

“Like Their Lives Depended On It”:  
The Role of Comics in Subverting Anti-Arab and Islamophobic Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the role the medium of comics plays in the construction and subversion of anti-Arab and Islamophobic discourse. It seeks to address the following questions in particular: how does the medium of comics interpellate subjects regarding the Western discursive formation that conflates Arab, Muslim, and terrorist? What does the medium of comics afford creators in subverting dominant discourses that dehumanize Arabs and Muslims?

I argue that as a hypermedium in which text and repeated images are in continual tension, comics challenge the sort of foundational notion of truth necessary for dominant discourse. I use a Foucauldian lens to examine several comics in relation to larger discursive formations.

In Chapter 1, I explain the problem, my methods, and my theory in more detail. In Chapter 2, I apply this theory as a lens to examine the rhetorical work the medium plays in subverting dominant discourse in *Palestine*, a nonfiction piece of comics journalism. I use Chapter 3 to problematize the assertions made in the first two chapters by looking at an instance where comics are used to reinscribe dominant discourse. Specifically, I analyze the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report*. Chapter 4 acts as something of a retort to Chapter 3; it examines *In the Shadow of No Towers* to interrogate the ways in which Art Spiegelman explicitly addresses not only the issues he grappled with as a New Yorker during and after 9/11, but the complex relations of representation that arose from the event. Chapter 5 I examine how subversion works when a hypermedium is further remediated by analyzing Didier LeFevre's *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors without Borders*. The Conclusion is devoted to discussing the implications of this study, both in terms of pedagogy and in terms of theorizing the relationship and differences between image and text. I argue that comics demonstrate the productive ideological tensions that exist between modes of signification (such as verbal and visual). An understanding of this ideological tension is key for scholars of visual rhetoric and hegemonic discourse.

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## Introduction

At a recent conference on rhetoric, I noticed a recurring and troubling motif. Many of the panelists whose talks I attended, both graduate students and professors, kept relying upon a metaphor of rhetoric as a means of piercing surfaces to determine “what’s really there”—tacitly invoking a binary of surface versus depth, underlying truth versus appearance. For example, a group of panelists repeatedly argued that teaching their students rhetoric would provide those students with a way to understand what a text “really means.” Another speaker, addressing an instance of presidential rhetoric, used the metaphor of what was said as surface, its true meaning somewhere beneath.

I find this troubling for a number of reasons. First and foremost, as scholars of rhetoric *we should know better*. Several rhetoricians have written thoroughly about the problems with this metaphor and depth models of language and content have been thoroughly critiqued. Second, in this context, the model is problematic because it ignores Foucault’s cogent critique of interiority (in its assumption of human and institutional intent and agency). In other words, by attributing agency to human or institutional actors (the president, students), we elide questions of *how* power works in favor of simply choosing *who* and *why*. Third (and the most addressed in rhetorical studies), it posits a given rhetorical hermeneutic as a sort of decoder ring; the act of interpretation is merely translating between signifiers and reality, as if there were no arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, as if signifiers could refer to anything but other signifiers. The implicit assumption in this formulation is that there is a truth that is external to language, and that it is knowable and demonstrable. This leads to the fourth and most egregious problem of the metaphor: it then privileges the rhetorician, designating her as the shaman who—using her decoder ring—shows us “what’s really there.” In other words, one only needs the

correct interpretive lens to get at a foundational reality. The interpreter excused from responsibility in interpretation; rhetoric is merely the glass pane through which the light of the text's truth passes.

In explaining my problems with this metaphor, I do not mean to denigrate the work of the rhetorician (nor, for that matter, of the shaman). I do, however, think we need a better metaphor. The trouble with assuming that rhetoric somehow gets us at reality is that it brings us right back to the same essentialism and yet another regime of truth, whose claims to knowledge and authority enable it to reduce complexity and enact power: meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

So rather than try to “read between the lines,” to “get at what's really there,” when we work to interpret a text, we should work to simply widen our lens. The surface versus depth metaphor asks that we choose between a facade or a foundational truth, and in so doing it avoids an important question: “whose truth?” As postmodern and poststructural scholars have consistently argued (and as I will throughout this book), truth is always sponsored, always serves power, and has been used to justify all sorts of nastiness. A metaphor of extended surface, on the other hand, recognizes the intertextuality of a given discursive artifact and its place as an intersection where history, power, ideology, culture, and any number of other forces are imbricated.

This just may be where comics come into play.

Comics, as various theorists explain (and whose due I will give in Chapter 1), cannot be anything but a study in surfaces. Elements within a panel make meaning only when juxtaposed with other elements in the panel. Panels within a page take on specific meaning only when juxtaposed with other panels on the page. And we can continue to extend this to the double-page

spread, the rest of the spreads within a given book, and even beyond. Tensions such as those between word and image and between linearity and simultaneity act to only further frustrate a belief in signifiers' correspondence with reality. While one could make a similar argument (and many have) about any form of visual—or even textual—representation, many of these have become such a familiar part of our discursive landscape as to have become invisible, as if their correspondence with reality is a given.

Subsequently, one of the enabling assumptions of this book is one that has been touched on by a few scholars, and is probably best articulated by Ole Frahm, who says that comics “make fun of the recurrent notion that, in some cases, a proximity between object and sign actually exists that can be called truth” (179-180). Similarly, Diana George offers an approach to defining comics that relates to the word's origin in the Greek word for “revels”: “because even in the darkest graphic novel or the stark reality of graphic news reporting, the medium betrays a certain irreverence perhaps brought on by the bare fact of panels and space, figure and word balloons, speed lines and word sounds (SPLAT!)” (“See You in the Funny Papers”). And this notion of parody, of irreverence, highlights what has perhaps become less obvious in other media: the endless play of signifiers that have no necessary reference to reality, only to each other. In this way, comics act as a sort of implicit hermeneutic that disavows depth or truth in any kind of foundational sense. The disavowal of authority serves an important function in resisting dominant discourses, where the “truth” authorized by power (and which in turn is authorized by its claims to truth), often works to dehumanize subjects and define what it means to be sub-human or abnormal.

Perhaps one of the more recent distressing manifestations of this dehumanizing through discourse is the American rhetorical construct that conflates Arab with Muslim with terrorist.

While this conflation is not new, it has been amplified almost immeasurably since the tragedies of 9/11, and it has been very tactically deployed in the midterm election year to stir up racial resentment and fear. And it has very real effects. It has enabled the open discussion of limiting the freedom of religion, the burning of mosques, and a rise in hate crimes. All of this because the characteristics of a few aberrant fanatics are taken (through discourse) to be essential characteristics of a diverse range of people who span numerous nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, and even religions.

There are, however, numerous points of resistance within this discourse. As Foucault argues, “where there is power, there is resistance...a multiplicity of points of resistance” (*History of Sexuality* 95). Power, in fact, cannot exist without resistance. Foucault describes its necessity, for without it, power “would simply be a matter of obedience. So resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance” (167). In other words, as hegemonic as a discursive formation can be, there are sites available for disruption and subversion. Operating then from the notion of comics as parody, as irreverence, as play, we can begin to see ways in which the medium can work to counteract hegemonic discourse. Political parties and organizations, as Foucault argues, do more to cement relations of power than to actually change them. Play, on the other hand, undermines these relationships through unsanctioned means.

The title of this book, “*Like Their Lives Depended On It*” is taken from a line in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*. Set in the Occupied Territories during the winter of 1991-92, the book collects a nine issue comic series depicting Sacco's visit there. In one scene, he sees a demonstration (and counter-demonstration) of Israeli members of Peace Now, an organization dedicated stopping settlement. After the rally, Palestinian children gather up the signs, and moments later, Sacco



witnesses a small demonstration of Palestinians now bearing the Peace Now signs: “A mini-demonstration! Maybe 50 people. Some kids, some women. They march a few dozen yards...chanting their heads off...raising more decibels in two minutes than I’ve heard all afternoon...I mean, they’re screaming like their lives depended on it!” (20). In a very real sense, their lives *do* depend on it. The dominant discourse on the topic of Palestine, as Said points out in his “Homage to Joe Sacco,” is “of Palestinians as rock-throwing, rejectionist, and fundamentalist villains whose main purpose is to make life difficult for the peace-loving, persecuted Israelis” (iii). As long as the power of this rhetorical construction persists, their lives are ever in danger. By taking the discursive tools (in this case, the signs) of the established political organizations and making them their own with their own context, subalterns find sites to challenge the dominant discourse. In much the same way, hybrid media can provide new sites for resistance and subversion.

In this book I seek to address what boils down to these questions: how does the medium of comics construct subjects and act as a point of articulation in the Western discursive formation that conflates the term “Arab” with “Muslim” and with “terrorist”? What does the medium of nonfiction comics afford creators in subverting dominant discourses that dehumanize Arabic peoples? How does this medium help them to appropriately address the rhetorical situation in which they find themselves? Secondly (though just as necessary), how is meaning made in these works? What kinds of ideologies are enacted in the process of making meaning in these works? How might the implicit logics of the medium (as Kress describes them) interact with the ideological features in the content of a given work? How do comics subvert or reinscribe certain discourses? How do the ideological features change when the mediums involved are further remediated? Finally, what are the implications of such a reading? What do they tell us about the

role medium and genre play in dominant discourse?

In addressing these questions, I will not attempt to “pierce” the rhetoric that permeates and constitutes this formation to see some sort of truth in its interior. Rather, I want to map out series of relations between what is depicted, the media and genres in which it is depicted, and the social, historical, and material conditions that surround these depictions. To do so, I will draw from a variety of critical lenses and disciplines ranging from postcolonial studies, visual rhetoric, comics studies, poststructuralism, political theory, and more. I am particularly indebted to Michel Foucault, whose theories about discourse, knowledge, and power are the foundations upon which the book rests.

In Chapter 1, I explain the methodologies I am using and the discursive formation that conflates “Arab,” with “Muslim,” with “terrorist” more fully. I will also work through a theory of comics' subversive quality drawn from a review the relevant literature. In Chapter 2, I will apply this theory as a lens to examine the rhetorical work the medium plays in subverting Anti-Arab and Islamophobic discourse in Joe Sacco's graphic novel *Palestine*. Chapter 3 will be devoted to studying the graphic adaptation of The 9/11 Report to address the ways in which the medium is used to articulate dominant discourse. In this chapter, I will rely on Barthes' work to interrogate that text and interpret the myths upon which it draws. Chapter 4 will act as something of a retort to Chapter 3: in it, I examine the ways in which Art Spiegelman explicitly addresses not only the issues he grappled with as a New Yorker during and after 9/11 but also the complex relations of representation that arose from the event. In Chapter 5, I will study Didier LeFevre's *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors without Borders*. *The Photographer* represents an intersection of genres (photojournalism, comics journalism, memoir) and media (comics, prose, photography) that together occasions different ways of meaning-making than the

genres or media it draws upon require alone. *The Photographer* offers a site to explore how meaning-making in comics is complicated in remediation and how remediation requires different forms of cooperation from the reader, as well as fosters new sites of resistance. In the Conclusion, I will work through some of the implications of this study, particularly in regards to writing classroom pedagogy and the relationship between word and image.

## 1.

**Discourse, the Politics of Representation, and Comics**

As negative portrayals of Arabs and Muslims continue to proliferate in the United States, the representations of them in various media convey and perpetuate ideologies that are not always immediately visible; these representations often elide the role of power, culture, history, and other factors that converge in their constitution. In this book, then, I seek to politicize these representations in a very specific medium: comics. While it may not seem the obvious candidate for an examination of these representations, comics are a fascinating site of study not only because of their multimodality but also their status as a sort of “low genre” or counter-culture artifact. Comics are just as, if not more than, important a site for understanding how Arabs and Muslims are represented in the U.S. as the more official documents that are typically privileged in this sort of examination: in many ways comics are at a distinct advantage compared to these other media because of how widely read they are by a variety of people. As a popular culture medium, comics play a vital role in relaying and constituting the various discourses that structure peoples' lives.

Given the fever pitch to which anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia have ascended, perhaps no time more than now has required a close examination of how their attendant discourse is structured, conveyed, naturalized, and perpetuated. Perhaps the most glaring recent instance of this is the national protest of the Park 51 Islamic community center in Manhattan, whose opponents refer to it as the “Ground Zero Mosque.” Several polls indicate that a majority of Americans are against the site (Altman, Sundby, *CNN*, *Rasmussen*). Ignoring for a moment the absurdity of the overtly rhetorical function of the moniker “Ground Zero Mosque,” (it is no more a mosque than a YMCA is a church, and it is four blocks away from Ground Zero), the

protests and polls disclose some fairly unsettling things about the way the United States sees Arabs, Islam, and terror.

In this formulation, the hijackers of the planes responsible for the destruction of the World Trade Center have been framed as representative of all Arabs and all Muslims, never mind the fact that the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” are not in any way coterminous. Moreover, the religious overtones with which Ground Zero has been rhetorically constructed as “hallowed ground” is even more telling. This narrative pits East against West in religious terms: to wit, the Islamic community center should not be built because it is Islam (and not a few extremists) that destroyed the World Trade Center; Ground Zero is “hallowed ground,” but it is exclusive ground, apparently fit only for Christians. And as recent attacks and abuse against nonwhites from the protesters have demonstrated, it is fairly clear that the xenophobia on display is not restricted solely to religion. For example, an amateur video posted to the Internet reveals a young black man being harassed at the site of one of the protests. The videographer described the incident as such:

A man walks through the crowd at the Ground Zero protest and is mistaken as a Muslim. The crowd turns on him and confronts him. The man in the blue hard hat calls him a coward and tries to fight him. The tall man who I think was one of the organizers tried to get between the two men. Later I caught up with the man who's name is Kenny. He is a Union carpenter who works at Ground Zero. We discussed what a scary moment that was for him. (Duss)

Similarly during this period, a Bangladeshi taxi driver was attacked by a drunken man with a knife who asked him whether he was a Muslim before slashing him in the neck and arms. The

driver attributed the attack to the toxic xenophobic environment fostered by the Park 51 debate (Associated Press).

These are, of course, only the most recent and most prevalent of a continuous string of events highlighting—and enabled by—the discursive formation that conflates the term *Arab* with *Islam* and with *terrorism*. There are many other instances in the last year alone that demonstrate the power of this discourse: Qur'an burnings, U.S. mosques being subjected to arson, anxieties about the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, hate crimes, and more. This discursive formation (which I will develop more fully throughout this the chapter) thus has very real material consequences. Representation—particularly when it is imposed upon a cultural Other—is always a political act imbricating power relations between the audience, the author, those represented, and their social worlds.

In this book, I seek to work through certain aspects of this discursive formation, particularly regarding how it might be subverted. Specifically, I look at comics as a point of resistance in the articulation of anti-Arab and Islamophobic discourse. Though many traditional and mainstream comics have been complicit in this discourse, in the last few decades a number of comics creators have written innovative works that subvert not only this particular discursive formation but also the very authority with which dominant discourse is issued.

To argue that comics can act as a point of resistance in the articulation of anti-Arab and Islamophobic discourse, in this chapter I focus primarily on three areas: one, Foucault's theory of discourse and the operation of ideology in media; two, the existence of a coherent (if diffuse) discursive formation in the West that others Arab and Muslim peoples; and three, the formal and cultural qualities of comics that lend themselves to subversive discourse. In making this claim, I do not seek to attribute agency to media or discursive technologies, and do not advocate any sort

of technological determinism. That said, these technologies are driven and assigned meaning by subjects operating within the cultural and discursive parameters in which the technology is embedded. In other words, media and genres do nothing on their own, but within a cultural context have a profound impact upon the ways texts are composed, consumed, reproduced, and remediated. As Anis Bawarshi argues, genre is not simply a text, but rather what is *done* with those texts. Genres “help us define and organize kinds of social actions, social actions that these texts rhetorically make possible” (Bawarshi 335). It is vital to study these media precisely because of the cultural values, habits of meaning-making, and ways of being in the world attached to them and the way they subsequently structure the discursive field of possibilities.

### **Foucault and Discourse**

Foucault offers rhetoricians an especially compelling lens to view the social construction of difference. Foucault's best-known works examine how social processes produce and discipline human subjects. Throughout this section, I will share examples of how mainstream media accounts have worked to discipline Arab and Muslim subjects by implicitly and explicitly linking these categories to terrorism. As Gillian Rose points out, Foucault “paid close attention to the ways various practices and institutions defined what it was to be human (and therefore also what it was to be sub-human, abnormal, or deviant)” (141). When applied to the way in which the dominant discourse in America has come to define terrorism in a very specific ethnic and religious sense, his notion of how discourse functions is thus valuable.

Foucault uses the term *discourse* very specifically to refer to

... a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation; it does not form a rhetorical or formal unity, endlessly repeatable, whose appearance or use in history might be indicated (and, if

necessary, explained); it is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined (*Archeology of Knowledge* 116-117).

Discourse creates the conditions in which a thing is thought, and structures the possibilities for action based on that thought. If terrorism is only defined in terms of the transgressor's race or religion, then other alternatives begin to become precluded. Discourse then determines subject position—that is, the subject cannot communicate outside of the discursive field of which one is a part; subsequently, one is subject to discourse. Subject position thus enables or constrains how subjects produced through a given discourse are able to relate to other subjects, based on their relationship to that discourse. In the case of Anti-Arab and Islamophobic discourse, cognates such as *Islam*, *Arab*, and *terror* become interwoven in a muddled discursive formation.

Discursive formations thus consist of the conditions in which meanings coalesce into discourse. For Foucault, discourse disciplines subjects not simply through repressive rules but through producing a sense of self; as Rose describes, “Discourse produces the world as it understands it” (143). In other words, the “knowledge” created by discourse in turn creates the world. For example, if we define terrorists as Arabs and/or Muslims, the recent calls for racial profiling begin to make sense: after all, rather than trying to proactively prevent the political and socio-economic conditions that engender terrorism, it is easier to enact control on a smaller category of individuals who wear their rhetorical category on their skin, in their mode of dress, and in their cultural practices. Moreover, because the definition of abnormality in this instance hinges in part upon race, the subjects to be controlled cannot avoid scrutiny, nor are they confined to only one group of people; Muslims can be found among Hispanics, blacks, South Asians and others. These subjects can, however, attempt to monitor behavior so as not to be



singled out, thus serving the function of power in which the subject disciplines himself in an attempt to appear “normal.” Foucault refers to this practice as panopticism, or the state's ability to monitor subjects or to even merely induce the feeling of being watched. This works to “induce...a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (*Discipline and Punish* 210). Though he takes the term from Jeremy Bentham's prison plans, Foucault also suggested that as a model it can be (and has been) used for other contexts as well.

For example, Nadine Naber cites Foucault's notion of panopticism in her article, “The Rules of Forced Engagement: Race, Gender, and the Culture of Fear Among Arab Immigrants in San Francisco Post-9/11.” She found that Arabs and Muslims from all classes had “an intensified sense that one is always under the scrutiny of others—strangers, hidden cameras, wire-taps, and other surveillance of the security state” (254). Consequently, this feeling of constant scrutiny affects how subjects behave. In another instance, Louise Cainkar describes Arab and Muslim difficulties and changed behaviors in activities such as flying, engaging in charity, and even praying at mosques (181-186). Psychologists have found that the overwhelming public discrimination against Arab Americans after 9/11 has contributed to lowering self-esteem, a degradation in perceived personal control, and lower overall mental health (Moradi and Hassan).

What these examples demonstrate quite well is the extent to which power and discourse are linked. For Foucault, discourse is powerful not because it constrains, but rather because it is productive and diffuse. Power produces behaviors. Power produces possible relationships between subjects. Power is not necessarily exerted directly from “on high,” but is instead “employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising

this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation” (“Two Lectures” 98). Dominant discourses then normalize and privilege certain ways of making meaning, of “producing the world” by acting *through* rather than *upon* subjects. Individuals receive and relay this discourse, cementing its status as a thing in the world.

### ***Foucault and Resistance***

Because there are many discourses that comprise a formation, there are many sites of contestation: “where there is power, there is resistance...a multiplicity of points of resistance” (*History of Sexuality* 95). In the case of the American anti-Arab and Islamophobic discursive formation, there are any number of these points. In this book I focus on comics because—at a glance—they are such an unlikely and yet potentially productive point of resistance. In studying these points of resistance, I am using the Foucauldian approach to discourse that I have described above. The questions that I seek to address lend themselves well to rhetorical discourse analysis. My work, then, consists of identifying and interpreting patterns in these texts, drafting an account of those patterns influenced by several theories, and presenting that account. More specifically, I am looking toward the suasive functions inherent not only in the content, but also in the medium itself. To do this, I have assembled a collection of texts that primarily work to subvert the dominant discursive formation that conflates the terms Arab, Muslim, and terrorist. In addition to these texts, I have also included the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report*, which instead works to reinforce this discursive formation. I include it to examine how the form is reworked to allow for dominant discourse. I explore the rhetorical organization of these texts, paying particular notice to the images and imagetext and the organization of imagetext into panels on a page. I will pay particular attention to the key themes and images and the ways in which they connect, looking to identify the relations between the statements conveyed in and

among these texts.

This approach helps me to elucidate some of the ideological implications of how the medium of comics is used. While Foucault was somewhat skeptical about notions of ideology and the sort of 'penetrative' models of interpretation typically associated with it, I hope to conduct this analysis (as I mentioned in the introduction) less as a way to see what “lies underneath” and more as a way to adequately contextualize the discourses that appear on a given page in terms of the larger formation of which they are a part.

### ***Foucault, Therborn, and Ideology***

Though Foucault was fairly skeptical of the term ideology, I suspect his skepticism had to do with the way it was deployed in its strictly Marxist sense as false consciousness. The Marxist notion of false consciousness is problematic in a Foucauldian sense because such an approach positions ideology against some universal truth and is premised upon a stable subject. Foucault, of course, problematized the subject as anything but historically contingent. Consequently, any attempt to theorize ideology in such a fashion runs up against the anti-foundational approach to knowledge, the subject and discourse that Foucault advocates.

Subsequently, I am using the term 'ideology' here in the sense that Goran Therborn employs it: “that aspect of the human condition under which human beings live their lives as conscious actors in a world that makes sense to them in varying degrees. Ideology is the medium through which this consciousness and meaningfulness operate” (2). That is, ideology is not limited to false consciousness or a superficial screen through which reality is apprehended. Rather, it is constitutive; we can operate in the world only through ideology. One of the enabling assumptions in this research is that discourse is inherently ideological—that is, discourse in all its permutations (content, genre, medium, social context, etc.) is imbricated in ideology.

This observation enables me to observe potential sites of conflict and collusion in a given piece of discourse between those ideologies inherent in the medium, those inherent in the genre, and those employed in its narratives. As Therborn argues, ideology is not a possession but a plurality of processes that “differ, compete, and clash not only in what they say about the world we inhabit, but also in telling us who we are, in the kind of subject they interpellate” (78). Therborn’s formulation of ideology then builds upon Althusser’s, wherein ideology is considered to be an imaginary relationship between the subject and the material conditions of his or her existence, particularly as it regards the means of production. This relationship is established through interpellation, which hails individuals into particular subject positions: “ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!’” (95-96). In other words, ideology acts upon subjects through material, psychological, and communicative means.

Most important to my examination is Therborn’s assertion that ideologies are always “produced, conveyed, and received in particular, materially circumscribed social situations and through special means and practices of communication, the material specificity of which bears upon the efficacy of a given ideology” (80). Discursive practices thus bring about the conditions in which we can formulate accounts of the world; these accounts, as Therborn describes, address three concerns: what exists, what is good, and what is possible. As James Berlin points out in his examination of Therborn, ideology’s social character affects us in such a way as to naturalize what we see as existing, valuable, and possible. Further he argues that, “Ideology also, as we have seen, always includes conceptions of how power should—again, in the nature of things—be

distributed in society” (56). Not only does this power manifest as political force, but as social forces that determine how we behave in everyday situations. As discursive artifacts, these comics thus contain an argument regarding how power ought to be distributed, how power determines the terms of our social contact, and who has power in determining what exists, what is good, and what is possible. Further, as an aspect of a communicative medium, this ideology interacts with and affects the rhetoric/ideology of the text contained within the medium and the discursive formations that encompass it. Specifically, ideology for Therborn addresses three questions: what exists, what is good, and what is possible. Using these questions as a rubric with which to interrogate not only the content of a given piece of discourse but also its mode of delivery, I am thus able to articulate the assumption inherent in that discourse.

The way meaning is attached to discourses can be taken then as codes that refer both denotatively to their referents but also connotatively to other discourses. What I am most interested in in this context is how these connotations become ideologically naturalized. As Stuart Hall explains,

Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed—the effect of an articulation between sign and referent—but to be 'naturally' given. Simple visual signs appear to have achieved a near-universality' in this sense: though evidence remains that even apparently 'natural' visual codes are culture-specific. However, this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather that the codes have been profoundly *naturalized* (132, emphasis his).

My argument then is that the codes in the U.S. linking the discourse surrounding the term

*terrorism* connotatively to the terms *Arab* and *Muslim* have become naturalized. That is, the process of coding takes on a concealing quality wherein there appears to be no overt argument that terrorism is an Arab or Muslim phenomenon: it is simply a thing in the world, the way it is.

### **Contemporary Forms of Othering: the Rhetorical Construction of the 'Evil Arab'**

To return to a point I had made earlier, if I wish to examine the ways in which comics challenge a dominant discursive formation, I must, of course, establish it as a thing that exists in the world. My work here is made easier by the many scholars who have written extensively on the subject and the sheer amount of racist media discourse explicitly linking Arabs, Muslims, and terrorists.

#### ***The Role of the Other in Rhetorics of Ressentiment***

Though Foucault's work has generally addressed how discourse facilitates power through institutions such as the prison, the hospital, and the asylum, his overall theory of discourse applies here as well. While the “evil Arab” rhetorical construct is not fully institutionalized, it is important to remember that the discourses that coalesced into incarceration, medicine, and insanity were not always, either. And given current U.S. policy toward the Middle East and even its own Arab and Muslim citizens, it seems—as I will argue more fully momentarily—as though the construct *is* indeed in the process of becoming institutionalized.

While I will describe more fully the rhetorical construction of the “evil Arab” as it has been produced and perpetuated in American discourse, I wish for the moment to focus more specifically on the uses to which it has been put in contemporary culture and politics. Jeremy Engels provides an incredibly useful framework for understanding some of the larger political discourse that this construct is plugged into and the role it is meant to play as “victimizer.” He argues that rhetorics of victimage can be used to inflame publics by preying upon emotion and

xenophobia: “When rhetorics cultivate hostility toward the perceived cause of suffering, they become deeply problematic—especially when one is not really a victim, or when one has identified the cause of suffering incorrectly” (304). While he frames his overall discussion in terms of conservative victimage (particularly as it is manifested in the Tea Party movement and the “silent majority” of Nixon's presidency), it is useful in understanding how powerful the “evil Arab” rhetorical construct is.

Engels employs Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* to develop what he terms “the politics of resentment”: “the goals of this politics is to keep an audience weak and in need of leadership by keeping them perpetually hostile at their purported victimizers” (305). Here we begin to see how useful an already available rhetorical construct coincides with the events of 9/11 to serve as a continuous bogeyman; the actions of a few deranged murderers (true victimizers) are, through the fallacy of composition, made to be mere examples of the characteristics of an entire people. This bogeyman ever lurks on the perimeter of Order, and seems particularly available for political uses every election year.

Its perpetual availability is perhaps its most chilling feature; Engels contrasts Burke's notion of the curative function of the victimage ritual to Nietzsche's notion of “guilty” practices of the resentful soul. As Nietzsche describes it, the guilty forms of victimage are those that confuse revenge with justice and which imply “some kind of orgy of feeling—employed as the most effective means of deadening dull, paralyzing, protracted pain” (136). Rather than curing the ills of the perceived victim, this sort of rhetoric merely serves as a sort of anesthetic. Ultimately, it merely evokes more guilt, and subsequently a scapegoat is sought yet again—to whit, “they made us like this!” This then ensures a cycle of hurt and resentment, and as Engels characterizes it, exact a hefty toll: “namely, unhappiness, weakness, and dependence” (312).

Curing the structural ills that would dispel the supposed cause of the pain—undoing imperialist foreign policy, naming and then working to ameliorate the evils of a white supremacist society, etc.—would remove the bogeyman, but sadly, because of the construct's political usefulness and our apparent susceptibility to rhetorics of victimage, another would likely take its place as a scapegoat for the sake of the politics of majority resentment.

For Nietzsche, the necessity of such a scapegoat is rooted in its constitutive function in “slave morality”—its agent “has conceived 'the evil enemy,' 'the Evil One,' and this in fact is his basic concept, from which he then evolves, as an afterthought and pedant, a 'good one—himself!’” (39). In other words, the subject cannot conceive of himself in any terms that do not include what he is not. In this respect, we see how what he is not—that is, what is outside—becomes the Other.

### ***The Other in Anti-Arab Racism***

Edward Said also documents this phenomenon in his concept of Orientalism, arguing that “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (3). For Said, Orientalism is a formation of Western assumptions about the East which enables the West to continue its imperialism in the Middle East and to “manage” the Orient. Said, too, relies on Foucault's notion of discourse to identify Orientalism. His “contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, scientifically, and imaginatively” (3). While *Orientalism* focuses primarily on how the Orient has been rhetorically constructed in Europe, Said has made the case for America's complicity in it as well:

So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight



overstatement to say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression. ("Islam Through Western Eyes")

These caricatures come from a variety of sources: movies, newspapers, television news, fiction, and ostensibly nonfiction writing.

Lest I go too far in essentializing this discourse—that is, to assume it has some universal character that transcends its historical circumstances—I think it is fair to heed Steven Salaita's warning that “it is foolish to decontextualize any potentially interrelated social phenomena, especially when they inform notions of Americanness and the peculiar nodes of Othering that arose during the settlement of North America and continue in modern forms today” (*Anti-Arab Racism* 5). Salaita carefully clarifies how he uses terms such as *Arab*, *anti-Arab racism*, and *Islamophobia*. Specifically, he points out the limitations of *Islamophobia* as a description in that it designates an intolerance based solely on fear (there is more to it than that) and that it isn't necessarily limited to Muslims; it often “appears at times to be directed at non-Muslims such as Arab Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, or even Hispanics—i.e., anybody perceived to be Muslim” (*Anti-Arab Racism* 10). Further, because of how linked together the notions of terrorism and ethnicity have become, each has become a strange sort of shorthand for the other.

For example, shortly after the thwarted bombing attempt on Flight 253, numerous media outlets began reiterating a longtime American meme that has only been amplified since 9/11:

“why aren't authorities profiling Muslims or people from the Middle East?” Fox News, in particular, gave a platform to pundits such as Representative Peter King (R-NY), who argued that “100 percent of the Islamic terrorists are Muslim, and that is our main enemy today. So why we should not be profiling people because of their religion?” (Shakir). In the same segment, radio host Mike Gallagher said, “There should be a separate line to scrutinize anybody with the name Abdul or Ahmed or Mohammed.” Similarly, Karl Rove (once again, on Fox) claimed that “we have to be on the lookout for people from the Middle East or from largely Muslim countries” (Shakir). Implicit in these statements is a definition of terrorism that focuses solely on the religion and ethnicity of the suspect.

In the wake of recent acts of white and/or Christian terrorism, mainstream media has been awkwardly reticent about applying the appellation of terrorism to the incidents. For example, the day after Joe Stack attacked an IRS building by flying a small airplane into it, Brian Stelter of *The New York Times* described the reluctance of media pundits and government officials to classify Stack's actions as terrorism. He reported that while there was initially some speculation of terrorism, once Stack's identity was divulged, the definition game began (Stelter). Perhaps the most telling piece of Stelter's account lies in an exchange between Fox News' Megyn Kelly and correspondent Catherine Herridge on why local police had not labelled the event an act of terrorism:

“I take it that they mean terrorism in the larger sense that most of us are used to?”

“They mean terrorism in that capital T way,” Ms. Herridge said.

If an act of intimidation and violence for the sake of political or cultural coercion (as was clearly the purpose of Stack's attack as outlined in his manifesto) is not terrorism, then what is it?

Implicit in both Kelly's and Herridge's notion of terrorism is the idea that who commits it matters. If the only difference between Stack's attack and those that the media has no problem calling terrorism was his demographics and religion, and if his attack does not count as "terrorism in the larger sense" or "terrorism in that capital T way," it becomes clear then what it is that defines "capital T" terrorism: ethnicity (specifically Arab) and religion (specifically Islam). None of this, of course, is explicitly stated—the connotation is sufficient because the code has become dominant. Once again, this trepidation can be seen in light of Foucault's theory of discourse in that the rules which prescribe what is 'sayable' about a subject necessarily preclude other possibilities. The classificatory systems which shunt Arab and Muslim subjects more easily into the category of terrorism then make it difficult for members of that discourse community to consider white Christians as such and thus regulate the production of subjects.

So while it has gained new momentum after recent acts such as the shootings at Ft. Hood and Abdulmutallab's attempted bombing, this Othering is nothing new. Arabs and Muslims are frequently depicted on television, in movies, in fiction, on the news, and in other media as barbarians, terrorists, kidnappers, and irrational savages rather than as a diverse range of ethnicities, cultures, and religions that span a variety of nationalities and regions. Over the last 30 years, numerous scholars have detailed the countless ways in which media have negatively portrayed Arabs, the Middle East, and Islam in grossly unfair ways. The American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee has collected accounts of various ways the media has characterized Arabs and Muslims as terrorists and barbarians (and documented the violence that such portrayals engender). Narmeen El-Farra describes the role CNN played in implicating Muslims and Arabs in the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing. Numerous other scholars have indicated the unbalanced coverage in the Arab-Israeli conflicts (Kressel, Dobkin, Ghareeb,

Salaita).

The point I wish to make here is basically twofold. First, as I have argued throughout this chapter, this formation has very real physical consequences; it leads to intense scrutiny over a small category of people, inducing changed behaviors, discrimination, resentment, and political power. Second, it is difficult to challenge this formation in mainstream media venues *because these very venues have the most traction in rearticulating this discourse*. Foucault argues that discursive resistance is generally futile when it comes from within established parties or political organizations (like mainstream media). Returning to the example of the Park 51 community center, the media has presented—largely uncritically—the notion that it is somehow insensitive for the Muslim builders of the community center to create anything to do with that religion so close to Ground Zero. While there have been outlets in mainstream media for questioning this assertion, the fact that the two viewpoints have basically been equivocated not only legitimates the first but tacitly endorses the underpinning of anti-Arab racism within it. Because each of these viewpoints is presented as equally legitimate (and usually along partisan lines), the act of resistance to racist discourse simply reifies that discourse.

So rather than political organizations or typical venues for resistance, for Foucault it is in the notion of play that one may find an appropriate means of challenging dominant discourse. Play is less predictable than large political parties, and more importantly, it challenges not simply the discourse, but the very grounds upon which that discourse is premised. He asserts that “We must see our rituals for what they are: completely arbitrary things—tied to our bourgeois way of life; it is good—and the real theater—to transcend them in the manner of play, by means of games and irony...one must put 'in play,' show up, transform, and reverse the systems which quietly order us about” (Miller 180). As a medium associated with childishness, subversion, and

irreverence, comics thus may provide exactly this sort of notion of 'play.'

### **Comics as Subversion**

In modern times the functions of parody are narrow and unproductive.

Parody has grown sickly, its place in modern literature is insignificant. We live, write and speak today in a world of free and democratized language; the complex and multi-leveled hierarchy of discourses, forms, images, styles that used to permeate the entire system of official language and linguistic consciousness was swept away by the linguistic revolutions of the Renaissance (71)

--M.M. Bakhtin "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse"

Despite Bakhtin's claims about the limited functions of parody, as recently as 2004 the Associated Press reported that 21 percent of people aged 18 to 29 cited "The Daily Show" and "Saturday Night Live" as places where they learned information about the current presidential campaign ("Cable and Internet Loom Large"). Other shows like "The Colbert Report" and cartoonists such as Tom Tomorrow also demonstrate that despite a "world of free and democratized language," we still struggle with what Bakhtin called "the direct word"—a language "that is perceived as the sole and fully adequate tool for realizing the word's direct, objectivizing meaning," and permeated by national myth. These modern instances of parody criticize not only the ostensible topic, but just as often the very media and language surrounding that topic.

Parody, then, is still alive and well, but instead of the traditional low forms that Bakhtin describes in "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," it has found new media and genres, and it critiques a different form of national literature than Bakhtin described. The comics that I

will discuss act as a way to critique the dominant discourses conveyed by traditional media on the subject of the Arab world and terrorism. The subversive quality (which is both contextual and formal) of comics lend themselves well to this form of discourse. Moreover, the way ideologies operate through the medium play a constitutive function in this critique. As Diana George observes, “it is clear that the term *graphic novel* is applied to a number of forms...like graphic journalism, docu-comics, graphic memoirs, comics that give instructions or perform advocacy roles or lay bare the bizarre and seriously funny world of contemporary politics...” (“Funny Papers”). She attributes to the medium (in its idiosyncratic elements such as sequential panels and word balloons) a certain irreverence and penchant for complication, even in its more serious forms such as graphic news reporting.

Comics have been written about frequently but unevenly. Scholarship often focuses more on contextual/historical elements or on panel-level signification rather than on the form itself. And in those analyses that are more formalist, more holistic approaches to how meaning is made in the medium is elided in favor of very focused approaches. Consequently, examining the role of ideology in comics can be problematic if we regard ideology as a process that informs meaning-making at the levels of signification (words and images), of syntax (the peculiarities of the medium), and of socio-cultural context (the comics' relationship with the larger discourse patterns in which it was produced).

That said, entire books like Martin Barker's *Comics, Ideology, and the Critics* and collections of essays such as Matthew McAlister's and Edward Sewell's *Comics and Ideology* have been assembled to address the issue of the relationship between the medium of comics and ideology. Frequently in these studies, however, ideology is examined almost exclusively in terms of the narrative—focusing on ideology *in* comics rather than *through* comics. That is, they

neglect the particular ways of making meaning associated with the medium. Thus, while these studies provide excellent models for grounding the discussion of ideology in specific historical and material circumstances, the ideologies implicitly argued for in the features of the medium of comics itself is often neglected. In other words, the particularity of the medium is elided in favor of examining a given cultural discursive/cultural artifact that happens to be in comics form. Conversely, those studies which do address the form—such as Groensteen's *The System of Comics*, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, or Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*—fail to make explicit the medium's implicit existential, ontological, and normative ideological claims, or to ground these claims in some historical or cultural context.

Accordingly, I want to distinguish here between the subversive aspects of comics' form (which I will touch upon in a moment), its content, and its cultural currency as a popular culture artifact. What I mean to say is, leaving aside the meaning-making affordances of the medium, there has long—in the U.S., at least—been a subversive quality associated with comics which only intensified after Frederic Wertham's notorious 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*.

### ***Socio-Historical Contexts***

While comics had never been taken seriously by the American public, there was relatively little backlash against the medium in the early part of the century. Early twentieth century critics such as Sidney Fairfield, Annie Russell Marble, and Ralph Bergengren viewed comics with some alarm (Heer and Worcester viii). Bergengren, for example, argued that comics lacked “respect for property, respect for parents, for law, for decency, for truth, for beauty, for kindness, for dignity, or for honor” (273). Heer and Worcester argue that these sorts of arguments were reflective of a broader anxiety regarding the emergence of mechanically reproducible visual media, citing historian Neil Harris' claims that these pictures were subversive

“because they presented a new and apparently uncontrollable set of sources to the larger public” (348). This is not an entirely unique argument—the appearance of a new medium often prompts worry over potentially corrupting or degrading effects, whether it be comics, photographs, television, or the internet. However, as such talk was mostly limited to literary magazines like the *Atlantic Monthly*, it did not necessarily or immediately have much of an impact on the industry or its readership.

By the 1940's, however, anxiety about the possible malignant effects of comics began to appear in popular magazines such as *Collier's*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*, and reached its apotheosis in *Seduction of the Innocent* (Duncan and Smith 39). Wertham's book basically blamed comics as the cause for most forms of juvenile delinquency. As Duncan and Smith argue, thanks to an excerpt in *Ladies' Home Journal*, the book's message reached the public in such a way as to actually prompt a 1954 Senate Subcommittee hearing in which Wertham was the star witness. The committee concluded that comics were supplying children with endless amounts of gratuitous violence and mayhem and were having a negative impact on them. The ensuing media coverage had a profound impact on the comics industry

While the mainstream comics industry adapted to the times by focusing more on superhero comics and establishing the Comics Code Authority, others embraced the subversive mystique that comics had begun to develop. Underground comix (the spelling used by the counter-culture movement) such as those created by Harvey Pekar, Robert Crumb, and Gilbert Shelton began to circulate. These comix embraced counter-culture values and politics. *Mad* shifted formats from comic to magazine to avoid being subject to the Comics Code Authority due to its lewdness and highly parodic material. Art Spiegelman has cited *Mad* as one of the influences that “galvanized [his] generation,” and Joe Sacco has also remarked upon the



formative influence of the magazine (*Those Dirty Little Comics* 5; Bowe 27). These underground comix in turn inspired new wave and alternative comics that also focused embraced counter-culture values while at the same time being able to take advantage of new methods of distribution “that allowed independents, alternatives, and even a few of the residual undergrounds to be sold side-by-side with mainstream comics in a new type of store” (Duncan and Smith 67). Comics’ increased visibility subsequently allowed the often subversive and marginalized comix to reach a more mainstream audience, eventually paving the way for the acceptance of the graphic novel as a more legitimate form of art.

### ***Formal Aspects***

My primary argument about the subversive qualities of comics form is that in general it is difficult to transmit dominant discourse in a medium that a) parodies the notion of a proximity between signifier and signified and b) cedes a great deal of agency in the act of meaning-making to the reader.

#### ***1 - Comics Subverting Foundational Truth***

A discourse typically gains dominance through a perception that it is predicated on absolute Truth—the idea that a set of language conventions somehow gets subjects at “reality” in a way that is outside of language itself. That is, those disciplines that have become the most productive in their social effects—as Foucault would enumerate psychology, medicine, the prison system—depend on the assumption that the knowledge they produce is true and independent of language. Such a proposition is dubious, of course, for as Foucault describes, “Fiction does not exist because language is at a distance from things [...] Language is the distance” (“Distance, Aspect, Origine” 940). In other words, language reveals that things exist while at the same time demonstrating that these phenomena are inaccessible to us outside of

language. What's more, power and knowledge are not independent of one another—each implies the other.

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (*Discipline and Punish* 27).

To put it another way, any attempt to disrupt the hegemony of a given discourse is most effective when it focuses not necessarily on the content or claims of that discourse but instead on the very grounds of its truth.

This same approach can be applied to comics. As I mentioned earlier, Ole Frahm, in his article, “Weird Signs. Comics as Means of Parody,” argues that “the reading of comics is precisely *not* about reconstructing unity (of whatever) but rather to appreciate the heterogeneous signs of script and image in their peculiar, material quality which cannot be made into a unity” (177). In such a way, they act as what McLuhan termed “anti-environments”—sites of signification wherein the act of discourse is not afforded the invisibility typically accorded to the prevalent media in a given culture. Admittedly, a similar claim could be made about many other forms of media, particularly those hypermedia that are relatively new in a given culture and de-historicized claims about these media can be problematic. However, as Frahm points out, comics’ form parodies precisely that implicit notion that media are invisible panes of glass through which one might somehow get at truth.

Frahm proceeds into his argument based on a definition of parody derived from Linda

Hutcheon. She argues that “Parody is [...] repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (6). In comics, whose ontology is that of sequenced juxtaposition of panels, images, and/or text, this repetition is inescapable. For Frahm, this repetition and its critique of an original to which the heterogeneous signs on the page refer takes form primarily as self-referentiality and the performance of character identity through material repetition and disruption. To this analysis I would like to add the construction of space and time and the tension between the particularity of repeated images and their polysemy. For the rest of the chapter, I will describe each of these elements and how they work toward subverting the foundational notions of truth necessary for the propagation of dominant discourse.

What Frahm means by self-referentiality is the medium's ability to engage in metacommentary that blurs the distinction between the diegesis and the materiality of ink on pages. For example, a character being evicted from an apartment in the story might reference getting kicked out of the non-diegetic space of the page, or another might climb the sides of panels to arrive in a later scene. In this way, readers are confronted with the fact that there is no “original” to which the signs refer. While a similar approach can be taken in textual forms, it is particularly powerful and prominent in comics because of their use of repetition. As Jakobson argues, recurrence, symmetry, loops, and rhetorical devices draw a reader’s attention toward the text as a text—these very features are those that are cited frequently in popular and scholarly definitions of comics as a medium (Groensteen, McCloud, Eisner, Harvey, Hatfield).

This repetition also informs the way characters' identities are performed. Frahm explains

A comic-strip character's identity exists only in its material repetition. This material identity is inevitably disrupted. Although the character is called by the same name, it is, owing to material repetition in space, from panel to

panel and from drawing to drawing, as well as in time, from day to day, not the same character but another alike. Being another, the character has to be repeated to preserve its continuity” (183).

Once again, the tension between repetition and disruption disavows a foundational original. We might attribute a given likeness to refer to an individual “in the world,” but this tension resists the temptation to assign a natural relationship between the image(s) and referent. While it may be tempting to assume a natural relationship between a singular image and its referent (although this, too, has been problematized by scholars of visual rhetoric), the fragmented syntax of juxtaposed images never designates any one of those images as the original. Further, given the coded nature of drawing, the artist designates as most representative those features that a) most readily identify the character and b) most easily convey whatever emotion, state, or action in which the character is embroiled. Because these two purposes may be at odds, coding can result in vastly different depictions of the same individual within panels of each other. For instance, a physical marker of identity (or several) shown in one panel might be elided in favor of depicting markers that indicate mood (cartoonishly furrowed brows, distress lines, etc.). As a result, these images cannot be considered to convey any essential quality of the character and instead function as a sort of rhetorical shorthand that enables the reader to follow a trace or sense of unity throughout fragments.

Pascal LeFevre develops this notion of repetition and disruption in regards to how diegetic space is constructed in comics. Like faces and characters, depictions of space and place can vary between (and sometimes within) panels, and in doing so argue for a particular version of the world. As Rawson explains, “Drawing methods are a major part of the artist's means for stipulating the 'IS', attributing an affirmative quality to his topic; without them, he can make no

affirmation. And we may as well take the last jump and realize that, since this is so, implicit in every drawing style is a visual ontology, i.e. a definition of the real in visual terms” (19). To put it bluntly, the mode of delivery has a constitutive influence on how diegetic space is negotiated between artists and audience.

Because comics rely on repetition and disruption, the reader, as LeFevre argues, looks for overlaps to link the fragments together. Just as depictions of characters can contradict other depictions of the same character, places and space in comics can as well. Echoing Frahm's argument that in making meaning through fragments, the reader grapples with the materiality of the account, LeFevre asserts that “each reader is confronted with a particular extradiegetic space of the comic book itself, with a particular organization of the space on each page and with a particular representation of the fragmented diegetic space in a series of panels. During his reading process the reader tries to cope with these various aspects of space and to make meaning of it all” (161). In other words, the way that comics pages are laid out presents the reader with the simultaneity of the elements both in the narrative and the visual elements as they are presented on the page. Instead of a straightforward, necessarily cause-and-effect narrative, we have fragments of a narrative space that we are to piece together post hoc.

I bring up this simultaneity and the way time, space, and movement are proposed in comics for a specific reason. As Gunther Kress explains, in the spoken and—to a lesser extent—written modes, the dominant logic is that of action through time: “The temporal and sequential logic of speech, and, leaning on speech, of writing, lends itself to the representation of actions and events in time...The question asked by speech, and by writing, is: 'what were the salient events and in what (temporal) order did they occur?’” (14). In terms of the act of speech itself, most of the agency lies with the speaker. Listeners (and to a lesser extent, readers) are as Kress

puts it “dependent—at least in their initial hearing and reading—on sequence and on sequential uncovering...If the hearer or the reader wishes to reorder what has just been said or what has been written, the recording has to be done on the basis of and against the author's prior ordering” (13). In such a configuration the audience's agency can thus only be framed in the binary terms of passivity or resistance.

The logic of image-based representation is distinct from that of speech and thus enacts different ideological claims. Its logic lends itself to display more readily than narrative; the relation established between elements is one less of sequence and more of space, demonstrated by things such as differences in size, proximity, relative location on the page or screen, and so forth. Because it is difficult to communicate time in image-based representation, clearly defined sequence breaks down in favor of a simultaneous presentation of all the elements on a surface. Consequently, image-based representation posits a very different implicit world-view than speech. Causality barely figures into image-based representation: we can only infer an actor/acted-upon relationship post hoc; the notion of an active or passive voice doesn't exist in visual display so it is just as easy for the viewer to privilege what we might construct as the object rather than the actor in terms of agency. Thus the audience has a great deal more agency in constructing and negotiating meaning than in purely speech-based modes.

So what does an examination of the ideology of different modes of representation—both text-based and image-based—have to do with comics? It would be glib to claim that as a hybrid medium, comics incorporates and synthesizes the logic of both. While this is true, a medium is more (and perhaps in some ways, less) than the sum of that which it remediates. Comics *is* image-based representation—and yet, it is by most estimations sequential. It *does* incorporate text, but its approach to causality is not quite as linear as text's. Comics enacts the logics of both

text and image at the same time as it interrogates, critiques, and subverts these logics. Moreover, the reader has a great deal more agency in entering into and directing meaning-making in comics because there is no one preordained path. Western readers have a sense of where to begin, and comics writers exploit that but are not limited by it. The presence of these dual logics, along with other elements, put comics into a state of tension. Hatfield describes these tensions as between codes (text and image), between single images and images in a series, between sequence versus surface, and between the text as experience and the text as object (132). In the process of navigating these tensions, it is thus difficult for the reader to assume an epistemology where discourse is merely a screen for a more foundational reality.

## ***2 - Shared Meaning-Making***

What's more, by having ceded a great deal of agency in terms of meaning-making to the audience, comics thus undermine the univocal authority upon which dominant discourse is founded. Eisner refers to the “tacit cooperation” between artist and reader in comics—that is, the way that sequence and meaning are negotiated between artist and reader in an image-based narrative; he observes “there is no way in which the artists can prevent the reading of the last panel before the first (*Comics and Sequential Art* 41, 40). Similarly, Scott McCloud demonstrates how the reader provides and projects a great deal of the meaning in comics through means such as closure, which he characterizes as the “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63). While this phenomenon is present in other visual media like film and television, McCloud argues that “visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar. And since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangement of elements—then, in a very real sense, comics *is* closure!” (67, emphasis his).

Thierry Groensteen perhaps best describes the agency of the reader in his explanation of

'plurivectoral navigation'. He analyzes an example page depicting a man (Alack) lying in bed who sees a newspaper page describing John Lennon's murder as the newspaper page is blown up against his window. The man reaches for a pack of cigarettes, lights a cigarette, and coughs.

From the way sequence is extrapolated from this page, Groensteen says:

If the first two images summarize the sequence, neither can be held to be intrinsically narrative. It is from their juxtaposition that I can deduce a narrative proposition. Again, this involves no small amount of interpretation. Is Alack really sleeping? If he was awake, was his attention drawn to the noise (no onomatopoeia is signaled) or only to the sight of the newspaper? Nothing allows me to categorically respond to these questions. As a reader, I construct meaning on the basis of inferences that appear to be the most probable. There is the content that each of these images *shows*, and there is the meaning that their confrontation permits them to *say*.

Groensteen's emphasis on probability in the role of constructing meaning in comics is important to note because it not only demonstrates the polysemy of these sequenced images—that is, the uncertainty of the floating chains of signifieds that they invoke—but also the necessity of the audience in meaning-making. While power, in the Foucauldian sense, is rearticulated by subjects, this kind of polysemy and agency cast doubt on the foundations of truth in the traditional positivist sense—as something outside of discourse and the subject.

That said, polysemy alone is not enough to completely negate dominant discourse. As Stuart Hall explains, “Polysemy must not, however, be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are *not* equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These



constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested” (134). As I will explain in Chapter 3, the appearance of polysemy in the medium can often be deceptive; there are ways in which meaning-making can be more directed in comics than one might think, and as Hall points out, given the cultural codes imbedded in the images, they can often serve to reinforce that dominant cultural order.

### **Conclusion**

Given the prevalence of anti-Arab and Islamophobia in the U.S., I remain convinced that the task of understanding how media authorize these discourses is just as important now as when Edward Said began examining them. What's more, the availability of mainstream and popular means of problematizing the grounds upon which these discourses are premised warrants further scrutiny. Hegemony is fostered and supported through our discourse and the media and discursive technologies that articulate them. This book then works to examine the relationship between a medium and the often conflicting discourses that intersect it, as well as the relationship between these discourses and the subjects they regulate. If we neglect to study these relationships and the opportunities for the exercise of power and resistance that a given medium affords, we will continue to be subject to them and the sort of bigotry that is becoming the “new normal.”

## 2.

**The Moral Ambiguity of Representation:****The Rhetorical Work of Representation in Joe Sacco's *Palestine***

In order to argue that comics serve as a novel site for subverting anti-Arab and Islamophobic discursive formations, in this chapter I will examine one graphic narrative specifically: Joe Sacco's *Palestine*. I will examine the ways in which Sacco uses the multi-modal character of the medium to problematize not only the representations the West affixes to these peoples but also the foundational notion of truth upon which these representations rest. In examining this text, I do not wish to engage in a form of epideictic scholarship that paints it as completely exemplary; while admirable in the way it challenges dominant discourse, it also highlights some of the tensions inherent in attempting to represent a cultural Other.

In this regard, I use this chapter as something of a response to a chapter in Rocco Versacci's book *This Book Contains Graphic Language: "The 'New Journalism' Revisited: Comic Books vs. Reportage."* Versacci offers a cogent discussion of comics journalism as a sort of remediation of the genre of New Journalism. Like my own argument here, Versacci asserts that comics journalism works to undermine official versions of discourse and the notion of objective truth. Because of the broad nature of his examination, however, I find his argument somewhat lacking in four significant dimensions. I will relay them in brief here and then spend the rest of the chapter responding to them more fully, using *Palestine* as a case in which to examine these dimensions.

First, although Versacci offers an excellent rendering of the notion of fictionalization in New Journalism, he focuses primarily on the term's connotation as literary devices more commonly associated with fiction. That connotation, however, does not fully explore the ways in

which comics journalism must often take some visual liberties in reconstructing scenes delivered to the reporter through memories or hearsay, nor its ability to critique foundational notions of objectivity through its use of “parallel universes” in making meaning. Because his use of the term does not anticipate these affordances, he also does not speculate on the implications of such reconstructions.

Second, his account doesn't sufficiently account for the role the multi-modal quality of comics plays in subverting mainstream discourses. That is, he tends to focus more on the narrative/textual content of the account instead of the work that the imagetext does. And while he addresses the ways in which some of the images in comics subvert the dominant narratives they address, such subversion isn't necessarily unique to comics. That is, he doesn't address how the juxtaposition of sequenced images contributes to the subversion of these narratives: isolated images do not a comic make.

Third, his argument fails to adequately problematize the privileged subject positions journalists such as Sacco and Rall enjoy in gathering and crafting their accounts. What I mean here is that although Sacco and Rall try to disrupt the discourses that perpetuate the injustice that their subjects suffer, they also enjoy benefits as Western reporters (status, mobility, safety) that their subjects do not, and they operate under cultural assumptions that need to be accounted for. This failure leads to the fourth and final problem I see with Versacci's argument: it does not address the productive function these problematic subject positions themselves serve as disruptions and tensions in the conveyance of objectivity.

Though Sacco's focus in *Palestine* is more on politics, the Intifada, and the everyday lives of Palestinians, his account remains a rhetorically powerful argument against the way mainstream media in the West still continue to construct Arabs and Muslims as subjects. After

all, the way race and religion have been portrayed in the region, as Said has demonstrated, have played powerful roles in how the conflict has been narrated and military action justified. Sacco's account, which focuses on the everyday lives of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, removes the all-too-frequently binarizing lens that is applied to the area in favor of a more nuanced view of both the situation and the rhetorical work of representation.

### **Joe Sacco and the Rhetorical Situation of *Palestine***

...whereas Israel and its history have been celebrated without interruption, the actuality of Palestinians, with lives being led, small histories endured, aspirations felt, has only recently been conceded an existence.

--Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* xiii

Before I examine the text, it is important to discuss the rhetorical situation to which the text responds. Sacco is one of the best known comics journalists in America, having won the American Book Award in 1996 for the nine-issue comics series that would eventually be collected as *Palestine*.

Even as a youth, Sacco was interested in comics, news and world events, and the Middle East. Biographer Monica Marshall describes his developing interest in the region and the U.S. media's representation of it in the wake of Israel's invasion of Beirut in 1982: "He wondered about America's relationship with Israel and began to question the coverage of these and other events on the television news and in newspapers such as the *Los Angeles* and the *New York Times*...having grown up in America, Sacco became skeptical that he wasn't always learning of these world events in a way that was fully objective" (Marshall 33). He began reading books such as Noam Chomsky's *The Fateful Triangle*, developing a skepticism about mainstream media's portrayal of events dealing with Palestinians (Marshall 33, Bowe 27). Sacco told

interviewer Kathleen E. Bennett that

Having a journalism background, and getting it drummed in about objectivity, you know, and the Truth, and the Facts, and then when I finally started learning about the Palestinian question...it seemed something was really strange here. I read some books [about]...how the media has manipulated us...Noam Chomsky's *Fateful Triangle*, which outlines in detail America's relationship to Israel, and how that affects the Palestinians (Interview with Bennett).

He also read Edward Said's *The Question of Palestine*, who also wrote “Homage to Joe Sacco” in the beginning of the collected edition of *Palestine*. Said's chief charge against Western journalism's portrayal of matters in the area is—as I have described in Chapter 1—the underlying assumption of terrorism being a uniquely Arab and/or Muslim phenomenon, particularly in the context of Israel's actions. Said condemns the “hypocrisy of Western...journalism and intellectual discourse, which have barely had anything to say about Zionist terror” (*Question x*). And if the popular press's prejudices did not preclude a fuller telling of Palestinian's plight, Palestine certainly received no succor in academic and political science studies, either. As Said describes, “Insofar as most of them derive from and in most important ways unquestionably accept the framework that has legitimized Zionism as against Palestinian rights, they have very little to contribute to an understanding of the real situation in the Middle East” (xiv). If, then, both academic and journalistic means of subverting the rhetorical construct of the Evil Arab are already fraught, what is left?

And so Joe Sacco traveled to the Occupied Territories in winter of 1991 and spent two months researching and interviewing both Palestinians and Israelis. Sacco typically prompts his

interviewees not simply with questions of what happened but what things looked like, details regarding clothing, setting, layout, and more, referring to them as “visual questions” (UF 2002). His methods were very ethnographic; he would frequently tape-record the interviews or take notes, and try to photograph his subjects (if they consented) and the areas they talked about. He would supplement these stories with additional research and reading. As narrative threads and commonalities (or differences) emerged, he would further pursue them (*Mother Jones*). Once he had decided upon which stories to tell and how to tell them, he would begin drafting pages, drawing upon his source materials and references as well as his own experiences.

The culmination of this research, *Palestine*, was originally a nine-issue comic series. Though it initially saw limited distribution (confined mostly to comic shops), it drew critical acclaim and was eventually collected in “graphic novel” form. It is comprised of nine chapters (the original individual issues) which are in turn comprised of several titled episodes or vignettes detailing the experiences of Sacco and/or his interviewees. It reads less as a piece of “scoop”-oriented news reportage and more as a series of stories of lived experience, very much along the lines of New Journalism works such as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* or Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*.

### **Comics Journalism, Fictionalization, and Parallel Universes**

To examine the role fictionalization plays in New and Comics Journalism, perhaps a shared definition is in order. Versacci—in his assertion that Comics Journalism is the latest permutation of New Journalism—derives his notion of New Journalism from John Hollowell, who characterizes it as a genre “that combine[d] fictional techniques with the detailed observations of journalism” (10). This seems an adequate definition, but I would like to add to it. Comics journalism—particularly as it manifests in Sacco’s work—presents an embodied form of

witnessing. What I mean by this is twofold. First, rather than telling, for instance, about the poverty or casualties that follow in the wake of the Intifada, Sacco works to saturate each image with them; these facts cannot be intellectualized and pushed away. Instead, the repeated visual presence of these facts of life intrudes on every panel, texturing the narrative with their inescapable presence. Second, by including himself in the telling of these reports and grounding them in people he meets, whom we can see and come to know, the accounts have an immediacy and locate a time, a place, and bodies upon which these events leave their mark. The anonymity and abstraction afforded by nameless numbers contained in typical reports of the conflict simply are not viable in a narrative and visual medium such as comics.

Perhaps the most defining features of comics journalism are 1) its critique (both explicit and implicit) of not only the content of mainstream media's reportage but its very mode of reportage, and 2) how this critique manifests in the way the medium of comics is used. As a narrative medium, comics make visible the way narrative is constructed in other media and how that process of construction is often rendered invisible. In reconstructing events for mass media consumption, the narrativization (and its attempted erasure) of the news has several discouraging effects: in attempting to create instant and brief coverage, reporters and organizations frequently oversimplify the object of their discourse and lose the particulars of the reportage (Evesen 177, Roshco, 1975). These features have even more deleterious effects when combined with the tendency of television news to binarize participants in conflicts. As Bormann argues of this tendency, "Without protagonists (heroes) and antagonists (villains) there is little drama" (9-10). Fox asserts that such binaries are actually a natural consequence of the constraints of time and space placed on mass media such as television and newspaper (63). As a response to these constraints, Sacco works to complicate the object of reportage, focus on the particulars and the

people involved in a news event, and deconstruct the binaries and frameworks of heroes and villains often presented (sometimes quite explicitly) in mainstream media. Through an emphasis on narration and embodiment, comics journalism can do this in a number of ways.

### ***Comics, Immediacy, and Media Critique***

As Van Leeuwen and Jewitt describe, pictures encourage the notion of immediacy—that is, of being thrust into a specific time and place as action occurs. Similarly, several scholars have described the affective impact of visuals in war reportage (Konstantinidou, Fahmy & Kim 2008, Fahmy & Wanta 2008). Sacco himself addresses the notion of immediacy in comics and its importance in the medium: “And, one of the effects of things about comics is you're dropping a reader right into a situation, you know. Prose writers, of course, can be very evocative, and I appreciate what they do, but I find there is nothing like thrusting someone right there. And, that's what I think a cartoonist can do” (UF 2002). On one hand, one might interpret his use of the word “immediacy” as simply synonymous with a sense of urgency, of being in the “now.” However, given his arguments about what he does as imparting some form of essential truth regarding a given situation (UF2002), his use of the term in some ways alludes to the sense in which Bolter and Grusin use it. That is, as a form of representation that works to “make the viewer forget the presense of the medium...and believe he is in the presence of the object” (272-273). Of course, given the cartoonishness of the style, the intrusiveness of the competing forms of representation, and the fragmented nature of the account, the reader cannot help but acknowledge the medium. That said, it seems that this is in essence Sacco's argument for authenticity: the situation as he represents it *is* mediated (just as any other account), it *is* comprised of competing accounts, it *is* fragmented and it resists closure. In this sense, Sacco's acknowledgment about the situatedness of his discourse *does* argue for a more authentic account



than the forms of reportage to which he responds. As Bolter and Grusin argue, “Although each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium” (20). In short, this argument for immediacy works toward two ends: one, it offers readers/users authenticity, a reading experience that Sacco has suggested is a more “essential” representation of an account than traditional journalism might offer; and two, it subsequently acts as a critique of the mediation that occurs in traditional journalism while at the same time allowing for an acknowledgment of and reflexivity regarding its own mediation.

However, as Dragana Obradovic points out about Sacco’s comics work, “While one of its purposes is informative, the text does not have the immediacy of television and press reportage” (94). Again, while Obradovic's use of the term could simply indicate the sense of urgency and “real time” that television and press reportage impart, we could read it in yet another way. Because television offers a sense of the real, as Hamid Naficy asserts, viewers “often ignore that film and television are themselves constructs; that is, they are representations of a profilmic reality, not reality itself—whatever that might be” (73). In other words, Sacco's work argues for the always-already mediation that occurs in experience: post hoc, we reassemble fragmented instances and encounters into a narrative that makes sense—what happens always adjusts to fit what happened after. Even in live news footage, there are always layers of mediation, of intervention, that take place: the cameraman decides what is shown, the camera limits what and how what is depicted, television networks are distributed only to select audiences, and those audiences mediate what is depicted through pre-established narratives and cultural contexts. Throughout his narratives then, Sacco demonstrates skepticism about official accounts and seeks to reassert the conflicting subjectivities that have been erased in official journalism.

### *Parallel Universes*

Thus, in some ways comics journalism—and in particular Joe Sacco's work—brings to light not one objective reality or foundational truth but instead a number of subjective realities: contemporaneous, conflicting, competing, and often contradictory versions of reality that attempt to occupy similar mediated spaces. That said, Sacco does not entirely disavow the notion of truth. Instead, what Sacco does in some regards is to lampoon what he perceives as official journalism's impulse to choose the more favored of these accounts to present as (capital “T”) Truth and then ignore (or, ironically, caricature) those accounts that do not fit. Sacco then looks to explore these varying accounts and negotiate the contact points between them. In so doing, however, he must navigate the often murky waters between reporting and fictionalization.

Fictionalization, as Versacci points out, is a staple in the genre of New Journalism. In the sense that he employs it, it refers simply to authorial techniques that are typically employed in fictional narratives: things like foreshadowing, dialogue, or a narrator who is not omniscient or who provides commentary on the narrative. Because of the presence of these elements, what New Journalism—and by extension, Comics Journalism—writers do is to call “attention to the mediation that takes place in any journalistic enterprise” (110). Comics journalists, as Versacci characterizes them, do this by placing themselves in the stories they cover and by grounding their reporting in their embodied experience. Moreover, they do it visually.

While Versacci's characterization of fictionalization of comics journalism is certainly true, it diminishes the complexity of what Sacco does with the medium in challenging traditional notions of truth and limits the ways in which the idea of fictionalization operates within comics. Sacco readily acknowledges the complexity of fictionalization in terms of what he calls “parallel universes”:

make no mistake, everywhere you go, not just in Marvel Comics, there's parallel universes...here? On the surface streets: traffic, couples in love, falafel-to-go, tourists in jogging suits licking stamps for postcards...And over the wall behind closed doors: other things—people strapped to chairs, sleep deprivation, the smell of piss...other things happening [sp] for “reasons of national security”...for “security reasons”...to combat “terrorist activity”...they were happening to Ghassan a week and a half ago, he shows me his back and wrists, he's still got the marks...he's a fresh case, all right...right off the rack... (102)

In an open acknowledgment of his comics' superhero genre predecessors, Sacco invokes the notion of parallel universes to demonstrate how divergent these accounts can be. But even more than that, the notion of parallel universes manifests in how he tells the stories.

***Example 1: “Moderate Pressure, Part 2”***

For example, in the vignette that begins with the passage above, “Moderate Pressure, Part 2,” Sacco is depicted in Ghassan's living room, examining the scars on Ghassan's back. Ghassan's daughters look on amidst the trappings of their home. The panels begin to break up after the original splash panel as Ghassan begins to narrate his story. The point of view focuses on one of Ghassan's daughters as she sits on his lap, falling asleep, forming a narrative link (sleep) to the next page and an entry point into the parallel universe of Ghassan's arrest, where he is woken up to the sound of his doors being bashed down. The next page begins with a large panel depicting Ghassan emerging from his bedroom door into the same living room as shown on the opposite page, but this time it is crowded with police officers.

During a lecture, Sacco later said of the scene that Ghassan told him that only a couple of

the officers were in uniforms, and a few were in plain clothes. Sacco, however, felt compelled to show something different. For the sake of the visual components the story (which are necessarily semantically dense), he felt he needed to communicate that they were all police officers without using exposition. Sacco said of the scene, “But in this particular story, what I tried to do was use the medium of comics to somehow emphasize something essentially true about what I was finding out. In other words, to somehow enhance the journalism itself” (UF 2002). As Figure 1 shows, Sacco depicts a crowd of at least eleven officials, only two of which could be considered “plain clothes.” Even those two are depicted wearing suits and trench coats, a trope connoting police detectives. So, in yet another parallel universe, the men depicted in the room are police, but their clothing has changed to communicate their roles more efficiently to the reader.

Perhaps even more interesting, Sacco then begins to play with the ideas of visuality and point of view to further the notion of parallel universes. In the bottom left panel (the row is divided only into two panels), Ghassan is shown from the officers' perspective, hunched down, his hands bound with a zip line, and a blindfold over his eyes. And yet, the next panel shows the officers from Ghassan's lowered perspective, but despite the blindfold we are still able to see them. This thread is continued into the next series of pages as a bag is placed over Ghassan's head and the reader sees him. It is unclear whose point of view the reader is adapting: an omniscient narrator's or the Israeli detainers'. Layoun describes this as an awareness of the limitations of any form of narration. She writes, “The journalist-narrator is increasingly aware of the limitations of what he can narrate from within any one single 'universe' or even as he moves between parallel universes. Yet the *visual* narrative of the panels in this sequence is distinctly *not* that of Ghassan. For he has a dirty sack pulled over his head” (Layoun 189). And yet, the comic *needs* this visual to remain a comic; without the visual element, the unfilled space is simply a

blank backdrop with text, an essay. Such an approach would then suggest that a textual retelling would be an adequate account of Ghassan's experience, but would elide the ways his predicament could be represented in other ways. A purely textual account of this event would be dangerous in a critical endeavor like Sacco's, in some respects, because there would be an implicit argument conflating—or perhaps rather, confusing—text with thought and/or experience. Sacco's endeavor is quite explicitly the opposite, and so: a parallel universe.

The panel layout depicting Ghassan's imprisonment becomes a staccato rhythm of somewhat repetitious panels that begin in an even 3x3 for the first page and then increase to 3x4 for the next page, 4x4 for the next two pages, 4x5 for the subsequent four pages before finally ending in a page with two rows of three panels as Ghassan is finally released. The bottom portion of the final page of the vignette is a large splash panel depicting Ghassan in the street with his wife after he regains his freedom. The use of panels in this sequence offers readers a few ways of accessing this parallel universe.

First, it demonstrates the indeterminacy of time in such conditions. While the scenes of Ghassan's hooded imprisonment are punctuated with panels showing a judge determining how long he should be held (twenty four hours, seven days, four days), the number of panels do not reflect this, showing how subjective Ghassan's perception of time in such a state was. Second, they allow for Ghassan's hallucination (his daughter dying, his father dying, the hallucinations about the size of the cell) to wander into the narrative and depart abruptly between panels, showing the jaggedness of his experience and increasing inability to parse reality from delusion. Third, as Layoun remarks regarding the scene, it grounds the tension of verbal narration “here in the first-person speech of Ghassan [through captioning], and grammatically marked as such with double-quotes. The predominance of the journalist-narrator's organizational narrative is strongly

mitigated” (189). That is, the use of the quotation marks in the captions work to remind the viewer of the “now,” which is not taking place with Ghassan in the cell but rather in the universe that Joe Sacco inhabits: Ghassan's living room. The omission of the quotation marks could work to bring about a sense of immediacy; the viewer would be invited to occupy that space, that universe, without a mediator. But despite Sacco's nonpresence in the scene, the viewer is subtly reminded that this is a form of witnessing from a distance.

Fourth and finally, this scene works as an interesting commentary on the role of the visual in punishment when examined in a Foucauldian light. As Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*, forms of punishment were, for a long time, primarily visual in the West. He describes how the State began moving away from public spectacles of punishment and execution to a more orderly, regimented, and perhaps more importantly *invisible* approach to discipline and punishment. After all, spectacle had two unintended and potentially disastrous consequences for the State: 1) it enabled the idea of martyrdom in that the prisoner's body became a focus for sympathy and perhaps even admiration, and 2) it produced a place of opposition (as embodied by the prisoner) between the masses and the state. Instead, the notion of visibility was turned around. Instead of the masses watching the spectacle of State, the State began to watch the masses. Prisoners were removed from the sight of society, and instead the notion of the panopticon, both at the level of the prison and in the larger society (in the sense of surveillance), was introduced: “He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication...And this invisibility is a guarantee of order” (200). What Sacco does, then, is to bring spectacle back to punishment, to draw attention to Ghassan's body as a site of contestation between Palestinians and the State, and to make explicit the ways in which, as Foucault puts it, “visibility is a trap” (200).

***Example 2: “Through Other Eyes”***

Though Sacco has been fairly explicit in his bias and desire to address what he perceives as an imbalance in the way the U.S. journalists have portrayed the struggle in the area, he does write about the friendships he maintains with Israelis and his own positionality in his reporting. In an interview, Sacco said of his notion of balance that “Palestinians have been historically wronged. That doesn't make them angels. People crave the perfect individual. I'd rather portray the balance.” But how he defines balance, his approach to balance, is different than typical notions of it. Instead of spending a great deal of time among both “sides” and creating a sort of false equivalence, he primarily spends his time among the Palestinians out of a perception that they have not adequately been represented up to point he went there. For Sacco, balance is not a matter of simply representing two monolithic “sides” in a conflict but instead problematizing not only that conflict but the notion of homogeneity among these differing factions. Instead of attributing a single narrative, characteristic, or singular “universe” as essential to understanding a side, Sacco instead presents these conflicting accounts as a form of balance. As Thomas Juneau and Mira Sucharov point out, “he gives voices to multiple viewpoints and factions, having no pretention [sp] whatsoever that any one of them represents a dominant or mainstream version, or that it is possible or even desirable to add up the voices” (180). Seen in this way, Sacco argues implicitly for a phenomenological rather than a positivist world view. Each of these accounts exists in its own “imagined universe” (to rely on a term of Clifford Geertz's); they make meaning and create knowledge when juxtaposed with one another. They cannot add up to a singular, logical, consistent account. These accounts, like the human experience upon which they are based, are often contradictory, disquieting, polysemous, and fluid. They privilege situatedness, embodiment, and particularity. Attempts at relaying traumatic events in the types of media

Sacco criticizes often end up as abstraction, diminishing the affective elements of the event and its impact on the lives of the people involved. Instead, as Hillary Chute points out, “an awareness of the limits of representation...is integrated into comics through its framed, self-conscious, bi-modal form; yet it is precisely in its insistent, affective, urgent visualizing of historical circumstance that comics aspires to ethical engagement” (457). These notions of affect, urgent visualizing, and particularity also effects the way Sacco attempts to deal with issues of balance regarding relations between Palestinians and Israelis.

In the vignette, “Through Other Eyes,” Sacco addresses the limitations of representation through the notion of parallel universes to explore difference and balance in lived experience. In this episode, Sacco offers to guide some of his Israeli friends through the Arab market by the Damascus Gate to give them a glance of life among the Palestinians as he has seen it. Before they depart, one of his friends asks him, “Shouldn't you be seeing our side of the story, too?” His captioned response to the reader is “And what can I say? I say I've heard nothing but the Israeli side most all my life.” Still, as they make their way to the market place, Sacco uses the medium to represent how what he thinks he knows is challenged.

This conversation takes place during a walk from the Jewish Quarter to the Western Wall. The panels are fairly large and adopt a wide elevated angle that makes the sky visible. There are people present, but they are small and sparse. The overall impression lent is one of space. As Sacco and the friend who takes him up on his offer to walk through the Arab market leave, the panels lose some of their geometric rigidity and distinctness. When they fully enter the market, a large splash panel consumes the bottom half of the page. Rather than assuming Sacco's point of view, the panel instead is “shot” from the end of the enclosed tunnel. It depicts Sacco and his friend from a distance, in the middle of the Arab crowd confined to the tight quarters the tunnel.



The angle is lower, from this midst of the crowd, intensifying the claustrophobic feel of the panel. The point of view exploits the optical illusion of linear perspective—the parallel lines run tighter together in the distance (where Sacco and his friend are), increasing the tightness of the enclosure and the crowded conditions: Sacco (and the viewer) is entering a parallel universe.

The next page is a splash page that must be turned to—the reader has no cues and does not know it will be coming due to its presence on the right side of a double page spread. It is a depiction of the crowd from several different angles that blur together, over the top of which jagged panels are laid. These panels consist of increasingly close-up shots of Sacco's face as he grows more and more visibly worried. Laid over and linking the panels to the larger splash are captions that convey Sacco's paranoia: "we walking too fast? ... he looking at us? ... are they? ...very colorful...why is she looking at her feet? ... she's acting nervous...couple more corners..." (258). The next (and final) page of the episode (depicting their exit from the tunnel and the market) is structurally a mirror image of the page depicting their entrance. It is divided into three panels: two of roughly equal size taking up the upper third of the page, and another splash panel comprising the rest of the page. The space begins to open as they leave the tunnel in the first panel, becomes tight again in the second panel as they have "this last turn..." and then opens up again into a shot in which the feeling of space and sky are restored. The punch line consists of Sacco, sweating and flushed announces to his friend, "See! We made it! That wasn't that bad, was it?" (259). Having exited the parallel universe, he has seen things as Israelis have seen them—the continual fear, the feeling of being watched, and the self-monitoring that accompany these feelings. Although Sacco is still primarily interested in representing the Palestinian's plight, as Kristian Williams puts it, "he does see the conflict from the other side, and he realizes that the Israeli experience is not just about seizing land and conducting raids, but

also about the quiet tension...Such ambivalence fits well with the complexities of the Palestinian territories” (54-55). As this sequence shows, the medium of comics itself—not simply the narrative content alone—contributes to establishing these parallel universes.

### **The Rhetorical Work of the Medium: Visual Coding, Faux Cinema, and Repetition**

Subsequently, it is impossible to discuss Sacco’s work without returning to the question of how the medium itself is used. That is, to understand how Sacco does what he does, we must examine the role the medium plays. It is not enough to simply look at individual images alone, or narrative content alone. Instead, we must examine the rhetorical work of the medium. Though often problematized, Scott McCloud’s definition—that is, “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response from the viewer” (9)—should suffice. In other words, what does drawing repeated figures in sequence buy Sacco? Though I have discussed the ways in general comics work to subvert the notion of foundational truth, in this section I would like to examine those aspects of the medium that Sacco particularly exploits in this endeavor.

#### ***Visual Coding and the Self-Reflexivity of Faux Cinematography***

One of the more frequently remarked upon features of Joe Sacco’s works in reviews and articles is his artistic style. More than being merely aesthetic, Sacco’s style plays an important rhetorical function in his work. As Barthes argues, there is no drawing without style: the artist cannot reproduce every feature of what is represented and thus has to make decisions about what the drawing is intended to convey (*Image Music Text* 43). Subsequently, when attempting to interpret the rhetorical work of a visual medium in a given piece of discourse, one must evaluate what features have been reproduced and which have been occluded. These decisions implicitly

(and sometimes explicitly) argue for what is capable of being represented, what ought to be represented, and how things should be represented.

Kress and Van Leeuwen, for example, discuss the motivation that goes into sign-making in modes (such as the visual) that are popularly assumed to have a natural relationship between the signifier and signified:

...we see representation as a process in which the makers of signs, whether child or adult, seek to make a representation of some object or entity, whether physical or semiotic, and in which their interest in the object, at the point of making the representation, is a complex one, arising out of the cultural, social and psychological history of the sign-maker, and focused by the specific context in which the sign-maker produces the sign. That 'interest' is the source of the selection of what is seen as the criterial aspect of the object, and this criterial aspect is then regarded as adequately representative of the object in a given context. In other words, it is never the 'whole object' but only ever its criterial aspects which are represented  
(7)

These criterial aspects, in other words, demonstrate what the sign-maker deems to be most worthy of representation. In this regard, I do not mean to argue for the agency or intent of an author (after all, the author is, in many ways, merely a point of rearticulation in the larger discursive patterns in which she is enmeshed). What an examination of style *does* provide, is a sense of the discursive contexts in which the author was operating and toward what end.

So what *is* Sacco's visual style? In interviews, Sacco has cited several influences from among comics, art, and film.

One of Sacco's influences is Brueghel the Elder, whose unsentimental and yet vigorously intricate paintings depicted life in Flanders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In his workspace, Sacco has a framed print of Brueghel's *The Triumph of Death*, a painting that serves as an allegory of war (Johnson). Looking at *The Triumph of Death* alongside nearly any double page spread in Sacco's work demonstrates some of the similarities. Neither romanticizes the objects of representation (peasants in Brueghel's work, Palestinians in Sacco's)—yet another consequence of Sacco's aesthetic of ugliness (which I will describe more completely momentarily). The work of both, despite this aesthetic, is dense in meaning. Put another way, each create images that are packed with signifiers, and despite the supposed simplicity of the medium, Sacco's panels are bursting with details. The level of detail Sacco infuses in his work affords him a number of rhetorical advantages in his endeavor. First and foremost, it helps Sacco to quickly and compactly communicate attitudes, roles, and other information without a lot of verbal exposition. This contributes to the perception of the medium's ease and immediacy (American comic readers are typically conversant with the shorthand he employs) while at the same time allowing it to be semantically dense. Moreover, this detail-rich approach grants him a lot of leverage in specificity. Fellow comics artist Craig Thompson tells how he once heard Sacco say that he could not bring himself to draw generic faces even in depicting crowds, instead opting to give each individual in the crowd a unique expression (Johnson). Such a visual approach to specificity and embodiment enables Sacco to avoid the abstraction and disembodiment that so frequently occurs in mainstream journalism that decontextualizes the suffering of cultural Others.

Another prominent influence on Sacco's style is R. Crumb. Known for his frequently bizarre caricatures and even more outlandish subject matter, Crumb was one of the spearheads of the underground comix movement. Both embrace an aesthetic of ugliness, of cartoonishness

mixed with bleakness, of alienation. David Rieff says that Sacco's style is "broadly reminiscent of the work of R. Crumb and the other 'head comics' artists of northern California in the 1960's, [and it] seems almost defiantly ugly" ("Bosnia Beyond Words"). In some ways, this seems like an argument against the impulse to aestheticize the struggles and tragedies he depicts.

Obradovic, for example, discusses this impulse in *Safe Area Gorazde* as it relates to Adorno's opposition to Holocaust literature—that is, the attempt to make beauty out of something terrible. Sacco's creative work in depicting the tragedies that he represents poses a moral difficulty in this regard, and as I will discuss later in terms of the problematic subject position he occupies, his attempt to account for this can threaten to turn the entire endeavor into caricature or exploitation. While style is insufficient in its own right to account for the charge of exploitation (after all, an aesthetics of ugliness is still an aesthetics), his cartooning approach to style mitigates potential accusations against glamorization or valorization of those he depicts.

Part of this aesthetics of ugliness comes from the influence of film. In particular, Sacco has cited Sergio Leone as having a huge impact on his style and early development as an artist. Interviewer Barry Johnson says of the influence that "while Sacco is respectful of his subjects, he's never fawning. The faces in his books are unflinchingly drawn, with dark circles under their eyes, premature wrinkles, snagged teeth, lank hair, paunchy bellies. Sacco told me once that the only movie that really inspired him visually was Sergio Leone's 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,' which he saw in high school" ("Drawn to the Truth"). Sacco has also said that as a teenager he was impressed with "the way shots were framed, the close-ups, the way it gloried in gritty ugliness, the sweating, dogs, old growth of beard" (Bowe 27).

Of course, an aesthetics of ugliness is not the only influence Leone had on Sacco. That is, Sacco brings a cinematographic sensibility to the medium that evokes film, photography, and

documentary video at the same time as it quietly critiques the assumption of invisibility commonly associated with these media. As Walter Benjamin said of film, “The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole...The audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera” (228). In other words, the work of film and photography never shows things as they are, but rather as they are presented, divorced from time and context, in a particular moment. Sacco’s work, through its highly-wrought style and evocation of film, works to remind the viewer of this, even as it argues for its own truthfulness

Perhaps the most immediately striking aspect of Sacco’s art is its lack of color. Sacco works in heavy, thick, and often abrupt black ink lines. There is no gray, and the only shading is through feverishly tight cross-hatching. Obradovic says of the color palate that “Sacco draws in black and white, a choice which demands the reader not only to understand the extremes of representation, but also to differentiate between subject and object, the dominant and the subordinate” (97). She observes that in Sacco’s work, unlike in black and white photography, subject and background often merge and are linked by stylistic cues such as crosshatching or the use of panels—in Obradovic’s words, these divisions are permeable. For example, to return to the sequence of Sacco’s growing paranoia walking through the Arab market (**Illustration 2**), the scene shows people crowded together with uneven panels strewn about the page which depict close-ups of Sacco’s anxious face. A closer look at the crowd shows Sacco among them in three places. The panels depicting Sacco’s nervousness act as sorts of dividers for these three scenes, blocking each off from the rest while still blending the crowd together, heightening the claustrophobia conveyed and paranoia conveyed in the text. Still, these are not clean divisions, and the panels and text spill over into the larger scene, which is only, again, vaguely divided.

And so, while the choice of black and white is evocative of documentary photography, the meaning-making work the art is put to is distinctly different.

And as Bowe points out, “it’s not exactly radical these days to say that drawings can have as much documentary credibility as anything shot through a lens” (27). In an age of proliferating media and image manipulation software like Photoshop, media consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the mediation that occurs in representation. To heighten this awareness, Sacco uses other methods commonly associated with the camera. David Hadju, in a 2003 review, finds Sacco’s works to be “composed and paced...like feature movies, particularly films of the studio era...Landscapes put the subjects in perspective; figures are often shown at full length and in groups, so we can see their body language, watch their interaction and examine their relationships; the close-up is used sparingly, for impact” (“Comics for Grownups”). In other words, because the extreme angles and the cinematographic quality of his use of perspective, Sacco confronts the viewer with the mediation that takes place not only in his account, but also by extension in photography or video footage.

### ***Repetition***

Finally, Sacco uses one of the more defining features of the medium—its reliance on the repetition of images and panels—to bring attention to not only mediation but to the contexts surrounding the lives of Palestinians. If Sacco’s use of detail makes each panel semantically dense, the repetition of details and his use of repeated panels make each page syntactically dense. Sacco says of his repetitive depiction of details such as the mud and graffiti that permeate Palestine, “A prose journalist is probably going to mention these things, but he or she is not going to mention them at every paragraph whereas with a cartoon, just by the fact that I have background I can play with, I can have these things, the mud, the graffiti. All of these things just

follow the reader around wherever he or she goes in each panel so that it just creates an atmosphere” (UF 2002). Repeated images, then, grant Sacco’s account a sort of authenticity and an ethos of lived experience.

Obradovic makes a similar claim regarding *Safe Area Gorazde* when she says that in the repetition of mundane details as points of reference, “There is also an undeniable claim to authenticity here: these are the type of ethnographic details about life...(98). Once again, there is an implicit visual argument for a phenomenological account of knowledge, where proof is not found necessarily in positivist univocal fact, but rather in thick description, verisimilitude, and situatedness.

Sacco’s use of repeated panels, as I have described earlier, also allows for the conveyance of a particular subject through time and space. What I mean by this is that in the sort of news reportage that leans towards abstractions (where subjects are simply numbers and the events relayed are usually divorced from context and lived experience), subjects do not have the opportunity to perform identity. Those depicted in photographs, which are usually presented as individual evidentiary documents, run the risk of being essentialized or encapsulated in that moment. In the use of repeated images, however, as Frahm points out, a subject is able to “preserve its continuity” while at the same time visibly act as a performative cipher—the representation (especially as cartoony as Sacco’s are) is clearly *not* to be confused with its referent. To return to the example of Ghassan, his imprisonment and removal from society as seen in terms of *Discipline and Punish* acted as a way to create a “docile body,” and placing a sack over his head was a way to alienate him from any sense of identity. But in Sacco’s portrayal of his privation—moving him visually through time and space by using repeated images of the



character in the panel as well as through repeated captioning of the character's experience—Ghassan is, even in those conditions, afforded some agency in representation.

***Example 3: "Getting the Story"***

To examine how Sacco uses these techniques in context, let us look, for instance, at the opening sequence from the episode "Getting the Story." The first page is divided into three rather jagged panels. In the first panel, there are already several elements that denote Sacco's style. Each of the characters has a somewhat cartoony appearance. Rather than the essentializing and stereotyping function that cartooning often plays in comics art, however, Sacco does not use cartooning to indicate race or some form of animalistic traits. Indeed, he portrays himself as looking stranger than any of the other individuals he depicts (I will delve more specifically into the implications of his depiction later in this chapter). Cartooning for Sacco instead serves a number of other functions. First, as Versacci argues, it reinforces the craftedness of the account; one can hardly see the cartoonish looking characters inhabiting these irregular panels and not be aware of the role the medium plays in relaying the narrative. Second, cartooning helps the author to involve the reader in ways more realistic forms of representation cannot. As McCloud explains,

...when you look at a photo or a realistic drawing of a face—you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon—you see yourself. I believe this is the primary cause of our childhood fascination with cartoons, though other factors such as universal identification, simplicity and the childlike features of many cartoon characters also play a part. The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled...an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in

another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it!

(McCloud 36)

In other words, rather than offering stereotypes as narrative tropes, Sacco elects to present us with cartoons whose manner of dress indicates subject position, whose faces can emote while being vague enough to not only deny easy racial identification, but can also invite the reader to engage in the sort of projection that McCloud discusses. Third, cartooning allows him to introduce nonstandard and somewhat cinematic points of view that further confront the reader with the mediation of the account without completely destroying the sense of immediacy that the narrative establishes.

For example, the woman in the first panel, extends her arm and finger out in an exaggerated fashion that is dramatic but not necessarily out of place in a cartoon. Her finger points beyond what the reader is permitted to see in this panel, over the reader's shoulder, indicating that we are on the side of Hebron from which she is prohibited. The perspective relaying this dramatic gesture is evocative of a fish-eye lens, but it doesn't extend to the rest of the panel. As it is often associated with the panoptic security camera, the fish eye lens evokes the notion of voyeurism, particularly when combined with the finger pointed somewhat uneasily at the viewer. The implicit charge of voyeurism is also reinforced by the presence of soldiers acting as security. These features work to implicate the reader's privileged position as an observer.

The low angle of the point of view depicted here has a few effects: it communicates confusion and indicates the powerlessness of the woman arguing with the soldier whose back we see in the center of the frame. Furthermore, it adds to his height, making him an even more dominant presence in the panel. Because only see the roof lines and sky are shown, the reader doesn't necessarily receive a sense of the environment immediately surrounding them, which

further adds to the chaos and tone of danger in the scene. Finally, it highlights the diagonal lines of the buildings, which along with the woman's out-thrust arm and pointed finger help create a canted sense of space in the panel—the narrow space to which the woman is confined.

Because these qualities can apply to any medium that incorporates drawing, it is important to step away from them to examine some of the features more associated with medium of comics (after all, any one of these panels could stand on its own as a picture). Features more commonly associated with the medium, the captions, for example, also play a role. The captions are laid over one another in a fairly chaotic jumble, mirroring the narrative both as it is relayed in the juxtaposition of the elements presented in the panels and in the text itself (contained in the captions and speech bubbles). This feature, combined with the recurring characters in different poses, fosters the notion that time is passing and motion is occurring, despite the fact that we are observing static images.

This first batch of captions details—in fragments—the confrontation between the woman and the soldier. This occurs simultaneously as the speech bubbles that braid together the dialogue between Sacco and another soldier. A separate caption links the bottom left panel with the first panel. The repetition of the characters, but who are now in different poses and seen from a different angle, further reinforces not only this notion of the passage of time and action, but also of space. The different camera angle discloses pieces of the environment not depicted in the first panel. As LeFevre states, “In general, the reader expects that the diegetic space of a comic is sufficiently coherent: he expects—in analogy with daily life—a consistent space, because he tries on the basis of cues (given in panels) to form a global image of the complete space” (159). In other words, though the author is providing the cues, it is largely the reader who constructs the diegetic space in which the story takes place. Furthermore, the way that space is depicted in these

panels is somewhat contradictory. For example, the buildings shown in the different angles bear different features, and due to the attempt at a canted angle in a two-dimensional surface, provide differing depth cues which, as Arnheim explains, can also cause tension (*Art and Visual Perception* 126).

The background, however, quickly evaporates in the third panel, where only the characters are shown against a white placeless backdrop. Despite the background disappearing, the reader is not necessarily distracted; in LeFevre's view "Such inconsistencies do not have to surprise us, because unlike in cinema there is no camera that registers a material décor or existing place, in comics every panel has to be composed again on the blank page" (160). Yet again, the reader is complicit in constructing a sense of space, despite none actually being present. The movement lines around the gun (an abstract device of convention that intrudes into the diegetic space of the panel) and the soldier's elbows reinforce the rhetorical work done by depicting him in the first two panels; together they form a visual proposition from which the reader is to infer that he has lifted his gun above his head in response to his dialogue with the woman but has now extended the gesture to the other women gathered. The way the panels are laid out, yet again atop one another, presents the reader with the simultaneity of the elements both in the narrative and the visual elements as they are presented on the page. Instead of a straightforward, cause-and-effect narrative, we have fragments of a narrative that we are to piece together post hoc.

In short, we are forced to reckon with the sometimes competing, sometimes complicit logics of verbal representation and visual representation, as they play out in terms of coding, visual self-reflexivity, and repetition. These techniques subvert the expectations of a natural relationship between signifier and signified and of journalistic objectivity captured through

representation; if the reader begins to question foundational notions of truth—begins to see the role discourse plays in constructing truth conditions—the hegemonic function of discourse begins to weaken. For example, by the end of “Getting the Story,” wherein Sacco tries to get a sense of what happened in a shooting incident in Hebron, the reader gets a sense of complicated narratives that converge in this occurrence. At the very end of the section, Sacco reproduces the Jerusalem Post's report, a very reductive piece that contradicts what Sacco's cartoons painstakingly create. It gives an abstracted, disembodied account that privileges one version as objective whereas Sacco's ethnographic approach (which negotiates several subjectivities, including his own) gives the reader a fuller, seemingly more authentic rendering.

### **Problematic Subject Position**

Moreover, the notion of journalistic objectivity is continually thwarted not simply by Sacco's commentary but also by his frequent visual presence on the page. Sacco writes himself into his accounts, and his appearance has several implications for comics journalism. Chief among these is how it highlights the problematic subject position of journalists in terms of their relation to their subjects and their role in mediation. Secondly, as a work in a medium that blends text and image, it confronts the reader with how the author represents that role.

As a Western journalist (indeed, as a Westerner in general), Sacco enjoys a great deal of privilege that his subjects do not. He has access to mobility, amenities, and above all, safety. The same cannot be said of the Palestinians he depicts. The work of representing others is always fraught, but the case of representing a cultural Other to a largely American audience is even more complex. Representations of cultural Others can easily just rearticulate (and thus reproduce) a notion of Western civilization as a sort of transcendent signifier and vantage point from which to categorize and critique other cultures. Obradovic remarks upon the dangers of this

form of representation (from which this chapter is lent its name). She writes that Sacco's "is an exclusively Anglo-American audience for which he makes no apologies. Indeed, his text is an export, an export that carries with it the guilt of exploitation (of its subjects, their lives) towards an audience trapped by its own privilege, captives of their own media discourse. Part of the problem in Sacco's work then...is the moral ambiguity of representation" (94). After all, if textually representing another culture is fraught, doing so in a comic, where other modes of representation also mediate implicit values, can be even more so. Cartooning can always lead to caricature, to trivialization.

Similarly, Jared Gardner writes of Sacco's work that "Some are disturbed by the degree to which he highlights his own fears, his own ignorance, his own desire to exploit the generosity of his Palestinian hosts for the advancement of his own career," and there are many moments (particularly early on) in the comic where this self-involvement is readily displayed ("Home/fronts"). For example, the first chapter of Sacco's experiences demonstrates his early belief in his mastery and the exploitative tone his story-gathering adopts:

Palestinian victims all right! The real-life adaptation of all those affidavits I've been reading! The flesh and blood stuff! Up close and almost personal! But it's time for me to go...Now he's thanking my ass! He's touched! I've come all this way!" and later on the page "I'm off to fill my notebook! I will alert the world to your suffering! Watch your local comic-book store...

... Mission accomplished! Told you I was good at this! (10)

By the end of the chapter, he is cornered by two Palestinian boys with rocks and intimidated into giving them money. Angry, he finally returns to Jerusalem's Old City through a market as he

walks “by Palestinian shopkeepers...They make me sick...Their big, sad eyes...Their empty pockets...I want to kick them...”(24). In representing Palestine in this way, we see in the early chapters of *Palestine* a sort of tension between what Debbie Lisle refers to as colonial ideologies in travel writing and Sacco’s brand of postcolonialism. Joanne P. Sharp describes the impulse toward colonial visions in travel writing when she writes, “Western travellers have tended to adopt a colonialist style of writing which assumes the superiority of the traveller’s cultural and moral values and which leads to this figure taking possession of what he [sic] sees in a voyeuristic gaze” (203). In Sacco’s early accounts like the one I have described above, then, he makes his clear his voyeuristic impulses and feelings of moral superiority. While he wants to report on their suffering and disrupt dominant and essentializing accounts of Palestinians, he does not hide his own frequent apprehension in dealing with a cultural Other (particularly in episodes like the previously described “Through Other Eyes”). As Aryn Bartley argues, “Sacco highlights his own participation in the unethical nature of the American hegemony that allows him mobility and access, and the process of privileged forgetting” (69).

### ***Sacco’s Self-Portrayal***

Sacco, however, readily acknowledges his problematic subject position and incorporates this acknowledgement visually in his narrative and commentary, opening up new sites for ethical witnessing. Sacco represents himself in a highly cartoony manner. His over-sized glasses do not permit the reader to see his eyes, his mouth is ridiculously large, and his proportions are irregular. Early in *Palestine*, most (if not all) of the other characters are drawn in a similarly cartoony fashion. He claims in several places that this was due to the fact that this was the only way he knew how to draw at the beginning of the endeavor (Gilson, UF 2002). However, as the book progresses and his skill increased, he began drawing his subjects and the surroundings

more realistically while leaving himself a cartoony cipher. This difference has a number of implications that are braided throughout the images as well as the narrative.

For example, in the episode titled “Still One of the Boys,” Sacco sits with some Palestinian men as one of them discusses his wives. After apologizing for having no tea, the man explains that one of his wives is sick and the other is away visiting family. Offhandedly, he jokes that he may have to go out and find another wife. Sacco replies, “If you marry her within the hour, maybe you can get lunch.” This episode is interesting for a few reasons. First, given its placement after two episodes about feminism and Palestinian women, as Mary Layoun points out, “Here gender and a transnational patriarchy make him nervously complicit—‘one of the boys’—emphasizing his equally nervous recognition of the limitations of his (benevolent) understanding of and ability to narrate the situation of Palestinian women” (192). In other words, while the text alone refuses to comment on anything but Sacco’s complicity in this form of patriarchy, the images show a slightly different story. Sacco’s mirth seems overwrought compared to the other two in order to fit in. Furthermore, at this point, Sacco’s drawing style and depictions of others have become more realistic. The irony here is that while he proclaims himself “one of the boys” there is always visually a gulf between him and his subjects. Further, as his understanding of his surroundings becomes more nuanced (visually manifesting itself as graphical clarity/realism), he still stays a caricature.

This difference manifests itself in other ways, as well. Sacco is the only character whose eyes are never shown. Many scholars have commented upon what this may imply. For Tristram Walker the blankness of Sacco’s glasses evoke older comics characters whose eyes, like Little Orphan Annie were also blank. Walker cites Art Spiegelman, who says of Little Orphan Annie’s influence on his own work that those eyes are “a white screen the reader can project on”



(Spiegelman qtd. in Walker 76). This is similar to Scott McCloud's claim of what cartooning accomplishes: "we don't just observe the cartoon, we become it!" (36).

Obradovic, on the other hand, sees something else in Sacco's glasses: "The reader will also notice his glasses too—the blank stare that does not allow anyone, either the reader or the subject, to penetrate his gaze" (101). For Obradovic, this impenetrability frees him to express what he encounters through renouncing, after a fashion, his humanity. In her words, such a move indicates "a simple apology: as Sacco reveals the banal complexity of the individuals he meets, he realizes that anything that defines him as a human being diminishes in face of the survival and trauma represented..." (101). In short, Sacco, due to his privilege, cannot claim the sort of "realism" that his subjects occupy. For him to represent himself as equally real compared to his subjects would diminish their suffering and ignore the relations of power that have rendered them different.

While as some argue his blank spectacles might act as a focal point or surrogate for the reader's gaze, it is also important to add that strictly speaking, he has no eyes himself. It is thus impossible for the viewer to meet his gaze, rendering him an object of our gaze; he is incapable of hailing the reader. He is as much an object of the viewer's gaze as his subjects—more so, given his cartoony depiction compared to that of his subjects. In depicting himself in such a manner, he thus finds new ways of engaging in the New Journalism practice of grounding the narrative, the reportage, in the context of the reporter's experiences. But more than simply depicting himself once, Sacco's portrayal of himself is repeated. As Frahm observes of comics characters more generally, his identity is performed through repetition. Each individual instance acts as a marker denoting a given time and context, and the reader then works through closure to construct a being who acts through the fragmented markers of time and space. Sacco's depiction

is not a static or essentialized representation but rather a signifier that is conventional and arbitrary. His depiction is no less naturalistic, no less arbitrary in a sense, than others he depicts. Regardless, the reader gets to know him after a fashion, and because those whose stories he relates are also enabled to perform their identities through repetition (rather than, say, in a single photograph whose textual anchorage performs the work of identity), they have the same sense of agency in this regard as Sacco.

These visual cues in identity performance also work to acknowledge Sacco's problematic subject position and demonstrate his account's self-reflexivity. For example, after repeatedly indicating his mastery and competence in the text, the images convey an ironic self-contempt: he often sweats, his caricatured face twists in anxiety, and he contorts his cartoony body into uncomfortable poses as he makes these declarations. This irony allows for a playfulness and self-reflexivity that implicitly act as an argument against of the notion of objectivity, of foundational truth, and the inadequacy of signs to fully signify their referents.

### ***The Productive Function of Sacco's Subject Position***

The way that Sacco depicts himself indicates that his problematic subject position in relation to those he represents is fraught, but can be put to productive ends. In acknowledging and critiquing his interactions with Palestinians and Israelis, in acknowledging his biases, anxieties, and indeed his privilege, Sacco puts the lie to the assumed invisibility of mediation and the reporter in crafting accounts.

Aryn Bartley probably best describes the productive aspect of Sacco's fraught relationship with his subjects in the context of war reportage, comparing what he does to Michael Herr. She writes that "Both journalists recognize that to put on a performance of discursive substitution without acknowledging their refusal to physically substitute themselves for those

they identify as their ‘others’ would be to distort or erase the conditions of recording in the same way that the conventional journalism they critique distorts and erases that on which it reports” (62). For Bartley, however, they do this precisely because it indicates the “unequal political, economic, and social structures that privilege and protect their bodies over others” (62-63). And the refusal to engage in this gesture is exactly what Lisle indicts in other travel writers: “while travel writers spend much of their time crossing cultural and national borders, they fail to address the intricate and ambiguous power relations at work in these sites” (9). Sacco’s account, then, acknowledges the ways in which privilege works in these accounts and his struggles with his own ingrained colonial ideologies. Even as he critiques the essentialized account of Palestinians presented in mainstream journalism, he struggles against his own impulse to essentialize these peoples. Ultimately he is unwilling to forgo his privilege, but he is made aware, and makes the reader aware, of it. His privilege enables him to continue living even at the cost of Palestinian lives, and due to the narrative and visual cues linking him to the reader, he implicates the reader as well.

## **Conclusion**

In an interview for *Art Threat*, Ezra Winton asked if Sacco felt that he was working from a Foucauldian notion of “subjugated truths” or “subjugated knowledge”—that is, trying to tell stories that have been crowded out by more dominant narratives (Winton). Sacco responded that though he had never read Foucault, he felt that this was clearly what he was trying to do. As I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter, Sacco employs the dual logics of text and image that are in tension in comics to recover lost stories and lend them an immediacy they are not often afforded. As reviewer Janice Morris argues, “Precisely because it allows for a variety of interpretive codes, the comics medium presents an unlikely, but nonetheless apt, documentary

aesthetic suitable to capturing our politically dissonant times” (188). The way meaning(s)-making is done in the medium, then, always confronts the reader with the sort of mediation that, in normal reporting, becomes invisible.

The task of rendering mediation visible is necessary work, for as several scholars have pointed out, mainstream news reportage often acts as a way to support political decisions and justify, mobilize support for, and assist in war efforts (Ballensiefen, Fahmy & Kim, Konstantinidou). When one privileged way of producing the world through words and/or images—one parallel universe—is taken as the *only* one, the complexity of events and situations is reduced. As a result, what is “objective” becomes apparently obvious, and the sorts of actions and subject positions made available in these accounts typically lend themselves to imperialist policy. Comics journalism, then, is a way to undermine this sort of foundationalism.

For Hillary Chute, graphic narratives (such as *Palestine*) raises several difficult questions for readers: “What is the texture of narrative forms that are relevant to ethical representations of history? What are the current stakes surrounding the right to show and to tell history? What are the risks of representation” (462)? *Palestine* offers some ways at getting at those questions. But at the same time, while the medium of comics provides novel ways to ethically address issues of representation, it can also be used to elide questions of mediation. As I will explain in the next chapter, comics have often been complicit in normalizing racist, nationalist, and imperialist discourses. As comics become more accepted as a medium, as they become a more legitimate means of dealing with serious subjects, they run the ever-increasing risk of being co-opted, their ways of making meaning internalized. When this happens, the line between a new form of journalism and naked propaganda begins to blur.

## 3.

**The Graphic Adaptation of *the 9/11 Commission Report*:****New Popaganda**

One of the obvious counterarguments to the claim made in the last chapter—that comics' affordances lend themselves well to a critique of dominant discourses—would be to point to the many instances when comics have been used (and continue to be used) to reinscribe those very discourses. This chapter focuses on one recent instance in particular—the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Commission Report* (written and drawn by Sid Colon and Ernie Jacobson)—to study how it works to reinscribe dominant anti-Arab/Islamophobic discourse. In it, I would like to argue that the graphic adaptation accounts for the anti-hegemonic features of the medium primarily by two means: first, through its visual emphasis in constructing an ideological Other and drawing upon comics stereotypes and genre tropes; and secondly by asserting the medium's transparency, denying the human intervention necessary in signifying, and subjugating the medium's more subversive affordances. I will describe the problematic rhetorical situations that both the original and the graphic adaptation of the report had to address, the issues brought about by resignification, the various ways the adaptation visually constructs otherness, and finally how the artists downplay some of the features of the medium to naturalize the account they offer. In trying to package the confusing tragedy of 9/11 and the events that led up to it into a narrative that makes sense, Colon and Jacobson (whether intentionally or not) reduce an incredibly complex set of circumstances into a Manichean tale of good guys and bad guys, conveniently color coded and wearing appropriately ethnic garb. As Debbie Lisle writes, “Acts of writing and speaking are given meaning through prevailing discourses and actually *do violence* to the world because they are an imposition of ordered meaning on an otherwise ambiguous reality” (12).

While this conception of order as violence is true in any act of representation, particularly when it is done for the Other, it is especially egregious in the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report*. In masking the process of mediation and presenting it as neutral 'reality,' Jacobson and Colon draw upon and reproduce discourse that further endorses anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia.

What's more, despite Colon and Jacobson's insistence that the adaptation is visual journalism, they engage in a great deal of poetic license: they insert scenes not described in the original report to give vague passages a fixed appearance and presumably to make those passages easier to understand. In a review of the graphic adaptation, Douglas Wolk indicts this impulse when he writes:

Sadly, they've failed on that account, producing a garbled mess of a book that leaps frantically and incoherently from factoid to factoid, peppered with made-up scenes that undermine the credibility of the entire affair. It's so poorly put together that the book suggests its creators fundamentally misunderstand how comics communicate information and ideas, and where the line between fact and fancy lies (“Maus' it's not”).

Moreover, given the many arguments within and around the graphic adaptation for the medium's transparency (which I will discuss at greater length throughout the chapter), this blending of fact and fiction takes on an even more sinister dimension. Though the manner in which the book is assembled suggests to Wolk a misunderstanding of how comics work, to me it suggests something else entirely: when trying to reduce the complexity of such an enormous event into a narrative that perpetuates dominant discourse, a subversive medium such as comics has to be subjugated—its intrinsically parodic quality must be accounted for. What I mean here is that, as Ole Frahm argues, comics's form parody the notion of “a proximity between object and sign

actually exists that can be called truth” (179-180). Subsequently, those features of the medium that work to heighten ambiguity and parody foundational approaches to truth must be accounted for. To do so, however, is to mangle what readers typically expect from comics, leading to Wolk's confusion about how two accomplished comics creators like Colon and Jacobson could seem to misunderstand the medium so fundamentally. Seen in this way, the clumsiness of the graphic adaptation's form is not a result of an ignorance of the medium, but rather of an attempt to marry a form that is often associated with subversion to propaganda.

### ***Comics and Propaganda***

Despite its formal qualities and historical instances of discursive subversion, even a brief survey of comics history reveals numerous instances when comics have either implicitly or explicitly endorsed prevailing ideologies. Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart famously critiqued Disney comics (and particularly Donald Duck) as vehicles of cultural imperialism. Angela McRobbie argued that British girl magazine *Jackie* served the values of a patriarchal culture. Several scholars and writers have addressed the issue of how women and minority groups are represented in comics (Simone, Jennings and Duffy, Robbins), and many other scholars have written about the propagandistic qualities of comics during wartime (Murray, Thompson, Nolan, Savage).

Chris Murray offers a particularly interesting formulation of the interaction of United States propaganda and pop culture during World War II that he labels *popaganda* (emphasis his): “Popular culture [also] borrowed from official discourse and propaganda. With the boundary between propaganda/official discourse and popular culture thoroughly breached it becomes misleading and meaningless to distinguish between them as separate categories” (142). Comic books were exemplary as pop culture artifacts that served as media for domestic propaganda.

What is somewhat troubling about Murray's argument is the implication of how crudely hegemonic discourse functioned in *popaganda*:

The emphasis on play, the pleasure to be derived from the defeat of the enemy seems childish to modern eyes, as does the emotive and robustly patriotic rhetoric of much *popaganda*. However, *popaganda*, with its dual reliance on what its audience feels to be true (politics and myth) and what it wants or needs to be true (fantasy and desire) cannot be easily dismissed as primitive manipulation but needs to be analysed in terms of what it says about a particular people at a particular time. *Popaganda* texts such as these defined who the “American people” were, or what the dominant discourses allowed them to be represented as. This was mediated through their construction of otherness (143-145).

While his argument about how otherness mediated dominant discourses is certainly sound, his formulation here is problematic. First, by claiming the “modern eyes” of current readers would make them somehow less susceptible to similar instances and secondly, by claiming that studying *popaganda* “defined who the 'American people' were, or allowed them to be” Murray implicitly asserts that this sort of propaganda no longer occurs (144, emphasis mine). In contrast, I argue that the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report* is representative of the “New *Popaganda*,” a current, more subtle form of dominant discourse in comics. Murray is, of course, correct about the need to analyze a work of *popaganda* “in terms of what it says about a particular people at a particular time” (145). Consequently, I will attempt to ground this analysis in the broader cultural contexts described in the first chapter. Due to what I argue is the mystifying function of the graphic adaptation, Roland Barthes' conceptualization of mythology will be useful in accounting



for how this example of New *Popaganda* works.

**“Set Up to Fail”: The Rhetorical Situation(s) of *The 9/11 Commission Report***

***The Original 9/11 Report***

In the wake of 9/11, Americans were confronted with one overwhelming question: “How did this happen?” In response, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks (also known as the 9/11 Commission) was formed on November 27, 2002 (“Investigating Sept. 11”). Its ostensible task was to determine the facts and circumstances surrounding the attacks and to assess how prepared and responsive the government was. It was also mandated to give recommendations to prevent future attacks (*9/11 Commission Report* xv-xvi). Its work culminated in the *Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (or the *9/11 Commission Report*) published on July 26, 2004.

Though the report levels some degree of criticism at the preparedness of both the FBI and CIA, several people argue that it performed this function inadequately. For example, writers including Dan Eggen, Robin Wright, and Justin Rood question why a key meeting between CIA director George Tenet and Condoleezza Rice failed to appear in the report. According to Rood, “The meeting, in which Tenet warned Rice of the al Qaeda threat, does not appear in the commission's final report, although it had already been publicly reported two years earlier—and the panel had been briefed on its details by Tenet himself” (Rood). Though this meeting is perhaps the most discussed instance, it is not the only relevant one that was excluded. For example, in the “Able Danger” controversy of 2005, Lt. Col. Anthony Shaffer claimed he had informed the commission of the identification of two of the terrorist cells responsible for 9/11. This information, however, never appeared in the report. Benjamin DeMott reported in *Harpers* that several officials testified to the Commission about attempts to inform Bush “as candidate,

then as president-elect, then as commander in chief, about the threat from terrorists on our shores. The news these officials brought was spelled out in pithy papers both short and long; the documentation supplied was in every respect impressive” (DeMott). This information was also omitted.

If the purpose of the report was to determine the facts, and yet the report went out of its way to omit what were perhaps the most salient facts, the obvious question is “why?” To address that question, the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Commission need to be addressed. Thomas Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, the Chair and Vice-Chair (respectively) of the Commission later admitted to wondering if they “were set up to fail,” and described the difficulty of the rhetorical situation faced by the Commission (Without Precedent, 14). Writing in their book detailing the experience of chairing the Commission, Kean and Hamilton maintain that they “were aware of grumbling around Washington that the 9/11 Commission was doomed—if not designed—to fail: the commission would splinter down partisan lines; lose its credibility by leaking classified information; be denied the necessary access to do its job; or alienate the 9/11 families who had fought on behalf of its creation... (15). While they use these circumstances to craft a narrative of success in overcoming insurmountable obstacles, this victory seems somewhat facetious. In fact, critics allege that in trying to avoid being seen as partisan, the Commission failed to assign any political consequence to the circumstances, which subsequently rendered the Commission's analysis inert. That is, how can they assess preparedness while at the same time avoiding being seen as laying blame? The report is thus a diluted document that diffuses criticism so much that it is made largely meaningless. As Benjamin DeMott puts it, “In the course of blaming everybody a little, the Commission blames nobody—blurs the reasons for the actions and hesitations of successive administrations, masks choices that, fearlessly defined,

might actually have vitalized our public political discourse” (36).

Rather than the clarifying function it purports to serve, the report instead then serves to mystify. That is, the report confuses the pursuit of explanations with the ritual of establishing a Commission and authoring a report. What I mean by “ritual” here is the confusion of form and meaning Barthes elaborates in “Myth Today.” In Barthes' view, “When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains” (117). The essence of Barthes' argument as it would apply here is that the Commission acts merely as a form; that is, its success in determining the material and historical circumstances surrounding 9/11 is largely irrelevant. The mere fact of its establishment is the gesture that declares the problem has been taken care of. The purpose of the Commission was thus somewhat different than its explicit one. Instead of addressing a gap in its audience's education, the *9/11 Report* instead works as a sort of placebo. The audience wants answers and culpability of its leaders but are instead offered a symbolic gesture that basically exonerates the status quo. While these two things (a want for culpability and a symbolic gesture) are not necessarily mutually exclusive, a placebo may make one feel better, but does little to alleviate the root causes of the problem. In this case, the imperialist foreign policies of the U.S., the laxness in leadership, and specific individuals' unwillingness to act are ignored.

Subsequently, any incentive to address these problems is elided.

So, despite its stated goals of explaining how the attacks were able to happen, the report diffuses blame for inaction and obfuscates the historical circumstances that led up to the attack. In so doing, it enacts what Barthes says prompted him to reflect on myth in the first place. He “resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and [he] wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in [his] view, is

hidden there” (11). In other words, the report presents a document scoured of history and presents its account as nature, or “*what-goes-without-saying*.” In this regard, the 9/11 report resembles Barthes’ assessment of the Established Order in “Operation Margarine.” For Barthes, “To instill into the Established Order the complacent portrayal of its drawbacks has nowadays become a paradoxical but incontrovertible means of exalting it...plunge it into its natural imperfection; then at the last moment, save it in spite of, or rather by the heavy curse of its blemishes” (41). *The 9/11 Report* omits much of the historical circumstances that led up to the attacks and levels only a murky sort of blame for the unpreparedness and incompetence that permitted the attacks to happen. This blame is assigned only to an abstract “system”(rather than individuals) which will be saved by the recognition of its flaws and the nonspecific recommendations taken to address them.

If the values of competence and responsibility are to be restored to the various government agencies that were unprepared, first the authors must show them to fail by these same attributes. As Barthes himself puts it, “one cures doubts about the Church or the Army by the very ills of the Church and the Army. One inoculates the public with a contingent evil to prevent or cure an essential one...A little ‘confessed’ evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil” (Mythologies 42). A diffuse guilt in which no one in particular is to blame, a system that was inevitably flawed, villains accidentally allowed to lurk within the perimeter of Order: these are the confessed evils by which the gross incompetence in leadership is rescued from explicit acknowledgment, and the report is the ritual by which Order is inoculated against future mishaps.

Ultimately, my purpose in this section is not to critique the original 9/11 Report but rather to demonstrate the problematic circumstances in responding to a nearly impossible rhetorical

situation—to critique and yet at the same time to preserve the Established Order. Jesse Hicks illustrates this problem poignantly when he argues that, “Five Democrats and five Republicans promised not just to find the facts, but—paradoxically—to deny any political consequence to those facts” (Hicks). As the rest of this chapter will attempt to demonstrate, the graphic adaptation of the report works toward a similar end. However, the graphic adaptation enjoys a particular advantage in diffusing blame by employing comics tropes and other forms of visual rhetoric to construct an Other toward whom blame can be redirected.

### *The Graphic Adaptation*

The graphic adaptation of the report emerges from a somewhat different rhetorical situation than the original, though it employs a number of comics affordances to further obfuscate accountability and history. Written and drawn by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon, the graphic adaptation was created with the sanction of the 9/11 Commission (Hamilton and Kean wrote the foreword of the piece). In it, the artists take what they deem the most important features of the 567 page report and condense it to 117 pages of image-heavy text.

In the Foreword for the graphic adaptation, Kean and Hamilton lay out the rationale for the adaptation and their conception of the book's purpose. I reproduce the Foreword here in its entirety to examine its stated purpose and to interrogate the epistemology and the ideology that inform it.

It was the goal of the commission to tell the story of 9/11 in a way that the American people could read and understand. We felt strongly that one of the most important and tragic events in our nation's history needed to be accessible to all. Our goal in The 9/11 Commission Report was not only to inform our fellow citizens about history but also to energize and engage

them on behalf of reform and change, to make our country safer and more secure.

For this reason, we are pleased to have the opportunity to bring the work of the 9/11 Commission to the attention of a new set of readers. We commend the talented graphic artists of this edition for their close adherence to the findings, recommendations, spirit, and tone of the original commission report. Their adaptation conveys much of the information contained in the original report. We believe that you will find the story of 9/11 a gripping one, whether in narrative or pictorial form.

We hope readers of all ages, especially those unfamiliar with the original report, find that these pages encourage them to learn more about the events of 9/11. We would be delighted if this publication led to additional national conversation about the recommendations of The 9/11 Commission Report, and the extent to which they have been implemented.

The safety and security of our country require a well-informed public to hold its elected leaders to account. Have our leaders done all that they can and should to protect the American people? It is up to each of us to insist that they do. As we stated in our original preface to the commission report, we hope that this graphic version will encourage our fellow citizens to study, reflect—and act.

While it must address what is in some ways a similar rhetorical situation to the original report (adequately provide some account of the event while allaying specific assessments of guilt), the circumstances surrounding its 2006 publication are somewhat different. In short, it had to serve

the same function as the original—that is, to somehow critique and at the same time preserve the status quo—but also had to “be made accessible to all,” to inform, and to “energize and engage.”

There are a number of points in the preface that convey the adaptation's ostensible purpose. The co-chairs hope the adaptation will reach “readers of all ages” and initiate “additional national conversation” as well as prompt “well-informed public to hold its elected leaders to account.” I will argue throughout this section that despite this stated and overt rhetorical purpose, there is a curiously arhetorical approach to narrative and imagery that pervades the Preface (and, indeed, the rest of the work). With the denial of the rhetorical work done by narrative and imagery, the adaptation works to erase the mediation of its account, offering instead to present that which simply is.

### ***Resignification and Epistemology in the Foreword***

The adaptation of a work in a textual medium to a visual medium automatically entails re-signification; because different signifiers will be used, different interpretations are inevitable. However, the Foreword reveals a different belief on the part of the artists and their patrons. Lines such as “one of the most important and tragic events in our nation’s history needed to be accessible to all” and “We commend [the artists] for their close adherence to the findings, recommendations, spirit, and tone of the original” indicate some implicit claims that are developed further in the actual adaptation (ix-x).

The first of these claims is that text/language is a filtering agent capable of obscuring or rendering inaccessible “truth,” which is then external to language. In addition to the lines above, this assumption is also conveyed in the certainty with which the Chairs assert that there is only one version of the event and what preceded it: “*the* story of 9/11” (emphasis mine). The assertion of text-as-filtering-agent connotes the second implicit claim, that of the existence of a

transcendent signifier, and that it is visual. In other words, according to the Commission, by stripping away language and allowing pictures to demonstrate the facts (it is implied that seeing is, after all, believing), they have somehow authorized an edition that will be easier (“all ages”) to receive than its prose-based parent. Admittedly, the graphic adaptation does not require as much reading per se as the original (although, as I have argued in the first chapter, comics require a different set of literacies both textual and visual). However, there was already a summarized version of *The 9/11 Report* published and readily available. One then has to assume that it is specifically the comics form that makes this edition more accessible.

The “all ages” assertion—that comics are easier to understand because they are for children—reinforces this foundational approach at the same time as it infantilizes the medium.

As Charles Hatfield argues,

Comics raise many questions about reading and its effects, yet the persistent claims for the form's simplicity and transparency make it impossible to address these questions productively. Criticism...will remain at an impasse as long as comics are seen this way—that is, as long as they are rhetorically constructed as 'easy.' In fact, comics can be a complex means of communication and are always characterized by a plurality of messages (132).

In this light, we can read the Preface's reliance on the rhetorical construction of “comics as easy” to submerge the medium and deny its complex role in making meaning. The plurality of messages and the medium's polysemy are elided in favor of the preferred reading. Subsequently, the content seems to speak for itself, free of human intervention.

The Commission thus implicitly asserts that pictures are by necessity uncoded (as



opposed to language, which is necessarily coded in this rhetorical construction) and can denote only the truth. Here then we see an attempt to assert the transparency of the medium—its freedom from the filtering effects of language or subject position (which is somewhat ironic considering, as I will explain, how text-dominant the graphic adaptation is). This is further manifested in the explicit image vs. narrative binary they invoke (“whether in narrative or pictorial form”): the belief conveyed here is that pictures cannot tell a story but only serve to illustrate. Language is where “the” story is found; the images merely reveal. Such a foundational approach to language and reality finds its basis in a somewhat naive notion of the relationship between signifiers and their signified. What I mean here is that while the relationship between signifiers and their referents is conventional (that is, there is no natural relationship between them, only what is agreed upon), the implicit assumption conveyed in the Foreword is that there *is* a natural relationship between images and their referents, something that scholars of visual rhetoric have long problematized. Even more ironically, this approach argues against the parodic quality of comics that questions the proximity between signifier and referent.

While this proximity is problematic, it should not dismiss intention. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that signs are never 'arbitrary' in the traditional semiological sense; rather, they are motivated “in that each conjunction of signifier and signified is an apt, motivated conjunction of the form which best represents that which is to be meant” (*Reading Images* 8). Thus, the images in the report convey—with purpose—that which the creators feel best represents the meaning they are trying to communicate.

The attempt in the graphic adaptation's Preface to affirm the innocence of image-based representation from codedness also dismisses the differences in the types of literacies required to make meaning of images. Mitchell, for example, argues that Nelson Goodman's theory of

symbolism provides a way “to look at the differences between sign-types without reifying them in terms like 'nature' and 'convention,' terms which inevitably import some invidious ideological comparison while claiming to be nothing more than neutral descriptions...The difference is between *kinds* of convention, a matter of contrasting syntactic and semantic function” (*Iconology* 69). In other words, images are no less conventional than words—simply conventional in different ways. Words are discrete units of meaning-making in a binary—digital—system. By contrast, images constitute an analogical form of meaning-making wherein the individual elements are relatively meaningless until juxtaposed with all of the other elements of the composition and its surrounding context.

Subsequently, the implicit argument for transparency in the Foreword, when combined with the recurring blend of fact and fiction that Wolk deplures, indicates what seems to be an intentional demonization of Arab peoples and Islam. Colon and Jacobson produce fictions and negative portrayals of Arabs, all the while arguing that they are merely showing things the way they are.

### **Constructing Otherness**

Rhetorically constructing an Other using various narrative, visual, and cultural stereotypes is nothing new, nor is it unique to the graphic adaptation of the *9/11 Report*. In the first chapter, I surveyed how Otherness is constructed in more text-oriented media. What makes the graphic adaptation of the 9/11 commission report particularly compelling in this regard is not only the way it uses images to bolster the Western cultural narrative surrounding the Arab world but also its implicit foundationalism.

### ***Visual Othering***

Many of the ways in which Otherness is rendered are fairly obvious. Consider, for

example, one of the many instances of what Wolk described as the artists' "innocuous speculation" in a panel on page 57. In it, three of the four members of the Hamburg Group, "key players in the 9/11 conspiracy," are shown in what the reader must assume (based on the surrounding text) to be an example of them interacting with "life in the West" (57). Though the speech bubble in the panel uttered by a white male to another— "You notice they speak only in Arabic and keep to themselves"—could be interpreted to indicate the xenophobia the men encountered in the West, the surrounding context and its placement on the page seem to signal something else (57). After panels and text indicating their membership in the 9/11 conspiracy, their status as "aspiring jihadists," and their "anti-U.S. Fervor," the Arab men cloak their terrorist intentions in a language no one around them understands, and they do not assimilate—they "keep to themselves" (56-57). Worse, given that these men were indeed key players in the attack, the Westerners depicted in the panel *were right* to be suspicious of them. By this logic, any group of insular nonnative speakers could be potential terrorists. The images of the terrorists further this Othering. All three are drawn in the style of comic book villains (which I will touch upon momentarily): heavy brows, squinting eyes, high foreheads, and expressions that convey (in order, from left to right) contempt, secretiveness, and mental incapacity. Further, two of the characters are inexplicably colored blue, further designating them as outsiders and quite literally foreshadowing the events to come by having them entering shadows as they leave the Westerners behind them.

Similar tactics are used throughout the book by drawing upon tropes from spy and crime comics. The book is peppered with depictions of intelligence agents in dramatic action poses kicking down doors, spies speaking over their shoulders to sinister-looking Arabs pretending to read the paper, and F.B.I. agents delivering vital but doomed intelligence to shadowy superiors.

In each instance, Arabs are typically cast in the role of criminal, crazed terrorist, or jihad-waging zealot. Subsequently, verbal characterizations that what would seem out of place in the report are implicitly conveyed in relative normalcy. Such caricatures hardly seem incongruous with a medium that is usually associated (in America) with superheroes. The use of stereotypes then helps to reinforce dominant depictions of Arabs and Muslims as menacing and violence-prone outsiders.

### ***Comics and Stereotyping***

Of course, comics have a long tradition of relying on stereotypes to visually convey information about characters to the reader. Comics artist and scholar Will Eisner writes:

Comic book art deals with recognizable reproductions of human conduct. Its drawings are a mirror reflection, and depend on the reader's stored memory of experience to visualize an idea or process quickly. This makes necessary the simplification of images into repeatable symbols. Ergo, stereotypes...In comics, stereotypes are drawn from commonly accepted physical characteristics associated with an occupation. These become icons and are used as part of the language in graphic storytelling (*Graphic Storytelling* 11-12).

Eisner uses depictions of stereotypes to demonstrate how depicted physical characteristics can help a reader determine the profession of a given character. These characteristics help transmit meaning quickly and allow the artist to package a number of significations into one signifier. Naturally, stereotypes are dangerous in the way they essentialize certain characteristics in subjects, and the graphic adaptation does just this. Of course, Colon and Jacobson did not invent this stereotype of the “evil Arab,” but the graphic adaptation works as a point of articulation in

the stereotype's reception and perpetuation.

But how are these stereotypes expressed? A brief survey of the representations of Arabs in the graphic adaptation shows them often depicted with animal-like features. Eisner explains the use of animal characteristics in the representation of people as a way to capitalize “on a residue of human primordial experience to personify actors quickly” (*Graphic Storytelling* 14). While his formulation may be a bit too simple since different cultures regard a given animal with different values, it still indicates the intention and interpretation of stereotypes inherent in crafting these resemblances, particularly given the American audience of the graphic adaptation. To give just one example, most (if not all) of the Arab men depicted in the book have high foreheads and widow's peaks, heavy and arched eyebrows, down-turned mouths, and eyes that do not hail the reader directly. When one of these characters' gaze is directed at the reader, it is as if through the corner of the eyes. Comparing these depictions to those which Eisner uses as examples, the depictions of Arab men in the graphic adaptation most frequently resemble those of the men Eisner depicts as drawing upon foxes and snakes, animals associated in the West with evil and trickery (*Graphic Storytelling* 14).

The notion of representing the Other as an animal is interesting because of its rhetorical purchase in erasing history. Because the circumstances leading to the attacks have been largely erased (as I will explain more thoroughly later), as readers we are to assume that the conflict arises from some essential property of the Other—that is, its animal-ness. Because animals cannot speak in meaningful terms, they cannot engage in the very social conditions that constitute politics, and therefore are always-already outside of the *polis*. As Margaret Somers argues, “Outside of the political community, it was well understood that humans lose the very qualities that make them human” (*Geneologies of Citizenship* 25). Since Arabs are largely

voiceless in the adaptation (the only one depicted as speaking is Bin Laden), and are rendered in very animal-like forms, the medium naturalizes an account of Arabs as apolitical barbarians.

As scholars such as Giorgio Agamben and Michael Ignatieff have argued, the reproduction of a divide between what we consider human and animal is essential for political activity. Ignatieff in particular notes that dedication to the notion of the *polis* requires the rhetorical construction of an inhuman constitutive outside. This outside is frequently determined by designating its constituents as barbarous or animalistic. Consequently, this populace is necessarily deemed apolitical is because speech is meaningless within it. (“Myth of Citizenship” 59). Thus, the ways Arabs are depicted in the graphic adaptation work to further place Arabs outside of the realm of political discourse, justifying any number of imperialist behaviors in the name of “liberating” them while at the same time silencing them.

### ***Apolitical Barbarians***

With the animalistic stereotypes established, Colon and Jacobson continue to take artistic license with the source material to provide barbaric depictions of the Arab world. A number of the panels in the book draw upon television tropes of Arab hordes seething with rage. The way they are depicted, these voiceless hordes are not capable of participating in the political discourse that defines democracy and the polis; in contrast, they can only howl with fury.

In inventing these scenes, Colon and Jacobson continue what Steven Salaita describes as

...the American tradition of dehumanizing its geopolitical enemies, in this case by totalizing as terrorists Arabs who contravene the United States' imperial ambitions. Underlying this totalization is the assumption that Arabs are incapable of entering into modernity and that whatever demands they express through violence are necessarily reasonless whereas American

violence, however ugly, always intends to serve the interests of progress...The flippancy with which American media apply the word 'terrorism' to Arab populations likewise reinforces the notion that violence in the Arab World is ahistorical and therefore senseless. Arabs in turn become a people without narratives who belong to a culture incapable of rationality (*Uncultured Wars* 8).

The mob scenes depicted work to dehistoricize violence in the Arab world and to convey irrationality in differing and disturbing ways. For example, many of the mob scenes have nothing to do with their accompanying text. For example, one panel (on page 38) shows what one would assume to be Osama Bin Laden (based on a resemblance to a named illustration on the same page) waving to a mob that looks at once menacing and exuberant. The text panels include, “Al Qaeda enjoyed a freedom of movement here [in Afghanistan] it didn't have in Sudan,” “They entered and exited without visas or immigration procedures...,” and “...they purchased and imported weapons and vehicles and weapons...” (38).

Once the text and image of the panel are unified, they signify a number of assumptions. On a purely visual level the panel argues—like the other, similar panels—that the people of Afghanistan are not to be considered individuals, that they are a barbaric horde. Secondly, and perhaps more insidiously, it argues that this horde (which is clearly meant to metonymically signify all of Afghanistan, given the accompanying text) welcomes Bin Laden, a designated terrorist. Combined, the images and text work in turn rhetorically to justify continued American imperialism in the area.

A panel on page 117 works toward a similar effect. Its accompanying text also has no direct relationship with the stereotypical depiction of a mob of “barbaric Muslims”:

The commission believes that the President and Congress deserve praise for their efforts thus far. Now they and the international community must make a long-term commitment to a secure and stable Afghanistan.

But the U.S. Presence is overwhelmingly oriented toward military and security work. The State Department presence must be greater and there must be more done to restore the rule of law and contain rampant crime and narcotics trafficking (117).

These passages, when read in the context of the preceding panels, indicate another chilling implicit argument: this is the natural state of these lawless criminal Afghans (who look no different than other Muslims and Arabs depicted in the book) unless the U.S. intervenes not simply through arms, but through cultural means; they need to be civilized, assimilated, and recast in our enlightened image.

### *The Strange Case of the Scimitar*

Perhaps even more telling is the recurring motif of the scimitar throughout the book. Long the locus of Western anxieties of Eastern barbarism, the scimitar has been so thoroughly associated with the cultural and religious Other that when describing stereotypes and objects, Eisner claims its depiction can be used to signify “Bad Knife.” The weapon makes numerous appearances in the graphic adaptation, though (yet again) no mention of any scimitars are made in the original report. I will explain here how as one of the more interesting examples of the blurring of fact and fiction, the signifier of the scimitar is deployed very tactically throughout the book.

The first, and perhaps the most subtle uses of the signifier is—strangely enough—in the early portions of the book depicting the hijacking of the planes. Though the graphic adaptation



begins with a depiction of the hijacking, the knives depicted are not identified as box-cutters until very late in the time line reconstructing the events on pages 20 to 25. Even then, they are never explicitly identified other than with an image of a box-cutter by the text “Likely Takeover.” Until this point, the weapons the terrorists use look little like the angular box cutters depicted in the time line. Rather, they are curved, long knives evocative of Eisner's “Bad Knife.” While this style of drawing—this stereotype—enables, as Eisner describes, Colon and Jacobson to use the it as a sort of symbolic shorthand, it has some other effects: on the one hand it links the knife to “bad,”; on the other, it links “bad” to Islam and the Arab world.

Further, the curved knife links the hijackers metonymically to the other scenes and individuals depicted in the book that feature scimitars. For example, on page 34 the scimitar appears, though (once again) there is no mention of it in the original report. This page consists of three horizontal panels that propose to depict the expulsion of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. In the first panel, a man is shown to be shot in the head from what we assume to be a distant sniper. Of the man's two Soviet soldier companions, one looks on in shock while the other scans the distance for the sniper. The second and third panels depict Soviet soldiers retreating as Afghans charge. The most prominent figure in these panels is an Afghan who wields an upraised scimitar in one hand; in the other he holds an AK-47 by the haft like a sword.

It would be difficult for the eye not to be drawn to the image of the scimitar on the page. It lies in the center of the page, but more than that, it is drawn in a completely different style than anything else on the page. Unlike the shaded, colored, and relatively detailed drawings for the rest of the signifiers, the scimitar is an empty line drawing. It is uncolored and un-detailed, looking less like the picture of a sword and more like what Scott McCloud describes as an icon—that is, an abstraction that by its more symbolic than particular orientation allows for a

level of projection unavailable in a more realistic drawing (27). As an abstraction, the scimitar is then an empty symbol that links to its other incarnations in the book. As McCloud argues about the abstraction of faces, “the more cartoony a face is...the more people it can be said to describe” (31). The scimitar depicted in this sequences of panels is not then, meant to be taken as that particular scimitar (which again, does not exist in the original report), but instead can represent the scimitar (and the significance that Western readers attach to it) in general. In other words, the expulsion of Soviet forces from Afghanistan had the same quality of religious violence that the takeover of the planes on 9/11 did. That is, the scimitar acts as both the symbol and the evidence of the link between Islam and violence.

The implicit argument equating a homogenous Islam and violence is mirrored in the scant text that appears on the page. The graphic adaptation discloses that, “April 1988... ..brought victory for the Afghan jihad. And the Soviets were out of the country within nine months” (34). Framing the expulsion as “victory for the Afghan jihad” has a few effects. First, combined with the scimitar it depicts, the graphic adaptation equates the Afghan resistance with religion rather than with politics. Second, in using the phrase “jihad”—again, when combined with the scimitar—the depiction of the Soviet expulsion links this scene to the hijacking. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the use of “Afghan jihad” makes the resistance to Soviet occupation seem more monolithic and homogenous than it actually was. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, the Afghan resistance of the time was multifaceted and often the factions within it were in conflict. In portraying the resistance as a monolithic jihad, Colon and Jacobson eradicate difference and present an unindividual Other.

Colon and Jacobson employ similar strategies in the final instance in which the scimitar makes an appearance, on page 51. Wolk describes the strangeness of the scene:

A description of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan mentions that Ahmed Shah Massoud's soldiers “were charged with massacres”—an excuse for the artist to draw an image of them raiding a village, swinging swords, firing rifles into buildings, blood running in the streets, a peasant woman frantically dashing away with her baby in her arms, some fronds from a tree poking out from behind a building. That panel looks dynamic in a way that no other images in the pages around it do; it also represents a kind of fantasy that has no place in a book like this, because a medium as subjective as comics heads into very dangerous territory when it conflates documented fact with speculation for artistic effect (“Maus' it's Not”).

This reading echoes what I have been arguing throughout the chapter, primarily that Colon and Jacobson rely on a blur of fact and fiction, stereotyping, and coded cultural symbols (like the scimitar). This sort of myth-making (both in the sense in which Barthes employs the term and in the more literal sense of “making things up”) depoliticizes speech and replaces complexity with simple “common sense” meanings. This penchant for clearly coding the drawings through style carries over into others areas in similarly significant ways, particularly when it comes to Colon's rendering of faces.

### ***Portraits of Essentialism—A Barthesian Reading***

Because of the different styles used to depict different people and activities within the work, I think it is important here to examine the rhetorical function that style serves. In this regard, Roland Barthes' discussion of the codedness of drawings and visual signification is particularly useful:

The coded nature of the drawing can be seen at three levels. Firstly, to reproduce an object or a scene in a drawing requires a set of *rule-governed* transpositions; there is no essential nature of the pictorial copy and the codes of transposition are historical (notably those concerning perspective). Secondly, the operation of the drawing (the coding) immediately necessitates a certain division between the significant and the insignificant: the drawing does not reproduce *everything* (often it reproduces very little), without its ceasing, however, to be a strong message...there is no drawing without style (*Image Music Text* 43).

Barthes' formulation of drawing's codedness is valuable here for a few reasons in particular. First and foremost, it draws attention to the conventional rather than natural relationship visual signifiers share with their referents (while Barthes' early work argues that photographs are not coded, he later problematized this as well, as I will address in Chapter 5). Secondly, it draws attention to the motivated nature of signification. That is, as Kress and Van Leeuwen argue, particular signifiers are chosen from among the range of possible signifiers specifically because the rhetor perceives them as most adequate to convey the intended meaning. The questions this asks of a drawing, then, are 1) what rules governing the transposition of the signified to the signified is the artist employing? and 2) what features does the artist deem significant enough to reproduce in a drawing? By examining the only sets of portraits in the book—those of the hijackers, those of the Commission, and those of President Bush's “War Council”—I hope to make those rules and features soon become clear.

### *Portrait of Evil*

To address these questions, let us first examine the first page of the piece after the titles

and observe the way in which the players are represented. There are drawn portraits of the hijackers on page 4. Most are drawn in the way of stock comic book villains: heavy, low-hanging eyebrows, beady black eyes, exaggerated features that make some look simian, others insectile, and others only vaguely human. There is no texture or shading present; the portraits are mere line drawings, making the hijackers appear even more alien. The portraits themselves rest on a black back drop, suggesting evil, darkness. The first order of signification here is simple: these are representations of the referents—the men who hijacked the planes. The only indication, however, that these depictions are of the hijackers is the anchorage provided by both the text and the context. Without giving them Arab names and providing the bolded names of the flights that they hijacked in all capital letters, we might be looking only at caricatures of comic book villains—in a sense, mere masks signifying their roles. The inclusion of their names gives the portraits a linguistic anchorage: this alienness has a name, and it is Arab. We are to associate this simplicity in presentation and the sinister aspects of the signifiers as representative of an entire people—indeed, as I have argued throughout this chapter, anyone of Arabic descent depicted in the book generally has a similar look.

As Barthes demonstrated, the codedness of any drawing requires an examination of the second order of signification. Here this examination reveals a number of connotations at play. The hijackers, as a sign in this form, signify Evil: an unyielding black-and-white force. For Barthes, when meaning becomes form, the richness of a “spontaneous, indisputable image” almost becomes lost (*Mythologies* 118). He argues that “When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains” (*Mythologies* 117). If meaning is put at a distance, what fills the space is signification. In the case here, signification produces the notion that the actors behind these

masks have perpetrated this attack. All that the viewer need know is contained therein: these are not individuals with motives but rather mere roles. Because we are presented with the faces, the mythological roles, of villains, we cannot question the culpability or the ineffectiveness of the U.S. government in proactively countering it; there is no drama and there are no villains without the action being portrayed as inevitable. The motive is as irrelevant as it might be for the bearer of the Minotaur mask in the Greek tragedies. Indeed, this caricature is laced with a sense of inevitability—the layout resembles a series of mug shots that imply the crime has occurred post hoc (even though the narration has only just begun), which secures this sense of inevitability. The contingency of the situation and the history of the meaning behind it become remote; the image instead naturalizes the way things are and asserts the situation as mere truth. As reviewer Jesse Hicks argues, by presenting the events as inevitable and outside of the scope of the status quo, politically, the status quo is shielded from scrutiny:

The 9/11 Report reads as an emotionally anesthetized Greek tragedy, where government at the highest level lies flaccid in the hands of cruel Fate...Serious failures of imagination, attention, and competence ('Bin Laden determined to strike in U.S.') are presented with an air of inevitability. In this narrative, events are predestined; therefore, there can be no blame—and no drive for redemption. (“The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation”)

Here then, the drawing style draws upon crime dramas, comic villain tropes, and hackneyed representation to designate the roles in a tragedy rather than to simply depict the terrorists responsible for the tragedy.

*Portraits of Good*

Now let us contrast the portraits of the hijackers with the depiction of the Commission on page 129. Rather than caricatures, we see an attempt at near photograph-level realism. The title of the page—its textual anchorage—is “Unity of Effort in Sharing Information.” Rather than the black background of the hijackers’ page, we see a white background in which the ten portraits are surrounded by disembodied blocks of text. The pronouncements read like commandments: “Members should serve indefinitely on intelligence committees...Congress should create a single principal point of oversight...” Though not written in the third person (rather, in the royal “we”) or in the passive voice, the tone of the pronouncements lends a sense of distance—a distance that is also communicated in the portraits themselves.

Each portrait not only bears a textured, shaded, human visage, but these countenances are also emotive: sadness, sternness, and yet confidence and competence are well displayed in nuanced interpretations. Yet, these faces are no less conventional representations than those presented in the hijackers’ section. These representations do not dehumanize these actors like the hijackers’ do; rather, they officiate—these are the vestments worn by authority, whose presentation makes them seem wise beyond reproach. The artists’ decisions in determining significant from insignificant have produced not a photographic likeness (although the attention to detail in these renderings does indicate photo referencing) but rather an idealized realization of those visages.

The only other such collage in the report is that of the president and his “war council,” who are depicted in a similarly ennobling fashion (101). Relying once again on McCloud's discussion of faces, we see distinctly different attitudes about representation manifested in the portraits. McCloud argues that “When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating the details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image

to its essential “meaning,” an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't” (30). Contrasting the details that were thus amplified and/or omitted in the depictions of Commission and those of Arabs and Muslims discloses which details Colon and Jacobson considered essential for meaning making. Subsequently, the individualism that comes with a more realistic approach to representing images allows the Commission and the War Council more real, actual beings in the world. The way the hijackers are presented, by contrast, is more abstracted, more coded, and more generalized. The terrorists are linked by name and by depiction to all of the other Arabs and Muslims shown in the book.

### **Naturalizing the Account**

In order to mediate dominant discourses, the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Commission Report* not only constructs otherness through its use of images but also through its often (though not always) implicit assertion of the transparency of the medium to naturalize the account the narrative offers. In other words, the authors deny the possibility of myth-making at the same time as they use the coded nature of drawing to perpetuate it. As my earlier discussion of the Foreword suggests, part of the burden born by a realist approach to narrative and language is making it seem like the only account—as if there were no human intervention in crafting it. Toward this end, the graphic adaptation of the report uses a variety of means beyond those I have already enumerated to naturalize the account offered. These include erasure, sequence, and the use of comics tropes.

### ***Erasing Mediation***

As scholars such as Hatfield, LeFevre, Groensteen, McCloud, and others have pointed out, comics require a number of multimodal literacies and are heavily mediated. And yet, as the Foreword demonstrates, transparency is the overriding logic of the graphic adaptation report.



Further, in an interview on the report for *USA Today*, Ernie Colon and Sid Jacobson asserted that the adaptation was not a comic. Colon stated that they are “in the business of clarification,” and Jacobson distinguished the work from comics by claiming that “it’s not a dramatization...it’s the story of an investigation...it’s graphic journalism.” This claim, made both in *USA Today* and in *Slate* magazine, is undermined by the coding practices I have described above, and it ignores the way fact that relaying content in a given medium necessarily elides some things even as it brings others into sharper focus. For example, content relayed in a movie has different affordances than those of a book; a comic book will have different affordances than that of a prose-based report. When “clarification” is evoked, however, the only facet of media that is implied are its constraints. By arguing that they are merely making reality clearer, Colon and Jacobson thus deny the very constitutive *mediating* function of a given medium.

Much of this impulse to achieve transparency seems to spring from what Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin describe as “immediacy”—that is, “a family of beliefs and practices that express themselves differently at various times among various groups...the common feature of all these forms is the belief in some necessary contact point between the medium and what it represents” (30). However, as I have argued in the previous chapters, this is a fairly untenable (if not impossible) belief to maintain as regards comics—as a hypermedium, comics simply contain too many elements from other media that exist in tension with one another. Consequently, the case for erasure and immediacy in the graphic adaptation is somewhat more complicated than in less hypermediate discourses. Though Colon and Jacobson’s case for transparency is made primarily in the text within and surrounding the work, I will argue that it is also made in the images as well.

But first, a definition of “erasure” and its relationship to immediacy is in order. The

notion that the medium can somehow be willed away through erasure has manifested in different media throughout history. Scholars such as Norman Bryson have demonstrated that the “Western tradition oil paint is treated as an *erasive* medium. What it must first erase is the surface of the picture-plane” (92). Grusin and Bolter trace this erasive work in other media through means of the Albertian and linear perspectives. What makes comics an interesting case is that as a hypermediate work, it can be difficult to present a given page as not being mediated. In order to ameliorate this, many of the images in the graphic adaptation are, as Wolk points out, photo-referenced. That is, Colon draws upon on well-known photographs and portraits to depict certain things. This lends the rest an ethos of authenticity that enables Colon and Jacobson to introduce their own interpretations as being more “real” than if they had not.

Finally, in addition to the reductive quality of the descriptions (such as the monolithic presentation of the Afghan peoples), the complex historical circumstances that led up to the attacks is muted and reduced to a very limited narrative: “The conflict did not begin on 9/11. It had been publicly declared years earlier, most notably in a declaration faxed early in 1998 to an Arabic-language newspaper in London by the followers of a Saudi exile gathered in one of the most impoverished countries on earth” (29). And thus is Osama bin Laden introduced as the aggressor, washing the U.S.'s hands from any previous imperial aggressions in the Middle East and Central Asia. It is as if the conflict began on that one day. The report does not merely neglect to take America's colonialist foreign policy taken into account; by ignoring it, it is as if such policy *never existed*.

### ***Sequence***

The way sequence is employed in the graphic adaptation also works to mask mediation. As Wolk explains, “there's virtually no narrative flow to it—with very few exceptions, no two

consecutive panels show the same characters or are contiguous in time, and Jacobson's script is simply a stripped-down version of the commission's book, preserving most of its structure and lots of chunks of its text" ("Maus' it's Not"). As I described in Chapter 1, much of comics' subversive power comes from the way meaning is made by juxtaposing repetitious images. By privileging a more text-driven approach to sequence, the graphic adaptation works to minimize the reader's perception of a lack of unity between representation and reality. One of the more exemplary instances of this approach to sequence can be found on page 85. There are what amount to six panels on this page, which is divided into three horizontal sections. In the top section there are three panels, the second horizontal section is a panel unto itself, and in the bottom section there are two symmetrical panels. In terms of the images themselves, they have a quasi-narrative quality that, juxtaposed with one another, indicate a theme of cops and spies engaging in something to do with Arabs and/or Muslims (which the audience can divine based on the way they are drawn).

However, as Wolk argued about the book in general, there isn't anything in the images themselves that indicates a narrative sequence. Instead, it is the text that drives the sequence, and the images act as illustrations for the activities described in the text. While we may take in the page as a simultaneous presentation of visual elements, to adequately make meaning we must rely on the text. Accessing the text anywhere except from the beginning only leads to confusion, as the text-driven sequence is cumulative and linear. The arrows I have placed on the illustration demonstrate how the narrative sequence is visually designated, and as one can see from where each arrow begins and ends, it is completely driven by the text. While the text's layout against the page may appear somewhat chaotic at a glance, it actually follows the left-to-right, top-to-bottom conventions typical of how Westerners read, particularly within a given panel.

Because the sequence is text driven, its logic is in line with what Gunther Kress describes as the epistemological commitments of the mode of speech-based representation. That is, in the spoken (and to a lesser extent, written) mode, as Kress explains, the dominant logic is that of action through time. Kress points out that, “The temporal and sequential logic of speech, and, leaning on speech, of writing, lends itself to the representation of actions and events in time...The question asked by speech, and by writing, is: 'what were the salient events and in what (temporal) order did they occur?’” (14). Taking this as a cue, we can begin to interrogate the ideology implicit in this logic. For example, by asking, “What exists?” or “What is possible?” according to the logic of speech, a number of assumptions emerge. First and foremost, that salient events occur and may do so independent of human action. Secondly, causality, as Kress puts it, is inescapable: events occur because something caused them to. Third, because events can occur outside of human intervention, it is very easy to assume that language is a screen rather than a constitutive element in cognition or perception. This is of course, in line with the epistemological claims made in the Foreword to the adaptation.

In terms of the act of speech itself, most of the agency lies with the speaker. Listeners (and to a lesser extent, readers) are as Kress puts it “dependent—at least in their initial hearing and reading—on sequence and on sequential uncovering...If the hearer or the reader wishes to reorder what has just been said or what has been written, the recording has to be done on the basis of and against the author's prior ordering” (13). In such a configuration the audience's agency can thus only be framed in the binary terms of passivity or resistance and works to erase what Frahm describes as “the ambivalence of repetitions which makes comics seem weird. Ambivalence between the simple, material surface of the signs and the overdetermination of the white space caused by their repetition, ambiguity between identity and difference...”(189). As

Frahm argued, much of the parodic element of comics' structure comes from repetition. In the graphic adaptation of the *9/11 Report*, however, there is very little repetition of characters. In fact, very few, if any figures are featured in consecutive panels. Though it contains the “double-voice of the parodistic repetition of image and script,” as I described previously, the images are subordinate to the more foundational text, alleviating some of the ambivalence typically evoked in this pairing (Frahm 180-181).

Perhaps more importantly, because of this disavowal of repetition, the function comics serve in problematizing identity is thwarted to a degree. Frahm describes this function:

A comic-strip character's identity exists only in its material repetition. This material identity is inevitably disrupted. Although the character is called by the same name, it is, owing to material repetition in space, from panel to panel and from drawing to drawing, as well as in time, from day to day, not the same but another alike. Being another, the character has to be repeated to preserve its continuity. Identity therefore exists only from repetition to repetition, it is, to borrow from Gilles Deleuze, a “mask” that hides no real identity but is itself identity (183)

Consequently, if this performative/constructed notion of identity is belied through dispensing with repetition, then its parordic function ceases. The picture is presented strictly *as* identity. And, once again, the nameless savage Arab is presented without motion, without agency (instead being shown as static, unable to move), and without parody—it is simply *what-goes-without-saying*.

## **Conclusion**

Despite their claim that the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report* is not comics, Jacobson

and Colon clearly draw upon comics journalism (or, as they put it, “graphic journalism”) in addition to spy and crime comics tropes. As I argued in the previous chapter, the lack of official scrutiny and sponsorship of a medium so associated with the margins is one of the reasons comics has such an appeal for resisting dominant discourse. Comics creators can thus bring an effective critique of this discourse to more mainstream audiences. However, as Versacci points out, “there is a danger in attracting attention on the margins. Specifically, a marginal yet increasingly popular movement runs the risk of being co-opted by the mainstream, and when that happens, the movement's power is diluted” (131). What once may have been considered shocking (the use of comics to tease meaning out of a report) is now uncontroversial, natural—a fact that the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Commission Report* ably demonstrates and uses to propagate myth. As Barthes describes it, “myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made. The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences” (*Mythologies* 142). The graphic adaptation then removes the history from both the circumstances surrounding 9/11 as well as from the crafting of the report. In their place, we have the “harmonious display of essences”: Arab terrorists, spies, well-intentioned Western officials, and a reductive narrative that employs genre tropes while at the same time denying its artifice.

Lisle explains this process through “the Gramscian idea of assimilation: discursive hegemony continues because it is able to assimilate and neutralise the forces of resistance it encounters” (15). New comics *popaganda* then works to subvert subversion. That is, it must minimize its reliance on those features of the medium which cast the relayed account into doubt, which confront the reader with the conventionality of signs: repetition, hypermediacy, tension

between form and content, etc. Subsequently, a major challenge for comics creators—particularly those working to resist dominant anti-Arab and Islamophobic discourses—is finding means to root out and address the ways in which their medium enables myth and coded assumptions about the Arab world to continue to operate and seem invisible. As Adam Banks argues about the use of racist code, “Form is every bit as important a site of protest as content” (104). These comics creators work to continually reexamine and reinvent the form in ways that denaturalize the accounts they craft, highlighting the tenuous relationship between signifier and signified, and how highly contested this relationship is.

Ultimately, there are always contested sites and spaces for resistance present in colonial discourse, a way to read against the preferred reading. In fact, reading against the preferred reading, one could interpret the report as a parody of neocolonial ways of seeing the world, as a satire of good guys versus alien bad guys draped in comic violence and dressed with onomatopoeia (R-RRUMBLE...BLAMM!). An oppositional reading, of course, still doesn't mitigate the fact that there *is* a preferred reading, one endorsed by the state, one that encourages a colonial view of the world, and one that offers racist, nationalist, and xenophobic rhetorical constructions as self-evident in order to justify that imperialistic view. And to return to Murray, while World War II instances of *popaganda* likely *do* seem childish to modern eyes, the function, form, and myths that these earlier instances drew upon are not really so different from the instances of *popaganda*—like the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report*—we see today.

## 4.

**“Equally Terrorized”:****Comics as a Site of Ironic Contestation****in Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers***

As comics gain more intellectual and popular legitimacy, the medium’s ability to act as what McLuhan terms an “anti-environment” is lessened. That is, as the graphic adaptation of the 9/11 Report illustrates, as the tropes associated with comics become more internalized, they become less visible as mediating agents. While we become more familiar with comics, their ability to shock and subvert diminishes. In response to the medium become coopted, comics creators grapple with new ways to use the medium to challenge readers’ perceptions and resist the ways in which comics are being co-opted by dominant discourses. My questions in this chapter are, most basically, “how do they do this?” and “what are the implications of this development for the subversion of anti-Arab and Islamophobic discourses?”

To address these questions, I will regard Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* as something of a response to the concerns I raised in the previous chapter. “*No Towers*” is a landmark comics work that experiments with narrative and the medium and problematizes representation in ways few comics do. It is an album-sized book whose thick cardboard plates (rather than pages) are intended to be read vertically, like the comics section of a broadsheet newspaper. It opens with a two-page prose foreword titled “The Sky is Falling!” and is basically divided into two halves (“two towers”): the first batch of ten plates (in Arabic numbering) are reproductions of the serial originally published in magazines, and the second batch of seven plates (in Roman numerals) are reproduction of U.S. comics produced at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sandwiched between the two halves is another two-page prose section made to look like



an old newspaper, titled “The Comic Supplement.” Finally, both the inner front and back covers are comprised of images of an old newspaper cover featuring stories about then-president McKinley’s bullet wound and the imprisonment of Emma Goldman.

Even the materiality of the book itself highlights the tensions between materiality and ephemerality, between history and representation. Its oversized plates force the reader to reckon with the materiality of the account; the text is not afforded the medial invisibility that paper pages offer to a culture where such a medium is common. As Gillian Whitlock argues, “Arguably the format...recalls those first experiences of reading nursery books somatically. All of this amplifies Hirsch’s point that such books make particular demands on the reader in their engagement with memory practices, and perhaps they have the extraordinary potential to—as Said suggests—free us to think and imagine differently in times of trauma and censorship” (967). “No Towers” then reflects Spiegelman’s attempts to grapple with the horror of living in New York City at the moment of the attacks: his rage, his confusion, and his astonishment at the political aftermath of the tragedy. Perhaps more than anything, the work examines what he describes as “posttraumatic stress about the hijacking and attack on the towers, and the hijacking and attack on the world by America's government afterward” (NPR interview). Despite ostensibly examining the same event in the same medium as the graphic adaptation of the *9/11 Report*, “No Towers” enacts very different ideologies and approaches to the medium of comics.

Many scholars have written extensively about “No Towers.” In particular, these scholars focus on the roles that temporality, sequence, fragmentation, and history play in the work. While I will necessarily reference these features and the related scholarship, my focus will primarily be on how these features figure in to deconstructing the notion of terrorism as a uniquely Arab or Muslim phenomenon. As Spiegelman puts it in “No Towers,” he feels “equally terrorized” by

both Al Qaeda and the Bush administration. In this chapter, I will examine how Spiegelman employs the elasticity of the medium to resist the sort of reductive narrative forwarded by the *9/11 Report*. When I use the term “deconstruct” here, I mean it only in the loosest sense. In other words, in the popular imagination, where East and West are binarized, the values and characteristics Westerners associate with their culture are privileged: deductive reasoning, linearity, logos, “civilization,” etc. As Said has described, the “opposing” values, which are necessarily framed in the negative, are then assigned to the East, the cultural Other; instead of reason there is madness, instead of civilization there is only barbarism, instead of logos there is only blind pathos.

In “*No Towers*,” Spiegelman disrupts this binary and the sort of logics that inform it. In particular, I discuss how Spiegelman pursues the theme of irony both in content and in medium to disrupt this violent hierarchy. While the topic of Arab and Muslim representation is addressed in *In the Shadow of No Towers*, it is not necessarily present as an overt theme. Rather, it is by problematizing the basis and values upon which the grand narratives of the terrorism meme are premised that this comic works to resist anti-Arab racist and Islamophobic discourse. I contend in this chapter that Spiegelman problematizes these discourses primarily through irony. In the next section, I will define the sense(s) in which I use the term irony and how Spiegelman pursues it explicitly in the content of his narratives and essays. In the sections following, I will examine how the theme of irony manifests in the formal aspects of the medium as well as their implications for resisting dominant discourse.

### **The “Death” of Irony**

Shortly after the horrifying events of 9/11, *Time* magazine published an article titled “The Age of Irony Comes to an End.” In it, author Roger Rosenblatt railed against what he perceived

as a lack of seriousness on the part of American intellectuals, and declared that a traumatic event such as 9/11 would force us to reckon with “reality” in a way that we previously would only do through irony. The piece seemed to be aimed at postmodern thinkers, and in a way anticipated the sort of theorizing produced by Baudrillard and Zizek in the wake of the attacks. That is, the article proposes that there is a materiality that is often ignored in these sort of critiques, and that by focusing on the endless play of signifiers, intellectuals lose sight of reality and of pain. The sense of the term irony that Rosenblatt employs is thus one of sarcasm, sardonicism, and critical distance. Rosenblatt writes, “History occurs twice, crack the wise guys quoting Marx: first as tragedy, then as farce. Who would believe such a thing except someone who has never experienced tragedy?” And yet, people who have experienced tragedy—people like Art Spiegelman—have made exactly this claim. Part of the dissonance here can be attributed to fact that there is another sense of the word irony: irony as a way of arranging discourse in a manner that allows for contradictory as well as complementary impulses. While irony often indicates detachment, it can also work as a way to see through trauma while acknowledging one’s subject position. As Kristiaan Versluys writes, this distance enables Spiegelman construct “a counter-narrative, that is, a narrative that serves to reintroduce trauma into a new network of signification without normalizing or naturalizing the event” (980). Spiegelman thus incorporates contradictory and/or complementary impulses in this work to de-naturalize both the trauma of the attacks and the political ends to which the attacks were later put.

So it is in this sense that Spiegelman employs irony. As a seeming retort to Rosenblatt’s condemnation of the notion of history as tragedy and farce, in “*No Towers*,” Spiegelman writes, “And September ’04? Cowboy boots drop on Ground Zero as New York is transformed into a stage set for the Republican Presidential Convention, and *Tragedy is transformed into*

*Travesty...*” (10, italics mine). And despite the cartoons and the irony, the lack of seriousness that Rosenblatt sees in the ironic—“the ironists, seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything. The consequence of thinking that nothing is real — apart from prancing around in an air of vain stupidity — is that one will not know the difference between a joke and a menace”—is noticeably absent in “*No Towers*.” “*No Towers*” is deadly serious, and it seems to argue that it is only through irony that the menace of America’s terroristic foreign (and increasingly, domestic) policy and the grand narrative that informs it is made visible. In contrast to Rosenblatt’s claim, irony is not a matter of thinking that “nothing is real” but instead asks us to examine what we constitute as real and the effects of that constitution.

In “*No Towers*,” Spiegelman examines not only his trauma and horror of the incident itself but also its political hijacking and the increased levels of what Richard Grusin calls “premediation” in the media—that is, the media’s attempt to insulate the viewer against the immediacy of potential tragedies similar to 9/11 by continually communicating a state of emergency and fashioning stories in such a way as to act as precursors for potential instances of medial trauma. For Spiegelman, irony provides a sort of distancing panacea against both the heightened anxiety present in the media after 9/11, but the sort of jingoistic myth-making and grand narratives represented and rearticulated in media artifacts like the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report*.

The sense in which I am employing the term irony is borrowed from Richard Rorty. He discusses irony as a way to destabilize the “final vocabularies” which constitute the stories we use to make sense of ourselves and the world. For Rorty, a final vocabulary consists of a set of discursive beliefs whose contingency—that is, whose situatedness in language, history, culture, etc.—is ignored by those who rearticulate them. In other words, by attempting to appeal to

foundations upon which their beliefs are predicated, agents can engage only in a sort of circular logic wherein the ultimate meaning of its appeals is always deferred, whether that meaning be coded as God, nature, or common sense. This notion, of course, bears some passing resemblance to Foucault's concept of discursive formations in that these vocabularies create the conditions in which things can be thought and structure the field of discursive possibility.

For Rorty, the ironist fulfills three conditions:

(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old (73).

I argue throughout this chapter that Spiegelman fulfills these conditions: he continually questions the adequacy not only of official narratives to encapsulate the traumatic experience of 9/11, but his own as well; despite his efforts to convey his own experiences, he also communicates a radical doubt about these efforts; and finally, he uses both content and medium to play "the new off against the old." I would particularly like to emphasize the role that media and genres can play as "vocabularies." As Kress has argued (and I summarize in the first chapter), media and

their attendant modes act as implicit arguments for certain epistemologies and ways of being in the world. Thus, in addition to recognizing that no singular vocabulary is adequate for apprehending “reality,” she also recognizes that communicating through one medium cannot get one somehow closer to reality than another.

In chapter 1 I laid out the way the American discursive formation conflates the terms Arab and Muslim with the term terrorism. Seen in a lens lent by Rorty, these are then cognates in a final vocabulary that makes it difficult to conceive of terrorism as anything but an ethnic or religious phenomenon—hence, as I explain in that chapter, the obvious discomfort journalists have in labeling any sort of political violence done by non-Arabs or non-Muslims as terrorism. To address these kinds of disparities, Spiegelman draws upon a number of tropes and accounts to problematize the “final vocabularies” that have been developed regarding racial-, national-, and religious-oriented definitions of terror. Such a move allows him to account for what Rorty explains as one of the chief problems in engaging with final vocabularies: “The trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honored vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary” (Rorty 8). Seen in this way, Spiegelman does not simply challenge stable notions of terrorism but rather the entirety of the vocabulary in which the cognate is located.

### ***The Irony of Definitions of Terror***

There are numerous instances of explicit and obvious irony throughout the book. To return to the notion of dropping boots, the meme makes its first appearance on the first plate. In the middle of the bottom of the double-page spread, there is a stand-alone circular panel depicting a cartoon crowd running from a photograph of a Dr. Martens-style shoe. The slogan “Waiting for THAT OTHER SHOE to drop!” sits at the top of the panel, and at the bottom left of

the panel, a caption box contains faux-advertising text for “Jihad brand footwear” (1). In a sense, this appearance of the first shoe to drop (the 9/11 attack) acts as a bookend when juxtaposed with the second appearance of the meme on the last of the ten Spiegelman plates.

This panel appears in a grid that comprises the second WTC tower. In it, a crowd of comics characters (including Spiegelman as his mouse-headed *Maus* character) flees a rain of cowboy boots adorned with dollar signs and bald eagles. In a later interview, Spiegelman says of the depiction:

My panic about other shoes dropping is more focused on whether the Bush/Cheney gang gets to live out another term or not, not whether Al Qaida will hit us or not...They're equal threats in some ways; it's not to downplay the latter. But the Al Qaida and fundamentalist Muslim threat seems to work on a very long time clock. They don't seem to be deeply moved by American events. So at the moment, I'm more focused on the domestic threat (Fleischer).

What Spiegelman does here is to equivocate the sort of violence and aggression of the Bush administration with Al Qaida. Rather than defining terrorism solely as an Arab or Muslim phenomenon (as do many whom I describe in the first chapter), Spiegelman reworks the definition in terms of what terrorism does—as in, producing terror—rather than by who does it.

Another example of this equivocation can be seen on the second plate. In another stand-alone panel Spiegelman depicts himself (yet again as his *Maus* character) asleep at his desk with caricatures of Bush (as a monkey in a suit) on his right bearing a revolver and flag while facing down a caricature of Osama bin Laden (who vaguely resembles early comics character Krazy Kat) bearing a bloody scimitar. The caption box at the bottom begins with “Equally terrorized by

Al-Qaeda and by his own government...” (2). While I will speak more specifically to the function of cartooning and intertextuality more fully in a later section, it is important to note here the function that cartooning serves in this panel. While it would be easy to interpret the cartoon depiction of the scimitar in a negative, anti-Arab light given the uses to which it is put in the graphic adaptation of the *9/11 Report*, when seen alongside the caricatures of Bush and of Spiegelman, it instead produces an ironic sense of the way we binarize “sides” and the arbitrariness of these depictions.

Spiegelman continues deconstructing this binary throughout “*No Towers*.” In one of the more obvious and chilling examples, on the top of the fourth panel, Spiegelman portrays caricatures of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney riding a large eagle wearing an Uncle Sam-style top hat. In an analogy with one of the highjacked planes on 9/11, Cheney is shown slicing the throat of the eagle with a box cutter while Bush cheers on: “Let’s Roll!” The eagle asks, “Why do they hate us? **Why??**” (4, bolding his). As well as equating the Bush administration with terrorists, this question carries a double meaning. First, it ironically repeats and inverts the conservative meme “They—the Arab terrorists—hate us because of our freedoms,” and second, it earnestly asks the question of the U.S. governments infringement of rights post-9/11.

### ***Irony, Premeditation, and “The New Normal”***

The irony of Spiegelman’s account is not limited to notions of terrorism. Spiegelman addresses other forms of irony explicitly as well, particularly regarding what he refers to as “the New Normal.” For instance, Spiegelman answers Rosenblatt’s charge that irony is dead both in the collection of headlines assembled in the inside of the back cover and in the comic itself. In the back cover, the headline for Rosenblatt’s article is placed among several other headlines from the run-up to 9/11, the aftermath of 9/11, and the run-up to the Iraq War. With the benefit of



hindsight and the distance brought about by time, these headlines begin to look ironic. For example, the headline, “IN NY, TAKING A BREATH OF FEAR: ILLNESSES BRING NEW DOUBTS ABOUT TOXIC EXPOSURE NEAR GROUND ZERO” (Washington Post 1/9/02) is paired with “NEW YORK CITY SMOKING BAN SMELLS SWEET TO NEW JERSEY BAR OWNERS” (Knight-Ridder/Tribune 2/2/03). In the text itself, Spiegelman discusses how the toxic fumes spewing from Ground Zero should have effected an evacuation of Manhattan. This didn’t happen, he supposes, due to real-estate interests and economic concerns in the aftermath of the attack (Fliescher). Instead, in a bout of unintentional irony, the mayor banned smoking in bars. Amidst headlines such as these, Rosenblatt’s own proclamation that “The Age of Irony Comes to an End” seems especially ironic. It is this kind of unintentional irony that Spiegelman characterizes as “the New Normal.”

The first instance in which the concept of “The New Normal” appears is on the top of the first plate in a self-contained row of three panels. The first panel depicts a family of three (presumably a father, mother, and daughter) seated half-asleep on a couch in front of a television, while in the background a calendar shows that it is September 10<sup>th</sup>. The calendar shows that it is now September 11<sup>th</sup> in the second panel, and the family sits before the television in a state of awakened, visible alarm; their hair is frazzled, their eyes are bloodshot, motion lines erupt from them, and their postures indicate terror. In the third and final panel, the calendar has been replaced with a U.S. flag, and their postures have returned to that of the first panel—half-asleep. This time, however, their hair retains the frazzled quality that it had in the second panel. Grusin interprets this sequence as indicative of Spiegelman’s commentary on premediation: “In relation to our TV viewing practices, this new normal looks very much like the old normal, except that the experience of watching 9/11 on TV has had an affective, bodily impact on its

viewers, making their senses appear to be shocked even while they return to sleep” (29). The irony of this phenomena—sleeping while at the same time affectively exhausted—is that as Spiegelman has argued throughout, it has enabled “brigands suffering from war fever [to] hijack those tragic events” (4).

Of course, while it has been amplified since 9/11 and taken on new permutations in the rise of Web 2.0 technologies, premediation is not necessarily a new phenomenon. Spiegelman demonstrates the sorts of premeditation occurring prior to 9/11 in his ironic depiction of the billboard to the Arnold Schwarzenegger movie *Collateral Damage*. Originally supposed to be released on October 5<sup>th</sup> 2001, because of its depiction of terrorism, plane hijacking, and bombing, its release was delayed for four months. A digitally inserted picture of the billboard can be found on the second plate of “No Towers,” at the end of the penultimate row of panels. Recounting his experiences of the morning of 9/11, Spiegelman writes that he “could only see smoke billowing behind a giant billboard...It was for some dopey new Schwarzenegger movie about terrorism. Oddly, in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, some pundits insisted that Irony was Dead” (2). His inclusion of the image and the reference to the death of irony serves several functions. First, it indicates that premediation preceeded 9/11. In other words, if we take Grusin’s notion of premediation as working “to prevent citizens of the global mediasphere from experiencing...the kind of systematic or traumatic shock produced by the events of 9/11 by perpetuating an almost constant, low level of fear or anxiety about another terrorist attack,” we see that the cultural articulation of terror as instigated by a cultural Other (and the attendant xenophobia and anxiety) has long preceded the attacks (2). Second, it indicates a sort of “prefigurative imaginative experience” (to borrow a term from David Simpson)—in other words, our fictions prepare us for potential encounters with “the real” (127). In the case of movies like

*Collateral Damage*, we have ready-made narratives and tropes to draw upon in making-meaning out of such an incomprehensible disaster: good guys versus bad guys (who are usually Others) who exist simply to vex the good guys—any given reason for their behavior is simply a narrative pretext for the act of simply being villains. Third and finally, amplified trauma acts to normalize the sorts of discourses that relate to them. In other words, when catastrophes occur on a scale such as 9/11, the sort of cultural narratives such as those enacted in *Collateral Damage* seem natural—the violence, essentializing and stereotyping that occur in them have the “volume” reduced, so to speak. When contrasted with the horror of an actual attack like 9/11, their violence doesn’t seem so egregious. These functions contribute to the articulation of a culture in which what was previously considered transgressive becomes “The New Normal.” Spiegelman threads the theme of “The New Normal” throughout the “*No Towers*,” whether through referencing the new Orwellian blockades in downtown New York or the stories of a woman who was relieved to be mugged because “things are finally getting back to normal!” (9).

These are just a few examples of an ironic approach to the tropes surrounding 9/11, and Spiegelman’s use of irony extends beyond narrative content. Spiegelman uses the medium in novel ways to explore a number of themes through an ironic lens. Because he does not seem to think that his “vocabulary is closer to reality than others” (to use a phrase from Rorty), he instead uses the medium to place often contradictory and competing impulses alongside each other (73). In his attempts to grapple with the attacks and the subsequent “hijacking of the country,” he uses an ironic approach to media in several ways: in problematizing “common sense” and final vocabularies by juxtaposing them in several modalities; in exploring competing notions of materiality and ephemerality; in equivocating fact with fiction, past with present, and juxtaposing several texts and vocabularies; and in attempting to negotiate sequence and narrative through

fragmentation. I will explore each of these notions in turn, and conclude by exploring the ironic and contradictory impulses of *No Towers* as it regards closure.

### **Hypermediacy, Multi-Modality, and Medium as Architecture**

Spiegelman crafts his accounts and thoughts not solely through comics but also by incorporating and referencing other texts, reproductions of older media, digitally incorporated media derived from photographs, movie posters, trading cards, propaganda posters, faux advertisements, old newspapers, and more. As I have argued throughout the book, juxtaposing the logics of meaning-making associated with these modes automatically entails a heightened awareness of the work of mediation and problematizes the notion of correspondence any one of these media has with reality; the adaptation of narrative content from one medium to another and the tracing of narrative content between media necessarily implies resignification. Because different signifiers will be used, different interpretations are inevitable and confront the reader with the dilemma of making meaning in often incompatible ways. Spiegelman further problematizes and parodies the idea of a fixed meaning through metacommentary and irony. For example, as Grusin argues, “Spiegelman’s book clearly exemplifies the double logic of remediation, insisting simultaneously on the unmediated authenticity of his immediate experience and on the inseparability of his experience from the materiality of its hypermediation” (26). In the Foreword, Spiegelman writes that he “wanted to sort out the fragments of what [he’d] experienced from the media images that threatened to engulf what [he] actually saw, and the collage-like nature of a newspaper page encouraged my impulse to juxtapose my fragmentary thoughts in different styles” (ii). So, on the one hand, Spiegelman offers an argument that his account (or his apprehension of it) is immediate, while ironically

noting that other attempts to represent the event are threatening to overtake his. Again, as an ironist, Spiegelman acknowledges the ambivalence of his own vocabulary, his own medium.

Hirsch notes the multi-modal character of Spiegelman's endeavor and describes its rhetorical quality as

Enabling reality and fantasy, historical and fictional figures, human and cartoon characters to coexist and morph into each other, it demands an extraordinarily complex response beyond just combining reading and looking. Comics highlight both the individual frames and the space between them, calling attention to the compulsion to transcend the frame in the act of seeing. They thus startlingly reveal the limited obstructed vision that characterizes a historical moment ruled by trauma and censorship" (1213).

By highlighting the "compulsion to transcend the frame in the act of seeing," Spiegelman problematizes his own account. For example, the first page displays the glowing girders of the towers as they collapse. Despite having seen this firsthand, Spiegelman repeatedly renders them digitally rather than through the comics medium with which he is most comfortable and best known. These images are repeated on every panel. He writes of his decision to represent them in such a manner that "I repeatedly tried to paint this with humiliating results but eventually came close to capturing the vision of disintegration digitally on my computer" (ii). His decision to represent something that he actually saw as something other than, say, a photograph may seem unusual, but the irony here is that while arguing for the unmediated and affective experience he had in seeing the north tower collapse, he can speak of that experience only in reference to forms of mediation, implicitly arguing that our sight is always-already mediated and unreliable.

Moreover, mediation (even when it's "close") never gets us at the phenomenon or the experience itself.

Slavoj Žižek offers a way of looking at the rhetorical work of the recurring tower theme (in its digital rendering) surrounded by other media: the ideological 'quilt'—that is, "the multitude of 'floating signifiers', of proto-ideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain 'nodal point' (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) which 'quilts' them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning" (87). In an unironic reading, one would see this as an attempt to finalize the vocabulary, to affix to the images of the burning towers Spiegelman's narrative as stable—put another way, the towers would act as a sort of buttonhole that, like concepts such as "freedom" or "God," acts as a sort of ideological anchor for the signifiers surrounding them on the page. Instead, Spiegelman reverses this expectation: the obvious antifilmic depictions (not photographs but a digitally-manipulated drawings) of the towers are made even more unstable by the profusion of media and modes of meaning-making that surrounds them. In other words, it is not the Towers that Spiegelman uses as a nodal point to fix meaning but rather the notion of *their mediation itself*. As the Towers become more fixed as a nodal point in the popular imagination which pins down and intertwines signifiers involving terrorism, nationalism, and the rise of the security state, Spiegelman offers them not as invisible signifiers but as highly rendered ones. He also extends this approach to other media as well.

For example, on that same plate (1), the three-panel sequence in the middle acts as a contemplation on the mediation that occurs in TV. The first panel depicts a pixelated television image of the towers during the first attack. The second is a drawing of Dan Rather's face with a caption window over his shoulder declaring "NEWS ATTACK." The final panel is a drawing of Spiegelman sitting on the floor looking up at a looming television that depicts an American flag.

Running across the three panels is a dash indicating the flight of a cartoon airplane that has crashed into the side of the television. Cartoon stars erupt from the explosion, completing the stars of the flag shown on the television. The text that accompanies these panels are as follows:

[Panel 1]: Those crumbling towers burned their way into every brain, but I live on the outskirts of Ground Zero and first saw it all live—unmediated.

[Panel 2]: Maybe it's just a question of scale. Even on a large TV, the towers aren't much bigger than, say, Dan Rather's head...

[Panel 3]: Logos, on the other hand, look **enormous** on television; it's a medium almost as well suited as comics for dealing in abstractions.

Perhaps the most significant feature in this sequence is the use of self-reflexivity and metacommentary in the use of the plane. By having it—through the dash—transgress the diegetic space of the panels and then interact with the diegesis in the last panel, the plane acts as a device that 1) highlights and exaggerates the mediation occurring in the sequence and 2) frames the attack on the tower as a disruption of our usual patterns of mediation. Having the plane crash into the television once again recalls Zizek's notion of the ideological quilt, where TV acts as a nodal point that affixes the terms at the same time as it is disrupted by something outside of the established narrative/diegesis. Moreover, by portraying the plane attack that is something at once mediated and that transgresses mediation, the sequence implicitly argues for Rorty's critique that these codes, these vocabularies, do not "get" us at the world. Indeed, we cannot separate our sense of the world from them. Both Spiegelman and Rorty problematize "the assumption that 'our 'language'—the language we speak now, the vocabulary at the disposal of educated inhabitants of the twentieth century—is somehow a unity, a third thing which stands in some determinate relation with two other unities—the self and reality" (13). Put bluntly, no medium

gets us at some reality distinct from our ability to make meaning of it; there is no truth without discourse in which to express it. By highlighting the plane's ability to at once act as an extra-diegetic signifier at the same time as it participates in the diegesis, Spiegelman draws attention to this paradox in representation.

Where in this sequence he equates the towers with TV, in the vertical rows of panels that flank the left and right of the double page spread, he equates the towers with comics. The disintegrating towers are represented doubly in the broken panels and in the broken narrative in the captions (I will more fully explain the rhetorical work of this fragmentation momentarily; suffice it to say here that Spiegelman is linking mediation to building, and comics to architecture). This link between comics and architecture is reinforced in the subsequent plates; the panels mimic and map out the crumbling towers, culminating in the final plate where the two strips are contained within frames provided by the towers. The strips then look like cut-away cross sections of the building.

The link between comics and architecture is one Spiegelman has explored in prior work. For example, in the Introduction to his 1972 collection of work *Breakdowns*, Spiegelman writes

My dictionary defines COMIC STRIP as “a narrative series of cartoons.”

A NARRATIVE is defined as “a story.” Most definitions of STORY leave me cold.

Except the one that says: “A complete horizontal division of a building...[From medieval Latin HISTORIA...a row of windows with pictures on them].”

Even the title of the work, *Breakdowns* is a double entendre indicating Spiegelman's mental state and the process of diagramming out panels on a comics double-page spread. For Spiegelman,



both comics and buildings tell stories. Both are structures whose contents can shift, are fluid, and both direct that content and intervene in its arrangement and constitution. As Hilary Chute argues, “The comics page, and Spiegelman’s in particular always presents a kind of serialized architecture, either gridded conventionally—offering regular intervals, regular panels, gesturing towards a consistent ‘rhythm of acquisition’ in reading—or deviating meaningfully from the grid” (“Temporality and Seriality” 235). In other words, comics, like architecture, make obvious the notion of medium-as-environment.

The deconstructive move makes here is to destabilize the binary between the WTC and our mediation of them. The attacks not only destroyed the towers but our ability to use them as stable nodal points. The comics plate that conveys all of this is fairly indicative of the structure and multi-modality of the work as a whole. And in equating the comics page with architecture and the towers, Spiegelman highlights another ironic tension always present in issues of representation: the contradictory impulses toward materiality and ephemerality.

In the “Comic Supplement” section of “No Towers,” Spiegelman writes, “Comics pages are architectural structures—the narrative rows of panels are like stories of a building—and while an eccentric artist like Verbeck could turn that structure on its head, Winsor McCay, the towering genius of the first decade of comics, drew monumental structures designed to last” (Comic Supplement). In describing the included page of “Little Nemo,” he writes that “an outsized Nemo and his companion, a Jungle Imp, are lost in the canyons of Lower Manhattan, and make their way to the South Street piers along the East River. A giant-sized Flip, their cigar-chomping associate, scrambles to catch up with them, knocking over the tall buildings near where the twin towers would fall 94 years later” (Comic Supplement). Spiegelman thus articulates an ironic notion of mediacy disavowing naïve notions of (certain) vocabularies

enjoying correspondence with reality. Even buildings, governments, and materiality itself are mediated.

### **Intertextuality**

In the tenth plate, Spiegelman writes, “Right after 9/11/01, while waiting for some other terrorist shoe to drop, many found comfort in poetry. Others searched for solace in old newspaper comics.” One of the most crucial ironies Spiegelman navigates is the contrasting vocabularies of different texts. While I have communicated some of this in the previous sections, it is an important enough presence in the work to warrant a fuller discussion. As Rorty explains, ironists realize

that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in the position which Sartre called “meta-stable”: never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves (73-74).

As an exploration of trauma, “No Towers” explicitly addresses the fragility of self in its narrative content and juxtaposes the vocabularies associated with different texts.

### ***Texts in Time***

“No Towers” obviously references other texts such as the older comics that comprise the second half of the book and other media that I have described above (playing cards, posters, digital inclusions, etc.), but there are other, more subtle references as well. For example, the explicit gag about irony in reference to the *Collateral Damage* billboard makes more sense read

against the inclusion of the headline (“The Age of Irony Comes to an End”) inside the back cover. This headline is obviously intended to be juxtaposed against the other headlines that surround it, taken from newspapers, magazines, and tabloids. In addition to referencing often contradictory stories, given their place not as paradigmatic and timeless objects, but rather situated pieces of discourse that now look quaint, misleading, ridiculous, or even somewhat nefarious in retrospect, these headlines then implicitly argue for not only the inadequacy of a vocabularies reference to “the world,” but also to time itself.

As Spiegelman has indicated in various interviews, the book is divided into two towers: the first set of plates and the second set of plates: “To me, that’s what allows there to be a kind of happy ending, the fact that there’s a dialogue between past and present” (Fliescher). Spiegelman’s claim here echoes a theme that is repeated throughout the book, one that resembles Walter Benjamin’s notion of dialectical history. Benjamin argues that the present is in continual conversation with both the past and future, that the past is not some dead artifact that is later recounted (if only with the correct vocabulary), and that the future is not some possibility that will be resolved as definite as it arrives to the present. In other words, the past is not some material relic that, through representation as a medium, presents itself on a one-to-one basis. Instead, our notions of it change as our current conditions change. Time is thus not a matter of telos, of destiny revealing itself, but instead of interpretation and contingency. Kuhlman notes this tension of time in representation in Spiegelman’s own situatedness. She writes, “As in *Maus*, Spiegelman meticulously records the dates of composition, so that the attentive reader can appreciate the irony of his mea culpa: because he did not in fact begin to draw until November 19 and completed the page on February 15, 2002, the page was finished in just over five months

after September 11<sup>th</sup>” (852). Thus, even while arguing for the immediacy of his own experience, Spiegelman demonstrates an ironic ambivalence about the role of time in interpretation.

***Maus, Historical Comics Characters, and Trauma***

This technique of recording the dates of composition is not the only reference in the work to *Maus*. Perhaps one of the more overt themes is how Spiegelman periodically depicts his family as mice in a fashion similar to that he used in *Maus* by drawing them with cartoon mouse heads. While this is perhaps the most obvious reference to the holocaust work, there are others as well. For example, Spiegelman alludes to the W.H. Auden poem—“September 1, 1939”—several times, both in the “Comic Supplement” section and in the plates of the first half of the book. As McConnan observes, the Auden quote—‘The unmentionable odour of death offends the September night’—echoes his father’s description of the smoke in Auschwitz as ‘indescribable’, something Spiegelman finally understood after 9/11” (McConnan). In other words, trauma, and its associated mediation are ‘indescribable,’ but that does not preclude our (and certainly not Spiegelman’s) attempts at mediating them anyway. By holding these two texts and the unstable vocabularies attached them side by side, Spiegelman indicates how we only process trauma through representation and through other representations of previous trauma—trauma is thus always-already premediated.

Similarly, by referencing *Maus*, Spiegelman performs his Jewish identity at the same time as he argues for a contingent self. For example, in the left-most vertical sequence of panels on plate 6 he depicts himself falling out of the bones of the tower and landing on the street as the homeless comic character Happy Houligan. The final caption box here is “But in the economic dislocation that has followed since that day, he has witnessed lots of people landing in the streets of Manhattan” (6). This provides the context for the narrative conveyed in the rest of the panels,

wherein he describes his encounters with a homeless woman who used to shout anti-Semitic invectives at him in Russian. After the attacks, he ponders that “her inner demons had broken loose and taken over our shared reality...” (6). Encountering her again, she begins hurling her hate in English, blaming the Jews for the attacks. He turns on her and yells that people will think she’s crazy. The sequence ends with a panel that acts as an homage to Little Nemo.

In the Little Nemo series of comics (one of which is included as Plate VI), most of the cartoon strip details Nemo’s adventures in Slumberland. Typically, in the last panel of these strips, Nemo awakes in his bed and has a conversation with his mother. In Spiegelman’s homage, the Nemo character is a mouse in the vein of *Maus*, and the mother is depicted wearing a gas-mask. The helpless mouse says of his dream, “Then John Ashcroft pulled off his burka and shoved me out of the window and...” (6). Versluys notes that the gas mask acts as a token of “general disarray and one more reminder of the Holocaust” (986). Thus, the book’s political dimensions are framed by juxtaposing his parents’ memories of Auschwitz, Spiegelman’s own experience, and the texts that surround them.

By co-mingling all of these things (fictional characters with real, past events with current events, other media with comics, comics with other texts), Spiegelman seems to be arguing for not simply for the presence of media as something between an agent and reality, but rather for mediation’s constitutive effects, problematizing the correspondence theory between reality and representation that underwrites Rosenblatt’s proclamation of the death of irony. This argument for the constitutive quality of meditation continues in sequences such as “Weapons of Mass Displacement” on plate 9, where Spiegelman directly addresses the reader. In the first panel, he is shown smoking on an easy chair with a cat in his lap. In the next panel, his head and the nearby lampshade change places, and in the third panel he and the cat change places. In the

fourth panel, his head and his hand change places, the fifth his head and his foot, and finally in the last panel he is shown with his *Maus* head hurling the cat away. In addition to mirroring the theme of the strip (wherein America attempts to deal with its problems symbolically by dealing with something else: attacking Iraq instead of dealing with Al Qaida, banning smoking instead of dealing with the toxic fumes of Ground Zero), also indicates a skepticism regarding correspondence. As with his use of historical comic characters as stand-ins for himself and other characters, “one can say that the cartoon characters account for both distance and resistance...they remain outside of the mimesis or, more exactly, the mimetic is raised to the level of the figural in a conspicuous, self-reflexive way, mixed with a wryness that befits the occasion and its many paradoxes” (Versluys 991). In other words, by using these characters in such a way as to frustrate any notion of mimesis in representation—that is, the imitation of the real world in art—Spiegelman destabilizes any sort of “final vocabulary” that is associated with making sense of this event.

### **Sequence and Fragmentation**

Perhaps the most prevalent vocabulary Spiegelman works to destabilize in “*No Towers*” is that involving sequence. As I argued in the previous chapter, attempts at creating a definitive narrative that encapsulates the situated and historically contingent circumstances of such an impossible catastrophe can at best become reductive, and at worst be used as a weapon in a war of propaganda. Narratives often require villains and closure, and the graphic adaptation of the 9/11 Report, by bending the event into the tropes of a sequential, causal narrative, acts as such.

Indeed, according to many definitions of comics, they can be considered only in terms of their sequence. Perhaps the most referenced definition in comics scholarship is Scott McCloud’s: “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). As an ironist, however, Spiegelman

works to frustrate this notion by placing the vocabulary of sequence in contrast to another way of being in comics: fragmentation and display. He writes in the introduction, “I wanted to sort out the fragments of what I’d experienced from the media images that threatened to engulf what I actually saw, and the collagelike nature of a newspaper page encouraged my impulse to juxtapose my fragmentary thoughts in different styles” (i-ii). While for Grusin this kind of thinking demonstrates the double logic of remediation, I see here an argument for fragmentation and against linearity. That is, the vocabulary used to narrate 9/11 has become, as the graphic adaptation of the *9/11 Report* illustrates, increasingly linear, narrowed, and (as I have worked to argue in the first chapter) overly focused on the national and religious identity of its perpetrators. Returning, however, to Benjamin’s notion of history, our narratives, our histories, cannot be thought of as teleological but instead should be understood as alive in the present moment as fragmentary and pieced together post hoc.

Rorty points out that we think of causes as discovered rather than as invented (28). Linear texts, as Gunther Kress points out, reinforce this sort of epistemology. That is, “Time and sequence in time provide the organizing principle for making meaning. Sequence is used to make meaning; being first has the potential to mean something other than being second or being last” (12). Consequently, the arrangement of signifiers, whether verbal or pictorial, matters in sequence because this arrangement has a direct impact (based on shared cultural practices of meaning-making) on how meaning will be made. Further, this form of meaning making implicitly argues for a world of necessarily causal relations; the subject of one clause in a sentence typically causes or is caused by the other. The same could be said of what Groensteen refers to as the “regular layout” of comics’ rhythm. He states that “when the more or less regular layout observes a canonical division into separate strips, the reading of a comic obeys a natural

rhythm, a breathing aroused by its discrete apparatus of enunciation, which discontinuous, is laid out in strips and tabular” (61). I interpret that “rhythm” as the characteristic of a medium that has a commonly practiced mode of cultural consumption—that is, the medium’s function as a structuring agent in rearticulation and fomentation of experience becomes elided and naturalized as that meaning-making practice becomes more internalized.

Still, fragmentation, even in the form of comics’ more regular layouts, presents a continual tension in reading: are the fragmented panels divided by time? Space? Topic? Theme? McCloud finds what he labels “closure” to be the device through which the mind sutures these fractures “to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67). Frahm, however, complicates McCloud’s understanding of how comics are read. He particularly critiques the binary McCloud creates between “fracture and unity, comics and reality,” finding “[t]he persisting metaphysical notion that underlies this understanding of how comics are read...problematic” (177). Frahm focuses specifically on the aesthetic reasons for finding the binary problematic, explicitly postponing epistemological reasons. The lens lent by Rorty for my examination, however, supplies a means of examining some of the epistemological problems of binarizing reality and representation, fragmentation and unity.

As Frahm points out, such a claim is at its basis metaphysical. That is, it seeks to address the nature of being and the world, and in this particular usage there is a metaphysical assumption that being and the world are separate. The difficulty with this position, as Rorty describes, is that “Metaphysicians think that human beings by nature desire to know. They think this because the vocabulary they have inherited, their common sense, provides them with a picture of knowledge as a relation between human beings and ‘reality,’ and the idea that we have a need and a duty to enter into this relation” (75). In the case of McCloud’s approach to closure, there is an



assumption that humans want or need to suture this division, as if this division were already a given. The ironist, on the other hand, does “not take the point of discursive thought to be *knowing*, in any sense that can be explicated by notions like ‘reality,’ ‘real essence,’ ‘objective point of view,’ and ‘the correspondence of language of reality’” (75). The ironist does not seek to put any given matter to rest through language, but instead plays language games precisely to resist this closure. In comics this can, and regularly does, come into play through the tensions between a sequential approach such as McCloud advocates, and a more fragmented approach such as described by Groensteen, who argues that “...far from presenting itself as a sequence of panels, comics require a reading that is capable of searching for aspects or fragments that can be placed in a network, beyond linear relations, with potentially corresponding aspects or fragments of other panels” (qtd. in Groensteen 173, Kuhlman 855).

### ***A Close Reading of Sequence and Fragmentation***

To examine how Spiegelman plays the logics of sequence and fragmentation against and along with each other, I turn now to the first page from “*No Towers*.” As with the rest of the comics plates in the book, the double page spread is meant to be read by turning the book sideways, lengthwise. The spread is divided into roughly six parts: the top horizontal strip of three panels, the horizontal strip underneath it consisting of twelve panels, the horizontal three panel strip under that, the large circular panel in the bottom middle, and two vertical strips on the left and right sides of the spread acting as the World Trade Center Towers. There is no proscribed entry point. While there is clearly a title, there is a strip above it, frustrating the impulse to begin below the title. None of the individual strips relies upon the others for it to make sense on its own, but each strip's juxtaposition with the others deepens and reinforces the themes relayed in each. Further, due to the episodic and essayist nature of the narrative, it is

unnecessary to read the plates in the order in which they occur in the book. The approach to design here is similar to how Kress describes the logic of a webpage: there is an open order, with multiple entry points; the reader selects a point of departure from the page, and the reading path is designed by the reader; finally, the images—rather than the text—dominate the organization of the page and the presentation of material (11). Spiegelman's approach to sequence reflects the narrative content, which conveys disarray and skepticism about the official discourse and media surrounding the event.

Despite this fractured approach to narrative and the emphasis on disjointed time, sequence does occur on the page; each individual strip works to convey a narrative in a more or less sequential fashion, but even these have a more complicated and less linear approach than text. For example, the second horizontal strip titled “Etymological Vaudeville,” follows a fairly standard comics sequence. Even in this relatively “regular” strip we see an approach to sequence that is not solely cumulative and causal (as with text), but also associative and recursive. For instance, we do not know where the man is walking to in the third panel until the fourth panel, wherein we see the lighted window and its accompanying “click” text signifying his arrival into that room. A better example might be the second panel on the second row depicting him doing something to his shoe. It is only in the next panel that we realize, *a posteriori*, that he was removing his shoe in the preceding panel. The reader can only, as Groensteen puts it, “opt for this translation because it is verified retroactively by the panel that follows it” (108).

Groensteen labels this process of translating panels into a diegetic sequence “plurivectoral narration” (108). That is, the reading of these panels requires the retroactive and dialogic participation of the reader who makes meaning based on the “inferences that appear to be the most probable.” Though the same might be said to a lesser extent of word-based sequence,

comics rely on this even more because of its display-oriented logic and simultaneity.

Subsequently, because of this emphasis on the role of the audience (both in terms of the double page spread layout and in the individual strips), agency in meaning-making has much different implications than it does in speech-based modes. As Kress demonstrates (and I described in the first chapter), the speaker/writer possesses most of the power in the exchange between speaker and audience. In this use of comics, however, as in most other image-based media, there is a much more reciprocal form of agency. Though the traditional “Z” pattern that this particular strip follows encourages the reader to interpret each panel in a proscribed path, it doesn't “unfold” like speech-based modes and doesn't require the reader to confine his or her reading from panel 1 to panel 12. Moreover, the reader will likely revisit panels to make sense of the visual narration as it progresses. Finally, the reader has to supply the “action” that occurs between what is depicted in the panels by making inferences about the relationship between what is depicted in different panels and create a tentative synthesis of those images, which is in turn subject to revision based on interpretation of subsequently encountered panels.

Ultimately, this disjointed and open-ended approach to page design furthers the ideological work inherent in the narrative: to dispel any notion of easy explanations. While as Western readers we have an intuition to begin the plate on its top left portion, there is little guidance on how to proceed, nor is there really any need for such guidance—the narrative is deliberately fractured. For example, the downward-progressing panels on the bottom-left and the right of the plate, would appear at a glance to be narratively linked. While the image of the glowing frame links them, the verbal cues do not. The last text box on the left series ends with an ellipsis that is not resumed in the right series and vice versa. Instead, the frames of the buildings act as a frame for the central narratives which blend Spiegelman's experiences with those of

anecdotes, musings, and mainstream narratives. None of the individual panels is necessarily intrinsically narrative; like all comics their narrative quality comes primarily from their juxtaposition. On this page, then, Spiegelman thwarts a simplistic sequential reading by disrupting what we might regard as the natural rhythm of comics' layout. Groensteen describes the power of such a disruption on the "breathing" of comics—that is, when the rhythm of panels and gutters achieves a sort of regularity akin to breathing:

When the layout is chaotic, this breathing becomes affected, anarchic, or even disappears within a phenomenon that accompanies the reading... The transformation of the layout into an ostentatious performance (instead of as an apparently neutral apparatus, with a tendency toward transparency) diverts the formal parameters to the profit of a part of the attention that, otherwise, would be entirely devoted to the narrative contents; and at the same time it is rid of the reader's captivity to the rhythm, on which the comics most often recognized as classics naively rest. (61)

It is not hard to read the "captivity to the rhythm" as the power of the illusion of transparency striven for in the graphic adaptation of the *9/11 Report*. Spiegelman thus disrupts this captivity and its accompanying naivety, instead employing the affordances of the medium to challenge causation and sequence.

### **Conclusion: Resisting Closure**

To close, I return to the subject of irony and its post-9/11 role. Whereas Rosenblatt contends that irony diminishes the reality of suffering, of cruelty, of ethics, and of actionable politics, I would argue that Spiegelman's ironic resistance to closure does not preclude these

things; rather it indicates a reflexivity that asks us to evaluate the grounds upon which that action and those politics are premised. Rosenblatt wrote that ironists, “seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything. The consequence of thinking that nothing is real — apart from prancing around in an air of vain stupidity — is that one will not know the difference between a joke and a menace” (“Age of Irony”). Yet Spiegelman clearly knows the difference between a joke and menace, even if that menace does not. By placing the final vocabularies of multiple narratives of 9/11 and the logics of the media surrounding the event—sequence against fragmentation, the dual logics (immediacy and hypermediacy) of Bolter and Grusin’s notion of remediation, the logics of display and of verbal linearity, and the cultural contexts and logics that accompany differing texts from differing eras—in ironic juxtaposition, Spiegelman thus suspends the sense of certainty that accompanies the sort of discourse that has enabled yet more cruelty. To date, the human cost of the Iraq War—for which 9/11 has served as a pretext and which stemmed from the dominant discourse asserting that all Arabs and Muslims are the Enemy, the Other, “They,”—has been staggering: depending upon the source, civilian casualties in Iraq numbers anywhere between 87,000 to over 150,000 (Gamel, Leigh, Carlstrom).

Moreover, Rosenblatt’s argument that the ironist is somehow alienated from the notion of human suffering is somewhat baffling if we define “irony” in Rorty’s terms. Because the work of the ironist is to disrupt the sort of final vocabularies that lead to an idea of truth as “out there,” they lay bare the fact that philosophical arguments are re-descriptions rather than discoveries. Because there is no philosophical foundation to our quandaries, the *only* recourse then is to avoid cruelty and move beyond the metaphysical categories that have long acted as means of division; as Rorty explains, “...my position is not incompatible with urging that we try to extend our sense of ‘we’ to people whom we have previously thought of as ‘they’” (192). In the dominant

discourse of the sort conveyed in the graphic adaptation of the 9/11 Report, it is clear in our current context that “they” are Arabs and Muslims, and that there is something essential to them that links them to current definitions of terrorism.

As the dominant U.S. discourse more stridently links cognates such as Arab to Muslim and Terrorism, it coalesces these terms into something resembling a final vocabulary, thus making it more difficult to regard these terms as contingent, as re-descriptions, as rhetorical constructions rather than as simply things in the world. A resistance to closure then *is* a political act because it argues for a sense of the world and a way to engage the world through that sense. Finally, it creates a space for the negotiation of reality that takes into account suffering, whether it be “our” suffering or “theirs.”

## 5.

**“It’s the Science of Reading Signs”:****Hybridity, Remediation, and *The Photographer***

*Think of how contemporary novelists like Paul Auster, Jorge Luis Borges and John Fowles deliberately encourage such a meta-conversation with regards to fiction: they call attention to the formal properties of the novel, pass comment on the mechanics of storytelling, make judgements about contemporary political issues and develop innovations in both form and content. The question, of course, is why hasn't the equivalent transformation happened in travel writing? (267)*

--Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*

In the first chapter of this book, I made a claim about the construction of Arabs and Muslims as cultural Others and how comics may provide a rhetorical site for subverting this construction. In the second chapter, I examined Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* to discuss how these theories work in a specific context. The third chapter acted as something of a naysayer to the second, focusing on a modern instance in which the medium was complicit in Othering, and the fourth chapter worked as a retort to that chapter. I argued that by challenging both the capacities of the medium and the meaning-making assumptions that accompany it (as well as the narratives and cultural logics that accompany them), Spiegelman worked to render the rhetorical work of the medium more visible. In this chapter, then, I wish to extend this reading further. I ask, what happens when the medium itself is remediated? That is, how do we make meaning of a comic that does not merely draw upon other texts or media, but becomes something more than a comic?

For scholars in visual rhetoric, the recent wave of visual narrative forms—especially those texts using comics as their primary medium—have posed a particular challenge in terms of analysis: How might one read the sort of text that refuses to conform to visual genres as we have come to know them and yet draws upon a number of conventions from these genres and the media they typically appear in? More specifically for the purposes of this chapter, how might comics be used to address issues of imperialism and inequity in genres—such as travel writing or photojournalism—that are often fraught with ethical issues about representation? Finally, as visual narrative forms like comics and their remediations become more ubiquitous, how should scholars read a text that refuses to conform to visual genres as we have come to know them and yet draw upon a number of conventions from these genres (even as they subvert them)?

I contend here that the quality of these difficult texts engender exactly the kind of meta-conversation Lisle seeks for travel writing. Such a reflexive approach in these accounts regarding the mechanics of storytelling, the constitutive function of its form, and a reckoning of the political dimensions of representation *are* occurring—just not necessarily in travel writing’s prose incarnation. Rather, comics journalists and travel writers such as Ted Rall, Joe Sacco, and Didier Lefevre and Emmanuel Guilbert have done just this, but in a different form. Moreover, by positioning text against drawing against photography, these authors call attention to the potential hegemonic function of any one of these modes.

In this chapter, I work to address the questions I have outlined above by examining Emmanuel Guilbert’s and Didier LeFevre’s *The Photographer*, an innovative work that blurs genre and media conventions. I will briefly describe the postcolonial critiques associated with travel writing and photojournalism to better examine how *The Photographer* fits into these milieus at the same time as it subverts them. From there, I will develop a theory of how the



notion of hybridity informs the rhetorical work of the book in terms of its authorial voice(s), its form, and its content. Whereas *In the Shadow of No Towers* juxtaposes different media and narratives ironically to undercut the final vocabularies associated with each, *The Photographer* adopts a hybrid approach that I conclude problematizes cultural and medial rhetorics of purity. By destabilizing fixed categories of identity, *The Photographer* enables its subjects to take on a sort of humanity than might otherwise be available to them.

One part photojournalistic essay and one part travelogue, *The Photographer* blends comics with photographs and prose to tell the story of LeFevre's travels in Afghanistan in 1986 with a Doctors Without Borders mission. Lefevre, a professional photographer, took roughly 4,000 pictures of the experience. He published six of them, and in the early 2000s, he and friend Emmanuel Gilbert began assembling the photographic contact sheets, LeFevre's memories, and Gilbert's comics renderings of those memories into *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders*. The over-sized book consists of several sections and is composed in several different media. The prose introduction is written by Alexis Siegel, and provides a historical and geo-political context for understanding LeFevre's journey. He explains the importance of Afghanistan as a regional theater in the Cold War, its colonial past(s), and the rise of the Taliban (though not monolithic) as originally a stabilizing influence in the area. Between the Introduction and Part I two sketched maps of Afghanistan are printed. The bulk of the book consists of Parts 1, 2, and 3, narratives which are composed primarily as comics with pictures from (and sometimes the entirety of) the photographic contact sheets LeFevre had kept from the journey. The final section of the book, titled "Portraits," acts as something of an epilogue to the book. It is comprised of photographic portraits of the characters and accompanying text that details what has come of them since LeFevre's return to France.

### Postcolonialism and Issues of Representation in Travel Writing

While it is obviously a piece of photojournalism (and I will discuss the implications of this momentarily), as a story about LeFevre's travels to and in Afghanistan, *The Photographer* draws upon the travel writing genre at the same time it acts in what Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan describe as a “postmodern vein,” by playing on naïve notions of authenticity and revealing how the traveller imposes his or her subjectivity upon the narrative (16). This is an important distinction to make due to the fraught history of the genre and its frequent complicity in imperialism.

But what is travel writing, and how does *The Photographer* fit into that milieu? It can be difficult to parse what might “count” as travel writing because it is itself a hybrid genre that draws upon a number of parent genres and disciplines. As Holland and Huggan point out, these “run from picaresque adventure to philosophical treatise, political commentary, ecological parable, and spiritual quest. They borrow freely from history, geography, anthropology, and social science, often demonstrating great erudition, but without seeing fit to respect the rules that govern conventional scholarship” (*Tourists with Typewriters* 8-9). Raban demonstrates that travel writing “accommodates the private diary, the essay, the short story, the prose poem, the rough note and polished table talk with indiscriminate hospitality” (253). Moreover, travel writing strides the line between autobiography and ethnography. This is a crucial point because the empirical overtones of the ethnographic element lend the narrative an ethos it might otherwise lack, providing the imperial and voyeuristic “I/eye” (to use Mary Louise Pratt's term) with a sort of alibi. In this regard, it is easy to see how *The Photographer* could be bound up in some of the more troublesome aspects of travel writing: it documents Lefevre's encounters with

difference, and the presence of a medium so associated with the idea of transparent objectivity may only further the imperialism always-already present in travel writing.

It is this argument that lies at the core of postcolonial responses to travel writing. In brief, postcolonial critiques of travel writing indict the frequent unwillingness of writers within the genre to address the unequal power relations between writers and their subjects and between the colonizers and colonized. In colonial representations, the colonizer (and privileged travel/photographer) and the colonized (or non-Western Other) are posited as essentially different from one another. These sorts of depictions ignore the material history and relations of power that permeate these encounters in favor of categories whose origins are based on race, class, gender, geo-political boundaries, religion, ethnicity, etc. Subsequently, these depictions serve as a justification for ongoing forms of colonialism. For the rhetorician, perhaps the most interesting recent critical work on this genre is Lisle's book, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*. Lisle argues that travelogues "play an *active* role in the reproduction of discursive hegemony and can therefore be held responsible in some measure for the political consequences of those forces" (261, italics hers). That is, travelogues function as elements in larger discursive formations that rearticulate prevailing notions of truth and thus position subjects accordingly—these accounts are not innocent.

That is not to say that all travel writing is necessarily a colonial activity. Steve Clark argues persuasively against reducing travel writing to simple relations of hegemony by observing that "If the structural function of the journey is to uncover, bring into relation, there are potential reversals by which the authority of home may be suspended, even repudiated. Travel writing's success as text, representation, may be predicated on what Pratt (1992) terms its 'betrayal' of the imperial project (p. 5), and testimony to failure" (5). In other words, there are spaces in travel

writing—whether the result of a preferred reading or a subversion of it—wherein resistance to imperial discourse is produced.

### **Issues of Representation in Photography and Photojournalism**

Photography has had similar issues raised about its role in the construction of difference and its correspondence with reality. Several scholars have remarked upon the sort of problems associated with assuming that photography somehow gets the viewer at “reality” in a way that other media do not. The primary thrust of this critique is that photography is no less mediated or “filtered” (and I use this term advisedly) than other forms of representation. The naïve view of photography supposes that the camera simply apprehends a thing in the world “as it is,” capturing its essential characteristics and relaying them free of human intervention. Barthes’ earlier work (“The Photographic Image,” “The Rhetoric of the Image”) and Christopher Pinney’s scholarship suggest that the camera does capture at least some element of what was present when the picture was taken. Others, however, have problematized the “truthfulness” of the image that photography produces, the notion that photographs are somehow “uncoded.” Barthes’ later work, for example, particularly problematizes the notion of a purely denotative photograph. Similarly, Foucauldian scholars such as John Tagg and Alan Sekula note photography’s status as an institutional technology whose use is imbricated in institutional apparatuses and their attendant regimes of truth. In the sense that Foucault employs the term, technologies are “diffuse, rarely formulated in continuous, systematic discourse...often made up of bits and pieces...a disparate set of tools and methods” (*Discipline and Punish* 26).

Tagg studies the use of photography in the nineteenth century in the context of police, prisons, orphanages, newspapers, and more. Each of these institutions asserted the truth of photographs as an element in a larger argument that enabled the detection, imprisonment,

punishment, and/or curing of those groups subject to that institutions power: the mad, the degenerate, the ill, children, etc. Photography then acted as a sort of a technological vector between these institutional forces, the rhetorical force of which was to reinforce photography's status as an objective measure of reality. Similarly, Yves Michaud writes,

“A photographic image is manufactured, produced with the help of instruments. All we can say about it is that something has left a trace there—but the causes cannot be read in their effects; the former are limited to causing them. A photograph is the imprint of something—of what is another matter. Something which realizes not its truth but simply its value as a trace or relic. A photograph is not a ‘true image,’ it is the trace of something which has disappeared” (736).

In other words, the photograph is not some conveyer of essential truth, but merely another form of signification. Michaud continues, “Fundamentally, the whole problem of the photographic image is that it ‘seems’ to be transparent. It ‘seems’ to provide us with the actual things, while really giving us only a relic. Objects seem to push their way through the image, but we only see, to use [photographer] Gary Winogrand's words, ‘what they look like when they are photographed’” (737). Subsequently, photography can function as a way to elide the role of context and history in constructing difference as it is conveyed in a photograph. The notion of realism becomes problematic because it ignores the intervention of the photographer and the work of interpretation of the viewer. Accordingly, scholars who study how Otherness is represented in the West (whether in terms of racial minorities, gender, the Third World, etc.) must be careful not to seek “realism” or the notion of a more accurate representation of “reality,” but instead should seek more just representations and acknowledge the fact that film and

television are representations of a profilmic reality. The circulation of Othering images through a medium like photography that has such an ethos for objectivity is dangerous because it reifies these profilmic realities at the expense of more nuanced representation. Therefore, photojournalism texts, just as Lisle argues for travelogues, “are politically interesting texts because they mask that process of discursive ordering and offer their observations as neutral documentations of a stable, single and ordered reality” (12). Photography then provides the exactly the sort of alibi, an empirical ethos, that can justify this masking, making its use in such an endeavor even more ethically fraught.

### **Ambivalence and Representation**

Given how problematic photojournalism and travel writing can be in representing otherness, it may be considered more ethical to simply avoid it entirely. However, as scholars in postcolonial studies have argued, such a refusal is merely an excuse to avoid engaging with Otherness. To put it another way, as difficult as the endeavor may be, writers have a duty to adequately represent and render the Other in just ways. In fact, travelogues have a distinct advantage because they are widely read popular works that in a very real sense create the world for its readership. I will argue throughout the rest of the chapter that *The Photographer*, by presenting a multiplicity of authorial voices, conflicting subjectivities, and competing modes of representation, does not mask but rather *confronts* the reader with the sort of discursive ordering that goes into crafting an document and undermines any notion of a stable and ordered reality.

### **Modes of Representation and *The Photographer***

While comics theorists including Eisner, McCloud, and Groensteen have worked to explain how comics “work,” much of their theory seem to elide the ways meaning might be made differently by the introduction of different media. Comics theory can, however, lend a

basis beginning to understand how certain formal parameters work. For instance, Groensteen's work (which he characterizes as "neo-semiotic") can explain phenomena such as how the photographs in *The Photographer* work as panels belonging to a multiframe tied to other panels and the frame through "reciprocal determinations" (89); it can account for how these panels may be read to deduce narrative propositions; it can also account for how word balloons function in relation to frames. Actually, Groensteen's theories can tell us a great deal about the syntagm—the system—of comics, but they do not account for the semantic, denotative function that the insertion of photographs and contact sheets has in *The Photographer*. Put another way, Groensteen and others have provided an account of how readers construct a narrative out of panels on a page, but they do not account for the way that photographs, in their unique way, can "prick" us (as Barthes would say)—surprise us and cause us to step out of the diegesis, asking us to consider the narrative in which they are embedded in another way. These theories do not take into account "the type of consciousness the photograph involves...not a consciousness of *being-there*...but an awareness of its *having-been-there*" (*Image Music Text* 44).

Similarly, if we privilege the photographs and simply regard the comics as another form of text (reading *The Photographer* as a merely novel approach to the photographic essay), we also risk reducing the way meaning in this book is made. The comics do not merely act as commentary on or context for the photographs; instead, the photographs are woven in as panels to the comic. With little exception, few are technically finished photographs. What we receive instead are contact sheets, often marred with red markings and roughly inserted to the more symmetrical and complete comics panels. To characterize the comics as text that "constitutes a parasitic message designed to connote the image" (*Image Music Text* 25) is to ignore the image function of the drawings as well as the syntactic/narrative function of the sequenced images.

### *Toward a Synthesis*

By acknowledging that privileging one mode of reading over the other fails to adequately address how meaning is made in *The Photographer*, we are enabled to make some early heuristic assumptions: first, that each theoretical approach can help us understand an aspect of the work, but not the totality; secondly, by fusing the two mediums in such a way (rather than separating text and photograph as a more traditional photographic essay might) we see a remediation that leads to a new hybrid medium; third and finally, examining *The Photographer* through the logic of remediation as described by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin can help to bridge the gap between each of the understandings produced by a comics-oriented reading and a photograph-oriented reading. As a new medium the work draws upon its parent media, but as a separate medium, it needs to be examined on its own terms—by extension, it is more than simply the sum of its parts. What's more, as a hybrid text, *The Photographer* implicitly interrogates the rhetoric of purity that accompanies both cultures and modes of representation. To observe how *The Photographer* accomplishes this, I will examine several features and examples from the text.

### **The Introduction, Context, and Multiple Subjectivities**

The first of these examples is the Introduction by translator Alexis Siegel. It is primarily a prose document supplemented with panels from the comics and contact sheets in the body of the work. Its primary function is to situate *The Photographer* in a historical context: both in terms of what came before Didier Lefevre's travels there and the relationship between Afghanistan and the Taliban that has come to the forefront of American discourse since 9/11. More than this, the Introduction serves also to situate the book in a postcolonial context; by detailing the struggles between Britain and Russia in the region in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the region's role as a Cold War theater beginning in 1979, Siegel highlights the part Western powers played



in destabilizing Afghanistan and amplifying local tensions. This is a crucial point to make, because as Lisle explains, too often travel narratives elide issues of history and power relations in favor of presenting difference as somehow a cultural or even biological given. So rather than, as is the case in the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report*, presenting the region as a monolithic and cultural Other, the Introduction instead paints a picture of the complexity and diversity of Afghanistan. For example, in explaining how the Soviet Union came to invade the region, Siegel describes the factions that had arisen out of Afghanistan's independence from British and Russian imperial influence, culminating in a series of coups that began in 1973. The U.S.S.R. invaded to support its favored faction, and the C.I.A. began organizing assistance to the resistance; as Siegel points out, one of the projects the C.I.A. facilitated was headed up by none other than Osama bin Laden. This observation complicates the often black-and-white accounts of the region, such as in the graphic adaptation of *The 9/11 Report*.

In addition to providing a historical context and complicating a casual Western reader's notions about Afghanistan, the Introduction also complicates the ideas of authenticity and truth in the account. For example, a footnote alludes to an inaccuracy in Lefevre's story. According to the graphic novel, Lefevre recalled that a certain warlord's protection was purchased with a bribe. Siegel claims that this is inaccurate, and instead the warlord was "acting out of gratitude and respect for the work that had been done in his region in the 1960s by Jacques Fournot...the father of Juliette Fournot, the leader of the MSF expedition" (vii). This observation not only introduces some of the characters the reader will encounter in the narrative, but also clearly indicates that *The Photographer* is not a monologic piece told solely from Lefevre's point of view. Both Siegel and the voices of those Lefevre photographs are included in the Introduction and the "Portraits" section.

In fact, this is not the only time Lefevre's recollections are called into questions by the other collaborators. For instance, in the "Portraits" section the co-authors follow up on Bassir Khan, a local leader who supported the MSF teams. The co-authors point out that Lefevre had a harsher perception of Bassir than the rest of the team: "He remained angry with Bassir for having dumped an escort on him whose desertion nearly cost him his life. Apparently, Bassir had the four men of the escort punished with a severe beating upon their return to Yaftal" (266). Similarly, the "Portraits" section mentions the fact that Lefevre misremembered the name of a boy whose operation he witnessed. Highlighting some of the uncertainties and ambiguities of Lefevre's account has a number of effects: one, it undermines the objective authority typically associated with photography and travel writing, and two, it lends the rest of the account a sort of ethos of authenticity—that is, pointing out the shortcomings of Lefevre's memories requires a level of confidence in the lifelikeness of the rest of the account. The implicit argument here is that it is not the empirical overtones of the photographs that convey the narrative's truthfulness or immediacy. This is also conveyed in the style of the photographs, which are not finished or polished photos, but instead rough-edged and damaged contact sheets that run together with other photographs and are often marred with red marker. Rather, it is the engagement with the past, with memory, and with grappling with the materiality of the contact sheets and the way they occasion or frustrate meaning-making. It is through this act, I argue, that *The Photographer* works to engage the reader to humanize the subjects that Lefevre depicts.

### **Hybridity and The Mingling of Media**

Although nearly any set of pages would suffice as an example of how the differing modes of representation compete and collude in a reading of *The Photographer*, I will concentrate particularly on the sequence on pages 132 and 133. The scene described in the pages consists of

LeFevre and some of the doctors from the MSF entering a village bakery in Pustuk to treat war-wounded civilians. LeFevre snaps pictures of the people, particularly a brother and sister. Both are terribly hurt, and the boy calls out, “Aoh.” LeFevre leaves the bakery to load a new roll of film and follows one of the MSF doctors and a villager whose daughter is hurt. This sequence is a particularly apt one to study because of the powerful role that affect and the photographs’ *punctum* (to borrow a term from Barthes) play in meaning-making.

The larger multi-frame (the double page spread) is split between the two pages. The first page is divided into four even rows, each consisting of roughly two panels. Of the eight panels, six are photographs partially cropped from contact sheets; the only drawn panels are the first and fifth. As throughout the rest of the book, the drawings and caption boxes are arranged to appear as if they lay atop the photographs. Further, in the penultimate and last rows, the caption boxes are almost the same size as the photographs/panels. The second caption box in the last row links the panel before and after it by overlaying each of their borders.

From the arrangement panels on the page, the reader can deduce a number of things. First, despite some of the flourishes (the linking caption boxes, the contact sheets), the layout of the first page is traditional. That is, it is read in the “Z” pattern that Eisner describes as “ideal” for Western readers: it is laid out in a grid form read from the top left to the bottom right (41). Groensteen calls this form of layout “regular.” Expanding upon an earlier argument of Benoit Peeters’, he asserts that such a layout conveys of a sort of “neutrality that allows it to elevate other parameters” and that it “possesses the ultimate virtue of handling the possibility of sudden and spectacular ruptures from the initially given form” (96-97). Such a rupture occurs on the second page of the spread (which I will discuss momentarily).

The “other parameters” elevated in this page due to the regular layout include the caption boxes, and of course, the photographs themselves. The caption boxes that accompany the photographs on this page are of a similar size to those used to accompany photographs throughout the book. Here, because of their large size, they have the curious effect of making the boy’s “little wails” of “Aoh,” that much smaller—the single word in the midst of all of that space lends the word a sense of loneliness—mirroring the diegesis in the abstract containers of the captions. Further, by using the second caption box as a link between the photographs of the boy uttering it and the villagers in the bakery who hear it, the reader is able to participate in a visual proposition regarding the relationship between the villagers’ visible distress and its source. Moreover, because the caption boxes lay atop the raw contact sheets, there appears to be an implicit argument for the more foundational basis of the photographs, as if the words and images (such as the first panel on the page) were secondary, *post hoc*.

The second page is divided in half horizontally: the top half consists of one panel and the bottom half of two rows—the first row comprised of three panels, and the last row of two. After the regular layout of the first page, the rupture of including such a large panel at the top of the next page accounts for some (though not all, as I will explain) of its impact. In a purely syntagmatic reading, the panels’ large size alone determines its intentional importance. In the last two rows, we see other narrative propositions. By juxtaposing the sequence of images, we infer *a posteriori* that what LeFevre is reaching for in his bag in the first panel is the roll of film that he uses in the second panel; by depicting LeFevre noticing the doctor and villager in the third panel, we are able to infer a relationship between him and the other characters in the last two panels—in other words, we know that he is intentionally following them rather than walking where the other two characters happen to be walking. Groensteen refers to this process of translating panels

into linguistic statements “plurivectoral narration” (108). That is, the reading of these panels requires the retroactive, recursive, and dialogic participation of the reader. All of this reflects what Eisner refers to as the “contract between the artist and the reader,” highlighting the “tacit cooperation” that each requires of the other for meaning to be made (41).

The layout is not the only way a reader interacts with the comics medium. Scott McCloud, for instance, focuses on the interaction between reader and visual aspects of the text. His notion of amplification through simplification explains how readers respond to a cartoon image: “When we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). This is an important claim to make, because as McCloud argues, it explains how we participate in the stories made in comics. In short, the highly-coded approach to representation typical of cartooning enables the reader to interact with the images in a way unavailable in more realistic styles—specifically through what McCloud labels *projection*. He describes projection as the ability of a cartoon to act as “a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled...an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel to another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it!” (36). The drawings in *The Photographer* then not only focus on that which the artist deems most important and defining for each character, thus serving as an identifier (letting the reader know, for example, that the turban, glasses, and a patchy beard signify LeFevre), but are also abstract enough to enable the audience to project themselves into the immediacy of the narrative.

The immediacy of the narrative, however, is disrupted by the inclusion of the photographs—particularly the large one depicting the brother and sister on the top of the second page. The coded nature of the drawings and the way they enable the reader to tacitly cooperate

with the writer are subverted by the inclusion of the more denotatively-oriented photographs. Subsequently, as I have asserted earlier, an exclusively comics-oriented approach reduces the rhetorical work done in photographs to a mere unit in a structural examination.

What is this rhetorical work? According to Barthes it is to foster a sort of paradox, one that

can then be seen as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the ‘art’, or the treatment, or the ‘writing’, or the rhetoric, of the photograph)...it is here the connoted (or coded) message develops on the basis of a message *without a code*...how then can the photograph be at once ‘objective’ and ‘invested’, natural and cultural? (*Image Music Text* 19-20, italics his).

That is to say, while the narrative in *The Photographer* is largely carried out through the necessarily coded (though representational) drawings of the comics, as readers we are frequently confronted with photographs. These photographs occasion a different kind of consciousness than that of the comics. On the one hand, we recognize that these are elements of a story (and that the comics provide both the connotation and the *studium*); on the other hand, we are confronted with the irrefutable reality of those depicted.

Barthes describes the *studium* as the “average effect, almost from a certain training...[the] application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity” (*Camera Lucida* 26). It is derived culturally in that it requires a certain sort of training to apprehend both its connoted meaning. In *The Photographer*, this meaning is supplied both from our cultural context and understanding of Afghanistan and the narrative woven around the photographs: “the *studium* is a kind of

education...which allows me to discover the *Operator*, to experience the intentions which establish and animate his practices, but to experience them ‘in reverse,’ according to my will as a *Spectator*” (*Camera* 28). The *stadium* is the act of detached analysis.

But the *studium* is pierced by the *punctum* of the photograph, that element which instead of being sought after by the viewer (as it is in the *studium*) is what acts upon him or her: “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me” (*Camera* 27). As he describes it, it is often a seemingly unimportant detail within the photograph that captures the viewer’s imagination: the familiarity of a brand of shoe, the meticulousness of a subject’s fingernails, or the pattern on a small piece of cloth. Barthes contrasts the *punctum* with the mere surprise that a “shock” photograph engenders because the *punctum* is not necessarily what we (as a culture) would designate as the most emotional element of a photograph. For example, when describing the picture of a woman weeping over the sheet-covered corpse of her child, what interferes for Barthes is the corpse’s one bare foot, the particularity of the sheet held by the mother (he asks, “why this sheet?”), and a woman in the background holding a handkerchief to her nose (*Camera* 23). The *punctum* therefore falls outside of the photographer’s intention; its power to pierce is inextricably linked to a thing in the world *having-been-there* and subsequently cannot be captured within a coded message. It is necessarily personal because it cannot be predicted.

Barthes describes the type of *having-been-there* consciousness involved in the photograph as a combination of

Spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*. It is thus at the level of this denoted message or message without code that the *real*

*unreality* of the photograph can be fully understood: its unreality is that of the *here-now*, for the photograph is never experienced as an illusion, is in no way a *presence*...its reality that of the *having-been-there*, for in every photograph there is the stupefying evidence of *this is how it was*, giving us, by a precious miracle, a reality from which we have been sheltered.

(Image 44).

When read against McCloud's description of the projective power of the cartoon, this is a pregnant passage that indicates the power of combining comics and photographs. If we accept the projective power of cartooning, and the sort of cooperation engendered in the narrative way of reading comics (Barthes characterizes this consciousness as *it's me*), then we find it somewhat at odds with the spectatorial way of reading photographs (the consciousness of something *having-been-there*). The photographs act as a sort of check that forces us to reckon with the created-ness of both the comics medium and the narrative itself, as well as the lived experience of its subjects. The *studium* surrounding the picture of the brother and sister in the large photograph informs me—that is, I can comment upon and analyze the formal properties of the photograph, the disruptive size of the panel amidst the otherwise regular layout, or the cultural and intellectual issues for which the photograph acts as a locus. However, the inherently personal punctum that is unique to me induces an unexpected poignancy that a drawing necessarily cannot—each of these elements converges in a way that comics or photography alone could not.

As I will argue further in the Conclusion, the combination of comics, texts, and photography works to return some form of representative agency to the subjects of the photographs: they are not some Other isolated from history; rather, the photographs apprehend images of actors being in the world at several points who are able to perform their identity (as



Frahm argues) through repetition in images rather than as a static object for the viewer to evaluate.

### **Hybridity and the Mingling of Cultures**

*The Photographer* rhetorically works to create a space for what Homi Bhabha designates as *hybridity*—that is, that space found “in-between the designations of identity” that “entertains differences without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4). In the cultural sense in which Bhabha employs the term, it indicates the untenability of the idea of a unitary identity, of a culture that exists as a homogenized force, the result of a teleological and originary past. Because of its concern with the textuality inherent in difference, hybridity offers a way to examine texts and the way they naturalize notions of difference. As Bhabha describes, hybridity demonstrates

the displacement of value from symbol to sign that causes the dominant discourse to split along the axis of its power to be representative, authoritative. Hybridity represents that ambivalent 'turn' of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification—a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority (113).

It follows, then, that the rhetoric of hybridity challenges essentialism and the essentialist categories that all too frequently inform travel writing and photojournalism’s frequent engagement with constructed exoticism, with difference. In postcolonial contexts, hybridity lays bare the hollowness of the rhetorics of purity contained within essentialist theories of ethnic or geo-political difference. In particular, Lefevre and Guibert’s portrayal of doctors Robert and Juliette demonstrates how geo-political identity is not stable, is always hybrid.

### *Issues of Gender*

One of the notions Westerners have about the region that *The Photographer* destabilizes is the treatment and role of women. As Salaita points out, many of the perceptions about the status of women in Arab and Islamic cultures fuels a great deal of liberal racism and xenophobia—to wit, these cultures are rhetorically constructed as always-already chauvinist and repressive, requiring the enlightened and liberal West to condemn and intervene. Writing in the context of feminist Katha Pollitt’s characterization of the ‘Iraqi resistance’ as if it were an “unvarying collective of hideous evildoers’ (161), Salaita explains that “We live in a world in which a decorated feminist of the American left can argue through blatant racism because few people investigate who others are beyond the certitude of deterministic cultural knowledge. With Arabs, this problem is acute because we exist in political colloquy as characters, never narrators” (165). And while the people of Afghanistan are not Arab, but rather Muslim, as I have argued throughout this book (and which Salaita also addresses), to many in the West they are one and the same. Because Arabs and Muslims (particularly women) are not given a voice in Western political discourse—that is, they do not exist as narrators—their identity is narrated by non-Arabs and non-Muslims, who then have a rhetorical carte blanche to generalize and oversimplify.

There is, of course, scholarship that puts the lie to these generalizations. For example, as Asma Barlas points out, many perceptions of patriarchy in Islam come from very selective (and often distorted) readings of passages in the Qur’an at the cost of all sorts of omissions (“Women in Islam”). *The Photographer* shows the hybridity of one woman in particular, Dr. Juliette Fournot, as she moves between cultures and even

genders with a comfortable dexterity. She acts as both the leader of the MSF contingent and also as a chief negotiator with the locals. In so doing, she demonstrates that neither women nor Muslims easily fit into the categories the West imagines for them.

For example, in one early episode, Juliette gathers the local leaders of a small rural area to help organize an expedition. As Lefevre observes, “What Juliette is pulling off is impressive, because the odds certainly aren’t in her favor. For an Afghan, a chief is a strong figure. There’s no way a woman can be a chief. And yet they all understand that Juliette is the boss” (41). On the one hand, there is a certain level of colonial ideology that plays out in this passage. For instance, the phrase, “For an Afghan” indicates a sort of essentialism based on geo-political identity. Moreover, the sort of colonialism wherein she is “the boss” also plays into the notion of the civilized European who leads the uncivilized natives. On the other hand, this text is subverted by both the narrative and the pictures. Juliette and the other doctors begin to dispel many of the myths that Lefevre holds about the region (and by extension those possibly held by the reader as well). The pictures throughout this episode (and throughout the rest of the book) demonstrate a more reciprocal and nuanced relationship between the MSF doctors and the Afghans with whom they work: they depict Juliette among the Afghans as one among many, rather than separate; they rarely depict her talking, instead she appears to listen; she tells Lefevre that she accomplishes her leadership by respecting the cultural practices and values of the locals rather than by imposing by fiat.

In another example of problematizing Western notions of the relationship between the region, Islam, and gender, Juliette explains how marriage works in the area to Lefevre. After describing the happy marriage of a young couple she met, she tells him

that the man in the marriage had a second wife since she last saw them. She asked the first wife why this was. “She said: ‘I’m the one who found her for him... You see, my husband’s a rich man, he has a lot of guests and he’s away a lot when they take the animals to the high pastures—so I really needed someone else’” (144). Lefevre remarks that stories such as that are not what “we” are used to hearing, and that “All we ever see is the same poor helpless woman under her *chadri*” (144). Juliette then explains that “people make it into an exaggerated and idiotic symbol. The real priorities for women are access to health care, to education, to work, and to the legal system. Not clothes” (144). What’s more, she points out that women have used the *chadri* to disguise themselves to break social taboos, meeting with lovers and even assisting in the armed resistance to Soviet forces. As Juliette describes the *chadri*, “At the moment, it’s a real tool of resistance” (145).

The exchange between Lefevre and Juliette is crucial for a number of reasons. One, it explicitly challenges Western notions of women’s roles in Afghanistan (and, by extensions, other Islamic cultures). Women in Afghanistan, as Juliette explains, have a powerful influence on local leaders, and Juliette moves among both quite freely. Juliette is thus serves as a hybrid of man and women, of West and Afghanistan; she dresses and enacts roles that are typically reserved for men, and she moves comfortably between her own French culture and the local Afghan culture.

Two, it demonstrates the sort of hybridities for which the *chadri* serves as a locus. Although the *chadri* is typically regarded as a symbol in the West for the repression of women (and as a result serves as a useful alibi for rhetorically constructing members of this culture as barbarians), the passage shows the politically progressive and even

feminist uses of the *chadri*. These point to a struggle that underscores the *chadri* as a symbol—the repression of women is less a Muslim issue and more a male issue in general. The contested meaning over the symbolism of the *chadri* and Lefevre’s use of the term as shorthand for oppression is fairly indicative of how the West appropriates and redefines Islamic symbology. As Salaita observes,

In the world in which human Muslims exist, Islamic symbology is both complex and inconsistent. There are few objects that can accurately represent Islam in its totality. There are no ethnic attributes qualified to do the same. However, in the world in which Muslims are represented by those either invested or complicit in imperialism, terrorism can be reduced to the articulation of visual symbols that signal the threatening presence of Islam. These visual symbols commonly include beards, *kuffiyehs*, prayer beads, and distinguishing garb (think dirty beige robes and dusty leather sandals) (140).

Similarly, women in Islam can be reduced to visual symbols that are then concurrently linked to simple relations of patriarchy (which is somehow solely an Islamic phenomenon) such as the *chadri* or the burka. Lefevre’s depiction of Juliette and the frank discussion of these issues brings the reader’s attention to these symbols and the way they are used to construct difference. In so doing, Lefevre demonstrates how these symbols can perform as new transcultural forms functioning within a contact zone created by colonialism.

### ***The “Science of Reading Signs”***

While not explicitly about culture, there are two particularly compelling conversations that take place in the book which indicate an approach to the practices of photography and

medicine, both drawing upon themes of hybridity. Both medicine and photography, as Foucault and Foucauldian scholars have pointed out, bear some resemblance to the sort of colonizer/colonized relationships explored in postcolonialism. In medicine, for example, a discourse is coalesced into a form that privileges one side of a newly created binary: that of the doctor over the patient. This can be extended to other forms of discipline/knowledge: psychiatry (analyst/patient), the penal system (warden/inmate), and even photography (photographer/subject). Though perhaps photography is not, at a glance, completely analogous to these other forms of knowledge-making, as I have argued above, as a practice it does produce a sense of the world, and acts to discipline subjects. By examining the assumptions that inform specifically photography and medicine (in the context of the MSF doctors), Lefevre opens a space for subject and patient by exposing each practice not as an engagement with some foundational reality, but rather as a practice of interpretation.

Early in the book, for example, Lefevre converses with one of the doctors, Regis, about photography. He discusses the difficulty of taking a photograph, of juggling the various parameters that just go into snapping the picture, of developing film, and of simply capturing a good picture. It is a revealing dialogue because it highlights many of the critiques of foundational notions of photography that I discussed above. For example, by Lefevre's reckoning, human subjectivity intervenes in the photographic message several times: in the technical act of taking the picture, in the act of developing the picture, in the aesthetics of the shot, and finally in the evaluation. The point for Lefevre is to internalize the act: "The main thing, to produce technically good pictures, is to be able to handle the camera without thinking about it" (60). Photography is not a matter of simply recording reality, but evaluating what will make a good photograph. The world cannot be "good" or "bad," just as Rorty explains that it cannot be true or

false. Rather, sentences (which are descriptions of the world) can be false. Representations—not the world—can be “good” or “bad.” Consequently, Lefevre actively acknowledges the mediation that occurs in photography as well as its inability to serve as a neutral, objective apparatus. Interpretation is key in producing “good” photography; if photography were a matter of simply apprehending the essence of the subject, interpretation would be unnecessary.

One of the MSF doctors, Robert, makes a similar claim about the practice of medicine in a later conversation. Lefevre remarks upon his surprise at the sort of work the MSF does in Afghanistan, comparing it to medicine in France and saying “it’s such a different world” (124). Robert offers a surprising answer: “It’s the same world, though. The basis of medicine, whether here or in France, is always the same: it’s clinical observation, the study of symptoms. It’s the science of reading signs” (124). The rest of the conversation is devoted to giving examples of this, framing the practice of medicine as an interpretive art. Just as with photography, the argument here then is not for some sort of objective correspondence between signifiers and signifieds. This is an important claim to make because it begins to chip away at notions of an essential backwardness of the Afghans or the superiority of the West for possessing true “knowledge.” As Bhabha puts it,

It’s like Michel Foucault’s idea that there is no Truth with a capital T, no transcendent quality. There is always a battle around what is the true, and it’s the function of discourse to stabilize something as true for a certain period of time, whether it’s a particular laboratory method, whether it’s a particular form of medical diagnosis, whether it’s a particular law relating to behavior or a particular norm. Truth is always a negotiation, and it always has a certain authority (“The Moving Gun”).

Lefevre's initial impulse was towards a colonial ideology that posited France and Afghanistan as essentially different in regards to medicine: one is state-of-the-art, antiseptic, and organized, the other the converse of this. But as Robert points out, they are the same world, simply operating in different circumstances due to different levels of power and resources. Difference is not a matter of an essential categorization but instead the result of historical circumstance. There is a level of uncertainty operating in both milieus, and neither context provides access to absolute truth, but instead offers only differing means of reading and interacting with signs.

### **Conclusion**

Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin describe the twin logics of remediation, saying that “Although each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium” (20). Due to the unpolished presentation of the photographs in *The Photographer* and their juxtaposition with comics panels, the reader is confronted with the intervention of the photographer, the photographs' codedness, and ultimately photography's opacity. The sequence of comics images and photographic images that accompany a given photograph indict any single photograph's ability to adequately contextualize the circumstances surrounding it. Similarly, despite the verisimilitude established in the narrative of the comics panels, the presence of the photographs, as demonstrated above, disrupts the suspension of disbelief comics typically work to foster and yet, despite these often competing modes of meaning-making, together each invites the reader to become invested in the account in new ways.

*The Photographer* acts as an implicit meditation on the authenticity of its parent media, about the rhetorics of purity that surround them. Immediacy for Bolter and Grusin refers to “a



family of beliefs and practices that express themselves differently at various times among various groups...the common feature of all these forms is the belief in some necessary contact point between the medium and what it represents” (30). Hypermediacy, by contrast, “expresses itself as multiplicity. If the logic of immediacy leads one either to erase or render automatic the act of representation, the logic of hypermediacy acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible” (33-34). Most importantly hypermediacy reminds the audience of our need for immediacy and leads to disorientation when our suspension of disbelief is not only frustrated but actively sought after. This, perhaps, is the most compelling argument for the rhetorical work of *The Photographer*: though comics could be considered a form of hypermedia due to the practice of combining multiple images and words, the juxtaposition of photographs against these forms of representations heightens the visibility of the medium itself. Douglas Wolk explains, “Seen next to Lefevre’s finely shaded photos, Guibert’s idiomatic line work emphasizes that what we’re seeing in the comics sections of *The Photographer* isn’t quite real: It’s history recollected and reconstructed” (*Washington Post*). The unstated converse of Wolk’s statement is that seen next to the narrative and context that the comics are able to provide, Lefevre’s rough-edged and unfinished photographs remind us that what we’re seeing in photographs isn’t quite objective documentation; it, too, is recollected and reconstructed. Like Lefevre in his conversation with Regis, or Robert in his conversation with Lefevre, it is the readers’ duty not to bask in the presence of the unmediated subject but rather to read the signs.

### ***The Exchange Between Photographer and Writer***

In discussing claims that Jacob Reis’s use of text as a possible subversion of his photographs, Mitchell states “A better argument would be that the text “enables” the images (and their subjects) to take on a kind of independence and humanity that would be unavailable under

an economy of straightforward “exchange” between photographer and writer” (*Picture Theory* 286). *The Photographer’s* use of comics panels enables a similar sort of humanity for the subjects of its photos. The unfinished photographs show us experience in the midst of being processed, and the dialogic, recursive reading required of comics (once commonly considered a low, disposable medium) require the reader to reckon with the people and situations depicted not as isolated aesthetic objects, but as people struggling in the world. *The Photographer* reveals the role of mediation in crafting and normalizing discourses at the same time as providing a counter-narrative to currently prevailing stories, one that details the lives and hardships of Afghans. Through doing this, works like *The Photographer* offer a way to problematize the dominant discourses that enable dehumanizing cultural attitudes and policy decisions regarding the Other. I believe this is a critical task in a democracy given the ever-increasing concentration of mass media ownership and the cultural myopia this concentration all too frequently prompts.

## Conclusion

In this book, I have focused primarily on the ways the modes of signification associated with comics rearticulate or (more hopefully) subvert anti-Arab racist and Islamophobic discourses. Here in the conclusion, I would like to extend this discussion to pose questions about *why* the modes of signification matter and the political and pedagogical repercussions of such questions. As Lisle argues, “Representation is never a simple literary event: reading, writing, and interpretation are political acts that involve complex power relations between readers, writers and the social worlds they inhabit” (11). There is never a simple correspondence between representation and the world, and this makes understanding the way we understand texts—the way we produce the world through texts—so important. As a medium blending image and text, comics complicate representation and thus the social worlds implied by modes of representation.

And while Lisle’s focus is on the *what* of representation, what I have endeavored in this book is to argue for the importance of the *how*. This is becoming an increasingly important question in the field of Rhetoric and Composition where the metaphor of “everything is a text” has become more and more prevalent. It is a metaphor in that it posits any given artifact or activity (overtly discursive or not), as a written text, thus arguing that everything is coded and can be examined in the ways that we examine a written text. This has obviously been a useful metaphor, particularly for the field of Rhetoric and Composition, because it has opened space for reflection and critical examination of otherwise unremarked upon cultural practices and objects. It has allowed us to deconstruct the often implicit binaries in these practices to move toward more just forms of representation.

However, it is not entirely unproblematic. WJT Mitchell characterizes this approach (answering the question “What is an image?” with the answer “just another form of writing”) as

an ultimately futile manifestation of iconoclasm (which as Mitchell understands it connotes a certain fear of the image). He explains the problem when he writes,

It seems clear that knowledge is better understood as a matter of social practices, disputes, and agreements, and not as the property of some particular mode of natural or unmediated representation. And yet there is something curiously anachronistic about the modern attack on the notion of mental images as “privileged representations” when the main thrust of modern studies of *material* representations has been to take away these privileges. It’s hard to debunk a picture theory of language when we no longer have a picture theory of pictures themselves (*Iconology* 30).

In other words, re-describing other modes of representation as but another form of writing ironically privileges writing, refusing to meet the image (or any other form of representation) on its own terms. I hope it is obvious that I am not arguing here for a return to fixed medial categories, medial purity, or any notion of naturalism. The text metaphor has been so productive and useful *precisely* because it has problematized these categories. The problem, of course, becomes when the metaphor is taken as natural itself, confused for its referent.

So, briefly, I have several concerns regarding the unreflective use of the metaphor. First, by globalizing the word text, we lose the specificity of the term signifying “written words,” which as a consequence diminishes texts’ particular ways (as Kress describes and I summarize in the first chapter) of occasioning different ways of composing, thinking, interpreting, and being in the world. Second, the metaphor reveals certain assumptions privileging text. By conflating it with the term “signifier,” we implicitly elevate it as the principle or most important form of meaning-making. In so doing, it erases differences in modes of representation and subordinates

non-textual modes as ‘translations’ of verbal/textual modes. Put another way, by reducing a given example of discourse to simply another form of text, use of the metaphor ironically assumes a sort of one-to-one correspondence between a signified and its textual signifier; signifiers across a range of modes are mere permutations of the textual signifier. The idea of correspondence between different media is a problem, because as Obradovic explains, “...image and verbal text are not irreducible and so while we can read both semiotically, the two cannot be equivalent. Reading an image requires different deconstruction of the frame than reading a sentence or a paragraph because certain elements of the image (perspective for example) do not have an equivalent feature in verbal analysis” (94). It follows, then, that the totalizing impulse that underwrites the unreflective use of the “everything is text” metaphor is the same that wants to settle the questions of what Mitchell describes as “what pictures are, how they relate to words, and why the relationship matters” (*Picture Theory* 6-7). The implicit answers in the metaphor are thus: pictures are just text; they relate only to words as translations; and the relationship doesn’t matter. Like Mitchell, I’m more interested in exploring “the received answers to these questions in practice and why settled answers of a systematic kind may be impossible” (*Picture Theory* 7). Comics, where not only words and drawings but many other modes converge, have provided a bountiful site to ponder these questions.

And as Mitchell observes about this convergence, “The image-text relation...is not a merely technical question, but a site of conflict, a nexus where political, institutional, and social antagonisms play themselves out in the materiality of representation” (“Beyond Comparison” 116). If the materiality of representation matters—that is, if its specificity as *something in the world*, bound up in issues of history, context, power, and substance matters—then overly systematic sorts of hermeneutics (such as the unreflective use of the “everything is text”

metaphor encourage) can elide too much of the rhetorical impact of representation. The rhetorics of representational purity are of course fraught, and any endeavor to compare modes, as Mitchell and others have repeatedly demonstrated, can often meet with frustration. After all, visual modes are as conventional as speech modes, and writing in its physical form is a visual medium as well. However, to flatly deny the differences between modes also diminishes the rhetorical work they do in a given piece of discourse. The spatial logics of visibility differ from the linear logics of speech, and each encourages or precludes certain world views and ideologies.

Ultimately, as Mitchell points out, “The real question to ask when confronted with these kinds of image-text relations is not ‘what is the difference (or similarity) between the words and the images?’ but ‘what difference do the differences (and similarities) make?’” (“Beyond Comparison” 116). A political and pedagogical practice informed by the relations of image and text must thus keep returning to this question. As scholars of discourse, teachers of Rhetoric and Composition have an obligation to attune our students to the political and ethical dimensions of representation, both as consumers whose sense of the world is shaped by the media in their culture, and as producers who rearticulate that sense in any number of discursive contexts. Because of the self-reflexivity and representational tension fostered by a multi-modal medium such as comics, comics serves as an excellent site for the study of the rhetorical and constitutive functions genre and medium play in discourse, the political and social antagonisms at work within a given piece of discourse, and how identity is negotiated within these modes. Scholars across a range of disciplines have written about the use of comics in the classroom, highlighting the role they can play as sponsors of multimodal literacy (Jacobs, Williams), as tools for teaching international relations (Juneau and Sucharov), as ways to engage material with multilingual learners (Cary), to teach science (Cheesman), and more. I hope that the work I’ve done in this

book adds to this conversation by asking teachers to consider not just the way the medium might be used pragmatically in the classroom in conveying a particular subject content, but also the medium's complicity in articulating that content. More specifically, I hope that it highlights the role of difference, both in terms of differences in modes of representation, and the construction of cultural difference.

As I write this conclusion, the discursive construction of difference in the United States has only become more prominent, more damaging. The words "Sharia law" have become a rallying cry to many on the Right, serving as racist and xenophobe code and endorsing yet more discrimination and the incursion of the State into matters of religion. Politicians and pundits on both the Right and the Left have openly supported brutal dictatorships in the Middle East in the face of recent democratic revolutions for fear that democracies might lead to more Islamic states. In a move not seen since McCarthy's hunt for imaginary communist agents, Congressman Peter King (R-N.Y.) has been holding hearings titled "The Extent of Radicalization in the American Muslim Community and That Community's Response." As if to underscore how important a role images play in this sort of activity, a framed portrait of the burning World Trade Center towers served as a backdrop to the proceedings (Bellantoni). As Americans become more and more inundated with Othering discourses in an increasingly wide array of representational modes, the work of understanding these modes has perhaps never been more important.

As I hope my examination has demonstrated, comic books are not simply examples of pop culture that are innocent bystanders in the creation of difference or hegemony. Rather, as popular discursive artifacts, they play an active role in reproducing or subverting hegemony. Further, as I have argued, it is impossible to parse the formal aspects of comics from their content. Politically, this implies that the aesthetics of the medium matter less than how cultural

difference is encountered, produced, contextualized, and represented within that medium. The various ways of being-in-the-world and epistemological commitments culturally assigned to a given medium thus preclude or make possible certain forms of representation and political engagement.

Lisle argues that “To the extent that discourse analysis helps us interrogate our continuing struggles with difference, it continually resists those political understandings that veer towards resolution and narrative closure” (277). Comics—those funny little books with word bubbles, fractured panels, and vibrantly rendered bits of synesthesia and onomatopoeia (Splat! Boom!)—help us interrogate our own representational struggles with difference perhaps because they are so bound up in, so fascinated with, the negotiation of difference. And in playing with our expectations about content and form, in parodying our assumptions about the relationship between representation and reality, in the irreverence of imagetext, we see a potentially viable and popular site in which to resist easy resolution and closure. Even as we consume their content, their mode of delivery prompts us to continually question how it is we are making meaning, the differences between ways of making meaning, and what difference that makes.



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