Red Diapers, Pink Stories

Color Photography and Self-Outing in Jewish Women’s Comics

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Abstract:

In this essay, I analyze the function of color photography in autobiographical comics through a comparative analysis of confessional works of comics by two Jewish women artists, Jewish-American cartoonist Dianne Noomin’s 2003 comics spread “I Was a Red Diaper Baby” and Israeli cartoonist Ilana Zeffren’s Pink Story (written in Hebrew). While exploring the tensions evoked in these works between comics and photography and between black-and-white and color representations, I highlight an important difference in the nature of the images used in each work, evoking yet another tension: that between private and public. I demonstrate that these works by Noomin and Zeffren represent the array of private and public photographs available to any autobiographer, ranging from public images taken from posters, magazines, and video screenshots to intimate family snapshots. I argue that the choice between personal and public photographs in these works poetically determines the path of self-outing in each work, thus representing the two key options for such an act of self-outing, namely, using the personal sphere as a path to the public one or vice-versa. Finally, I address the role of Jewish identity in these two self-outing comics. I posit that while Jewish heritage is not a major factor in either work, the fact that in both cases the community of reference is a minority group within a Jewish community plays a significant role, introducing specific dilemmas into the already complicated identity struggle. By shedding light on the unique function of color photography in autobiographical comics about ethnographically charged self-outing experiences, the analysis of these specific works introduces to a wider audience two important yet insufficiently explored voices of women cartoonists.

1 The author would like to thank Nancy Pedri and the readers of Image & Narrative for their constructive suggestions, as well as the Israel Institute and the Program for Jewish Civilization at Georgetown University for their support. A special thanks to Dianne Noomin and Ilana Zeffren for the generous permission to reproduce their work in this essay.
Résumé:
Dans cet article, j’analyse la fonction de la photographie de couleur dans la bande dessinée autobiographique par le biais d’une comparaison entre deux œuvres réalisées par des artistes juives, “I Was a Red Diaper Baby” (2003), par l’auteure judéo-américaine Dianne Noomin et Pink Story, par la dessinatrice israélienne Ilana Zeffren (en hébreu). Mon analyse des tensions entre photographie et bande dessinée, d’une part, et blanc et noir et couleur, d’autre part, souligne non seulement les différences entre types d’images, mais aussi la tension entre privé et public. Je montre que les travaux de Noomin et Zeffren représentent l’éventail des images privées et publiques qui sont à la disposition de n’importe quel autobiographe. Cet éventail va des images publiques prélevées sur des posters ou dans des magazines aux captures d’écran vidéo et aux photos de famille intimes. Je défends l’idée que le choix entre images privées et images publiques dans ces œuvres détermine la manière dont s’y construit l’autobiographie. Il en résulte deux stratégies fondamentales de construction de soi : du personnel au public ou inversement. Enfin, j’aborde la question de l’identité juive dans ces deux œuvres consacrées à la quête identitaire. Selon mon analyse, l’héritage juif n’est un facteur décisif dans aucune des deux créations. En revanche, le fait que dans les deux cas la communauté de référence est une minorité à l’intérieur de la communauté juive est un élément essentiel, qui crée des dilemmes spécifiques dans la construction identitaire déjà fort complexe en elle-même. En jetant une nouvelle lumière sur la fonction particulière de la photo de couleur dans la bande dessinée consacrée à la recherche de soi, l’analyse de ces deux œuvres cherche aussi à présenter au grand public le travail de deux femmes-artistes encore trop peu étudiées.

Keywords: autobiography; comics; photography; Ilana Zeffren; Diane Noomin; Jewish identity; American communists; LGBQT in Israel
In this essay, I analyze the function of color photography in autobiographical comics through a comparative analysis of confessional works of comics by two Jewish women artists. The first is the 2003 comics spread “I Was a Red Diaper Baby” by Jewish-American cartoonist Dianne Noomin, which portrays Noomin’s experiences of growing up as the daughter of communist spies in America in the 1950s. The second text is the 2005 graphic memoir *Pink Story* (written in Hebrew) by Israeli cartoonist Ilana Zeffren that tells the story of her growing up and coming out as a lesbian in Israel in the 1990s. Both Noomin and Zeffren were recently included in the exhibition “Graphic Details,” which opened at the Cartoon Art Museum in San Francisco in 2010 and toured around the world until 2013, and presented confessional comics by eighteen Jewish women cartoonists (Lightman, “Preface” 1). This joint study expands the scholarly attention to the contribution of Noomin and Zeffren to the genre of autobiographical comics by exploring both artists’ unique usage of photography, especially color photography, in their work.

In “Red Diaper Baby,” Noomin uses family snapshots and focuses mainly on her personal story. However, by alluding to the 1950 trial of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg within her narrative, Noomin turns her personal story and her decision to expose it into a public outing of the often repressed communist past of small parts of the Jewish American community. Conversely, Zeffren packs *Pink Story* with public images, from color screenshots of television shows and films to magazine and newspaper images of public figures, and refrains from including any personal photographs in the narrative. She recounts the history of the LGBQT community in Israel as a way to relate to her personal story of coming out. She does so by intertwining and juxtaposing her personal story with that of the Israeli LGBQT community, marking the very writing of the memoir as a significant step in her personal process. In short, while Noomin addresses collective subjects through her personal story and images, Zeffren’s channel to her personal story runs through communal history and public images. Through a close reading of the usage of photographs in each work, I will argue that the insertion of color photography enhances the act of self-outing in comics, especially when the identity in question is associated with a specific color. As suggested already by the titles of these works, Noomin’s comics alludes to the association of red with Communism, and Zeffren’s to that of pink with the LGBQT community, and in both works color photography plays a significant poetic role. Both authors allow many of these photographs to function as independent panels, thus bringing to the fore both the connections and the tensions between photography and comics. In short, by sharing with comics the graphic aspiration to capture a moving moment in a relatively small square, photographs lend themselves easily to inspiring or becoming a comics panel. At the same time, with comics’ traditional preference of black ink on white pages and combination of text and image, color photographs also carry with them a sense of “foreignness” into the comics page.

While exploring the tensions evoked in these works between comics and photography and between black-and-white and color representations, I will highlight an important difference in the nature of the images used in each work, evoking yet another tension: that between private and public. In short, I will demonstrate that these works by Noomin and Zeffren represent the array of private and public photographs available to any autobiographer, ranging from public images taken from posters, magazines, and video screenshots to intimate family snapshots. I argue that the choice between personal and public photographs in these works poetically determines the path of self-outing in each work, thus
representing the two key options for such an act of self-outing, namely, using the personal sphere as a path to the public one or vice-versa.

Finally, I will address the role of Jewish identity in these two self-outing comics. Both Noomin and Zeffren reflect in their work a certain detachment from Jewish tradition in its most strict definition. Yet, while Jewish heritage is not a major factor in either work, the fact that in both cases the community of reference is a minority group within a Jewish community plays a significant role, introducing specific dilemmas into the already complicated identity struggle. By shedding light on the unique function of color photography in autobiographical comics about ethnographically charged self-outing experiences, the analysis of these specific works introduces to a wider audience two important yet insufficiently explored voices of women cartoonists.

From “Baby Talk” to “Red Diaper Baby”

As comics scholar Hillary Chute notes, women artists were central in introducing the autobiographical mode to underground comix in the sixties and seventies (Graphic Women 20-24) and Noomin was a prominent driving force in that milieu. Alongside Aline Kominsky Crumb and Linda Barry, she is considered one of the founding mothers of feminine (and feminist) confessional comics that established “a mode of comics narrative -- exploring the self seriously -- that has since become dominant within literary comics” (Chute, Graphic Women 14). Indeed, Noomin was generally more reluctant to produce direct autobiographical comics, creating instead the lightheaded alter ego of DiDi Glitz, who became a recurring character in her work. Thus, her induction into the hall of fame of feminine autobiographical comics is often attributed to her involvement in various projects such as Wimmen’s Comix (as a major contributor) and Twisted Sisters (as co-founder and co-editor alongside Kominsky Crumb). Yet, together with her involvement in such endeavors that gave rise to some of the most influential and groundbreaking autobiographical comics by women, Noomin’s own experimentations with the autobiographical mode, rare as they may have been, should echo loudly in that imaginary hall. A growing scholarly attention has been directed in recent years to Noomin’s 1991 “Baby Talk: A Tale of 3/4 Miscarriages,” a powerful comics exploration of her personal trauma of recurring miscarriages. To this important work I would like to add “I Was a Red Diaper Baby” as another significant milestone in the genre of autobiographical comics. Furthermore, I suggest that Noomin’s painstaking narrative about her personal trauma of miscarriages in fact gave birth to the autobiographical mode in her work.

Following the impersonal title -- “A Tale of 3/4 Miscarriages” -- the text opens with the story of a fictitious character, Glenda. However, “Baby Talk” soon takes a sharp turn when in a pivotal scene Noomin depicts her famous alter ego DiDi Glitz dragging a comics version of herself by the hand into a panel, thus forcing Noomin to stop hiding behind the fictitious character (Glitz-2-Go 91). In her analysis of this scene, Sara Lightman argues that “the rip that is drawn into the comic seems to birth Diane Noomin the artist within the comic” (“‘Cartoon Tears’” 216). Indeed, in order for this birth of the self to take place, Noomin summons DiDi, her camouflauge for so many years, as a metaphorical midwife. However, a close exploration of “Red Diaper Baby” will reveal that Lightman’s argument is accurate not only in relation to the pivotal moment in “Baby Talk,” but also in Noomin’s work as a whole.
Published a decade later, “I Was a Red Diaper Baby” marks the successful delivery of the self in Noomin’s oeuvre, as already indicated in the title which is phrased in the first person and includes a photograph of Noomin as a baby. This is not only a visual statement about the autobiographical mode of this text, but also a reference to the visually bleak title of “Baby Talk” comprised of alarmingly open nappy pins and a dripping-blood font. When contrasted with the earlier title, the title of “Red Diaper Baby” seems to visually celebrate the poetic outcome of the traumatic miscarriages tale -- namely, the birth of the self. It is thanks to that dramatic moment in “Baby Talk” that in “Red Diaper Baby” Noomin not only speaks in her own voice from the outset, but also walks the extra biographical mile of including photographs of herself at different ages within the narrative. Indeed, as Chute notes, in every biographical work of comics the first-person narrator “is graphically visible on the page” (Graphic Women 4), but the inclusion of personal photographs carries the autobiographical comics even closer to its roots in the memoir realm, one of the earliest literary genres to include photographs within its pages.

While it is crucial to remember that it is DiDi who assists Noomin in delivering this shift, the leap from DiDi’s early superficiality to the confessional voice of “Red Diaper Baby” was a significant one. As Stephen Tabachnick notes, the transfer from black-and-white to a hyper realistic style that involves color and photographs, and from an alter ego narrative to an overtly autobiographical one, also involved a shift in the political sense. Unlike Didi, who is “not very political or even philosophical,” this comics “is about Noomin herself and reveals the basis for her own political ideas” (170). In that sense, “Red Diaper Baby” is Noomin’s second act of self-outing in comics, after “Baby Talk.” In both cases, Noomin reveals the complicated background -- albeit on a somewhat different traumatic scale -- for a known fact about herself. In “Baby Talk,” she exposes her recurring trauma of miscarriages that stand in the background of her childlessness. In “Red Diaper Baby,” she reveals the biographical background for her stated radical political views. In using the terminology of “coming out” in reference to both of Noomin’s texts, I follow the author’s own choice to describe the aforementioned scene in “Baby Talk” as a moment of “coming out from behind the cartoon page” (“Wimmin and Comix” n. pag., emphasis added).

To be sure, the trauma depicted in “Red Diaper Baby” does not involve physical suffering as that which the experience of miscarriages involves. Instead, this work equally deals with the exposure of a personal secret that deeply shaped Noomin’s identity and self-perception, and which is sometimes perceived by others who experienced it as shameful or embarrassing, thus similarly evoking a sense of coming out.

As mentioned, Noomin includes a photograph of herself already in the title of “Red Diaper Baby.” More specifically, she inserts it in the background of the words Red Diaper which appear in red stencil font and uses the same shade of red to ‘dress’ her baby self in a red diaper (Fig. 1). This choice has an obvious tongue-in-cheek quality, as the term clearly alludes to an upbringing in the spirit of Communism and not the actual diapering of babies in red.

2. See Lightman (“Cartoon Tears” 211); and Leonard (79).
3. On the practice of including photographs in memoirs and autobiographies, see Adams.
4. Lightman uses the terminology of “coming out” in her analysis of “Baby Talk,” albeit without referring to Noomin’s own usage of it. She juxtaposes Noomin’s confession of keeping a DiDi costume in her closet with DiDi’s role as the catalyst forcing Noomin to “come out of the closet” regarding her miscarriages (“‘Cartoon Tears’” 209-210).
5. For a similar usage of the term, see Kornbluth; Kaplan and Shapiro; and Laxer.
Apart from its humorous effect, this choice is also crucial in signalling Noomin’s identification with her upbringing. By retroactively ‘dressing’ her baby self in a red diaper, Noomin negates the possible interpretation of the title as suggesting a tale of an involuntary indoctrination or brainwashing of an innocent baby. Instead, she visually marks this text as one that “reinforces [her] statements about herself and her radical views” (Tabachnick 170). Furthermore, although Noomin embeds three actual color photographs in the comics, the color red appears only in the title and closing image, creating a visual connection between the titular photograph and the ultimate one. This is especially true in light of the fact that in both photographs Noomin is seen at different ages wearing a red garment. But while the red diaper is superimposed onto the baby photograph retroactively, the photograph that concludes the narrative shows a ten-year-old Noomin standing next to her sister, Ronnie, on the external stairs of a building, both wearing identical red cardigans (Fig. 2).
Noomin’s decision to envelope this first-person narrative about her communist upbringing with photographs of herself in red garments raises the issue of hidden costumes and closeted identities, which Sarah Lightman evokes with regards to Noomin’s usage of DiDi as a “coming-out catalyst” in “Baby Talk” (211; see n. 3). In this case, however, the closeted costume is not a catalyst in the self-outing process, but a visual emblem of the secret itself: the roots of Noomin’s persevering left-wing political views.

While highlighting the fact that her parents’ communist activity was secretive and they were under orders to assimilate into their surrounding environment, Noomin’s comics clearly elucidates that her parents’ true ideological views somehow seeped through to their children. This duality is visually echoed in the juxtaposition Noomin draws between this final image and the photograph appearing next to her statement about her parents acting under orders to “fit in” (118). Unlike the color photograph of Noomin and her sister, this photograph is a black-and-white photograph of her parents walking side by side in an American urban street in similar winter coats (Fig. 3).

Noomin uses the several visual parallels between the photographs -- two family members standing side by side and wearing similar garments -- to highlight the visual difference between them. This visual juxtaposition captures the very essence of the duality at the heart of her parents’ closeted identity: an effort to disguise their ideology while nevertheless bequeathing it to their children. If the parents’ black-and-white photograph seems to blend in with the black-and-white comics sketches, the red cardigans in the final photograph become the “punctum,” to use Roland Barthes’s concept (26), not only of this photograph, but of the entire work.

The only other two color photographs Noomin includes in the comics are individual portraits of her parents that contain very little color outside the gray scale of black-and-white photographs (Fig. 2).
Significantly, these pale color photographs appear next to the reddish color photograph of Noomin and her sister. That the color photographs of Noomin’s parents could have very well been in black and white further underscores the degree to which Noomin’s parents followed the instructions to fit in and kept their communist agenda hidden. By contrasting these photographs with the concluding one, Noomin reveals how her parents nevertheless secretly transferred that agenda to their daughters, who unlike their parents could be dressed in red without the risk of exposure. The color photograph of Noomin and her sister functions as an intensification of Barthes’s notion of ça a été or “that-has-been” referring to photography’s unique capability of capturing reality and the past (76-77). While Barthes ascribes this ability to any photograph, whether in black-and-white or color, within Noomin’s comics it is the color photograph of Noomin and her sister dressed in red that visually exposes some truth about her past. As such, it visually echoes the premise of the entire comics or Noomin’s attempt to excavate the truth about her upbringing.

Yet, despite this attempt and the subconscious acts of ideological transmission, the caption of the final image -- “Many questions remain for my sister and myself…” (119) -- aptly summarizes what Noomin’s comics as a whole conveys. Namely, that the exact nature of her parents’ political activity is still not entirely clear to Noomin and was even less so while she was growing up. In fact, the comics’ point of departure is the earliest unanswered question in Noomin’s life: the question of her mother’s absence from her first birthday. The speech bubbles Noomin adds to the concluding photograph introduce two more questions to those left unanswered throughout the comics (Fig. 2). Her sister’s balloon reads: “Didn’t Mom say they quit the party when the Hitler-Stalin pact was signed?!” In return, Noomin replies: “What do you think Dad meant when he said ‘What Mother and I did was worse than the Rosenbergs.’ I mean, he believed they were innocent… right?!?” (119).

These ambiguities notwithstanding, Noomin concludes her comics with a statement expressing a lingering identification with the ideological spirit behind her parents’ activity, noting: “I keep putting off sending for my parents’ Freedom of Information Act files from the Dept. of Justice… Do I really want to communicate with John Ashcroft?” (119). By expressing her reluctance to communicate with the U.S. Attorney General of the George W. Bush administration, even at the cost of deferring the discovery of answers to these and other troubling questions, Noomin links her own political stance to that of her parents. Read in connection with the concluding image it follows of a ten-year-old grinning Noomin wearing a red cardigan, this statement is an affirmation of Noomin’s act of self-outing in this comics. It reaffirms her choice not only to expose her upbringing, but also to identify with it and thus to reclaim it -- indeed, to wear the red cardigan with a smile and the red diaper out of free choice.

In “Red Diaper Baby,” Noomin does not lament her parents’ choices or apologize for them; rather, she identifies with them. Furthermore, she does so in the medium that was one of the most popular platforms in America for anti-communist plots when Noomin was growing up. Noomin not only tells her parents’ story in the first person, but also writes it in her handwriting and embeds in it her drawings and private photographs. As Chute notes, these elements are tightly connected since “there is an intimacy to reading handwritten marks on the printed page, an intimacy that works in tandem with the sometimes visceral effects of presenting ‘private’ images” (Graphic Women 10). Noomin brings this process to its extreme by superimposing handwritten speech balloons onto many of the photographs. On the one
hand, in allowing photographs to function in “Red Diaper Baby” as individual panels, Noomin charges her comics with the aesthetics of hyper personal genres such as the family album or the scrapbook. That photographs lend themselves so easily to this graphic usage suggests the close connection between the family album and confessional comics. This sense is further accentuated through Noomin’s occasional usage of photo-corners and family album-style captions, which are the only instances in the comics where she does not use an all-caps font. On the other hand, while speech bubbles fit seamlessly into the drawn comics image, they stand out when superimposed onto snapshots and call to mind the recorded soundtrack of a historical documentary film that combines stills and a voice-over commentary. By juxtaposing private and public modes of expression, Noomin poetically echoes the tension that is at the heart of her text between her personal experiences and their link to a wider issue in the history of the Jewish community in America.

Towards the end of the comics, Noomin describes a traumatic event that took place during her teens when FBI agents paid a visit to their house in Brooklyn after questioning their neighbor about her mother. Noomin concludes this scene, in which a sleepless comics version of her teen self is begging her younger sister to allow her into her bed, with a caption that notes: “That summer I read the juicy parts of ‘The Judgment of Julius & Ethel Rosenberg’ by John Wexley” (119; Fig. 2). Up to this point, Noomin described herself as occupied mainly with teenagers’ problems and almost completely ignorant of her parents’ activity. For example, when relating their move back to Brooklyn from Long Island, she notes the jobs each of her parents took as part of their efforts to “fit in” while she was “very busy learning about make-out parties & bowling alleys” (119; Fig. 2). Of course, Noomin the narrator is aware that by being an average American teenage girl she was in effect unknowingly complying with her parents’ orders. However, by linking the FBI visit and reading about the Rosenberg trial the following summer, Noomin marks the point when some sort of subconscious understanding of her parents’ actions began to formulate in her mind.

At this point of the narrative, the link between the private experience and the public reality is drawn. Into her personal narrative, drawn in her handwriting and embedded with her photographs, Noomin inserts a reference to a book -- *The Judgment of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg* by John Wexley -- about a case similar to the private case of her parents, with the difference that it became public and ended with death by execution. By evoking the aesthetics of both a private photo album or scrapbook and the documentary film, Noomin offers her personal story as a way of revisiting what many Jewish Americans, whether critical of the Rosenbergs or of their harsh punishment, perceive as a collective trauma. Noomin’s choice to conclude this narrative with a color photograph in which her parents documented her dressed in red in public visually echoes the fine line between private experiences and public events, between biography and history.

*From a Pink Story to the Family Album*

Two years after Noomin published her red-shaded comics spread on her communist upbringing in America, Israeli cartoonist Ilana Zeffren published a graphic memoir on her experience of coming out as a lesbian, aptly shaded in pink. Indeed, the color pink appears on the cover of the memoir not only textually (the title reads “Pink Story” in light blue letters), but also visually within the cover image
(Fig. 4). It shows a partial drawn self-portrait of Zeffren (from the nose up) with a miniature cat on her head and a pair of pink “devil horns” that are revealed to be Zeffren’s way of visually reflecting gay identity, whether her own or that of others. To the pink color, itself a reappropriation of the pink triangle homosexuals were made to wear under Nazi rule, as Zeffren herself notes in one of the appendices to *Pink Story* (145), she adds a visual reappropriation of acts of ad-busting or defacing which are sometimes directed at gay public images.

The cat in the cover image, who is later introduced as Spaghetti and appears here on Zeffren’s head, has become the trademark of her comics strip, “Rishumon” (“A tiny sketch”). Together with Rafi, the male cat of Zeffren’s partner, Spaghetti stars in “Rishumon” as both Zeffren’s alter ego, expressing some of her personal ideas, and as part of Zeffren’s alternative family. Zeffren began publishing “Rishumon” as a newspaper comic strip in 2006, in which she and her partner are named “Mother 1” and “Mother 2” and the cats often function as the couple’s children. “Rishumon” gained Zeffren public recognition and marked her as an important voice both in the Israeli comics community and as a representative of gay culture in mainstream journalism. Its genesis, however, is between the pages of *Pink Story*. Here, Spaghetti makes her cameo, both in Zeffren’s life and in her work as a grumpy commentator on chapter titles. In that sense, Spaghetti’s appearance on the cover in full portrait is contrasted with Zeffren’s partial portrait, marking Zeffren’s struggle with self-exposure in this memoir. Indeed, the title page shows an opposite drawing of a miniature Zeffren sitting on top of a partial portrait of Spaghetti (Fig. 5). However, between the cover image and this one, Zeffren includes a jacket photograph -- her only photograph in this volume -- echoing the cover image by showing Spaghetti’s full head next to Zeffren’s half-hidden face (Fig. 6). This shift between exposure and concealment serves as a visual introduction to the journey outside the closet Zeffren depicts in this book.

Zeffren overcomes the difficulty of exposure by intertwining her personal story with that of the entire LGBQT community in Israel. By doing so, she gains the necessary courage from the community, dividing the pressure of exposure between it and herself. In return for offering her voice to narrate the community’s history, Zeffren uses public photographs from its history instead of personal ones. Yet, as I will show, like in Noomin’s case, Zeffren’s process of a “comics self-outing” in *Pink Story* gives birth to a more direct autobiographical mode in her work, leading to a future comics work that involves her personal photo album.

But it took the composition of *Pink Story* to bring about that mode and, although in it Zeffren, like Noomin in “Red Diaper Baby,” often allows photographs to act as independent panels, here this technique achieves a different effect. Due to the public nature of these photographs, the experience of reading *Pink Story* is of leafing through a communal, rather than a family, album, with one of the community members offering captions alongside some of her personal memories of the events. This is not to say that Zeffren appears in the book only as a narrator. On the contrary, Zeffren traces her personal biography in text and drawings, some highly intimate, from her birth (and her twin sister’s) in 1972 to her relocation to Tel Aviv in 1998. This move marks the beginning of the final stage in her coming-out process, reflected in the publication of this book.

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6. See Plant.
As mentioned, the actual photographs embedded in *Pink Story* are public images, both in black-and-white and in color. The division between black-and-white and color photographs plays an important narratological role and is in accordance with the (meta-) division of the narrative into two sections, “Inside the Closet” and “Outside the Closet.” Whereas in Noomin’s “Red Diaper” the terminology of closet and outing was only implicit, in *Pink Story* it is an explicit element at the very heart of the book’s narrative structure. As Alon Raab notes, Zeffren reflects this thematic division visually through color:

The former [section] appears in black and white, as if reflecting the limited options and repressed lives of many Israeli gays and lesbians forced to pass as heterosexuals, with rare splashes of color hinting prospects of a more authentic life. The second section liberates a veritable explosion of colors, demonstrating that only in a life out of hiding is the full spectrum of human possibility available. (224)

Raab suggests that this device calls to mind the opening scene of the film “Yellow Submarine,” where the gray world becomes colorful when the Beatles appear. While this is a fruitful comparison, “The Wizard of Oz” seems even more relevant due to the subject matter of Zeffren’s book. One of the first live-action films to employ such a symbolic switch from black-and-white to color, “The Wizard of Oz” was considered a remarkable achievement of Technicolor cinema of its time. Furthermore, its central motif, the rainbow, became one of the most important symbols of the LGBQT community. As in the film, Zeffren employs the shift from black-and-white to color as a visual device that symbolizes an opening up or coming out to a new life. Yet, unlike the film, in Zeffren’s memoir this visual shift marks the act of coming out not as a passage to a place “somewhere over the rainbow,” from which one inevitably must return, but rather to a place underneath the liberating solidarity of the rainbow flag community.

Tellingly, the page with the greatest number of color photographs appears almost exactly halfway into the second section of *Pink Story* and portrays what can be defined as the defining coming-out moment
of the LGBTQ community in Israel. On this page, Zeffren reproduces eleven screenshots from the Israeli talk show “Qlafim Ptuhim” (“Open Cards”) that focused on gay teenagers and was about to air in 1996 (Fig. 7). In it, four gay teenagers -- two homosexuals, one bi-sexual, and one lesbian -- discussed their experiences of coming out. As Zeffren recounts, the airing of the show was delayed for a year by religious members of the Israeli parliament, during which time LGBTQ organizations appealed to the Supreme Court that unanimously ordered its airing. Zeffren visually celebrates this verdict by depicting the judges in black prior to the decision and in pink after it.

![Screenshot from Qlafim Ptuhim showing four gay teenagers discussing their experiences of coming out.](image)

*Fig. 7: Zeffren Pink Story 97*
Like Noomin, Zeffren allows the screenshots (and many other photographs in Pink Story) to function as independent panels to which she adds captions; however, in this case, the speech bubbles contain direct quotes from the panelists and other guests in the show. In the first panel, unlike other screenshots on the page and throughout the book, Zeffren combines, in a split-screen effect, four screenshots of each participant’s first appearance on the show accompanied by their names and titles. By placing the titled screenshots at the opening of this page and by including so many photographs from the show in Pink Story, Zeffren marks this show as a pivotal moment in the history of the LGBQT community in Israel.

The reproduction of these photographs in their original color format is highly significant since it serves as a visual reaffirmation of the courage of exposure at the heart of this event. As in Noomin’s concluding color photograph, here too color photography offers an intensified sense of revealing the truth about one’s identity. Conversely, while Noomin reproduces a color photograph of herself wearing red in public, Zeffren reproduces color photographs of a public event that reflected and inspired her own private process of coming out. By adding speech bubbles that record the spoken text of each participant in her own handwriting, Zeffren turns their texts into her own.

Indeed, previously in the book, Zeffren refers to two earlier attempts to bring about a similar public “coming out” of the community in Israel. The first is an early Israeli television program from 1976 on homosexuals in which founding figures of the LGBQT movement in Israel were interviewed, albeit with wigs and muffled voices to secure their anonymity. By including this program in her account of the LGBQT history in Israel, Zeffren acknowledges it as a predecessor for the 1996 program. However, instead of reproducing an actual screenshot from the broadcast, she offers a fuzzy drawing of a television screen (23; Fig. 8). By way of this blurry cartoon rendition, Zeffren suggests that more than a public coming-out moment for the LGBQT community in Israel, this program testifies to how deep in the closet the community was at the time, and not entirely by choice. The second public coming-out event Zeffren portrays prior to the 1996 program took place during the Gay Pride events in Tel Aviv in 1993, when a closet was placed in a public garden and gay participants were photographed coming out of it (76; Fig. 9). Though this event not only encouraged people to expose their identity in public, but was also essentially based on the medium of photography, Zeffren includes only a drawing of two “photographs.” One is of a gay couple proudly stepping out of the closet and the other of a gay soldier bashfully opening the closet’s door.
By refraining from the reproduction of actual photographs in her portrayal of these earlier instances of public outing moments and including so many of the 1996 talk show, Zeffren indicates that the public impact of the show exceeded that of the two previous events. It seems that for Zeffren even the more audacious act of those photographed coming out of a closet in 1993 marks less of a changing point in Israeli attitudes towards its LGBQT community. This could be due to the fact that the symbolic gesture was performed in their own community, somewhat sheltered from the response of society. Furthermore, Zeffren’s choice to include several photographs of each of the participants in the 1996 program mirrors her choice to altogether exclude personal photographs from *Pink Story*. She marks them as individuals who put their bodies on the line, both for the LGBQT community in its efforts to become more visible and for individuals like herself who continue to grapple with the issue of exposure even after coming out.

In the context of Zeffren’s struggle with exposure, it is noteworthy that while she does not share any personal photographs, she does design several sketched panels about her personal experiences as photographs. A striking example is a panel designed as a class photo, which appears on a page devoted to Zeffren’s elementary school experiences and more specifically to her hidden sense of being different despite her seemingly successful social integration (31; Fig. 10). Zeffren achieves this double function by mounting on top of the “photograph” a reproduced teacher’s assessment (in the teacher’s handwriting) attesting to her social and academic success, while also depicting herself in the “photograph” with devil horns. The devil horns, which Zeffren adds to her portrait already on the cover, are part of a mini system of “symbolic horns” Zeffren constructs in the book, with pink devil horns signifying gay people and pink moose horns signifying transgender people (*Pink Story* 103-104). This unmistakable homage to Art Spiegelman’s allegorical system of animal heads in *Maus*, which was also one of the first autobiographical comics to include photographs,\(^7\) permits Zeffren to further mark this drawing as a photograph. Just as Noomin adds a red diaper to her baby photo and both authors transform photographs into comics panels by adding speech bubbles to them, throughout the memoir Zeffren occasionally adds

\(^7\) On the employment of photographs in *Maus*, see Hirsch.
horns to photographs. By adding horns to her portrait, Zeffren underscores its photographic status, a status equal to that, for example, of the actual photograph of Dana International, the transgender Israeli singer to which Zeffren similarly adds pink moose horns (103).

Zeffren’s class photo panel is remarkably reminiscent of a panel in “Red Diaper Baby,” comprised of an actual class photo (118; Fig. 11). It similarly deals with Noomin’s complicated experiences as one of two Jewish students in her class, despite official leniencies she received.

Fig. 10: Zeffren Pink Story 31

Fig. 11: Noomin “Red Diaper” 118 © Diane Noomin
Both Noomin and Zeffren employ the class photo genre as a way to address the otherness they experienced in school, be it a gender otherness or an ethnic one. Its use can therefore be contrasted with Marjane Satrapi’s usage of that same technique in *Persepolis*, a graphic memoir about growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. The oft-analyzed opening panel of *Persepolis* shows a drawing of a veiled little girl sitting with arms crossed at a desk. It is accompanied by a narrative caption that reads: “This is me when I was 10 years old. This was in 1980” (3). The second panel shows a row of similarly drawn girls, with the caption: “And this is a class photo. I’m sitting on the far left so you don’t see me” (3). Unlike Noomin and Zeffren, Satrapi employs the class photo genre as a way to address the lack of visible otherness between herself and her peers following the Islamic Revolution. Yet as Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer note, Satrapi’s employment of the class photo also corresponds with the identity struggle this genre represents even outside totalitarian regimes: namely, “the individual child’s struggle between singularity and ideological interpellation” (n. pag.).

This is, in fact, precisely the type of struggle Noomin and Zeffren address by employing a class photo, an actual one in Noomin’s case and a drawing of one in Zeffren’s. More particularly, the reference to a class photo in both texts relates directly to the tension between the private and the public at the heart of the narratives. On the one hand, the class photo serves as a testimony of a public event that not only depicts every participant, but is also distributed among participants; it thus constitutes a communal representation. Yet, as they migrate into photo albums and storage boxes, class photos take on the form of a private memory, usually evoking the urge to locate the owner of the photo within it. While Noomin includes an actual class photo, she refrains from pointing out which one of the photographed children is she. Zeffren, on the other hand, marks herself within the drawn photograph both with devil horns and with an arrow connecting her image to the superimposed teacher’s note. However, as with all other personal photographs in the comics, she refrains from reproducing the actual photo.

Zeffren also represents this dilemma of exposure graphically through shifts between print and handwriting, usually with print used for captions and handwriting for speech balloons. If handwriting, as Chute argues, is a way for comics artists “to put the body on the page” (*Graphic Women* 10), Zeffren’s shift between print and handwriting can be described as a graphic echo of her visual shift between reproducing public photographs and drawing personal ones. If Noomin’s shift between upper case and plain handwriting font reflects her shift between the personal and the hyper personal, Zeffren’s shift between print and handwriting reflects her constant oscillation in *Pink Story* between the communal and the personal.

One noteworthy exception in which Zeffren uses print both in captions and in speech bubbles is a page in the first section dedicated to the films of pioneer Israeli gay filmmaker Amos Guttman. This page is one of the only pages in *Pink Story* to compete with the “Open Cards” page in the number of photographs it contains. Yet, while acknowledging Guttman’s contribution to the visibility of LGBQT community in Israel, Zeffren is also critical of his films’ reinforcement of some stereotypical perceptions.

8. This image has been the focus of considerable discussion in the study of Satrapi’s work. See, for instance, Whitlock; Chute, “The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*”; Chaney; and Darda.
9. Thus, the comparison of *Pink Story* to Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (see Raab 225 and Bauer 102) should also include their shared choice to draw photographs. On photography in *Fun Home*, see Cook; McBean; and Pulda.
She conveys this criticism both visually and graphically by reproducing the screenshots of his color films only in black-and-white, thus locating them in the closeted phase of the community, and using print in the speech bubbles, thus distancing herself from its dialogues. By doing so, she creates a clear juxtaposition between Guttman’s films and the 1996 show, marking these events almost as opposites. The page dedicated to the show appears only in the second section and is the first case of an almost entire page of color photographs fully incorporated into the narrative and accompanied by speech bubbles in Zeffren’s handwriting. To use Raab’s definition, these visual choices mark the participants of the show as “Zeffren’s heroes” (Raab 229).

In contrast to what one may expect, a corresponding page of personal photographs does not succeed this photographic turning point in the narrative; instead, it leads to a page that suggests the possibility of that happening in the future. Towards the end of the book, after depicting the traumatic breakup from her first girlfriend who left her for a man, Zeffren dedicates several pages to describing her recuperating process, in which the composition of the memoir played a key role. The first page, which has no panels, presents a series of drawings that depict Zeffren literally putting herself together limb by limb. It is followed by a mega-panel page with a drawing of a nude Zeffren all in pink (next to a pink-shaded Spaghetti), with only a triangle illustration of three women comprising her pubic hair area (132; Fig. 12). She appears to be dramatically speaking, but instead of a speech bubble, a rainbow is drawn from her mouth to become part of the background of the page, alongside a colorful collage of posters, magazine covers, and photographs. These are all public images relating to the LGBQT community in Israel that were published around the same time that Zeffren began writing the book.

Fig. 12: Zeffren Pink Story 132
The rainbow substitute for a speech bubble and the coupling of Zeffren’s naked body with a collage of public images of the LGBQT community visually echoes the combination of the personal and the communal expressed in the captions enveloping this mega-panel. “My strengths were gradually returning to me and I felt stronger than ever,” writes Zeffren. “I knew who I was. I lost her and found myself. Something in me opened up and was flowing out, and I began drawing this book” (132). For Zeffren, the birth of the self and the process of coming out both in life and in comics meant first and foremost the ability to tell her personal story as part of her community’s story. In her analysis of an earlier collage page in Pink Story, Heike Bauer suggests that Zeffren’s employment of collages “makes clear that the process of becoming is subject to a multitude of influences” (104). Following this, Pink Story, and this page in particular, may be compared to Linda Barry’s use of collages in her autobiographical work, as it similarly “calls attention to itself as multilayered composition, the self as collage” (Chute, Graphic Women 113).

Apart from offering a visual synopsis of the book and its techniques, this page also contains an indication of the future possibilities this project introduced in Zeffren’s oeuvre. Similarly to the pivotal scene in Noomin’s “Baby Talk,” Zeffren’s nude self-portrait in drawing, which appears six pages before the end of the narrative, marks the moment of the birth-of-the-self. The portrayal of a full female nude body evokes Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus,” although unlike Venus, Zeffren’s arms are spread out; instead of concealing her genitals, she successfully juggles six balls in different colors. As in Noomin’s case, it is a complex autobiographical work that pushes Zeffren towards a more explicit autobiographical mode in her subsequent work, a shift that is signalled primarily through the incorporation of personal photographs. The equivalent to Noomin’s “Red Diaper Baby” in Zeffren’s work is a “Rishamon” strip she originally published in 2007 depicting herself leafing through a family album with her cats (Fig. 13).

The cats’ function as the children of Zeffren and her partner is accentuated in this strip since in it Zeffren shares her family photos with the cats like parents do with their children. Lightman suggests reading the transition from drawing to photography in this comics as a visual expression of the inherent differences between Zeffren’s alternative family and the traditional heterosexual family reflected in her childhood photographs (“Foodlines” n. pag.). While this is a compelling argument, in the context of my analysis of the function of public photographs in Pink Story and the moment of birth that occurs towards its ending, I identify a different “punctum” in these photographs. Rather than the differences between the drawings and the photographs, the focal point is actually what they share in common, namely Zeffren herself. This unique moment in Zeffren’s work, when her cartoon and photographic representations meet in her comics, aptly illuminates the dedication Zeffren wrote in my copy of Pink Story: “the roots of Rishamon are in here.”

10. Bauer’s attribution of these influences to a “graphic lesbian continuum” is valid, unlike her claim for an overarching “bilingualism” in Zeffren’s work (apart from a multilingual collage in Pink Story, Bauer relies mainly on never-published Hebrew-English translations of “Rishamon” strips).
11. Chute mainly focuses on Barry’s One! Hundred! Demons!
12. Zeffren translated the strip for the exhibition “Graphic Details.” See Lightman, Graphic Details (294).
Conclusion

In the last decade or so, comics scholarship has witnessed a flow of scholarly titles and exhibitions dedicated to the connection between Jews and comics. Allegedly, the centrality of Jewish figures in the history of comics renders the Jewish background of comics artists pertinent to their work regardless of whether it is autobiographical or whether it focuses on their Jewish heritage. The case becomes somewhat more complicated with artists that directly attest to the lack of centrality of their Jewish identity in

13. See, for instance, Buhle; Baskind and Omer-Sherman; Kaplan; Royal; Strömberg; and Tabachnick. Among the major exhibitions were the 2010 exhibition at the Jewish Museum in Berlin “Heroes, Freaks, and Super-Rabbis: The Jewish Dimension of Comic Art” (where “Red Diaper” was presented among many other works), the aforementioned exhibition “Graphic Details,” and Art Spiegelman’s 2014 retrospective exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York.
their upbringing or in their work. While addressing the difficulties she faced as one of two Jews in her class, Noomin simultaneously marks that fact as ironic in light of her parents’ fervent adherence to Communism that upholds an antireligious stance as one of its foundational principles. Furthermore, Noomin visually suggests that as part of their efforts to follow the instructions to conform, her parents were even willing to celebrate Christian holidays such as Christmas. Above a Christmas card with a photograph of her six-year-old self, she defines her family’s way to fit in as “a seriously bizarre Jewish-communist leave-it-to-beaver way” (118; Fig. 3). Unlike Noomin, Zeffren portrays an upbringing with a strong religious sentiment, which included going to synagogue every Friday evening and attending the summer camps of the Conservative movement (*Pink Story* 23, 33). However, she also emphasizes that when she and her sister were free to decide for themselves they immediately stopped attending these activities (*Pink Story* 44). In directly addressing the relevance of her Jewish identity to her work, Zeffren attests to feeling “more Israeli than Jewish,” arguing that her life as an Israeli is reflected in her comics more than the fact that she is Jewish (qtd. in Bauer 105).

These points notwithstanding, Noomin’s and Zeffren’s Jewish identity is nevertheless relevant to these coming-out texts in a way that goes beyond the history of Jews and comics or the mention of the absence or unwanted presence of religious sentiment in their upbringing. In the context of each author’s act of coming out, it is the Jewish group to which each author belongs -- the Jewish American community in Noomin’s case and the Israeli society in Zeffren’s -- that makes this act distinctly courageous.

While telling her private story, Noomin makes several references to the trial of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg who, accused in 1950 of atomic espionage for the Soviet Union, were executed in 1953. Through several allusions to the Rosenberg trial, Noomin connects her personal story to a sensitive point in American history and an especially explosive one in the history of Jewish integration in America. Some Jewish Americans felt sorry for the Rosenbergs or felt they were being falsely accused, but the majority of the Jewish American community perceived them as a threat to the hard-won Jewish integration. By connecting her parents’ actions to those of the Rosenbergs, Noomin emphasizes the degree to which her identification with a communist upbringing requires an act of coming out in America and specifically within the Jewish American community.

Similarly, in *Pink Story* Zeffren highlights not only the objections of religious Jewish groups in Israel to homosexuality, but also the ways in which non-traditional gender and sexual behavior did not accord with Zionism’s major goals in its attempt to create the new secular Jew in Israel. The objections of Jewish religious groups to homosexuals and lesbians are based first and foremost on biblical and Jewish law. Alongside quotes of Israeli public figures who expressed such objections, Zeffren refers to several of these texts, including the prohibition on homosexuality in Leviticus (23), the prohibition of a man wearing female clothing in Deuteronomy (82-82), and Maimonides’s ruling against lesbianism (136). However, at the very outset of her narrative, after depicting her birth, Zeffren highlights the tension between the Zionist aspiration to replace the effeminate, diasporic Jew with a masculine, virile Israeli, and the presence of homosexuals in Israeli society (12-13). This tension lingers long after the establishment of Israel, as the original aspiration for a “New Jew” brought about a strong militaristic

14. On the centrality of virility in Zionist thought, see Biale and also Pinsker.
sentiment in the young Israeli society, a sentiment that left very little space for gender digressions on any side. In that sense, Zeffren like Noomin makes it clear that if coming out as a lesbian is challenging, coming out in Israel introduces its own set of difficulties.

Whether looking from the inside to the collective as Noomin does or through the communal into the private as Zeffren does, both authors begin their autobiographical comics in the moment of their birth and end it in the present time of their writing. Indeed, as Elisabeth El Refaie argues, and as both Noomin and Zeffren demonstrate in their comics, “cartoon drawings can […] reflect the ‘authentic’ self more successfully than a photograph” (148). Yet, by incorporating photographic images into their works, creators of autobiographical comics draw “on the mythical status of photography as a particularly authentic medium” (138). By adding color photographs to their texts and drawings, each author charges her self-outing comics with the quality of a life-long photo album, whether communal or personal. Hence, the choice to begin their narratives with their own birth is not a mere biographic point of genesis. It is a metaphorical choice attesting to what led to “Red Diaper Baby” and what stands at the very heart of Pink Story: the birth of the self with true and flying colors.

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