

Age Troubles, Emotional Labor, and Roz Chast's Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?

Shu-li Chang  
*National Cheng Kung University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), and the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

## Recommended Citation

Chang, Shu-li. "Age Troubles, Emotional Labor, and Roz Chast's Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?" *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 20.5 (2018): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3393>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3393)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture**ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 20 Issue 5 (December 2018) Article 11****Shu-li Chang,****"Age Troubles, Emotional Labor,  
and Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss5/11>>Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 20.5 (2018)***Thematic Issue ***Voices of Life, Illness and Disabilities in Life Writing and Medical Narratives.*****Ed. I-Chun Wang, Jonathan Locke Hart, Cindy Chopoidaló, and David Porter**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss5/11>>

---

**Abstract:** In the article "Age Troubles, Emotional Labor, and Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*," Shu-li Chang examines the medium—comics—Roz Chast uses to give expressions to the emotional labor involved in caregiving. The first section reads closely the Introduction of Chast's memoir to set the stage for a critical engagement with Chast's innovative use of comics to critique the discourse of positive aging. The next section examines the double movement of the emotional labor of caregiving: what moves the caregiving subject and how she is moved into thought. The article concludes by proposing, in the final section, an affective mode of reading that hopefully can do justice to Chast's use of multi-medium techniques to lay bare those moments in the caregiving experience so invested with affective forces that the caregiving subject is moved, as if by shock, to resist interpretative or affective closure of any kind.

## Shu-li CHANG

### **Age Troubles, Emotional Labor, and Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?***

In *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*, a graphic memoir of caregiving that won the National Book Critics Circle (NBCC) Award for Autobiography in 2014, Roz Chast tackles the emotional issue of caregiving. Chast's graphic memoir appeared at a time when more Americans of the baby boomer generation than ever are facing the difficult issue of caregiving and, more painfully, having to witness their parents' slow decline and eventual death. However, what makes Chast's memoir appealing to readers is not just the subject matter of caring for her aging/dying parents, but also the spectrum of feelings that she evokes and the medium of comics, which she uses to express those feelings that are both ambivalent and inexpressible. In a review for the National Book Critics' Circle blog *Critical Mass*, Eric Liebetrau praises Chast for "masterfully captur[ing] the kaleidoscopic array of emotions involved in the caregiving for her 90-something parents" and for "sharply demonstrate[ing] the potency of expression that the format allows" (emphasis added). This essay agrees with Liebetrau's assessment of the emotional force unpacked by Chast's memoir, but further argues that it is due to Chast's use of the specificity of comics as a medium — its hybrid combination of verbal texts and visual images — that she is able to highlight the conflicting, difficult, and contradictory emotions that characterize the caregiving experience.

Chast's memoir, a multimedia text composed partly of hand-written prose and partly of hand-drawn cartoons, is also interspersed with family photos, typed and hand-written poems, pie charts, tables, lists, and sketches in pen-and-ink. Do these photos, cartoon drawings, documents, and realistic sketches serve any narrative function, either to provide insight into the subjects of aging, dying, and caregiving, or to express the pent-up emotions that only come to the surface at moments of crisis? British novelist Will Self asks these questions in a Book Club discussion that was broadcast live online. Self, unlike the other members of the book club, gives Chast's memoir a thumbs-down and criticizes Chast's use of comics as a medium as "an indication . . . of a kind of 'kid-ult' culture" ("The Books"). Motivated in part by Will Self's provocative dismissal of the "pictures" in Chast's graphic memoir as superfluous, this essay proposes to examine why and how the word-picture medley of the comic form matters in Chast's memoir. The visual language of comics, as Scott McCloud points out, is tailor-made to evoke the emotions and sensations that are otherwise lost in between the lines of verbal language (132). With its hybrid of various media and its productive friction between the visual and the verbal, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* brings the words into a productive dialogue with the visual images, thus allowing Chast to document the experience of caregiving as an invitation to be moved and affected, a condition that needs to be met before a cognitive response, however contingent or uncertain, is activated.

In other words, the use of multiple media — words, pictures, photos, and documents — is Chast's strategy to throw the reader into a world traversed and intersected by a spectrum of feelings, the conflicting feelings that assault Chast the caregiver as she cares for her aging and dying parents: anxiety, exasperation, shame, and even cynical amusement. If the experience is emplotted into a story, the plot may be repetitive, the characters predictable, and the narration digressive and circuitous. Rather than relying on sequentialized actions, Chast's story of caregiving focuses on the repetition of one worsening crisis after another, as each crisis prompts her to constantly review her affective ties with those for whom she cares. Chast's translation of the repetitive everyday labor and the emotional cost of relationships in crisis into the medium of comics demands innovative uses of position, color, shape, and framing of the panels to allow the reader to feel the fluctuations in the family relationship and the emotional valences of the caregiving routine. Her formal experiments in visual storytelling resonate with the themes of repetition and risk involved in the work of caregiving.

This ecology of caregiving is made visible in moments or scenes in which the daily routine of caregiving is interrupted by moments of crisis. Therefore, the first section of this article closely examines the introduction to Chast's memoir in order to set the stage for a critical engagement with some of the topics and concepts that have been proposed both for the study of comics as a narrative medium and for the framing of aging as a positive experience to be managed. The next section examines the double movement of the emotional labor of caregiving: what moves the caregiving subject and how she is moved or affected to feel "otherwise" about her relationship with her parents. The article concludes by proposing an affective mode of reading that seeks to do justice to Chast's use of multimedia techniques

to lay bare those moments in the caregiving experience so invested with affective forces that the caregiving subject is moved, as if by shock, to resist interpretive or affective closure of any kind.

"Overwhelmed" is perhaps the most fitting word to describe the general mood that permeates Chast's memoir from the first page until its end. Obviously overwhelmed, the narrator even begins her memoir with a six-page preface, which she calls the Introduction, that ends with a series of rhetorical questions posed by her parents about the imperative not to "rock the boat," "roil the waters," or "rattle the cage" (7); that is, about the benefits of not attempting to manage, speculate on, confront, or talk about death. The first page of this introduction includes neither comics nor words, but only a family photo of a blonde toddler sitting in the middle of a couch, flanked by two adults who appear too old to be the child's parents. Immediately after the family photo sets up a realistic reference frame, the next page uses cartoonish characters, dialogue balloons, and graphic panels to depict the family's failure to "talk about death." Together, the eight-panel, full-color comic not only tells a funny story about the daughter's failed attempt to involve her parents in a talk about "THINGS" (3), but also registers the sense of queasy apprehension her parents feel about their future. The sense of realism that the family photo establishes is immediately dissipated by the eight-panel comic on the following page, with all three members of the Chast family drawn in cartoonish style and with little variation among the panels in terms of their composition. The framing of the cartoonish drawings in panels with unsteady, edgy, and wavering lines highlights the hesitation that plagues Chast in her initiating this conversation with the unpleasant question: "So . . . do you guys ever think about . . . THINGS?" (3). Her parents, sitting upright with both arms folded in front of them and their gaze turned away, look obviously edgy. Instead of giving her a direct response, her father returns her question with a rhetorical question of his: "What kind of things?" Surprised by her parents' indirect approach and reluctant to define the "THINGS" she has in her mind, Chast dodges her father's question and instead offers an ambiguous response: "You know . . . THINGS." From this panel onward, Chast monopolizes the conversation, as she frantically repeats many euphemisms for death in order to launch a productive conversation on this taboo issue. Meanwhile, her parents simply throw their hands in the air, shrug, lapse into silence, and even burst into awkward laughter. At the end, with Chast unwilling to name the things that they should talk about, and with her parents silent and unresponsive on this issue, they end their tense conversation without making any progress. The last panel is split into two halves, with the upper-left-hand half depicting Roz in her own home and the lower-right-hand half placing her parents in their own apartment. The panel shows all three of them interjecting a "whew!," as if they were all relieved at not having to tackle this difficult issue any longer. However, as an expression, "whew" may carry different meanings for Chast and her parents: why does Chast feel compelled to discuss the issue of death with her parents? What is there to talk about if death is something that simply happens, beyond one's control and comprehension? Moreover, if death is inevitable, is aging a process that can be deliberately arrested, productively managed, or even effectively governed?

Arresting the aging process by engaging in self-reliant activities and participating in techniques or even the technology of self-care, and self-reflexively examining and articulating anxieties, are all key strategies to concretize and actualize the positive discourse on aging that is gaining critical attention and shaping national and international approaches to governing the aging population in the contemporary world. The idea that aging as a process can and should be reconfigured, managed, and governed efficiently so that the elderly can learn to "fight all signs of aging by remaining active, autonomous and in control" (Sandberg 18) underscores Chast's attempt to engage her parents in an honest discussion about their (lack of) readiness for this presumably desirable self-care project. In initiating this conversation, Chast proves herself under the influence of the positive aging discourse.

As a daughter, Chast may consider it her obligation to ensure that her parents are not only living a lifestyle conducive to their aging well, but are also fully psychologically, financially, and physically prepared for the inevitable. What makes her conversation with her parents awkward is her unwillingness to name the unpleasant things that need to be discussed and perhaps prepared for. As neither Chast nor her parents are willing to name the things or the risks, it is obvious that language fails them. Because they can only use euphemisms and ellipses to signify what they cannot name, they end up communicating with each other more with body language than with verbal expressions. What is more, their strenuous efforts in struggling to activate a dialogue without recourse to verbal language charge their bodies, and even the space in between their bodies, with an affective force or intensity that cannot be seen but can be clearly felt by all three of them, even though none of them is willing to go the extra mile to translate that affective force of their unspoken worries into words. The nervous intensity of that affective force is signified in the comic by the scribbly lines with which Chast crowds the background of her comic pages. By illustrating her failure to engage her parents in a conversation on this taboo issue,

Chast draws the reader's attention to the richness of the visual language of the body in miming, performing, and communicating what language itself fails to deliver. Moreover, she uses additional lines and strokes to register the emerging but forceful operation of affect, especially its unsteady transmission between the self and the other.

When Chast becomes desperate and tries to clarify herself by saying "Let's say something HAPPENED," her father simply turns around to look at her mother, who is then sticking her index finger in her ear as if trying to cut out the noise that Chast makes by using her finger as an earplug. Meanwhile, Chast inserts a free floating interjection, "Heh heh — Good one," directly above her father's head, without placing it within a speech or thought balloon, to indicate his interior monologue. The addition of "heh heh — Good one" suggests that Chast's father agrees with her mother and that he also considers this conversation pointless, even though he does not put his view into words, nor does he gesture his disapproval with his hand. This uncalled-for conversation on preparation for the end of life becomes a site of struggle, with the child and the parents competing with each other in sustaining the power of non-speech. Chast, who initiates the conversation and asks all the questions, is not communicating with her parents, whereas her parents, who are unresponsive to her inquiries, nevertheless communicate well with each other, without uttering a word.

In the following panel, as Chast becomes even more desperate and cries out in indignation, "AM I THE ONLY SANE PERSON HERE???," the use of the uppercase letters and the addition of three question marks at the end of the sentence are meant to mime and convey the sense of frustration Chast felt at that point. Her frustration, moreover, is registered at a bodily level but conveyed, figuratively, when Chast draws her cartoonish avatar's head in a size that is out of proportion with the rest of her body. What deserves particular attention is Chast's population of the background of this panel with irregularly drawn short lines and symbols, as if to suggest the background is charged with the intense affective energies that rather ironically connect Chast with her parents, in their usual game of detached intimacy, nervous disregard, or affective non-communication. This oxymoronic or paratactic connection affectively links them by feelings that are mutually cancelling and effacing. Ultimately, nothing comes out of their conversation, but at the same time, they are brought together into an affective field charged with intensified energies into gaining difficult knowledge about themselves and the unnamable things circulating around them and sustaining their fragile relationship.

The sighs of relief they utter at the end of their conversation — despite the conflicting meanings those sighs may have for Chast and her parents — register the animating force they have each exerted in not tackling the issue of death. No matter how much effort Chast the narrator puts into trying to draw on family lore and her own observations to gauge the nerve cord of her family, the contextualized argument that she tries to consolidate, that the reluctance to tackle death runs in the family, is overshadowed by the aura of the conundrum that haunts the six pages of the Introduction. This aura sometimes exudes from the drawings, often emanates from the intricate interaction between the verbal and the visual tracks, and frequently comes from the episodic, non-linear, serialized movement of the panels across pages.

At first sight, dialogue balloons and comic drawings function mainly as illustrations that dramatize the extended hypothesis she offers to explain her parents' denial of death. Yet, in the sketchy family stories that she tells, the plot itself is overshadowed by the tone in which the Introduction is delivered, a tone that is rendered simultaneously sad and funny by the discrepancy between the gravity of the subject matter and the frivolity with which such a serious issue is dealt. Accordingly, a prominent effect emerges from the asymmetrical interaction between the prosaic comments and the comic drawings, and then assumes sharper prominence with the juxtaposition of the twelve panels, respectively, on pages five and six of the Introduction. This effect has less to do with the dangers and troubles her people have historically encountered than with their collective awareness of the precariousness, contingency, and chance of life. This awareness that they are themselves disposable "THINGS," animated only to live a creaturely life, motivates them to form exclusionary everyday life practices as a means by which to screen out presumably undesirable chances and changes in their lives.

Short as it is, the Introduction frames Chast's graphic memoir through a neoliberal doctrine of self-care built on the premise of aging as a risk to be managed and governed. If thinking positively makes her parents refuse to talk about negative or unpleasant things, it is also due to positive thinking that Chast wants to involve her parents in a talk about death, as she believes that only by giving her parents a dose of reality can they learn to manage "the aging thing." Whereas the discourse of positive aging provides Chast with the optimistic belief that if she can help her parents plan ahead, they can age positively and gracefully, the positive thinking that her parents subscribe to and put into practice also emphasizes the virtues of autonomy and the individual's power over circumstance to the degree that



they regard going to the hospital as a verifiable sign of bodily aging and, as such, an affront to their self-esteem. In other words, they not only think positively, but they also aggressively deny that age is a factor that needs to be confronted and tackled. Age will not be a problem when age is either positively governed and actively managed by responsible citizens, or when it is simply denied. The affective drives of both the positive aging discourse and liberal individualist virtues are sometimes constituted by shame, sometimes denial, and oftentimes an uneasy mixture of both. Unwilling to show any bodily sign of weakness and reluctant to be perceived and treated as a burden, her parents live in denial and refuse to seek medical help.

Yet, despite their best efforts at maintaining their independence, Chast cannot help but perceive her parents as her burden, as things that need to be talked about and managed. Meanwhile, she also feels obligated to care for them. It is a double bind in that they find themselves to be trapped by their obligation, if not love, for each other. Her conflictual perceptions of her parents as both burden and obligation prompt her to ask the titular question: can't we talk about something more pleasant?

After this six-page introduction that sets up the mood and establishes the context, the memoir proper is divided into eighteen chapters, with the first chapter ironically entitled "The Beginning of the End," and the last chapter "The End." In these eighteen chapters, she documents, with unflinching honesty, the key moments of her parents' final years: her mother's two falls, their reluctant departure from their Brooklyn apartment, their stay at an expensive eldercare facility, her father's dementia and eventual death, and her mother's failing health and eventual passing. In the last chapter, fittingly called "The End," in addition to recording her mother's slow death, Chast reflects on what her parents' death signifies for her. In a rather unusual gesture, Chast decides to leave the two urns that contain her parents' remains in her bedroom closet: "Maybe when I completely give up this desire to make it right with my parents, I'll know what to do with their remains. Or, maybe not" (227). In other words, she seems to suggest that she is keeping her parents' ashes in sight so that she can continue to "make it right with my parents." However annoying her parents once were, she nevertheless finds their presence, now that she keeps their ashes in her own closet, comforting, as if "she has found a way to take care of her parents, and in doing so has taken care of herself" (Wasserman).

The closet is an important image that occurs at least three times in her memoir. Her parents' "Crazy Closet" is crazy because they keep all the family junk there, since they "could not throw anything away" (45). There is a different kind of archive fever from the one that piques Jacques Derrida's curiosity, as they simply keep objects in their closet as such without endowing them with much symbolic value. Instead, once these objects, or what Chast calls the "inanimate objects" (qtd. in Kreilkamp), are placed into the "crazy closet," they are forgotten and left there as reminders of a lost time. Inanimate as these pieces of detritus are, they are capable of plotting their so-called "conspiracy" against those who have once made, bought, owned, or used them. Chast's parents are compulsive hoarders who become "stuck" with these "inanimate objects" to the degree that they take on the thingness of these inanimate objects and become, as they age, as immobilized as these objects are. In contrast, even though Chast finds her parents' hoarding habit incomprehensible, she is haunted and affected by these "stranded objects," to borrow Eric Santner's phrase, as if these objects, traces, and fragments of her parents' lives have the mobilizing force to animate unexpected responses in her.

The "inanimate objects" represent more than just junk: they are symptomatic of her parents' neurotic behavior of responding to personal and family traumas with such deprivation anxiety that they have become compulsive savers and hoarders. To show her parents' obsession with hoarding things, Chast inserts a series of snapshots in the middle of the memoir documenting her parents' rubbish: "The snapshots' central placement in the text mirrors the location of the Chasts' 'Crazy Closet,' the Brooklyn apartment version of an attic, in their home" (Huang), but at the end of her memoir, Chast returns to the image of another closet, her own closet, in which the two urns containing her parents' ashes now sit. When halfway through her narrative, she finds herself entrusted with the unwanted responsibility of sorting through her parents' accumulated debris of over fifty years, she decides that even though she won't keep this junk, "it was our junk, and the thought of never seeing any of it was troubling" (108). She took some photos of the junk that she decided to throw away. The ten-page snapshots capture the worn-out nature of these objects. Rather than drawing these banal, strange, and outdated objects in iconic abstraction, Chast strips them of any mystery and nostalgia by showing, in the concrete detail and full color characteristic of snapshots, their messiness and thingness, while underscoring the scars and traces of lost time etched on their surfaces. By doing so, she throws an ironic light on her parents' compulsion to save inanimate objects that are outrageously cheap, dirty, and devoid of use and exchange value, while proffering an oblique and sardonic critique of how her parents have, prompted by the preemptive logic of immigrants to avert risks by saving things, unwittingly allowed "inanimate

objects" to define them and make claims on them: "For her and the reader, the photos succeed in capturing the sedimentary layers of the couple's domestic lives" (Kreilkamp), but they also yield glimpses into bits and fragments of their vanished, if not vanquished, lives.

Chast has no interest in holding onto these objects that bear the scars and traces of her parents' past, but she feels the tug of their history as well as her parents' proximity to the thingness of these "inanimate objects." What is truly significant is that when she shows the reader those mementos that she wants to keep, she once again swaps the medium from photography to cartooning. Earlier, the switch from cartooning to photography, halfway through the memoir, is obviously not intended simply to indulge in the illusion of immediacy and verisimilitude facilitated by a photograph as a medium, since her snapshots expose the absence of her parents whose possessions these inanimate objects are. In switching from photography back to cartooning the mementos to be kept, Chast also annotates each of the drawings, as if to suggest that these objects are, in her eyes, no longer inanimate objects but objects mediated and interpreted by her drawing. In this sense, Chast's cartoons of the "inanimate objects" carry the added implications that on the one hand, these inanimate objects — the material remainders of her parents — are uncannily animated by the absence of their human owners. On the other hand, as these objects are animated and gain affective intensity, the people with whom these objects were once associated are deanimated in that they become as immobile as the refuse they left behind. The animation of the inanimate objects and the deanimation of human beings constitute the Barthesian "punctum" of these photographs (26-27), which interrupts the sequential flow of the narrative to reveal the double-edged irony in the proximity between animate objects and inanimate objects. At the end, her parents, who are obsessed with hoarding "inanimate objects" in their crazy closet themselves become "inanimate objects" stored in their daughter's closet.

When she returns to the image of the closet at the end of her memoir, Chast shows the reader a relatively well-organized closet, with the two urns for her parents' ashes sitting conspicuously on the top shelf. This time, she also foregoes photography as a medium and uses cartoonish images to present the "inanimate objects," including the two urns, in her closet. The switching back and forth between cartoons and photography poses the question of what different effects the use of these two media generate, or, in other words, what different affective disposition it mobilizes. The two urns, similar to other objects in her parents' crazy closet that she decides to keep, carry the specters of the dead, register the singularity of the deceased, and expose the radical "thingness" of humans as "inanimate" objects on the one hand. On the other, the urns are not only things that are either useful or symbolic, but are also the material media through which Chast can continue to work things out with the dead.

Both photography and cartoons deliver images. Chast's photographs of things to be disposed, characterized by poor lighting, off-centered focus, and blurred images, may appear less formal but more "authentic," as if they were themselves the medium of the message of their disposability. They can be taken as, in this sense, the non-medium, since their role as medium is to be downplayed, if not erased. Her cartoon images of the things she takes as mementos to be kept may appear more mediated and connote a stronger sense of abstraction than the photographs. McCloud, for example, argues that comic abstraction and simplification are the major characteristics of comics, which facilitate "amplification through simplification" since "by stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realist art can't" (30). However, if we take into consideration that Chast gives the reader not only one photograph or cartoon, but a series of images, we may begin to see that what she is trying to do here is not to valorize one medium over another as the dominant mode of either self-expression or cultural negotiation. Hers is the kind of cultural work that requires mixed use of whatever medium that can help her best respond to the call of the urns, to loosen their affective potentiality, and to streamline the ecology of the subject-object orbit.

When she shows the reader the different claims that "the inanimate objects" make on her and her parents and how their lives are organized around these inanimate objects, Chast places them, whether as drawings or as photos, in an arbitrary order so that these objects are presented in a moment-to-moment or aspect-to-aspect framework that highlights the gap, gutter, or emptiness that exists in between each drawing or photo of these "inanimate things." This gap underscores the paradoxical animating force these "inanimate things" generate on those people who claim to possess them, and these gutters punctuate the narrative movement by dividing the narrative into discontinuous moments or aspects. With moment-to-moment and aspect-to-aspect panel transition, the gap between panels or frames is loaded with affects that resist easy closure.

In *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, Chast zooms in on those moments, when she and her parents feel burdened by love and when inanimate things and their hoarders come into uncanny proximity, to trace the affective intensity of this moment-to-moment movement. In each moment, a

tension exists between expectations and reality, the said and the saying, everyday practices and filial/parental obligations, and, consequently, a gap emerges that exposes the multiple ways that "inanimate objects" enter, overwhelm, and disorient the affective life of the Chast family and, in the process, disrupt the relation between Chast and her parents. As such, these gaps activate and demand an affective type of reading that pays attention less to the will of the Chasts than to the singular evocative power of "things" — both animate and inanimate things, since these "things" are what Chast tries to capture by experimenting with an array of media in writing this memoir.

For example, one drawing that appears in Chapter Two features two frames superimposed on each other. At the center is a "wheel of doom" that looks like a game spinner (29). It is divided into three layers of equally divided segments, listing possible but bizarre causes and symptoms that may lead to death, blindness, and deafness, thus vertically linking "deafness" with "water in the ear" and then with "swimming without a cap." Surrounding the wheel is a second frame divided into nine unevenly placed square panels describing various "cautionary tales" she was told as a child, such as "friend's husband killed by the falling flower pot" or "friend's son killed by a baseball." The gaps between the gravity of death and its possible causes or symptoms are so forced that, rather than inviting closure, they provoke laughter. Meanwhile, behind the absurdity of taking a trivial symptom such as a lump as the cause of death are Chast's parents' zealous efforts to explain away death. It is almost as if they believe that, as long as they can find a cause, they can take preventive measures and delay death, if not avoid it altogether. The imposition of one drawing on another and the multiple layers or panels found in the two drawings generate both internal tensions within each drawing and external tensions between these drawings. These tensions register the active anxiety of her parents on the one hand, but on the other comment cynically on their futile efforts to fend off death by trivializing it. Moreover, the overlaying of two frames on the Wheel of Doom exemplifies the kind of affective reading Chast puts into practice in relation to her parents' neurotic obsession with, and denial of, death. Rather than reading her parents' chronic anxiety allegorically merely as rooted in and symptomatic of their ethnicity, Chast weaves together her parents' various "cautionary tales" and their idiosyncratic interpretations of various tragedies into a singular image dense with emotional baggage and evocative details. Affective reading throws Chast into a double bind — I am like you and I don't want to be like you — thus challenging her both to be affected and not to be affected by their neurosis at the same time.

There are other "gaps" or double binds exposed by the caregiving experience that surprise Chast and shock her into loosening her habitual ways of thinking and reading. She conveys this sense of shock rather effectively in her memoir in a Gallant and Goofus parody, "The Daughter-Caretaker Edition" (146). Under the "Gallant" heading, the Chast avatar is sketched with a halo above her head, and this haloed daughter is one who "doesn't worry about the money, because if it runs out, she would be thrilled to have them come live with her!" Juxtaposed to and contrasted with the "Gallant" is the "Goofus," drawn with red horns on her head, as if "still seething with resentment about crap that happened forty years ago." The ironic contrast set up by this "daughter-caretaker" matrix suggests that affect has become a major problem for Chast, as she is caught in between contrasting ways of perceiving herself and caught in between daughterly obligations and irritations.

Her irritations may be caused by the abstract notions she once held about aging and dying and how the caregiving experience causes her to realize that it is a process that is "a lot more painful, humiliating, long-lasting, complicated, and hideously expensive" (148) than she had previously thought. The top of the page features three panels illustrating what Chast used to think about "the end." In three quick-paced panels, Chast illustrates how a healthy old woman suddenly felt unwell, took to her bed, "stayed there for, oh, about three or four weeks, growing weaker day by day," and then "she died. The End" (148). The transition from the first to the last panels is fast and needs no further explanation. The two paragraphs of authorial commentary, placed immediately beneath these three panels, give us Chast's commentary on and critique of her naivety about "the end." In between the drawings and the prose is a shift in Chast's perspective on aging and dying, away from perceiving aging and dying as "The End" to seeing them as a "process" with fits and starts that expose her parents' becoming-thingness. With this shift of perception comes a different ecology of affect that overwhelms the caregiver, as she is affected by different moments during health crises in which the elderly shuttle back and forth between health and illness, such as the scene of the first panel, and the scene of the second panel. In the process, Chast the caregiver-daughter finds herself self-reflexively evaluating her own relation with her parents. As a daughter, she faults herself for not being daughterly, for not being able to extend unconditional care to her parents, but she also faults her mother for acting as a mother, rather than as a friend, to her. As a caretaker, she finds herself not as patient and efficient as the professional caretaker, Goodie, hired to care for her mother around the clock. As such, many different moments trigger her re-evaluating



*Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 20.5 (2018): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss5/11>>

Special Issue *Voices of Life, Illness and Disabilities in Life Writing and Medical Narratives*. Ed. I-Chun Wang, Jonathan Locke Hart, Cindy Chopoidaló, and David Porter

of her relationship with her parents in a mode of reading that can only be described as affective. It is an affective mode of reading in that any given banal objects in her family's everyday life, any seemingly insignificant scene, action, or gesture, may generate intense psychic energies that prompt Chast to read them in several different registers at the same time.

To read affectively means to take constant digressions and to switch frequently from moment to moment. This mode of reading resonates with the fits-and-starts nature of the caregiving experience, the memoir's privileging of emotional rhetoric, and the memoir's preference for multiple media. As such, it is understandable why Chast should end her memoir with a note of open-endedness, of still having things to work out with her mother, since closure may not be the most fitting reading strategy for Chast in reviewing her experience caring for her parents. In retroactively reading her own caregiving experience, Chast practices a mode of reading that demands she re-examine her relationship with her parents by assembling disjointed and scattered fragments, exposing its multiple layers. To the caregiver, the end of caregiving is but the beginning of learning to live with the oxymoron of absence as presence.

In writing her memoir, Chast charts her parents' transition away from "the sphere of TV commercial Old Age" to "the part of old age that was scarier, harder to talk about" (20). In so doing, she also maps the affective movement initiated by the caregiving experience, as Chast the caregiver is shocked out of habitual ways of perceiving her relation with those she cares for. To see and perceive otherwise entails feeling otherwise, and to feel otherwise occasions knowing otherwise. Seeing, feeling, and knowing otherwise, as such, generates a movement with all factors working almost simultaneously to channel the autobiographical energies of graphic narration to facilitate an intuitively affective as well as a retroactively cognitive understanding of the entanglements of different relationalities. As such, Chast's graphic caregiving memoir is an experimental work that gauges the intensity of her own deeply affective experience and also testifies to the emergence of a visual and affective literacy in which text and image work in tandem to both affect and shock.

### Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1982.
- Chast, Roz. *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Huang, Michelle N. "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?" *Graphic Medicine*, [www.graphicmedicine.org/comic-reviews/cant-we-talk-about-something-more-pleasant/](http://www.graphicmedicine.org/comic-reviews/cant-we-talk-about-something-more-pleasant/). Accessed 20 Feb. 2017.
- Kreilkamp, Ivan. "Maximal Anxiety." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 27 June 2014, [lareviewofbooks.org/article/maximal-anxiety-roz-chasts-graphic-memoir-cant-talk-something-pleasant/](http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/maximal-anxiety-roz-chasts-graphic-memoir-cant-talk-something-pleasant/). Accessed 11 Mar. 2017.
- Liebetrau, Eric. "30 Books in 30 Days: Eric Liebetrau on Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*" *Critical Mass: The Blog of National Book Critics Circle Board of Directors*, 26 Feb. 2015, [bookcritics.org/blog/archive/30-books-in-30-days-eric-liebetrau-on](http://bookcritics.org/blog/archive/30-books-in-30-days-eric-liebetrau-on). Accessed 11 May 2017.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. HarperCollins, 1993.
- Sandberg, Linn. "Affirmative Old Age: The Ageing Body and feminist Theories on Difference." *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, vol. 8, 2013, pp. 11-40.
- Santner, Eric L. *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany*. Cornell UP, 1993.
- "The Books: *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* by Roz Chast." *The Book Club Transcript*. ABC TV, 9 Sept. 2015, [www.abc.net.au/tv/firsttuesday/s4284837.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/firsttuesday/s4284837.htm). Accessed 05 Apr. 2017
- Wasserman, Dan. "Review of *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* by Roz Chast." *BostonGlobe.com*, 3 May 2014, [www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2014/05/03/review-can-talk-about-something-more-pleasant-roz-chast/pA7czRwU8oZuZYWpOdNWgO/story.html](http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2014/05/03/review-can-talk-about-something-more-pleasant-roz-chast/pA7czRwU8oZuZYWpOdNWgO/story.html). Accessed 20 Mar. 2017.

**Author's profile:** Shu-li Chang teaches diaspora literature and graphic novels at National Cheng Kung University in Taiwan. Her interests in scholarship include trauma and memory studies, graphic narratives, and world literature. Chang's latest publication includes "The Unlikely Blessings of Living on Borrowed Time in a Leased Land: Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*." *EurAmerica* 47.4 (2017): 395-432. E-mail: <[zhuli@mail.ncku.edu.tw](mailto:zhuli@mail.ncku.edu.tw)>