



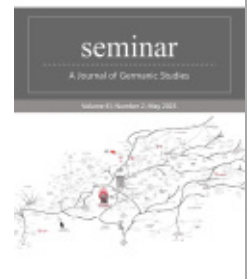
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Slowing Down and Taking Time: A Proposal for Integrating
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Slowing Down and Taking Time: A Proposal for Integrating Care Ethics into Visual Storytelling Research and Practice

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This forum contribution discusses an arts-based research project that reconfigures survivor testimony within a relational ethics framework. Highlighting the creative partnership between Utrecht-based comics artist Tobi Dahmen and his research collaborator Akram, a young man who survived the Syrian prison system, the author proposes to employ comic drawing as an inquiry-based tool and caring practice during collaborative life writing sessions. A commitment to relational storytelling—honouring relationships that are based on mutual trust and shared authority—also fosters a practice of mindful, reflective slow scholarship. Taking time is thus a critical pillar of collaborative storytelling work for the survivors and the artists, as well as all members on the research team, as they mutually negotiate the flow, pace, and rhythm of co-narration.

Keywords: survivor testimony, collaborative life writing, arts-based research, relational ethics, care ethics, slow scholarship, genocide and mass atrocity studies.

Six years ago, I started to slow down. After having completed a series of oral history interviews with Hungarian Holocaust survivors, I became interested in exploring the genre of Holocaust testimony from multimodal and multidisciplinary perspectives. In my own work, I was keen to approach the notion of survivor testimony beyond a linear or binary configuration of testifying and witnessing. It was also the first time that I more fully considered that “each, teller and listener, enters the space of the story for the other” (Frank 18). We remember in the presence of others, or with others in mind, and our (imagined) interlocutors and partners in storytelling influence how we recall stories, share our memories, and make sense of them. The need to take time is a foundational principle of relational storytelling. It encourages us to be in relationship with one another and to create a communal space for trust building, active listening, and mutual care. A commitment to relational storytelling fosters a practice of mindful, reflective slow scholarship as “the researcher pauses for a moment to think about how his or her presence, standpoint, or characteristics might have influenced the outcome of the research process” (Wall 148).

With the aim of reframing testimony beyond formulaic interview templates, which largely disregard the power imbalance between the testimony giver and receiver, I intended to employ tools of inquiry that would be inherently slow and contemplative. Thus, the idea was not to incorporate a methodology that would interrupt or disrupt the testimony-gathering work—for example “let’s pause for a moment and document what we do!”—but rather to enact a practice that was deliberately slow-paced, self-aware, intentional, and deeply collaborative. Moreover, as a Germanist and oral historian, I wanted to bring in new forms of arts-based inquiry that would challenge my logocentric approach to testimony collection. Given that many Holocaust survivors, especially child survivors, remember visually or through sensory stimulation, I was looking for a form of engagement that could gently elicit silent and embodied memories. When asked not to follow a scripted testimonial format, Holocaust child survivors tend to remember in associative, repetitive, disjointed fragments. Oftentimes their memories are like a composite of film stills; this specific quality of remembering prompted me to consider comic drawing as an ideally suited mode of visual (hi)storytelling.

Interlinking the comic medium with scholarship in collaborative life writing and relational ethics, our team of scholars, artists, and community partners developed a research design that upheld relationship building and care work in all aspects of our creative partnership. In our first project—Narrative Art and Visual Storytelling in Holocaust and Human Rights Education¹—we brought together three comics artists and four Holocaust survivors, supported by educational teams at the Anne Frank House (Amsterdam), the Ravensbrück Memorial (Fürstenberg Havel), and the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre. Our research collaboration resulted in a collection of three graphic novellas, *But I Live: Three Stories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust*. The experience gained in this initial phase of our research partnership laid the groundwork for our current project, Survivor-Centred Visual Narratives, which includes a broader range of disciplines and a more diverse group of knowledge holders.² In close dialogue and exchange across five research clusters (the Holocaust; Iraq and Syria; Rwanda; Turtle Island; the Yugoslav Wars), we are co-developing arts-based testimony-gathering practices that are interconnected yet respect the singular cultural and historical contexts of each research site. Our foremost commitment is to the participating survivors, who hold unique knowledge not only of the mass atrocity itself but also of the process of sharing their story. There are many elements to relational care practice within our research design and governance structure. Project Co-Director Andrea Webb and I decided to forfeit hierarchical project management structures and replace them with mentorship-based forms of collaboration. A relationship-centred approach also means that we carry the responsibility to implement culturally sensitive mental health and wellness support structures for all participants, including the student researchers who transcribe and translate the interviews.

Within our larger ethical framework, Survivor-Centred Visual Narratives supports the co-creation of twelve graphic narratives across five

site-specific research clusters. In this contribution I highlight the creative partnership between Utrecht-based comics artist Tobi Dahmen and his research collaborator, Akram.³

قصة أكرم—Akram's Story

Tobi Dahmen and Akram met throughout 2023 and 2024 to co-create a graphic narrative based on Akram's lived experience under Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship, and his survival of Syria's detention and torture system. Akram is a Sunni Arab man who grew up in Deir-Ez-Zor and Damascus. In 2009, at the age of 19, he moved to Aleppo to study architecture at the local university. He was first arrested on 28 March 2010, when he was falsely accused of mobilizing other students "to stand [up] against the regime" (Akram, Interview).⁴ Akram was in custody for nine months, enduring inhuman living conditions, verbal threats, physical abuse, and torture. After the 2011 revolution, he was arrested three more times.

The relationship between Dahmen and Akram was initiated and (continues to be) facilitated and mentored by Uğur Ümit Üngör, a professor of Holocaust and Genocide studies at the University of Amsterdam and the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies.⁵ Dahmen met Akram for the first time—with Ümit Üngör present—at NIOD on 17 February 2023. Throughout the summer, fall, and winter of that year, Dahmen and Akram engaged in a series of life writing sessions at a cafe at The Hague's central railway station. In tandem with these regular meetings, Dahmen started to develop a visual style and presented several character sketches to Akram. After considering a number of photorealistic renditions, they agreed on a more abstracted character style (figures 1 and 2).

Dahmen took a short break from the project (to meet the submission deadline for his graphic novel *Columbusstrasse*) and finished the script in April 2024. He also created an initial set of seven storyboard pages, which he showed as proof of concept to Akram and the research team. I observed the two of them during a deeply reciprocal life writing session in May 2024 in Amsterdam with Dahmen sharing sketches and preliminary panel drawings of Akram's first arrest. Akram commented on the drawings and speech balloons; he also provided additional detailed descriptions of his survival conditions in the Syrian regime's detention facilities. During the session I was struck that a mutual focus on the image-creation process created a safe in-between space for the artist and survivor to reconcile present-day Amsterdam with Akram's recollections of utmost cruelty, abuse, and torture in Syria.

With ongoing input from Akram during the summer months, Dahmen completed the hand-drawn seventy-two-page storyboard in mid-October 2024 (which coincided with the submission deadline of this contribution).⁶ At the outset of our project, Ümit Üngör doubted whether the graphic art form would be a suitable medium to engage with the experiences of a young Syrian torture

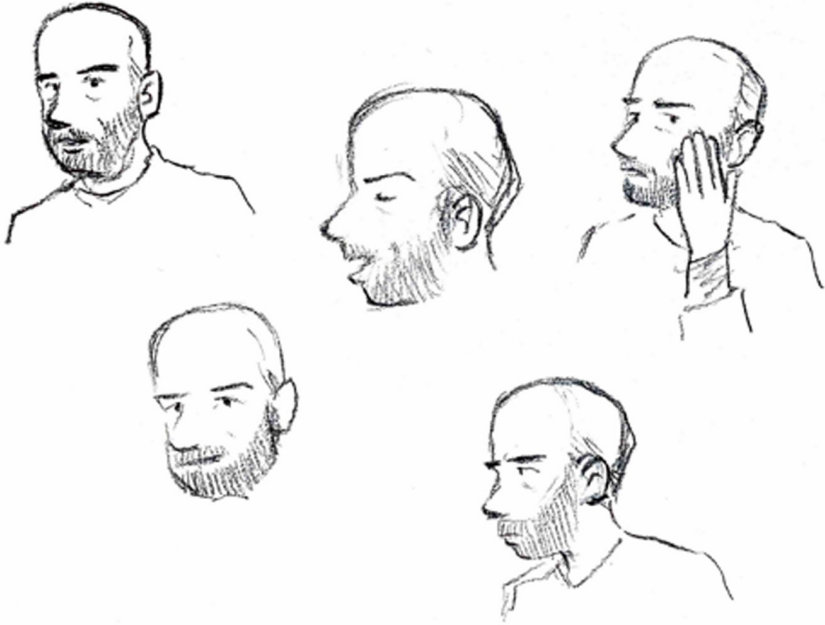


Figure 1. Tobi Dahmen's character sketches of Akram (21 November 2023).

survivor. As an oral historian, he was apprehensive that a comic about the Syrian prison system might trivialize experiences of extreme suffering:

When I was first approached to contribute to this project, I felt a bit skeptical. I thought, comic books, it sounds a bit childish . . . juvenile . . . how does that even relate to a serious topic like genocide, which requires the kind of traditional, conventional methods of oral history. You put somebody on a chair, you point the camera at him, and you let him talk about his experiences in surviving violence [. . .] but I kind of made a 180 in this project for the simple fact that such a universal, or allegedly universal, approach doesn't work everywhere. It has difficult and very different connotations in specific societies, especially authoritarian societies where the camera is not just an innocuous, innocent piece of technology, but it is a weapon. (Üngör, Interview)

Here, Ümit Üngör also refers to the filming of coerced confession videos. For many survivors of state violence in repressive regimes, a camera set up during interview sessions can be triggering and harmful. I would add that any research-based interview scenario bringing back memories of ill treatment and torture at Syrian interrogation centres may be retraumatizing for survivors. Visual storytelling as a care-based tool of inquiry does not circumvent these concerns. It does, however—when integrated within a relational ethics framework—uphold shared-authority principles,⁷ thus engaging with survivors as partners in research (versus research subjects) while centring their agency and expertise as knowledge holders. In our project we conceive of drawing practice as slow,

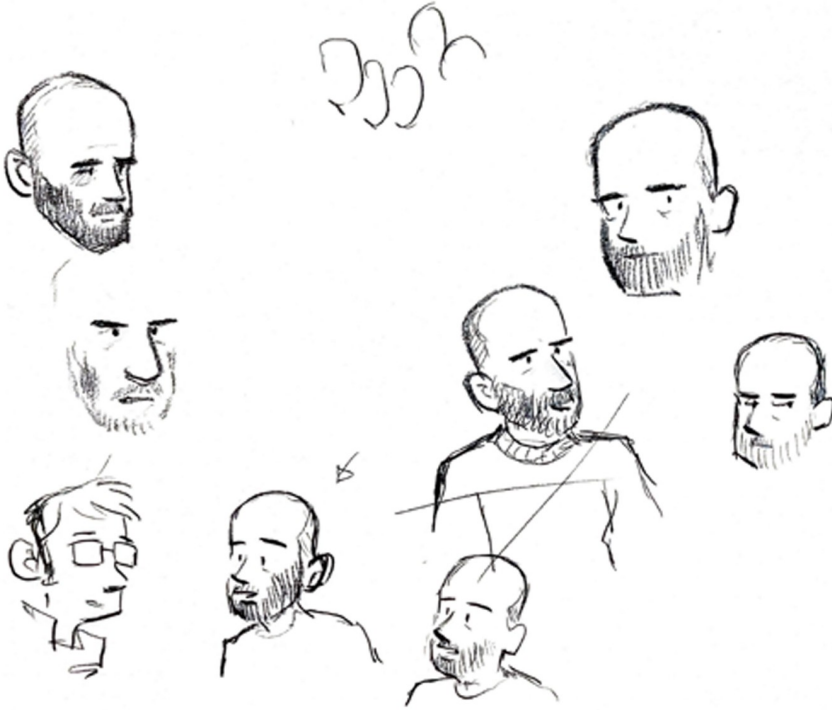


Figure 2. Tobi Dahmen's character sketches of Akram (21 November 2023).

intentional, and collaborative, honouring reciprocity and mutual care throughout all facets of the artist-survivor collaboration. As in our previous arts-based collaboration (*But I Live: Three Stories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust*), we asked Tobi Dahmen and the artists in the current project to insert themselves into the graphic narratives. The artists' avatars situate the storytelling work as relational, shining light on their own positionality and subjectivity, while laying bare the process of co-creation with the survivors. In more general terms, the presence of the self-aware artist in the graphic narrative may also serve as a template for compassionate empathic engagement with survivors of genocide and mass atrocity, whose pain is ours to learn about but not to absorb or make our own.

Dahmen uses several visual storytelling techniques to represent Akram's experiences without resorting to imagery that would dehumanize him or violate his personal dignity. Dahmen's intention is not to represent scenes of gratuitous violence but to evoke the effects of violence on Akram's spirit, soul, and body. At the same time, Dahmen's experiment of putting himself figuratively in Akram's place suggests a deep awareness of his own positionality as author and research collaborator. His attempts to stake out an emotional approximation remain elusive and speculative at best. As a proxy, however, Dahmen's avatar holds an important narrative function. In that Dahmen struggles to convey the emotional impact of Akram's life story, he signals to the reader that the artist's

authorial agency does not override or diminish Akram's lived experience. Dahmen reflects on this process as follows:

Wie soll man eine solche Situation überhaupt abbilden? Schon alleine von den physischen Dimensionen her? Um mich in Akrams Situation hineinzusetzen und damit auch den Leser, die Leserin, in diesem Prozess mitzunehmen, habe ich mich selbst gezeichnet, wie ich versuche, die Dimensionen der Zelle nachzustellen. Was es aber wohl emotional bedeuten muss, so etwas zu durchleben scheint mir nahezu unmöglich in seiner Gänze abzubilden (see [Figure 3](#)). (Dahmen, "Re: Short Essay")

The consecutive three-page single-panel layout slows down the reading and viewing process, which is, I would argue, a care-based strategy. We as readers, too, are called on to reflect on our role and accountability. Are we desensitized, voyeuristic "spectators [...] unable to look" (Sontag 89) or self-aware and implicated readers? And it is here that Dahmen challenges us once more. The third splash panel (right page; [figure 4](#)) zooms in on all the multiplied "Tobis." We suddenly realize that one of these figures is Akram. The effect is unsettling and disorienting; Dahmen's creative intervention may seem playful, yet it never proposes to erase the integrity of Akram's life story. Moreover, visually weaving Akram back into the story enacts shared-authority principles and honours the truth of his lived experience.

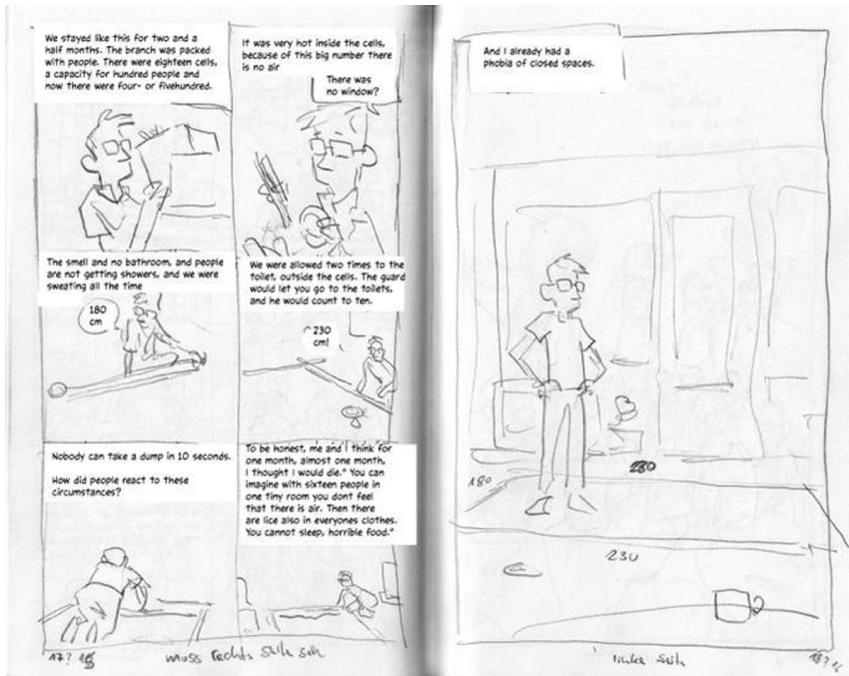


Figure 3. Tobi Dahmen's storyboard pages (work in progress; 25 April 2024).

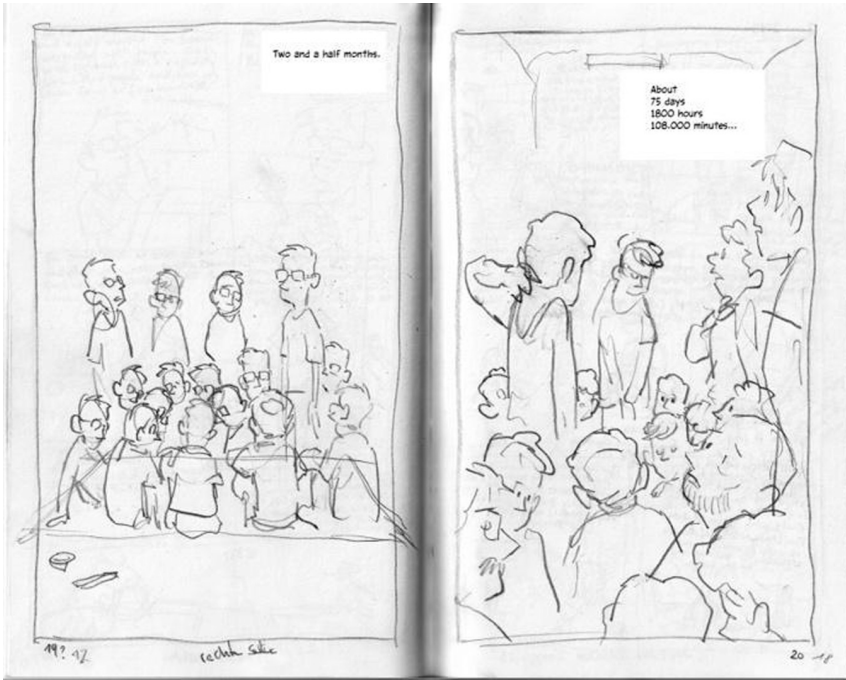


Figure 4. Tobi Dahmen's storyboard pages (work in progress; 25 April 2024).

I invited Akram to comment on his creative research collaboration with Dahmen:

When I was first approached by Uğur about the idea of the project, I initially felt a bit of surprise. The reason was that I wasn't familiar with the world of comics, and I found it difficult to imagine how this art form could convey such brutal realities, like living under a dictatorship or the experience of detention and torture. However, after thinking it through—thanks to the relationship of trust I had with Uğur—I realized that in Syria and in other countries where human dignity is violated, the horrifying reality is often portrayed in blunt and direct ways. This can desensitize audiences to the violence and abuses, rather than stirring the necessary moral outrage to drive change. As the project progressed, I was also happy to build a relationship of trust with Tobi, which allowed me to share my experience. It was amazing to see my story come to life through his hands and drawings with such creativity and integrity. (Akram, "Re: Short Essay")

Conclusion

In this contribution I explore a brief excerpt from Tobi Dahmen's storyboard while providing a snapshot of his arts-based research collaboration with Akram, a young man who survived the Syrian prison system. Reconfiguring survivor testimony within a relational ethics framework, I propose to employ comic drawing

as an inquiry-based tool and caring practice during collaborative life writing sessions. Our research design foregrounds the co-creation of narratives between the survivor and the artist, who takes on the role of both interlocutor and empathetic listener. Throughout their creative partnership, both the teller (interviewee) and receiver (interviewer) share authorial agency in all decision-making processes. Our team at large supports the evolving artistic co-creation, holding space for a plurality of voices to “interact and create new meanings” (Bouton et al. 183). Establishing relationships that are based on mutual trust, care, and respect for the shared work of testimony gathering is not feasible without a commitment to slow scholarship. Taking time also means that we can practise self-care and be kind to ourselves when we bear witness to stories of extreme human suffering. Taking time is especially important for the survivors and the artists as they mutually negotiate the flow, pace, and rhythm of co-narration. Their collaboration is a gentle and slow process of feeling at ease with one another and with the scholars who facilitate their visual storytelling work.

Our Survivor-Centred Visual Narratives project—currently in year 4 of a seven-year SSHRC-funded research partnership—continues to plant the seeds for us to grow and strengthen a community of care in which the contributions of all members are seen, recognized, and valued.

With gratitude to Akram, Tobi Dahmen, and Uğur Ümit Üngör.

Notes

- ¹ This was funded by a SSHRC Partnership Development Grant, 2019–22.
- ² This is funded by a SSHRC Partnership Grant, 2022–29.
- ³ As a precautionary measure, we decided to not disclose Akram’s last name. I have permission from Tobi Dahmen, Akram, and Uğur Ümit Üngör to discuss various aspects of their collaboration.
- ⁴ We are very grateful to Mitchel Stuffers, research intern at NIOD and master’s student in Holocaust and Genocide studies at Uppsala University, Sweden, for transcribing the interview sessions.
- ⁵ Ümit Üngör is the co-lead in the Iraq and Syria research cluster.
- ⁶ Dahmen envisions that it will take about six months to bring the digitally drawn graphic novel to completion. Barring unforeseen circumstances, *قصة أكرم—Akram’s Story* will be published in spring 2026.
- ⁷ The sharing of authority, according to Michael Frisch, includes “not only a distribution of knowledge from those who have it to those who do not, but a more profound sharing of knowledges, an implicit and sometimes explicit dialogue from very different vantage points about the shape, meaning, and implications of history” (xxii).

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