I Like This Country Fine, a graphic novella

by

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Table of Contents

*Acknowledgements* 1

I. Introduction 2

II. I Like This Country Fine, a graphic novella 23
   *supplemental material enclosed*

III. Thesis Journal 24

*Bibliography and Photo Credits* 53
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Introduction

I. Personal Statement, the first of many

*In short, the comics page is about turning graphic design to narrative ends.*

-Charles Hatfield

I’m embarrassed to admit it, but I didn’t choose to do this project for my senior thesis because I’m a huge fan of graphic novels. I mean, I am a fan: I enjoy reading graphic novels, I am interested in them as an art form, I think they offer up a rich array of discussion topics and stimulate fruitful questions about literature and the visual. But I never had the kind of exposure to or experience with comics that would warrant or even permit me to act as any kind of authority or aficionado; in fact, I would bet that, page for page, my twelve-year-old brother has read more graphic novels than I. Instead, I conceived of this project, and sold it to my Department and advisor, as a study of narrative and aesthetic theories, as an exploration of how a story is told, verbally and visually, and as a dissection of the process behind the product and the practice behind the theory.
II. The Great Debate, or, Semantics and Semiotics: What is a graphic novel?

*Both [painting and poetry], he realized, present to us appearance as reality, absent things as present; both deceive, and the deceit of either is pleasing.*  
—Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Defining a graphic novel really means defining comics, a term casually used in reference to the Sunday funnies or Marvel superheroes, but that technically indicates a specific variant of narrative structure that has become more and more formalized in the past eight decades. There remains, however, contention in and outside of the field as to what comics is; even the professionals have yet to decide whether comics is a medium, genre, language, or system. In what is considered a seminal work in comics studies, Scott McCloud's “Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art” (1993), comics is defined as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”  
“Other images,” it should be noted, includes words because “letters are static images...[and] when they're arranged in a deliberate sequence, placed next to each other, we call them words” (McCloud 8) McCloud's own wording acknowledges and points to works throughout and across the history of art that fit his definition of comics and he makes a point to include examples ranging from pharaonic Egyptian wall carvings to stained glass windows, from 17th century engravings to 21st century web publications. For McCloud, comics is undeniably a medium, a “vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images,” and in which one must “never mistake the message for the messenger” (McCloud 6). He insists that there are no genres, subject matters, styles, materials, tools, philosophies, movements, or ways of seeing that are either confined to comics or out of bounds for the medium (McCloud 22).

McCloud’s definition is important, and oft-disputed, because it does end up putting such a variety of works under the comics rubric, combinations of words and other images, or just non-verbal images, that perhaps have been claimed by other media or left nebulously undefined. Thierry Groensteen, a French scholar, pays particular attention to the debate over definition in his book *The System of Comics* (2007), noting that most definitions are indeed too limited, normative, or in fact biased, employed by authors and critics in favor or defense of their own projects. Before proffering his own particular, more structural definition, Groensteen sides most completely with one given by Pierre Couperie:

Comics would be a story (but it is not necessarily a story...) constituted by handmade images from one or several artists (it must eliminate cinema and the photo-novel), fixed images (in difference from animation), multiple (contrary to the cartoon), and juxtaposed (in difference from illustration and engraved novels...) But this definition applies equally well to Trajan’s Column and the Bayeux tapestry.

It is in this kind of breadth of application that comics seems most approachable, and yet there is still the need to understand how comics, ancient or modern, unexpected or more obvious, actually functions. We can pick out the constituents—juxtaposed, fixed images in a deliberate sequence—and the exemplars—Trajan’s Column and Marvel comic books—but identifying these commonalities is not the same as analyzing their effect, in a sense their purpose.

Groensteen posits that “the rational play of a plurality of interdependent images as the unique ontological foundation of comics” (Groensteen 17); it is in the combination of images (this again includes words) that comics becomes anything more than a series of fixed frames.

Groensteen continues:

The apparent irreducibility of the images and the story is dialectically resolved through the play of successive images and through their coexistence,

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through their diegetic connections, and through their panoptic display, in which we have recognized the foundation of the medium (Groensteen 9).

As demonstrated through the use of juxtaposition and sequence, comics is dependent on the manipulation of space and time, the confusion of these individual concepts, and the conflation of the two. Ultimately, Groensteen argues for what he calls iconic solidarity as the most essential element upon which comics is to be defined: “iconic solidarity,” which is a result of the use of “interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated—this specification dismisses unique enclosed images with a profusion of patterns or anecdotes—and which are plastically and semantically overdetermined by the fact of their coexistence in praesentia” (Groensteen 18). Groensteen’s comics, along with McCloud’s, embraces the depiction and division of time in and through space. The vitality of the static, sequentialized images lies in the physical space between, “between those frozen moments, between the panels, [where] our minds fill in the intervening moments, creating the illusion of time and motion” (McCloud 94). The graphic quality of comics (“graphic” here exemplifying the word’s etymologic root in the physically of writing and drawing) allows for the visual breakdown of space, and thus of time—layout is the manipulation of narrative time just as much as it is the spatial design of the page.

The originator of the modern comic is generally agreed to be Rodolphe Töpffer, a German artist of “satiric picture stories,” who, in the mid-nineteenth century, “employed cartooning and panel borders, and featured the first interdependent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe” (McCloud 94); again we see spatial delineation as key and represented by frames and panels. American comic books and strips, French and Belgian bande dessinée, and Japanese manga all continued to develop—with movements like Cubism and Dada partaking in the spatio-temporal experiment and word-image collaboration—but it wasn’t until the late 1970s that the term graphic novel appeared widely. Comics artist Will
Eisner published his *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories* in 1978, with the subtitle “a graphic novel”; Eisner admits he didn’t actually coin the term but contends that he was the first to such a designation in order “to develop what I believe was viable literature in this medium.” In a 2002 symposium honoring his achievements, Eisner said that “The word “comics,” of course, we’re still living with, is a misnomer. We can’t get rid of the thing,” indicating that whatever fundamental, structural concerns he shares with McCloud, Groensteen, and other contemporary critics, might be negated by semantics. For a medium that has often seen itself as striving not only for definition but for recognition and legitimation from the art and academic worlds, the particularities of naming become all the more important, supposedly; taxonomy is certainly implicated in the contest for existence and acceptance, but something vital, perhaps even more authentic, seems to be lost in the semantics of legitimation, as Charles Hatfield argues:

Comics *shouldn’t* be easy to define, as they are an interdisciplinary, indeed antidisciplinary, phenomenon, nudging us usefully out of accustomed habits of thought and into productive gray areas where various disciplines—such as literature, art, semiotics, and mass communications—overlap and inform one another. That’s why I’ve never been satisfied with newfangled phrases that are designed to do the same work as the word *comics* yet with greater respectability, phrases like *sequential art* or *graphic narrative*, which always seem to err on the side of narrowness and exclusion.

Just as the most precise definition of comics ends up defining myriad works of art, the interests of such a definition implicate other forms of media, theory, and disciplines. But what

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5 Ibid.

6 McCloud makes frequent reference to Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) as one of the early examples of American academic comics discourse, particularly in its examination of sequentiality and its interest in actually making comics. Groensteen, too, acknowledges Eisner’s influence and most Anglophone critics are quick to cite Eisner’s work as a foundational text.

does it mean to even define comics and why does it matter? A large part of the debate over the proper place comics holds vis-à-vis other art forms revolves around the fact that, according to comics proponents, most people—critics and consumers—relegate comics to the low-brow end of the genre scale, as Eisner alludes to; Charlie Brown and Superman dominate the narratives traditionally associated with comics. This is where a critique like Hatfield’s cited comes in and where questions, and I think fears, about medium, genre, and definition play a large part. The desire to classify, to know, and ultimately to judge an art form is taken up by Derrida when he asks “Can one identify a work of art, of whatever sort, but especially a work of discursive art, if it does not bear the mark of a genre, if it does not signal or mention it or make it remarkable in any way?” 8 Can we talk about comics without relegating it to a specific set of parameters, or rather, what happens when such mark-bearing seems more inclined to genre-breaking and medium redefinition? I think it is in the face of questions like these that I first arrived at comics, again, as a reapplication of narrative and aesthetic theories, a combination that does not directly equate to comics theory but that sheds light on this interdisciplinary critical analysis.

What is attractive about narratology as applied to comics is the way in which the latter’s narrative units are more readily exposed, as the layout and panels create a visual diagramming of the story. If narratology is meant to help us understand narrative structure and the grammar of a narrative, 9 I see the explicit use of sequence and framed units as indicators of the parts that make up the whole, calling our attention to morphology and syntax, succession and transformation reinterpreted and re-presented as boxes and images. “A narrative has clear boundaries, the sequences that carry the tale from beginning to end follow

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a certain internal logic and every action, and every function in the narrative has some causal link with the eventual outcome”¹⁰; if comics doesn’t call attention to boundaries, sequence, and the movement from beginning to end, I can think of little else that does so while still telling a story. The temporal quality of speech is foundational for linguists like Saussure and structuralists, as it is for our comprehension of narrative. If, as explained by J.M. Bernstein, “Constructing narratives involves eliciting connections between events by describing them in one way rather than another,”¹¹ comics makes known this process of construction by structurally fragmenting the narrative as a necessary part of continuing it; in the stopping and starting of each panel, we are reminded of the possibility of not knowing what's next and the irresoluteness of the narrative a priori. Like all narrative structures, comics operates under rules that we as readers do not know explicitly but follow implicitly and in turn reinforce.

Even if the defining aspect of comics still seems to be its focus on sequence and temporality, for many readers and critics, myself included, an initial interest in comics comes from the combination of words and images, which we will come to see are fully implicated themselves in issues of space and time. Word and image, like the comics McCloud defines, have been used in tandem for communication purposes for millennia: from the wall panels of ancient Egyptian and Mayan civilizations to Dutch master oil paintings to satirical cartoons. They are combined in multiple dimensions in opera, silent films, and Brechtian theater and their presence together is ubiquitous today, a daily occurrence thanks to photography captions, advertisements, and the Internet. But the way they allegedly work separately, independently, fundamentally, and the debate that arises as a product of their differentiation, perhaps strikes more profoundly to the core of how they work in conjunction with one another.

In Renaissance Italy, a battle was waged between the arts, or rather the artists: Leonardo da Vinci articulated this dispute in his *Paragone*,\(^{12}\) a series of treatises on the science of painting and a wholehearted advocacy of painting over poetry. In their return to classical texts, Renaissance artists looked to Horace's *Ars Poetica* for guidance, encountering and testing his famous assessment, “Ut pictura poesis,” “As is painting so is poetry.” The equivocation of the two art forms was alternately supported and refuted, with da Vinci laying claim to the supremacy of painting based mainly on the science behind the art, that is on the supremacy of the eye and optics over that of the ear and aural experience. He writes:

> The imagination is to reality as the shadow to the body that casts it and as poetry to painting, because poetry puts down her subjects in imaginary written characters, while painting puts down the identical reflections that the eye receives, as if they were real, and poetry does not, like painting, impress the consciousness through the organ of sight (da Vinci 49).

Capturing expression is also of utmost importance for da Vinci and a skilled painter was able to adapt the physical expression, gesture, and movement to the underlying mental state, something too exhaustive for a poet to accomplish.

Two centuries later, in Germany, with the emergence of formalized aesthetic theory, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, too, retains and reinforces the distinction between poetry and painting, also using the efficacy of emotional expression as the criterion for judging the two arts. Lessing's *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766)\(^{13}\) argues against Horace's claim, using the sculpture “Laocoön and His Sons” and Virgil's lines in the *Aeneid*, both depictions of the Trojan priest's painful death by sea-serpent, as examples of the plastic and poetic arts, respectively. Before examining the merits and limits of either medium, Lessing acknowledges that the point of any artwork, and thus the crux of artistic criticism, lies


in the emotional efficacy of the scene depicted; that is, what Lessing seeks out of the sculpture or the poetry is the most vivid, most beautiful emotional response to a horrific event like Laocoön’s suffocation. For Lessing, this type of response is only achieved when the artist leaves something to the imagination of the audience, when we see the moment just before the climax; this is Lessing’s pregnant moment, the pause before that which he ultimately decides is too ugly to give permanence to, and thus is to be absolutely avoided in the psychical representation but evoked in the recipient’s viewing. According to Lessing, then, we understand the dignity of soul and nobility of suffering of Laocoön the sculpture because though we see him sigh, we hear him shriek and were the climatic cry of agony put before us, we’d have nothing more to imagine, no interest in what comes next or purpose to our viewing. He writes, “for what we find beautiful in a work of art is not found beautiful by the eye, but by our imagination through the eye” (Lessing 53), privileging that which is not physically present. In returning to the debate of poetry versus painting, it is necessary to keep Lessing’s ideas of beauty, imagination, and the moment in mind, as he goes on to explain that

Physical beauty arises from the harmonious effect of manifold parts that can be taken in at one view. It demands also that these parts shall subsist side by side, and as things whose parts subsist side by side are the proper subject of painting, so it, and it alone, can imitate physical beauty. The poet, who can only show the elements of beauty one after another, in succession... realizes that those elements, arranged in succession, cannot possibly have the effect which they have when placed side by side (Lessing 102).

The timing that is so important in creating and depicting the pregnant moment, expands (though doesn't lengthen) to encompass the very moment of viewership, that is, both the action of the artwork and the action of the audience are confined to that single second. Time is literally of the essence here and Lessing reiterates throughout his treatise the essential difference between painting and poetry based on this premise of temporality: painting exists in space and poetry unfolds over time. This means that in poetry, in literature, a narrative develops over time, whereas in painting, in the visual arts, according to Lessing, there is but
one moment to depict past, present, and future.

Lessing is less impassioned than da Vinci about the supremacy of one art form over the other, but remains fairly rigid in drawing his distinctions between the two. Issues of fragmentation and totality arise alongside questions of sequence and succession, but as Lessing defends the validity and efficacy of specific media attributes he resists any points of cross-contamination:

Nothing requires the poet to concentrate his picture on one single moment. He takes up each of his actions, as he likes, from its very origin and conducts it through all possible modifications to its final close. Every one of those modifications, which would cost the artist an entire separate canvas or marble-block, costs the poet a single line; and if this line, taken in itself, would have misled the hearer's imagination, it was either so prepared for by what preceded, or so modified and supplemented by what followed, that it loses its separate impression, and in its proper connection produces the most admirable effect in the world (Lessing 39-40).

In defining the limits of panting and poetry, Lessing indeed shapes the way in which we think of media as bounded in terms of both theory and technique; had he titled the essay On the capacities of painting and poetry, however specific and well-defined these may also have been, one wonders whether those seemingly inherent differences less as restrictions and more as potentialities.

Lessing argues that the most successful poets and painters will work within these boundaries, but largely ignores what could happen should an artist choose to surpass these limits, and to use the medium specific capabilities of two art forms together in a synthetic fashion. It would be a transgression against the limits of poetry, for example, to arrange units sequentially, for “[the poet] realizes that those elements, arranged in succession, cannot possibly have the effect which they have when placed side by side” (Lessing 102), but not necessarily so for another medium, like comics. The question of medium specificity in regards to comics is difficult, not only because of its debated status as a medium, but in light of the reductive quality of such a theory in general. Medium specificity seeks to define and cement
the fundamentals of an art form, favoring purity and exclusiveness over less essential, less hierarchical interpretations. However, pushing both poetry and painting, and comics for that matter, all the way down to their core, to their fundamental existence, equalizes media in different way, one based less in aesthetics and instead in semiotics: we realize that "words and images are both representational signs." 14

Both McCloud and Groensteen devote substantial amounts of their writings to the development and use of icons, signs, and representations of reality in comics. Comics, in its combination of words and pictures; its repetitive, fragmented images and sequences; and its deliberate structure and empty spaces, requires the use, comprehension, and creation of visual and linguistic signs. W. J. T. Mitchell describes this kind of semiotics, though not expressively as applied in comics, in terms of images, particularly the graphic, mental, and verbal:

For modern criticism, language and imagery have become enigmas, problems to be explained, prison houses which lock the understanding away from the world. The commonplace of modern studies of images, in fact, is that they must be understood as a kind of language; instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparence concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification. 15

Mitchell goes on to discuss the Wittgensteinian preoccupation with images that are not really there, noting that there is indeed a faulty reliance on "the pictures that seem to reside in our language," that they "are not unmediated copies of any reality" (Mitchell 517). And yet, the images generated, by artist and reader, verbal, visual, and otherwise, within comics are, as with any work, meant to represent reality, or at least the reality of the narrative constructed. The representational quality of images in comics is perhaps more striking than in other art forms because we as readers are more aware of that which is lacking; the author giveth and she taketh

The panels, gutters, layout, and sequentiality of comics lends itself to incomplete representation, and at the same time the utmost in representation. In terms of visual, pictorial representation, comics relies largely on the reader to continually fill in what is missing, an effect McCloud calls closure. From recognizing that a few lines represent an individual character to understanding what happens between two panels, closure is the “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (McCloud 63), a process upon which comics is dependent and with which the reader is wholly engaged. Closure includes realizing that a headshot of someone represents their entire body, or perhaps even more powerfully, unconsciously accepting that the entire body exists, elsewhere. Mitchell writes that “We can never understand a picture unless we grasp the ways in which it shows what cannot be seen” (Mitchell 526), a statement both McCloud and early aestheticians like Lessing would agree with. In art, as exemplified in comics, representation is an act of re-presenting that which is absent; this type of metonymic substitution challenges more than the creative powers of imagination when the reader is forced to make assumptions about what is happening (due to ambiguous or intensely juxtaposed scenes, intentional or not) or, even more seriously, to make decisions about what is happening and how (by suggesting an end that must be carried out.) The gutters and distinct frames of comics make absence more apparent through very visible negative space, and thus the power of re-presentation and recollection in service of the narrative more important and more evocative.

To return to the relationship between words and pictures, we realize how similar the two really are when functioning in terms of representation; as Nelson Goodman argues:

Plainly, resemblance in any degree is no sufficient condition for representation.... Nor is resemblance necessary for reference; almost anything can stand for anything else. A picture that represents—like a passage that describes—an object refers to and, more particularly, denotes it. Denotation is the core of representation and is
independent of resemblance.\textsuperscript{16}

Words need not resemble that which they represent, and rarely do, and picture scarcely need to either, although the latter distinction is not as explicit and as a result is easily exploitable by the artist, or not. That is, resemblance and representation are not givens, and it is through narrative work that the correct, desired denotation of character, plot, etc., is enabled; Mitchell notes that “the meaning of the picture does not declare itself by a simple and direct reference to the object it depicts,” an assessment that artists like Magritte (see “The Treachery of Images”) make evident, but is useful to think about in reading comics. “Meaning retained. Resemblance gone. Words are the ultimate abstraction,” writes McCloud (47). A profound part of the graphic quality of comics is its ability to actualize this kind of statement, rendering a letter form completely intelligible as such, reducing it to its formal qualities and reminding us of its constructed status as signifier. By de-emphasizing the physical reality of what’s on the page, the concept behind the image—verbal or visual—is made more important; here is where the narrative is drawn out and perpetuated. Words and pictures in comics come to function both in spite of and because of each other: we continue to read them separately, one a system of verbal signifiers, the other pictorial in nature—both lines on a page—but integrate their signified representations into the reality of the narrative. “We imagine the gulf between words and [mental and graphic] images to be as wide as the one between words and things,” writes Mitchell, “between (in the largest sense) culture and nature.

The image is the sign that pretends not to be a sign, masquerading as (or, for the believer, actually achieving) natural immediacy and presence. The word is its "other," the artificial, arbitrary production of human will that disrupts natural presence by introducing unnatural elements into the world-time, consciousness, history, and the alienating intervention of symbolic mediation (Mitchell 529). I would like to argue that comics does not put an end to this kind of debate—either over the efficacy of words versus images, or the 'otherness' of either one—but rather utilizes this kind

of dispute. In tandem, words and non-verbal images amplify the synthetic nature of each one and their status as mere signifiers; as Terence Hawkins writes, “In consequence, the true nature of things may be said to lie not in things themselves, but in the relationship which we construct, and then perceive, between them.” 17 This tenet of structuralism is overtly employed in comics, as demonstrated above through the importance of closure, the presence in and of absence, and the physical frames of the panels and the page. What has become most striking to me about working with comics is the degree to which theories of representation, semiotics, and structure are embodied by the very medium; 18 I don’t believe that comics must be read within these frameworks but I see analyzing comics as an opportunity to begin to concretize and integrate apparently abstract critical theory. In thinking about the term ‘graphic novel’ and deciding what the difference might be between various terminologies (a visual narrative, an illustrated book, iterations Hatfield mentions, etc.), I realized that one proper definition of “to illustrate” is “to make clear or evident by means of examples; to exemplify.” An example is used to make something abstract concrete, and I can see that equally as important as the images that create and propel the narrative in the novel are the devices that illustrate these theory-based aesthetic and semiotic concerns.

Comics, writes McCloud, is a medium of fragments, 19 and is contingent upon both emphasizing and downplaying this fact. “The comics panel is fragmentary,” writes Groensteen, “and caught in a system of proliferation; it never makes up the totality of the utterance but can and must be understood as a component in a larger apparatus “(Groensteen 5). There often lies within fragmentation a contradictory tendency, one that Thedor Adorno

18 Studying comics has solidified my understanding of Marshall McLuhan’s assertion that “the medium is the message” and I regret not being able to push further into the relationship between form, content, and the media that disseminates what we take to be the world, that his book *The Medium is The Massage* introduced me to.
fully admits—“The fragment is that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality—
and that comics confronts. Comics exploits the inclination to narrativize by being founded on sequence, but it denies the full pleasure of reading an entire image and thus getting the whole story; furthermore, comics is well-aware of the gaps created in its narrative process (the gutters, the frames, the layout, the immediacy) and yet uses these empty spaces and limited viewpoints to advance and complete the project. Given its fragmented nature, comics both challenges and is challenged by issues of motivation of presence and threshold of narrativity, measures that can be pushed dangerously close to the edge of illegibility and incomprehension. A rewarding consequence of this type of truncated, circumscribed storytelling is the overcoming of these contradictions, about fragmentation and totality, or, particularly with comics, space and time. Adorno, always one for the antithetical and paradoxical, argues that

In art something momentary transcends; objectivation makes the artwork into an instant.... If, as images, artworks are the persistence of the transient, they are concentrated in appearance as something momentary. To experience art means to become conscious of its immanent process as an instant at a standstill” (Adorno 84). 

Fragmented space and time, the transient made eternal, a two-inch box representing reality—comics draws our attention to that which is incomplete and the process of how we make whole, raising our consciousness about the “immanent process” that both the audience and the work go through when a text, visual and/or verbal, is read. While the fragments that comprise comics are particularly unique in their graphic presentation on the page, this breakdown engendered by comics of word and picture, unit and total, remains an almost universal presence for

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21 I often find Adorno’s aesthetic theory difficult to apply when I’m actually looking at works of art; however, Professor Arden Reed of Pomona College, in a guest lecture last fall, effectively discussed moments of aesthetic experience like the one Adorno evokes here, as I describe in one of my thesis journal entries on page 39.
as Mitchell has noted, the *paragone* is also a metaphor for Western dualism itself, that deep metaphysical divide between mind and body, subject and object, rhetoric and truth, illusion and reality, work and play, signifier and signified (Morris 340-341).

The lofty claim would be that in exploiting, perhaps exploding, the *paragone*, the competition between media, as comics can, comics is capable of bridging that “deep metaphysical divide,” no small task as philosophers and artists have proved for centuries. But, there is potential in such a far-reaching goal, in the same way that a seeming rupture in continuity, in perception, doesn’t necessitate misconstruction; discontinuity in enunciation doesn’t have to equal discontinuity in enunciated, for as Groensteen concludes, “the story is possibly full of holes, but it projects me into a world that is portrayed as consistent” (Groensteen 11). I think this assertion is true of any art form, be it a painting, a novel, or a film; comics, it seems to me, is built around this possibility for incompleteness, hoping to overcome discontinuity in time and space, between word and image via its direct confrontation.

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III. Synthetic Inspiration: What the Dust Bowl has to do with the creative process

*Anything becomes interesting if you look at it long enough.*

—Gustave Flaubert

After letting my imagination run wild with theories about art and narrative, I consequentially came up with my own story. Like the theoretical origins of this thesis, the creative side of the project was a bit of a projection on my part, an amalgam of historical reality and wishful thinking. I came across a collection of posters designed for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) under Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Created to help rebuild the country by employing thousands of out-of-work Americans, the WPA included a notable arts department, the Federal Arts Program, that produced murals, paintings, and
posters, which at times fell somewhere between propaganda and public service announcements. The posters caught my attention for a number of reasons: as a call for civic engagement they serve a social purpose; as a celebration of America in the midst of the Great Depression, a more ideological objective; and as examples of 20th century graphic design, the posters are stellar examples of a modern aesthetic. As much as I found it interesting to think about the government-sponsored slogans being disseminated, the design is really what kept me looking—the posters in the end achieving their original aim I suppose by drawing me in with Art Deco typefaces and geometric arrangements. And so the graphic design of 1930s America bred a story about 1930s America, the words and pictures that were combined to help encourage the country through hard times inspired me to use that same combination to my own ends. The more I thought about the America portrayed on the posters—one of a strong, honest workforce, cultural achievements, and vast natural beauty—the more I considered the other images I thought represented the 1930s—Black Tuesday, long soup lines, and the Dust Bowl. The U.S. government’s role is promoting images of the less fortunate during the 30’s is perhaps more well-known; under another New Deal branch, the Farm Security Administration (FSA, originally the Resettlement Administration), thousands of photographs were taken of the down-and-out in an effort to educate the public and the press, to document the Depression and the Dust Bowl, and to “introduce America to Americans.” Some of the most well-known American photography and photographers came out of the FSA, including Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Gordon Parks.

Suddenly, the two worlds depicted, my two visions of 1930s America, seemed quite incongruous: bold, colorful affirmations of progress and stark, black-and-white statements of struggle. I saw this kind of discrepancy, even within my own framing of the time period, as indicative of the incomplete manner in which we receive and represent a history, particularly when it comes to the material and the visual but also extending to the creation of History,
memory, and archives. Thus, my fiction, my novel was wholly inspired by a visual history I didn’t quite understand, a graphic representation of lives lived that I had partially already constructed by assuming these images meant something—so why not finish (or at least continue) the story? My graphic novel takes up where the posters and photographs left off for me and I like to think the narrative concerns not only the fictional story about a family in 1937 New Mexico that is being told but the one that unfolds in the interpretation, adaption, and (re)telling of any history, real or invented, visual or verbal.

In the introduction in “Graphia: The Graphic Novel and Literary Criticism,”

William Kuskin writes that

The poetics of graphia[, cartoons, comics, graphic novels,] complicate literary understanding by reminding us of the synthetic nature of representation, which, like the nature of trope itself, is premised on an almost magical synthesis of forms—of text and image certainly, but also of the literal and the figural with the tactile presence of the book.22

Something I never considered in structuring this project was the synthesis that would have to happen between the historical research, European intellectual thought, graphic artwork, and my own familial experiences—basically any and all of my inspirations—and the invented story I wanted to tell. To add to the task of combining words and pictures, I found myself struggling to incorporate critical theory and creative fiction. The two pairings—words and pictures, theory and fiction—seemed almost like givens to me, that is, I find the couplings enticing yet natural and both appear to be fairly symbiotic and advantageous relationships. It is difficult, however, to work with words and pictorial images in tandem and not hierarchize; could one eclipse or usurp the place of another? Am I being innovative here? Or redundant? I came to realize that I seem to fear redundancy and was often forced to admit to such an aversion if I ever hoped to overcome it. In researching a thematic element of the narrative, for

example definitions and manifestations of nostalgia, I was more than once disheartened (if not actually distressed) to find that my own ideas on the subject weren't necessarily my own; in the case of the theoretical underpinnings of nostalgia, I realized that I would have to cede to Kant on this one. However, the reassuring part about discovering what's out there, defended, published, and often canonized, is the opportunity such an established theory affords in terms of (re)expression. And so, beyond rehashing, reinterpreting, or even reapplying Adorno's aesthetic theory or the presence of the uncanny, I hoped to recreate them. A term like creative synthesis is rather redundant, but I think the redundancy highlights how little heed we pay to the creativity required in actually synthesizing someone's else argument or some philosophical take on the world. Does a graphic novel necessarily acknowledge this particular kind of synthesis? No, not at all, but it is interesting to note how it is that the questions comics raise in terms of genre-breaking, discipline-crossing, and juxtaposition are equally pertinent to examinations of philosophical inquiry and literary creativity.

IV. Conclusion, or, This Reader's Response

_The field of reading is that of absolute subjectivity._

---Roland Barthes

Before I was a student of letters or a writer of my own, before I understood literary criticism or even really knew that literature was someth_thing_, I was a reader. I think it is in this most basic role, one that has certainly been enriched and reformulated by more critical thought and personal reflection over the years, that the efficacy and singularity of comics comes out. “Comics is a genre founded on reticence” (Groensteen 10), and there is as much that the art form doesn’t say as it does indeed articulate; as discussed above, the comics reader
is required to fill in the most glaring blanks as well as the more subtle ones. Why do we agree

to this work, particularly coming from an art form that’s naively thought of as easier to read—

I mean, there are pictures? What maintains the balance not only between image and word,

but between author and reader and is either one ever overwhelmed and subsumed? According
to Jan Baetens,

images are very hard to “tell” when they not clearly involved in narrative, and...the
overall difficulty of verbal paraphrasing acts as a kind of warrant that the proper
visual qualities of the image will not be forgotten or neutralized when the global
storytelling takes over. Thus, it would be absurd to oppose the narrative to the
non-narrative: each picture tells a story, yet not all aspects or elements of a picture
do so, and a literary graphic novel attempts to maintain a healthy tension between
these two forces.23

It is a testament to the skill of the author and artist that the narrative continues, and to the
work of the reader that it is completely constructed. Perhaps the very elements of comics
easily derided—the pictures, the fragmentation, the repetition—are those that require the
most effort on the part of the reader to decipher and integrate; more than a defense of or
encomium to comics, this line of thinking recasts the strength of the medium, challenging not
only our expectations about words and images together but the very spirit of literature.

Genette argues that Literature is characterized by “a rupture of the ordinary regime of the
language”24 and it is difficult to deny comics that distinction.

Scanning a notebook I started over the summer I see that the first note I took, the
first question I had was “What is literary?” It is followed immediately by “Why does that
matter?” (and a scribbling of Roman Jakobson’s name.) Kuskin again calls attention to the
synthesis inherent in comics and in doing so, the literary work involved:

Graphic stories highlight the synthetic nature of literary production. In doing
so, their poetics bring the complex interplay of material and rhetorical forms

23 Jan Baetens. "Graphic Novels: Literature without Text?" *English Language Notes* 46.2 Graphia: The
Graphic Novel and Literary Criticism (Winter 2008); 80.

that define the literary object into great focus, and thus reinvigorate the current discussions of literary method by recalling the essentially interdisciplinary nature of literary analysis. *Graphia* [the journal] does not so much claim the graphic novel for literature, then; it claims literature for the graphic novel (Kuskin 5).

Questions of literariness, of medium, of definition ultimately remind us of the ongoing process of actively creating meaning in a text; narratology admits to this kind of constructive practice, as does aesthetic theory, semiology, and the production of any art form. Comics embraces and exploits the work of the reader to the degree that we become absent in our very presence, in our very reading; the narrative power of comics lies in our obeisance to our own desire to create it.
I Like This Country Fine, a graphic novella

(please see enclosed material)
Thesis Journal

My thoughts, inspiration, influences, readings, feelings, quandaries, and crises, or as I like to call it, American History meets European Intellectual Thought, Now Illustrated!: Research, Resources, and Awholelotta Soul-Searching

Throughout the making of my graphic novel, I kept a journal of most of my process, writing about the inspiration that I found, problems that came up, and doubts that arose. I saw this journal as a chance to briefly, informally explore the various historical, philosophical, and artistic ideas that I found applicable to my work; this ranges from research about the Dust Bowl to meditations on Adorno and Kafka, and while my interests and influences are somewhat disparate at times, my journal allowed me to work through different theories and my own hare-brained notions in the hopes of synthesizing something greater, or at least getting it written down and out of my headspace. In returning to this journal at the end of the process and realizing that someone besides myself would be reading it, I have tried to provide some context as to what exactly I was working on when I decided a particular topic was pertinent; the italicized passages preceding each entry are my efforts to bridge the gap between my thought-process and an outside reader. The entries I’ve included are candid and largely uncensored, sometimes incomplete and sometimes long-winded, but overall are
representative of what went into this project.

Week of November 23

The origins of the story lay largely within my own relationship to my family, specifically my sister, who is five years younger than me. In telling the story from Adele's point of view, I tried to think about how it is that my sister sees me; while this seemed like a novel way to change my perspective of myself, I realized that my point of view is still privileged. This is only how I imagine my sister conceives of me, and I wonder if she wouldn't already expect me to do something like that.

Most recent inspiration:

But the disparaging of those we love always alienates us from them to some extent.

We must not touch our idols; the gilt comes off in our hands. – Flaubert

I remember underlining this quotation in Madame Bovary when I read it in high school; something resonated with me then and, after four years of carrying them with me, Flaubert’s words have finally become applicable in a very immediate way. In building (and I guess subsequently undermining) the relationship between Adele and Jonah I often return to the word ‘disparaging.’ I think I first learned what it meant when my mother chastised me for speaking so disparagingly towards my younger sister, and clearly the association with siblings and the way they communicate stuck. Jonah is an idol to his younger sister, perhaps originally just by grace of his status as elder/oldest. Over the course of their childhood she comes to admire his intelligence, his composure, his sense of self; they share genuine moments of mutual affection and respect, aspects of their relationship that scenes in the novel, like at the movie and the carnival, remind them of and then complicate. Any nostalgia is not merely sentimental or romantic, it is very much tinged with regret and doubt. In his failures or
unfulfillment away from home Jonah becomes self-alienated, something that is exacerbated by his syphilis and the depression and paranoia it breeds. Often, the more Adele tries to reconnect, the more disparaging he is, the more he alienates her. More than just pushing her away, Jonah’s detachment is a reflection on his own reconceptualization of himself as well as the lens through which Adele comes to reconfigure who he is and what that means to her. Jonah feels her touch and turns away because he knows whatever gilding remains is quickly loosening; Adele, too, sees her attempts to reach out as leaving her with fistfuls of that which Jonah once was (generous, motivated, etc.). How many layers she wishes to remove and how many are still left intact are yet to be determined. They both know he is a tarnished idol—now what?

>>> Thematical, I consider the West to be evocative of certain aspects of the American dream, like Manifest Destiny and self-sufficiency (definitely “Western” ideals); I’m totally taken in by it’ mythic qualities and wanted to explore the idea of how and why we perpetuate certain histories long after they have passed or have become practically fictional.

How the West was won…

In 1893, Frederick Turner Jackson presented his “Significance of the American Frontier” at the Chicago’s World Fair, a thesis that attempts to explain basically why America is the way it is and how American exceptionalism manifested the unique character of the American citizen when civilization of settlement and savagery of the wilderness were brought into contact and into conflict, that is, at the frontier. How does this apply? Jonah is fascinated, perhaps deluded, by the history of the American West; it is very much his home and so he does feel a connection to this history, but really only as he imagines it. In the face of a devastated national economy, incredible, prolonged natural disaster, and his own physical
demise, he sees the period of Westward expansion (the bulk of the 19th-century, though mainly the last half) as the glory days. Decades after the fact, he is as enchanted with Manifest Destiny as the earliest settlers, maybe even more so because he gets to look back and romanticize/fanaticize about the way things were. I think part of him feels like he missed out, and this lacking (and self-pitying) compels him in part to continue to go west to California. It is an interesting moment in history—he leaves New Mexico in 1930, just before the Dust Bowl forces thousands of migrant farmers out to California. But Jonah doesn’t think of their migration as part of a great expansion or akin to other westward journeys; I think he sees it as sign of America’s current decline, a last-ditch resettling that, for one thing, is not nearly as exciting. Apparently he draws the line between being compelled to move to California by divine right and as an act of self-preservation. His journey back, away from the last frontier, grinds against a general, historical trend and highlights his own self-delusions about the grandeur of American past.

The failed epic of his life (heroes only return home after victory)

Jonah is not the Biblical prophet who foretells the future, but rather a prodigal son who dreams of the past.

>>> 

I initially hoped to draw more explicitly from the history of art, one of my favorite areas to study in general. In thinking about the memory in/of objects I saw the potential to use a classic genre of painting and photography in representing my characters.

Still Life as...Memento mori

Precursors to a more defined genre of still life, paintings and mosaics found in ancient
tombs (Roman, Greek, Egyptian) often depicted the same scenes that would later
characteristic the most academic of trompe d'oeil canvases: food, wine, jewelry, and other
earthly possessions. The belief held by the ancients was that food, drink, and goods on
the walls would become real in the afterlife and available for use by the deceased. The
relationship between objects, death, and image was solidified with the inclusion of skulls in
otherwise mundane collections of things, a symbol of man's mortality and the transience of
our earthly presence and possessions. Early Roman still life paintings, etc. of this nature were
often accompanied with the phrase *Omnia mors aequat* (Death makes all equal), just in case
the viewer had any doubts about his own impending death.

The still life went on to include more and more subjects (here, objects), along the way
accruing all kinds of religious and allegorical meanings and developing its own system of
semiotics. Dutch painters of the 16th century took this to a whole new level, intensifying the
drama of the still life with dramatic lighting, uncanny detail and surface rendering, and an
increased repertoire of significant objects. The perfunctory skull appeared alongside books
and other documents, scientific and musical instruments, playing cards, highlighting a
person's way of life; there are also the candles, smoking pipes, and flowers that return to the
fleeting nature of that life, however well-lived, well-educated, or important. The *vanitas* genre
of still life emphasized the impermanence of human vanity. It roughly translates to
"emptiness," suggesting the meaninglessness of our earthly existence. What's interesting in
some of these vanitas paintings is, despite being such strong examples of memento mori, they
often suggest that there is a kind of staying power in human memory and achievements that
can transcend death. The painting itself as an object is a humanist testament to the enduring
legacy of man, the artist, and his ideas.

Given Jonah's preoccupation with his own death, he needs no memento mori, his is,
in fact, hyper-aware of his mortality. But I wonder whether there are things around him,
particularly any of his possessions, that bring his own death to his mind, or if he would turn to those momentos that will outlive him. Would he identify with that smoldering pipe or vase of wilting flowers? Does he accept his own impermanence, as some vanitas painters quite domineeringly dictate he do? Does he still believe in the immortality of human memory?

Material history/reality

I really enjoy collections of things and am always attracted to cabinets of curiosities, etc. I do like playing off the associations/assumptions a collection of objects connotes, and how there is a tendency to judge the owner by the things she surrounds herself with. Still life paintings (drawings, etc., too) can offer a reflection on the owner of said objects as well as the time period and social milieu in which she lives, evidence of the material culture of, for example, the 1930s American Southwest. Still life frames would bring a physical quality to my work that would normally have to be described in prose; they indicate a specific historical reality while suggesting a certain reading of a character (or not.) Plus, they offer some interesting formal possibilities (abstraction of forms, playing with shapes and sizes, perspective and the reader.)

Week of November 30

I stumbled across the film La jetée on the New York Times homepage (perhaps during a bout of productive procrastination?) and discovered a remarkable use of the verbal and visual that actually gave me pause as to continuing with my project and not totally shifting gears.

La jetée: hurtling through time via still images
A photo-roman according to its creator, Chris Marker, La jetée is a series of still photographs that you watch, juxtaposed pictorial images in deliberate sequence (note: this is also Scott McCloud’s definition of comics). There is text, from the omniscient, decidedly removed narrator (there is also a haunting and beautiful score but I’m ignoring it on purpose for right now). I can’t help but imagine La jetée as a graphic novel, and apparently neither could Marker, as the book version of the film was published in 1992, 30 years after the original. An interesting difference between the two is the amount of control the ‘author’ gives up in turning the film into a book. In the film, the audience sees an image only for as long as Marker wants them to; with the book, the reader can linger (or not). The differences in timing and pacing then can end up affecting things like plot and meaning as emphasis and continuity are potentially misconstrued. Different than the ciné-roman (how Marker describes the book version of the film), a graphic novel as I’ve taken it to mean attempts to rectify the issue of controlled timing, taking pains to move the reader at a certain pace (or changing but no less determined paces). The size and shape of frames and the continuity of content within each one guide the passage of time, the time within the fiction and the time it takes the reader to move from panel to panel.

Speaking of controlling Time…

The challenges of constructing time now seems vital to storytelling, regardless of medium, though the graphic novel does hold a great liminal position between other, more differentiated media, like film and printed books. La jetée is a film about time-travel. After World War III, scientists subject other survivors to painful experiments in hopes of escaping a post-apocalyptic Paris and doomed existence. The world has pretty much ended and so “this was the aim of the experiments: to send emissaries into Time, to summon the Past and Future to the aid of the Present.” Hope and help still lie within humankind, but only within one that no longer exits or does not yet. The protagonist of the film is a man chosen by the scientist
because his “strong mental images.” His is fixated on two images from his childhood, both of which he sees one Sunday on the jetée at Orly: one of a woman’s face and the other of a man collapsing, which actually turns out to be the protagonist himself dying. Time—Past, Present, and Future—is constructed as a series of separate worlds, at once rather independent of each other but still aware of and contingent on the others’ existence. The way that the man enters the Past and Future is like that of a foreigner, forcibly extracted by the scientists when things begin to feel familiar or comfortable. His obsession with specific memories is important for the scientists because “if they were able to conceive or dream another time, perhaps they would be able to live in it,” perhaps they could escape the Present. As practice, the man travels back in time several times, establishing a relationship with the woman he saw at Orly; he is also sent to the Future in order to obtain the means to save mankind, after which his services are no longer needed. The people of the Future offer to bring him to live with them, but he instead asks them to send him back, to the woman. It is when he returns to the jetée of his Past that he dies, apparently not able to live there either.

In many ways, the man in La jetée accomplishes, however fleetingly, to do what Jonah desires: to actually return to the Past, a real place. The man does not glorify the Past as Jonah does; he is not going somewhere that is essentially better (though it obviously is in comparison to now-radioactive Paris), just somewhere different. The idea of possibility in the Past, for the scientists and for the man, is very much akin to Jonah’s hyperbolic nostalgia, and in the end, the man does choose the Past over the Future. In the course of the experiments, the scientists discover that “the Future was better protected than the Past,” a lesson that doesn’t stop them from more aggressively trying to infiltrate the Future. The Past is easier to access, mentally and physically, whereas the Future offers resistance; Jonah sees it this way and much prefers the comfort and accessibility of his dreams and memories to the struggle against the Future.
What does the form do for me? What does the form of photo-roman have to do with the content and what does it do to it?

>>> 

*How do I choose what to draw? It's hard enough when considering how I want the narrative to turn out and my own technical limitations without worrying about the philosophical and ethical implication of my decision, as Adorno is quick to remind me of.*

Adorno and the Ugly

“As Nietzsche knew, art’s own gesture is cruel. In aesthetic forms, cruelty becomes imagination: Something is excised from the living, from the body of language, from tones, from visual experience.” (in *Aesthetic Theory*)

“Since, however, the images of a terrifying nature have from the outset mollified those gods mimetically, the archaic grimaces, monsters, and minotaurs already assume a human likeness. Orderly reason already governs these mixed creatures; natural history did not allow their kind to survive. They are frightening because they warn of the fragility of human identity, but they are not chaotic because threat and order are intertwined in them.”

“The affinity of all beauty with death has its nexus in the idea of pure form that art imposes on the diversity of the living and that is extinguished in it.”

Quite literally applicable to taxidermy as an art. Also to Jonah’s dreaming and Catherine’s photographs. Also to my work—what am I excising, extinguishing?

>>>
Jonah’s mantra, channeled through me, the author/artist:

“Its [humankind’s] self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure.” Walter Benjamin, *Work of Art*

>>> Another serendipitous moment—almost too-good-to-be true—when I was still in the early stages of trying to combine really anything I was interested in into one coherent, cogent creative work. I was simultaneously alarmed and reassured when I first realized that maybe my attempts at synthesis weren’t so innovative, but have come to see such overlaps and confluences as some kind of serendipity of art and the educated imagination.

Kafka’s *Amerika* and the Great natural theater of Oklahoma

When I learned only last week that Kafka had an unfinished novel about America and its mythologies, I was elated. Kafka’s absurd rendering of the world and the American dream, mankind tortured by the bizarre beyond his control and mankind destined to settle the Great Plains, European intellectual history and the American west—what could be better? I really couldn’t ask for more, as a COL major and as the creator of a character whose inner demons and surreal self-destruction I sometimes see as Kafkaesque and who lives in 1930s New Mexico. But then I was worried, as every artist, thinker, and paper-writing student habitually is: has this been done before?

I hope not, and I don’t think it’s the case, at least not with *Amerika*. I think things that I read, see, watch, and talk about are now tinged with the themes, literary and visual, with which I am now so preoccupied. There’s certainly some projection on my part but so far it’s actually been amazing how many movies, papers, books, people I’ve bumped into that have been of genuine use by questioning, rephrasing, or explaining the way I’m thinking about family, death, the past, etc. (also, on a more meta register, about writing a thesis). It is difficult
not to believe in serendipity when there’s a lecture about Adorno and *Amerika* hosted at the CHUM or a review of *La jetée* on the New York Times homepage. At some point I know I have to stop finding more and focus on synthesizing everything, but this kind of research (and the opportunity to discuss it in this diary and in meetings) is a wonderful complement to the very different process of writing a story, composing images, etc. It’s a mental relief, both from the creative working and from the scattered mess that would otherwise be my mind. The time I take to reflect on and analyze my influences and inspiration is so worthwhile and meaningful to me, and is what I want to be reflected in my final work.

That had to come out, back to Kafka…

Karl Rossman, *Amerika*’s protagonist, is one of Kafka’s more hopeful characters, and it seems genuine. He ascribes to skepticism instead of pessimism, self-judgment instead of self-loathing, and runs into people and problems that are less maddeningly insurmountable than those encountered by someone like Josef K. in *The Trial*. One has to wonder if Kafka thought of America as actually less ridden with inanity and impossibility than Prague or Berlin, or if the country just brought out the greatest naïveté and simplicity of spirit. Part of the difficulty in determining what it is that America means to Kafka lies in the incompleteness of the novel. The end we are left with sees Karl on a train with hundreds of others, traveling to Oklahoma (Kafka’s spelling) and the Great Nature Theater there, a kind of circus show that welcomes everyone. Because it sounds too good to be true and because it’s Kafka, any number of debilitating setbacks or conspiracies could await Karl and the others out west, but we’ll never know. The descriptions we get of the Nature Theater and the mid-western and western landscape as “almost limitless” suggest to me at least some kind of serious affinity for the vastness of America for Karl and/or Kafka. Perhaps Jonah would be equally enticed by the Theater’s claim to have work for everyone, to take on and accept anyone. Dreams, the West, and Kafka come together in a comment from Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*: 
If one wakes up in the middle of a dream, even the most troubling, one is disappointed and feels as if one had been cheated of what is best. Yet there are as few happy, fulfilled dreams as, in Schubert’s words, happy music. Even the most beautiful ones retain the blemish of their difference from reality, the consciousness of the mere appearance [Schein] of what they grant. That is why even the most beautiful dreams are somehow damaged. This experience is unsurpassable in the description of the nature theater of Oklahoma in Kafka’s America.

In Adorno’s terms, even the beauty and promise of the blue-black hills and valleys Karl’s train passes are compromised by the some division or difference from reality. This reading suggests that there is something ominous or at least less perfect at the end of the line, or that we know that Kafka’s vision of America is far from the reality. Jonah probably isn’t as aware of this semblance when he dreams, although this means that his nostalgia has really become some kind of delusion. He certainly notes “the blemish of their difference from reality,” but I’m not sure that makes him any more inclined to accept his present reality/the reality of the present. Actually, the intersection of dreams, nostalgia, and delusion works well vis-à-vis Jonah’s paranoia about going mad, really worse than just the dying, as a result of his illness.

If my fictional family was going to be in the taxidermy business, I was going to do my research. Taxidermy fascinates me in the typically morbid way, but more specifically in its ability to preserve something. I’m very interested in paintings conservation and restoration and appreciate the approaches such a practice shares with taxidermy. The idea of freezing or reversing time, or slowing or stopping an organic process is central to both and becomes a physical process in application; I know the animals are dead and the paintings are inanimate to begin with, but the the material
manipulation creates such an uncanny illusion of life that I can't help but believe in the power of suspended animation.


taxidermy: Greek for "skin arrangement"

Last Friday I took myself on a field trip down Route 3 about five miles to Northeast Taxidermy Studios. It is apparently the largest full service taxidermy in the northeast and mounts any animal from striped bass to white rhinos. After a very brief tour I was able to just hang around and look, trying to stay out of the way while trying just as hard to snoop. I saw quite a bit. I went with the intention of taking photographs that I would use in scenes of the novel; I realized pretty quickly, however, that I didn’t really know what I wanted to photograph. The tools, work spaces, and flat-out weird shit there (I saw a recently dead deer in a box, like a package. He was crumpled, or maybe folded) ended up drawing most of my attention. There was much less blood that I suppose I expected (almost none, actually), and it smelled less like death than most hospitals I’ve been in. I left with an appreciation for how regular but also incredibly complicated taxidermy is, a desire to come back once I’d gathered myself and my aims a little, and a sincere wish to avoid salted meat products for a while.

>>> 

I’ve been trying to figure out Jonah and Adele’s relationship and what it is either one expects out of the other. Is Adele disillusioned by her brother once he’s returned, suggesting she once was fully convinced by whatever illusionary existence he maintained? Or has he really changed? Who’s responsibility is it to understand what someone is truly like—should they shed their disguises or must we unmask them?

Nostalgia
First medically diagnosed in the 17th century, nostalgia was said to have been exhibited by Swiss mercenaries who missed the Alps of their homeland. Nostalgia is a pathological homesickness, though really for a 'home' that is a time rather than a place. Jonah returns home, though there is no indication that he was really homesick for Clayton (his family, maybe.) When he comes home physically, he becomes even more homesick, at least in temporal terms. What happens when your home elicits further homesickness? Nostalgia became less of a physical illness and more of a psychological condition, and thus became much more difficult, if not impossible, to cure. Medically, it was also often diagnosed as or as indicator of melancholia.

His and her nostalgia

Jonah: His nostalgia is a definitely idealized Past, imagined and revered as such more so for the fact that it was then, less than for what he knows of it in and of itself (which really isn’t that much given he never lived it). His nostalgia buttresses him against the present, and the future.

Adele: Her nostalgia is possibly more sentimental. It is manifested as a general reminiscence, a fondness for childhood and growing up with Jonah. But, it also comes out in comparing their relationship then and now. Her nostalgia informs and is the result of her changing relationship with and view of her brother.

Drawing melancholia

German artist Albrecht Durer packed many of his works with symbols that related to melancholia. In “Melancholia I” (1514), Durer placed at least eight symbols of Melancholy in
his master print, such as a sphere, a ruler and scales. According to popular belief of the time, people of Melancholic temperament were prone to possess intellectual and creative gifts and inclined to experience depression; here Melancholy, represented as a winged woman, sits among objects and tools that symbolize her endeavors. These objects and their symbolic value relate back to the questions I had about still life paintings and what a person’s possessions could potentially say about them.

**Week of December 6**

Flaubert, once again: "Anything becomes interesting if you look at it long enough."

In November, I attended a lecture given by COL-alum Arden Reed that focused on his most recent work defining and documenting 'slow art.' Slow art boils down to duration—it does not have the property of objects but of the subject and hir reception of a work. Reed questions attentiveness and how it is that we can build an aesthetics that counters "speed culture" (rushed viewing, rapid consumption, forgettable experience). Of particular interest are tableaux vivantes, popular 19th-century drawing room activities, as well as a contemporary cultural preoccupation. Creating a tableau vivant entails recreating a work of art, specifically a painting, as a theatrical staging, mimicking costume, lighting, and pose, and holding it. With the advent of photography people would go beyond this recreation and precisely photograph the reenactment. What interests Reed is the way these Edwardian and Victorian consumers would go from the two-dimensional painting to a three-dimensional representation and back to 2-D in the photograph. It's as if the photograph was a testament to their ability to internalize and perfectly duplicate the original artwork; the more exact the staging the better.
and the photograph took on a liminal role between the lifeless and living canvas.

Slow art has as one of its aims inducing the experience of slowing down a moving artwork or image to the point that it is still. In the photographed *tableaux vivantes* the palpable human presence of the initial reenactment is frozen on film—the animation of the actors is totally suspended. The idea of suspended animation strikes me rather powerfully, as it not only explains much of what I think we feel when looking at art but also a major goal and technique inherent in my project. Comics are suspended animation, something that could be revved up or slowed down, something that brings rhythm, tempo, and duration—temporal indicators of life—to a lifeless page. Like a "skillful impoverishment of film," comics and suspended animation keeps something lacking and that missing piece is invariably what holds the audience's attention. (I am reminded here of Scott McCloud's theory of closure, wherein the reader completes the sequence in the empty gutters the artist had provided.) *Tableaux vivantes* remind us of the categorical difference that exists between the 2-D and 3-D, between art and audience, while at the same time daring us to overcome such a distinction. In seeing a human presence, the work of the artist or participant/actor, I think we as audience are affected by the realization that a painting, for example, is but a moment in time (enter cubism and multiple planes). An inevitability is instilled upon the subject of the piece, but it remains unknown—the animation is suspended not stopped and yet the eventual is never explicitly realized. This suspense is part and parcel of Lessing’s early aesthetic theory founded upon the ‘pregnant moment,’ wherein the object (a human subject) is frozen in the moment right before emotional climax. Lessing argued that to physically, artistically represent the climax would be ugly and unpalatable—vulgar really—and thus the imagination of the viewer was the only domain within which the dignity (nobility in his terms) of art, of humanity could be envisioned and exemplified.
Reed noted that there exists this area of slippage in between what we are looking at and what we might be looking for (again this follows the 2-D/3-D, maybe 4-D, and art/audience parallels.) This is not to say that there is necessarily something to be found, try as we might to see it, but rather that the ability to slow down our reception of a work to the point where we can question the difference between the canvas and ourselves, between object and subject is the vital aspect of art and experience that we may be missing in our fast-paced world.

What happens when an artwork makes you aware of the time you are spending looking at it? Searching? Waiting? How do we know when to look at something else, to go into the next gallery, to move on?

One more from Gustave F.: "There is no truth. There is only perception."

Week of January 16

I've been thinking about what it means to have a physical likeness (for un-likeness) stand for someone. E.H. Gombrich writings about the mask and the face, the image and the eye are at once interesting for the science he explains behind perception and resemblance, particularly of fixed images, and for the way in which a character like Jonah might react to such theories of recognition and identity.

“The group of shapes that can be read as a physiognomy has priority over all other shapes.”

“We tend to project life and expression onto the arrested image and supplement from our own experience what is not actually present. Thus the portraitist who wants to compensate for the absence of movement must first of all mobilize our projection. He must so exploit the
ambiguities of the arrested face that the multiplicities of possible readings result in the semblance of life.” 117

“...perception as a nearly a nearly automatic act of categorizing in universals. What people experience as likeness throws light on their perceptual categories.” 109

>>> By the end of the project I was forced to realize and accept the fact that a lot of what I had wanted or intended to included—thematically, theoretically, visually—just wasn't going to happen. Due to time restraints, some kind of theoretical incompatibility, or the overreaching of my own ambitions, there are many areas that weren't explored as deeply or as fruitfully as I planned. One of these such areas is the idea of the grotesque, something I hoped to exploit through taxidermy, the carnival, and Jonah's disease. The grotesque ultimately ends up signifying a collapse of the difference between the individual and their surroundings, between body and world.

Mikhail Bakhtin and the significance of the grotesque

“The basis of the image [of the new body as opposed to the grotesque] is the individual, strictly limited mas, the impenetrable façade....It is self-sufficient and speaks in its name alone. All that happens within it concerns it alone, that is, only the individual, closed sphere. Therefore, all the events taking place within it acquire one single meaning: death is only death, it never coincides with birth...etc.” (In Rabelais and His World 320).

“We find at the base of grotesque imagery a special concept of the body as a whole and of the limits of this whole” (315).

“The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss. The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is
itself swallowed by the world” (317).

Week of January 28

I spent winter break trying to write and draw, which meant trying to figure out what to write and what to draw. The choice between words and pictures, and the choices of how to use them together, were even more loaded than I expected. Often it wasn't that I felt that a verbal description would be more powerful than a visual one, or vice versa, it was that I couldn't figure out how they were supposed to respond to each other. Again, what I worried about most was repetition—in the bad, redundant way. It took me a while to get over that. I struggled immensely in trying to decide if I wanted my words and my pictures to complement, critique, undercut, reinforce, etc., etc. one another; once the desired relationship was chosen, all I had to do was create it. Added to the word/picture debate was the issue of enunciation, basically how a conversation is carried out. The story is about Jonah and Adele's relationship and ultimately how they communicate was less important to me than what they communicated, or perhaps the 'what' really came out of the 'how.' And so I frequently entered a period of time, usually an extended sitting, where these questions built off each other, to the point that in the end, I felt somehow satisfied with the few answers I had come up and the existential crises I had provoked.

Take the scene where Adele and Jonah talk about the past few years...

Do I show climactic moments or mundane ones?

Do I show what she’s talking about or the actual conversation they’re having? His reactions, body language? The less explicit?

How much attention or interest does the text sustain? When does evocation become redundancy become competition?
Image and understatement: can I maintain the distance between them while affecting the reader? Which relationship(s) are accentuated?

Take the scene where Lucas and Jonah talk about the past few years...
I like the idea of overlaying their conversation(s) on one large image, depicting how this conversation is being held rather than what it’s about. This puts pressure on the text, however, as some of the most powerful images are only presented in words. Am I not making use of the medium? Or is this just an unexpected, potentially subversive use of it?

Is this a comment on what can and cannot be represented or shared? Documented, in way?
Are both Jonah and the reader left without a stronger visual sense of the Dust Bowl?
Or, cannot I not think of a different, better, more visually stimulating way to do this?
If the words are paired with somewhat descriptive images, why not just the images? Do I think the images then have to be ’good enough’? How does the quality of image and the importance of this change?
Is this a graphic novel without the graphics you expect?
How can I keep the Dust Bowl present without showing a million dusters and ghost-towns?
Where does it still exist?

Week of February 12

I’m thinking about why Jonah comes back to New Mexico, and why he left in the first place, which both are centered on the idea of home and by extension, homesickness.
As they say, You can't go home again...

Awesome: an article on Homesickness and Nostalgia in U.S. History! Seemingly perfect fodder for working on Adele’s reaction to Jonah’s admission and figuring out what he’s feeling, as she sees it. Crap: I am not so original! First it was Kafka, now it's Thomas Wolfe. Apparently, “the idea that it is impossible to return home and to the past is commonplace today and a hallmark of modern consciousness” (as argued by George Webber and Susan J. Matt). Okay, fair enough. How did I not know this before? Or, I suppose I obviously did know this (as it really makes so much sense to me), but where did I learn it? How? Is this like Plato's eternal memory of the Forms, something I uncover or only rediscover? When I read the other article about nostalgia and learned about the Swiss doctors and Kant focusing homesickness on a time rather than a place, that was really striking because it was like my ideas on the subject had totally been validated. Jonah is hyperbolically homesick and does go back home but is even more melancholy than before; his nostalgia is untreatable. But really I just never understood nostalgia’s full definition or history. I didn’t think it up, so how can it feel like I did, especially when it is next to impossible for me to pinpoint those texts, etc., etc., that so clearly left a strong, persisting impression? Did I really think it was original to think of the idea of an impossible return? Yes and no; I’m not sure what I chalked it’s familiarity up to. A motif of human existence? Okay, I don’t have a problem straight-up plagiarizing from that. But sometimes it's like I'm thinking backwards, where I come up with a specific scenario or nebulous thought-cloud, only to find out that I've pretty much given the definitional equivalent of certain terms or theories, like nostalgia or Kafka’s vision of America or Adorno’s conception of aesthetics and the past. Sigh. There are no new ideas, even thought everything feels exciting like a real Eureka! moment. Again, I can’t tell if this is really great (my ideas make sense!) or really disconcerting (my ideas don’t matter!). Should I read this article before thinking things out more? Will I arrive at the same
conclusion either way? Is synthesis really where any originality I may have lies? Where are these ideas coming from? osmosis? inheritance/tradition? inference? ancestral transmission/ cosmic understanding? my brain? I apparently don't even know all that's permeated my brain! I'm reading it; the good stuff, my stuff will come in the articulation.

>>> 

A large part of the decision-making process surrounding what type of images to include revolved around whether or not I thought it would be helpful, appropriate, or interesting to use archival and found material. In the end, I did, and of a number of media, in various ways, and for different reasons.

I had issues about namely including photographs and decided that part of the point of the story was how impossible it is to know an event which you did not experience, i.e., Jonah's relationship to the Dust Bowl. Jonah doesn't have access to this experience so why should we? Well, because Adele is telling the story and she is trying to share her experience with her brother. I eventually chose to use the FSA photographs because they told the story in a different way, one that is mediated and incomplete (a later entry explores the role of photography in this history and my story more completely); I think they suggest the difficulty there is in formatting and describing an experience for someone else. We don't get Adele's vision of the first-half of the 30s and the Dust Bowl (images I would have drawn) because it resists conceptualization and because we're really supposed to see what she sees now, moment to moment in August 1937, and those visual traces that remain are the photographs.

The photographs, postcards, and maps all are ways of portraying place; like the icons of history I discussed in my introduction, I think these images also have the capacity to define how it is we think about certain places and how we make them real in our minds.

The posters were indeed a historical presence and bring together the cultural climate engendered in their messages and the fiction of the story; the pulp covers are fun, Adele's escapism.
Visual Culture/Found Images—why?

- to the historically ground/situate story
- to illustrate their influence on one particular woman
- to draw attention to our visual stereotypes/preoccupations regarding the past, especially the 1930s (perhaps my most original interest for this project)
- to question the way we see and remember specific times in our life
- to further demonstrate the ability images have to convey a certain set of information, a story, a history
- to highlight the presence of visual culture and art in everyday situations
- to capitalize on my medium
- to show how it is I see all these things as very much related, however disparate they may seem
- to look at who makes the images and who consumes them

Week of February 28

One of my most recurring themes and set of questions focused on the type of subjectivity I was creating in the novel. What does it mean to really adopt a character’s point of view?

The gaze and narration

What it's like to have a story through her eyes—ways of seeing, literally, literally

The gaze, center of consciousness, and epistemology: Subject-object creation

pages 13–end of syphilis discussion (also see January 28 entry)
Jonah and Adele are playing dominoes while she thinks and talks about the Dust Bowl, California, and his disclosure. This scene is semi-stream of consciousness as she 'explains' the Dust Bowl, and although she's not usually actually speaking to him she's watching him as she goes over the past six years in her head. He is largely absorbed in the game, usually looking at his pieces and the game board, head down. Adele is reflecting on the Dust Bowl itself and what happened as much as she is also examining how she feels about her brother and the fact that he was gone. She is judging him and is self-reflective about this. “I'm not sure which is more despicable—Jonah for leaving, coming back and still not caring, or me for still being awe-struck.” In drawing this scene I am most interested in how she is looking at him. How do I draw her gaze? Her judgement, indignation, and scrutiny? I can only draw what she sees—Jonah not really paying attention to her—not how she sees. Her thought process is subjective and interior, but she is mapping it onto what she sees before her. As her interior recounting and the conversation progress, Jonah's appearance, as well as his reactions and actions, remain the same, but she's changing. (Side note: Jonah actually is physically, biologically changing due to his disease. This further complicates what it is we 'see' in others.) Jonah looks exactly the same but she sees him so differently as she works through her memories and appraisal of the situation and of him.

I think these efforts, on Adele's part and on mine, really speak to subject-object creation. We only have Adele's point of view, psychologically and visually, but how do those two aspects fit together and how do they inform our knowledge of Jonah? What exactly is informing her judgements and opinions? Adele is the subject and Jonah is the object, and each one's status as such basically constructs the other's. Obviously his kind of obliviousness (his silence, his uncaring, his ignorance, his looking down) upsets and angers her. “We were lucky,” she thinks. “I don’t know if he realizes that.” Adele can only read so much from his appearance and actions and they seem to exacerbate the distance between them, here centered
around the distance between Jonah and her experience of the Dust Bowl. She is really scrutinizing his character and their relationship and while there are significant implications to her watching him they are almost impossible to depict without changing the objectivity of what’s happening in the scene. How do you express the tone or intent of someone’s gaze? What is more objective, what she’s seeing or what she’s thinking? There is not the kind of subject-object collapse that would happen if Adele was actively studying herself (though there are traces of this crossover in the way she thinks about how it is that he is affecting her con of herself); rather, I see it as more of a subjectivity-objectivity collapse. We cannot deny what we see, yet we control, or at least try to control, how we see it. If Jonah’s seeming callousness could be manifested physically on his body, would it make sense to draw that as Adele’s judgements get harsher, as she sees him in new light? I’m considering viewing/drawing Jonah from different angles, actually changing Adele’s point of view and perspective, so that he actually stays the same while the viewpoint varies. In a scene like this where they are supposed to be sitting at a table across from one another she doesn’t have reason to see him differently (this is technically, realistically speaking, although maybe she doesn’t have reason period), so altering the perspective from frame to frame would be strange, but maybe in a good way. If she’s not moving but the angle from which she views him is changing, we are constantly trying to position her in space, to figure out where this places Adele in relation to her brother. Where does this put her? I like this question.

Adele is both narrator and medium (in the psychic sense; also, the intervening substance through which impressions are conveyed to the senses or forces act on an object, as in radio waves through the air, or a vacuum); it is through her and only through her that we see Jonah. She transmits him, his story, and in turn her own. But is the narrator always the medium in this sense? Does a graphic novel accentuate or actualize this? In representing and visualizing and receiving her center of consciousness, we are forced to ask which comes first:
what we see or what we think? The reader is forcibly given both simultaneously, harking back to the theory that a painter, for example, has one moment to capture past, present, and future. But we also have the verbal, the supposedly timeless, now constrained to a visual interpretation, a single glance. These questions about the creation of consciousness are what I like about art, in general.

>>> The Process

trying to make a grid out of a catastrophe, or rather fit it into a grid
trying to reassemble and order an experience

>>> cultural mythology vs. material culture

Week of March 6

Deciding to use so many archival photographs was not an obvious choice for me; I thought, I decided to create and represent this world, it should exists by my hand alone. I came to realize, however, that the use of photography, that is, it's curation and very inclusion in a narrative, is a powerful form of communication in it own right. I didn't have to take the photographs or draw the pictures depicting similar scenes because I could make a statement by placing them on the page in the middle of a scene.

In a clear and well-honed opening statement, Arthur Rothstein describes his philosophy of photography: “In photographing for the Farm Security Administration, I became conscious of a new concept—that photographs could be used to communicate ideas
and emotions, as well as present facts, for the camera capture the decisive moment and records events with greater accuracy than does the human eye.

My photography is based on the concept of knowing the subject and telling the story as graphically as I can. I use design the and composition to enhance the effect and make the message clear. I prefer to portray people with dignity and sympathy and to capture expressions with the greatest meaning. Sometimes I will select a revealing detail or fragment of the whole scene in order to make a more effective statement. My photographs are primarily designed to serve a useful purpose in communication, yet many of them have been considered art. Because powerful images are fixed in the mind more readily than words, the photographer needs no interpreter.

The photographer who uses this universal language has a great social responsibility. Accepting this challenge, I have probed the problems of our times and used my camera to communicate ideas, facts and emotions” (*The American West in the Thirties*).

Where Rothstein is reserved, if not a little defensive, the back of the same book dramatizes his project, as seems was often the case with FSA photographers:

“But here there is more than misfortune....Throughout, there are perceptive portraits of the people of the West—farmers, ranchers, sharecroppers, miners, shepherders—retaining their dignity and optimism in the midst of trying times. ...This book will appeal to a broad audience, but especially to those interested in the West as it looked nearly half a century ago; in humans beings under trying conditions portrayed with sympathy and compassion.”

How can a photograph be sympathetic? And what's the use of that sympathy? The FSA's photography chief, Roy Stryker, is often criticized for exploiting these kinds of questions, selecting for dissemination only the most “dignified” of portraits. Stryker's aim was almost paradoxical: he hoped to draw attention to the suffering of thousands of Americans but he also insisted on maintaining their stoic nobility. They were strong in their suffering
and that's what elicited compassion, the idea that yes, things are terrible now, but we will pick ourselves up. Stryker it turns out was quite selective, punching holes in photographs turned in to him that didn't present this quixotic vision of American hardship.

I think there is a tendency to use photographs to invoke some kind of empathy but it's a difficult sentiment to manage. On the one hand, the documentary quality of photography makes the subject more “real”; its presence and its truth become undeniable. On the other hand, such an indexical marking makes us realize we haven't experience anything like that and the subject becomes frozen as such, a site for speculation and spectatorship.

Catherine Reynolds has no problem with her role in the lives of those she photographs; she is committed to the people who become her subjects. Jonah sees her interest in the less fortunate as pitying and exploitative: this is what poverty, misery, or disaster looks like. I don't think he has a problem with such images turning individuals and lives into products of aesthetic consumption, but rather he feels that she is only doing this out of some perverse interest in the needy. Adele is somewhere in between; well-aware of the photographs that will come to define what she lived through for other people, perhaps she, too, has already begun to believe in their infallibility, their power to create as much as represent a subject.

“Just as a writer has to write honestly and truthfully about what he sees and thinks and does, a photographer has to make pictures that are honest and truthful” (Rothstein)

>>> 

The title comes from a song pioneers on the Plains used to sing and that I came across while reading The Worst Hard Time, an incredibly readable and compelling piece of nonfiction about those who survived the Dust Bowl.
“The first Anglos in the Panhandle used to recite this little ditty:

I like this country fine
I like this country good.
For the wind pumps all the water
And the cow chops all the wood.” (40)

“It scares them because the land is too much, too empty, claustrophobic in its immensity....It scares them because of the forced intimacy with a place that gives nothing back to a stranger, a place where the land and its weather—probably the most violent and extreme on earth—demand only one thing: humility.” (1-2)

“Infinity was never an abstraction on the High Plains.” (40)
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Library of Congress. Manuscript Division, WPA Federal Writers; Project Collection: Documents from the Folklore Project, Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1945

****. Prints and Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection.


**Filmography**


Photography Credits

3. Rothstein, *Fleeing a Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma*. April 1936
4. Arthur Rothstein, *Heavy black clouds of dust rising over the Texas Panhandle, Texas*. 1936 March

5. Buried machinery in barn lot in Dallas, South Dakota, United States during the Dust Bowl, an agricultural, ecological, and economic disaster in the Great Plains region of North America in 1936. May 1936
6. Dorothea Lange. *Dust storm*. *It was conditions of this sort which forced many farmers to abandon the area. Spring 1935. New Mexico. 1935 April*
7. Rothstein, *Heavy black clouds of dust rising over the Texas Panhandle, Texas.*
   1936 March

8. Rothstein, *Waiting with the mail for the train to Reno, Minden, Nevada, 1940.*


12. Rothstein, *An abandoned farm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma*. 1936 April

13. Lange, *Abandoned cafe in Carney, Texas. Carney is fast becoming a ghost town of the Texas plains*. 1937 June

14. Rothstein, *Dust storm damage. Cimarron County, Oklahoma*. 1936 April

15. Rothstein, *Drifts of doil piled up by dust-bowl winds against a farmer’s barn, Liberal, Kansas*, 1936.


17. Lange, *A corral practically buried by drifted dust. Mills, New Mexico. Therefore, the fertile top soil of grazing area cannot be utilized*. 1935 May

20. Lange, *Dust bowl refugee in California.* “We was starved out and we live on perhaps. We could maybe find a little if we could afford to roll.” 1936 February


22. Lange, *Drought and depression refugee from Oklahoma now working in the pea fields of California. Imperial Valley.* 1937 March


24. Lange, *Child of an impoverished family from Iowa stranded in New Mexico.* 1936 August


26. Lange, *Dust is too much for this farmer’s son in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.* 1936 April

27. John Coller, *Chacon, Mora Country, New Mexico. Idlers at the general store.* 1943 January


30. Rothstein, *Empty farm and idle truck (typical of drought area)*, Beach, North Dakota, 1936.

31. Lange, *These farm implements should never have been used for they destroyed a naturally rich grazing area.* Mills, New Mexico. 1935 May

32. Rothstein, *Corn withered by heat and chewed by grasshoppers.* 1936 July


34. Rothstein, *Sand dunes on a farm in Cimarron County, Oklahoma.* 1936 April

35. Lange, *Dust Bowl farm. Coldwater District, north of Dalhart, Texas. This house is occupied; most of the houses in this district have been abandoned.* 1938 June

Photographs courtesy of the Farm Security Administration Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division; and the United States Department of Agriculture