

• *Articles* •

**Don't Laugh at Kim-Il Sung:  
Anecdote, Occupational Narrative, and Representation in  
Guy Delisle's *Pyongyang***

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**Abstract:** *French-Canadian graphic novelist Guy Delisle has made a name for himself with his series of illustrated narratives about life in highly politically-charged nations. The best-known, *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea*, is known for its witty yet sharply critical take on a nation known for its secrecy and belligerence. Delisle's narrative, while firmly rooted in a tradition of personal graphic narratives, is further bolstered by the use of anecdote and occupational narrative; this essay examines how such forms of verbal art are not only highly present in Delisle's book, but also bring up important issues surrounding both outsider perspectives of North Korea and North Korea's representation of itself to the world.*

In looking at stories of societies with repressive regimes, personal experience narratives are a form of storytelling with great popular appeal. From Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* to African boy soldier memoirs, these accounts have the power to tell a story and sell many books. In the 2000s, a decade dominated by the fears of terrorism, the rise in the stories from the countries designated as the "Axis of Evil" is noticeable, even to the point where a book titled *Literature from the "Axis of Evil:" Writing from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Other Enemy Nations* was published in 2006 in order to "uncover a dazzling cross-section of humanity, different from, yet ultimately recognizable to ourselves."<sup>1</sup> This may be perceived as evidence of a more than casual interest in the stories of everyday

individuals who, whether native to the area or an outsider, are working to survive repression and its rippling effects.

Many of the popular narratives, however, are often those of people who have taken the risk of fleeing in order to seek a better life; in many countries, however, the majority of the people do not receive the opportunity to tell their story, leaving outsiders responsible for providing accounts of a place to others. In looking at the Democratic People's Republic of Korea—more commonly known as North Korea—everyday society, with its Orwellian sense of control and surveillance, is off-limits to the majority of the world. An almost unprecedented sense of control over what outsiders see, document and discuss while in the country makes determining the true experience of an average North Korean citizen a nearly impossible task. It is a dangerous task for foreigners to try to get people to tell more about the nation than what is told by government officials and/or guides, and puts both foreigner and local at risk for imprisonment.

With these boundaries in mind, the question arises: how are the experiences of living in North Korea expressed? When government officials exercise control over what a person encounters, creating an unofficial and vernacular experience, let alone sharing it with others, is not an easy task. More often than not, such expressions take place after the fact, and in one case, have even spawned a graphic novel about the capital city, Pyongyang. Guy Delisle, a Quebecois who is also known for his work on life in China and Burma, has created *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea*, which has been praised by critics as a frank, honest account of working as a

foreigner in Pyongyang. Delisle, part of a group of Francophone artists known as L'Association, continues their tradition of creating graphic novels that tell personal experience narratives. This group also includes Iranian-born Marjane Satrapi, best known for her works *Persepolis* and *Embroideries*, and French artist David B., noted for his family account, *Epileptic*.

Delisle's graphic novel brings up important issues surrounding the study of personal narrative. As an outspoken foreigner in a nation known for its repressive nature, Delisle's story brings up issues concerning the subversive potential of counternarrative, as well as narrative representations of North Korean society. In this essay, I will attempt to discuss some of the issues by utilizing a three-fold approach. First, a discussion of both narrative representation and North Korean cultural myths will provide scholarly context. Such scholarship will then be utilized in examining the case study of *Pyongyang* as both a graphic novel and a personal experience narrative. Finally, a discussion of the subversive capabilities of such a narrative will examine the ability of an outsider to provide a subversive counternarrative of a society.

### **Personal Narrative versus Cultural Myth: The North Korean Example**

In looking at the study of hegemony within narrative, sociologists Patrick Ewick and Susan Sibley point out that narrative consists of what it represents, but is also "used as a method or means of studying social life" (1995, 199-202). Folklorist Gary Butler's discussion that a narrative "may function as a medium for the expression of extremely serious concerns and opinions" (1992, 36) furthers the idea

that narratives have the ability to make a large impact on society, whether via social commentary or group analysis. This is largely evident in the narratives of everyday people, but it can also be a part of something larger, such as a sacred or national narrative. In either case, philosopher Louis Mink's idea that narrative again, overused makes experience into something comprehensible can apply (1978, 129).

Sandra Stahl's examination of the personal narrative as folklore furthers the idea of narrative as social commentary, stressing that "to be a complete and 'successful' performance, a personal narrative must make some statement about the topic in terms of traditional attitude" (1977, 24). The notion of a traditional attitude, however, does not automatically suggest that the narrative must be examined from the lens of those who are being discussed; it simply means that tradition contributes to how the narrative is presented. In terms of when a narrative is responsible for either resistance or is of a subversive nature, tradition is agitated because "Any deviation from expectation is attention-getting... [and] unexpected happenings also expose the inadequacy of our cognitive models of reality" (Robinson 1981, 60). The unusual sticks out, disrupts the flow of life, and is often noticeable.

In the case of a nation like North Korea, such deviation can be highly dangerous. One of the last fully communist nations remaining in the current world, the nation, ruled by the deceased Kim Il-Sung (1948-1994) and Kim Jong-Il (1994-2011), and now by Jong-Il's son, Kim Jong-Un, has maintained its control for nearly six decades. According to political scientists Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, this has been done by "restrictive social policies; manipulation of ideas and information;

use of force; co-optation; manipulation of foreign governments; and institutional coup-proofing,” all of which prevent democratic mobility (2010, 45). Backed by a military that has an unprecedented presence within the nation, the use of force is prominent in the country’s propaganda,<sup>2</sup> with depictions of Koreans carrying weapons being a common scene (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** Delisle (2005, 17).

According to the image, it will take ideology, labor, and weapons, whether personal or explosive, to move forward; the nation’s ideology is far from peace-based.

The revolutionary nature of the nation is even further manifested in its capital, Pyongyang, a city of Stalinist-Marxist architecture that is simultaneously viewed as the heart of a revolution and as one of the world's "arenas for self-glorification" (Kim 2007, 24). Filled with statues dedicated to the Great Leader (and technically, still president) Kim Il-Sung and the recently departed Dear Leader Kim Jong-Il, as well as spaces for positivist propaganda and revolutionary operas, Pyongyang has even been described as more than just a theatrical setting; it is simultaneously a character in the story (*Ibid.*, 26-27). The nation's policy of requiring foreigners to be accompanied by a guide and/or translator at all times restricts mobility of tourists to see things for themselves, and thus places them into a controlled environment in which the ability to speak freely about things is heavily compromised.

The presence of personal experience narrative within Delisle's graphic novel is a counter to such an environment. In looking at storytelling in Northern Ireland, folklorist Ray Cashman suggests that stories are ways to simultaneously pass on worldviews, as well as question them (2008, 1). The primary function of Delisle's personal experience is to do just that, albeit with an experience that took place four years before *Pyongyang* was initially published. Sent to North Korea for two months, Delisle tells the story of his work as a liaison between his French employer and the Scientific and Educational Film Studio of Korea (SEK). SEK, which employs about 1,500 artists and is one of the largest animation studios in the world, receives foreign contracts to complete animation drawings, coloring and production.<sup>3</sup>

Assigned to supervise one of these contracts, Delisle recounts his interactions with both animation workers and foreign supervisors in the graphic novel.

Humor is a major way for Delisle to be able to turn a personally unpleasant situation into something more entertaining. This humor creates a new story for the greater narrative of *Pyongyang*, serving as a display of speech interaction while providing social commentary about personal experiences, many of which can be considered confusing and/or disorienting. In looking at the culture of paramedics, folklorist Timothy Tangherlini examined the profession as being “marked by disjuncture and ambiguity. Seen in this light, storytelling acts as a means for individuals both to interpret their experiences in the organization and to position themselves within that organization” (1998, xxi). Applied to the world of animation, Delisle’s storytelling in *Pyongyang* is not only an expression of his experience to the outside world, but is also an interpretive display of commentary that utilizes humor to orient the reader in seeing the same level of absurdity.

*Pyongyang*’s format of being a printed (and drawn) form of a personal experience narrative brings the challenge of whether or not these anecdotes can be considered “local character anecdotes.” Though she initially focused on anecdotes being orally transmitted, rather than printed, Sandra Dolby-Stahl’s work on the personal narrative shifted towards looking at the role of personal narrative within the literary. In a study of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, she points out that Hurston had “written a personal narrative, that like most oral personal narratives, is based on a true experience but enhanced by the demands of a literary genre”

(Dolby-Stahl 1992, 61). *Pyongyang*, a text neither sold as a folk narrative nor even close to it, utilizes said anecdotes to a great extent.

An excerpt from *Pyongyang* (**Fig. 2**) simultaneously functions as both an occupational tale and humorous anecdote about both a language barrier and an overly joyful technician:

*To check the animation, I work on a computer that's used for production the rest of the time. With it, I've inherited a technician who helps out with great zeal instead of taking a break while I do my stuff. Whenever I hesitate...she points at the spot I've got to click. It gets to be annoying. After a while, she lets up and decides to give me a taste of her country's musical genius instead. The tunes sound like a cross between a national anthem and theme song of a children's show...Like a Barney remix of "God Save the Queen" or "Oh Canada." My new friend is just singing right along, looking my way to get me going too.*



**Figure 2.** Delisle (2005, 27-28).

In cases such as these, occupational stories serve as a simultaneously important place for the incorporation of local character anecdotes, which are dispersed throughout *Pyongyang* and serve the purpose of providing humor and

social commentary. Using Archer Taylor's idea of anecdotes involving a "quotation of a witty remark or description of a remarkable situation" (1970, 223), we are able to further examine the incorporation of anecdotes within the graphic novel as being part of a counternarrative to North Korean ideology.

### **Counternarrative and Anecdote**

In his examination of anecdotes in Northern Ireland, Ray Cashman states that the anecdote "offers a lighter take on a customarily tense situation" (2008, 105). By being typically humorous in nature, and discussing people that folklorist Diane Tye describes as "nonthreatening, and often humorous, by most if not all other group members" (1989, 182), the production of anecdotal material is contingent upon two things. First, there must exist a lack of desire for openly serious social criticism, which is evident in the frequently humorous nature of such anecdotes. Second, there must be a reassurance that the teller will not suffer repercussions for their exposition of another's potential shortcomings or eccentric attributes.

Given that Delisle, as well as his fellow workers, were working in a nation that is well known for its history of imprisoning (and often executing) dissenters, the use of character anecdotes has shifted contexts twofold. In his discussion of the technician's singing, Delisle's joking approach to describing the song, as well as the performance of it, are interspersed with moments of social commentary; such moments not only point out perceived absurdities, but also criticize the shortcomings of musicians who are, by trade and by command of their nation, dedicated to their leader. Next, as anecdotes and other forms of verbal art are

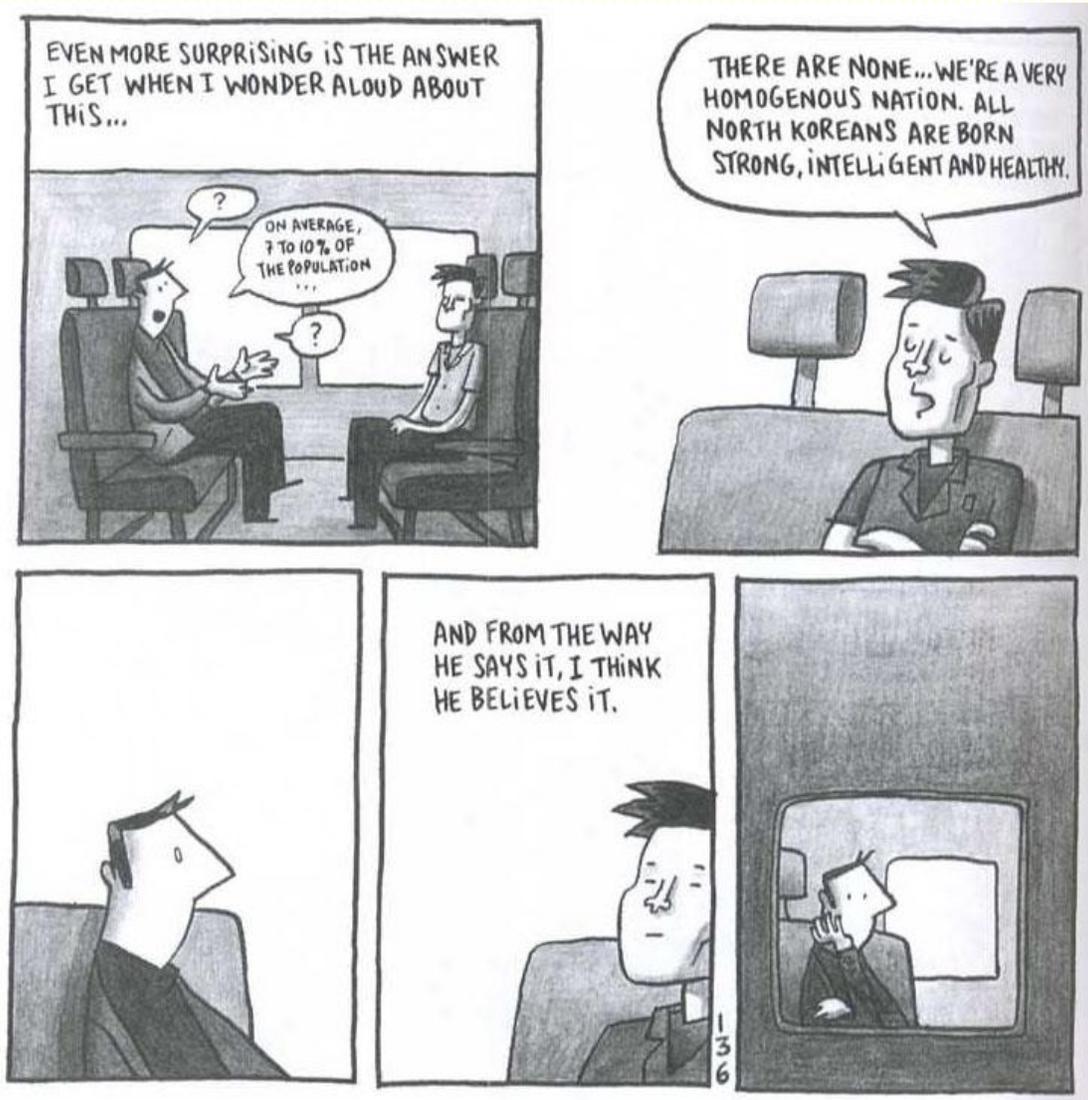
frequently told in either a semi-private or public setting among a small group of people, the medium in which Delisle's anecdotes are shared divulge from tradition while, at the same time, holding true to many of its key concepts.

Folklorist Elena Bradunas' discussion of individualism versus conformity within a community (1977, 161) is also reversed within Delisle's narrative; whereas Diane Tye suggests that the characters in anecdotes cause worldview-related dilemma (1989, 194), the opposite is taking place within *Pyongyang*. When asked by Delisle about the lack of people with disabilities in Pyongyang (**Fig. 3**), the guide says, "There are none...we're a very homogenous nation. All North Koreans are born strong, intelligent and happy" (Delisle 2005, 136).

Delisle, staring in disbelief and seeing that his guide seems to truly believe his own words, is awestruck to a point that he frames the conversation as swiftly ending, only to turn to silence and perceive his guide's belief as absurd and unrealistic. The characters, through their eccentricities, present Delisle, as well as many of his coworkers, with an admonishing reminder of what *not* to do: live in a perceived world of denial and blind allegiance.

Although the anecdote is not nearly as humorous in tone as others, is, among others, responsible for the more critical aspects of the graphic novel. Such anecdotes, rather than providing a lightening of tone among a tense environment, are instead responsible for validation of Delisle's own culture. Stahl's suggestion that the statements of narratives are also responsible for projecting traditional attitude can be interpreted from the perspective of both Delisle and his guide (Stahl

1977, 24), but it is from Delisle's perspective that the challenges to North Korean norms are presented.



**Figure 3.** Delisle (2005, 136).

This frame depicts of an encounter with a local, who also happens to be Delisle's guide, and underscores the complex development of individual worldviews in *Pyongyang*.

As North Korea is a homogenous society that values mass obedience and following the wisdom of one ruler, Delisle's own worldview, and the expressions

branching out from it, are, in fact, a counternarrative that destabilizes the institutions that North Korean propaganda strives to sustain (Honko 1984, 47). Each panel with disagreeing social commentary is a questioning of that which sustains North Korean culture, and for outsiders such as Delisle, the use of anecdotes is merely one way of demonstrating it.

### **Counter and Occupational Narrative**

In looking at occupational narrative, folklorist Jack Santino states, “Every industry and every job will have its own set of challenges, duties, skills, working conditions, and its own social milieu, and all of these will affect the narratives of that job” (1978, 205). As one of many expatriates in Pyongyang, it could be potentially easy to lump Delisle into a growing group of foreign capitalists within North Korea, but as he is the only one to have created a graphic narrative of said experience, his story is nonetheless significant in terms of what—and how—it portrays experience. Art historian and folklorist Suzanne MacAulay’s look at expatriate narrative bolsters support for looking at such narratives, suggesting that the “overall effects of large-scale movements such as migration and transnationalism tend to overwhelm the personal unless they are encountered “one story, one memory at a time” (2004, 263). By looking at occupational narrative within *Pyongyang* as a reflection of both personal experiences and changing societal landscapes within North Korea, it is possible to understand the narrative’s importance in telling the world more about the nation.



Figure 4. Delisle (2005, 50).

Figure 4 (above), which involves Delisle's interaction with a non-English-speaking supervisor of the SEK, is an example that mixes anecdote with occupational narrative. In the story, Delisle continues to speak English in spite of the fact that the supervisor does not speak anything but Korean (and does not attempt to speak English), leading to the following dialogue:

Delisle: While I write the retake notes, my translator makes himself useful elsewhere. That doesn't prevent one of the two animation

directors from coming to chat. Initially, I tried to convey that I don't understand Korean (especially North Korean) but he keeps coming back for more...even after I cut out the charades.

Delisle: So, wasting time?

Director: (Korean)

Delisle: Yessir, as you can see I'm busy!

Director: (Korean)

Delisle: I get the same way, but the feeling passes.

Director: (Korean)

Delisle: Of course, sure, no doubt.

Director: (Korean)

Delisle: Don't worry- things always work out in the end!

Director: (Korean)

Delisle: Well, I won't fall for it again.

Director: (waves)

Delisle: Ok then, see you.

Delisle (alone): Wow. It's crazy how much you can say with a smile and a wave or two. (Delisle 2005, 50)

Given that the two of them do not speak each other's language, it is much more possible for Delisle to tell the story of the supervisor as a character anecdote.

According to Tye, the notion of character is often considered to be "in contrast to, or in conflict with governing social norms," and such eccentricity is associated with

nonthreatening behavior (1989, 182). In this case, the supervisor's lack of recognition that Delisle is unable to speak Korean, and his persistence in talking to him despite not knowing what Delisle is saying in response, simultaneously contrasts the behavior of the group in which Delisle works, thus creating a sense that there is no danger in retelling such an anecdote.

From the perspective of an occupational narrative, this situation is also reflective of relationships between worker and authority; as Santino points out, "dealing with status and authority superordinates by subordinates is a major theme in occupational narrative [that] almost caricatures their relationship" (1978, 209-10). Despite the fact that Delisle is working for the supervisor, his perceived lack of linguistic capabilities and unflinching desire to keep talking reflects a perceived ignorance among authority and carries on a common occupational narrative trend. In a way, he is simultaneously functioning as a subordinate, an expatriate, and a capitalist trickster.

Many of Delisle's discussions of North Korean culture, particularly those involving deeper discussions surrounding North Korean society, not only take place in a setting involving other expatriates, but also in a non-work setting. As this is the basis for many forms of occupational storytelling (Santino 1978, 201), we see some of the most prominent examples of counternarrative in frames where Delisle is either talking with other expatriates or paying a visit to touristic sites throughout the country. These settings are a place to release, ponder what has taken place, and

have a chance to speak one's mind without being accompanied by a guide or translator.



**Figure 5.** Delisle (2005, 83).

In Figure 5 (above), Delisle's friend David is criticizing the dirtiness and wetness of the dining table, only to have Delisle tell him "You'll get used to it," implying that the dining conditions are unchanging and simply a part of the living conditions expatriates experience. Delisle's reply is, in a way, expressing the notion that putting up with such shortcomings is, of sorts, a type of work ritual that puts an expatriate through what folklorist Robert McCarl sees as social and psychological change (1976, 53). Put in the local perspective, the conditions are quite nice in comparison to that of ordinary North Koreans (many of whom have endured famine and severe rationing), but in the eyes of foreigners, they are far inferior to what is found at home.



**Figure 6.** Delisle (2005, 84).

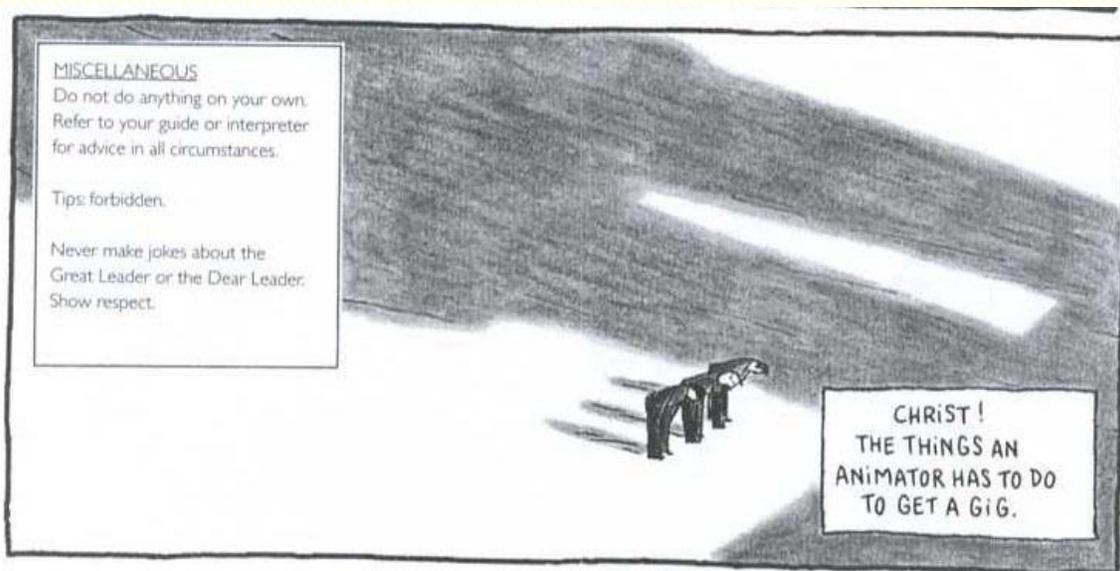
The dinner table is also a space for social and political commentary in which Delisle and David debate the narrative capabilities of a water bottle label (**Fig. 6**). The two of them, in noticing that the water is South Korean and nearly expired yet has a censored label to prevent tourists from knowing its origin, are utilizing unaccompanied non-work hours as a space for questioning the motives and ideals of their host country. Having realized what their hosts are trying to do—promote hostility towards their southern neighbours while still taking advantage of their commodities—Delisle and David are involved in an action that is chipping away at the self-inflating narratives that shape North Korean society. Folklorist John Robinson’s examination of personal narrative, which suggests that such narratives often retell “a triumph of the actor over untoward circumstances” (1981, 60), provides support for such cases as this one; knowing something that many North

Koreans might not (or might not publicly express), and publicly sharing it in the form of a graphic narrative, could be interpreted as such a triumph.

Such personal triumphs can be seen in the examples that Delisle gives of his visits to tourist sites in North Korea, many of which are considered practically essential for visitors to the country so as to not draw suspicion or scorn from their hosts. Ranging from the obligatory visit to the massive, bronze statue of Kim Il-Sung (which is related to a scene in which every visitor to the country is greeted with flowers at the Pyongyang airport, only to be taken immediately to the statue, asked to place the flowers at it, and bow) to the International Friendship Exhibition (a museum essentially consisting of all of the major gifts ever given to Kim Il-Sung, Kim Jong-Il, and now Kim Jong-Un), these sites are many in number, and even have roads specifically leading to some of them that are otherwise rarely used. It is this leisure time where some of the sharpest comments about the perceived peculiarities of North Korean culture come to mind, and the place where counternarrative within *Pyongyang* best manifests itself.

Such countering comes within the context of forced respect for North Korea's leaders, as one of the earliest panels of *Pyongyang* demonstrates (**Fig. 7**); listing a series of recommendations for travelers, such as "Do not do anything on your own. Refer to your guide or interpreter for advice in all circumstances" and "Never make jokes about the Great Leader or the Dear Leader.<sup>4</sup> Show respect" (Delisle 2005, 8), serve as examples for the reader. Superimposed on a panel of Delisle and his driver bowing before the statue while Delisle thinks "Christ! The things an animator has to

do to get a gig,” the tension between Western thought and North Korean ideology is evident and provides an early context for future acts of written and drawn dissent. Control is a must for the guides, and obedience is a must for those they supervise; visitors are informed by tourist information that “it’s essential to accept that you’ll have no independence during your trip – you’ll be accompanied by two government-appointed local guides at all times and only hear a one-sided view of history.”<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 7.** Delisle (2005, 8).

As respect and obedience applies to both guide and visitor, it is best for opinions regarding the surroundings to be kept private ; the most recent Lonely Planet guide to Korea, in discussing the question of visiting North Korea, suggests the following advice:

If you do decide to come, the one thing you should never do is visit with the intent of stirring up trouble or making any kind of protest—your guides and any North Koreans having contact with your group

will suffer very serious consequences and you'll achieve nothing more than a speedy deportation. If you do come, listen to the version of history given to you by the guides, accept that this is their version (however untrue) and leave serious criticism until you are back at your hotel.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Koryo Tours, one of the best-known organizations for visitors interested in a context of stubborn conviction:

Guides have very strong beliefs which probably differ quite starkly from most tourists, however they will not try to brainwash you for perhaps the simple reason that their system of 'Juche' socialism is intended for those of Korean blood only. They are not into spreading world revolution through the mouths of their handful of Western visitors. They express their beliefs and faiths very strongly and these are held universally throughout the DPRK so it is both impolite and futile to argue certain points with the Koreans.<sup>7</sup>

Far in advance, visitors are warned of the consequences of open dissent, leading to the need for a more private level of questioning. Delisle, as a foreigner in this country, did just that, keeping quiet as needed and adhering to customs as his guides requested. However, in speaking his mind and publishing it as a graphic narrative, the private opinions shifted towards a public narrative that was simultaneously telling of experience and subverting the rules of his hosts.



**Figure 8.** Delisle (2005, 74).

One of the best examples of such questioning, comes on a trip that Delisle took with his translator and guide (**Fig. 8**); sitting quietly in the vehicle, Delisle says “There’s a question that has to be burning on the lips of all foreigners here... a question you refrain from speaking aloud... but one can’t help asking yourself: Do they really believe the bullshit that’s being forced down their throats?” (Delisle

2005, 74). Involved in what folklorist Amy Shuman refers to as a “critique of the master narrative” (2005, 18-19), Delisle is utilizing his leisure time to think about things, and outside of the work context, freely expressing something that is unquestionable in the original setting.

With the rule of never mocking North Korea’s leaders in mind, it is also possible to look at how *Pyongyang* has served as a space for Delisle to be able to break the rules and engage in what is perceived by North Koreans as mocking behavior. In a visit to the International Friendship Exhibition (**Fig. 9**), an exhibit which leads to a room where visitors bow to a life-like wax statue of Kim Il-Sung, this trickster-like behavior is best displayed by Delisle, who tells the story as follows:

It’s amazing! The soundscape, subdued lighting and slightly forward bend to the figure create an aura of surprising realism! I feel like the “Beloved Leader” is about to turn my way and put an end to this unbearable immobility. (*to self*) Oh man! Don’t laugh...Behind me a detachment of soldiers bows down, tears in their eyes. As agreed, I bend over along with my hosts, biting my tongue to keep from laughing out loud. (Delisle 2005, 105)

Grudgingly bowing down while in a state of near-laughter, Delisle is holding everything in, restraining himself from criticizing what is in front of him to save his thoughts for later.

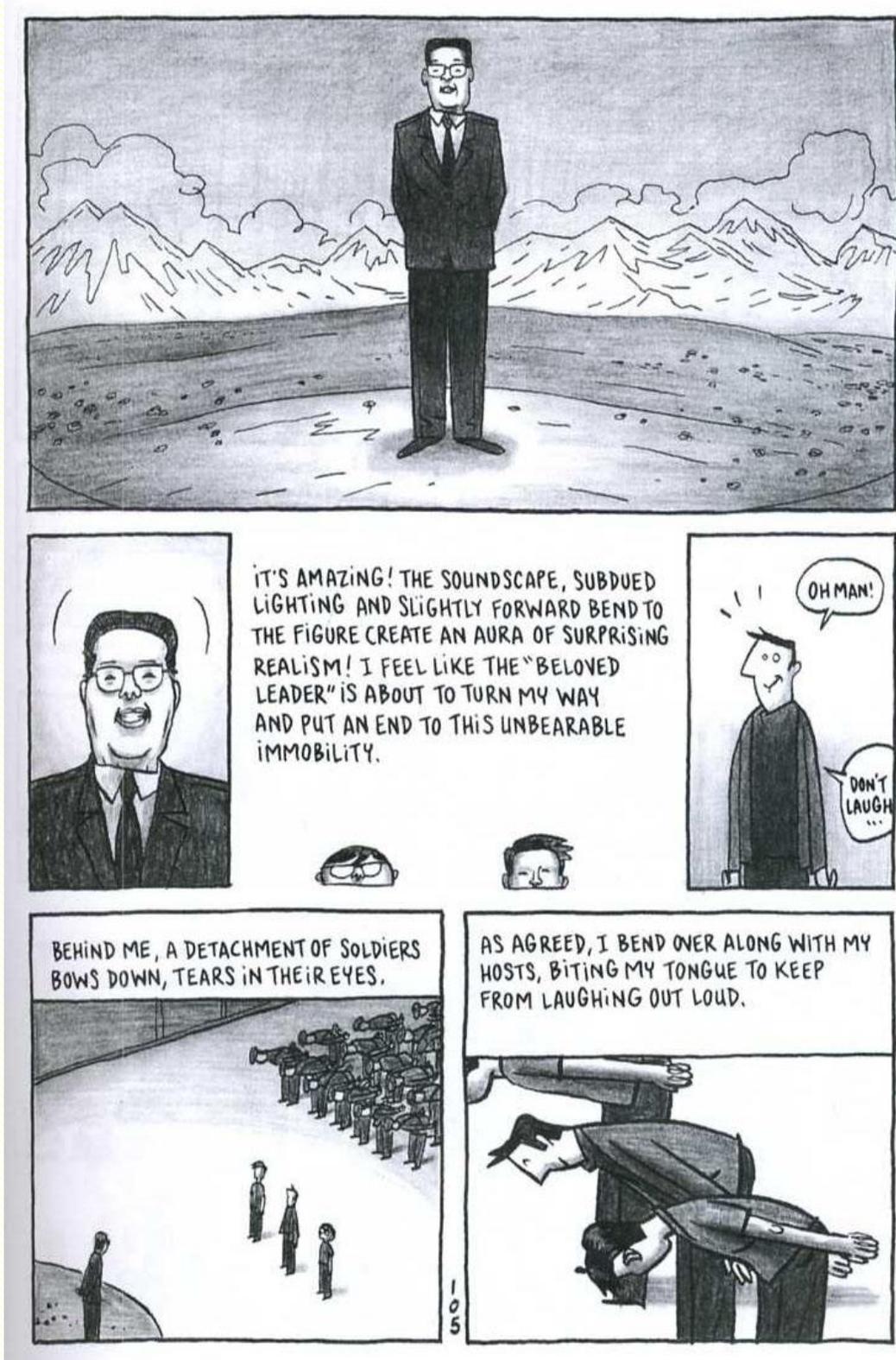


Figure 9. Delisle (2005, 105).

### **Untellability and Representation: Concerns over Voice**

The frames of the previous scene, as well as the arguments, are the best place to discuss the notion of untellability. While Delisle strives to discuss the untellable, his escorts remain elusive by doing what Amy Shuman refers to as “refusing to permit any effort to make sense of the senseless” (2005, 21). Delisle’s response to this is to simply tell the outside world of their refusal to confront what others perceive as being a hidden reality of North Korean life. He goes beyond the constraints of his hotel, his guides, his tour, etc.; it is all done through storytelling, which according to Shuman “can resist the constraints of appropriate situations as well as the constraints that label and categorize experiences” (*Ibid.*). Combined with his inclusion of stories such as trying not to laugh at the Kim Il-Sung statue, Delisle confronts the untellable in one easy way: putting it in a best-selling graphic novel, a tellable realm where everyone has the choice to see the story.

The concern with untellability, however, brings to mind a question: in Delisle’s graphic novel, although the story is about a Western capitalist’s time in an Eastern socialist state, and appears to be an untellable tale, is the story *truly* untellable if, in Western society, it has been told before without concern? Daniel Byman’s discussion of authoritarian regimes and social policies suggest that these regimes “use restrictive social policies to engineer a society in which organized dissent is both dangerous and difficult, if not impossible,” highlighting the commonality of such tales as dangerously seditious (2010, 47). Unlike these forms of dissent, however, Delisle’s counternarrative takes place *after* the fact, something

that is even referenced in his later graphic novel, *Burma Chronicles*, a tale of his time in Myanmar; being away from the country he has stepped out of the danger zone and into a place where free speech is more acceptable.

Another concern with tellability can be examined by looking at how North Koreans themselves have been able to provide a counternarrative. As the only ones who are able to safely provide such voice are those who have escaped North Korea, their narratives are the most vital; yet, as multiple scholars have pointed out, that does not necessarily mean that such stories are being discussed. In looking at the performance of trauma in the musical *Yoduk Story* (a musical that was created by North Korean refugees in order to demonstrate the atrocities of the regime), drama scholar Suk-Young Kim notes that it “is common for the survivors of trauma to remain silent since they find it difficult to revisit their painful memory with documentary-like precision” (2008, 129). These stories are able to be told, but the presence of factors such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Chang, Haggard and Noland 2008, 1-3), combined with the details involved in the specific stories, make things easier said than done in terms of collecting such narratives. For many survivors, the details are too hard to relive, which often leads to emotional distance between the informant and their experiences when stories are, in fact, discussed (Kim 2008, 129).

There has, however, been multiple counternarratives by Westerners against the North Korean government, whether through documentary films (2000’s *North Korea-Shadows and Whispers*, about a family defecting to China), feature films

(2004's *Team America: World Police*, a satirical film involving Kim Jong-Il in puppet form), or television skits (*MadTV's* The Kim Jong-Il Show sketch). The level of seriousness is variable within each genre, but the presence of such programmes and the success of them in the West are worth noting. *Pyongyang*, with its humorous take on the experience of a Western capitalist in North Korea and its biting commentary on the ruling regime, fits more within this category, simply because there is a far stronger level of comfort and distance towards the regime. Delisle, in relating his account, did, in fact, risk prosecution should he ever return to the country, but as he has no plans to visit there again,<sup>8</sup> what might be perceived as unspeakable or seditious in North Korea is now safe to discuss.

Safety and distance aside, however, it is important to point out that Delisle's story, however unlike the narratives of gulag survivors or former employees of Kim Jong-Il (his personal sushi chef, who fled to Japan, wrote such a book), is not trivial. Rather, it provides, through its anecdotes and occupational narrative, a stronger look into how foreigners are treated in a region where foreigners are considered dangerous. In discussing the success of autobiographical graphic novels such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, folklorist Rosemary Hathaway suggests that they are about interaction with society, suggesting that "While those autobiographical accounts do also attempt to capture a specific sense of place and time, they are at heart really about how the writer/artist's own personal experiences relate to larger historical and cultural contexts" (2011, 250). Her words bring to mind the importance of multiple voices in understanding a culture, and in reality, Delisle's voice, while not

being even close in detail to that of a gulag survivor's, is important in the way its personal experience is seen in relation to the experience of others who have dealt, in some form or another, with the mannerisms of the North Korean world.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Courtesy of Words Without Borders' webpage:

<http://wordswithoutborders.org/books/literature-from-the-axis-of-evil-writing-from-iran-iraq-north-korea-and-oth>.

<sup>2</sup> According to the U.S. Department of State's research, approximately one in every five North Korean men, ages 17-54, belongs to the Korean People's Army. Source:

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2792.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Kitchens, Susan. 2003. "Axis of Animation." *Forbes.com*. Created 3 March 2003; Accessed 27 April 2009.

<http://members.forbes.com/global/2003/0303/014.html>.

<sup>4</sup> The Great Leader refers to Kim Il-Sung; the Dear Leader, to Kim Jong-Il.

<sup>5</sup> This is according to the latest publication of the Lonely Planet guide to Korea, which was available digitally as of 2012.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> This was posted on Koryo Tours' site as of 2008; the rules can be found at <http://www.koryogroup.com/tips/index.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Delisle, when asked in an interview about whether or not he planned to return, said "I probably wouldn't be welcome there anymore." *National Post*, 7 September 2005; accessed via Drawn and Quarterly. <http://www.drawnandquarterly.com/newsList.php?item=a43204677c3785>.

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