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Visualizing the Jewish body in Aline Kominsky Crumb's *Need More Love*

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Abstract

This article discusses Aline Kominsky Crumb's graphic memoir Need More Love (2007), and especially her portrayals of Jewish identity in this work. Through close readings of several comics found in the memoir, as well as a discussion of the structure of the memoir as a whole, I show how for her, depicting the body visually and verbally is so inextricably tied to her location and status as a woman that the Jewish body is always inevitably a gendered body. Her graphic memoir questions the constructions that form and inform self-identifications (of woman, Jew or artist), the constructed boundaries between how we define ourselves and how others define us, and the ways that self-representation on the page, through the interplay of text and image, can inform, supplant or destabilize these various constructions. Her work demonstrates the possibility, through art, of inhabiting a liminal or in-between space; it is a space or a 'style' that she continually redefines and rearranges as she negotiates the boundaries between self and other.

Introduction: visualizing the Jewish body

Aline Kominsky Crumb has never disguised her Jewish body or voice. From her earliest published works, she has incorporated Yiddishisms into the language of her comics, has often drawn her alter egos displaying symbols of their Jewishness (such as wearing Stars of David around their necks) and has not shied away from a continuous criticism and reflection of the affluent and Jewish Long Island community into which she was born. A close inspection of her comics also reveals a consistent, self-conscious awareness of the anxiety that accompanies having and representing the body as Jewish. As Derek Parker Royal (2007: 9) points out in his introduction to a special issue of the journal *MELUS* (*Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*) on ethnicity in graphic narratives, comics provide an especially fertile space for the examination of 'those very assumptions that problematize ethnic representation' because they have historically relied on visual stereotypes. Kominsky Crumb plays with visual stereotypes to reveal their limitations and degradations, as well as their productive possibilities, not only in relation to her Jewish identity, but also in relation to her identity as a woman. For her, depicting the body visually and verbally is so inextricably tied to her location and status as a woman that the Jewish body is always inevitably a gendered body.

In Kominsky Crumb's self-proclaimed graphic memoir *Need More Love* (2007), she illustrates the interdependence of these positions of identity through serial depictions of various alter egos in the framework of one overarching narrative. While most of the comics included in this memoir had been previously published, reading Kominsky Crumb's representations of the Jewish body as part of this larger collage-like work, which includes photographs, comics, diary-like entries, drawings and an interview, allows us to see how her understanding of Jewishness is integrated into the scheme of a carefully structured life narrative. Teetering on the verge of the autobiographical and the imaginary, this text invokes and performs countless anxieties and fluctuations about genre classification and intent, much like comics and graphic novels themselves.¹ Her ambitious aesthetic project questions the constructions that form and inform self-identifications (of woman, Jew or artist), the constructed boundaries between how we define ourselves and how others define us, and the ways that self-representation on the page, through the interplay of text and image, can inform, supplant or destabilize these various constructions. Her work demonstrates the possibility, through art, of inhabiting a liminal or in-between space; it is a space or, as we shall see, a 'style' or 'temperament' that she continually redefines and rearranges as she negotiates the boundaries between self and other.

This article traces Kominsky Crumb's fashioning of this liminal space through a close reading of three comics included in *Need More Love: Goldie, Nose Job* and *Euro Dirty Laundry*. These comics appear at different stages of the memoir, which, as I will explain, unfolds according to one of many

1. Many people have written on the taxonomy of comics and graphic novels. For instance, in Laurence Roth's essay 'Contemporary American Jewish Comic Books', found in *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*, he argues that some critics mistakenly classify comics as a genre, which leads to a perception of comics history as a kind of 'evolutionary' move from 'low-brow' superhero comics to what many see as more 'complex' graphic novels (as epitomized by Eisner and Spiegelman) (2010: 7). Roth argues for more nuanced readings of this artificial comics/graphic novel divide, as do others including Scott McCloud, who refers to comics as a 'medium' and not a genre.

2. For clarification, 'Kominsky' was the name that Kominsky Crumb acquired from her first husband, and not her maiden name. Interestingly, some of the ways that Aline Kominsky Crumb has been referred to in various interviews and articles include 'Ms. Crumb', 'Aline Kominsky' and 'Aline Kominsky-Crumb'. Given the importance of naming in her works, in this article I use the arrangement she uses ('Aline Kominsky Crumb') to sign her name to entries in the blog 'Crumb Newsletter' (<http://rcrumb.blogspot.com/>).
3. 'Goldie: A Neurotic Woman' was first published in the premier issue of *Wimmen's Comix*, the first ongoing comic drawn exclusively by women. The first published comic drawn and written by women only was *It Ain't Me Babe* (1970). Two years later, *Wimmen's Comix* put out their first issue. In publication from 1972 to 1992, *Wimmen's Comix* has featured many of the most well-known underground women cartoonists, among them Phoebe Gloeckner, Dori

possible chronologies, and specifically the chronology of her coming to and defining an aesthetic and emotional style. The comics, which are representative of Kominsky Crumb's attitude towards her identity statuses as a woman and Jew in her larger oeuvre, reveal the contradictions and possibilities inherent in occupying such a liminal space.

'In the beginning I felt loved ...'

Goldie is one of Kominsky Crumb's earliest semi-autobiographical recurring characters. In a recent interview, she describes Goldie as a kind of alter ego representing the worst or most hated parts of herself. As she explains, 'my maiden name is Goldsmith. They used to call my father "Goldie", so it went back to my father. And also since I didn't like my father very much, I sort of hated that name, and my character was a part of me that I felt was repulsive, and the name sort of fit that character' (2009: 62).² Here, in the choice of her alter ego's name, she demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the most hated and feared aspects of herself and her childhood. She is conscious of and loyal to this past, even elements of it that she wants to forget. Her incorporation of such negative concerns in her comics, and especially her frequent retellings of the traumatic events of her childhood (including teenage experiences of date rape and physical and emotional abuse from her parents), indicates her awareness that to take oneself out of the past and into the present requires a constant and continual revisiting of those past events. Her graphic memoir, which includes comics and diary entries that frequently retell the same series of events in different narrative and aesthetic contexts, performs this privileging of the past, in all its different incarnations, through a rendering of the self that is also mired in the present.

In their introduction to *Interfaces: women, autobiography, image, performance*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2005: 7) argue that one of the ways women artists have frequently experimented with notions of the autobiographical is through a 'repetitive series of self-images [used] to tell a story through sequencing and juxtaposition'. With the comic 'Goldie: A Neurotic Woman' (2007a: 140–44), Kominsky Crumb traces the first 22 years of her life through various images of herself (as Goldie) that dramatically diverge.³ These serial depictions demonstrate the multiplicity of identities, memories and experiences that frame autobiographical acts and reflect the impossibility of a unified notion (and, consequently, representation) of the self. They perform the idea that '[c]onstruction not only takes place *in time*, but is itself a temporal process' (Butler 1993: 10). Although Goldie's coming-of-age is represented in sequential time, the serial rendering of Goldie in dramatically divergent depictions collapses the possibility of a straightforward, linear narrative of the self or of self-image. In the first panel of 'Goldie', we see a smiling, curly-haired little girl with a doll protected in her arms and a tiny Jewish star around her neck (Figure 1). The caption reads, 'In the beginning I felt loved...' In

this panel, she is framed by a rectangular box and surrounded by relatives ogling and admiring her from the sidelines. The box-within-a-box arrangement suggests that such unadulterated love requires stringent boundaries, that unconditional love is related to an understanding of the self as an object, as divided from others. Soon, puberty hits: her hair loses its bounce, her body balloons, and large, round blemishes cover her face. 'With puberty came ugliness and guilt ...' the narrator writes, and she depicts herself in a panel alone, surrounded only by a light that accentuates her new, unwieldy frame (see Figure 2).

This dramatic metamorphosis occurs in the span of a single page, emphasizing the sense of helplessness and lack of agency that accompany Goldie's changing and aging body. In the next few pages, she juxtaposes her first sexual experiences and hungers with her father's verbal abuses ('Ya can't shine shit', he says to her one day as she applies make-up in front of the bathroom mirror) and her desire to 'attract a boy'. These episodes culminate in a panel that reads, 'I was a giant slug living in a fantasy of future happiness' (Figure 3).

Here, her body indeed comes to resemble a giant mass with formless legs and an exaggeratedly bulbous nose. In the background, we see two happy, skinny couples looking off to the sidelines. This panel contrasts with Goldie as a framed and admired golden child and again suggests that happiness and self-image are connected to the status of her boundaries in relation to others. As a slug, her body overtakes the frame and, although she is spatially a part of this school crowd, the borderlessness of her protruding body actually highlights her otherness, the sense that her experience is taking place in another dimension. She looks off to the side just like the other teenagers, but the dramatic distinction between what she is thinking – 'When I'm 18 I'll be beautiful' – and how she looks suggests that she is not seeing whatever it is that the others are seeing outside of the frame. This teen-aged Goldie is no longer subject to the gaze of the other because she cannot recognize where (both literally and metaphorically) she ends and others begin.

If the first half of 'Goldie' traces the narrator's transformation from a smiling, protected little girl, literally boxed in on the page, to a wretched, borderless adolescent – one who cannot distinguish how she sees herself from how others see her – the second half expands on the traumas of this early narrative with her adult self. As an adult, Goldie acts out the roles that match how she believes others see her: sex object, Jewish wife, artist-muse. In each case, she does not last long in her roles because of the contrast between how she feels and how she wants to be seen – a gap that is often demonstrated in the text through a pronounced disparity between what she is thinking (as depicted verbally in thought bubbles or narrative text) and how she presents herself (as depicted usually visually in facial and bodily expressions).⁴ The divergence between her inner and outer selves impels her to try out new roles in the hopes of finding some sense of relief – presumably, she is searching for the sense of wholeness that she felt as a child surrounded by clear and closed boundaries separating herself from others. In just a few pages, she pursues drugs and sex, gets pregnant, marries a 'sensitive insecure

Seda and Roberta Gregory. For a history of women's underground comics, see the introduction to Hillary Chute's forthcoming work *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (in press).

4. For an extensive exploration of how images and texts can interact to create meanings that they could not convey on their own, see Chapter 6 of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. In *Interfaces*, Smith and Watson point out how women artists like Kominsky Crumb have frequently been the ones to experiment with the 'visual/textual interface' (2005: 7) as a way of pushing the limits of autobiographical practice.



Figure 1: "Goldie: A Neurotic Woman," p. 140 in *Need More Love*



Figure 2: "Goldie: A Neurotic Woman," p. 140 in *Need More Love*

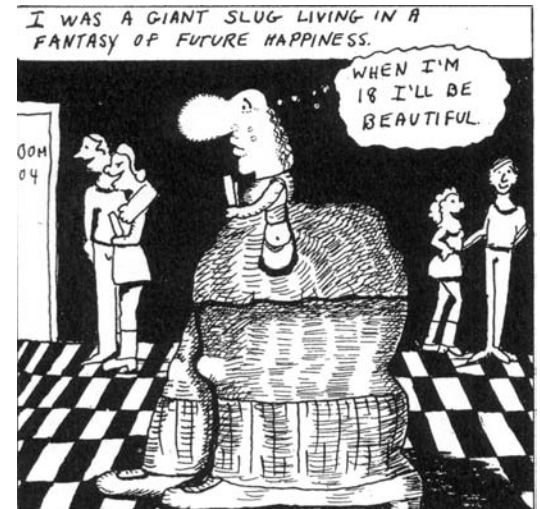


Figure 3: "Goldie: A Neurotic Woman," p. 142 in *Need More Love*

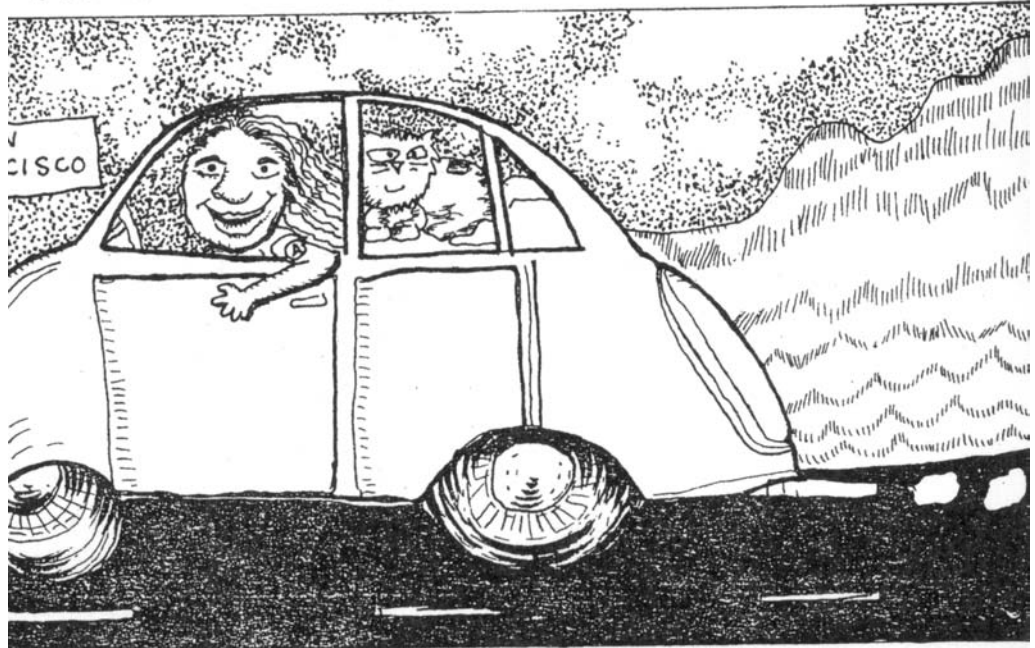
Jewish boy with a job', moves to the desert, leaves her husband to pursue other men, alcohol and drugs, and finally finds that other women and her own brother have 'turned against me'. In one panel, which shows her lying naked on a bed with men lined up at her front door (one leaving the house with a satisfied grin on his face), she explains, 'The more I was ostracized the more I degenerated'. The ostracism she feels stems from her continued attempts to define herself in terms consistent with how she believes others see her. As with Goldie-the-child, the adult Goldie depicts her actions as determined by outside forces. Instead of her changing body propelling the downward spiral, adult Goldie finds herself 'compulsively' pursuing pleasure and inevitably 'end[ing] up in a state of despair'. It is only in the last three panels, when she begins to 'analyze the past events of her life', that she finally begins to blame and hate others, instead of feeling self-hatred. In a sense, in becoming 'indignant at everyone else', she learns to distinguish herself from others, to rediscover and, for the first time, to possess of her own agency those boundaries that were forced on her as a child.

Tellingly, the Star of David appears twice in 'Goldie'. It first appears (as I have mentioned) in the opening panel when Goldie is still the 'golden child', her image framed by loved ones. The star disappears as Goldie's childhood story unravels, signifying that her conception of herself as Jewish and her subsequent omission of that identification is intimately tied to her relationship with her changing, increasingly sexual (and sexualized) female body. The second Star of David appears in a panel depicting the beginning of Goldie's first (unhappy) marriage. The star looms large behind the bodies of the newlyweds, suggesting a point of union or connection between them. However, the couple's body language, the thought and speech bubbles next to each character and the captions accompanying the image tell a different story. 'It happened so fast', her new husband thinks, as Goldie declares, 'You're all mine'. Goldie's neediness, in comparison to his sense of shock and inevitable suffocation, presage the unfolding of a marriage characterized by miscommunication and emotional isolation. The Star of David, so prominent in this mismatched union, comes to symbolize the life and home that this couple will build together (as the chuppah is meant to symbolize in Jewish weddings).⁵ Unfortunately, as the larger context of the panel shows, it is a home premised on misunderstandings, need, and the pressures of familial expectations ('Thank God he's Jewish', Goldie's mother thinks). In both cases, the Star of David represents an identity-symbol forced on Goldie by her family, and the narratives that unfold after the star is depicted and then omitted suggest this enforced and isolated version of an inherited identity as ominous and, inevitably for Goldie, unsustainable. Kominsky Crumb's inclusion of Jewish symbols and concerns in 'Goldie' (which will become even more central in the next two comics I explore in this essay) reveal her desire to grapple with the complexities and contradictions of what it means to be a secular Jew in America after the Holocaust.⁶

In the last panel of the comic, Goldie sits in the driver's seat of a car with her cat in tow, this time looking straight at the reader, and the caption reads, 'Finally after 22 years of trying to please other people, I set out to live in my own style!' (Figure 4.) It is unclear from the rest of the comic that she *has*

5. A chuppah is a Jewish wedding canopy or covering.
6. For more on the depictions of Jewishness by feminist women artists from the 1970s and beyond, see Lisa E. Bloom's *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art*. Bloom argues that this art 'rather than expressing a successful integration of Jewish women into the US cultural sphere, can be seen as historically fractured' (2006: 2). Bloom is not talking about comic book artists (she makes no mention of them in her work); nevertheless, Kominsky Crumb's ambivalent stance towards her Jewish identity, which can be seen in all of the comics mentioned in this article, aligns her work with Bloom's model of Jewish feminist art.

FINALLY AFTER 22 YEARS OF TRYING TO PLEASE
OTHER PEOPLE.



I SET OUT TO LIVE IN MY OWN STYLE!

Figure 4: "Goldie: A Neurotic Woman," p. 144 in *Need More Love*

any kind of personal style, except for the one drawn onto the page and tying together the young and old Goldie, the narrator undergoing trauma and the narrator drawing and telling of the trauma. This panel suggests, then, that it is Goldie the-artist who inevitably ties together and gives voice to the young, happy child, the miserable slug and, finally, the adult-pursuing-independence. The style is both overarching and still being sought out, as she recognizes the impossibility of ever reconciling these many versions of herself in terms beyond the mere superficial. And yet, that surface says a lot, as it marks the traceable voice of an artist. With this voice, the past that haunts and hurts her (including those versions of her identity that were forced on her) also serves as the basis of her self-exploration. This boxed-in version of Goldie inside of her car represents her desire both for boundaries and for continuous movement in relation to those boundaries. She becomes an insider and an outsider in relation to her own life, able to articulate the traumatic experiences of puberty through adulthood from the inside, through the voices of a child, an adolescent and finally an adult, because of her distance from them as an autobiographer-artist, as one who has learned to seek and observe from the outside. Goldie looks at us, in this last panel, from inside the frame of her car, which symbolizes movement and possibility, but she is still stagnant in this image, trapped in the boundaries of her own constructed narrative.

In the critical anthology *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, editors David Biale, Michael Galchinsky and Susannah Heschel argue that in the case of North American culture, 'Jews constitute a liminal border case, neither inside nor outside – or, better, both inside and outside' (1998: 8). Jewish women constitute a double 'liminal border case': they are situated not only inside/outside of North American culture, as these editors point out, but also inside/outside Jewish culture, which, at least in many of its religious iterations, is premised on a patriarchal model of obligation and piety.⁷ In the last panel of this comic, Goldie's position as the insider-artist as well as the outsider-observing consciousness works analogously with her positions as a woman and Jew. For Kominsky Crumb, the questions surrounding Jewishness and the representation of that Jewishness begin with the paradox of Jewish identity as both inherited and chosen. Werner Sollors, in his seminal text *Beyond Ethnicity*, refers to 'the conflict between contractual and hereditary, self-made and ancestral [...] – between *consent* and *descent* – as the central drama in American culture' (1987: 5–6). Kominsky Crumb seems to be moving past the figuration of various forms of identity as based either in consent or descent. Instead, she represents how certain elements of being Jewish – adopting various cultural and religious practices, identifying *as* a Jew in a certain community – can be accepted or rejected (what I am calling 'consent' or 'choice'), whereas other aspects of being Jewish – your familial ties, how others see you – are without choice (what I am calling 'descent' or 'inheritance'). The same goes for her identity as a woman: as we will see more clearly in her other comics, while she has some choice in terms of how she chooses to represent her female body, there are expectations and pressures that are passed on to her from others (including her mother and her male partners) based on

7. For an academic account of the question of how Jewish women might learn to feel 'at home' in Judaism (and why many do not), see Laura Levitt's *Jews and Feminism: The Ambivalent Search for Home* (1997). Susan Gubar's article, 'Eating the Bread of Affliction: Judaism and Feminist Criticism' (1994) also offers a powerful narrative on why many women academics have complicated and often ambivalent feelings about their Jewish identities.

her status as a woman. It is the privileging of herself as an artist at the end of 'Goldie' – her representation of being an artist as an identity based primarily in consent – that allows Kominsky Crumb a safe vantage point to explore the elements of her identity that are thrust on her by others. And through an exploration of and experimentation with the inherited aspects of her identities, she can establish choice both from within and alongside these identities.

'So I managed to make it through high school with my nose!'

The comic *Goldie* appears in Chapter 2 of *Need More Love*, entitled 'Escape'. This chapter focuses on the beginning of Kominsky Crumb's career as a comic artist, the vocation that allowed her to escape from (and then return to, in her work) the strict confines of her family and childhood community. By putting her first comic in the second chapter of the memoir, Kominsky Crumb suggests the importance of 'Goldie' in terms of the story of her career rather than primarily in terms of the events of her early life. Conversely, her comic *Nose Job* (originally published in 1989), forms part of the first chapter of the memoir 'Post-War Jerks', which centres on her childhood and adolescence. This chronological play (the comics are situated not in the order they were drawn or published, but rather in terms of the unfolding of her subjectivity and her maturation as an artist) suggests that *Nose Job* reflects Kominsky Crumb's struggle with her Jewish identity before she had come to identify herself as an artist. In a sense, then, this comic can be read as prefiguring that artistic 'style'.

Early on in the 'Post-War Jerks' chapter, she sketches her family's 'upwardly mobile' move to Woodmere when she was still a young child in one of the brief, diary-like pages that are interspersed throughout the memoir. Her description of the community presumes everyone in it to be Jewish; along with socio-economic status, Jewish identity is what ties the community together and forms the backdrop of her childhood:

The financial and social pressure to keep up was monstrous in the Five Towns [...] An education was seen merely as a way to make more money. The ultimate for Jewish boys was to go to medical school and become doctors, or gods as far as everyone was concerned. For us girls, a good education was the way to land a rich husband and secure a 'better life', meaning a large, showy new house, a big brand new car, the right schools, summer camps and beach and country clubs, the absolute latest fashion ('It's what they're wearing deah dahling!'), and every beauty treatment available – including a nose job, fairly routine in this socioeconomic group.

(30–1)

Kominsky Crumb here delineates the status of 'Jewish boys' as separate from that of 'us girls', pointing to the gendered differences built into the Jewish identity of her childhood community, as well as

the specificity of her point of view as a woman. And yet, the description of both groups as subject to the expectations of a silent but persistent majority ‘pressure’ highlights the interconnection between the Jewish boys and girls – both are subject to certain inherited expectations. Her comic *Nose Job* picks up on this question of gendered difference in light of a common otherness in the Jewish community of Five Towns.⁸

Nose Job stars ‘the Bunch’, yet another recurring alter ego in Kominsky Crumb’s works. In an interview in *The Comics Journal*, she describes the origin of her character’s name in a narrative that echoes the story of how she came up with her alter ego Goldie: ‘I saw Honeybunch [Kaminski, a Robert Crumb character] as a cute, cuddly little victim, dumb and passive and compliant. I wanted to make the thing the exact opposite, a strong, obnoxious, repulsive, offensive character, but with a name that related to Honeybunch, so I shortened it to the Bunch which sounded disgusting’ (1990a: 66). Honeybunch Kaminski was drawn by Robert Crumb, Kominsky Crumb’s husband, before he had met her; for years, Crumb had been drawing this character that coincidentally resembled Kominsky Crumb (both visually and in name). In the context of the naming of both Goldie and the Bunch, Kominsky Crumb took names that had been ‘passed on’ to her (retroactively, in the case of Honeybunch) by the men in her life and revised them, thereby claiming some agency over the naming process. In both cases, the characters she created came to be associated with this newfound agency – the ability to rename herself – but also with the inevitable ties she shared with the negative, ‘disgusting’ and ‘repulsive’ aspects of her past self. By including ‘the’ before Bunch’s name, for instance, she continues in a sense to objectify herself, but it is an objectification that takes place on her terms. These characters thereby encapsulate the impossibility of ever fully detaching from the senses of self that were projected onto her in the past in her relationships with these men – the inherited aspects of her identities – despite having freed herself somewhat from these prescribed roles through her art.

The comic opens with the adult Bunch musing about plastic surgery: ‘Growing up with cosmetic surgery all around me [...] at 40 I can’t help dreaming about surgical possibilities’ (2007: 86–8). She connects her reluctance to have plastic surgery with her experience of growing up on Long Island where, as she explains, ‘a disturbing epidemic’ took place in 1962, as her Jewish classmates all began to show up in school with ‘pug noses + lots of eye make-up + cover up under the eyes [...]’⁹ Kominsky Crumb depicts the Bunch in one panel alongside her friend, Stephanie Karasick, facing two young women with noses that have clearly been altered, but are still slightly distinct from each other (one is long and straight, the other a tiny ‘button’) (Figure 5). Although there is meant to be a strong contrast between the two sets of women in this panel (those, like the Bunch and Stephanie, with ‘big nose pride’ and those without it), the drawing portrays four women with similar hairstyles (bangs, shoulder-length hair and bows) and slightly parted, thick lips. What distinguishes the women most of all, besides the tiny detail of their noses, is the way they are poised. Stephanie and

8. The full title of the comic reads, ‘Just Think [...] I could’ve ended up looking like Marlo Thomas instead of Danny! If only I’d had a Nose Job’.
9. For a social history of Jews and plastic surgery in contemporary times, including a brief discussion of Kominsky Crumb’s ‘Nose Job’, see Chapter 6 of Sander L. Gilman’s *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (2001), ‘Assimilation in the Promised Lands’ (especially pp. 186–99).

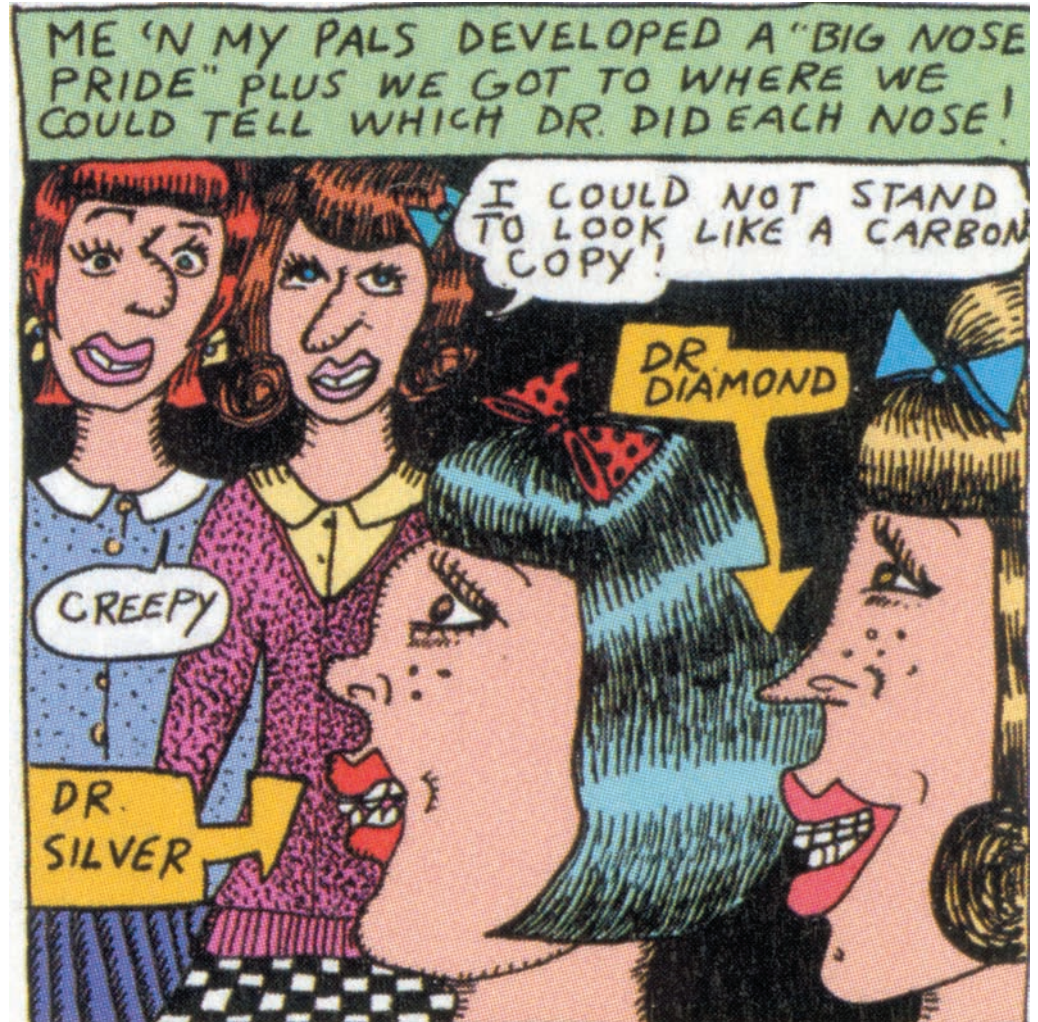


Figure 5: "Nose Job," p. 87 in *Need More Love*

the Bunch face the front of the page, standing together as a pair, while we see only close-up profiles of the other two women, who almost block our view of the others. The symmetrical positioning of these two pairs of women reflects their interchangeability. In Andrea Most's article 'Re-Imagining the Jew's Body: From Self-Loathing to "Grepts"', she writes about Kominsky Crumb's graphic explorations of Jewish identity as focused on '[t]he distinction between Jew and non-Jew' (2006: 23). If, for Kominsky Crumb, this distinction is 'a central organizing opposition' (Most 2006: 21), an opposition that shows itself in her comics in the way that Jews talk, eat and look, then in showing two sets of Jews who are supposed to be opposed to one another but are clearly not, she works to set up and dismantle the possibility of opposition from within the group of Jewish women. Even with their nose jobs, these women do not 'pass'. The contrast between the two sets of women is more a matter of context – of the way they stand in relation to one another, of who gets to have a voice in this panel – than of content, of what they look like on the page. In a sense, then, there is no escaping certain inherited aspects of one's identity, because identity is always relational: it is dependent not only on how one sees or fashions one's self, but also on how one is seen by the other and in the context of many others.

In the next panel, whatever comfort the Bunch derived from being a part of a pair is taken away when Stephanie shows up to school looking, literally, like a different person (Figure 6). The Bunch wonders, 'Who is that button-nosed beast? Sounds like my friend Stephanie Karasick, but it doesn't look like 'er!!' In this image, both women look dramatically different from the previous panel. The contrast is not only in how changed Stephanie looks from her previous self (her new face does not correspond at all with her old face), but also in how the women are situated in relation to each other. Large white speech and thought balloons fill up most of the panel, with the faces of the two women nestled at opposite edges, looking at each other. Although they are having a conversation, only the Bunch's lips are parted, while Stephanie's remain closed. As with the previous panel, the opposition between the two women is a matter of context – of where they stand in relation to each other, of who gets to speak (or, really, who gets to draw the comic to begin with). But here, the women also look very different from each other. The Bunch is no longer wholeheartedly part of any group; her refusal to change her looks – to 'pass' – paradoxically marks her isolation from the Jewish community around her.

As this comic ends, the Bunch narrates, 'So I managed to make it thru high school with my nose! I was the only one o' my friends with their "original" face'. For Kominsky Crumb, maintaining that link to her original face is obviously a point of pride, even though, as an adult, she wrestles with questions of whether or not to get an eyelid job or a facelift.¹⁰ With this simultaneous disidentification and identification with her younger self, she 'celebrates the multiple possibilities of Jewish self-representation' (Most 2006: 27). She can feel a certain pride in her Jewish body (and nose) even as she recounts her struggles with body image as a teenager, and although she continues to struggle with these issues as an adult.

10. A *New Yorker* cartoon by Crumb and Kominsky Crumb from 28 November 2005, 'Saving Face', returns to the question of plastic surgery. In this cartoon, published six years after 'Nose Job', Kominsky Crumb decides to have plastic surgery (a facelift) and returns home to justify and explain her decision to a somewhat horrified Crumb (and, ostensibly, to herself as well). Kominsky Crumb's decision to record this experience in her comics reflects her depiction of the self as always changing and often even outgrowing or contradicting previous versions of the self.

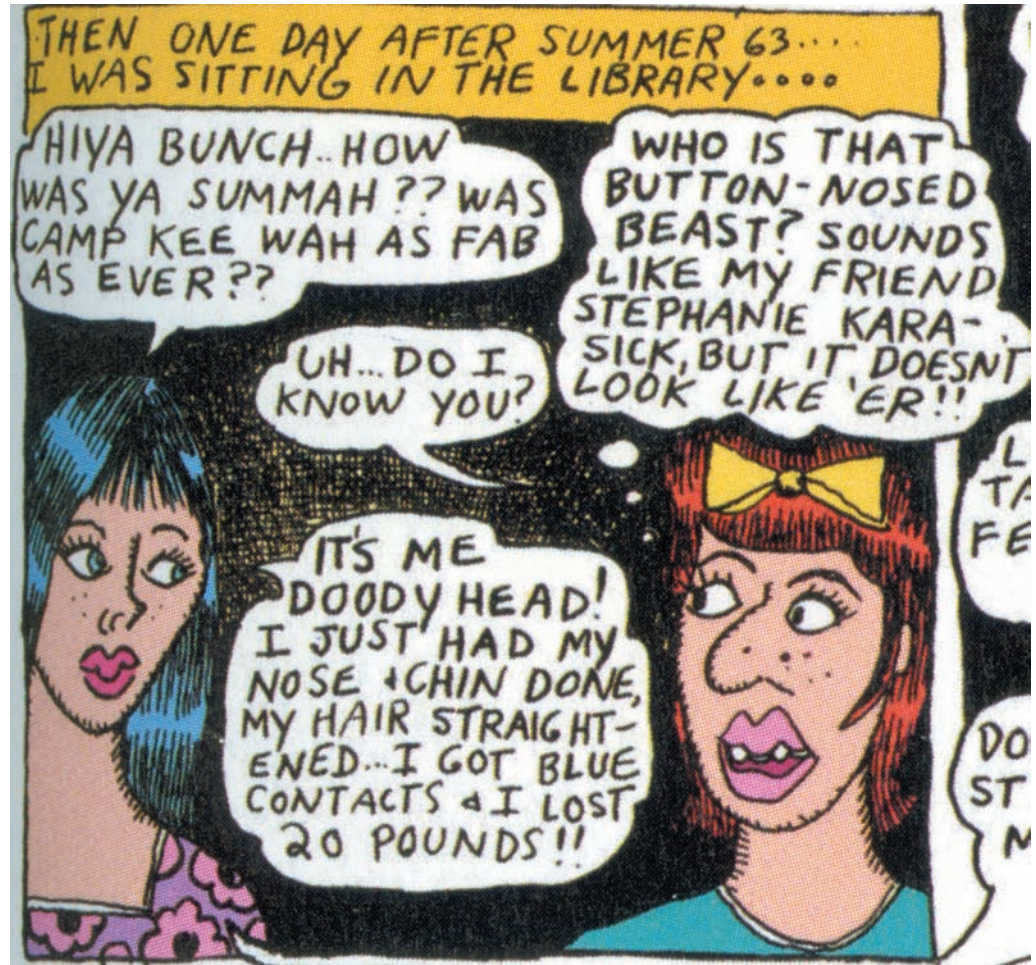


Figure 6: "Nose Job," p. 87 in *Need More Love*

In *Nose Job*, then, Kominsky Crumb portrays herself as both an insider and outsider Jew. She is the product of her upbringing, tempted by many of the same desires and values that she criticizes, but also one who has moved away from and often actively works against this way of life. This insider/outsider status crystallizes later in life in her identity as an artist (as we have seen at the end of ‘Goldie’), an identity that allows her a sense of choice and freedom within the framework of the inherited aspects of her identities. At one point in *Nose Job*, the Bunch muses, ‘How come boys get to keep their noses?’ For Kominsky Crumb, the question of Jewish identity – and how to represent that identity – is always inevitably related to her identity as a woman. Karen Brodtkin has argued that Jews in America have experienced ‘a kind of double vision that comes from racial middleness’ (2006: 1–2), from existing simultaneously inside and outside the realm of normative ethnoracial boundaries. In this comic, the Bunch experiences her identities as a woman and as a Jew as similarly granting her such a double vision, the ability to define herself through an ambivalent relationship to an assigned identity. If, as a woman, the Bunch has to deal with the problem of the assimilation of her body, of whether or not to keep her nose, she can frame and draw that story as one of both personal agency and group dis/identity. She is forced to confront her nose because she is a woman, but it is also as a woman that she is able to claim her own independent Jewish identity, to stand *as* a Jew *outside of* the Jewish community. The inherited aspects of her identity positions (which include the stereotypes associated with being a Jew and a woman) paradoxically allow her a starting point to explore choice or individual agency in the face of what is forced or passed on to her by others.

‘But I don’t want to seem Jewish anymore ...’

The third chapter of *Need More Love*, ‘Love, Marriage, and Motherhood’, is organized around Kominsky Crumb’s experiences of ‘settling down’ and starting a family of her own in a setting very different from her childhood community in Long Island. The chapter marks a halfway point in the memoir, as a new and important stage in Kominsky Crumb’s life narrative, and it also marks a new stage in terms of the trajectory of her aesthetic subjectivity and career as a comic artist. Throughout the chapter, she includes various comics created both by herself and her husband. As she recounts, after breaking her leg in six places, she was forced to wear a cast for six weeks.

To keep me from getting too bored, we started to work on a two-man comic story, something Robert had done with his brother Charles when they were kids. We just rambled on without any particular aim, plunging into crazy fantasies about invading aliens and Tim Leary, mixed with real details about the floods we were living through, and for the first time drawing our mutual ‘sexploitation’. We just let ourselves go and had fun with it.

(2007c: 176)

11. This comic also lists their daughter, Sophie Crumb, as the third collaborator. I am not including Sophie Crumb in my discussion because the part of the comic that I am looking at involves only her parents.
12. For more on the ethics of collaborative life writing, see G. Thomas Couser's *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing*, Chapter 3: 'Making, Taking, and Faking Lives: Voice and Vulnerability in Collaborative Life Writing'. Although Couser is writing about prose memoirs, his discussion on possible exploitations involved in collaborative life writing could also apply to collaborative comics.
13. In his introduction to Kominsky Crumb's collection of works *Love that Bunch*, Harvey Pekar writes about Kominsky Crumb's project as partly a way to recover the 'old world heritage' that was 'lost to her' by her assimilated, American parents and assimilated, mostly (but not all) American-born grandparents (1990b: iii).

These playful collaborations stress not only the relational nature of the various identities at play in the comics (Jew/non-Jew, man/woman), but also the relational nature of the very style of the artist. This style, born of the struggle to negotiate between inherited and chosen identities, paradoxically shows itself also to be a matter of both the inherited and chosen realities of the identity of the artist.

In 'Euro Dirty Laundry', which is featured at the end of Chapter 3, Crumb and Kominsky Crumb's self-identifications in terms of individual artistic styles literally bump up against one another on the page, revealing how much these identifications are dependent on the delineations and articulations of boundaries between self and other.¹¹ Although they have very different drawing styles, their collaborations mask these differences by offering no clear boundaries between the work of each individual artist on the page. While it may be clear that Crumb, who has a more classical and realistic-looking drawing style (heavy on details and cross-hatching), has drawn his own figure and thought or speech bubbles, and it is also clear that Kominsky Crumb has drawn hers, it is often less clear who has filled in the backgrounds, drawn the headings or started the comic to begin with. In this way, their comics question the boundaries between self and other, artist and muse, creator and collaborator. By inserting such collaborative comics into her graphic memoir, Kominsky Crumb also questions the rigid definitions of life writing (posed by certain academics and popular culture critics) as writing by and about a single, representable subject.¹²

The content of these comics further expands on the question of boundaries. At the beginning of 'Euro Dirty Laundry' (2007b: 249–63), Kominsky Crumb declares, 'But I don't want to seem Jewish anymore [...] It's too yucky and unpopular [...] Everyone hates the Jews!' (Figure 7). Here, she draws herself to look like Frida Kahlo, with thick eyebrows and a cross around her neck. In this panel, her visual self-depiction emphasizes the possibility, in autobiography, of turning one's self into whatever image suits one's particular desires at a moment in time (as well as the desires of the public, of what sells). Her words, however, almost take back that possibility by declaring her Jewishness on the page. This word–image collaboration asserts the agency of the artist to reclaim (or reject) certain facets of her identity, all the while performing the impossibility of ever fully hiding or passing. In other words, even the artist is not free, in creating depictions of herself (and others), of inherited notions of what this self should look and sound like. The panel is complicated even more by Crumb's 'side' of the page. He draws himself waving his hand in a Nazi salute, as he says, 'I'm not anti-Semitic! Some of my best wives have been Jewish [...] Ha ha Seig heil!' In the context of Jewish American women's literature, the representation of interfaith marriages has often been a place to air out both the anxieties and fantasies of assimilation. As a third-generation American, Kominsky Crumb, with her husband, fits herself into the conversation, but reconfigures the boundaries of this fantasy/anxiety as a space that can and should be talked about from the point of view of both the Jew and non-Jew.¹³ The anxiety of the Jew to assimilate and, consequently, to



Figure 7: "Euro Dirty Laundry," p. 249 in *Need More Love*

lose her heritage is in this way understood as dependent on the anxiety of the non-Jew *not* to be seen as anti-Semitic or as part of a history of anti-Semitism.

In the next panel, Crumb draws himself in traditional Hassidic garb, asserting, 'Why I'm practically a Jew myself, I've been hanging around with Jews so long'. As the two are facing each other in this panel, this visual stereotype can be seen as an image that is dependent on the mirrored face of the other. Crumb's caricature brings to the forefront the question of how much one can reinvent or play with one's identity in autobiography before it becomes an offensive way of reducing the self or the other to a stereotype. Crumb asks this question several panels later, after he has taken the joke even further, having depicted himself pondering his 'Jew paranoia' in a panel in which his wife is absent. It is, ostensibly, her absence from the panel and not the content of it (which is no more offensive than the earlier ones) that prompts him to finally ask, 'Are you offended by that last panel, Aline?' Kominsky Crumb responds, 'No. I started it didn't I??' The question of who 'started it' emphasizes the difficulty, in such a collaboration, of deciphering between self and other or, more generally, of deciding who should take the blame for such characterizations. In the context of Jewish American comics, this set of panels stands as a commentary on who is to blame for the characterization (or lack thereof) of Jews in popular culture. Like Crumb and Kominsky Crumb's collaborative comic, the self-identification of the Jew is as much a product of the fantasies and paranoia of the self as of the other. In terms of the self-identifications of the artist, this comic illustrates the impossibility of ever claiming an artistic style as completely free of outside influences, even and especially those that the artist wants to reject or escape.

Conclusion: claiming a Jewish identity

Towards the beginning of *Need More Love*, Kominsky Crumb describes the end of her relationship with a 'real cowboy named Ray Edington' in the late 1960s. She writes, 'His violent ways quickly lost their charm, and his macho nature inevitably clashed with my independent Jewish monster temperament' (2007c: 122). With this wording, she makes clear the link between her independence and her status as a woman and a Jew. Through her comics, she has recast these identities as hybrids of consent and descent, which therefore represent the possibility of agency in the face of essentialized identity labels. She claims her Jewish identity alongside her status as a 'monster', set apart from other women and from other Jews. In this way, she 'transform[s] what was considered pathetic and abject into something sexy and glamorous' (Bloom 2006: 3). Her use of the term 'temperament' is especially interesting given Goldie's interest in finding her own 'style'. The *OED* defines temperament as a 'state or condition with respect to the proportion of ingredients or manner of mixing'. For Kominsky Crumb, finding a 'style' or 'temperament' is a matter of combinations – of doling out parts in search of a certain whole. Her Jewish identity can be understood in the same way, as a matter of accepting and rejecting aspects of her identity, of finding choice within inheritance.

In an interview published before her memoir, she links herself to a ‘tradition of complaining Jewish comedy’, which, she explains, ‘is deeply imprinted in me’. Then, in a move typical of her insider/outsider self-fashioning, she adds, ‘what I think is funny is quite often sick to most folks’ (2004: 128). To claim any status as an insider, to put herself in line with a group of inherited traditions or characteristics, she always needs to simultaneously set herself at a distance. It is, as she makes clear, her temperament that sets her apart, a state of being and a style that is both within and outside of her control. This emotional climate sets the tone throughout her work; her comics, like her identities, stem from a world of experiences mostly outside of her control that, as an artist and writer, she shapes. In her book on the creation of persona in memoirs, *The Situation and the Story*, Vivian Gornick, another contemporary Jewish writer with an interest in the preservation and expression of independent temperaments, writes about the importance of finding and creating a narrator ‘who can bring under control the rushing onslaught of my own internal flux’ (2002: 25). As Gornick explains, ‘we pull from ourselves the narrator who will shape better than we alone can the inchoate flow of event into which we are continually being plunged’ (2002: 24). For Kominsky Crumb, that narrator, or set of narrators (from Goldie to the Bunch), must continually be rewritten and redrawn, all the while maintaining the common thread of an independent style and temperament. This artist’s temperament links those many versions of the self together – past and present, Jewish and non-Jewish, independent and co-dependent, artist and novice, visual and verbal – to provide an optimistic space for play even within the confines of our personal and communal histories of self-image.

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