting does not demand. In fact, much like a film it is the editorial process that demands the most effort and focus. Combined with the rigidity required by the graphic novel form, the omission of a soundtrack from my work was the most challenging part of the process. While I had become used to sound as a part of the visual process, what became evident was that the omission of sound often has its own power, particularly in a world where we are constantly bombarded by sound.

Writing about graphic novelist Chris Ware's work, David Ball states that “Innovative artists often invent their own ancestors as a way of giving a pedigree to their work. There is a sense in which Franz Kafka invented Charles Dickens and T.S. Eliot invented John Donne.”¹² In a similar way I have often referred to Terrence Malick, a filmmaker who has steeped himself in history and regards the accuracy of its retelling as an art form, as my ‘ancestor’.

According to Scott McCloud, “many comics creators still measure art and writing by different standards and act on the faith that ‘great’ art and ‘great’ writing will combine harmoniously by virtue of quality alone ... suffering the curse of all new media being judged by the standards of the old.”¹³ In my own work, I strive to combine text and image as an inter-dependent form, whereby the words and images go hand in hand to create a sort of abstract montage, expanding on an emotion or giving a sense of space extrapolated in time. Because an image may express a political message and yet play only a small part in the story, the accompanying text fills out the back story. I place a high value on text remaining simple and clean; I want the text to read as a sort of tract.

Because we are, McCloud says, a self-centered species, readers will have no trouble in seeing themselves reflected in my story. While my background as a South African now living in New Zealand means that I am able to move between the two cultures and comment on both through my position of cultural liminality, what I lack is a sense of belonging – further underlining the issue of liminality. Writing from this point of view means that there is no clear, determined ending to my narrative, which is a story still unfolding.

Alex Theron came to Aotearoa in 2003 following a decade at sea as a marine officer. After education in South Africa at a specialist art, ballet, music and drama school – where she trained in art – she pursued marine engineering and captaincy for ten years. In Aotearoa she pursued tertiary education at AUT, Whitecliffe College of Art and Design, Ilam (SOFA, Canterbury University – BFA film), Unitec (MDES) and, finally, the Dunedin School of Art (MFA). During the last decade, Alex has been involved in creative projects in New Zealand and abroad ranging from film to painting exhibitions, residencies, collaborative shows, a children's book and most recently a graphic novel. She continues to work on pedagogic narratives that reflect her love for ethnographic narratives and indigenous cultures.

- 1 David Lutz, "African Ubuntu Philosophy and Global Management," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 84 (2009), 313-28, citing JS Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1969), 314.
- 2 Rosemary V Hathaway, "Reading Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as Postmodern Ethnography," *Journal of Folklore Research*, 48:3 (September/December 2011), 249.
- 3 Hillary Chute, "Decoding Comics," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 52:4 (2006), 1014-27, at 1015.
- 4 David M Ball and Martha B Kuhlman, *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), x.
- 5 Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000).
- 6 Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Raw Books and Graphics, 1986).
- 7 Ball and Kuhlman, *The Comics of Chris Ware*, x.
- 8 Charles McGrath, "Not Funnies," 11 July 2004, *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/11/magazine/not-funnies.html>.
- 9 Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
- 10 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 11 *Ibid.*, Preface.
- 12 Ball and Kuhlman, *The Comics of Chris Ware*, 4.
- 13 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993).