Becoming American: Visual Narratives of Immigration and Acculturation

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Over the course of the 2011-2 school year, I planned to research, write and draw a graphic novel based on my own family’s American experience. One of the most valuable lessons I learned in the process was that good work cannot be rushed. I sifted through dozens of CDs of family pictures, read and reread diaries and letters, wrote and rewrote scripts. Over the fall break in October 2011, my mother and I were able to fly to Detroit to meet and interview my aunt and great-aunt. I had the invaluable opportunity to see for myself the American city where my immigrant family had first taken root a century earlier. Back at Bowdoin, I mapped out a structure for the story I had in mind. A few weeks later, I discarded it entirely. The task of narrating my family’s journey, so as to do justice to my relatives both living and dead, was a daunting one.

A few months into my project, I went back to the graphic novels which had first inspired me: the work of Will Eisner, Marjane Satrapi, Art Spiegelman, Alison Bechdel. I read them again. Determined to keep working, I started drawing portraits of family members from the digital picture archive I had accumulated. The story still lacked structure, but it seemed better to start laying the foundations as far ahead of time as possible. I spent hours on the phone with my mother, traded emails with amateur genealogists from various branches of the family, and searched the library system for Jewish ethnographies and immigration stories to fill in the gaps. I was learning a lot, though the most sobering lesson involved the ability to realistically assess my own capacity for very personal storytelling work.

Then one morning, as I was pacing around my studio area and talking aloud to a friend about my difficulty structuring the story, everything fell into place. I knew exactly what to do and how to do it. The giddiness of renewed inspiration was more than enough to bolster my flagging motivation, though by that point I knew I would not have a completed product by the end of the year, as I had hoped. Instead, I have continued work on this project through the summer after graduating from Bowdoin.

At the Pacific Northwest Writers’ Association conference in June 2012, I was able to pitch my project to literary agents who deal with graphic novels. Four agents asked me to send them the full manuscript, while a fifth encouraged me to independently contact small comics publishing houses. At the time of writing this report, I am preparing my project for submission to these agencies, and hope to see it in the not-so-distant future as a published product. While the process shaped up very differently from what I had anticipated, I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to undertake the creation of this visual narrative. The possibility of being a professional graphic novel artist, which was never more than a vague dream at best, has begun to seem much more real and immediate than I had ever previously imagined. Without the opportunity provided by the Surdna Fellowship, this work would not have been possible.

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