

**“JUST LISTEN, YES?”:  
MAUS AS TRAUMATIC COMMUNICATION  
– AND –  
ARTICULATIONS OF ABSENCE:  
MEMORY, SPACE AND MOURNING IN VANCOUVER’S  
DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE**

by

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## ABSTRACTS

### “Just listen, yes?”

This essay deals with the transmission and reception of trauma inspired communication. Considering Art Spiegelman's, *Maus* as a creation inspired by trauma and as Holocaust testimony I reflect on the notion of suffering as an axis between isolation and community, identity and annihilation, silence and creation; the repercussions of recognizing the pain of another; the impact of this recognition on the identity of the witness, and; the role of the created object in the communication of pain.

**Keywords:** Communication of pain; Witnessing; Creation; Testimony; Maus

**Subject Terms:** Communication; Suffering -- Moral and ethical aspects; Sympathy -- Moral and ethical aspects; Holocaust testimony; Psychic trauma -- Social aspects

### Articulations of Absence

Using the memorial in CRAB Park as a focal point, this essay explores the values and assumptions that lie beneath the dominant construction of the notion of 'other' as it pertains to residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. I investigate the ways in which this community is perceived by those who call it home contrasted with those who live outside it, and how these assessments inform and enforce reality within its borders.

**Keywords:** Skid row; Memorial; Poverty; First Nations women; Vancouver; Downtown Eastside

**Subject Terms:** Skid row – Canada; Marginality, Social -- British Columbia – Vancouver; Missing persons -- British Columbia – Vancouver; Indians of North America -- Canada -- Public opinion; Memorialization

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**1:**  
**“JUST LISTEN, YES?”: *MAUS* AS TRAUMATIC  
COMMUNICATION**

In this nomadic era, characterized both by the intermingling of blood and also by ongoing ethnic conflict, communication across difference is vital. In urban settings in the twenty-first century, it is possible to interact with a myriad of people from all over the globe within mere minutes. Each contact with another can open a multilayered exchange, rooted in memory, experience and custom, either shared or unshared, each party assuming their basis of reference as common. Effective communication with another is always challenging, even among those who share memory, experience and custom, and even when that which is being transmitted is of a straightforward nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that without common ground transmissions can falter.

Even for those with common ground, transmission can be extremely problematic. The experience of pain, both physical and emotional, is perhaps one of the most difficult to communicate about and through. For while culture, language, custom and even blood may be common to both parties, the experience of pain is ultimately intimate, isolating the individual in pain from others (Scarry 4), enclosing the sufferer inside that intensely private realm delimited by the boundary of the skin. No statement is more false than “I feel your pain.”

In the project of communicating through and about pain, both parties, she who is in pain and she who is not, face potent obstacles. For the sufferer,

language recedes in pain's presence, words refuse their role and will not be summoned (Scarry 4). As language is central both to our understanding and to the communication of ourselves, this retreat results in the sufferer's separation, not only from her community but from herself. As Elaine Scarry says, for the afflicted "the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject" (Scarry 35).

It is important to clarify at this point that when I refer to pain I am referring to a very specific manifestation. I am not referring to physical pain, such as that caused by a wound or illness. Rather, I am referring to psychic distress. Further, I am referring to psychic distress that has a human cause. I distinguish this from the no less potent emotional distress caused by mental illness or existential angst.

Wholly internal and thus invisible, pain often lacks outward manifestation, a situation only compounded by the desertion of descriptive powers. Thus, disbelief regarding pain's veracity, intensity or even its existence is as persistent for those without pain as language is absent for those with pain. The sufferer's dissolution of language serves to foster doubt, for without words to describe, locate, transmit and thus make it real, pain lacks proof.

This essay deals with the transmission of pain in Art Spiegelman's two - part opus *Maus*, which relates in images and words the impact of the Holocaust on one family unit. Articulating the ways in which identity and communication are influenced by trauma, Spiegelman, under the umbrella of his father's story of survival and his mother's suicide, tells his own story of 'surviving the survivors'.

After a brief general discussion of *Maus*, I place Spiegelman's work in the context of important discussions of traumatic communication by Susan Sontag, Dori Laub, Lawrence Langer, and Elaine Scarry.

\* \* \* \*

The first incarnation of *Maus* was a three page strip published in 1972 in the underground comic *Funny Animals*. It later reappeared in the 1980s as a serialized feature in *Raw*, a comics anthology edited by Spiegelman and, his now wife, Françoise Mouly. In 1986 Penguin Books collected the six existing parts and published them in one volume called *Maus: My Father Bleeds History*, a title suggesting a wound that will not heal. Spiegelman continued to draw and write episodes for *Raw*, and in 1992 these further sections were brought together in a second volume, *Maus: And Here My Troubles Began*.

*Maus* is a hybrid work existing somewhere between comic book and novel, biography and fiction, satire and fable, high and low art. Its grim themes of war, murder, suicide, depression and isolation seem to belong in the realm of serious and therefore, high art, and as a book, specifically to literature. However, Spiegelman's illustrations--which are not realistically rendered images of recognizable people and places, but simply sketched sequential drawings featuring animal characters--recall the low art of the comic-strip.

Straddling genres, comics themselves are neither a simply visual nor a purely literary form, but are rather an "awkward in-between art" (Carrier 68). For some (Scott McCloud, Rocco Versaci, David Carrier and Art Spiegelman himself), it is this very "in-between" (Carrier 70) status that gives comics their

strength. According to Carrier, “pictures can induce strong feelings in the reader, but they can also lack the specificity of words. Words, on the other hand, offer that specificity, but can lack the immediate emotional charge of pictures” (135). The combination of words and pictures is doubly powerful.

The three critical elements that make up comics as defined by Carrier are “the speech balloon, the closely linked narrative, and the book-size scale” (Carrier 74). To this list I would add the depiction of plot and characters through illustration. In the case of *Maus*, this idiosyncratic alchemy of text and image grants the reader a more full experience of the story and greater access to the characters than either words or images alone could have accomplished.

The word balloon, which is used both for speech and thought (Versaci 39), makes the internal world of Spiegelman’s characters visible (Carrier 73), “creat(ing) not only a more flexible first person perspective, but a more complicated one as well” (Versaci 39). In *Maus* we, the readers, are privy not only to the verbal exchanges between the characters and their unspoken thoughts but at specific significant moments in the narrative, are also spoken to directly. The size, shape and position of the balloon all work together to add emphasis to its content. For example, Anya’s anguished plea “Let me die too!” (p. 122), or Richieu’s cries of hunger (p.123) have sharp zigzagged edges accentuating the character’s distress. Balloons also bleed beyond their originating panel indicating the far-reaching or shocking impact of their subject matter.

Unlike speech, which is ephemeral, the word balloon's presence is an indelible aspect of the visual landscape in *Maus*. The text burdens the illustrated characters, often taking up over half of each panel. Permanent and omnipresent, words hang above the characters heads trapping them in their story and denying the reader respite from their contents. Due to the dominant presence of word balloons in *Maus*, coming across one of the few panels without them inspires a certain sense of unease in the reader/viewer. Silent scenes, such as the one depicting four Jews hung for illegally trading goods on page 83 of *Maus I*, "offer no clues as to [their] duration" (McCloud, 102) and therefore impress themselves on and remain in the reader's mind as McCloud suggests.

The closely linked narrative characteristic of comics and their depiction of plot and characters through illustration results in a unique experience and treatment of time that is particularly fitting for a work such as *Maus*, dealing with history and memory. In comics action evolves from panel to panel, the content of each leading to the action in the next. After reading/viewing one section the eye moves to the following. However the previous section remains visually present and just a simple glance away (Carrier, McGlothlin, Versaci). In *Maus* this comic feature serves to provide a visual reminder that the past is but a membrane away, existing at the same time as and alongside the present. The contemporary lives of Vladek, Artie and the other characters persist in the shadow of what has gone before both historically and visually.

The graphic simplification of the comic medium subdues visual interference that can act as distraction and static; "by de-emphasizing the

appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts” (McCloud 41). Spiegelman’s minimal style coupled with his use of animals to represent different nationalities facilitates the transmission of *Maus*’ content. As animals, his characters do not resemble anyone in the real world, allowing the reader/viewer to project herself into the story without obstacle; they are like “empty shell(s) that we inhabit which enable us to travel in another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it” (McCloud 36).

The intimate scale of the book format furthers personal and private interaction with the characters and their story. Conveniently portable, the reader requires no special time, place or means to participate in *Maus* thereby reinforcing its accessibility.

Cartoons have long been associated with light-hearted fare and children’s stories. However, in the last twenty years comics have undergone a face-lift with the introduction of the more up-market term graphic novel. Introduced in the late 1980s, it was a conscious attempt by publishers to distinguish comics for children from the more serious comics for adults, it was a term that had cultural capital. As Art Spiegelman himself pointed out, “graphics are respectable, novels are respectable, so whammy double respectability” (Sabin 236). As a marketing ploy it was extremely successful and resulted in “space for comics on bookstore shelves rather than on magazine racks and enable[d] publishers and booksellers to charge commensurately higher prices” (Roth 8). The three initial comics christened with this term in 1986-87 were *Dark Knight*, *Watchmen* and *Maus*.

While *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* both dealt within traditional comic themes of adventure and rescue and featured superheroes, *Maus* further broke with expected comic notions by featuring animal characters in a Holocaust story.

*Maus* was criticized by many as using an inappropriate medium for the gravity of a topic such as the Holocaust. However, comics that deal with serious themes are not new or novel. *Puck* published in 1877, *Judge* published in 1881 and *Life* published in 1883 are just a few early examples of satirical adult magazines that “were critical of the establishment to varying degrees... (and) aimed at an educated, politically-aware, adult audience” (Sabin 133). Likewise, comics about the Holocaust featuring animals are not without precedent. Two of note have particular alignments with Spiegelman’s *Maus*.

*Mickey Mouse in the Gurs Internment Camp* was written by Horst Rosenthal in 1942, two years before he was murdered at Auschwitz. It is a fifteen-page comic strip pamphlet featuring a main character, almost identical to Disney’s Mickey, who is arrested and detained in the Gurs concentration camp near the Pyrenees. While this work is unpublished and less sophisticated than *Maus*, the main character is also a Jewish mouse. In addition to sharing this symbol (albeit for arguably different reasons) both Rosenthal and Spiegelman raise questions of identity and push the limits of their own comic fiction. As pointed out by Lisa Naomi Mulman in her essay, “A Tale of Two Mice: Graphic Representations of the Jew in Holocaust Narrative”, “From Mickey’s/Rosenthal’s perspective...he is not primarily a mouse, he is primarily Mickey Mouse, and thus his central identity is American, not Jewish” (Mulman, 89). Akin to the way

Spiegelman draws attention to the artifice of the comic and his role as protagonist and creator, at the end of Rosenthal's story, once the mouse realizes what Gurs is, he tells the reader "The air of the Pyrenees no longer suited me at all. So, since I am only a cartoon, I removed myself with a stroke of an eraser."

*La Bête est Morte!: La Guerre Mondiale Chez les Animaux*, also a two volume comic strip, was published in 1945 in France and written by Victor Dancette and Jacques Zimmermann and illustrated by Edmond-François Calvo. Conceived of and written during the Occupation and printed in the third month after Liberation it featured nationalities represented as different animals; the French as rabbits, the Germans as wolves, the Americans as bison, the British as a bulldogs and Italy as a hyena in wolf's clothing. In *La Bête est Morte!* a grandfather rabbit recounts how he lost his leg in battle. Thus, like *Maus* it is a story about war and survival transmitted down through the generations of a family.

The title of both *Maus* books includes the phrase *A Survivor's Tale*, which appears at first reading to refer to Vladek as a Holocaust survivor. However, as the story unfolds, one begins to wonder if it also conveys Artie's continued existence, in other words his surviving the survivor. The additional individual title furthers this ambiguity. *My Father Bleeds History* suggests that Vladek's experience has left him injured with a wound that will not heal. However, the perspective of the writer of that phrase is necessarily the offspring of the said sufferer, and a parent in distress is, in essence, a deeply disturbing experience for a child.

Spiegelman's use of animal characters to tell a clearly 'adult' story is perhaps considered the most contentious aspect of the work. While it may temper some of the initial reservations one might have approaching a Holocaust inspired creation (Harvey, Lewis, Sabin, Versaci) and, as mentioned earlier, permit the reader to enter into the story without preconceptions about the characters, it may also encourage racist sentiment. According to Robert C. Harvey the fact that the cast, whether male or female, old or young appear all identical within their distinct animal nationalities denies the characters individuality. Harvey asserts, "it was precisely this sort of dehumanizing of Jews that had to take place before the Nazis could persuade themselves to "exterminate" the "vermin""(Harvey 244).

As indicated, it is true that there is much debate about *Maus* in terms of its medium, style and format and their individual and combined suitability to a story that features the Holocaust. However, that is not the focus of this inquiry. Rather, I will focus on *Maus* as a powerful example of communication about and through pain. Its particular structure--a father's disturbing story told to a son who has been traumatized by its content and then who in turn becomes its conveyer-- offers an ideal opportunity to consider the implications of communicating pain for both transmitter and the receiver. *Maus* blurs the lines between victim and agent, sender and receiver, and reveals the difficulty of witnessing the anguish of another.

Considering *Maus* as traumatic communication, I use it to reflect on the notion of suffering as an axis between isolation and community, identity and

annihilation, silence and creation. Drawing on the work of Susan Sontag, Dori Laub and Lawrence Langer, I consider the repercussions of recognizing the pain of another and the impact of this recognition on the identity of the witness.

Introducing the thoughts of Elaine Scarry to this analysis, I will also reflect on the role of the created object in the communication of pain.

\* \* \* \*

The experience of perceiving suffering is addressed by Susan Sontag in her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. She asks: when we look at images of another in pain, what do we feel? How do we respond? While Sontag's work addresses the repercussions of seeing the pain of another in photographic form, I believe some of her more general observations are applicable to *Maus*.

Sontag states that there are three conventional responses to witnessing pain: feelings of powerlessness, compassion and sympathy. The word compassion describes both an emotional experience and its resulting impetus for action. It is defined by dictionary.com as "a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering". Sontag believes that if these distressing emotions are not translated into action, callousness and feelings of impotence will inevitably result.

Sympathy, Sontag believes, also results in inaction. It impedes thoughts of responsibility, hindering efforts to trace and dissect the intricate means by which the viewer may be enabling the suffering to occur or continue. Finally, powerlessness requires no action at all; it is rather a state of paralysis which Sontag believes can transform into depression or anger. All three of Sontag's

theorized reactions to suffering entail concerns about both feeling and the need for action--the problematic feeling necessitating action for its cessation. *Maus's* creation can, I believe, be seen as an action that followed from Spiegelman's irresolvable feelings of compassion and sympathy for his father. At the same time it is an attempt at defence against his overwhelming feelings of powerlessness.

Many commentators have criticized Artie's character as being selfish and insensitive toward his aged and traumatized father as he insists, despite his father's reluctance, that Vladek recall his Holocaust experience. In fact, Artie seems to be unwilling to engage with his father at all unless he is re-telling this particular story (e.g. *Maus I* 159; *Maus II* 24) and goes so far as to actively silence him when he attempts to talk about anything else, such as his unhappiness with his second wife, Mala (e.g. *Maus I* 67; 127, *Maus II* 25), money (e.g. *Maus I* 126; *Maus II* 23) or when he asks for his assistance (e.g. *Maus I* 96; *Maus II* 23). Rather ironically, Artie is often angry and exhausted in the face of his father's controlling eccentricities.

However, in spite of Artie-the-son's callousness towards Vladek, the scenes of his life that Artie-the-storyteller chooses to depict and the sensitivity with which he illustrates them reveal his compassion for his father. A simple and obvious example of how Spiegelman conveys his compassionate attitude towards all his characters, and specifically his father, is the manner in which he draws their faces. Their emotional state can be detected by the simple presence and the direction of their eyebrows. When a character is sad Spiegelman draws

his or her eyebrows pointing upwards at the center of the forehead, and when angry he draws them pointing downwards towards the nose.

In *Maus II* on page 24, the difficulty Artie has in explaining to his father that he and Françoise cannot come and live with him now that Mala has left is demonstrated not so much in the words he uses:

“I’m sorry, Pop. I don’t think it would work out. I mean, we’ve got our own place to live, and...”;

as in the way he illustrates his character’s open handed helpless gesture and the pointing of the worried eyebrows. A few pages on, Vladek speculates about what may have happened to his friend Mandelbaum in the camps:

“...maybe they kicked and hit him in his head because he couldn’t work fast enough...or maybe he got sick. So they put him first in the “hospital” and then the oven...”;

we see a similar open handed gesture of vulnerability accompanied by the eyebrow angle emphasizing the bewilderment and sorrow Vladek feels in recalling this episode.

Spiegelman’s very portrayal of himself/Artie as a callous and self serving son is evidence of his compassion for his father. There are innumerable ways he could have conveyed the facts in *Maus*. He could have depicted himself as an innocent victim of his parent’s trauma or as a heroic, free of flaws and blemishes. In fact, he might have chosen not to include himself in the story at all and instead simply re-tell Vladek’s Holocaust survival story as a historical biography.

However, his presence as receiver and culpable transmitter of Vladek's tale shapes *Maus* into more than simply another Holocaust story and opens up space to think about the process of pain's communication and its role in the formation of identity.

The reaction of sympathy as described by Sontag is a tricky one to locate in *Maus*. Not because it is hidden or too difficult to discern, but rather because, if we apply Sontag's theory—that the response of sympathy permits one to ignore one's responsibility for the suffering witnessed and thereby enable it to continue—we are forced to interrogate Artie's role in his father's suffering and vice versa.

Both men are tormented, and as much as neither wishes the other harm, they both contribute to each other's pain. Vladek's manipulative nature, his unreasonable demands and idiosyncratic behaviour are all factors in his son's torment. Yet we also witness Vladek's vigor slowly erode as Artie selfishly and unrelentingly pursues his story and neither father nor son is completely oblivious to the suffering of the other.

In the middle of *Maus I*, on page 100 Vladek finds and reads Artie's early comic, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History*. Inserted into the book exactly as it first appeared, these four blackened unnumbered pages (Halasz) disrupt the aesthetic choices Spiegelman has made thus far, including his minimalist unadorned drawing style, the white margins he includes around each panel and his depiction of his characters as animals (Witek 102). In this case History" Spiegelman's drawing style is detail-laden and fretful, composed of thin scratchy

lines, utterly contrasting with the simple bold outline style of *Maus*. Here the backdrop is black, the only light coming from the bordering text or occasional word balloon. The eyes of every character, with the exception of those who wear glasses and one angry and unsympathetic family member, are haunted and ringed with black.

*Prisoner on the Hell Planet* contains one of the only two times in *Maus* that Artie “turns to face the reader...and break(s) the “fourth wall” (Versaci 84). In his direct address Spiegelman “achieves immediate intimacy” (Versaci 36) with his audience and adds another layer to the narrative and to his already complex identity of character and storyteller. The reader/viewer is now implicated by Artie’s direct address, and akin to his own conversion from listener to conveyer, we are transformed during this episode from passive audience to active participant.

In the glare of a searchlight and standing in front of a height chart Artie stares out at us and simply states, “In 1968, when I was 20, my mother killed herself. She left no note!” Up until this point we have been aware that Anja is dead, but it is only now that we learn that she did not die during the Holocaust, but by her own hand years after. Dressed in a striped pajama-like uniform Spiegelman references his multiple identities of recent psychiatric patient, “child of the Holocaust” (Witek, Halasz) and prisoner caged by his conflicting emotions around his mother’s suicide. These four blackened pages tucked into the heart of *Maus* reveal the abandonment mingled with rage he feels towards both his parents, but specifically his dead mother. Defined by pain, Artie is depicted as “a

soul murder[ed] whose legacy is the exiled self” (Halasz). Artie as inmate, confined within his own suffering and unable to act, recalls Sontag’s theorized reaction of powerlessness.

The second time a despondent and overwhelmed Artie steps out of his narrative and appeals to the reader/viewer occurs in *Maus II*. The images in this second book are far more gruesome and disturbing than in the first and the plot progresses to its apex as Vladek is incarcerated at Auschwitz and Artie approaches a nervous breakdown. In Chapter 2 entitled “Auschwitz (Time Flies)” we find Artie in a bare fly infested room and once again he is caught in the beam of the searchlight. A watchtower, akin to those in Auschwitz or prison, is framed in his window, and most alarmingly, he and his drawing table sit atop a stack of naked mouse corpses. Deeply troubled, Artie believes that the success of *Maus I* has been built upon death and is questioning his role as “co perpetrator, [and] one who is able to constitute himself by annihilating others” (McGlothlin 82).

The flies referred to punningly in the chapter’s title first appear on the introductory page, crawling around the tortured central image of mice screaming as they are incinerated in Holocaust gas chambers. Upon turning the page to begin the chapter the flies remain. However we have moved through time, space and generations from images referring to the horror of Vladek’s imprisonment to Artie’s troubled present day. Only when he leaves his studio, the site of creation, and heads out into the streets of the city, where he becomes anonymous, do the flies cease to buzz around his head. Suggestive of filth and decay, they make

manifest the way in which Vladek's Holocaust past infests Artie's post-Holocaust present.

Significantly, only in *Prisoner on Hell Planet* and "Auschwitz (Time Flies)" does Artie disrupt his mouse identity. In *Prisoner on Hell Planet* all the characters appear in human form and this is explained by the fact that this comic was drawn in a time before and outside of those dealt with in *Maus*. However, in "Auschwitz (Time Flies)" Artie has both mouse and human features. In fact, he appears to be a human wearing a mouse mask.

Spiegelman has clearly established Jews as mice throughout the story. Thus, the fact that Artie becomes a human in a mouse mask at this point in the narrative indicates his unstable sense of identity as both the son of his father and a Jew. Up until this point he has lived as a mouse, but in "Auschwitz (Time Flies)" he begins to question his right to do so. Being Jewish and therefore a mouse seems to entail Holocaust experience. Thus Artie, who has none, feels he does not share what he deems to be this essential element of Jewish identity. The bodies upon which he and his drawing apparatus sit are true mice/Jews whose validity is cemented by their Holocaust identity. While Artie as "only human" is disconnected from these real Jews, the mask he wears is still a mouse mask and thus the separation is not complete.

When he leaves his studio to go to his therapist's office Artie remains a man in a mouse mask, an identity he shares only with Pavel his therapist. As a Holocaust survivor and thus a true mouse, Pavel should not be a man in a mask. However, the topics he and Artie discuss--the Holocaust, guilt and survival--are

at the base of Artie's unstable sense of self. Thus, the fact that both men wear masks during the session draws attention to the process and negotiation of identity in which they are both engaged. The masks in *Maus* emphasize the displacing impact pain has on the self.

During his therapy session Artie describes his despondency:

"I just lie on my couch for hours and stare at a small grease spot on the upholstery...Auschwitz just seems too scary to think about...so I just lie there."

(43)

His longing to relieve both his own and his father's suffering remains unfulfilled and, as predicted by Sontag, it has transformed into depression and resentment.

\* \* \* \*

In addition to Sontag's theorized responses on the effect of perceiving suffering, Dori Laub and Lawrence Langer offer further interesting observations gained from their extensive work with Holocaust survivors' testimony. According to Sontag, photographs can "turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed" (Sontag 81), which, like a book, can be mastered. Oral testimony however, is a much more volatile and direct format than Sontag's photographs or Spiegelman's *Maus*. One can control one's engagement with a text or a photo to a far greater degree than with a living, breathing and present person. The containable and familiar object that is the product of pain, like a photo or a book, at least retains an "appearance of form (that) is reassuring" (Langer 17). Unlike

the interaction between the reader/viewer and an unresponsive visual work, in oral testimony both the transmitter and the receiver are sensitive, present in the same moment and without buffer to moderate the experience.

However, while *Maus* does assume a seemingly benign format it does resemble the oral testimony discussed by Laub and Langer in four important ways. Both concern the horror of the Holocaust. As marriage of text and image, *Maus* simulates the combination of spoken words, accompanying physical gestures and facial expressions present in testimony. Vladek's story is transmitted to a known and specific person in a private and intimate setting; and finally, as Spiegelman describes in the title of *Maus I*, both 'bleed', making "former victims...not the only ones threatened by the ordeal (of testimony)" (Langer 9).

Laub, a psychiatrist and survivor himself, believes that the Holocaust was an unprecedented and exceptional event because, as he puts it, it "produced no witnesses" (65). He theorizes that the magnitude, the horror and unrelenting nature of the Holocaust meant that it "precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims" (Laub 65). Laub's "collapse of witnessing" (Laub 65) has much in common with Freud's theory regarding the traumatic incident. Both men agree that the extreme experience circumvents "the human cognitive capacity to perceive and to assimilate the totality of what was really happening at the time" (Laub 69). This inability to incorporate such an event into one's psyche corrupts identity, which for Laub is "perhaps the true meaning of annihilation" (Laub 67).

A founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, Laub has participated in the recording of hundreds of survivor testimonies. He believes that this “process of testimony” (Laub 61) allows survivors to establish the previously absent witness, first in the listener and then internally for themselves, and thus begin to restore their damaged sense of self. Laub’s work is particularly relevant to our examination of *Maus* as it provides a framework for understanding Artie’s incongruent and disrupted identity and *Maus*, as his, rather than Vladek’s testimony.

Langer, who both interviews and trains others to interview for the Fortunoff Video Archive, is the author of *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, based on 300 of the more than 1,400 testimonies housed at the archive. His work explores how survivors negotiate the contrasting experiences of the camps and their present ‘after Auschwitz’ existence. For the sake of this essay I look at Langer’s observations regarding the reception of oral testimony and the internal negotiation necessary to bear witness.

Having considered the role of the receiver of testimony, Langer believes, like Sontag and in agreement with Laub, that the experience of receiving transmissions of pain (whether in photographic or verbal form) is a “process that demands retreat” (Laub 62) and that invariably forces the receiver to engage in what Langer calls the “drama of avoidance” (Langer 28). We see evidence of this in *Maus*, for while the underlying framework is Vladek’s story, this is not continuous. Spiegelman interrupts this telling with the ordinary quotidian tasks of Vladek’s life (the counting of pills, a visit to the bank, lunch, etc.) and forays into

Artie's life, thus allowing the reader/viewer respite while confirming an outside and safe reality away from the nightmare content of the story.

The listener, or in the case of *Maus* reader/viewer, will attempt to place familiar blueprints on top of the survivor's experiences trying to make sense out of the chaotic world presented in testimony. According to Langer, the disorienting feelings aroused in listening are exacerbated by the erosion of familiar and regulating norms, such as time and measurement, both of which become variables. In *Maus I* this is evident on page 82 when Artie reprimands Vladek for his account's lack of consistency. In *Maus II* on page 68 the disparity between witness and survivor time is further demonstrated in the following dialogue:

Artie: How long were you in quarantine teaching English?

Vladek: Maybe 2 months...there I had it good. I--

Artie: You told me about that. How many months were you in the tin shop?

Vladek: In this workshop—tin and shoe work was combined--I was about 5 or 6 months.

Artie: So black work lasted 3 months.

Vladek: Yah...NO! I remind myself... After black work I came again as a tinman with Yidle. For 2 months. They-

Artie: But wait! That would be 12 months you said you were there a total of 10!

Vladek: So? Take less time to the black work. In Auschwitz we didn't wear watches.

According to Langer, the content of testimony is so disruptive to the witness that in attempting to order the chaos they often turn to the only structure from normal life that can contain such deviation--storybooks (or comics) replete with fantastic tales, heroes and heroines. As Sontag states, "violence can exalt someone subjected to it into a martyr or a hero" (Sontag 12), and in *Maus* we do see Artie struggle with the feat of his father's survival.

In page 44 of *Maus II* Artie tells his therapist, "No matter what I accomplish, it doesn't seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz." Pavel's assurance that "it wasn't the best people who survived, nor did the best ones die. It was random!" (Spiegelman 45) echoes Langer's comment of how the witness who listens to testimony "expects to encounter heroes and heroines" (25).

Spiegelman, however, prevents the reader from engaging in this illusion, denying any of his characters heroic qualities. Flawed and mortal, Vladek evades this status: he is cheap, difficult, controlling, and despite himself having been subject to ethnic violence, maintains racist attitudes (Loman 558). As Doherty declares, he "stubbornly, gallantly, refuses to be ennobled" (81).

Artie too avoids the pedestal. He ignores his father's diminishing health, requests for assistance, and unhappy relationship, demanding that Vladek relive

his wartime experience. His hounding seems merciless. Anja, although not visually present, is the third character with the potential to be cast as a hero. However, her ongoing depression and inability to cope after the Holocaust humanize her, and rather than adulation, we feel only sympathy for her.

The witness's attempt to maintain balance during the destabilizing process of testimony can cause her to actively, albeit unconsciously, control the communication. Even the marked emotional response of the listener or questions that guide the telling of the story can "shape the content" (Langer 9) manipulating the interaction and influencing a survivor to leave important things unsaid. In *Maus I*, on page 12, Artie coaxes the story from Vladek by telling him "Start with mom...tell me how you met". Vladek however, begins the story with another relationship prior to meeting Anja, to which a confused Artie asks "But, Pop...Mom's name was Anna Zylberberg!" Vladek wrestles the narrative back from his son by responding, "All this was before I met Anja-Just listen, yes?" (*Maus I* 14).

The communication of pain according to Laub, Langer and Sontag, whether through testimony or photograph, seems to involve a high level of discomfort for the receiver. Dislocating normality and falling outside regulating structures the experience of pain and then the transmission of this experience disrupts identity. All three thinkers agree that pain and its communication will cause the receiver to seek any means possible to diminish the impact of the experience.

Elaine Scarry would agree with Sontag, Laub and Langer on all the above points; however she posits creation, rather than simple avoidance, compassion or empathy as the ultimate alleviating action. As *Maus* is a creative composition, Scarry's thoughts on the role of imagination and pain in creation are particularly pertinent to its examination.

In her work, *The Body in Pain*, Scarry considers the experience of being inside pain's grip and its effects on language, the imagination, creativity and community. While her primary concern is physical pain, she does state that "a state of consciousness other than pain—such as hunger or desire—will, if deprived of its object, begin to approach the neighbourhood of pain" (166), and it is on this basis that I apply her thoughts to the emotional and psychic pain inherent in *Maus*.

Scarry proposes that when the body is undergoing pain words evaporate. And as language allows individuals to extend themselves out into the world and manifest their presence she believes its disappearance jeopardizes identity and reduces the individual's ability to partake in the imagining of the world.

For her, it is in response to discomfort (when at a high-level, called pain), and through the use of the imagination that human beings create (e.g. chairs to ease the standing body, shoes to protect the feet and light bulbs to extend daylight, etc.). Thus it is the alchemy of two private and invisible experiences, pain and imagining, that instigate creation, and *Maus* can be understood in these terms. However, this process is not finite. For the creation of one object usually necessitates the creation of at least one, if not multiple others. For example, the

creation of shoes necessitates the creation of shoe polish, which necessitates a shoe brush, and so on.

According to Scarry, “the total act of creating contains an inherent movement toward self-amplifying generosity” (318), every created object bearing the silent message, “Whoever you are, and whether or not I personally like or even know you, in at least this small way, be well” (292). The transformation of these private experiences of pain and imagining into the publicly manifested object is “directed against the isolating aversiveness of pain” (Scarry 326) and based upon the notion that maker is aware that others suffer as she does. As Scarry states, “mental and material culture assumes the sharability of sentience”, (326).

This phrase, “the sharability of sentience”, while coined by Scarry, is in fact the concern common to Sontag, Laub, Langer, and to Spiegelman himself. It is this very concept that underlies the disturbing power of traumatic communication. As Sontag says about photographs, “The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don’t forget.” (115).

The power of this realization and the distress it excites seem to summon an equally potent response. For perceiving that others suffer as we do also conversely means that as others suffer, so too may we, and perhaps this is the core of our discomfort in the face of pain. How then do we apply the various thoughts of Laub, Langer, Sontag and Scarry to *Maus* which can clearly be

understood as both a form of testimony and a creation inspired by pain? How are we to approach this--“the dubious privilege” (Sontag 111)--of bearing witness?

Sontag counsels us to forego compassion, empathy and passivity when encountering the pain of another. She seems to call for action when she states that “the only people with the right to look at images of suffering...are those who (can) do something to alleviate it...or those who (can) learn from it” (42). To the rest of us she urges “reflective engagement”, stating, “There’s nothing wrong with standing back and thinking. To paraphrase several sages: ‘Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time’” (118).

Langer, writing of Holocaust memories, asks, “Who can find a proper grave for such damaged mosaics of the mind, where they may rest in pieces?” (34). His query presupposes not only that a suitable place exists, but that this relief can be found with fellow human beings. It is important to note that Langer does not proffer healing, repair, or cessation, as he clearly states, “there is no closure” (24). He does, however, present the alternative of rest which he believes can only be accomplished if the witness “suspend(s) judgment” (Langer 26).

Laub, like Langer, avoids the concept of healing: “no amount of telling seems ever to do justice...there are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening” (63). Nothing will mend what has been broken. However, he believes that through the process of testimony, the collaboration of witness and survivor, “reconciliation with the broken promise and...the resumption of life, in spite of the failed promise, [is] possible” (75).

Scarry, whose perspective is located within the experience of pain, also discusses its alleviation and like Laub, Langer and Sontag, its communication. However, rather than the collaboration of two people in the form of testimony, she speaks of the coupling of the imagination with pain in the work of creation. Through the process of creation pain can be externalized, “carrying some of the attributes of pain with it” (Scarry 173). Using Scarry’s understanding of creation and applying it to *Maus*, the book becomes both a gift from Spiegelman to his audience and his attempt to claw back some of pain’s bounty. By partaking in the “imagining of the world” through the form of comics, he harnesses not only the power of language, but of the visual to express his personal alchemy of pain and imagination.

As with the photographs discussed by Sontag or the testimonies referenced by Langer and Laub, our “dubious privilege of being spectators” (Sontag 111) of the torment of Artie, Vladek, Anja and Mala and the anguish of their story can prompt a range of responses from compassion, empathy, powerlessness to the “drama of avoidance”. Combining the thoughts of these four authors, *Maus* can be understood as creation and testimony, whose existence is the result of the amalgam of pain and the imagination, witness and survivor. As such, according to Scarry, and as indicated in the thinking of Sontag, Langer, and Laub it instigates further creation and thus can be understood as part of a process, rather than an end in and of itself.

All four thinkers discussed have offered tools to use in the face of the inherent discomfort of receiving pain inspired transmissions such as *Maus*. None

believe that the experience of pain should remain enclosed and hidden inside the individual as “the ‘not telling’ of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny” (Laub 64). Rather they advocate willingness to thoughtfully engage in the encounter, for with active participation we may not “flounder at the point of intersection” (Langer 22). Conscious of the fact that we ourselves may be implicated in the perpetuation of the suffering, we should not staunch the discomfort with judgment or our penchant for order, but live courageously with the dissonance. For the work of the imagination, akin to “the process of the testimony [is], essentially, a ceaseless struggle” (Laub 61) and thus, no one communication will ever counter Artie’s sense of inadequacy in the face of Vladek’s pain or Laub’s lament at the limitations of testimony. No one creation will ever be enough. However each attempt to decode pain and translate it into shared creation is an act of “resolute defence of the human in the face of an indifferent universe” (Langer 34), and in turn becomes a beacon for further production.

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**2:**  
**ARTICULATIONS OF ABSENCE:  
MEMORY, SPACE AND MOURNING IN  
VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE**

In this paper I explore the values and assumptions that lie beneath the dominant construction of the notion of the 'other' as it pertains to residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES). I am interested in the function of this designation and seek to understand its source and the consequences of its use. Using the example of a demonstration (the Woodward's Squat), a park (CRAB Park), and more particularly a memorial (the boulder in CRAB Park) in the DTES, I investigate the ways in which this community is perceived both by those who call it home and by those who live outside the area, and how these assessments inform and enforce reality within its borders.

In my search to understand the community's transformation from an Aboriginal fishing ground to an urban neighbourhood notorious for drugs, prostitution, violence and homelessness, I briefly examine the history of the DTES from the time of European settlement in the 1800s to present day. I identify the social and historical influences that have shaped the neighbourhood and contributed to its current 'down and out' status.

Integrating the work of Laura Huey and Thomas Kemple on the construction of areas known as 'skid rows', I consider the differences between the ways in which residents of the DTES and outsiders perceive the community and its inhabitants. Next, drawing on Dara Culhane's work I will demonstrate how her observations on the obfuscation of Aboriginal women from "public culture"

(593) align with those of Huey and Kemple's regarding the realities of 'skid row' residents.

Having established the particular history of the DTES, the role the economy has played in its evolution and the way 'skid row' inhabitants and Aboriginal women are perceived by outsiders, I then turn my attention to the memorial. A manifestation of grief and memory, it is also a potent symbol that when deciphered tells a story of discrimination and neglect. Honouring those murdered in the DTES, it particularly focuses attention on the deaths of Aboriginal women, many of which were unsolved at the time of its creation.

It is important to note that I observe the DTES not as a member of the community, but as a passer-by. Thus I have attempted to include indigenous research in my investigation in order to balance my outsider perspective.

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Located in the oldest part of the city and bordered by North America's second largest Chinatown, Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) with its "frame houses of Strathcona...residential hotels of Hastings Street...clan houses of Chinatown, [and] brick warehouses of Water Street" (Blomley 34) has the dubious distinction of being the "poorest urban neighbourhood in the nation" (Downtown Eastside Residents Association). Once home to many of the women now designated as victims of Canada's 'worst serial killer', Robert William Pickton, it is now considered a "social crucible for Canada on addiction, policing, housing, and prostitution" (Richardson 60). Before European settlement on the West Coast of Canada it was known by the Stó:Lo as "s'olhthemexw", meaning

“our land” or “our world” (Newnham 2), and was the traditional fishing ground of the Coast Salish people (Culhane 595).

The area’s transformation from rural to urban began in the late nineteenth century when young able bodied men, first from Europe and later from China and Japan, flocked to the coast attracted by opportunities in the resource based economy. Timber brought from the north was processed in sawmills located at the water’s edge in Gastown, establishing this area as a main commercial zone. A few metres from the shore Hastings Street became the hub of an evolving and bustling Vancouver, housing City Hall, the library, head offices, banks, theatres, hotels, department stores, and the streetcar terminus at the BC Hydro building.

Due to the seasonal nature of the available work, the newly immigrated young men had a nomadic existence and used Vancouver as a base to return to between jobs. The constant presence of young single men with recently earned wages left an indelible imprint on what is now known as the DTES. It was here that many found temporary lodging in the newly established “dollar-a-day hotels” (Blomley 34), around which sprouted up “bars and other services...designed to serve the resource-industry workers” (Newnham 3).

By the late nineteenth century, Vancouver was expanding from its waterfront origins. The business district had relocated westward and, thanks to the extension of the streetcar network, more affluent families were able to move to new, less crowded and less commercial areas. This shift was recognized in language by the pre World War I era when the neighbourhood, previously called “downtown” Vancouver, became known instead as the “east side” and became

established as the locale for “warehousing and transportation, as well as shopping for the city’s working class” (Blomley 34).

By World War II many of the men initially employed in the resource sector were retiring and on fixed incomes. Those who had not established families returned to their once temporary east side lodgings, making the community their permanent home. The ongoing relocation of the city westward coupled with the retreat of the upper class meant that the neighbourhood was left to the working class, retired laborers, and members of the most recent, least established immigrant group. So began the coding of the DTES as “a place of dubious morality, racial otherness, and masculine failure” (Blomley 34).

In the 1950s the partitioning of the eastside was further emphasized when streetcars ceased to run in the area and the main library moved from Main and Hastings to Robson and Burrard. Soon large department stores and head offices joined the exodus; and this part of the city experienced a drop of almost 10,000 visitors a day (City of Vancouver).

Forsaken by both business and the affluent, buildings in the area, once well maintained, fell into disrepair. This in turn triggered a sharp decline in property values. As rents in the rest of Vancouver increased, those in the DTES fell. The government strategy of deinstitutionalization in the 1970s resulted in many former psychiatric patients joining the urban poor and the infirm in the area’s dilapidated accommodation.

When, by the late 1980s, cocaine replaced heroin as the drug of choice in the Lower Mainland the impact was especially obvious on the streets of the

DTES. Broke addicts often resorted to theft to pay for the drug, which was more addictive and less expensive than heroin. Moreover, hoping to meet the demand for places to fence 'hot' items, dubious businesses, such as second-hand stores and pawn shops, sprouted up in the neighbourhood.

The advent of this level of trade coincided with the exit of Woodward's, a Vancouver landmark and one of the two remaining large department stores in the community. The closing of Woodward's meant that Vancouverites who did not reside in the neighbourhood had even less reason to frequent the already distressed area and this reduction in visitors resulted in the demise of other legitimate businesses.

In their article, "Let the Streets Take Care of Themselves", Laura Huey and Thomas Kemple analyze the composition and function of areas designated as "skid rows" and refer to Vancouver's DTES as a classic "inner-city skid row district" (2307). According to their definition, a 'skid row' is an urban phenomenon located at the "interstices of business districts, police wards, transport centers, tourist areas, working-class and/or ethnic neighbourhoods" (Huey & Kemple 2310). The built environment is characterized by neglect and decay, with property either abandoned or poorly maintained and a "concentration of bars, low-rent hotel rooms and social service facilities" (Huey & Kemple 2307). Those who call 'the skids' home are "predominantly poor, street-entrenched, addicted, alcoholic and/or mentally ill" (Huey & Kemple 2307).

However, Huey and Kemple's use of the phrase 'skid row' refers to far more than the circumstances of the residents or the condition of the physical

structures in a specific area. Most importantly (from the perspective of this paper) they are articulating “a way of looking at that space and its inhabitants” (Huey & Kemple 2309). While sharing characteristics with ‘ghettos’ and ‘slums’, the ‘skid row’ populace are perceived by non-residents as “uniquely immoral, pathological, delinquent or simply 'deviant'” (Huey & Kemple 2306). Deemed to have ‘hit rock bottom’, they are considered somehow responsible for their own suffering “by virtue of their supposed 'moral' failings” (Huey & Kemple 2307). Those living within the scrutinized community do not share this evaluation, however.

While ‘skid row’ residents are “often keenly aware that they live as moral outcasts” (Huey & Kemple 2317), they rarely use this term to refer to the area in which they reside.

Rather, a

positive counter-discourse of community is invoked as a way of accounting for the variety of networks of personal concern and social investment which is closer to their lived experience than the stigmatized and contested vocabulary of skid row. (Huey & Kemple 2316)

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In the early 1980s, Don Larson, a DTES neighbourhood advocate and member of CRAB--Water for Life Society, began lobbying the Vancouver Parks Board to create a waterfront park in his community. In 1987, after five years of persistent advocacy, ‘Portside Park’ opened on land leased by Vancouver Port Authority from the Parks Board.

During the struggle for its realization, the park had acquired the name of CRAB (an acronym for Create a Real Accessible Beach). Perhaps it was the five years it took to secure the space or perhaps it was the assertive nature of the acronym, but by the time the park received official recognition as 'Portside Park', the DTES community already knew it as 'CRAB'.

With his initial goal achieved, Larson continued to lobby the Vancouver Parks Board focusing this time on changing the park's name to reflect the community's reality. As Sue Harris, a former Parks Board member, stated, "[the name] removes the park from any association with the neighbourhood...Portside Park sounds like a yuppie thing. It's such a lifeless name. CRAB Park has life to it" (Sarti 1987).

Larson's efforts were successful and in 1988 'Portside Park' became 'CRAB Park at Portside' and thus the term CRAB graduated from a casual and unofficial oral reference into the realm of the legitimate. Manifesting the community's habitual reality, the name change officially validated and legitimized DTES residents' connection with their community and its land. On maps of Vancouver where once the words 'Portside Park' were found, now the word 'CRAB' would appear.

It is important to note that at the time Larson was lobbying the Parks Board to Create a Real Accessible Beach no other group was laying claim to the area. This may have been because the park is difficult to access by car and is located in a neighbourhood many Vancouverites perceive as 'dangerous'. However, the fact remains that this petition from a group of citizens with little

access to power, and the subsequent official sanction of their expressed wish, contributed to destabilizing traditional notions of property and ownership, and challenged the perception of skid row residents as “abject and...forgettable” (Burk, Beneath and Before 953).

\* \* \* \*

There is a paucity of personal space in the DTES, which results in public space being used and inhabited in different ways compared to other parts of the city. Most housing in the community is found in single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels, the acronym referring to small individual sleeping rooms of approximately 100 square feet housed in large multi-dwelling buildings. Bathrooms are shared, as are kitchen facilities in the rare instances where these are available. Unlike traditional public space, which is impersonal and occupied anonymously, the sidewalks, alleys and parks of the DTES are extensions of the restricted quarters of most residents.

In 1995, endeavouring to make plain that the urban decay and obvious neglect synonymous with the DTES were not “a function of the presence of human derelicts” (Blomley 39), but rather the result of economic decline, members of the DTES community came together and began to look after the space surrounding the vacant Woodward’s store by “sweep[ing] the streets and clear[ing] up litter”, and painting the walled up windows (Blomley 39).

The acts of cleaning and painting are domestic acts. I clean my house. I decorate its walls. They are, of course, dependent upon an entitlement and an obligation. If it’s my house, I can and should

maintain and improve it. Similarly, in cleaning and painting Woodward's, activists were enacting a claim of ownership. For one of the organizers: "Woodward's belongs to the neighbourhood. (Blomley 39)

The poverty of DTES residents and their scarcity of personal living space means that "much [of] life [is] lived in public view" (Burk, Beneath and Before 953). Thus, usually private situations and circumstances, such as interpersonal disputes, substance misuse, mental illness and infirmity, which tend to occur behind closed doors in other parts of the city, are available for all to witness on the streets of the DTES. As Culhane states "wealth serves to conceal and privatize what, here, poverty reveals to the public gaze" (596).

In 2002 the community's original "claim of ownership" of the Woodward's building amplified, as neighbourhood residents and activists took over the empty department store as part of a campaign to demand affordable housing. Setting up camp on the sidewalk around the building, they pushed the already hazy boundary between public and private life and space to the point of dissolution. The tents, blankets and exposed fragments of personal life covering the sidewalk meant that, in effect "walking down Hastings Street, one entered people's bedrooms" (Blomley 44).

The protest, dubbed the 'Woodward's Squat', lasted over three months and managed to focus not only the province's but the nation's attention on the increasing cost and decreasing availability of shelter in the city of Vancouver. While the 'squat' did not manage to obtain sole custody of the building to the

community, it did manage to persuade city council to designate 200 of its future dwelling units as non-market housing. This achievement validated and reinforced the resident's custodial attitude and their sense of ownership towards civic space in their neighbourhood.

The gulf between the ways residents versus non-residents perceive the DTES is of the utmost importance when examining issues of space within this community. The lobbying for CRAB Park and the Woodward's Squat were demands that resulted in the granting of physical space to residents of the DTES. Originating from within this 'skid row' community, both these petitions depended upon the approval of outside non-residents for their completion, in one instance the Parks Board and city council in the other(both elected by and representing the public).

The DTES population is particularly disfavoured by those who do not live in the neighbourhood as the community's history of abandonment and the moniker 'skid row' suggest. Poor and often forsaken by civic, provincial and national social systems and bodies, the community inhabits their immediate physical and public environment as if it were private, but shared property. The third site, the memorial boulder located in CRAB Park, exists against this backdrop.

Like the designated non-market housing units in the Woodward's development and the establishment of CRAB Park, the memorial was created by and for the community; it is enacted in a public setting and is a declaration of paucity and an articulation of absence. However, unlike the park and the housing

in Woodward's, which were responses to the lack of adequate living space in the DTES, the memorial boulder marks the loss of life.

At the same time that Don Larson was lobbying the Parks Board for a green space in the DTES, residents of the community were aware that women from their neighbourhood were vanishing. All were "street-involved", all disappeared from the same area, and the majority were of First Nations ancestry. Char LaFontaine, herself a former sex worker and addict, now housing coordinator for PACE (Prostitute Alternatives: Counselling & Education), remembers, "I watched them one at a time disappear. I watched them vanish into thin air" (Culbert).

In a perpetual state of mourning, the community attempted to enlist the assistance of the authorities in locating their missing neighbours. The police, however, failed to investigate the disappearances. Many activists now believe that it was the missing women's status as "so-called throwaway people" (Skelton) that permitted their growing numbers to be ignored.

In 1997—some sixteen years after the first woman went missing, four years before the Vancouver Police and the RCMP would jointly form the "Missing Women Task Force", and nine years after the establishment of CRAB Park--the memorial boulder was placed on the southern edge of Burrard Inlet. Placed in the sight lines of the Main Street police station, it was conceived of and paid for by family members of those "murdered in the Downtown Eastside".

While the boulder expressly honours "women and...native Aboriginal women" the memorial's inscription does not name a single individual. Without

tombstones and in some cases even a body to bury, the question of whether or not to incorporate names into the memorial's design became a cause of considerable deliberation for its designers.

THE HEART  
  
IN HONOUR OF THE SPIRIT OF THE PEOPLE  
MURDERED IN THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE.  
MANY WERE WOMEN AND MANY WERE NATIVE  
ABORIGINAL WOMEN. MANY OF THESE CASES  
REMAIN UNSOLVED. ALL MY RELATIONS.  
  
HAS ITS OWN MEMORY

Inscription on CRAB Park boulder

In the end, those responsible decided to forgo including names on the boulder for three reasons. The first and perhaps most disheartening of these was that the list of those murdered would continue to grow, and that there would never be enough space on the boulder for all the names yet to come. Second, many of the families of the dead did not want their names listed publicly. Lastly, even many in the neighbourhood "didn't know them all" (Burk, *In Sight, Out of View* 55).

The memorial boulder is considerable in size. It occupies an open and public space and commemorates many women made famous during the trial of Robert William Pickton. However, it remains surprisingly unknown. One wonders whether it is the boulder's vaguely familiar shape against the backdrop

of mountains and water, its unobtrusive location at the edge of an underutilized park, or something about its content that renders it unnoticeable.

The Woodward's Squat and CRAB Park were both petitions for space addressed primarily to local governing bodies, the Parks Board, city council and the provincial legislature, and required reciprocation from outside for their successful realization. As demands they were successful in that they managed to secure some, if not all, of the space requested. However, the direction of the boulder's communication and the content of its message are not as simple to decipher.

Commonly a tool of the powerful, many traditional memorials, perhaps especially war memorials, belie the complexity of the events they commemorate by responding to "violence...with grief or a sense of noble sacrifice" (Burk, *In Sight, Out of View* 52). In effect, they transform inherent "opacity, gradations, ambiguities and contradictions" (Marschall 148) into seamless, palatable packages that reinforce dominant versions of history.

Not only can a memorial reduce the complexity of the events it commemorates by abridging and abbreviating the past in service of the future, it can also subsume the qualities of the individuals whose demise it marks, reducing their identity to that granted them through the nature of their deaths.

Let us consider the example of soldiers whose death is commemorated by a war memorial. Through the process of memorialization the fallen cease to be considered as unique humans being in the public eye and are re-coded instead as heroes or martyrs in the legend of nationhood. This stipulated veneration

invariably impacts the public perception of living individuals (in this case, soldiers), their treatment and, by extension, the way in which the group they belong to (in this case, the military) is understood. Therefore, official reverence for the war dead can inhibit—or may even preclude—any examination (far less any condemnation) of transgressions of and against the living soldier. This can have wide reaching implications. For instance, it may entice enlistment from those seeking heroic status.

In this example a positive assessment, even veneration, of the dead can lead to regard for the living. However, in the case of the boulder this dynamic functions in reverse, with the public's negative perception of the living undermining the value of the individual dead. As stated by Huey and Kemple, the boulder commemorates those who are perceived by outsiders to be “uniquely immoral, pathological, delinquent or simply ‘deviant’” (Huey & Kemple 2306), and thus somehow responsible for their own plight.

The boulder in CRAB Park adheres to some conventional memorial norms in that it is made of stone, it includes a dedication, is placed in a public setting, and honours those who are no longer living. However, it deviates from this pedigree in important ways. Often figurative, larger than life and situated above eye-level, conventional memorials are designed to induce a sense of the heroic, or triumphant. Eschewing valiant imagery, the architects of the boulder opted instead for what Marschall calls a “minimalist solution”(159). Its frankness of form echoes the contemporary trend towards simplicity in memorial design reflected in Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans memorial in Washington, and in several

Holocaust memorials (such as Peter Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, the Holocaust Memorial on the Danube in Budapest, and New York's Holocaust Memorial Park). It also evokes Theodor Adorno's famous contention that extreme terror and suffering are beyond representation (Marschall 159).

Rather than comforting the visitor with "the assertion that the deaths were not in vain...and that something positive has been achieved" (Marschall 161), the boulder, like the Woodward's Squat and CRAB Park chooses to honour those generally considered insignificant and "invokes social responsibility for the violences [it] names" (Burk, *In Sight, Out of View* 52).

Placed in the landscape a memorial is purportedly erected to mark loss, to stand guard against forgetting and to promote learning, in essence to "encourage remembrance of the dead or painful event by giving it a narrative form" (Marschall 159). Emanating the admonition "lest we forget" across the landscape, the underlying assumption of memorial tradition is that the continued recollection of a commemorated event will play a role in preventing its recurrence. In terms of marking loss, guarding against forgetting and promoting learning, the boulder's presence along with its inscription does indicate absence. However, whether it guards against forgetting and promotes learning is unclear.

As a transmission, customarily emitted and installed by those in power, the memorial's message is intended for the general public. The boulder's possible public can be separated into three groups, each akin to the ring of a tree or the layer of an onion. The innermost circle is composed of the family and friends of those murdered on the DTES, the second layer of those who did not

know the dead personally, but who are familiar with the content of their lives, and the outermost ring, necessarily the largest group, being those who have no tangible connection to the murdered at all. The significance of the boulder for each of these groups is different and its location in CRAB Park strongly affects the message it emanates to each.

For the innermost circle, those who were close to the dead, the boulder, like Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, functions as a stand-in gravesite and grants a designated place to mourn those who have no tombstone in the company of others dealing with equally intimate losses. While the boulder's location is public, the fact that it is rarely visited means that the site offers a measure of privacy and therefore permits quiet personal interaction, including the leaving of tokens and letters that remain undisturbed over time.

The second ring, composed of those who did not know the dead personally but who were familiar, whether through the sharing of their neighbourhood or circumstances, with the content of their lives the memorial's location is less effective. While the boulder is located in a public park and thus theoretically accessible, the exact characteristic that benefits the inner circle is prohibitive to the two others. The memorial does not lie in the path of daily life; it is not on the way to anywhere or near a highly frequented landmark for example. Rather its location makes it a destination visitors must be motivated to seek out.

Finally, for the outermost ring of the public, or those who have no connection with the murdered at all, beyond their common gender or their common humanity, the boulder's location serves to thwart remembrance. If, as

discussed above, memorials are meant to promote learning by maintaining memory in tangible form in the service of prevention, then the 'out of sight' location of the boulder in effect eclipses that message. The inner circle will always remember their dead and the conditions of their demise with or without the boulder. It is for those in the second and third circle, in essence the general public, that the boulder-as-memorial is aimed. Given that its message is frustrated by its position in the landscape, is the boulder actually a memorial at all?

In attempting to answer this question, it is important to re-visit the particular characteristics of public versus private space in the DTES. We need to consider how the memorial boulder in CRAB Park can be understood in a community where alleyways, street corners and parks are treated as extensions of private individual living space and where residents have demonstrated a collective attitude of ownership towards these types of public spaces which otherwise are generally reserved for privately owned land and property.

The location of the boulder is intimately linked to the dead it commemorates and influences the reception of memory it seeks to secure. It is not simply the characteristics of its site and the specific semantics of space in the DTES that impact the boulder's status as memorial. Integrating the work of Huey and Kemple into this consideration, it is also the general public's attitude towards the boulder's community (understood as a 'skid row') that shape its status as memorial.

Huey and Kemple have provided us with a framework to understand the dynamics that shape the status and treatment of communities like the DTES. I would like to introduce the work of Dara Culhane at this point to further build on their theory regarding 'skid row' residents and to further focus on a specific part of that population, Aboriginal women, whom the boulder expressly honours.

In her article, "Their Spirits Live within Us", Culhane identifies tendencies that influence how the Canadian public perceives Aboriginal women. She argues that the general public tends to favour depictions of Aboriginal women that emphasize "exotic and spectacular representation[s] of drugs, sex, violence and crime rather than the ordinary mundane brutality of everyday poverty" (Culhane 595). This propensity is similar to the general public's refusal to consider the role poverty plays in the spectacle of life visible on the streets of the DTES. Here the perceived 'public disorder' is understood to result from the degenerate nature of individuals rather the paucity of personal living space and overall lack of resources.

A preference for the fantastic allows those who survey, rather than participate in the DTES to dissociate themselves from the community and its residents. In doing so they can ignore any part they may play in perpetuating the current state of affairs, keep thoughts of responsibility at bay and foil any effort to trace and dissect the intricate means by which their actions, lifestyle and government may be enabling the suffering depicted to occur or to continue (Sontag 102).

According to Culhane, even when poverty is recognized as a shaping factor in the lives of Aboriginal women it becomes medicalized and/or pathologized. In this analysis the poor subject is understood to be ill or delinquent, an arrangement that continues to ensure that distance is maintained between the viewer and the viewed. Cloaking poverty in the jargon of science transforms it from confusing and uncomfortable knowledge to controllable truth.

Culhane refers to “a relative lack of interest in resistance practised and visions of change articulated by [Aboriginal women]” (Culhane 595). This propensity echoes the dichotomy detailed by Huey and Kemple; while outsiders view the ‘skid row’ community as a site of “social *dis*organization” (Huey & Kemple 2314) its residents understand their neighbourhood in terms of a “variety of networks of personal concern and social investment” (Huey & Kemple 2316). Again, by denying the simple tangible realities of individuals living in the DTES the general public can renounce the community without examination or discomfort.

These tendencies, as identified by Culhane, coupled with Huey and Kemple’s contentions, result in, at best, the misrepresentation and, at worst, the invisibility of ‘skid row’ residents and Aboriginal women in the public eye. This distortion serves to reinforce the boulder’s marginality as a memorial.

The other two claims for space in the DTES examined in this paper, CRAB Park and the Woodward’s Squat, were both visible beyond the community, each had a clear relationship with outside sanctioning powers and required

reciprocation for their realization. The boulder, however, whose origins also rest in the community, continues to exist in obscurity.

In examining the history of the DTES and the insights of Huey, Kemple, and Culhane we can see that the population of the DTES is composed of individuals considered marginal, invisible, or irrelevant to Canadian society and discarded by or unnecessary to the Canadian economy. The reason for the boulder's apparent insignificance now becomes plain—it attempts to promote the memory of those we wish to forget. Its position as memorial is jeopardized not simply by its location on an unwanted tract of land but more importantly by the “outcast” (Huey & Kemple 2317) status of those it honours. In lacking the necessary audience and veneration to be considered a memorial, the boulder mirrors our discomfort with poverty, ageing, illness, incapacity and difference, whether foreign or Aboriginal.

The insider-circle-status of those who do use the site, its concealed location and the lack of public validation regarding the circumstances and value of the dead it honours make the boulder more like a private gravesite than a public memorial. Akin to those massacred in the Holocaust and *los desaparecidos* in Argentina, many of the murdered and missing from the DTES “share the absence of a proper burial site...key to the nurturing of human memory” (Huysen 18). The boulder answers this call. As a public marker of absence, however, the boulder is a bound and limited gesture. In attempting to intone the names of the nameless, identify the unidentified, and repatriate the homeless it speaks to the wind.



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