

Speaking Spaces: A Material Ecocritical Approach to Graphic Narratives

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Abstract

In this thesis I examine how spaces in graphic narratives can act as oppressive forces. I apply a material ecocritical approach to three graphic narratives; *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel, *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention* by Tings Chak, and *Here* by Richard McGuire. In all of these works, I consider the matter that makes up the spaces to be active and agential and I look at the ways in which it influences the characters and other agents in the narratives. Looking at the material realities in graphic spaces render visible wrongdoings and power structures that exists in the texts, but which are not necessarily linked to human intentionality.

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Abstract

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1 Introduction

This thesis engages critically with spaces in graphic novels. By space, I refer to the tangible graphic landscapes that are visible within the frames or on the pages of the books, “the fictive space in which the characters live and act” (Lefèvre), what is often referred to as the “diegetic space” (Lefèvre). Sometimes the space is relayed in a representational manner such as through the use of maps or floor plans, in other cases it is what one might more commonly consider “the background”; the elements of frames that are not human or animal characters, but constitute the world that the characters move around in. In the chosen works, this can be natural or urban landscapes and insides or outsides of buildings, in addition to the objects that shapes them. In this thesis I will look at how spaces in graphic narratives can act as oppressive forces, not in a merely symbolic way, but as active agents in the stories. My assumption is that the fictive landscapes on the page render visible power structures that are not necessarily linked to a single human perpetrator, or sometimes not even to human intentionality.

The works I have chosen are *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel, *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention* by Tings Chak and *Here* by Richard McGuire. Of these, only *Fun Home* adheres to the most common comics layout with rows of panels on each page, but they all contain sequential textual and graphic elements. Despite being very different in content and form, I have chosen these books because they share an avid and explicit attention to space, built structures and natural landscapes, and they all use this spatial focus to communicate something to the reader. These works all contain spaces that are in one way or another used as human homes or living spaces, even though the responses that these evoke in the reader varies greatly. Moreover, the spaces that are represented in these works share an ambiguity; an ability of the spaces on the page to be perceived as forces that are both oppressive and liberating, homely and yet brutalizing. In all three narratives, the landscapes and buildings are connected to larger political or societal issues which becomes more tangible when looking at them through a lens of spatial relations.

In this thesis I will discuss how the graphic spaces in these works can be seen as oppressive forces. I will consider these spaces not only as the backdrop of human

activities, and not only as metaphors or symbols, but instead as active agents that are worthy of attention of their own, as entities that are agential and dynamic. I will argue that by shifting the gaze from the human and personal that often tend to be the main focus of reading and onto the landscapes and objects that are usually in the background, enables a reading that reveals larger power structures in the chosen texts.

1.1 Space in Graphic Narratives

Spaces in real life, whether they are living rooms, prisons, towns, or forests, are made up of complex combinations of social, natural, and political factors. Both built and natural environments are made up of matter which at some point stems from nature, they are built, or conserved, or tore down, through a combination of political decisions, social conventions, and natural events. Through these amalgamations of elements, the spaces that surround us shapes lived realities in endless amounts of ways.

The graphic narrative is particularly interesting when it comes to looking critically at space, because spaces in graphic narratives possess a unique ability to convey some of the cultural, political, and natural complexities that exist in real spaces onto the page. The medium has the advantage of being able to create highly specific, highly material realities that the reader responds to with a combination of affective and intellectual responses. As Silke Horstkotte observes in her essay “Zooming In and Out”, “each graphic narrative evokes not only a storyline but *a complete narrative universe* with a highly distinctive feel” (Horstkotte 33, my emphasis). By the use of drawing styles and colours, manipulation of perspective, and textual commentary, graphic narratives create not only a story of events but a world that the reader relates to.

As is pointed out in the introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Graphic Novels*, the graphic novel’s combination of text and images gives the medium an ability to do something that other mediums cannot, because images can do things that written text cannot and written text can do things that images cannot. Of course, as Hillary Chute has famously pointed out, the graphic narrative does not simply use one of these, text or image, to illustrate the other but employ the combination of both when looking for meaning in the text (“Comics as Literature?” 452). When it comes to representing space,

graphic narratives can employ all sorts of textual and visual techniques and any combination of these. As will be relevant in the analysis of *Fun Home*, graphic narratives can use objects like maps to emphasize certain spatial aspects of the landscape, or even manipulate them to hold subjective meanings or evoke immediate emotional responses in the reader. *Undocumented* also uses representational versions of space such as floor plans and satellite photography that plays their own part in shaping the world on the page and bring forth affective responses in the reader.

As Jennifer Ladino and Kyle Bladow observes in the introduction to their book *Affective Ecocriticism*, “place profoundly shapes our emotional lives” (2). They state that the non-narrative affective triggers that people encounter every day, things like the weather, built spaces, nonhuman animals or objects, “deserves assessment in terms of their emotional impact” (3). In their work, they have chosen to use the term “affect” as an umbrella term covering both bodily feelings and consciously interpreted or narrated effects.

In the following chapters I will analyse the relationship between the characters in the works, the reader, and the spaces on the page. Because of the way that images trigger instant emotional responses in the reader, affect plays a significant role in this endeavour. Spaces that might need pages of descriptions for the reader to be able to construct a specific, distinctive, and detailed storyworld in a regular prose novel, the comic medium can establish through a few images.

Karin Kukkonen’s article “Space, Time, and Causality in Graphic Narratives” is a theorization of how emotional responses influence the reading of space in graphic narratives. She argues that “through the relay of their own embodied experience, readers understand the two-dimensional characters on paper as having bodies like theirs and as moving around in the space of the storyworld” (53). She employs an interdisciplinary technique and refers to experiments in biology and psychology when arguing that it is probable that readers of graphic narratives “experience bodily echoes of the motions and actions they observe” (53). This means that through memories of sensory experiences of moving through space in the real world, readers experience some of the character’s movements not only visually, but through bodily responses that are not necessarily consciously narrated effects.

In his essay “Construction of Space in Comics”, Pascal Lefèvre writes that “the construction of space is a dynamic process” (Lefèvre). It is the reader that takes in the clues on the two-dimensional page and creates a fully operational storyworld based on an understanding of elements such as the linear perspective depth cues, overlapping objects, and both seen and unseen elements within and outside the frames. Lefèvre observes that there are several goals to this process. Firstly, it is necessary to construct a certain space in order to “situate the action” (Lefèvre) in the story. This is often done by drawing known icons, symbols, or buildings to locate the action to a particular place or a particular type of location. Secondly, he points out that the space can hold other meanings such as clues to the personalities of the characters, or it can express a certain mood or atmosphere, or it can be a “symbol for an underlying concept” (Lefèvre).

The points that Lefèvre makes about spaces as both a site for the action and as symbols or clues for the character’s personality are all important for the analysis in the following chapters. In the chapter on *Fun Home* I consider the Bechdel family house to be essential for understanding Bruce’s personality, and I see strong connections between the natural landscape and myths and stories. Likewise, in the chapter on *Undocumented*, I do indeed consider the detention centre building in the narrative to in a sense “stand in” for the detention system as a whole in what one might call a metaphorical manner. However, as I have already indicated, I will go beyond looking at spaces as symbols or metaphors in this thesis. Inspired by material ecocriticism and “storied matter” I will see the spaces on the page as physical realities that shapes a certain experience, as agential entities that have the power to inflict damage.

1.2 Storied Matter and Material Witnesses

Before providing an outline of the thesis, I will briefly discuss the theoretical foundations on which it rests. This thesis is mainly grounded in a blend of two different kinds of material approaches to literature. Firstly, it is inspired by some key terms from a branch of ecocriticism that is not exactly new, but which has gained new ground in the last few years. The branch I refer to is usually referred to as “material ecocriticism” or “the material turn” and is a branch that focuses its attention to the vivacity and meaning of matter (Iovino and Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism 2*). Secondly, this thesis is also

influenced by a field of study referred to as forensic architecture, which in its essence concerns itself with the testimony of objects and buildings in legal cases, and often in cases of human right's abuses. The spaces in the primary texts consists of both natural and urban landscapes, and it is therefore useful to employ both material ecocriticism which tends to focus on the intersections between matter and human narratives, and forensic architecture which seeks to "reverse the forensic gaze" (Weizman, *Forensic Architecture* 9) and investigate human power relations and institutions based on architectural evidence.

As the name "material ecocriticism" suggests, the field pays attention to inanimate objects, natural elements and even nonhuman animals and their meanings both in the real world and in art and literature. In the introduction to their book *Material Ecocriticism*, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann writes that material ecocriticism regards "the world's material phenomena as knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be "read" as forming narratives" (1). This means that material ecocritical readings pays particular attention to the intersections between human narratives and matter, the "knots" in the network of stories that both humans and nonhumans create.

The visuality of graphic novels renders the interactions between the environment and the characters visible at all times. The way that the characters relate to the places and objects that surround them, how they move around in the fictional universe, and thereby how the spaces affect them, makes the spaces on the page determining in the reader's impression of the story. Because of this, graphic narratives possess a unique ability to tell the narratives of matter, and particularly to pay attention to the ways that the narratives of matter connect to the narratives of people.

Central to material ecocriticism is an attempt at abolishing the equating of agency and intent. Iovino and Oppermann argues that traditionally, matter, and even nonhuman animals, have been considered passive and inert as opposed to active and agential and they wish to broaden the horizon as to what is usually considered as meaningful or meaning-making (2). As Iovino and Oppermann observes in their essay "Theorizing Material Ecocriticism", "[t]he assertion that matter is filled with agency is what the new materialisms oppose to a vision of agency as connected with intentionality and therefore to human (or divine) intelligence" (453).

The argument that supports an agential reading of inanimate matter is that matter continuously “forms the fabric of events and casual chains” (Iovino and Oppermann, “Material Ecocriticism” 451) with or without a degree of intentionality. It is not necessary for an object, building or material to intentionally perform a certain function, they perform functions and make up chains of events with or without meaning to do so. The many unpredictable manifestations of a changing climate, such as wildfires, rising sea levels or hurricanes are all examples of matter exerting power without what one would usually consider intent. So is ocean plastic inflicting damage on sea animals after it is discarded by humans, and so is the ravaging of COVID-19, which indirectly has affected the world economy, politics and restricted people’s movements throughout the past year. In a way, matter acting in ways that are new or more unpredictable than before makes up the essence of human fears regarding climate change.

The non-intentional agency of matter will form the backdrop of the reading of all the chosen works in this thesis. It is clear that all graphic narrative works, including the ones that are analysed in the following chapters, are made by deliberate sequencing. The non-intentional agency refers not to the way the spaces are laid out on the pages by the creator, but the ways in which they interact with the characters on the page. It is not necessary for the small town in *Fun Home* to intentionally moderate Bruce’s behaviour in order for it to function that way in the narrative. Neither does the house in *Here* wish to be an exclusive force in order for it to be so. It is, however, when non-intentional matter can be seen as active and agential that we scrutinize even those oppressive forces that are either not dependent on intent, or which are hidden within everyday structures.

Instead of intent, material ecocritical thinkers connect matter to meaning and to processes. As Jeffrey Cohen points out in the foreword to *Material Ecocriticism*, “a rock is within its properly geologic duration a wayfarer, a holder of stories of mountains that undulate and continents that journey the sea” (Cohen ix). What humans usually perceive as static objects, things like rocks, buildings, or even trees or plants, are in fact moving, developing and changing. The only reason they appear static is that they operate on a time scale that is so different from a human time scale that it does not register with humans. All matter forms its own narratives, or, in Iovino and Oppermann’s words: “[a]ll matter, (...), is a storied matter” (*Material Ecocriticism* 1).

The idea of storied matter, matter that is forming narratives in and of itself, seems particularly applicable to graphic narratives because it is a medium that in some ways is less bound to human language and storytelling than prose literature is. The medium has the potential to juxtapose the human, non-human animals, and the material in interesting ways. By drawing both human characters, nonhuman characters and matter from an outsider's or onlooker's perspective, a perspective where the viewer watches all of these interact with each other next to each other on the page, graphic narratives have the ability to in some ways to equalize the stories that are told by different actors. As will be more fully demonstrated in the chapter on *Here*, graphic narratives allow for storytelling that is less obviously connected to a human way of thinking and experiencing. In the case of *Here*, for instance, this allows us to regard the story of a place, which is essentially a story of matter changing and developing over time, as a story of value and agency.

One of the problems that occur from the reductionist view of agency and meaning that traditionally has been prevalent in literary criticism is, as Iovino and Oppermann point out, that it limits ethical considerations to include only our own species (*Material Ecocriticism* 2). As Jane Bennett argues in the preface to her book *Vibrant Matter*, “the image of thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption”, and “[i]t does so by preventing us from detecting (...) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies” (Bennett ix). In other words, the idea that matter is dead and passive only increases human feelings of entitlement to use and destroy landscapes, while it simultaneously keeps us from seeing the agency that exists in the matter around us. Because of this, critics advocating material ecocritical readings of art and literature considers discourses about the living world to be “insufficient if separated from their material substratum of inanimate substances and apersonal agencies” (*Material Ecocriticism* 3). It does not mean that human narratives are meant to be perceived as less important, but it means that the intersections between the narratives of matter, nonhumans and humans should be paid closer attention to.

Iovino and Oppermann challenges critics and readers to not only consider narratives that are applied to matter as metaphors, but to instead use anthropomorphizing as a “heuristic strategy” (*Material Ecocriticism* 8). This, they claim, is a technique that reduces the distance between the human and the nonhuman, and thereby lets the reader

access perspectives that could be important when attempting to deal with the world in new ways through the use of imagination (8).

Although this thesis perhaps most obviously uses a strategy of anthropomorphizing in the chapter that deals with *Here*, where a lot of land is considered the protagonist of the narrative, the spaces in all of the works are given a certain level of human-like characteristics when they are considered as oppressive forces. This is not meant to be viewed as metaphors, but it is instead a way of making the impact matter has on human narratives more tangible, and it emphasizes the space's agential and meaning-making qualities.

The way matter organizes itself, and the ways in which it is manipulated by humans, affect human lives. Considering matter as agential is useful when attempting to perform more inter-species ethical readings of literature. However, material thinking and focus on buildings and objects, also has great value when examining human power structures, which is the premise of the field of study called forensic architecture. A key concept in this field of study is the idea of the "material witness". According to Susan Schuppli, "[m]aterial witnesses are [sic] non-human entities and machinic ecologies that archive their complex interactions with the world" (Schuppli) Through archiving their interactions with the world, these material entities produce "ontological transformations and informatic dispositions that can be forensically decoded and reassembled back into a history" (Schuppli). In other words, embedded in the material world are clues and evidence which can, by the use of technology and knowledge, be decoded as forming narratives. These narratives can then reveal things about the processes and events that the object has been subjected to or participated in, and thereby information about past or current events.

The term "material witness" has been used and developed by the Israeli architect and professor Eyal Weizman who is a leading figure in forensic architecture. According to him, the practice of forensic architecture regards elements of the built environment and their representation both in media and as data, as "entry points from which to interrogate contemporary practices" (*Forensic Architecture* 9). Weizman considers the material witness to exist somewhere between subject and object in that it is capable of some kind of "speech" if technically unveiled and legally acknowledged (*Least of All* 114).

The act of witnessing or providing testimony is something that traditionally has been performed by humans. However, as Weizman argues, in the age of forensics, objects and built environments are entering the forums of international justice with increasing frequency (Weizman et al. 59). The term “material witness” can be seen as a technique of deliberate anthropomorphizing in the manner that Iovino and Oppermann suggest. The term “witness” has traditionally been used to describe a human and applying it to an object or building emphasizes the agentic and participatory qualities of matter.

The whole idea of material witnesses relies on an interlocutor or interpreter who can “translate from the language of objects to that of humans” (Weizman and Herscher 121). In a court of law where buildings were being tried, this would be an architect or another kind of scientist or expert witness (121). However, when looking at spaces in graphic novels, it is the reader that takes on the role of the expert witness or interlocutor. It is the reader that looks at the evidence provided in the text and interrogates the practices these spaces perform or represent. It is also the reader who possesses the experience and knowledge of relating to space in real life and who can therefore transfer this knowledge onto the landscapes and buildings in graphic narratives.

An important aspect of studying buildings and built environments is that it is not always possible to operate with a simple “who dunnit” logic in the investigations (*Forensic Architecture* 10). In their conversation, Eyal Weizman and Andrew Herscher are somewhat critical of the “axis of interpretation” which always “leads to the question of authorial responsibility” (112). Although this interpretative chain might be unavoidable in courts of law that seeks to establish whether a crime has been performed by a specific person, Herscher expresses concern about the limits of viewing “violence as an instrument apprehended by subjects who know what they’re doing and why they’re doing it” (112). According to him, intention is only one element in complex structures that determines the meaning of architecture, and architecture should instead be viewed as “an ensemble of individual, collective and nonhuman forces and dynamics” (112).

As fiction readers we possess greater freedom to steer away from the interpretation axis that only examines the guilt of a person, and can instead consider the multifaceted ways in which the spaces on the page affects the characters in the stories. We can examine power structures that are not discernible as intentional wrongdoings performed by specific people but we can also investigate the ways in which environments sustain and

enhance human experience, or the ways in which it develops and changes on its own. In fact, material ecocriticism often regards the intersections between human and material narratives as stories of dependency, sympathy, or affection. Critics discuss aspects connections to nature such as solastalgic distress (Weik Von Mossner) or of sympathy as a “dispersed and generic force” that works not only between humans but between humans and environments (Bennett, “Of Material Sympathies” 241).

Looking away from the axis of interpretation that ultimately leads to a question of guilt is particularly useful in works like *Fun Home*, where there is not a single simple culprit that can be blamed for the bad things that happens. Bruce’s death is in a way an aporia, a question that is not, and cannot be, fully answered. Yet, embedded in the landscapes are clues that gives the reader the possibility to understand his loneliness, his desperation, and the ways in which he tries to cope with his situation.

As far as I can tell, Schuppli and Weizman has not specifically referred to material ecocriticism in their work, nor have any of the articles I have read on material ecocriticism alluded to the work on forensic architecture. This is unsurprising considering that they are completely different fields of study that are usually applied in different discourses. Forensic architecture is a practical methodology that uses modern technology to provide evidence in trials, human rights cases or other legal matters. It is not a methodology that is explicitly directed at literary criticism the way that material ecocriticism is. Nevertheless, these two schools of thought share the common premise that matter and material objects are holders of information and that they form narratives that intersect and influence human narratives. Both of them are therefore useful when analysing the relation between spaces, fictional characters and readers, and they are both deeply concerned with matter as agential, meaning-making, dynamic and storied.

1.3 Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of three chapters, one for each of the three graphic narratives. The first chapter is an analysis of Alison Bechdel’s autobiographical graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Of the three works selected for this thesis, *Fun Home* is without doubt the one that has received most attention, both scholarly and otherwise.

Critics have published essays concerning different aspects of the novel, many focusing on its autobiographical qualities. Some critics have dealt with elements that relate to my topic of space, such as Rebecca Scherr, Robin Lydenberg and Kyle Eveleth, which are all featured in the chapter. *Fun Home* has since its publication in 2006 also received a great deal of popular attention. It has been listed on the New York Times list of bestselling paperback graphic novels for 47 weeks (“Paperback Graphic Books”), and *Time* magazine named it its best book of 2006 (“Comics as Literature?” 453). In 2015, *Fun Home* took a leap out of the comic book pages and was adapted to the big stage as a Broadway musical.

The plot in *Fun Home* revolves around the relationship between the narrator (hereafter referred to as “Alison”) and her father, Bruce Bechdel, who dies after being hit by a truck, an accident which Alison is convinced is a suicide. When looking back at Bruce’s life and her own childhood with him, Alison keeps returning, over and over again, to the landscapes of their small town and the house she grew up in with her family. The narrative is full of maps of the town and surrounding areas, detailed drawings of the house interior and textual references to the spaces in the story. I will argue that through the references to the space in the novel, the narrator creates a narrative of Bruce as a victim not only of circumstance, but of place, and that his death is intrinsically linked to the town where he grew up and lived most of his life.

The second chapter consists of an analysis of *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention*, a short graphic narrative by architect and activist Tings Chak first published in 2014. The narrative was published by grassroots organizations that seek to aid immigrants in their struggle to stay in Canada. It is a work that wish to convince its readers about the questionable practices of migrant detention. Even though it is set in a Canadian context, it also speaks to a wider context of migrant detention practices in western countries and in the world.

In terms of scholarly attention, the narrative has been addressed by critics such as Candida Rifkind who has written about its relation to the wider genre of comics of migration. However, most of the book’s attention stem from reviews and interviews by various groups and web magazines that in some way intersect with the narrative’s main areas of interest: immigration right’s and the architectural aspect of incarceration.

As a stark contrast to *Fun Home*, which is an autobiographical narrative and is centred mainly around human relations, *Undocumented* is an architectural approach to migrant detention, meaning that instead of being a narrative that focuses on human characters, it consists of sketches, floor plans and other architectural tools. In fact, the book contains little of what one might call a consistent narrative in the traditional sense as the book's three main parts mostly consists of illustrations of different landscapes and a loose textual narration. A large part of the text does not contain any visible human characters at all, which allows for the reader to participate actively and experience the spaces in the text more directly than if they were mediated through a character. In this chapter I will focus on elements of the text that allows for a readerly immersion into the spaces of migrant detention and argue that this immersion grants the reader access to a usually hidden space. This access allows for an uncomfortable reading experience, and a scrutiny of the architecture of a usually hidden system.

The last chapter is an analysis of *Here* by Richard McGuire, a graphic novel first published in 2014. This book tells, in overlapping time frames, the story of one small corner of the earth through the age of time. Like *Fun Home*, it pays meticulous attention to a family house, in this case a relatively traditional-looking middle-class home. It is, however, more similar to *Undocumented* in the way that it employs few recognizable human characters and focus instead on the space itself as the main centre of the text. *Here* has received some scholarly attention. Particularly have critics been interested in the novel as a book that deals with environmental issues in different ways. Some of these, such as David Rodriguez have dealt with the space as a narrative presence, others, such as Jon Hegglund have written about the home and its uncertain position in the Anthropocene. Both of these critics are featured in the chapter on *Here*. The novel has also received its fair share of popular attention, with reviews in prominent papers such as *the Guardian* and *the Paris Review*.

In the chapter on *Here* I will argue that the space should be read as the protagonist of the story. This reading allows the space to “speak” to the reader, and it sheds a light on the ways in which the house that sometimes occupies the lot operates not only as a nostalgic human home but instead reverses the nostalgic in order to investigate the human home as an exclusive force. The home in question, which is both a familiar cultural idea and portrayed as a cosy and nostalgic place in *Here*, builds and defines a world where

other species than humans are unnatural and alien members. It employs techniques that mirrors human and nonhuman bodies and shows an affective connection between humans and other species. However, it also demonstrates how human agency and material agency tend to operate on vastly different time scales.

These texts all share an attention to space. This attention manifests itself differently in the works; in *Fun Home* it is represented both visually and textually in maps, landscapes and decorations, in *Undocumented* it is portrayed as floor plans and drawings of insides of buildings, in *Here* it is manifested in drawings of the same space in hundreds of moments throughout time. Nevertheless, the spaces in these works have in common that they communicate with the reader, and allow the reader to perceive, visually and bodily, the ways in which matter connects to human experience. Particularly the way in which the spaces can be perceived as oppressive forces.

2 Fun Home

2.1 Chapter Introduction

In an interview with Hillary Chute, Alison Bechdel said about her graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) that it is a story “very much about place” (Chute, “An Interview” 1005). The novel is an autobiographical work centred around Bechdel’s own childhood and adolescence in the small town Beech Creek in rural Pennsylvania, and it pays particular attention to her complicated relationship with her father, Bruce Bechdel. Despite all the things Bruce and Alison seemingly have in common; their love of books, their queer experience and their upbringing in the same small town, their relationship is characterized by distance, culminating in a void when Bruce is hit by a truck only a few months after Alison comes out as a lesbian. She is convinced that he has committed suicide and this conviction becomes the pivot of the entire memoir. Throughout the memoir Alison returns over and over again to his death as she is examining their relationship and his possible reasons for ending his life.

Perhaps because of the distance that characterize the relationship between the narrator and her father, the landscapes surrounding them plays a prominent part in shaping *Fun Home*. Bruce’s character is usually drawn with an expression on his face that appears almost static, and there are few moments where his character provides the reader with speech bubbles or other peaks into his inner life. He is described as a complex and erratic character, with unpredictable “tantrums” and “bursts of kindness” (Bechdel 21). One of the most striking aspects of his personality, and one that the narrator returns to many times, is his passion for interior design, historical restoration and gardening. These passions are portrayed almost as a spiritual conviction, the result of which is made visual on almost every page of the memoir, in all the panels and settings that feature the Bechdel family home. The clues to Bruce’s personality and motivations is therefore largely found in the physical spaces that shaped the realities of his life, meaning the town he lived in, the landscapes which surrounded it and the built environments where the Bechdel family lived together.

Fun Home continuously brings attention to the landscape of Beech Creek in different ways, not merely as a background for the action but as an active agent in the story. Littered throughout the text are maps of Beech Creek, drawings of the landscapes surrounding the town and of the interior design of the family house. Often, these are accompanied by human characters within the frames, but sometimes they stand alone or are manipulated with textual captions. In many cases the interior design, the landscape of Beech Creek or other spatial elements are referred to by the characters in the story or plays part in conflicts between them. In short, graphic and textual references to the physical spaces in the novel is in fact so ubiquitous that it is hard to regard it as anything less than meaning making.

In this chapter I will argue that the narrator uses the landscapes and physical space of Beech Creek as a way of understanding her father's death, and that physical space, and particularly the small town of Beech Creek, could be regarded as a guilty agent in Bruce's death. I believe that assigning blame on the space he lived in not only reduces the amount of fault one might attribute to his behaviour, but places blame for the unhappiness of people like him in a wider political context. I will look specifically at the use of maps and other explicit references to landscape, in addition to the different uses of indoor space and interior design. In a medium like graphic novels, there might be an infinite number of ways to think about physical space. In this chapter I will focus on the ways in which physical space shapes what the narrator considers to be the suicide of Bruce Bechdel, and the ways that the indoor spaces serves as a contrast, as a means of escape and purpose. I will hereafter refer to Alison Bechdel the author as "Bechdel", and the protagonist in the memoir as "Alison".

The fact that the landscapes and spaces people live in shapes their lives is not a great revelation. It is obvious that the place someone lives affect that person's opportunities, their social circle and their education. One of the fields that attempt to understand the effects that regions have on lived experience is landscape ecology. According to William Howarth, professor of environmental law, landscape ecologists ask questions about regions, where they are, what they give or take, alter or influence, and does not separate between natural and disturbed regions (Howarth 76). The questions proposed by Howarth are, in a way, a more technical approach to the questions that occupy material ecocritics. The answers to these questions say something about the

interconnections between humans and the material reality that surrounds them. They speak to the “knots” in the “vast network of agencies” proposed by Iovino and Oppermann, the knots being the instances in which human narratives and narratives of matter come together and influence one another (Iovino and Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism* 1). Howarth’s questions help shape this chapter on *Fun Home*, because they concretize how I am analysing the relationship between Bruce and his surroundings. I am, in short, looking at what his small town takes away from him, what it gives him and how the narrator proposes that it alters or influences him. I am also extending these questions to encompass the Bechdel family house and assume that the proposed questions apply here as well.

2.2 Getting Stuck

One of the recurring motifs in the memoir is the motif of Bruce getting stuck in the landscape of Beech Creek, seemingly helpless against the pull of his hometown. Alison and her brother’s favourite story when they were children was a story of when Bruce as a young child wandered off into a muddy field. He got stuck in the deep mud and had to be lifted out by a passing postman (Bechdel 40-42). The panel, which is rendered in figure 1, shows his tiny body in the vast field, his small footsteps leading out into the open space

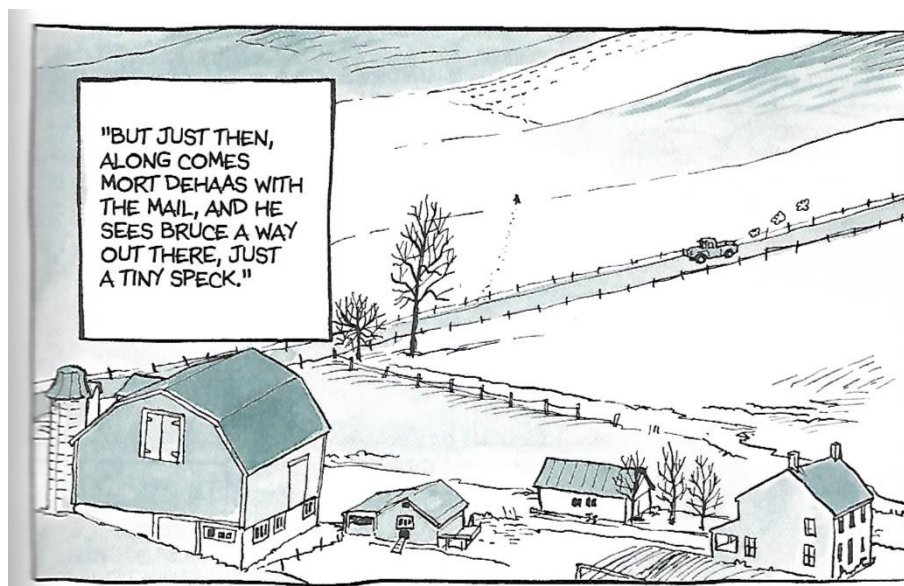


Figure 1: Birds-eye view of young Bruce in a muddy field. (Bechdel 40)

until he is only a small, lonely figure. The panel is drawn in a bird's eye perspective and includes a large portion of the field, which emphasizes the difference in size between the boy and the surrounding landscape.

This anecdote seems to mirror Alison's perception of Bruce's relationship with Beech Creek as an older man. He is constantly portrayed as though he simply got stuck in the town where he was born. On another occasion the narrator states that "If only he'd been able to escape the gravitational pull of Beech Creek, I tell myself, his particular sun might not have set in so precipitate a manner" (125). In addition to comparing the draw of the small town to a powerful natural phenomenon which pulls him in, this particular quote also references the myth of Icarus and Daedalus which frames Bruce and Alison's relationship throughout the text. As in the image of tiny Bruce in the large farm field, the mere size proportion between the person and the force he is up against, in this case the sun, is striking. The pull of the sun single-handedly keeps planets in their orbits. Against such a force it is obvious that the human life appears chanceless.

The recurring motif of the town as a natural force allows the reader to see the landscape of Beech Creek itself is an entity which exerts a defining power over Bruce's life, a power which is both external and formidable. The constant references to the sun by the use of the Icarus myth gives the relation between Bruce and Beech Creek an elliptical quality. The pull of the town not only keeps him grounded in one place; it sends him continuously circling in the same pattern. On another occasion the narrator claims that Bruce was "planted deep" (145), mirroring the story about the young boy in the mud while also suggesting a state of interdependence or symbiosis with the landscape. In short, the narration continuously draws connections between the landscape of Beech Creek and the force it exerts in keeping Bruce grounded in the same place, circling in the same orb.

2.3 Killer Beech Creek

The narration in *Fun Home* draws constant connections between the Beech Creek and Bruce's death. This association can be found in many levels of the text, both in the textual captions in Alison's narration, the structure of the panels in relation to one another, and, of course, in the images themselves. In one panel depicting Alison and a relative talking

about the loss of her father, Alison gets agitated when her relative refers to the death as a “mystery”. Angrily she is imagining herself yelling “There’s no mystery! He killed himself because he was a manic-depressive closeted fag and he couldn’t face living in this small-minded town one more second” (125). These kinds of explicit textual evidence leave no doubt that Alison, at least, considers Beech Creek as partly guilty for her father’s death. Through these accusations she is setting up the town as a guilty agent in what she considers his unhappy life and ending.

One of the most obvious representations of the physical landscape of the text are the many maps that are scattered throughout the text. These maps are elaborately hand drawn and, like a lot of other objects in the text, they are usually rich in detail. One of the most striking things about these maps is that they are often positioned adjacent to and in chapters that have the word “death” in the title, or which deals explicitly with Bruce’s death in other ways. There are two main clusters of maps, and the first one can be found in the chapter “A Happy Death” (25, first map on 30) which is the chapter where Bruce’s death is addressed directly for the first time. The first maps the reader encounters appear directly after a panel showing Bruce’s gravestone and epitaph. The next ones are located in “Canary-Coloured Caravan of Death” (121, first map on 126) which also revolves around the death.

This positioning might not in itself construct a link of causality between the place and the death, it is not a simple, linear, cause-and-effect kind of connection between the two. Belgian comics researcher Thierry Groensteen has proposed what he calls “braiding” as a way of reading comics as a system. In his book *The System of Comics* he writes that braiding is an operation that programs and carries out the bridging of a series in comics (Groensteen 146). He understands series as “a succession of continuous or discontinuous images linked by a system of iconic, plastic or semantic correspondences” (Groensteen 146). In Silke Horstkotte’s words, braiding means that “graphic narrative puts every panel in a potential, if not actual, relation with every other” (Horstkotte 41). Instead of a simple cause-and-effect narrative, the relationship between the place and death is a creation of a continuous thematical association which is both subtle and effective.

The maps of Beech Creek reappear so often throughout the text, that the sheer amount of them makes them stand out as important segments of the story. They show different sections of the town and a varying degree of the surrounding landscapes; some

show Beech Creek as a small dot in a big landscape and contain contour lines and other topographical markers, others are in bigger scale and focus on the town itself with lines representing roads and little squares representing houses. In her dissertation about nature writing, Sigfrid Kjeldaas writes that in maps, the geography of places is “reduced to the flat and continuous surface of representation” where “each place exists as a bounded and internally coherent entity” (Kjeldaas 45). Drawing on the renowned geographer Doreen Massey, she argues that places on a map have no time dimension, no history or development. To be able to imagine this “static, isolationist conception of place” is to reimagine things “in terms of process” (46). The keyword here is process, which is what all the constant references to the space, the motifs of getting stuck, the Icarus myth and especially the maps seems to embody. As David Lynch writes in the introduction to his book *Bioregionalism*, “map making can be an empowering tool of reinhabiting and reimagine place, allowing us to visualize in a nearly infinite array of contexts and scales the multiple dimensions of our home places” (Lynch 6).

The flat surface of representation that Kjeldaas mentions shows the simple realities of Beech Creek; the position of the town, the way that the buildings are positioned in relation to each other, where the roads are located. In short, it is a simplified version of space where everything is translated into understandable symbols. The drawing and relating of the maps could be seen as an attempt at getting a clear overview over an otherwise complicated and traumatic story. However, Bechdel does not only draw the representational landscapes, she, as Lynch suggests, reimagines them. In the book *Gestures of Seeing in Film, Video and Drawing*, Ernst van Alphen writes that “the gestures of the moving hand register, one could say, the movement if the thinking eye” (Alphen 110). When creating *Fun Home* Bechdel has retraced, by hand, the landscapes of her hometown over and over again. She takes the static and isolated frame of one particular place at one particular time and mediates the meaning with the use of captions, additional signs in the maps and by putting them next to other panels in a narrative. All of these narrative devices make the static image of the map a tool for thinking about the processes that shaped Bruce’s life.

2.4 The Testimony of Maps

In the same interview as quoted in the introduction, Bechdel said that the maps are in the text to emphasize that the story is real (Chute, “An Interview” 1005). One could argue that the maps act as what Schuppli refers to as “material witnesses”. They are material objects that relay simple facts about the landscapes where Bruce lived, the topography of the town and the surrounding areas. Yet, they serve both as a way of corroborating the narrative and as a way to construct the particular part of the narrative that circles around Bruce and his potential suicide, making the reader understand the issues that might arise from living in Beech Creek through their own visual and bodily impressions.

The details in the maps makes it possible to go to Beech Creek and find the places in the text. Even if that is not something that most readers would do, the maps constantly testify to the fact that the town and the people in the story are real. Sean Wilsey, a reviewer in the New York Times, went so far as to say that “[if] it were fiction, (or fictionalized) it would be meaningless” (“The Things They Buried”). Although this might be debatable, it is simple to imagine why it might be important to Bechdel that the story is perceived as real by the reader and that the realness gives the story more urgency. Even though the book is not in one sense explicitly political it is nevertheless a novel which tells the story of a group of people who traditionally have lived on the outskirts of society. It tells the story of a lesbian girl and her closeted homosexual father who both grew up in a small rural town - a kind of place which is not usually associated with gay life. Even though these particular people, Bruce and Allison and the particular town they lived in is unique, they are not the only closeted gay people who have suffered the trauma of living closeted lives in small towns, and Bruce is not the only one to commit suicide. Their story matters to many people who are or have been in similar situations and the realness of it makes it more urgent and more difficult to set aside.

Fun Home was published in 2006 and even in the relatively short amount of time that has passed since then, a lot has happened regarding rights for LGBTQ people many places in the world. The US has legalized same-sex marriage and passed laws against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Nevertheless, a lot of LGBTQ people still have to suffer in hostile environments that do not support them, both in the US and in the rest of the world. *Fun Home* shows how much the society Bruce and Alison lives in changes with regard to being gay in the time that passes between his and her adulthood.

Bruce is never able to live out his sexuality openly while Alison, by the time she is a young woman, tells her parents and her friends that she is a lesbian. At college, there is a gay union (76), a gay and lesbian centre, and other openly gay students all of which makes her experience very different from Bruce's, despite there being only one generation age difference between the two of them. That is not to say that Alison does not experience discrimination; a segment of panels shows how she and her friends were denied access to a nightclub based on their gay appearance (106-107). The difference remains that even though Alison has these negative experiences, she also has a network of support which makes it possible for her to live a more open and shameless life than her father. Emphasizing that *Fun Home* is a real story positions the memoir within a historical and political context about the individual costs of systemic oppression, instead of simply a story about a conflicted person or a dysfunctional family.

Thinking about the landscapes in the novel as agential matter that crystallizes oppressive structures, makes it easier to consider Bruce's suicide as being bigger than him. It is a way of steering away from the axis of interpretation that Weizman and Herscher see as reductive because of its emphasis on authorial responsibility. Analysing the landscape's role in his death becomes a way of processing his life, and the lives of people like him, without the necessarily divisive and diminishing practice of assigning blame on individuals. Even though it might be easier to blame a person for Bruce's death, such as the family, the community, Bruce himself, or the truck driver who hit him, this would miss the structural issues that brought on his discomfort. Instead of a human flaw, his suicide becomes a response to real experienced issues of living as a gay man in a landscape that did not support that kind of life.

The study "Filling a Void?", performed by Danielle Kelly et al. suggests that "[l]iving in a remote or rural location has been found to be a substantial risk factor for social isolation and loneliness" (Kelly et al. 226). Among the reasons mentioned are social risk factors such as "absence of social relationships and support networks" (225), and geographic risk factors such as "poor transport links" (226). Additionally, a 1987 study performed by Anthony D'Augelli and Mary Hart observed that in most of the rural areas of the US, the gay community was, at the time of the study, invisible as a result of "justifiable fear and discomfort about others' reactions to disclosure of affectional orientation" (82). His entire life, Bruce exists in the intersection between these two factors

of isolation, the physical isolation of the small town that will be elaborated further upon, and the isolation that comes from not being able to identify with a group that accept or understand his reality.

The isolation of Beech Creek is visualized in one of the maps, showing Beech Creek as a small dot between the Allegheny Front and ridges and valleys (see figure 2).

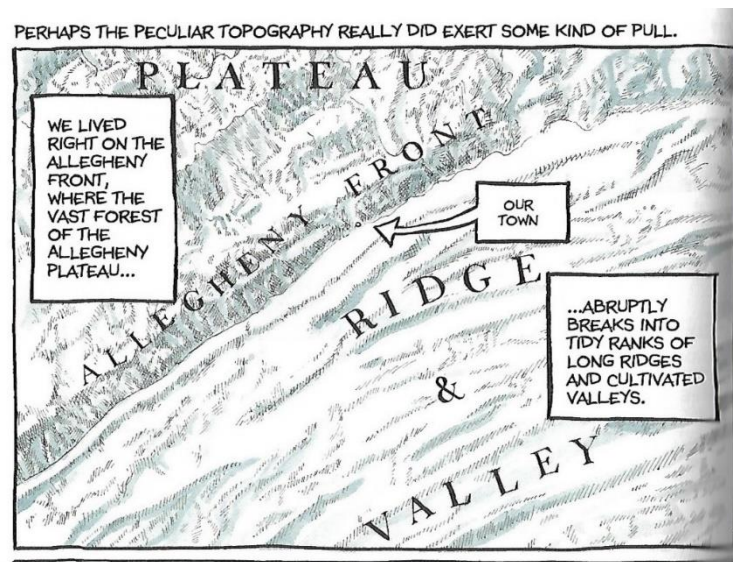


Figure 2: Beech Creek depicted as a small dot in a large landscape. (Bechdel 126)

As with the image of the young boy in the muddy field, the dimensions speak to the reader with a language of its own. The small dot is almost indiscernible among the mountains, and the reader is able to feel or imagine the sense of isolation that is embedded in the image. When referring to the map, the narrator describes this position of the town as a kind of isolation that traditionally “discouraged cultural exchange” (126), probably meaning that she perceives her hometown to be both physically and ideologically removed from the ideas of the big city. The map is a visual representation of the remoteness of the town, but seen in relation to the captions, there is also a perceived cultural isolation embedded in the landscape.

The idea of the city, which Alison imagines could have saved Bruce’s life, exists as the antidote to the ruralness of Beech Creek. As already mentioned, Bruce’s bonds with his hometown is continuously referred to as a dependency or as a symbiotic relationship, suggesting a strong mental and physical connection between the two.

Despite this relationship, the narrator states that “the anonymity of the city might have saved his life” (144). The city in *Fun Home* is the place where Alison first sees a woman in men’s clothing and with short hair, an image which has a lasting impact on her as a child (118). Up until that point she has never encountered a woman which so clearly defies gender norms, which says something about the kind of homogenous population they are surrounded by on a day-to-day basis. The city, in this case New York, is also where the image of the half-naked babysitter Roy is taken, which covers a full double-page at the centre of the memoir. Bruce might not have limited his escapades with young men to the city, it is suggested that he frequently were surrounded by the company of young men in Beech Creek as well, but the most tangible evidence of the affairs that remains after his passing is this picture taken on a family holiday. In other words, the narration in *Fun Home* continuously draws links between the city and the sexual diversity that could have been liberating for Bruce if he had been willing or able to break away from his life in his own hometown.

In the novel, Bruce does not explicitly allude to a desire to live in the city. The idea that the city might have changed his life is conveyed through Alison’s narration. However, Alison’s testimony holds great momentum, not only because she knows her father and the town they live in well, but because she, like Bruce, sees the landscape they exist in through queer eyes. From a young age she refused normative gender stereotypes and wanted boy clothes and short hair. She describes herself as “spartan to my father’s Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his nelly” (15). It is clear that she shares his non-stereotypical gender identification and that she from a young age shares his experience of being different. Later, in college, she realises that she is a lesbian and comes out to her family. Like Alison remarks in her deliberation of their relation, their experiences mirror each other, their difference connects them. This means that Alison is particularly qualified to understand his experience because her experience closely resembles his, even if they are separated by a difference in time.

The difference in Bruce’s and Alison’s experience is perhaps most clearly visualized through the images that show the difference before and after the construction of the interstate 80. Like with many of the other references to the landscape, the combination of the images and the captions provides the road with an almost metaphorical

aspect. The narrator describes how the creation of this road appeared almost as a mythical event to her as a child (see figure 3).

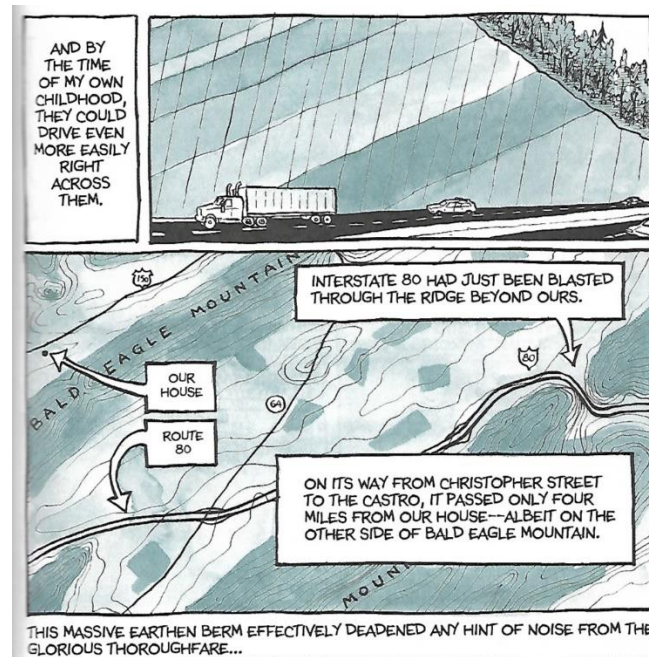


Figure 3: Interstate 80 and the Bechdel family house. (Bechdel 127)

The road makes it possible to drive to New York in only a few hours. As demonstrated in figures 2 and 3, Beech Creek is located in a mountainous area, and it is described in the textual narration how the landscape has changed between Bruce's childhood and Alison's. The narration guides the reader towards a connection between the changes that happened with the culture and the changes that took place in the landscape, the indication being that as cultures become less isolated, they also influence each other to a larger extent. When Bruce was young it was necessary to drive around the mountain to get to the big city. The interstate changes this when it is "blasted through the ridge" (126). In his article "A Vast 'Network of Transversals'", Kyle Eveleth claims that for the narrator, "I-80 represents a straightforward route of movement away from the stifling atmosphere of rural Pennsylvania" (95). The road sustains an almost metaphorical quality in relating the difference between Bruce and Alison's experience, the implication being that simultaneously as the practical distance to the city shortens, so does the distance to the ideas and lifestyles that are connected to the city. The landscape and the ideas influence

each other, but the mountains which impaired “the cultural exchange” becomes less of a barrier than it used to be. When Alison and her family visits New York city for a holiday, it is only a few weeks after the Stonewall riots, even though she did not realize that as a child. On that occasion she and her family has driven to New York on the I-80, and again the connection between the road, the city and the changes that where happening in the larger culture. In other words, when Alison grows up she has a better access to places where there are other gay people, or other groups of people who do not conform to gender stereotypes. This makes the landscape that she grows up in slightly less oppressive than the one that Bruce grew up in, and this is deeply connected to material realities, such as access to proper infrastructure.

2.5 Mythical Landscapes

As demonstrated above, the relationship between Bruce and Beech Creek is by no means treated mainly as a metaphorical relationship in this thesis. Instead, the maps and illustrations serve as testifying objects that help the reader understand his real situation that is influenced by the landscapes he lives in. However, *Fun Home* draws constant connections between the real lived experiences of the characters and myths, stories, and books. This also applies to the way that the spaces are portrayed, and thus the landscapes in *Fun Home* are not merely physical or cultural, it often blends into the mythical realm. They consist of a fusion of what is there physically and objectively, and the associations the narration breathes into them. The mythical realm of the landscapes provides layers that deepen the reader’s understanding of Bruce’s reality.

One of the connections between the physical and the imaginary is a literary reference in the form of a map from the children’s novel *The Wind in the Willows*. Alison remembers looking at the map as a child and how she “took for granted the parallels between this landscape and my own” (146). The drawn version of the map from *Fun Home* and a drawn map of Beech Creek are juxtaposed in figure 4 below. In the book, the map from *The Wind in the Willows* is positioned on top of the map of Beech Creek,

so that the images occupy a full page in a striking manner that allows the reader to spend some time pondering the similarities between the two landscapes.

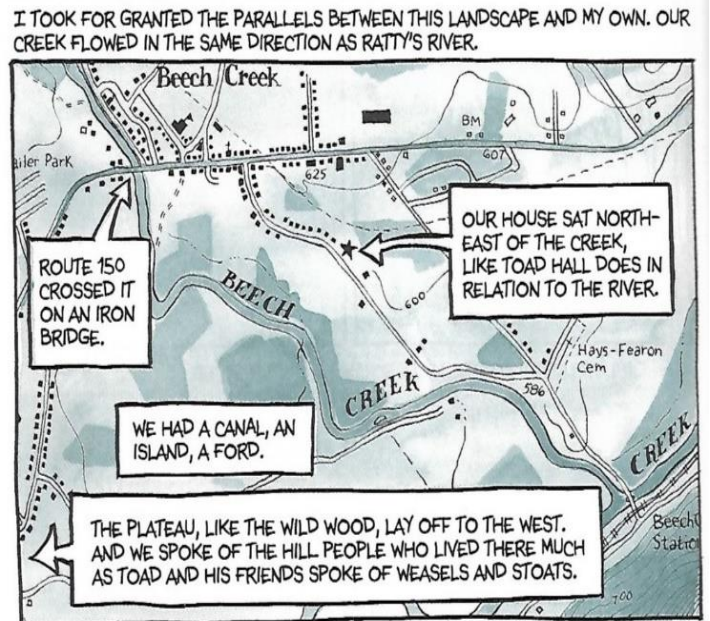
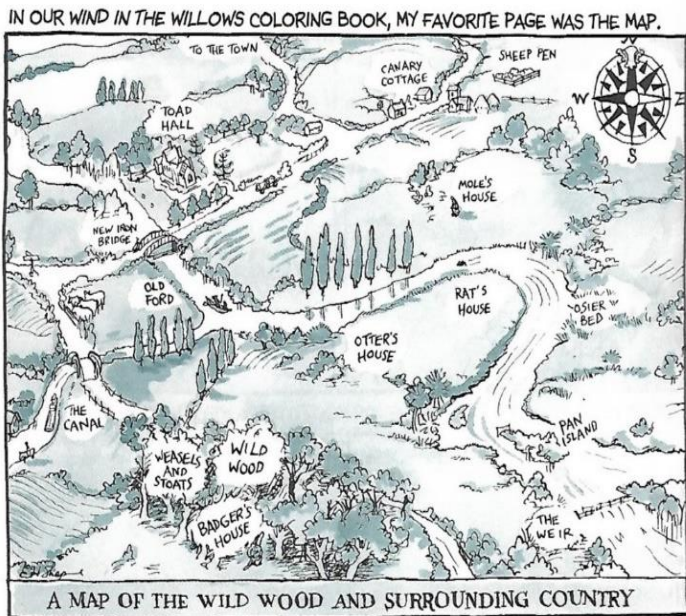


Figure 4: Map from *The Wind in the Willows* and map of Beech Creek. (Bechdel 146)

As the narrator remarks upon, the similarities between Beech Creek and the imaginary landscape is striking. The position and shape of the river, the forest on the outskirts of the village, even the position of some of the houses such as the Bechdel family home in relation to the river, shows a remarkable likeness between the two maps. Yet, it is clear that it is with a certain uneasiness that the narrator compares these two landscapes. As her wording “took for granted” suggests, she sees the parallels she refers to differently when looking back than she did as a child. There is a sense in the text that the similarities between the two landscapes are perhaps mostly of a superficial nature, perhaps even deceiving in their simplicity.

In his essay “On Other Spaces”, Michel Foucault defines utopias as unreal places that have an “inverted analogy” (24) with real space – like the reflection of a mirror which represents something real, but which does not exist itself. It is possible to consider the map from the *Wind in the Willows* as one such utopia, a place that shares common traits with a real place but which in its essence is unreal. It is easy to see the allure of the unreal space through a child’s eyes. Not only because it is aesthetically pleasing, but because it

represents a simpler world where the characters animal appearances reflect their personalities and where all conflicts are ultimately resolved.

The comparison between the two landscapes becomes even more emotionally loaded when Alison remarks upon the toad's yellow wagon. As readers of *The Wind in the Willows* might know, one of the stories in the book features Mr. Toad who steals a yellow motorcar and drives it away but ends up crashing the car and is eventually arrested for theft. However, he escapes prison disguised as a washerwoman and is never arrested again. Essentially, Mr. Toad escapes the consequences of his reckless behaviour, it has few repercussions except that it teaches him a moral lesson. When Bruce is hit by a yellow sunbeam truck there is no going back, it ends his life and thus illuminates the real difference between the two landscapes.

In a way, the fairy-tale landscape also mirrors some common ideas or conceptions about rural life. There is a long tradition in English literature to romanticize country life in nature writing. In genres like pastorals the rural life is regarded as simpler and free from the corruption of urban city life. Even though as we have already established, the myth of the idealised small town Beech Creek is just that, a myth, it appears that the idea of the rural is an important building block in Bruce's connection to his home. In one of the letters Bruce wrote to Helen before they got married, he describes a beautiful winter day in Beech Creek. He poetically depicts the frozen river with "solid mirrorlike passageways" and the wintry landscape with "silver grey woods" (Bechdel 145).

Even though perceptions of beauty and well-being are to a great extent subjective, scientists have found that there are certain environmental elements that could be said to be almost universal when it comes to determining whether a person will thrive in a particular environment or not, one of which is contact with nature or natural elements. In the book *Aesthetics, Well-being and Health*, Birgit Cold states that "[in] studies comparing images of built environments with or without natural elements people always preferred and even recalled better those with green elements" (Cold et al. 17). The appeal of nature is something that influence people's lives directly, and it is something that rural areas provide to a larger extent than urban ones. The article "Does Place of Residence Matter?" by Chris Wienke and Gretchen Hill, which examines homosexual living conditions in rural America, mentions the access to nature as an important aspect of thriving in these areas. Perhaps surprisingly, they see the connection to nature not only as

a general advantage of the areas but as an aid that specifically helps in coping with the strain of being perceived as different. In their article they write:

One of the benefits of the rural environment that may offset some of the costs is the open space it is perceived to offer its inhabitants. For example, several contributors to the book *Farm Boys* (Fellows, 1996), a compilation of stories from gay men who grew up on Midwest farms, described the wooded areas and open spaces of rural settings as places of refuge from the pressures and problems associated with being different. (1259)

A similar sentiment is reflected in *Fun Home* when the narrator remarks upon the use of the term “out on the mountain” (144) to describe the location of the bull pen she sometimes visits with her family. She states that “in the primeval wilderness beyond the front, specificity is abandoned” (144). Open spaces and natural landscapes might serve as temporary refuges where the need to define oneself with specific language is deserted for short periods of time.

In the case of Bruce Bechdel, the simple facts of his life can be rendered in one simple figure. As visualized in the panel rendered in figure 5 below, the place where he was born, where he lived, where he died and where he was buried can be encircled on a map with a mile and a half in diameter.

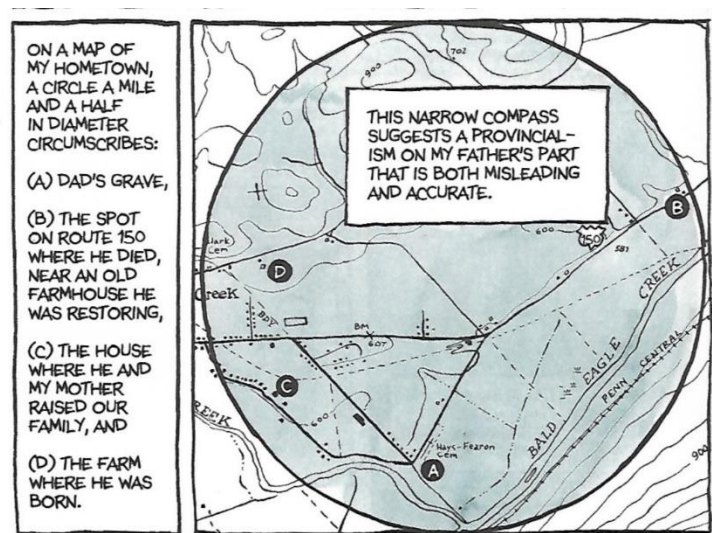


Figure 5: The "narrow compass" of Bruce's life.
(Bechdel 30)

Bechdel returns to the reality of this proximity several times, redrawing this one motif of Beech Creek and the places in his life several times with small variations. The narrator

refers to the circle that encloses the map as “a narrow compass” (30). The narrow compass Alison refers to can be interpreted as a double-entendre. Obviously, it is a reference to the physical proximity of all the places in his life. However, the narrowness is also a reference to a narrowness in experience which is at least partly caused by this exact proximity. The novel is full of references to the proximity in which the Bechdel family lived to each other, from relatives popping in to show off the house (31), to how in their “town of 800 souls, there were 26 Bechdel families listed in the phone book” (126). One of the other maps in the novel, shows how all of the Bechdel relatives live in houses nearby, many even on the same street as Alison’s family (see figure 6).

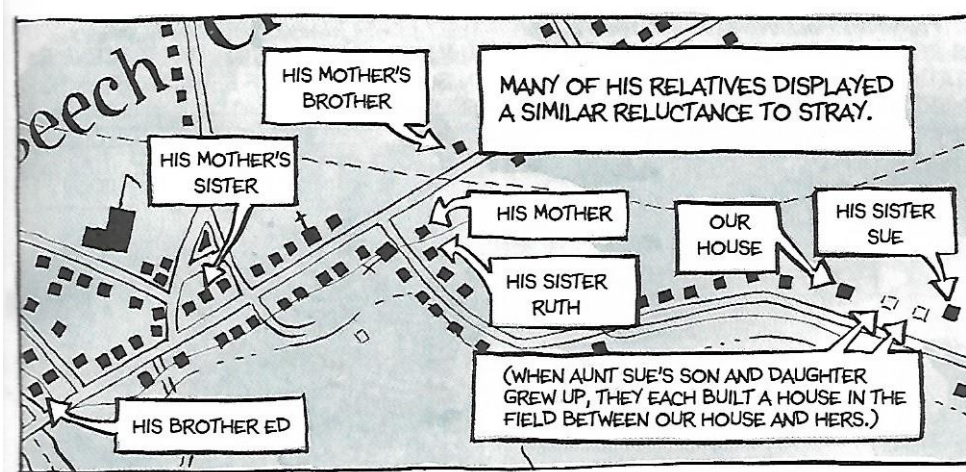


Figure 6: Proximity of the Bechdel family members. (Bechdel 31)

On the one hand it seems evident that proximity to family might be great for some kinds of support, such as running the family funeral home or taking care of the children (39). The narrator describes how they often spent time with their grandmother and how the funeral home is a family company where Alison and her brothers often help out or play. However, the “narrowness” mentioned in the narration also seems to lead the reader towards looking at the possible challenges of living so close to the family, that there can be something oppressive about it. What the proximity seemingly takes away from Bruce is the ability to express himself in a way which is not expected by a man, husband or father in the environment where he lives. As the study by Anthony D’Augelli and Mary Hart suggests, Bruce could have risked social estrangement or violence by living openly as gay in a small town. Even if prejudice and homophobia might be something he could

have lived with in and of itself, it is perhaps particularly challenging to act in way that the closest family does not expect of him. It is difficult to reinvent yourself in a place where everybody already has a set expectation of who you are, and where you have certain perceived obligations, for example as a husband or a father.

The proximity of the houses and the smallness of the village makes anonymity in short supply. The village becomes an external power which induces a certain kind of behaviour, in this case the pretence of a heterosexual family life. It is, in a way, a mechanism of power that is recognizable from Foucault's very famous theorization of Bentham's panopticon and a clear example of how physical realities act as oppressive forces that keeps Bruce from expressing his sexual preferences. The fear of someone finding out that he is gay, makes him internalize and self-regulate certain behaviours, in this case he is performing a heterosexual way of living. In Beech Creek everybody knows Bruce, which also means that everybody would know about it if his affairs with men were revealed. He is "subjected to a field of visibility" (Foucault, "Panopticism" 498) that creates a "power of mind over mind" (Foucault, "Panopticism" 501). No matter how much the narrator alludes to Bruce's shame and discomfort as a constant presence in their lives, it remains a fact that he only committed suicide after one of his affairs were made public, after Alison herself came out as a lesbian, and after Helen decides to divorce him. In other words, he commits suicide when the illusion that he has worked so hard in creating crackles.

2.6 The Spiritual House

Within the landscape of Beech Creek and surrounding areas, the Bechdel family home is located. The house is also a distinct physical landscape in itself, which is both a part of Beech Creek, but which in many ways also serves as a contrast to the ruralness of the rest of the town. Similarly to the outdoor landscape of Beech Creek, the house is not only used as background for the action but as a meaning-making element of the story. In her essay "Landing on the Patio," Jenna Goldsmith claims that "[the] narrative is as much a memoir of Bechdel's childhood and adolescence as it is a biography of her family and their house in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania" (2). The first page of the memoir, which is an

introductory page before the first chapter, depicts Bruce against a backdrop of the ornamented front porch supports. The image, like all the chapter introduction images, is a hand drawn version of a real photograph, and it serves the purpose of establishing both Bruce and the house as meaningful entities in the novel. The house itself along with its garden and interior design is continuously alluded to by the narrator. It serves as the epicentre of the Bechdel family life, and the relationship that Bruce and Alison have with the home is essential for the way that the reader perceives their personalities and the dynamic between them. The panels that depict the inside of the house is fraught with elaborate details of tapestries, ornaments, furniture and curtains which also play their parts in shaping the lived experiences of the characters and the relationships between them. Particularly the relationship between Bruce and Alison, which is the main focus of the novel, is drawn in and through their relation to the indoor space.

As with the natural landscapes alluded to in the maps, the blend of real and mythical constitutes an important element of the landscape that is the Bechdel family house. One could argue that the house serves as one of the most prominent myths in the story. The historical restoration of the gothic revival house is described as Bruce's life's work, his one true passion in "every sense of the word. Libidinal. Manic. Martyred" (7). The quote is captioned in the panel rendered in figure 7 which shows Bruce's figure in profile, labouring under the weight of a heavy-looking pillar balancing on his shoulder. The image captures the mythical or spiritual dimension of Bruce's relation to the house. Drawing on an association to the perhaps most famous martyr in the world, Jesus carrying

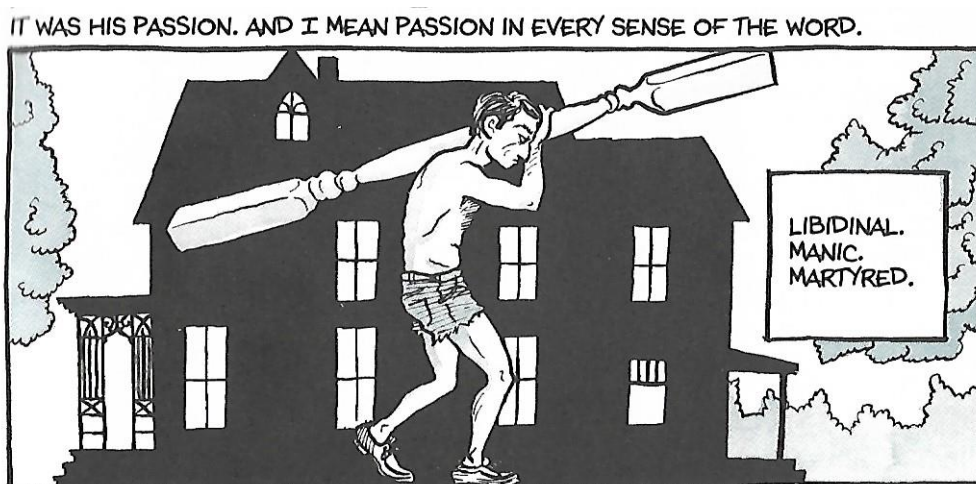


Figure 7: Bruce carrying a heavy pillar. (Bechdel 7)

the cross on which he is about to be crucified, the panel gives the impression that the house is more than a house; it constitutes a belief and a matter of life and death.

In a similar way as the maps depicting the landscape from *The Wind in the Willows* in figure 4, the continuous restoration of the house represents longing. As Robin Lyndberg observes in her essay “Under Construction”, “Fun Home presents Bruce Bechdel’s renovations of the family home as similarly haunted by the uncanny ghosts of repressed desires” (58). Bruce is spending an endless amount of energy cultivating the yard, manipulating flagstones and decorating picture frames (10), attempting to create the perfect house. Either consciously or subconsciously he is creating a world that is separate and different from the surroundings. It is a place where he controls every aspect of appearance and that is filled with the kind of objects that he considers to be beautiful. Like the landscape from *The Wind in the Willows*, the house becomes a kind of utopia. As with the map from the children’s book it is obvious that the idea of the perfect is an illusion which will never be real. However, the myth it represents is so powerful that Bruce involves all the members of his household in his “curatorial onslaught” (14).

Alison picks up on the uneasy role of the indoor space from a very young age. She refers to the ornaments and decorations as “embellishments in the worst sense” and “lies” (16), because she considers them to give the impression of something that is not true. The belief that the house constitutes, the myth it upholds, is the idea of the happy, heterosexual family. In the Bechdel family this picture-perfect idealization is far from the truth. Bruce and Helen’s marriage seems unhappy, Bruce is having affairs with men and even Alison fails to fit into accepted gender norms, even as a young child. The mismatch between the outward appearance and the lived experience inside the family home makes the narrator refer to the house as something similar to a museum and the children as part of an “exhibit” (13). This could easily be interpreted as a matter of keeping up appearances towards the community but in combination with the associations to a longing that is almost spiritual in nature, it seems like attempts at self-deception as much as anything else.

Ironically, the house could, in addition to being a display of the perfect heterosexual family, also leave in plain sight what Bruce is otherwise working hard to hide regarding his sexuality. For one thing, the interest in interior design and redecoration is typically considered to be a feminine interest. Even the kind of interior that he prefers

would usually be perceived as feminine, with flowers and floral patterns and heavily ornamented furniture. Rebecca Scherr argues in her essay “Queering the Family Album: Re-Orientation of Things in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*” that Bruce’s interest in interior and aesthetics is “a suspect obsession” which “always threatened to undermine his performance as a straight family man” (Scherr).

The excessive and feminine interior is a constant source of conflict between Alison and Bruce. Not only because Alison considers it to be hypocritical and deceptive, but because her taste is very different from Bruce’s. She develops a dislike for what she calls “useless ornament” (16) and prefers instead things that are practical, claiming that she wants her house to be “all metal, like a submarine” (14). Bruce wants to control the appearance in the entire house, including Alison’s room which he decorates with pink flowery tapestry and things like ornamented mirrors. When she tells him she does not want it he does not care and gives her the typically girly feminine interior anyways. In a way, Bruce’s need to express femininity in interior and design hampers the rest of the family’s, and particularly Alison’s, expression of her own identity. He forcefully steers her towards a feminine ideal with matching necklines and floral wallpapers instead of letting her explore the masculinity she admires. His obsession with the heterosexual family forces the whole family to play along. The wider landscape of Beech Creek and its surrounding areas inflict a pain on Bruce that makes him attempt to conform to the accepted norms for gender and love. He then in turn inflicts some of this pain onto his daughter who shares a similar kind of non-conformity he does. One could say that the house and the conflicts it causes between Bruce and Alison embodies their non-conformity to accepted gender roles.

The narrator describes the confined indoor space of the family house as characterised by isolation. The isolation within the home mirrors the isolation that is evident in the wider landscape that surrounds Beech Creek. In the map rendered in figure 2, the reader witnessed the town as a small dot in a huge otherwise unpopulated landscape. This striking visualisation immediately creates an understanding of possible loneliness and isolation. Within the house, even though the family lives together, the isolation they experience is also somewhat physical in character. It is a form of isolation which is in part due to the structure of the house, and it is often visualised through spatial layouts on

the page, constantly reinforcing the reader's understanding of isolation through images as well as through the textual narration.

In her previously mentioned article "Under Construction", Lydenberg discusses how Bechdel uses the architecture of the house to "reinforce the isolation that characterized the life in her family home" (60). She points out that through drawing the house from the perspective of someone outside looking through the window, Bechdel several times draws characters as separated by architectural elements such as muntins or walls, even when they seemingly occupy the same room (Lydenberg 61) (see figure 8). This is a way of using the physical layout on the page to emphasize the experience of isolation that characterises life in the family home.



Figure 8: Alison and Bruce separated by architectural elements. (Bechdel 86 and 225)

Similarly to the map mentioned above, the layout on the page is a physical way of referring to a lived experience of mental isolation. It gives the reader an opportunity to understand the emotions experienced by the characters through visual means that create an immediate reaction.

The family lives in a large house that is sometimes mistaken for a mansion amongst Alison's friends (5) and it is described as having so many mirrors, doors and bronzes that visitors tended to get lost (20). The largeness of the house allows for physical distance between the characters and allows them to be absorbed in their own activities. All the family members are preoccupied with their hobbies and passions; Bruce's

architecture and reading, Helen's acting and piano-playing, Alison's writing and her brother's music and model building. Alison remarks how their family is reminiscent of an "artist's colony" (134).

The largeness and the number of halls and doors creates an air of something uncanny, and this uncanniness is enhanced because of the textual narration's references to stories like the myth about Daedalus and the labyrinth he created to house the half-human half-ox minotaur. Like the other myths and literary references in the novel, the myth of Icarus and that of the minotaur does not merely distinguish the real from the unreal, but stresses the importance of stories in the Bechdel family, and particularly in Bruce and Alison's relationship. As Alison herself remarks: "My parents are most real to me in fictional terms" (67). The myths relate to reality in a way that Kyle Eveleth refers to as "quasi-allegorical" (Eveleth 88), meaning that the characters in the novel do not constitute one-to-one correlations with the characters in the myths, but serves instead as a means of abstracting and complicating the father-daughter relation. They are a part of the textual narration that gives a deeper dimension to the way that we read the images. The reference to the myth of the minotaur allows the reader to read implications and emotions into the text that might not be discernible by looking at the images alone.

As with the myth of Icarus, the myth of the minotaur casts Bruce in both main roles. He is Icarus who plummets into the sun *and* the skilful Daedalus, the creator of the maze *and* the monster that lurks within. His fits of anger are part of creating an unsafe and unstable home environment for the family. When he is unable to control his temper he yells, crushes plates, or hits the children, acting with the monstrosity of the minotaur. When he is renovating and decorating, he is continuously creating the maze that confines him. He is controlling, the sole ruler, but also the controlled, kept in place by the allure of his own creation. His efforts at creating the perfect and his belief in and longing for his own creation keeps him grounded in a life and a place where he does not thrive. The textual references to this myth set the house itself in the role of the labyrinth. It is the structure that houses the monster, and with the uncertainty that this entails, there is an oppressiveness embedded in the house as well.

2.7 Chapter Conclusion

The physical spaces in *Fun Home*, the landscape of the village and the family house, are opposing forces that influence Bruce's life. Both of these spaces are presented in a way that is unique to the comics medium. They consist of images that provides the reader with instant reactions, and a mediation and deepening of these images through the textual narration. This chapter has been particularly focused on the myths and stories that have been set in direct relation to the spaces, such as the myths of Icarus, the myth of the minotaur in the labyrinth, and the children's book *The Wind in the Willows*. The reason for this is that they all contribute to the emotional dimension that is important when attempting to understand the true dimensions of the effects that the physical spaces in the texts play on Bruce's experience.

On the one hand, the town of Beech Creek is portrayed as Bruce's doom. Maps and illustrations tell a story of a helpless figure who is practically incarcerated in the ruralness of his hometown and who is kept circling in orbits that are adapted to a form of life that does not fully apply to him. There are moderations and complications to this somewhat dire image of the town, especially in Bruce's own descriptions of it as a younger man, and the natural beauty it provides. Yet, the oppressiveness of the town remains the main takeout of the narrative. Serving as both an antidote and enforcement of the oppressiveness of the spaces in the text is the family house. On the surface, it is an object of beauty that Bruce pours all his energy, creativity and artfulness into. It gives him a sense of purpose that is almost religious in its ferocity, and it gives the reader a partial answer to what keeps him in Beech Creek. It is a landscape within the landscape where Bruce calls the shots, where he is the ruler. Yet, this landscape too becomes ambiguous in its character because it becomes clear that even this object of beauty is, at best, a cover-up for everything that Bruce is not willing or able to deal with. A prison of the conventional family life.

3 Undocumented

3.1 Chapter Introduction

Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention is a short graphic narrative created by artist and architect Tings Chak, a Canada-based long-time activist for immigrants' rights. The book is grounded in collective grassroots organizations, especially No One Is Illegal which is a migrant justice organization fighting for "the right to remain, the freedom to move, and the right to return" ("About Us"). The narrative was originally part of artist Tings Chak's master's project in architectural college and was published in the form of graphic narrative in 2014, as part of a political campaign against the practice of indefinite incarceration of immigrants in Canada. In this chapter I will argue that the oppressiveness of the spaces on the page are dependent on the reader's immersion into the narrative, which allows for an active and participatory experience. This activation, which relies heavily on affective responses to the portrayed spaces of incarceration, is a central aspect of the work's mission of communicating the questionable and controversial sides of migrant detention practices.

As critics have pointed out, Chak's narrative is difficult to classify on a formal level (Rifkind 650). It consists of landscape sketches, artistic drawings, sequential images, and floor plans, and is not organized in a classic comics form with rows and panels. *Undocumented* is not divided into chapters, but I perceive it to roughly contain three main parts; one that consists of landscape sketches and some statistics about the Canadian detention system, one that features what one might refer to as a "tour" of a detention centre, and one that contains interviews and short graphic personal stories from migrants.

Undocumented deals with the disputed practices of the Canadian migrant detention system. According to a 2018 report made by the Global Detention Project, a Geneva based non-profit organization working to promote the rights of migrant detainees, there are several severe issues regarding the Canadian detention system (Global Detention Project 5). Firstly, the report points out that unlike many western countries, Canada does

not have a maximum length for legally detaining immigrants in prisons or prison-like conditions. They continue to state that even though Canada has adopted measures to improve detention conditions and decrease the number of immigrants held in prisons, one third of the detained immigrants were still held in actual prison buildings in 2017. This also includes people with mental health issues that are imprisoned without access to proper treatment, and children that are “housed” in detention to prevent separation of families. The report also points out that there is very little publicly available information about which prisons are used for detaining migrants. In 2017, a group of Canadian civil society organizations issued a submission where they voiced concern about these issues, arguing that “detainees continue to suffer significant human rights violations in immigration detention” (Global Detention Project 7).

Undocumented was published in 2014 which was only one year before what is often thought of as the apotheosis of the European Refugee crises. Only in 2015, the European Union member countries received more than 1.2 million applications for international protection (d’Haenens and Joris 7). In Europe, tensions regarding refugees and what to do about them were rising rapidly, and the viewpoints were very visual in the public sphere. Many will probably remember the visually striking examples of this, such as UKIP’s Nigel Farage standing in front of long line of people on the “Breaking point”-poster that was circling pre-Brexit Britain (Stewart and Mason). The UKIP uses of rhetoric are, however, only one example of how debates on immigration in Europe were divisive, loud, public, and graphic.

Even though Canada, like Europe, has experienced an increase in immigration, it appears to have avoided the same level of tension and public attention regarding the refugee situation. In 2017, Canada received its highest ever amount of asylum applications (“Overview”). Even after that, the large and polarizing public debates about immigration that have been present in other western countries have largely been avoided. As Candida Rifkind observes, many Canadian citizens imagined the refugee crises of 2015 and the years before and after, to take place “elsewhere” (650). Although it might, at first glance, seem like a positive thing that the issue of refugees is not an openly polarized political matter, *Undocumented* raises concerns about how a secretive migrant detention practice and a lack of concern and awareness in the population allows for the kinds of inhumane treatment that The Global Detention Project reports.

In this chapter I will first argue that through an affective relation to the space the reader is confronted with the lived experience of incarceration. Because of the way the book employs sequential images and textual narration, the reader forms a relation with the space that is uncommonly direct, and this challenges the safe position of a bystander or witness that often befalls the reader. The relation between the reader and the space is ambiguous, and continuously puts the reader in an uncertain position. On the one hand, the reader is confronted with a totalitarian world from the position of the detainee, the victim, which allows for empathetic identification. On the other hand, the reader is also cast in the role of the oppressor, the architect of the oppressive spaces that are featured on every page of the book. This position carries a lot of the ethical issues that the text raises about migrant detention, because it lets the reader imagine themselves in the position of the enforcer of the system as well as in the shoes of a detained migrant.

3.2 The Involved Reader

One of the strategies that *Undocumented* employs to make the reader engage with the immigrant cause is to allow the reader to form a direct contact with the landscapes and buildings on the pages, a contact that is not mediated or narrated through visible human or other characters. The effect of this direct contact between the landscapes and the reader is that the narrative creates an illusion that the reader is virtually inside the landscapes or within the buildings. As Candida Rifkind observes in her essay “Immigrant Bodies and Migrant Topographies”, *Undocumented* “draws the viewer into the spatial configurations of migrant detention centres” (651). This effect is in place from the very first pages of the book which shows urban landscapes in spreads across pages, but it becomes increasingly clear when the narrative enters into its second main part; a part which can be understood as a “tour” on the inside of a detention centre.

The effect of being “transported” into fictional spaces has been described by Monika Fludernik, who coined the term “figuralization”. The term, as described by Marco Caracciolo in his essay “The Reader’s Virtual Body”, refers to “the projection of the reader into the fictional world, in the absence of any fictionally actual bodies” (121). Caracciolo uses a passage from Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* to demonstrate the effect

and describes how the reader with ease follows the movements of a sunbeam through a landscape, without there being any virtual bodies for the reader to connect with (129-130). Fludernik herself, in her book *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* calls the effect “the reflectoral equivalent of camera-eye narrative” (198), in the sense that “the empty centre, if it remains empty, a mere centre of perception, can induce reader identification, allowing a reading of the story through an empathetic projection of the reader into the figure of an observer ‘on the scene’” (198).

The first image the reader is encountered with in the second part of the book is an image which efficiently creates the illusion of the reader as a presence in the story, as an observer “on the scene” in Fludernik’s terms. The illustration, which is rendered in figure 9, is a picture of a drawn hand, holding a photocopy of a floor plan of a detention centre building.

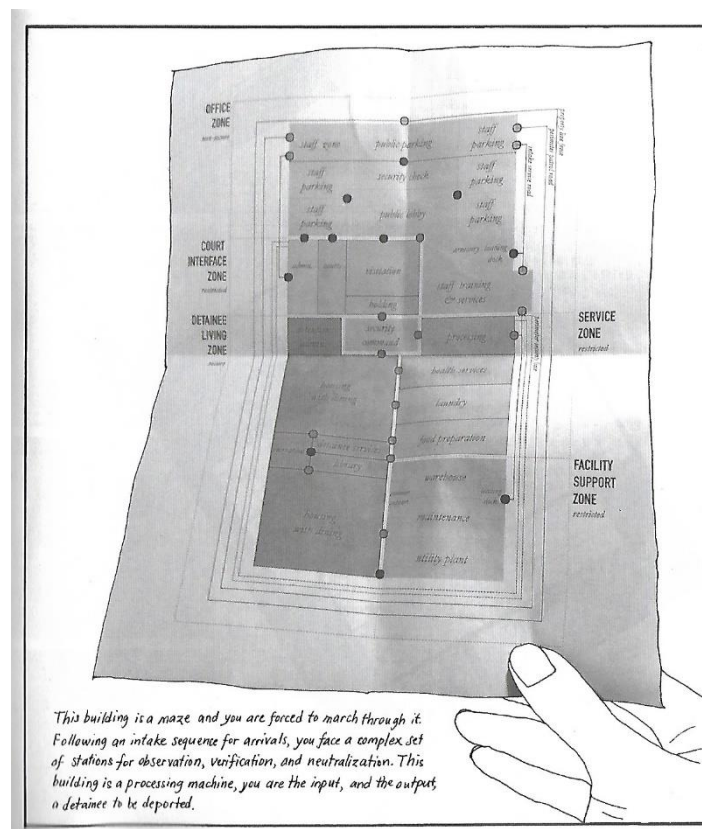


Figure 9: Hand holding photocopy of floor plan. (Chak 33)

The hand is the only visible human trait that exists on this virtual tour of a detention centre. The hand’s position on the bottom right side of the page coincides with the place

where the reader would most likely hold the book, and it creates an illusion of the reader as the person holding the drawing, the human presence that is ready to walk through the building. Additionally, the illustration also contains text which states that “[t]his building is a maze and you are forced to walk through it” (Chak 33), where the direct address of the second person “you” further builds the illusion that the reader is the presence that is about to the building.

As the journey through the building progresses, the reader continues to be placed in the position of the person moving around in the detention centre (see figure 10). I use the word “move” because this part of the book is designed to look as if someone is moving through the building. The graphic novel *Here*, which will be discussed in the next chapter, shares *Undocumented’s* focus on one particular building and its lack of an embodied narrator. However, *Here* consists of hundreds of images of a living room that are all focalized from the same position in the room. This gives a static impression, as if the reader is looking through a window or some other stationary device, something unmoving and therefore unhuman. Though engaging in its own way, this static impression does not really challenge the reader’s position as an observer and bystander, nor does it imply a human presence in its narration.

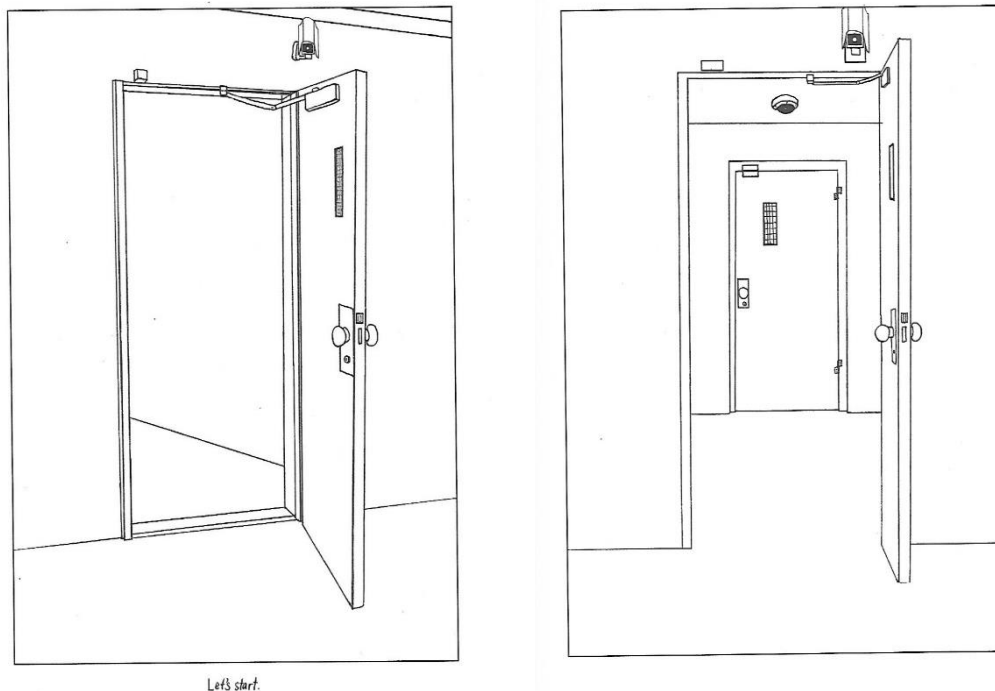


Figure 10: Shifting perspective suggesting movement. (Chak 38-39)

Serving as a stark contrast to the static focalization in *Here*, the tour of the detention centre in *Undocumented* consists of a series of illustrations which suggest movement when read in sequence. The illustrations consist of juxtaposed images, each occupying a full page, each drawn with a perspective that corresponds to human eye-level. As demonstrated in figure 10, these images show parts of the detention centre complex approaching one another in sequence, first a door that is slightly open, then a door that is a little more widely open and followed by a hall with a new door. The reader interprets these images by the process that Scott McCloud refers to as “closure”. McCloud describes closure as the reader’s ability to observe parts and perceive as a whole or else “mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience” (63). The clues that suggest movement can consist of a shifting of perspective from watching an almost open door from a left-angle perspective to an image of (presumably) the same door from a frontal perspective on the next page as demonstrated in figure 10.

The “figuralization” of the reader into the landscape leads to a lapse between what Pascal Lefèvre refers to as the diegetic space, the space that we observe to exist in the story, and what he refers to as the extradiegetic space, which is the space the reader is located in. According to him, the characters in a story are not usually aware of the existence of this extradiegetic space, and that only in self-referential exceptions this barrier is broken down (Lefèvre). In this case the character in the story is also the reader, and the reader becomes aware of its own position in the story. The barrier between the diegetic space and the extradiegetic space is therefore broken down as a technique of raising awareness and engagement in the reader.

The approach to the reader-landscape relation that *Undocumented* employs in this section relies on the reader’s active engagement with the spaces. In the level of participation, one could perhaps think of *Undocumented* almost like a piece of installation art, where the viewer is meant to engage with the art directly and without too much guidance. The perceived projection into the spaces is activating because the reader experiences an involvement. In this case, the figuralization of the reader into the spaces on the page challenges the usual safe position as an onlooker and bystander, and instead forces the reader into an active and participatory role.

The effectiveness of the approach is evident in the writing, scholarly and otherwise, that is done on *Undocumented*. As demonstrated in the quote above, Rifkind

claims that the narrative “*draws* the reader” (Rifkind 651, my emphasis) into the spaces on the page. A similar assertion is proposed by Victoria Law in her review of the book in the leftist web magazine “Portside”. In the article she suggests that “Chak *walks the reader*” (“Stripping Away”, my emphasis) and “[the] reader *cannot help but feel*” (“Stripping Away”, my emphasis). These formulations show that reading *Undocumented* is an act of active engagement, and that because of a lack of visible characters, the engagement is mainly an engagement with the buildings and landscapes on the page.

3.3 A Growing Sense of Unease

As established, *Undocumented* forces the reader into a participatory experience. It is, however, the nature of this experience that determines what the reader takes from the text, and which therefore holds the potential for an ethical exploration. One of the elements that has the potential to determine the nature of the experience is what kind of presence the reader is aligned with, what kind of role they imagine themselves in when they are projected into the fictional world. Is it the detained immigrant, a visitor to the detention centre or the architect of the building? *Undocumented* does not provide a simple solution to this question but plays instead on an ambiguous experience that creates a level of discomfort.

From the first image of the detention centre “tour”, the hand holding the floor plan (see figure 9), the reader is assumedly aligned with the presence of the detained migrant. The textual caption in the image reads:

This building is a maze and you are forced to march through it. Following an intake sequence for arrivals, you face a complex set of stations for observation, verification and neutralization. This building is a processing machine, you are the input, and the output, a detainee to be deported. (Chak 33).

The text addresses the reader directly and claims that he or she is meant to imagine themselves in the metaphorical shoes of the detained immigrant. This creates certain expectations; it is reasonable to assume that the main output of the text will be one of empathetic identification or sympathy with detained people. As room after room occurs, all drawn in the same sterile style with hard and sharp lines the reader’s affective responses will most likely be characterized by negative emotions. As will be further

elaborated on in section 3.4 - 3.6, the building is all but inviting. However, it is only a few pages into the tour that the perceived role of the reader as the detained immigrant is complicated.

In the beginning of the tour, nothing challenges the narrative of the reader as the victim. The illustrations of the building are introduced, and as demonstrated in figure 10, the textural narration states a neutral “Let’s start” (Chak 38) after which the rooms of the detention centre follow in succession. After this, however, it only takes a few pages before the perception of the reader as the victim is questioned when the narration asks “[h]ow do you sleep at night?” (40) to which another narrative voice replies “I sleep well, my conscience is quiet” (42). Suddenly, the role that the reader takes on is less certain. The tone of the questions is accusatory, and not, as one might expect if they were directed at a detainee in this context, sympathetic.

The narration that follows the rest of the detention centre tour is a continuation of the conversation between an “I” and a “you”, neither of which are accompanied by characters within the frame. As readers of both prose and graphic narratives we are used to aligning ourselves with a first-person narrator as a reference point. This is the case in *Fun Home* where Alison narrates the events and adds her own perception of them which makes it easy to understand one’s own position as a bystander. However, the direct address of the second-person “you” that is employed in *Undocumented* also appears to apply to the reader. As discussed, this connection has already been made from the first introduction of the detention centre tour. Consequently, the reader is drawn between the two voices. Since neither of the voices are visible characters, uncertainty regarding their identities, the relation between them and the viewpoints they represent becomes increasingly poignant as the conversation seemingly intensifies.

As the conversation unfolds it becomes clear that the first-person “I” is asking critical questions about architecture, while the second-person “you” answers the questions reluctantly and dismissively. The “I” asks questions like “[w]hat about the architect’s role in shaping society?” and the “you” avoids the question, answering that “[a]rchitects usually have big egos” (66) and that “[y]ou have to be modest, and not concerned with ideals” (70). Increasingly it becomes clear that the “you” is an architect, possibly the architect of the building on the page although this is never stated, and the “I” is a critical voice that is advocating for some sort of responsibility of the architectural

projects that are realized. The two voices become not only two perceived characters in the text, but also two opposing views in a wider ethical debate regarding the responsibilities of those who have the power to shape the appearance of the world, where one advocates for full adherence to the governing power, while the other argues for responsibilities in different layers of society.

The reader is cast in both of these roles. Seemingly addressed by both voices it is unclear whether the reader identifies with the critical voice or the defender of the building. As the conversation unfolds against the backdrop of the rooms of the building it becomes increasingly more obvious that there is a discrepancy between the architect's voice and the images. The rooms are all drawn in strong black lines with sharp edges and uninviting furniture. The appearance of the rooms will be further elaborated on later in the chapter, but for now it is enough to note that they appear to be cold and sterile, they are not places that anyone would like to live. The contrast between these rooms and *Fun Home's* ornamented furniture and tapestries is huge. The cold, sterile rooms of *Undocumented* builds the sensation that the architect is not willing to consider the impact of the work they are doing on real people's lives.

The conversation lets the reader consider the issues the two voices are debating. It allows for a consideration of the validity of the questions that the "I" asks. What kind of responsibility should architects or others who are involved with creating buildings have for the lived experience that follows from spending time inside the buildings? And, by extension, who can be considered an architect? As the conversation also touches upon, it is not architects who decide what kind of buildings are made and why. The "you" says: "Look. They come to me because they know I can turn X to Y in the shortest time possible. That's the architect's job" (Chak 76). There are many architects that would disagree strongly with this statement, but the point that he makes is that architecture is a product of policies. As he elaborates a little later, "[a]rchitecture was always connected to big money and political power" (Chak 82). Clearly, then, governments and politicians share the responsibility of the appearance of systems such as the migrant detention system.

However, the responsibility for the projects that are manifested into buildings and built environments can be seen as extending far beyond both architects, politicians and governments. In a democracy, theoretically, anyone can wield political power or have

their voices heard if there are policies their government employs that they disagree with. Most people have a potential for resisting practices and policies by demonstrating, supporting organizations or participating in politics in other ways. By placing the reader in the position of the architect as well as the critic, the narrative emphasizes that all people in a society have some sort of responsibility for the appearance of the projects that are realized.

3.4 **Oppressive Spaces**

From being projected into the storyworld the reader can experience what *Undocumented* emphasises over and over again; that the system of migrant detention rests on a kind of banal violence in which the buildings themselves function as oppressive forces. Through the combination of images and text, and through its use of colours and drawn objects, the book creates a distinctive feel, a feel that is almost exclusively eery and uncomfortable. In addition to the level of uncertainty that accompanies being cast in the position of the enforcer of the system as well as the victim, the uncomfortableness of *Undocumented* rests on two main pillars; a constant focus on surveillance and an obvious enforcement of what Chak refers to as the “logic of the minimum” (Chak 99).

The spaces that are featured in *Undocumented* are, in a way, oppressive by nature. As the narrative emphasises, migrants are often kept in prison buildings or prison-like conditions, buildings where people are usually kept to be punished or rehabilitated when they have committed a serious crime. A problem with this is, of course, that immigrants are not, in fact, criminals. To apply for asylum is a human right, and it is not criminal to move or wish to move to a different country than the one you are born in. It is questionable that people who have not been tried or found guilty of any crime are subjected to spaces and practices that are usually considered punishment. The walls, barbed wire fences, and heavily secured doors that are everywhere in the narrative not only show a reality with limited movement and limited freedom, but they also constitute and shape that reality. They are necessary actors for the incarceration of human bodies.

In some of the shorter narratives, *Undocumented* shows longing for the opposite of incarceration. A quote that is reminiscent of poetry states:

This was the first thing she
said when she was released.
“Take me to the sea, or the next biggest thing.”
Inside, they never let you see the horizon. (Chak 89)

The text expresses a longing for nature, for seeing big open landscapes. The quote is encapsulated in an illustration that shows two people by the sea in the middle, and which has prison cell walls with small windows on top and on the bottom (see figure 11). It is an illustration of the contrast between the openness of the horizon and the small space that is granted detained people. It shows, both physically and metaphorically, a limited and totalitarian experience.

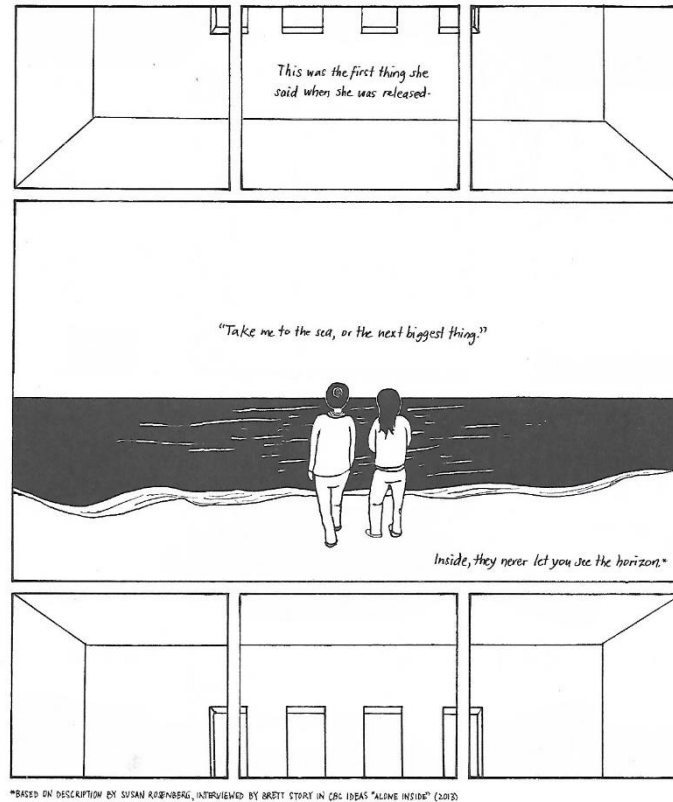


Figure 11: Horizon between walls. (Chak 89)

In section 2.5, wide open landscapes were discussed as having a kind of healing or soothing effect in the face of hardships. In that case, rural landscapes were presented as an aid in tackling the experience of being different in a small town, places where “specificity is abandoned” (Bechdel 144). The experience of migrant detention is obviously very different from that of being a closeted gay man in a small town. However,

it is safe to assume that even though the open spaces were perceived as an aid in tackling that specific experience, the comfort that might exist in the natural world is not limited to aiding that experience. If indeed natural landscapes help people tackle the difficulties in their lives, then spaces of incarceration are experienced as oppressive because they act as a barrier between people and the natural remedies that exists in natural landscapes, the relief that might occur from watching the horizon.

Instead of big open natural landscapes, the insides of the detention centre buildings represent a totalitarian world, the feeling of which is enhanced by constant focus on surveillance throughout the narrative. The air of surveillance is created largely by the security cameras that are featured on virtually every page. In the previously discussed tour section of the book, the cameras are visible in every room, drawn either as pitch-black domes or more traditional looking recording cameras (see figure 10 in section 3.2). The cameras are visually striking and hard to miss in the otherwise minimalistic drawings. Additionally, each part of the tour, the intake, the living zone and the outtake, is introduced by a page similar to the one rendered in figure 12 below, which shows surveillance camera positions on a floor plan.

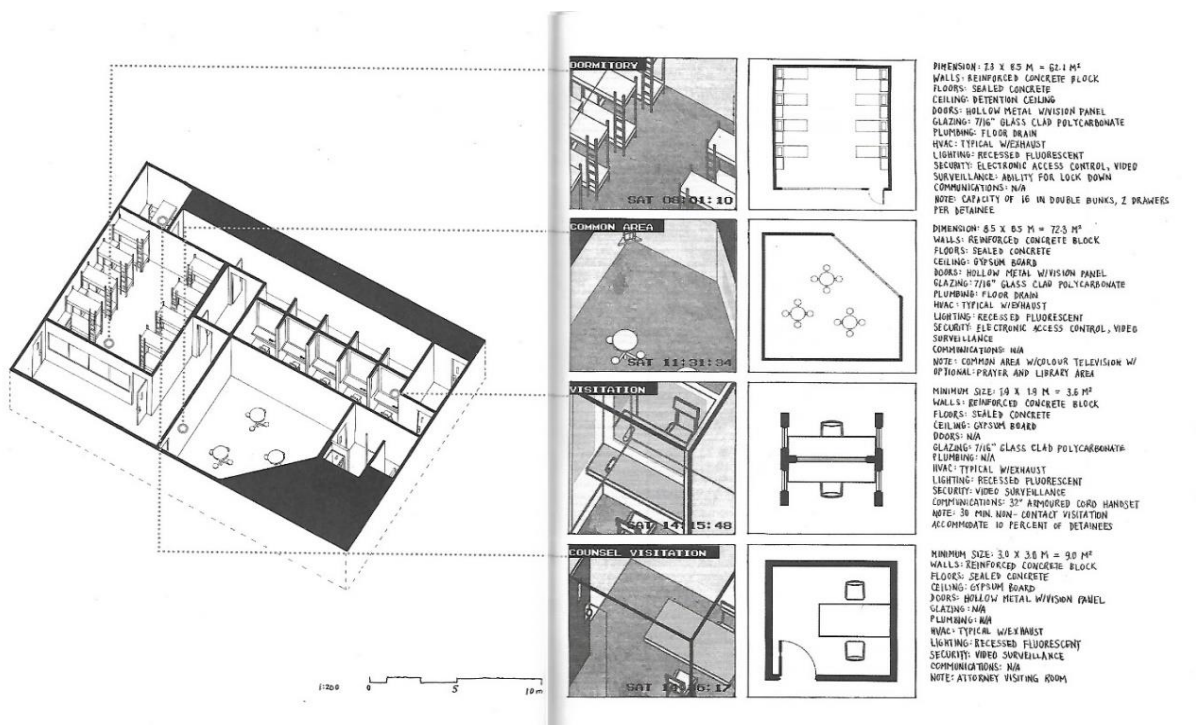


Figure 12: Introduction page to “The Living Zone”. Floor plan with positioning surveillance cameras. (Chak 54-55).

These figures show plan drawings of each of the areas that the reader is about to enter. In each of the rooms a circle signifies the position of a surveillance camera and connected to each circle is a dotted line that leads to a snapshot of the room at a given time. The illustrations also contain information about room dimensions, lighting, materials, and security level. These lists also add to the impression of a heavily guarded and monitored place where every piece of information about the physical space, but also about the people who reside there, is logged and regulated.

The surveillance cameras are not a human presence. They are material objects built into the architecture of the building and must therefore be considered as integral parts of the building itself. However, their ability to perceive and store information gives them something comparable to human characteristics. As Dominic Davies observes in his essay “Hard Infrastructures, Diseased Bodies”, “the camera’s eyeball returns the readerly gaze, confronting readers, and subjecting their bodies to a cool disciplinary surveillance” (Davies). Here, Davies also describes the cameras almost as having human-like qualities, the “eyeball which returns the readerly gazed” is clearly perceived not as a passive spectator but as an agential force. The number of cameras is emphasized again and again, and they give the reader an uncomfortable awareness of being watched at all times (see figures 10 and 12).

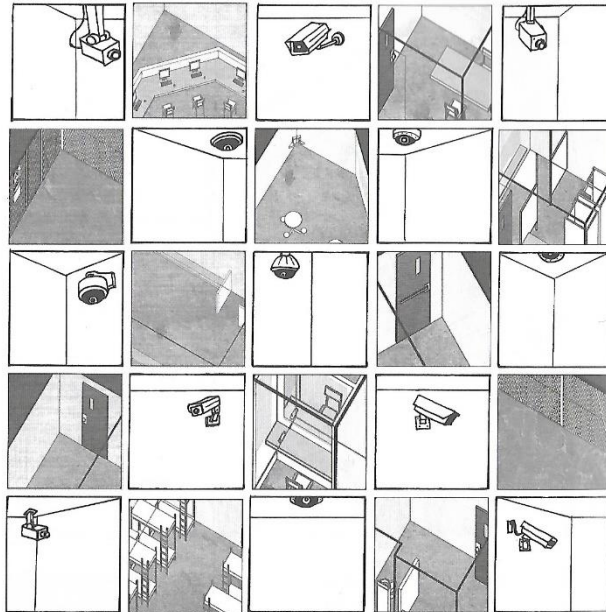
The image of the panopticon was in section 2.5 associated to the way that the proximity of Bruce’s relatives affected his sexual behaviour. The model of Bentham’s prison is even more obviously applicable here, and Dominic Davies has indeed drawn on this in his essay. Especially, Davies comments on how subjecting inmates to “a state of permanent visibility” (Foucault qtd. in Davies) that assures “the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault qtd. in Davies). The cameras are not manned at all times, there is not always a conscious person watching. However, it is always a possibility that someone is watching. Even if no one is watching, the recording is saved in a database and could be viewed later. As Foucault writes: “The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without even seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen” (Foucault, “Panopticism” 498). This uncertainty gives the cameras their power and efficiency. Like the panopticon prison, the cameras get access to all the rooms, without revealing whether they are manned by a human presence. It is therefore not whether someone is watching that makes

the cameras efficient. Their function is to moderate behaviour, internalize patterns of behaviour and make people conform to the rules and realities of detention.

The cameras in *Undocumented* and the proximity of Bruce's relatives both seemingly plays a part in internalizing behaviour. What separates these two instances of surveillance is, among other things, the degree of intentionality by which they operate. Bruce's relatives have not built their houses close to his to specifically moderate his sexual behaviour, whereas the cameras in *Undocumented* undoubtedly are put up in order to control the behaviours of detained people. As previously mentioned, Iovino and Oppermann have been clear in arguing for looking at agency as separate from intent when regarding the connections between matter and human narratives. The agency of both cameras and proximity of houses is clearly present in both cases, the functions they have on their victims applies with or without intentionality. However, the emphasis on the intent of the cameras, their omnipresence in the building and their positioning on plan drawings, gives them an extra harshness that adds to the eeriness of the detention centres on the page. *Undocumented* describes the perception of surveillance in terms that only adds to the eeriness it creates. By the use of textual captions, the illustration in figure 13 states that "[p]eople describe a sense of spatial haunting – feeling the presence of someone else in the cell, or in the walls, who you can never catch a glimpse of" (Chak 96).

As with the textual narration, the use of surveillance cameras emphasizes the reader's ambiguous role in the narrative. As can be observed in figure 10, the reader experiences the looming gaze of the cameras when moving through the detention centre. However, as the image in figure 12 demonstrates, the reader is also granted access to images that would normally befall the powerful, the watcher as opposed to the watched. In the image in figure 12, the reader sees the floor from above which, according to Horstkotte suggests omnipresence (28). It is the privileged position of the person with the access to the cameras and the information. However, in figure 13, the vantage point constantly shifts from being beneath the camera to being behind the camera. All of these illustrations show that the reader is placed on both sides of the surveillance, on both ends of the power, again stressing that the reader is not only a sympathizer, but part of the oppressive structures themselves.

People desire a sense of spatial haunting – feeling the presence of someone else in the cell, or in the walls, who you can never catch a glimpse of. Your spatial perception becomes affected by what you do see as much as what you don't see.



Unhinged from your social and perceptual world, a space becomes too small or too big, too bright or too dull, too loud or too quiet – too blank, impossible, and violent. The walls are too thick, impenetrable by your body and your voice.

Figure 13: Magnitude of surveillance cameras. Under and over the camera – from observed to observer. (Chak 96)

As previously mentioned, the banal violence of detention arises not only from surveillance, but from an enforcement of people into the “logic of the minimum” (Chak 99). Chak writes that “the logic of the minimum has permeated the design of our world. The bare minimum becomes regulation. It is standardized, measured in time, dollars, material, and energy” (99). The logic of the minimum refers to the way in which humans who reside within the kind of spaces that is visible on the pages of this book are reduced to a reality dominated by the minimum. The spaces contain everything needed to keep someone alive, it is protected from the elements, it has sanitation, it contains beds and basic furniture. The buildings will keep someone alive, but they are built for survival and not for well-being.

The other novels that are discussed in this thesis have as one of their primary settings a home. Both of these show that a great deal of effort has been put into them in order to make them nice and comfortable living spaces. Although the comfort of these

places are to some extent, especially in *Fun Home*, an illusion that does not coincide with reality, there is no doubt that an attempt has been made at making it a good place to live.

The spaces in *Undocumented* could not be a greater contrast to the homes in these novels. As mentioned briefly above, the entire narrative is drawn in black and white which plays a part in creating the cold appearance of the detention centres. The other novels employ various use of colours which emphasizes homeliness. Most notable in this regard is perhaps *Here* which uses a rich colour scheme that creates an appealing home, but even *Fun Home* uses various shades of green that creates a slightly warmer impression than a black and white drawing would. As can be observed in figures 10, 11 and 12, the insides of the centres are also drawn with strong lines and sharp edges. This applies to the walls, furniture and architecture and it is very much unlike the ornamented furniture and tapestries in *Fun Home*. Even in the “living zone” there are no patterns on the walls, no images, no plants, nothing to suggest that the spaces are being lived in.

The violence of the calculated and logged reality is not the sudden, shocking events that we are used to perceive as violent. It is instead a dull kind of violence that might be difficult to pinpoint because it does not cause sudden visual damage. Instead, it causes psychological damage from residing within spaces that are meant for storage and that isolates people from their families and communities. Its violence and oppression stems from its inability to take into account that even people who are incarcerated are full people who need more than to merely stay alive.

As previously discussed, there are no visible characters within large parts of these landscapes. It is the reader that is projected into the landscape that is the only continuous presence in the work. This means that the effects of landscapes, how their oppressive nature is perceived and affects people inside the buildings, must be determined differently than in for example *Fun Home*. In *Fun Home*, the ultimate effects of the landscape on the lived reality of Bruce was his suicide. The narration continuously draws connections between the landscape and the ways in which Bruce’s reality was not adapted to the places he resided. Because of the lack of visible characters and continued narratives, there are fewer of these kinds of cause and effect relations in *Undocumented*, and it is therefore the projected reader plays a crucial role.

3.5 Buildings as Resistance

Even though *Undocumented* is a text that is mainly focused on the violence of migrant detention, it also tells stories of how the people residing within these spaces manipulate and use the spaces to resist the systems. It is, in a way, a paradox, since the buildings are part of the structure and system that keeps them incarcerated, but these stories speak to people's need to be considered as more than a piece in a logic of the minimum, and to their creativity and ability to not be defined as such. These stories also, in a way, witness of the violence of the system, since they show that incarcerated people feel the need to resist the system in the ways these segments show. The resistance that detained people perform is the result of being incarcerated in oppressive spaces.

A short segment in the last section of the book tells the story of a hunger strike in California that was organized by prisoners in solitary confinement through years of stolen communication through walls and toilet pipes that were emptied of water (Chak 95). Through nonviolent means the detainees were able to communicate their needs using the very architecture that incarcerated them. This means that even in cells that are essentially created for isolation there are toilets or sinks which are connected to the rest of the building through a system of plumbing. It shows how the very architecture, even if built to separate and isolate, consists of systems that can be used for communication. There is a connectiveness in the ways buildings are made – they are made of systems, not of isolated segments.

The hunger strike organized by prisoners in isolation also shows that buildings, even buildings built for detaining people, are not only one thing. In their conversation titled “Architecture, Evidence, Violence”, Eyal Weizman and Andrew Herscher discuss how architecture sometimes changes meaning when it is exposed to outward forces. One of the examples Weizman refers to when making this point is how the military destruction of large parts of the Jenin camp, which is a refugee camp in the West Bank, made many of the residents think of the camp as a home for the first time. Up until that point many had considered it the camp to be only a temporary refuge. The attack changed this, and only in its destruction was the camp considered a home for many of the people residing there (114). Similarly, the organization of the hunger strike shows that even a building that is built for detention and isolation can have more than one meaning. To the people organizing a strike, the building is not only an oppressive force but also an opportunity to

resist the oppression. This slightly alters the identity of the building. From being a means of suppression and confinement, it becomes at least partly a means for communication and resistance.

Another one of the short segments in the book shows how detained people personalize their living spaces by using whichever materials are accessible to them. A full-page consisting of several smaller frames shows curtains made of toilet paper, a family photograph in a picture frame crafted from a cereal box and taped up photographs on a wall (see figure 14).

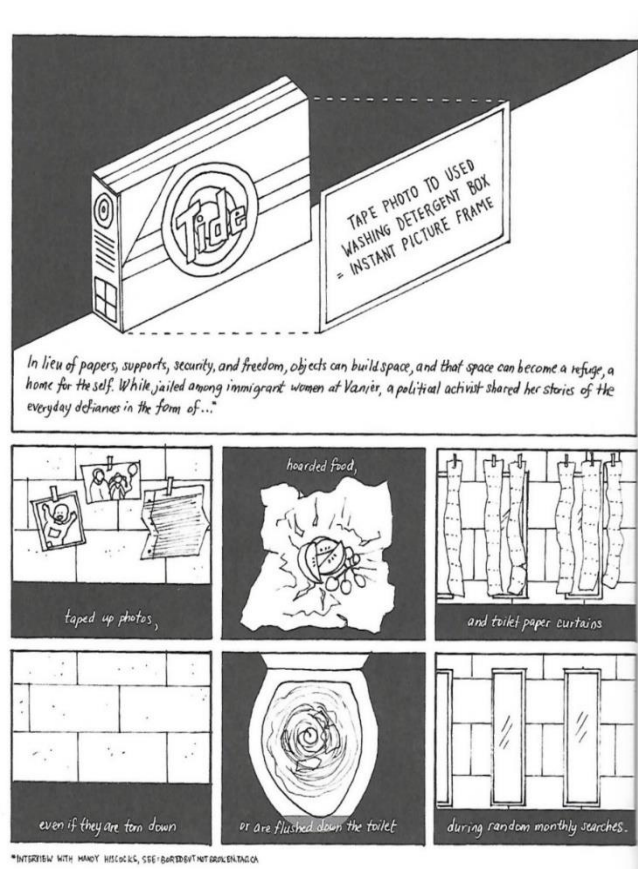


Figure 14: Full-page depicting cereal-box picture frames and toilet paper curtains. (Chak 106)

These small acts of creative expression can be seen as a way to fight the anonymity and repetitiveness of the detention buildings. In a discussion about ethical calculations and human rights, Eyal Weizman argues that sometimes, in order to pursue justice, one

should oppose the strict regimes of cost-benefit calculations and make oneself “incalculable, immeasurable, uncountable” (Weizman and Manfredi 171). By refusing to comply fully with the economy of stripped walls and windows, individuals assert themselves to the surroundings as something more than a someone who is detained. They refuse to be defined by a system that rests on calculations of cost and benefit.

The longing and expression of identity conveyed through the use of cereal boxes and toilet paper are comparable to the longing and expression of identity that the house in *Fun Home* represents. As discussed in the previous chapter, Bruce Bechdel hid his affairs with young men his entire life, but filled his house with feminine interior, floral patterns and pink wallpapers, expressions of traditional feminine beauty. His interaction with and manipulation of the house visibly expressed parts of his personality that he did not find the room to express in any other way, to the extent that the house and the landscape sometimes blends into the mythical realm. Similarly, these toilet paper curtains and cereal box picture frames show human traits that cannot be obliterated by outward forces, even ones made of barbed wire and iron; they show a desire for privacy, a desire for beauty, and the longing for family and loved ones.

Both of these types of resistance to the system mentioned above, the organized strike and the creation of a homely space in detention centres, are acts of patient and non-violent resistance. They are protests that appeal to humanity and the connectiveness between people because they represent universal desires. Even more importantly these stories show how detained people are not only victims, financial burdens, or any of the other narratives that are often presented in media or political discourse, but instead whole people with hopes, creativity and agency. They also speak to the fact that even within strict systems, buildings are not one stable unity, they can be used and experienced in a multitude of ways.

3.6 The Reader as Interlocutor

The effect of projecting the reader into the fictional world in *Undocumented* is that it allows the reader to be able to act as the interlocutor, or expert witness, that interprets the possible effects of spaces of incarceration. However, the act of interlocution relies on

information and access, and *Undocumented* shows how part of the structure of migrant incarceration is that it is hidden from the everyday spheres of society, thus preventing people to protest the practice or act out against the system.

The detention centre buildings in *Undocumented* can be considered to be what Schuppli defines as “material witnesses”; they are nonhuman entities that “archive their interactions with the world” (Schuppli). The way that they are built, where they are located or simply that they exist at all are all pieces of information that can be used to establish a narrative of the migrant detention practice. By drawing the buildings documenting, their existence and publishing them in a book and, as well as giving an idea of what they look and feel like from the inside, the buildings can function as material witnesses to a practice that is, at best, highly controversial.

As mentioned in the thesis introduction, the idea of material witnesses relies on an “expert witness”, an interlocutor, who functions as an interpreter and translator that can make the testimony of buildings and objects understandable to humans (Weizman and Herscher 121). In a court of law where architectural evidence is central, the interlocutor would likely be an architect or scientist, someone with competence to interpret the evidence of buildings. In *Undocumented*, the position of the interlocutor or expert witness is transferred to the reader. It is the reader that takes in the impressions from the text and reassembles them into a comprehensive narrative. It is also the reader that sees the oppressiveness of the spaces, the heavily surveilled totalitarian world and sterile landscapes, and uses this to construct an understanding of the landscapes as violent and oppressive.

As already suggested, the need for information is central for being able to act as this kind of interlocutor, and information regarding the migrant detention system can be hard to attain. The spaces in *Undocumented* are fictional spaces, they are not based on one particular detention centre or prison. In a talk about her book and the research she did when trying to complete her project, Chak discusses the obstacles she encountered when she attempted to file for access to detention centre buildings. Not only did she experience that it was difficult to attain plans, photographs, or sketches, but visitation was often impossible (Chak, “MLC 2015 Keynote” 8). In some cases, it was even hard to pinpoint on a map the exact locations of the buildings, even if it the name and address of the building was known (Chak, “MLC 2015 Keynote” 24). The difficulties that Chak

experienced when trying to gather information about detention centres suggests that there are forces that deliberately keep immigration detention hidden from the public and from interest groups and other political actors that might want to object to parts of the system, or the system as a whole.

The invisibility that Chak discusses at the lecture, is reflected throughout the narrative, but it is particularly problematized in the urban spreads that make up large parts of the first section of the book. These spreads consist of double-page illustrations of urban landscapes that are divided into panels (see figure 15). The images have a landscape along the top, and another landscape upside-down along the bottom. Connected to the urban landscapes by a dotted line is a small circle that shows a picture of a building, and enclosed next to the picture is a little piece of text that contains information about location, facility type, detention time frame, and security level. The text makes it clear that the facilities in the photographs are detention centre buildings. The motif that is rendered in figure 15 is repeated a total of twelve times, only with different landscapes and locations, and effectively make up most of the first section of the book.

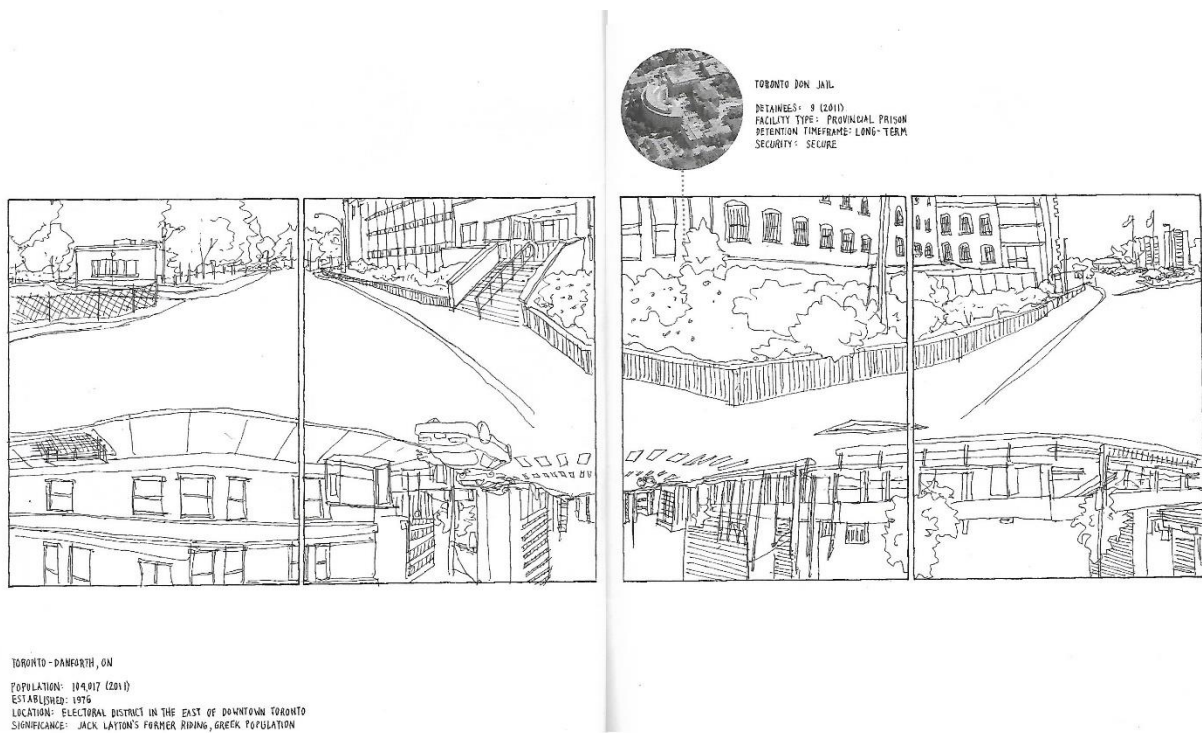


Figure 15: Urban spread with inverted landscape along the bottom. Satellite photograph of holding centre connected with dotted line. (Chak 22-23)

The invisibility of human characters in the book has already been discussed at some length. Yet, it is interesting to note that when the reader first encounters the detention centre buildings, these are also, in a way, invisible. As the textual narration beneath one of them states: “Just as the people are detained without papers, so too are the buildings. Without photos or drawings (or only highly classified ones) – they, too, are undocumented” (Chak 10). In the illustrations the detention centres are not completely absent, but they are in effect invisible within the frames of the illustrations. The pictures of the detention centres that accompany the urban spreads are located on the outside of the landscape panel frames and connected to the urban landscapes only by the dotted line. This serves as an almost symbolic effect of signaling to which extent the buildings are located outside of most people’s everyday spheres. The urban landscapes are familiar places we see every day, but we do not know or recognize the detention centre buildings that are located around us.

Similarly to the way that the small town in *Fun Home*, which was drawn as a small dot in a vast area (see figure 2 in section 2.4), creates an immediate understanding of isolation, the location of these detention centres on the literal outside of the illustrations create a similar immediate understanding of isolation. There is a barrier between the places that people in an area move around freely every day, and the closed buildings that contain detained people. The detention centres are clearly spaces marked as “other”, to the extent that they are not even part of the everyday visual perception of urban areas. The visuality of this isolation, the physical location on the outside of the frames, is what makes it something that any reader can understand instinctively.

Spaces of incarceration’s status as different from the rest of society is also emphasized through the stylistics of the urban spreads. The images within the panels are drawn in thin, wavy, sketch-like lines. The impression they give off is of landscapes which are familiar in the sense that they contain recognizable items such as trees, houses, and roads, but which are nevertheless distorted into something unrecognizable. The landscapes have an element of subjectivity and imagination, or as Dominic Davies described them, as inducing “an experience of motion sickness” (Davies). Either way, they are landscapes that are recognizable but not realistic. The pictures of the holding centres do not share the imaginary touch that characterises the rest of the landscapes. On the contrary, the pictures of the holding centres are bird’s eye satellite photographs that

are seemingly not manipulated or distorted but which instead looks very realistic. Their stylistic otherness from the rest of the landscapes highlight their difference from the rest of society.

The realistic appearance of the satellite photographs strikes a truth-cord that emphasizes the realness of detention centre buildings. As Susan Sontag writes in her book *On Photography*, photographs “furnish evidence”, in the sense that “[s]omething we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it” (Sontag, *On Photography* 5). In the modern media era, it is common knowledge that photographs are not necessarily neutral devices for truth-telling. Photographs can be photoshopped and distorted, and as Sontag herself points out, a photograph is always taken by someone who has decided what to include in the frame. As she writes: “the photographic image, (...), cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude” (Sontag, *Regarding the Pain* 46). However, photographs are also used as evidence in criminal cases or as archival documents, and they still have the effect of convincing of truth. A photograph cannot be taken of something that does not exist. By using realistic-looking photographs, *Undocumented* addresses the invisibility of the system and shows that a strategy of invisibility is not the same as not existing. As Andrew Herscher observes in his conversation with Eyal Weizman, there is an effort within human rights organizations to use satellite images of architecture to “speak on behalf of human beings who are purportedly silent, furtive, or invisible” (Weizman and Herscher 121).

The book highlights the idea of the invisibility of the detention centre system as ethically questionable in itself. As the textual narration states: “Spaces of incarceration are both nowhere and everywhere, blended into our landscapes. Their invisibility is no coincidence. We hide the things we don’t want to see or that we don’t want seen” (Chak 18). In a conversation between Eyal Weizman and Zachary Manfredi, Weizman argues that in some cases “[t]he crime is twofold. It is a violence against people and things, and it is a violence *against the evidence* that violence against people and things took place” (Weizman and Manfredi 178, original emphasis). The logic of this twofold view of crime, crime against people and things *and* against evidence that the violence took place, is that it not only damages people at the time of the crime, but it efficiently prevents later redress. It causes two kinds of damage, an original damage on someone or something, and a later

damage which prevents justice or closure. Similarly, the physical invisibility of systems such as the migrant detention system keeps the system hidden from the criticism of most people. If not a destruction of evidence, it is a concealment of evidence which might hinder detained people's rights.

In a similar way to the textual narration in the detention centre "tour" which casts the reader into the role of the upholder as well as the victim, the quote above refers to a "we" which appears to be a reference to a colloquial "we" rather than to a specific group. When the narration states that "[w]e hide the things *we don't want to see*" (Chak 18, my emphasis) it seemingly refers to anyone, to the society at large, which practices a disclaiming of responsibility when hiding systems. Likewise, the phrase "that we *don't want seen*" (Chak 18, my emphasis) suggests that the system is hidden because it is shameful, something that we do not want to admit that we are guilty of. It is, again, a way of including and activating the viewer into experiencing themselves as part of the larger structure that allows for the oppression of others.

By placing the reader within the detention centre buildings *Undocumented* defies the boundaries of invisibility that usually govern these hidden spaces. It allows the reader to see the inside of a usually hidden system and bring into the light the aspects of the system that might be considered a shameful or hurtful practice. In the introduction to his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon states that "writer-activists can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale" (Nixon 15). By placing the reader within the spaces, *Undocumented* helps the reader to imagine a threat that is geographically removed from their everyday spheres by deliberate forces.

3.7 Chapter Conclusion

By projecting the reader into an unfamiliar landscape, *Undocumented* forces the reader to respond actively and affectively to the spaces on the page. The sequential images of the insides of detention centres allows the reader to imagine themselves in the position of the

detained immigrant. This makes them able to act as an interlocutor for spaces that are usually deliberately hidden from the public.

By imagining themselves in the shoes of the detained immigrant the reader can understand something about the experience of incarceration. The spaces that reader interacts with are sterile and heavily surveilled, it is an unfamiliar and totalitarian world that creates an uncomfortable feeling. The uncomfortable feelings that arise from imagining oneself in these spaces first-hand is part of the effort to make the inhumaneness of migrant detention obvious to the western reader.

While the text allows the reader to imagine themselves as the victim in the narrative, it also forces the reader to consider themselves as part of the oppressive structure. Through the use of landscape drawings and satellite photographs, the book brings attention to the larger structure of migrant detention, which is that it exists within the context of a society that allows the practice of keeping migrants indefinitely in prison-like institutions. Through creating and reconstructing a specific experience of relating to a certain space, the narrative makes it possible to regard the larger structures that shape migrant detention, including the reader's own possible participation in these practices.

By considering the multifaceted identities of buildings and seeing the spaces of migrant detention as being able to hold various roles, the book manages to portray detained migrants as a varied group and oppose narratives that portray migrants as liabilities or victims.

4 Here

4.1 Chapter Introduction

Here is a graphic novel created by illustrator and graphic artist Richard McGuire. The full-length novel *Here*, which is the object of study in this thesis, was first published in 2014. However, the book exists in several other forms. It has been published as an e-book where the panels are reshuffled into other patterns, thus creating new meanings than those found in the paper version of the book. The illustrations have also been used for an installation art exhibition at Museum Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt and McGuire published a short story by the same name in the experimental comics magazine RAW as early as 1989. The short story was, at the time, drawn in black and white and consisted only of a few pages. Yet, the premise was the same as in the full-length paper version: *Here* is a story of a small corner of the world throughout the course of time. In this chapter I will analyse how the matter that constitutes the space in this novel takes centre stage and how this allows it to narrate the story and communicate to the reader. In doing so, certain issues of power are revealed, and the reader is shown how the human house acts as an oppressive force.

If one were to read *Here* as a book that was mainly about humans, one would likely conclude that the novel consists of fragments of stories rather than of one consistent narrative. Similar to *Undocumented*, the book does not contain a comprehensive narrative in the traditional sense. The novel is constructed by large, mostly double-paged illustrations with a year annotation in the top left corner. In the beginning these show only a living room with various pieces of furniture; a ladder in 1942, a sofa bed in 2007. A few pages into the novel something changes; a woman is standing in the living room in 1947 when a second panel shows up on top of the full-page illustration. The smaller panel shows a cat walking across the floor underneath the year annotation “1999” (see figure 16), and that introduces the structure of the novel. Almost all pages after this are presented in a similar way, a double page with a landscape and a year, and other, smaller panels on top which portrays the same landscape at a different point in history. They all show short moments, glimpses, of the little spot of land’s rich history.



Figure 16: Lady in living room (1957) and cat (1999). (McGuire n. pag.)

Some of these glimpses of life develops into storylines that are continued for a few panels or pages before they are discontinued. Often, however, the glimpses of life are not continued, and instead stand on their own as a brief moment in time. The human characters, which appear in many of illustrations, have so few distinguishing features that they would be unrecognizable if they reappeared in other storylines than the image, or images, they appear in. Generally, the only consistent factor in the novel is a small corner somewhere in North America. The time jumps from millions of years BC and to several thousand years after present time, but the location remains fixed.

Instead of creating a linear story, the panels are connected to each other in a multitude of other ways. *Here* contains no page annotations or chapters, but often a segment or a series of images appear to be linked through implied thematical associations or colour schemes. To grasp the full potential of reading *Here* it therefore makes sense to look at the illustrations and panels in other ways than locked in their linear sequence. Like with the analysis of *Fun Home*, it makes sense to rely more on the technique of braiding

that was proposed by Thierry Groensteen, where one regards all panels in a graphic narrative as being in a potential relation to all others (Horstkotte). Looking at *Here* through thematical associations, which do not necessarily follow each other linearly, gives the book an almost endless amount of possible interpretations.

Throughout this chapter I often refer to a part of the book as a “section”. I do this to be able to discuss a segment of the book which I perceive as having a kind of similarity between the illustrations that follow each other. Examples of this can be similar textual references, a continued narrative or a similar colour scheme, something that connects them. However, since the book does not really contain any obvious sectioning or chapters, this is ultimately part of an interpretation, and it is plausible that a different reader would find different sections based on different connections.

In this chapter I will argue that the space should be read as the real protagonist of *Here*. Some critics have been reluctant to characterize the space in *Here* as the main character and have promoted a more reader-centred reading of the novel. I wish to establish the space itself as the main centre and of the text, and I do so based on the place’s privileged position as the only fixed element of the text, and its character-like characteristics. I will further argue that looking at the space in this way allows it to communicate to the reader, and this informs my reading of space as an oppressive force. Particularly, I will argue that the prominent setting of the home plays an important role in the narrative, in that it acts as an exclusive force and that it exists as a visualization of some vastly different time scales that are connected to power relations.

4.2 Space as Narrator and Protagonist

Both critics and others have discussed who or what constitutes the main character of *Here*. In his review of the novel, the renowned comic book artist Chris Ware asks:

“But who or what is the main character? Is it the man who seizes up at a joke told in the first few pages (...) You could say it’s the space of the room, the arbitrary geometry imposed by a human mind on a space for reasons of shelter and as a background to this theatre of life. But you could also claim it is the reader, your consciousness where everything is pieced together and tries to find, and to understand, itself.” (Ware)

Ware does not conclude definitely to his own question, but the question itself, “who is the main character?”, and the fact that he asks the question, says something about the somewhat unusual experience of reading *Here*. In *Undocumented* too, there was no obvious main character. Instead, there were an empty centre in the narrative that the reader could be “figuralized” into and participate actively in the narrative. Ware suggests a similar possibility in the quote above when he says that “you could just as easily claim that it is the reader, your consciousness (...)”, but he does not argue that the reader-as-main-character is any more likely than any of his other suggestions.

The narration in *Here* does not allow for an immersion into the narrative in any comparable way that the narration in *Undocumented*. Instead of shifting perspectives of interior that suggests movement, *Here* employs a fixed focalization point which remains unaltered in all of the frames. The reader is always looking at the fireplace and the window of the living room, where the ridge of the book constitutes the living room corner. When the panels show natural landscapes, the fixity is sometimes indicated by trees or a water that remain in the same place through many years. This static narration transfers one of the space’s most defining traits, its physical fixity, onto the reading of the book. This aligns the reader with the spatial fixity, suggesting that whoever, or rather, whatever, takes the main centre of the story is, in fact, the space itself.

In his article “A Home for the Anthropocene: Planetary Time and Domestic Space in Richard McGuire’s *Here*”, Jon R. Hegglund claims that the home in *Here* is “rendered as a space that we anthropomorphize only indirectly; that is, we do not personify it as a ‘character’” (Hegglund 187). He views the home in *Here* as a “cognitive frame” (Hegglund 187) that lets the reader imagine planetary time in a comprehensive way but is sceptical towards calling it a character. He writes that “[t]he overall impression is a distancing, defamiliarizing effect that replaces empathy with characters in the storyworld with a kind of extradiegetic narratorial positionality (...) This detachment shifts the perception of the storyworld from one of empathy and engagement to self-reflection” (Hegglund 189).

What Hegglund and Ware have in common is that they both seemingly assume that if there is a nonhuman, nonanimal main character, it must be the *house*, which is a human built home occupied by humans. As we can see from the quotes above, Ware suggests “You could claim it’s *the space of the room (...)*” (“Ware on *Here*”, my

emphasis), and similarly Heggglund argues that “*the home* in *Here* is rendered (...)” (Heggglund 187, my emphasis). This reasoning fails to take into account that the landscape in *Here* consists of much more than the house itself. The time frame of the novel spans for millions of years of which the house only exists for a few hundred. It therefore seems natural to consider the space itself, the lot of land, to be the main character, and not only the house.

If anything, Heggglund and Ware’s shared assumption that it is necessarily the home that must be considered a character in this book could perhaps be seen as symptomatic for a bias towards regarding the human as the natural epicentre of action and agency. It renders the need to deliberately attempt to oppose the naturalisation of the human as the centre of all narratives in clear view. Because it is not something that happens automatically, we as readers have to intentionally place the agencies of matter in the centre of our imaginations to be able to access the potential of its narratives and its connections to human narratives.

Despite the seemingly nonintuitive notion of considering the space in *Here* as the real protagonist of the story, there exists plenty of textual evidence for such a reading when, as Iovino and Oppermann suggest, we use a deliberate strategy of anthropomorphizing. First and foremost, the only thing that could be said to constitute an overarching connective narrative in the story is how the place changes over time. The reader is constantly introduced to some new piece of information about the place, all the panels contain one unique moment that has happened here and nowhere else. Sometimes these moments have human or animal characters as a focus, but they also often consist solely of natural landscapes or other things that is usually perceived as static. A whole section towards the middle of the book contains nothing but double-page illustrations of landscapes that are very similar to printed landscape paintings (see figure 17). The only difference between what we usually think of as landscape paintings and these illustrations is that the illustrations are put after one another in sequence, thus implying process.

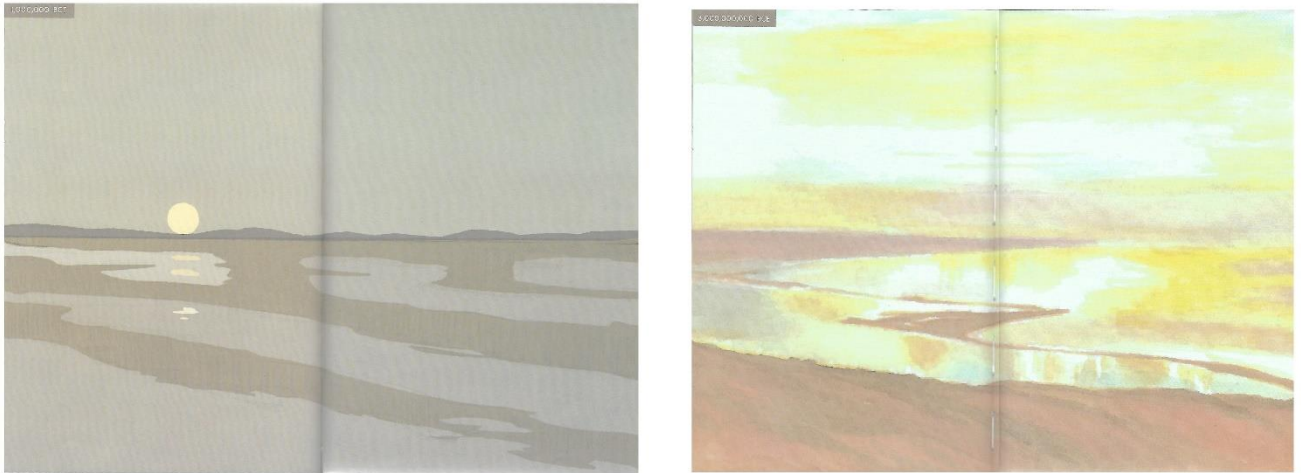


Figure 17: Landscape in 1,000,000 BCE and 3,000,000,000 BCE. (McGuire n.pag.)

The changes the reader observes on the page is not limited to the changing tapestries and furniture of the house, where a human agency is implied if not always addressed directly, but often consist of the changing of seemingly “empty” landscapes. As can be seen in figure 17 the landscape from 1.000.000 BCE is very different from the landscape in 3.000.000.000 BCE even though neither of them contains anything other than land and water. The ridges that forms in the horizon have different shapes, and in the earliest image there is a water or lake that has been reduced to small ponds of water in the later image. The changing landscape consists solely of material processes that occur without human interference.

One could say that the constant reformation of matter that we see in the illustrations above constitutes a kind of character development. Non-living entities such as dirt, stone and water all play a part in continuously creating the space. It is a visualization of what Iovino and Oppermann have refers to as “the world’s constant process of becoming” (Iovino and Oppermann, “Theorizing Material Ecocriticism” 453) which refers to the way that the world is never static, but on the contrary constantly recreated. The narrative in *Here* does not lean on stories of human intentionality. Instead, the visualizations of the constant reconfiguration of matter, the constant process, is many times what drives the novel.

The way that the changing matter ultimately forms the story of the book establishes the space itself as the main centre, or the main character of the story. In

addition to this, the structure of the novel appears to operate almost like pieces of memory, which contribute to giving the place a character-like presence and the knowledge to act as the narrator of the text. As previously mentioned, the novel is made up of boxes on top of boxes all containing small snippets of time. McGuire himself has noted that the simultaneousness of multiple frames on the same page “feels close to how we think” (Shapton). He argues that if one stops to examine one’s own head, it will always consist of multitudes of jumbled thoughts, memories and projections that occur simultaneously. As he puts it: “We are all zooming around in time in our heads” (Shapton). Due to the spatial fixity and immense time span in the novel, the memory-like structure appears to be embedded in the landscape itself. This gives the space a narrating quality and an ability to seemingly put together the moments on the page, which essentially guides the associations that forms the very fabric of meaning in this book. This ability to seemingly guide or construct these associations allows the space to communicate with the reader and perform a kind of speech.

As David Rodriguez argues in his essay “Narratorhood in the Anthropocene”, the narration that the text performs is largely based on what he calls “the oddity of rhyming events” (366). The rhyming events he refers to can be any of the connections and similarities that occur throughout the book the “something behind the texts that begs to be *encountered*” (Rodriguez 367, original emphasis). There is something in the text that communicates through the combinations of moments that it shows to the reader. The moments mirror each other, play on each other and often seemingly communicate with each other, constantly appearing as though they are put together by the presence of the place.

The rhyming events are constantly creating the sensation of the place as an entity with a memory. In a section that continues over several pages, three people from an archaeological society visits an elderly woman, stating that they believe her property might be an important archaeological site for native American culture. While the conversation between the lady and the scientists spans out in the double-paged background, smaller frames show native Americans in the same space in the year 1609 (see figure 18).



Figure 18: Interaction between an old woman, archaeologists, and Native Americans. (McGuire n.pag.)

The two timelines seemingly interact with each other. When the doorbell rings, one of the native Americans says: “I heard something” and “Be still!” (n.pag). A few pages later some other native Americans in year 1622 are using sticks or bones as tools, which are exactly the sort of things that the historical society wishes to find on the property.

The kinds of interactions as those in figure 18, are highly relatable to Schuppli and Weizman’s concept of “material witnesses”. The interactions act as a reminder that when studying history, the place itself is an entity that holds answers if it is properly studied and interpreted. The ground itself becomes a memory, or an archive, that through its interactions with the world can relate information about the people that used to live in the area. Even though the exact events that we see depicted in *Here* are fictional, it is still possible to use the archived information from the ground to construct a partial narrative of past events. The weapons and tools that the Native Americans use in the images have been made from materials found in the nearby environments, and then preserved in the matter that makes up the ground for archaeologists to discover centuries later. It is one of the instances in which the material “knots” in the “vast network of agencies” (1) described by Iovino and Oppermann becomes very tangible.

The section with the Native Americans demonstrates how archaeological evidence is hidden in the ground. This idea is also reflected in the structure of the novel. The double-page illustrations with panels on top, the structure of frames within frames, creates a sense of simultaneity. It shows coexistence between many different narratives and many different moments. This means that instead of linear time, it gives the reader the possibility to visualize time as layers on top of layers. The structure serves as a reminder that time in some cases function more as layers than as a linear storyline of events. Especially in the case of archaeological evidence, the different timelines coexist as layers in the ground. There are evidence of both human stories and of the processes of space hidden in the ground. One could perhaps say that layers on layers is the way in which a space, such as the space in *Here*, could likely experience the passing of time.

All of the elements discussed in this section plays a part in creating the space into an entity with a presence that communicates and narrates the story in the novel. The place itself takes centre stage and appear as an entity with an archive of information, a memory, and a specific perception of time. These traits allow the reader to consider the spaces

through a material lens. This means that the familiar home that is present in a large part of the illustrations cannot be viewed only as a cosy and nostalgic home but must also be seen as a force that is exclusive.

4.3 Home as an Exclusive Force

As established, the house that often occupies the land is not itself the main character of the text. However, it still serves some very important functions in the novel. It is the most prominent setting in the book and while it continuously plays on associations to the familiar and nostalgic, its presence in the story also efficiently shows how the house represents a way of life that in reality excludes all other lifeforms that have previously existed in the same place. This realization might easily have led to a narrative of the human home as a villain or as a kind oppressive structure similar to the buildings in *Undocumented*. Instead, the home takes on a much more ambiguous role, which more accurately problematizes some of the issues regarding humans' position in the natural world. The setting of the home brings forth certain tensions that exists in the novel, particularly those concerning relations between the human and the nonhuman, but also between the modern human lifestyle and the losses that has occurred in order for it to exist in the way that it does today.

Here was originally inspired by the artist's own childhood home (Sante). When making the book, McGuire researched the area around the house where he grew up and used his findings to create the different narratives that can be found in his book. He found evidence to suggest that there had been important Native American camp sites in the area, and some of the segments are based on historical events, such as those about Ben Franklin's illegitimate son who allegedly lived across the street from where the McGuire family house would be located several hundred years later (Sante). Likewise, some of the narratives of the people inside the house were inspired by old family photographs. This means that one could say that *Here* is, in a way, a story about a very specific place.

However, one of the fascinating aspects of *Here* is that even though it is based on a particular home and a particular place, the story could have been set anywhere. The novel does not present itself as an autobiographical work. It would be possible to make a

similar book based on any location in the world, and it would contain millions of these moments that are laid out as a fractured narrative in *Here*. This means that the setting of the home can be seen not only as a specific home, but as a more general representation of a kind of modern human lifestyle. The space of the home plays a role both as the specific physical figure in the book, but also as a visualization of a modern western human way of life in a wider, or even metaphorical, sense.

In *Here*, the relation that the reader forms with the space of the living room is based on familiar objects, warm colours and associations to home and family life. The living room is first introduced through the use of splash pages in the beginning of the novel (see figure 16 in section 4.1). According to Silke Horstkotte, a splash page shares common traits with the establishing shot in a movie; it sets the tone of the ensuing narrative and introduces important symbols, places or characters (Horstkotte 28). Like the illustration in figure 16 shows, the image is drawn in warm, lush colours. These warm colours immediately provide the reader with an indicator that the living room contains a hospitable and cosy atmosphere, and similar colours continue to dominate the rest of the book.

In an interview with the Paris review, McGuire commented that he had wanted the colours of the room to mimic those he saw in old family photographs; the “grayish reds and gray greens” (Shapton) of the 1950s, and the “golden yellow” of the 1960s. The living room contains furniture that looks inviting and comfortable; a yellow sofa or a pot plant under the window, and recognizable items from the times they depict, such as the sunburst clock that decorates the wall above the fireplace in most of the images from the 1960s and 1970s. Additionally, there are a great deal of happy family moments scattered throughout the text. There are fancy-dress parties, family photographs, and dancing, all of which reinforce the impression of the house as a good home, a nice place to be.

All in all, the setting and appearance of the home in *Here* could not be more different than the buildings in for instance *Undocumented*. The comfortable setting creates a welcoming impression. In *Undocumented*, it was safe to assume that the sterile landscapes and unfamiliar setting were meant to put the reader off and make them feel out of place and uncomfortable. This was one of the techniques used to create awareness of the problematic treatment of people in immigrant detention, and to make the reader attempt to imagine themselves in the position of a detainee, and object to the feelings it

created. *Here* to a much larger degree than *Undocumented* targets positive feelings. It is a meditation on the spaces, more than an attack on them. If we, again, extend the visual representation of the home on the page to include a wider representation of a certain way of living as humans, it is a mediation on the way that humans live in a wider context of nature and environment.

Despite the positive and nostalgic responses that the home posits, it also plays a different, opposing role, where its potential as an oppressive force is revealed. Great parts of the book portray landscapes that differ greatly from the familiar space of the living room. These spaces are anything from illustrations of barren planes from before there was life on earth to forests with roaming dinosaurs, or, as previously discussed, illustrations of Native Americans. Like the images of the living room, these landscapes are also drawn in warm colours and target positive reactions in the reader, they too invite the reader to form a positive affective relation. These illustrations show a great deal of cohabitation and coexistence. By continuously employing the technique of braiding proposed by Groensteen, we can see these images of coexistence in contrast to the images of the home, which are, with the exception of a few pets and an occasional potted plant, stripped from the presence of other living species than humans. These contrasts are evident throughout the novel, which makes the exclusiveness of the home constantly visible.

The illustrations of the Native Americans that were discussed in section 4.2 are examples of the exclusiveness that the house represents. The way that the house is placed on the exact location that the archaeologists believe might be an important site for retrieving Native American objects (see figure 18 in section 4.2) speaks to a larger discourse on the treatment of native populations throughout history. It is a clear visualization of how certain cultures have been, and still are, marginalized, and that this marginalization is not only due to social practices, but also due to physical exclusion from certain areas.

The old woman's response when the archaeologists tell her about their suspicions that her backyard might be a site for Native American culture is one of surprise and avoidance. On the previous page, when they discussed the historic building across the street, she has exclaimed "I am such a fan of anything colonial" (n.pag.). When they breach the topic of Native American culture she responds "Oh dear... Are you sure I can't get anyone a glass of water? Lemonade?" (n.pag.). This avoidance connects the physical

exclusiveness of the house to a wider tendency of cultural exclusion. The connection between the house's current occupant and the ones that have lived there in previous times is something that she is not interested in encountering, despite a proclaimed interest for history only moments before. The possible oppression that her house might perform, or the historical realities that has allowed her house to be placed on that particular site, is something she does not want to explore.

The exclusiveness of the house is also pertinent in the interactions between humans and other animals in some of the illustrations. One example of this is a background of the living room in 1915 with two smaller frames within, showing a bison in 10 000 BCE and a girl in 1970 (see figure 19). In the illustration, the bison and the girl are both lying on the floor. Their bodies are aligned on the ground and their mirrored bodies look almost as if they could touch each other. There are no speech bubbles, text or visual signs of sound or movement, the scene appears still and quiet. The illustration in an obvious manner emphasizes the connectedness between their two bodies, and to the space that they both inhabit.

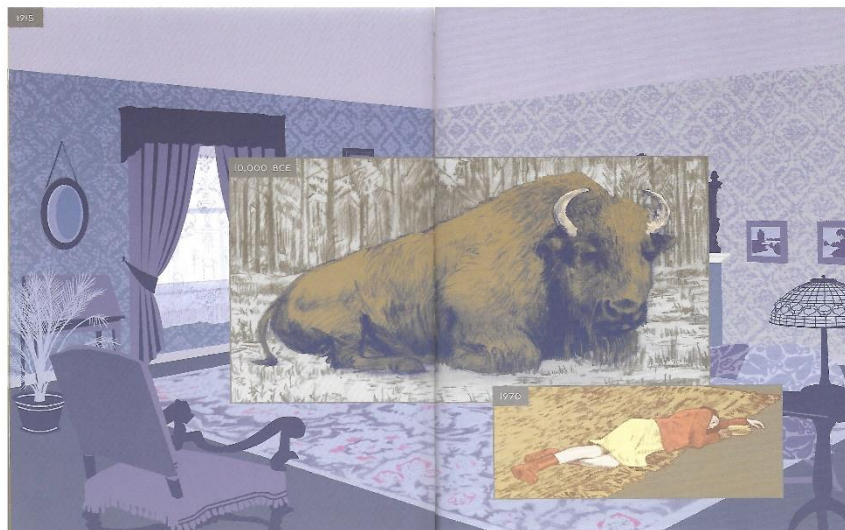


Figure 19: Bison and girl on the living room floor. (McGuire n.pag.)

There is no doubt that the bison looks slightly absurd within the small, carpeted and tapestried living room. The bison's absurd appearance on the living room carpet demonstrates space's defining power. The living room is not dimensioned for its

proportions, the bison is clearly too big. Wild animals, and particularly large ones, look very strange in modern human environments. They become strangers both because we are not used to seeing them, but also because the humans have constructed an environment that is entirely adapted to human requirements. The scene with the mirrored bodies within the same space definitely highlight connections between the two figures, but it also makes it clear that one of them is out of their natural habitat. Embedded in the home is both what it is – a safe and adapted place for the human characters, and what it is not – a place for woods or wild animals.

The oppressiveness of the exclusion that the home performs is complex in nature. The way that it plays with a combination of the nostalgic and the oppressive does not make the reader uncomfortable in the same way as in for instance *Undocumented*. The role of the oppressiveness is rather to render visible and make tangible the real conflicts that exists between humans and other species, conflicts that are extremely relevant in our time of environmental change. It is efficient because it reflects the emotional realities that characterises a lot of feelings about climate change; love for what we know, uneasiness about humans role in shaping nature, and a fear of how nature might change in the future.

In *Here*, this spatial conflict is sometimes tinged with deep melancholy which reflects what many might experience in the face of environmental change, such as “fear, sorrow, and more complicated responses such as “climate grief”” (Bladow and Ladino 2). In a section that continues for a few pages we see a background, a landscape dated to 500.000 BCE, with several smaller panels on top depicting various human characters looking for lost objects; a wallet, an umbrella, their mind. In the next page, which is rendered in figure 20, the losing of various objects continues in the smaller panels, this time against a backdrop from the year 50.000 BCE, except on this page there is a small, almost imperceptible silhouette of a mammoth standing at the left side of the double page. A pattern of losing objects continues for several pages, enclosing the illustration that contains the mammoth somewhere in the middle. The mammoth is so small that it might be easily missed, but if one notices it, it becomes clear that is deeply connected to the theme of loss that is established through the thematical associations in the illustration.

The mammoth is an animal that went extinct several thousand years ago, but which seems to possess some kind of position in the popular imagination, being used in

animation movies and children's books alike. It is perhaps an example of a species that everybody knows is gone, but which many might still feel an emotional connection to.



Figure 20: Objects being lost in smaller frames, mammoth in the background. (McGuire n.pag.)

The illustration with the mammoth seems to crystallize the idea that something of value is missing. The space is communicating to the reader, reminding them that what is now has not always been. In the illustration the animal is depicted as a sole figure against the horizon, a small silhouette in a vast landscape. As with the illustration of Bruce in the field in *Fun Home*, there is something about the size proportions in the image that seems to strike a chord with the reader's empathic response. The illustration demonstrates loneliness and isolation in a way that the reader can understand and react to almost instinctively. Combined with the knowledge that the mammoth does not exist anymore it targets feelings of eco-nostalgia or solastalgia and the strong emphasis on loss suggests that there is something of value at stake.

4.4 Home as Embodiment of Time Conflict

In addition to being a physically exclusive force, the house in *Here* embodies certain issues concerning time, or particularly what Paul Heubener refers to as “the conflict between fast and slow” (Heubener 328). Heubener is concerned with how time operates as a form of power both socially and, perhaps more relevant for this reading of *Here*, in socio-environmental activities. Heubener is eager to communicate that both “slowness” and “speed” can be used as a tactic not only for those who wish to preserve environments but also for those who wish to delay implementation of environment regulations (329). He argues that through mobilization of temporal power, those in privileged positions can implement “deadlines, timelines, time limits, strategic manipulations of both speed and delay” (332) and that they can “change these temporal rules at will” (332).

Heubener is concerned with how time operates as power, but he is sceptical towards the dichotomy that is sometimes imagined as existing between “cultural time” and “natural” time. He states instead that there are “many complex, intertwined temporalities” (332). Even within ecosystems, there exists large amounts of different temporalities, which makes understanding time perspectives a rather complex task. Inspired by Paul Ricoeur’s observations on narrative and time, Heubener suggests that it is not possible for any school of thought to account for all the different temporalities of nature, and that equating any particular temporality with nature, whether it is slowness, cyclicity or any other type of time, is necessarily reductive in that it privileges one limited perspective and closes off other kinds of understanding (336).

In his essay, Heubener suggests that “imaginative responses are key to understanding and questioning” (328) the ways in which time operates as a form of power. In this regard, comics can be a uniquely useful medium, because they represent a multitude of ways in which to reimagine time. As Hilary Chute remarks in her book *Disaster Drawn* “[c]omics provides an experience and view of time in which it is tensile and layered, proliferate instead of linear, dispersed rather than propulsive” (84). She describes what she calls the comics “all-at-once-ness” (86, original marking) which “gives readers panels to be read in sequence, and also to be seen as one integrated image”. She considers the simultaneity of comics to be “escape from “exclusive linearity”” (86). By giving readers images and text that can be viewed not only as a linear events, but

which can be combined or looked at in various ways, comics possess a unique ability to imagine time in different ways than through linearity.

Here is an example of a graphic novel that manages to imagine a multitude of different times through the use of non-linearity. As discussed in section 4.2, *Here* provides the reader with several images on top of each other, which reflects the “all-at-once-ness” that Chute describes. The panels on every page can often be read in many different sequences, and they can additionally be seen as one large illustration that shows all of these moments at the same time. This gives an impression of a time that is layered, but the sections and segments in the book also shows a multitude of imagined times, and, in some cases, it is possible to say something about the power relations that exist between these layers of time, particularly in the tension between fast and slow.

One of the segments that efficiently illustrates some of the conflicts of time that exists in the novel is a segment which shows the construction of the house. The section, which is rendered in figure 21 below, is comprised of a series of illustrations from the year 1907 which shows how the house is built from bricks and wood on an empty lot on a street. One of these double-page illustrations contain many smaller panels, each showing the same builder performing various kinds of construction work. The background remains unchanged for each of these smaller panels, the light and the colours



Figure 21: Construction of the house in montage-like illustration. (McGuire n.pag.)

are the same, which indicates that all the panels are from a similar time, perhaps even from the same day.

The illustration of the house construction suggests fast paced and condensed action. It is somewhat similar to a technique described by Scott McCloud which is sometimes used to suggest movement in comics, where the artist incorporates multiple images of the subject after one another (McCloud 112). The segment could also be reminiscent of montage scenes in movies, where a lot of action takes place within a short amount of time. Either way, the spread gives off an impression of speed and action in that the images, when put together and on top of each other, contain a lot of activity in a condensed time frame. To the reader, the builder appears simultaneously in all the little frames, as to emphasize again the limited amount of time that the construction takes. We see not only all the little moments from all the small frames, but we also perceive the illustration as one image in the “all-at-once-ness” that Chute describes, almost as one moment.

More than anything the illustrations of the construction of the house demonstrate how quickly the house arises; within one year, possibly within days, an empty lot becomes the skeleton of the familiar structure of the fireplace, walls and window that are the building blocks of the house. The house transforms the entire place from a more diverse lot of coexistence and into the homely yet exclusive building that the home represents. As Huebener suggested, it might not be possible to pinpoint one kind of time as human time, but the illustration definitely shows one way in which one version of human time operates with a defining power on the space in the narrative.

Compared to other changes that the reader witness in the novel, such as the changing landscapes illustrated in figure 17, the rise of the house is happening in an instant. As discussed in section 4.2, the open landscapes in also suggest movement in the way that they are organized in a series after one another, but the process they show is much slower. The length of this process visualized in figure 17 is emphasized by the use of only one image on each double page which means that unlike in these montage-like illustrations where the reader’s eye is constantly moving around the page, the reader can choose entirely for themselves the pace with which to consume the image. All of the double-page illustrations in the book “bleed” in all directions, meaning that they are not contained by a visible frame, but seemingly run off the page. According to McCloud,

“bleeding” suggests that “time is no longer contained by the familiar lines of the closed panel, but instead haemorrhages and escapes into timeless space” (McCloud 103). In other words, he suggests that “bleeding” panels creates an effect of timelessness.

In the illustrations that depict the living room, this effect of timelessness is lessened, because the pages of the book do some of what a the frame of the panel would normally do, they contain the image and act as the walls of the living room which encloses the space within in a limited moment. However, in the landscape illustrations in figure 17, the pages of the book do not stand in for walls and do not in the same way contain the image. The time seemingly stretches in all directions which emphasizes the lengthiness of the processes in these illustrations and creates a sharp contrast to the construction of the house.

Another section in the novel shows a different process of development – the narrative of a sapling developing into a tree over the course of several hundred years (see figure 22). First, the tree is portrayed on the side of a sequence with people having a conversation. Over the next few pages, a smaller panel on top of the tree shows a sapling in 1564. On the page after that the sapling has developed into a slightly larger tree in the year 1579. What we as readers observe in fragments is the development of this tree from early youth until it is a full-grown tree several hundred years later.

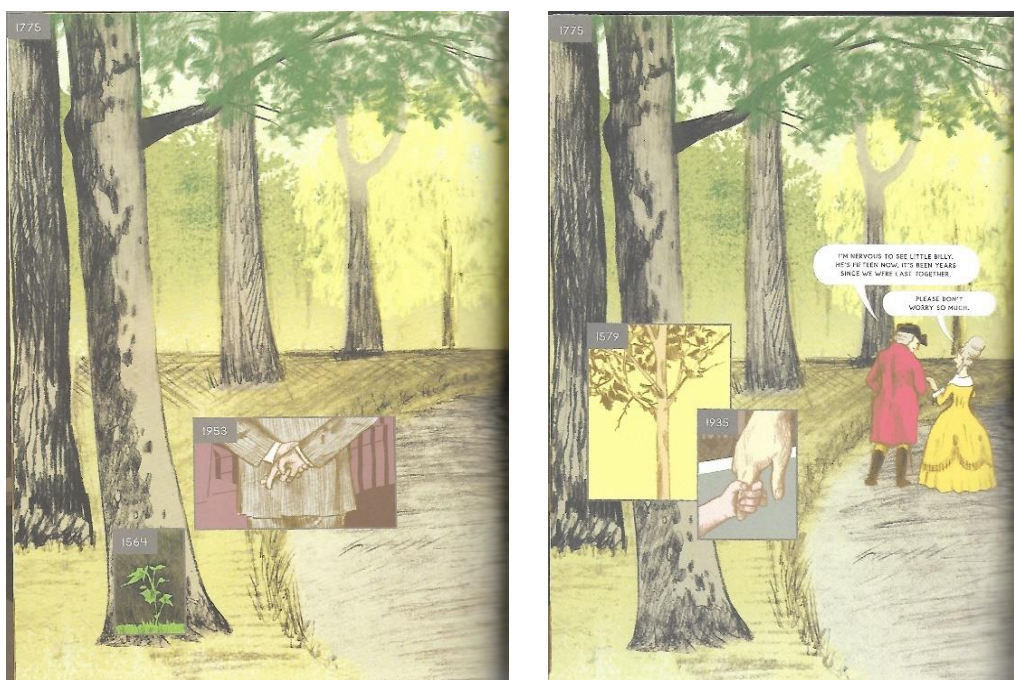


Figure 22: Tree growing across several pages (n.pag.)

The development of the tree can be seen as a kind of character development similar to those found in many of the other narratives in the text. It is not more incomplete or uneventful than most of the other glints that are illustrated but is instead told similarly to those narratives that convey some sort of human agency. The way the reader sees the tree develop through multiple panels suggests that the tree's story is worthy of the reader's attention, and that it should be regarded as a meaning-making element on similar terms as other characters. It is not only part of the background; it plays a part in creating the narrative. It shows how the way the tree is part of the "fabric of events" (Iovino and Oppermann, "Theorizing Material Ecocriticism" 451) is not dependent on intentional participation, but it is instead a matter of being.

Interestingly, the way that the tree's narrative is portrayed also mimics the human time frame that was present in the construction of the house. The illustration consists of multiple frames on top of each other showing the development of the tree in different years. Like the illustrations from figure 21, the illustrations of the tree are in their own ways packed with movement and development. With the tree as well as the construction of the house, the montage-like structure of the illustration suggests action and development in a limited amount of time. The development of the tree is, however, dispersed across several pages, which prolongs the time frame slightly, compared to the construction scene, because it lengthens time it takes for the reader to grasp the narrative.

Both the figures showing landscape development and those showing the tree's development are examples of how humans often operate at a faster pace than the matter and species that surround us. However, there are other times in the novel where it becomes clear that it is not only humans that can act with suddenness, that matter can also be fierce and fast. One illustration from an imagined future in year 2111 shows the window breaking and masses of water flooding the living room (see figure 23). The speed and destruction of this force is emphasized in both the double-page background and sixteen smaller panels which all depict either something being broken, or a speech bubble with a single offensive word. It creates an intense visual scene that is characterized by a distinctly negative atmosphere.



Figure 23: Water breaking through the living room window. (McGuire n.pag.)

The illustration does not specifically allude to climate change. Yet, considering the time frame of the event, about one hundred years after present day, and the type of crises, a flood, it is plausible to read this event as an allusion to climate change and extreme weather. This is particularly interesting when it comes to the power relations of time and agency of matter, because the real fear of climate change is, in a way, that matter will become more active, that it will act faster and fiercer and differently than we are used to. It shows that the matter of the earth is responding and reacting to human activities in ways that we might not be able to stop or control. Considering that the space itself acts as the narrator of these events with its layered perception of time and all-knowing presence, the flood can be seen as a warning, and this gives it almost a stronger sensation of being uncomfortable and eerie.

As with the exclusiveness of the house, it is possible to let the house stand in for a wider context, in this case a way that humans determine how places are going to be, what they are going to be and how the speediness by which we perform these changes act as a form of power. One of the things that the flood through the window emphasises, is that oppression often induces a response in the form of resistance. As with the detainees that organizes hunger strikes, communicates through pipes and keep hanging toilet paper curtains even when they are torn down, the matter that has been controlled, excluded and

not taken into consideration in the creation of the human space, resists through breaking the material reality of the human home. The novel thus demonstrates that the matter that we perceive as slow or even static works on many temporal scales. In a way, the conflict between fast and slow, only creates new and different conflicts between fast and slow, ones in which the human is not necessarily the powerful party.

4.5 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the space itself, the lot of land that is depicted on all pages of this book, is the main character of the novel. This is because of its prominent position as the only fixed element in the narrative, but also because of the way that the many panels on top each other appears to be a way of thinking that is embedded in the landscape itself. This quality also gives the place the ability to narrate the story and “speak” on its own behalf by guiding the combination of moments that the reader sees on the page.

The space is often occupied by a human house which plays out important functions in the text. It visualizes certain issues connected to power relations and humans’ position in nature. On the one hand, the living room that we often see on the page is a typical western middle-class home which plays on the nostalgic and familial. However, as with both *Fun Home* and *Undocumented*, the spaces on the page are ambiguous. While using the house to play on associations to the safe, familiar and well-known, the book also imagines the landscapes that were present in the exact same spot as the house in previous times, and it portrays them in warm, beautiful colours, allowing the reader to connect affectively with these prehistoric spaces as well. This ultimately creates a conflict, because while the house is inviting, it becomes increasingly clear throughout the novel that these two landscapes, the house and the forests or woods that previously occupied the lot, cannot coexist. The house becomes a force that effectively excludes all other kinds of lifeforms.

The house and its sudden appearance in the landscape also serves as a contrast to other kinds of time that exists in the novel. It allows the reader to see how time perspectives function as a kind of power. Although the human might in some regards act

as faster than other kinds of agency, the narrative also shows how one of the threats that is present in our time is that of matter acting out on different time scales than what humans are used to.

Here shows the power that humans have in defining the space and catering it to our every need. However, the narrating presence of the space itself contains a melancholy of what is lost, and warnings for what might come in the future.

5 Conclusion

Through this thesis I have examined different ways in which spaces in graphic narratives can act as oppressive forces. Based on work done in comics theory and in affective studies, I have argued that spaces in graphic narratives communicate to the reader not just by acting as a container for the action of the story or as symbolic elements of the text, but as meaning-making and active participants in the narratives. By applying a material ecocritical approach to three different graphic narratives, I have been able to argue that in these works a quality that is usually associated with human agency, the power of being oppressive, is enacted by physical spaces like natural landscapes, town structures and buildings.

The oppression takes its form through the highly specific and material realities that each of these works create. Because of the visuality of the medium and the instant reactions that images cause, readers react to these power structures affectively. However, as all of the works create the specific reality through a combination of words and images which work on each other, the works contain a depth that allows the reader to engage with certain specific issues on a conscious and intellectual level, as well as through emotional responses.

The three works chosen for this thesis are very different in form, content, and in the issues that they raise. The ways in which the spaces appear oppressive are therefore also different in the works. Yet, they all use the specific qualities of the comics medium to express a spatial reality that lets the reader see the material reality on the page as agential oppressive forces.

Fun Home uses maps, drawings of outdoor space and interior design to create an understanding of the struggles that Bruce experienced when living as a closeted gay man in a small rural town. Through understanding the physical realities of his life, such as the isolation of the town and the closeness of his relatives, the reader can understand the landscape as a guilty agent, a force that is ultimately a factor in his death. Even the house that is portrayed as his passion and salvation is not enough to sustain him, and it acts not only as a utopia, but as something that grounds him in a life he is not suited for, an illusion and a labyrinth.

Undocumented uses a technique of figuralization of the reader into the diegetic space of the narrative in order to create a negative affective response to detention centre buildings. It draws the reader into spaces that are usually secret and hidden to make them react to the experience of immigrant detention. This negative response enhances the understanding of the spaces in the novel as oppressive, which is connected to the novel's mission to make the reader critical and aware of controversial migrant detention practices. The experience is made uncomfortable by an uncertain position that casts the reader as both oppressor and victim, by the use of surveillance cameras on virtually every page, and by the use of blank, sterile landscapes. The visualization of these spaces allows the reader to act as an interlocutor for the buildings on the page.

Here puts the place at the centre of the story, and it is possible to read it as a main character with a memory and a presence. This gives the space in this novel a unique ability to speak and communicate on its own behalf. The sections that are put together seemingly by the space itself tells stories about the processes and developments that has occurred in the place over the course of time, and even beyond present time in an imagined future. Some of these stories are about oppression; they show how a human house is placed upon the land and efficiently excludes other life forms. Combined with other material elements in the text, such as wide, open landscapes, trees and water, the house also demonstrates the kind of power relations that exist in conflicts between fast and slow. Particularly, the book shows that even though we often perceive matter as static, or at the very least as extremely slow, material elements can have the power to respond to human activities and cause damage on human lives.

By including, manipulating and reimagining elements that represent spaces in the real world, such as maps, floor plans, buildings or a particular place, these graphic narratives all manage to render visible systems that are unfair or unavailable from the reader's usual sphere. However, the diegetic space does more than reproduce physical reality onto blank pages. By using images and text they appeal to the emotional, and they often show how the reader and the characters can relate to the spaces in metaphorical or narrative ways.

All the works tell stories about acts of resistance as essential parts of the narratives. Resistance, like oppression, is an act. It is a power of withstanding something or opposing something, and like oppression, it is therefore something that is normally linked to the

agency of humans, or at least of living species. In these works, however, the acts of resistance are performed both by humans and acted upon the spaces and performed by matter upon humans or human built structures. These acts of resistance occur either as a direct or implied result of the acts of oppression that the spaces perform, and they are therefore deeply connected to the oppressiveness of the spaces. They would not have been performed, or necessary, if the spaces were not oppressive in the first place.

These acts of resistance performed by and acted on the spaces, show that buildings, places and natural landscapes are not static entities. Instead, they are dynamic, and in the way that Weizman and Herscher suggest, they change their meaning depending on the outward forces that act upon them. A space of incarceration and isolation can become a means of communicating and of self-agency when the features of the buildings are put to creative use. A colonial country house that seems like a display of a rural heterosexual family life can be an expression of otherwise suppressed homosexual feelings.

As previously mentioned, material ecocriticism is not new, but it has gained a great deal of attention in the last few years, with the publication of important works by critics such as Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, works that have been extensively featured in this thesis. Critics within comics studies have written extensively on the unique abilities of the comics medium to convey trauma, because of the medium's ability to convey what is essentially unspeakable, to communicate with and without words. I believe that the combination between these two fields, comic trauma theory and material ecocriticism, could add something of value to the current debates. Especially, I believe it could have merit to examine the ways in which the threat of species loss, extreme weather and other manifestations of climate change is perceived as traumatic by people who live through this time in history where, for many, the devastation of nature as we know it appears to be a real possibility.

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