

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

Rachael's memoir *Hello, Hometown* is the culmination of a semester studying graphic memoirs, comics that tell the true stories of their author's lives through a combination of text and image, in styles ranging from simple cartoons to fine art. Rachael's reflection seamlessly weaves together many experiences in her WR120 class, from studying formal aspects of the genre in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, to readings models of excellent memoirs including Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and David Small's *Stitches*, to the final project when students tell their own stories in graphic form.

Students compose their memoirs in two distinct genres: first, they try out their stories in class by performing oral storytelling in the fashion of The Moth live events; then, after feedback from me and their classmates, they adapt their story to graphic form. Many students find this transition from oral to visual more challenging than they expected, but in the process they gain a deeper understanding of each genre. Rachael eloquently explains, "I focused more on my thoughts and feelings in my oral storytelling presentation and less on concrete scenarios that were easy to visually render. I eventually understood through the revision process the extent to which the graphic memoir genre utilizes the comic medium to portray immediate experiences instead of merely describing them as one does in oral storytelling."

Rachael's memoir and reflection will be useful models not only for classes focusing on graphic genres or on transitions between oral and written or drawn narrative, but for any classes teaching the multi-source paper. To use Rachael's work as a teaching tool, consider the following exercises:

A) Showing vs. Telling. Begin by asking students to read Rachael's reflection and then discuss her observations about the differences between oral and visual storytelling. Next, in pairs, students will take turns in the following roles: one student will tell a short story from their own life (5 minutes or less) while the other student draws a picture of what they "see" in their mind as they listen to the story. After both students have had a chance to tell a story and to draw, they can share their drawings and discuss how their experiences with the different genres compare to Rachael's.

B) Problem Solving. Rachael knew from the beginning that she would open and close her memoir with parallel scenes of her looking at the Houston skyline, but as she explains, her struggle was with what came in the middle: Rachael had to convey to her audience how she felt after her move to Hawaii – not in retrospect, but how her character felt *in the moment*. Ask students to read Rachael's graphic memoir without page 4 (the new panels she included in her revision to solve this problem). Ask students how they would address the challenge that Rachael faced in her storytelling, asking for concrete suggestions they would give to this writer in a workshop. Then, students can read Rachael's graphic memoir with page 4 included and discuss how it changes the impact of her story.

C) Juggling Voices. One of the strengths of Rachael's project is her confident handling of multiple sources in the reflection. Students could read her reflection, highlighting every moment when she brings in another voice. Discuss how Rachael acknowledges that voice before responding to it, how she attributes each idea to its source, and how she integrates quotations and paraphrases into her sentences. Ask students: does Rachael retain control over the voice of her essay? Would students have done anything differently?

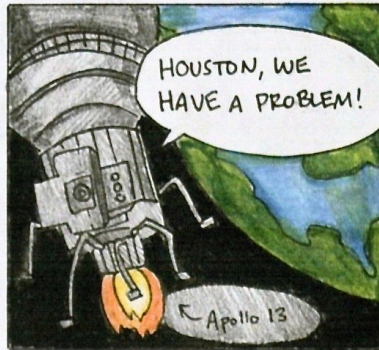
Jessica Kent
WR 120: First-Year Writing Seminar

FROM THE WRITER

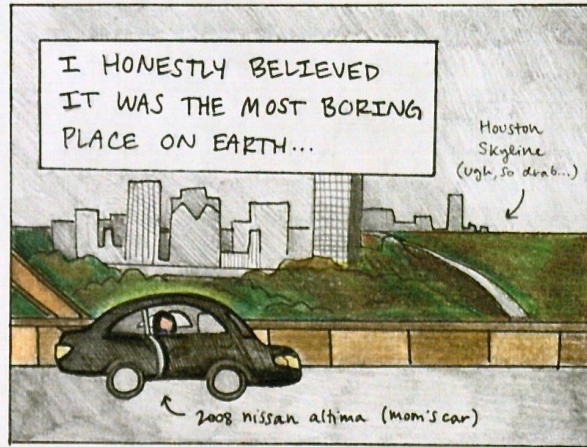
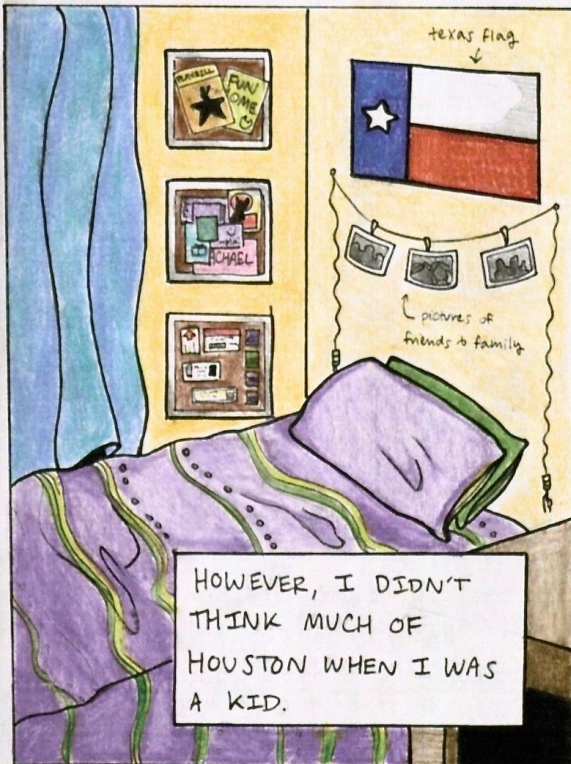
In WR 120: The Graphic Memoir, I learned not only how to scrutinize illustrated narratives under a literary critical lens, but also how to effectively communicate my own stories across various performative, written, and visual media. When my classmates and I were tasked with crafting our own graphic memoirs, I knew I wanted to tell an anecdote that readers would identify with. Therefore, I drew most of my inspiration from universal emotions and experiences, such as the bittersweet nature of homesickness and the sense of simultaneous excitement and uncertainty that anyone might encounter while adjusting to life in a new place. I had a lot of fun utilizing both literary and artistic techniques to convey these ideas, while also paying homage to the two cities I now call home.

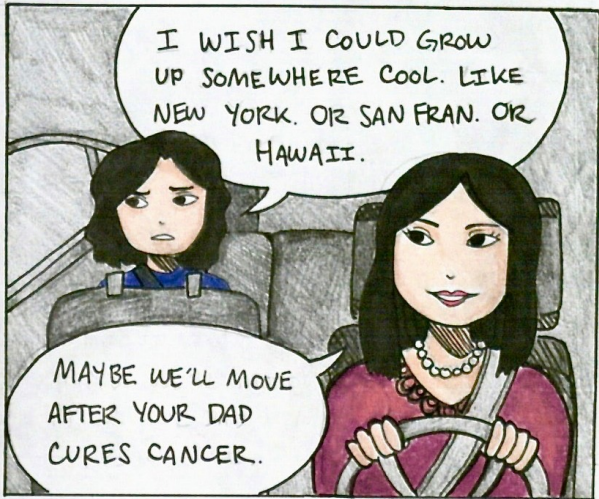
RACHAEL JOHNSON is a rising sophomore studying English and Neuroscience in Boston University's College of Arts and Sciences. Hailing from Houston, Texas and Honolulu, Hawaii, Rachael is an avid reader, writer and artist. While she intends to pursue a career in medicine, she hopes that she can continue to develop her creative skillset and share her love for the arts with others. She would like to dedicate the publication of "Hello, Hometown" and its accompanying analytical essay to her amazing professors, Jessica Kent and Takeo Rivera, who provided her with extraordinary mentorship throughout her freshman year at BU. She also wishes to thank her parents, high school English teachers, and friends for all of their support.

I WAS BORN AND RAISED IN A CITY CALLED HOUSTON, A SPRAWLING TEXAN METROPOLIS KNOWN FOR BASEBALL, MISSION CONTROL, AND THE BEST ANNUAL LIVE-STOCK SHOW AND RODEO IN THE SOUTHERN REGION OF THE UNITED STATES.

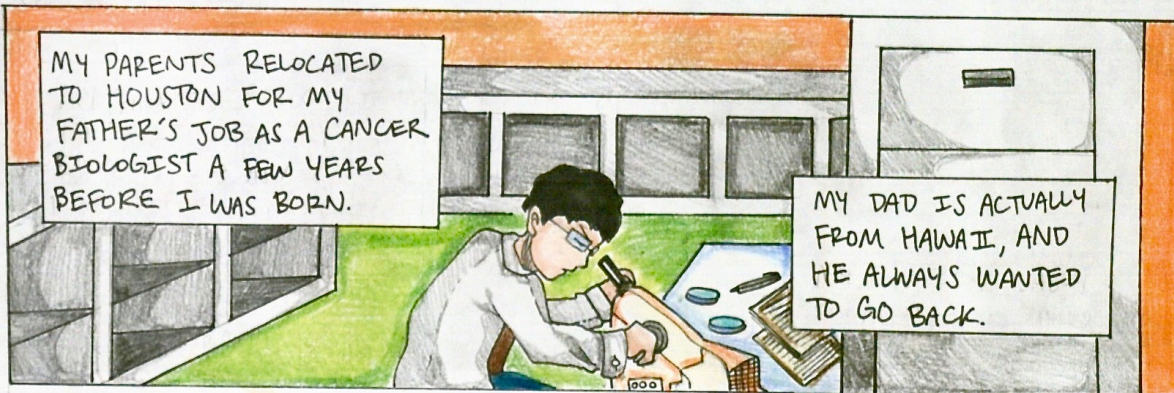


I'M A PROUD HOUSTONIAN, THROUGH AND THROUGH. EVEN AS A COLLEGE STUDENT, THE WALLS OF MY DORM ROOM ARE DECORATED WITH PHOTOS AND RELICS FROM MY SWEET HOMETOWN.

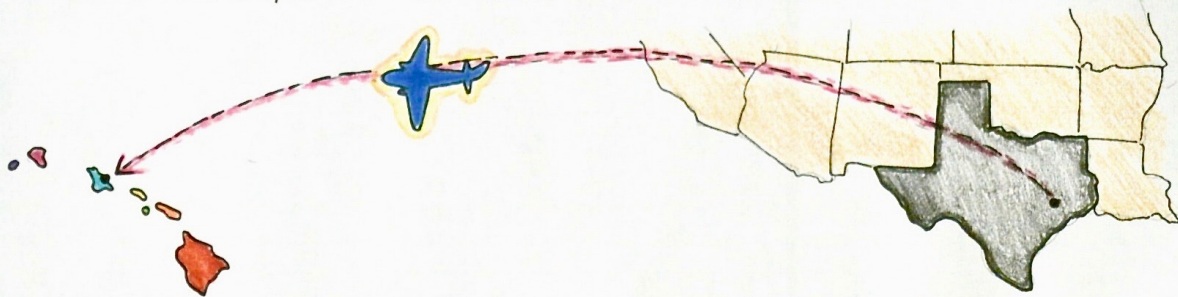




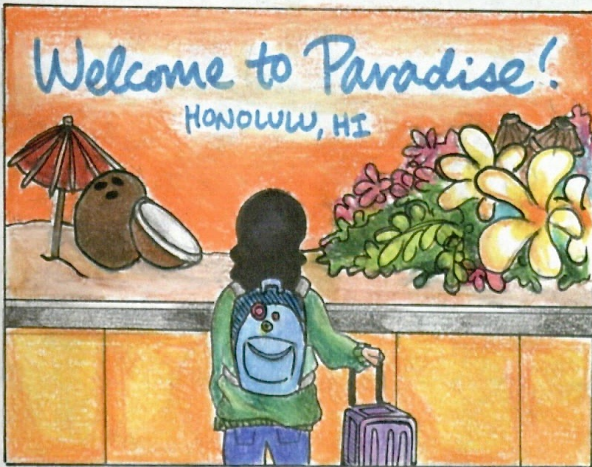
LITTLE DID I KNOW - OR LITTLE DID MY ENTIRE FAMILY KNOW - THAT THIS CHILDHOOD DREAM OF MINE WOULD COME TRUE WHEN I TURNED FOURTEEN.



AFTER I GRADUATED FROM MIDDLE SCHOOL, MY PARENTS DECIDED IT WAS FINALLY TIME TO RETURN. SO, WE PACKED OUR BAGS, LEFT HOUSTON, AND MOVED THREE THOUSAND MILES AWAY TO THE ALOHA STATE - A BEAUTIFUL ISLAND ARCHIPELAGO IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PACIFIC OCEAN.



I WAS QUICK TO LEARN THAT ADJUSTING TO MY NEW LIFE WAS GOING TO BE FAR MORE DIFFICULT THAN I ORIGINALLY THOUGHT.



EVERYTHING WAS SO UNFAMILIAR. BEAUTIFUL, INTERESTING, BUT ALMOST OVERWHELMINGLY UNFAMILIAR, AND I WAS TERRIFIED.



IT DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO START LONGING FOR MY FRIENDS BACK HOME, AND CRAVING SOME GOOD, OLD-FASHIONED TEXAS COMFORT FOOD.



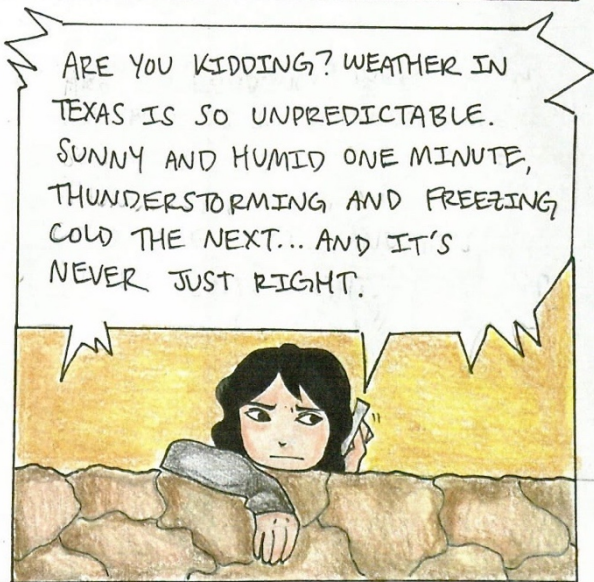
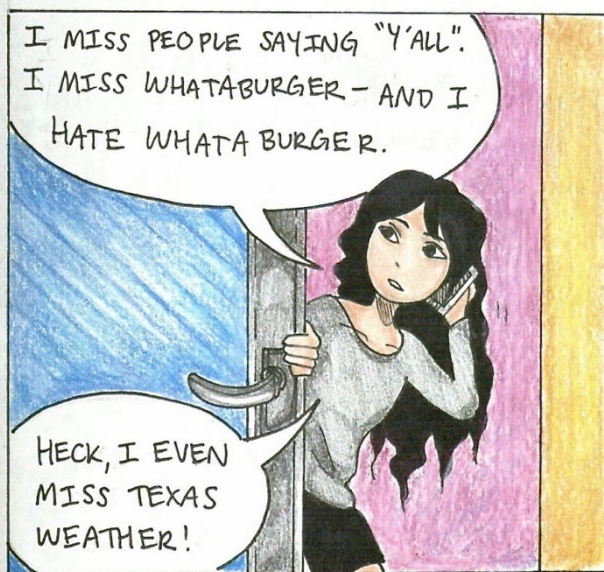
I MISS YOU! HOW HAVE YOU BEEN?

MISS YOU MORE! THINGS AREN'T THE SAME HERE WITHOUT YOU.



RACHAEL, WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR DINNER?

CAN WE EAT BARBEQUE BRISKET, MEDIUM-RARE? AND CORN ON THE COB? AND MAYBE DERBIE PIE FOR DESSERT?



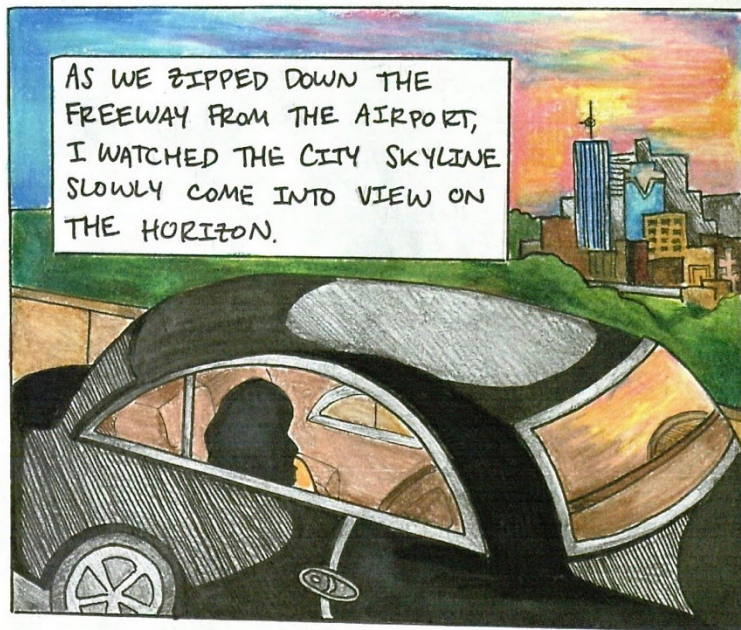


BUT IT'S NOT SYNONYMOUS WITH LIVING IN PARADISE.

I ALSO REALIZED I BEGAN TO APPRECIATE HOUSTON ONLY AFTER I LEFT IT BEHIND.



THE SUMMER AFTER MY FRESHMAN YEAR, MY PARENTS AND I VISITED HOUSTON FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE MOVING AWAY.



AS WE ZIPPED DOWN THE FREEWAY FROM THE AIRPORT, I WATCHED THE CITY SKYLINE SLOWLY COME INTO VIEW ON THE HORIZON.



I'D SEEN THE SAME SIGHT COUNTLESS TIMES GROWING UP. BUT THIS TIME, IT FELT DIFFERENT.

IT FELT SPECIAL.

AND ALTHOUGH IT WASN'T NEARLY AS VIBRANT OR PICTURESQUE AS MY NEW ISLAND HOME, I THOUGHT IT LOOKED JUST AS MAGNIFICENT.

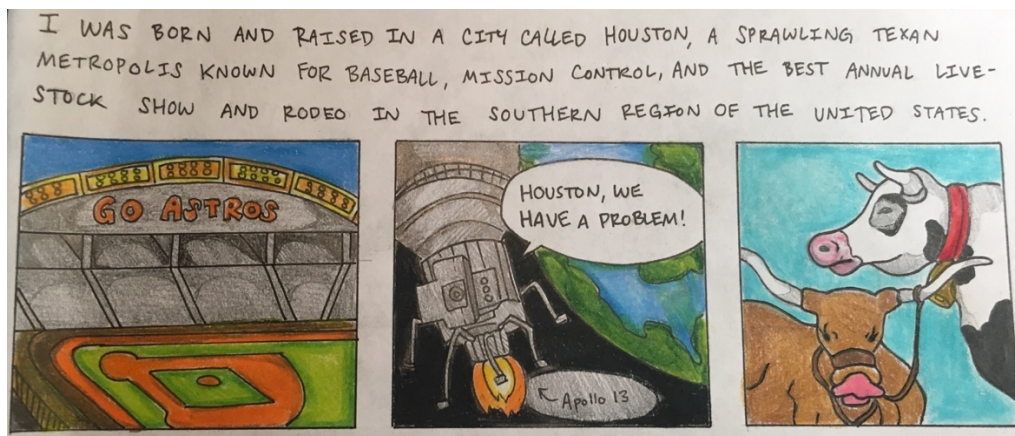


DEPICTING PERSPECTIVE SHIFTS IN GRAPHIC MEMOIRS VS. ORAL STORYTELLING NARRATIVES

While graphic memoirs and oral storytelling narratives present vastly different mechanisms for creative self-expression, they still have many technical elements in common. For example, both graphic memoirs and oral storytelling narratives allow the storyteller to zone in on a specific event, time span, or relationship with a place, person, or object, and their feelings surrounding it. For instance, Alison Bechdel's award-winning graphic memoir, *Fun Home*, focuses primarily on Bechdel's complicated relationship with her father. Meanwhile, David Small delves into his struggles growing up with physical disability and emotional neglect in *Stitches*. My own graphic memoir, entitled *Hello, Hometown*, is based on an oral storytelling I performed previously, which examined my childhood perspective on my hometown of Houston, Texas, and how it changed when I moved to Hawaii as an adolescent. I utilize differences in artistic detail and color contrast coupled with expository text and dialogue throughout *Hello, Hometown* in order to visually convey the same shift in perspective I communicated in my oral account of the same story.

Since *Hello, Hometown* focuses primarily on my character Rachael's relationship with the city of Houston, I wanted to make sure I painted a thorough picture of it within the mind of the reader from the very beginning. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud describes the importance of aspect-to-aspect transitions when introducing a setting. "Aspect-to-aspect transitions," he states, "bypass time for the most part, and set a wandering eye on different aspects of a place, idea, or mood" (72). With this in mind, I began *Hello, Hometown* by discussing and illustrating the various prominent features of Houston that I opened with in my original oral storytelling presentation (Fig. 1).

Fig.1



McCloud also acknowledges comics that combine simply-drawn characters with unusually realistic backgrounds in the second chapter of *Understanding Comics*. "This combination," he declares, "allows readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world" (43). While my setting illustrations aren't necessarily realistic, I draw them with more detail than I do the characters involved in the story. Since Rachael's struggles with homesickness and adapting to a new

environment are sentiments that many individuals can relate to, I hoped that readers would commiserate more with her if I opted for a less realistic drawing style when depicting her expressions in any given scene.

Nonetheless, during the initial planning stages of my graphic memoir, I actually had trouble coming up with specific anecdotes that accurately and effectively conveyed the story I wanted to tell. This is because I focused more on my thoughts and feelings in my oral storytelling presentation and less on concrete scenarios that were easy to visually render. I eventually understood through the revision process the extent to which the graphic memoir genre utilizes the comic medium to portray immediate experiences instead of merely describing them as one does in oral storytelling.

In the final draft of *Hello Hometown*, I employ both dialogue-based scenes and textual explanations with accompanying illustrations in order to drive the story forward. My most substantial revision consisted of changes to the phone conversation scene in the middle of the graphic memoir. In this scene, Rachael and a friend discuss Rachael's disillusionment with Hawaii after she moved there, as well as the various aspects of life in Houston that she took for granted before she left. This section was significantly shorter in my first draft—in fact, it only consisted of the two panels at the bottom of page 3 (Fig. 2). I later realized I could foster an

increased sense of intimacy between Rachael and the reader by adding additional panels that extended the conversation to include additional related subject matter. This allowed me to more effectively depict Rachael's homesickness as she felt it in the moment, rather than exclusively portray it through a retrospective lens, as I had during my oral storytelling presentation.

Fig. 2



The phone conversation concludes with the large panel at the top of page 5. In this panel, I used both Rachael's verbal commentary and grayscale coloring to visually juxtapose her unhappiness and the stunning beauty of her surroundings (Fig. 3). "Nothing ever changes here," she grumbles. "It's nice, but after a while it gets a bit...mundane" (5).

Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Of course, Hawaii's tropical scenery isn't visually mundane in the slightest. Certain aspects of island life—such as bad traffic and repetitious weather patterns—are instead what she perceives to be monotonous and mundane about Hawaii. In *Hello, Hometown*, Rachael realizes that it's the opposite in Houston only after moving away: what Houston lacks in surface-level beauty, it makes up for in the understated vibrancy of its residents' lifestyles. I visually depicted this perspective shift in the vastly different portrayals of the Houston skyline on pages one and six, despite the obvious car ride parallel (Fig. 4 and 5). The city itself remained the same throughout the time-skip. Rachael's perception of it was all that changed, similarly to how I communicated my actual experience in the orated version of the same story.

Graphic memoirs and oral storytelling narratives are extremely different forms of creative communication—the first conveys information solely through visuals accompanied by text, while the second does so exclusively through verbal anecdotes and descriptions. Nonetheless, it is indeed possible to translate a single story effectively between the two mediums because they possess many technical similarities.

WORKS CITED

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York, William Morrow Paperbacks, 1994.