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The Voyager and the Visionary:
The Self as History in *Palestine* and *Louis Riel*

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ABSTRACT:

Joe Sacco and Chester Brown are two artists who emerged out of a vibrant tradition of autobiographical comics in the eighties and nineties. This paper argues that Sacco's *Palestine* and Brown's *Louis Riel* announce a new way of writing the self rejuvenating the autobiographical genre in comic books which has been lamented for having become overused and excessively solipsistic. Sacco's flamboyant expressionism opposes Brown's aesthetic of silence. Brown's silence is configured so that it is not an absence of speech, but a suppression of it in which attention is continually being drawn to the unspoken. A close analysis of Sacco and Brown's comics reveals the different ways in which their complementary aesthetics construct different subject positions for the reader. Sacco simulates a sense of being there and uses his subjectivity as a vehicle for drawing a reader in, while Brown's *Louis Riel* collapses these distinctions between absence and presence such that there is no point of entry into the work with which a reader can sustain illusory bonds of identification.

RESUME:

Joe Sacco et Chester Brown sont deux artistes qui ont évolués durant (et ont étés grandement influencé par) le mouvement des bandes dessinées autobiographique des années 80 et 90. Cette thèse a pour but de démontrer que les œuvres intitulées « Palestine » (réalisée par Sacco) et « Louis Riel » (réalisée par Brown) présentent une nouvelle approche au format de l'autobiographie, et donne à la fois un nouveau souffle à un genre de bande dessinée qui récemment c'était fait critiqué pour ces dépassements d'éthique égoïste. L'expressionnisme de Sacco est un vif contraste quand on le compare au style dit 'silencieux' de Brown. Brown utilise le silence de telle façon qu'on n'observe pas un manque d'expression verbale mais plutôt une méthode qui dirige l'attention du lecteur à ce qui est non dit. Une analyse détaillée des styles des deux auteurs démontre que certains de leurs attraits esthétiques sont en effet complémentaires dans le développement de différents points de vue pour le lecteur. Sacco, avec sa subjectivité, réussi à créer une sensation d'intimité et d'empathie de la part du lecteur. Brown par contre n'essaye pas de créer de lien entre le lecteur et le sujet, de sorte que le lecteur ne peut identifier avec l'œuvre et reste toujours à part des évènements tel un spectateur.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction - Looking Back.....2

Chapter 1 - From Underground to Autobiography:
The New Super-Antiheroes 11

Chapter 2 - Through Sacco's Looking Glass:
The Self, The Other and The Audience.....28

Chapter 3 - Chester Brown's Unreflective Mirror:
The Aesthetics of Silence in *Louis Riel*.....70

Conclusion - Looking Ahead.....117

Works Cited.....121

Introduction – Looking Back

In 1989, Joseph Witek published a pioneering work in the field of comics scholarship titled *Comics As History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar.* Witek analyzes the development of fact-based comics and the relationship of these artists' stylistic techniques to their representations of historical "reality." Witek examines this cluster of comics artists who grew out of the underground comix movement, looking at the rhetorical modes within which they place their historical narratives. Pekar's work is committed to a social realism that unrelentingly centers attention on the details and complexity of ordinary life. Spiegelman's *Maus* uses Art's relationship with his father Vladek, an Auschwitz survivor, as a framing device for depicting World War II and the Holocaust. Jackson's critically examines historically neglected moments of American Southwestern history through biographies of forgotten figures such as the half-white Comanche chieftain Quanah Parker and the Tejano leader Juan Seguin. Witek examines the different ways in which each artist subjectively represents varying degrees of collective and personal history—from Pekar's *American Splendor* which filters world events indirectly through the rhythm of quotidian living, to Spiegelman's auto/biography, to Jackson's work which doesn't rely explicitly on an autobiographical approach, but speaks to Jackson's identity as a Texan and, as with the other two, invokes the zeitgeist of underground comix.

At the time Witek was writing his book that would become a classic of critical literary analysis in the field of comics scholarship, a new generation of comics creators were beginning to surface who were the cultural progeny of the artists that Witek was examining. Artists such as Chester Brown, Dan Clowes, Julie Doucet, the Hernandez brothers, Joe Matt and Joe Sacco are just a few of the younger artists who were being

directly informed by this earlier generation, and who have been retrospectively historicized as the new wave of alternative cartoonists.[1]

In this paper, I have chosen to analyze Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2001) and Chester Brown's *Louis Riel* (2003). *Palestine* was first published as a nine issue, two volume series written between 1993 and early 1994 and then collected into one volume. *Louis Riel* was published as a ten issue serial between 1999-2003 and then revised and republished into a collected volume in 2003. Sacco and Brown are inheritors of the cultural legacy of the earlier generation of adult comics creators.[2] Brown's biography of a figure from 19th century Canadian history is reminiscent of Jackson's biography of Quanah Parker, a man who was of mixed heritage and mediated between two ethnically divided groups. However, Brown's economical and iconic drawing style is closer to the defamiliarizing techniques Spiegelman uses in *Maus* with his minimally drawn "funny animals" that stand in for and self-consciously mask historically real people. On the other hand, Sacco's style can be seen as a combination of Spiegelman's narrative approach of examining a global crisis through the lens of personal history with the painstakingly detailed cartoon realism of Jackson's war histories.

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[1] This is not to say that earlier artists were not still active at this time. Harvey Pekar, Art Spiegelman and Jack Jackson, for example, were contemporaries of this younger generation and are still actively producing comics to this date. For a discussion of the transformation of alternative comics in the eighties and nineties, see for example, Roger Sabin's chapter "Alternative Visions" in *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels*, 176-215.

[2] Jackson's drawing style is rooted in the sensationalistic, yet historically accurate cartoon realism of Harvey Kurtzman's E.C. war comics. Witek has labelled Kurtzman's war comics "the first antiwar comics in the history of the medium" (37). These are an even earlier forerunner in theme and style to those comics of Sacco's which examine the consequences of war and violent conflict on human beings.

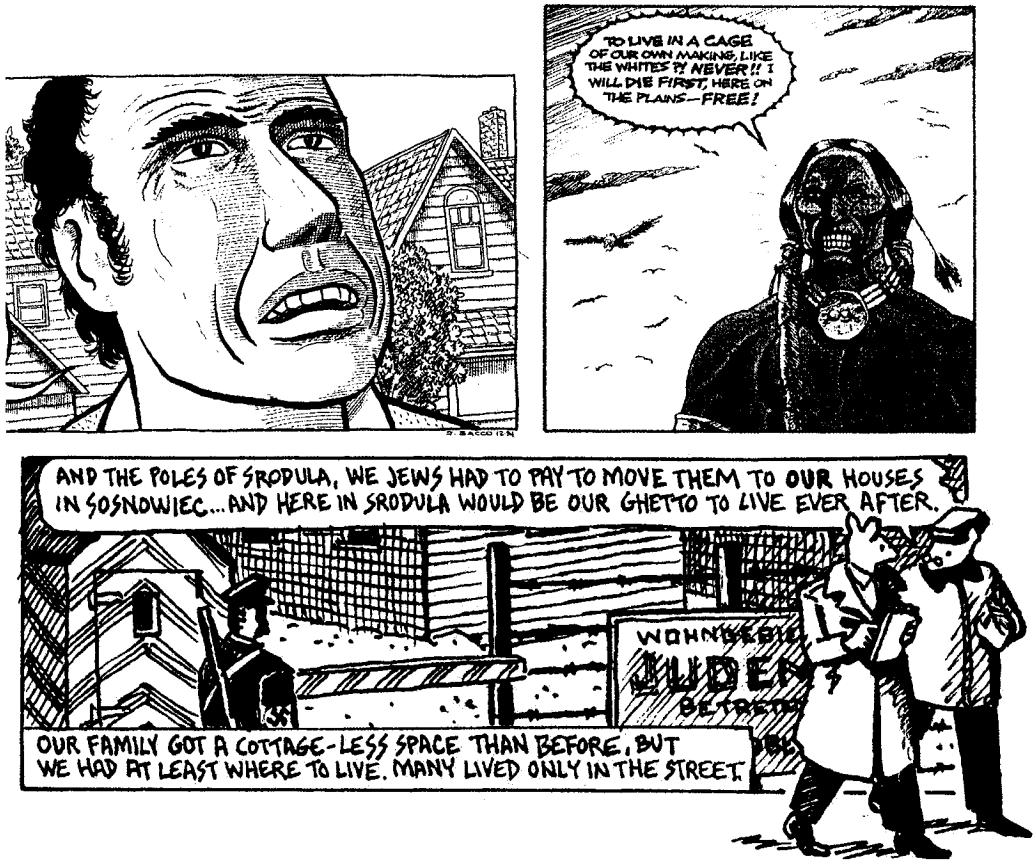


Figure 1. A sampling of panels from the works of (clockwise) Pekar (drawn by Sacco), Jackson, and Spiegelman (Pekar 6, Jackson 100, Spiegelman 105).

If Brown and Sacco are directly indebted to artists like Pekar, Spiegelman and Jackson, this thesis is directly indebted to Witek for his study. The first time I read *Comics as History*, I was excited about the idea that I could analyze comics not just in terms of broad historical and biographical overviews or from a pop cultural perspective, but that it was possible to devote comprehensive formal analysis and close readings to the works of individual artists. Witek was by no means the first or exclusive scholar to adopt this approach. Yet, it was reading his book that made me want to tell another chapter in the work Witek had undertook and to extend his effort of examining comics as history.

In *Palestine* and *Louis Riel,* Sacco and Brown choose to write stories about dispossessed peoples. The Canadian Métis, like the Palestinians, existed on land that was

seized by a young nation with indeterminate geographical boundaries. In both situations, their antagonists regard the two groups as being less civilized than themselves. The ethnicity of these subaltern figures serves to place them in opposition to their more powerful adversaries. Sacco and Brown write and draw what Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* describes as "the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees" (5).

On one level, my decision to build an analysis around *Palestine* and *Louis Riel* was personal and pragmatic. Here was an opportunity to put the hundreds of dollars invested in comics from the publishing houses Drawn & Quarterly and Fantagraphics to good use! Dollars aside, Brown and Sacco make up a productive dyad around which to focus a discussion of historical representation in comics. While there is a thematic similarity in *Palestine* and *Louis Riel*, and both artists emerge out of the autobiographical subgenre of comics from the eighties and nineties, they offer two agonistic approaches to fact-based storytelling.

This paper will be divided into three chapters. The introduction provides an examination of the relationship of Brown and Sacco's comics to the history of adult, independent comics as well as the particular impact autobiography has had on the medium. In chapter two, I will evaluate the techniques through which Sacco's persona and signature drawing style shape an ideal reader's response. The final chapter then contrasts the subjectivity in *Palestine* with the submerged subjectivity in Brown's *Louis Riel*. I analyze Brown's articulation of self through his manipulation of the serial form, the austere silencing of his protagonist and the minimalist aesthetic of silence he applies to his graphic storytelling.

In this thesis, I assume that as opposed to expressing unmediated historical facts, the content of the form exists in a tension with the professed subject matter of these comics. The formal and stylistic elements lead the reader away from the announced political and social content of the work—content that is immediately suggested by the titles of the comics—and they foreground the subjectivity of Brown and Sacco. What is revealed is that *Palestine* is as much about Joe Sacco as it is about Palestine, and that *Louis Riel* is as much about Chester Brown as it is about Louis Riel. This is rooted in the autobiographical modes they developed in their earlier works

Grounding *Palestine* in Sacco's selfhood does not result in solipsism. Although *Palestine* lacks a traditional story arc, the force of Sacco's personality moves the plot. One of Sacco's most effective techniques for drawing the reader into the story is the creation of a persona through whose eyes the audience interprets the events. In *The Role of the Reader*, Umberto Eco formulates a theory of "open" and "closed" texts. An "open text" allows for a promiscuity of interpretations and a "closed text" prescriptively cues a reader's response. Eco's oppositions interact with each other dialectically to the point where he ultimately confounds these binary distinctions by arguing that no text is either infinitely or purely "open" or "closed." He declares of the "open" text that "[y]ou cannot use the open text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it" (9) and even the most "closed" of texts "is in the last analysis randomly open to every pragmatic accident" (8). It is in this troubled space of Eco's paradigm that I situate the method Sacco uses in *Palestine* of manipulating an imagined reader or "model reader," to borrow Eco's terminology. Sacco's persona is the audience surrogate throughout *Palestine*. The perimeters of Sacco's "open" text are enclosed by the conditions of his subjectivity. Sacco's cipher-like persona clears a space for reader participation while simultaneously

circumscribing the limits of this interpretative freedom. This offers an effective means of manufacturing the reader's consent.

While it is essential to situate Sacco within the context of adult comics, it is equally important to locate him in the tradition of the New Journalists and their declared objective of charting a new form of literary realism. In keeping with the ethos of New Journalism, Sacco's realist style is not employed to establish a unified aesthetic discourse for representing the "real," but is employed to produce a powerful sense of reader identification. As Witek has remarked of "realism," it is "a conspiracy between writer and reader, not an essential relation between certain texts and the world of experience" (116). For both the New Journalists and Sacco, the central function of this conspiracy is to enable a reader to be completely absorbed and to feel as if they were inhabiting the world being depicted.

My thesis will demonstrate how the reader is interpellated into Sacco's shifting subject position of the cosmopolitan voyager/voyeur through his free-indirect drawing style. Sacco as protagonist, narrator and authorial presence cannot be conflated in this multi-voiced play between subject and object in the text. This free-indirect style of drawing shapes the mise en scène to sometimes express and sometimes ironically critique the attitudes of Sacco the protagonist. The expressionistic drawing saturates the comic with a highly subjective point of view that is associated with these multiple manifestations of Joe Sacco. Furthermore, as *Palestine* progresses, Sacco begins to develop a more realistic mode of drawing which reflects his growing awareness of and sympathy with the Palestinians he is encountering.

Although Sacco's persona is an audience surrogate, we are not completely aligned with this point of view. What emerges from *Palestine*'s drawings is a critique of this

persona as the cosmopolitan voyager/voyeur. Sacco's otherness, sense of alienation and ambivalence towards his own subject position is expressed through the representation of the impossibility of his inhabiting the perspective of the Palestinians trapped in internecine war.

If Sacco's affective and expressionistic style foregrounds his subjectivity and calls upon the reader to occupy this subject position, Brown's style, characterized by a lack of affect and expressionism provides a radical juxtaposition. Brown's surreal drawings do not evoke a naturalistic 19th century environment, but rather a barren and defamiliarized psychical landscape. I argue that Brown's aesthetics work to position him as the central subject of the comic, while at the same time foiling attempts by his audience to make meaning from this. I further argue that this stylistic slight of hand is replicated through Brown's presentation of his work as a historical process. For Brown, the publication of a text never implies that it is complete, but he redraws panels and publishes his revised work in different contexts, thus altering the way it is perceived. By refusing to divorce the work from its creator and the historical process of creation, the reader's attention is once again funneled back to Brown and away from Louis Riel. Meaning is deflected, in this case through its deferral, sabotaging one's ability to interpret Brown's comics.

The minimalist aesthetic of silence in *Louis Riel* would seem to create an "open" text because there is so much possibility for the reader to fill in what is literally the blank space of the comic. However, Eco theorized that "[a] text so immoderately 'open' to every possible interpretation will be a *closed* one" (8). In keeping with this position, I argue that despite the fact that all texts are made available to errant readings, Brown's rhetorical strategy of silence resists readers' attempts to colonize the empty space with their own meaning. While Sacco's persona loudly summons the attention of an audience,

Brown effaces his authorial presence. Paradoxically, by being effaced it exerts an even greater force. By being absent, the figure of authority becomes more present.

Palestine and *Louis Riel* announce a new way of treating comics as autobiography, thus revitalizing a genre in comic books that has been attacked as stale and derivative. Sacco's *Palestine*, which chronicles his journeys through the Occupied Territories, is more patently autobiographical than *Louis Riel,* since Sacco figures as both character and narrator in his story. Nevertheless, Brown's emphasis throughout the publication of *Louis Riel* on his own process of historical exploration (in particular in the extensive notes and responses to reader feedback that appeared throughout the *Louis Riel* series) draw attention to the artist's own investment in the narrative, rendering Brown into an invisible, omnipresent figure. What the reader finds in *Louis Riel* is not just a "comic strip biography" of one of Canada's most nebulous figures, as the subtitle of the comic indicates, but a "comic strip autobiography." Brown's *Louis Riel* is a form of autobiography masquerading as a "comic book biography" in which the reader's attempt to identify with either Brown or his historical characters is constantly subverted. Brown's surreal, minimalist drawings and emotionally flat narrative resist a reader's endeavor to find a point of entry into the narrative. Brown's characters remain as flat as the paper on which they are drawn, with no gestures toward latent meanings.

Unlike Sacco whose style is more traditional in that it experiments with a wide range of flashy, dramatic techniques designed to hook the reader, Brown resists the stylistic conventions of both mainstream comics and the underground comix tradition with his "less is more" aesthetic. *Louis Riel* reflects Brown's individualism. My paper will explore the irony that Brown's commitment to freedom of expression is articulated

through a compulsively literal narrative about one of Canada's most controversial icons that is rendered in a linear, uniformly paced and tightly controlled style.

Chapter 1 – From Underground to Autobiography: The New Super-Antiheroes

Before discussing their respective works, Sacco and Brown should be further situated in relation to the history of comics, and particularly adult comics in North America. Both artists began their work in the eighties. The eighties were a time of great hope and speculation for comics. As Scott McCloud remembers in *Reinventing Comics,* "I felt, as many in my generation did, that American comics were about to come together in a big way" (8–9). McCloud is referring not only to a renaissance in artistic production, but to the growth of specialty comic book stores. Unfortunately, this boom in the comics industry was short lived and in the late nineties the industry's bubble burst and it suffered a major economic depression that drove many of these specialty shops out of business. Brown and Sacco began their careers in the eighties during this period of prosperity. Both survived the downturn by moving outside of the limited market for comics to gain a wider audience. This was partially accomplished by producing works in "graphic novel" format which would sell more easily than serials in bookstores.

However, prior to this flourishing in independent titles in the eighties, comics in North America had endured a long struggle in order to expand beyond their stereotyped identity as mass cultural children's products. As Eco theorizes, there is a limit to interpretive license and a reader must use a text on the terms that the text demands. Reading Brown and Sacco's work as "auteur comics," as I do in this paper, is determined by the text. However, to be at liberty to even examine a work in relation to the inscribed authorial presence is not something that should be taken for granted. In North America, it was not until the sixties and seventies, with the advances of underground comix, that comics began to be perceived as more than a commercially profitable culture industry.

Unlike their European and Asian counterparts, American comics have been more tightly limited by prejudice and expectations about the form. The cultivation of comics as a medium of artistic experimentation and socially relevant messages was difficult for mainstream society to accept. This was on account of the industry imposed Comics Code Authority,[3] the domination of comics by corporations with eyes on profit margins more than on the panel margins, and the widespread perception of comics as low culture (owing to the strict allegiance to both the Code and commercial mass market).

The underground comix movement can be understood in terms of both the history of the medium as well as in relationship to the hippie counterculture to which it was symbiotically attached. The graphic depictions of sex, violence, drugs and radical politics were a direct "fuck you" to the draconian Comics Code and the almost exclusively commercial context of mass culture in which comics had been situated in North American society. Comics were a perfect medium for sending a subversive message because they were so heavily controlled and monitored and they had yet to be regarded as an art form.

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[3] If the history of comics needs a villain, Fredric Wertham would be the arch-nemesis. His book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), from which Wertham then subsequently culled most of his material for the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency the same year his book was published, was an invective against the comics industry that not only put certain publishing houses such as Bill Gaines' EC Comics out of business, but led to the implementation of the Comics Code in 1954. The Comics Code continues to be used today in a revised version. Wertham himself did not approve of the Comics Code Authority because he saw it as an effective public relations gambit made by the industry to silence criticisms without altering the overall content of comics. Superheroes could still solve problems using violence, but artists just had to make sure to leave the bloodstains off of their capes. As much as comic fans may have pointed the finger at Wertham and the moral majority, the Comics Code was a strict form of censorship not imposed from without, but preemptively instituted by the industry. The sacrificial lamb was EC comics and the entire genre of crime and horror comics whose production was ceased entirely. The most unfortunate consequence of the Comics Code was that it drove out of business the more politically critical and artistically innovative titles. For a history of Wertham and comic book censorship see Amy Nyberg's *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*.

Prior to the undergrounds, comics were understood primarily as an industry, specifically a culture industry directed toward children. This made the content of the underground comics all the more outrageous and shocking, especially when the artists aped the disarmingly friendly and accessible visual style of mainstream comics. Although there were historical precursors for the underground artists in the form of adult-oriented comics such as pre-code EC Comics, *Mad Magazine* and early avant-garde newspaper strips like *Krazy Kat* or the work of newspaper strip artist and animator Winsor McCay, it is difficult to think of underground comix without understanding them in terms of what they were retaliating against.[4]

The underground comix movement was not organized. The artists were never bound by a manifesto or a unified group of values. In a "nutshell" version of the movement, underground comix can be seen as coming into being with the publication of R. Crumb's *Zap #1* in San Francisco in 1968 and the decline can be dated to around 1973 when R. Crumb's *Zap #4* was declared obscene in New York after a trial that lasted several years. However, the beginning and ending of a cultural movement is never a tidy affair. In his book *Rebel Visions*, Patrick Rosenkranz satirizes the attempt to historicize the underground comix moment:

> This year [2002], we celebrate the 34th anniversary of underground comix, which began in February 1968 when Robert Crumb sold *Zap Comics #1* on Haight Street. No, wait! It could be considered the 36th anniversary, because Joel Beck published *Lenny of Laredo* in 1966. But hold on, it might really be the 38th anniversary because Gilbert Shelton published Frank Stack's *The Adventures of Jesus* at the

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[4] See Roger Sabin's *Adult Comics: An Introduction* for an overview of pre-underground pioneers and precursors.

> University of Texas in 1964, and that same year Jaxon published *God Nose*. But then what about *The Cartoon History of Surfing*, drawn by Rick Griffin and published by Greg Noll in 1963? Damn it! What anniversary is it? It was underground. So who knows? (3)

The underground comix movement rose and fell with hippie counterculture. Held together by the Vietnam War, this counterculture lost its relevance after the United States pulled out completely in 1975. Around the same time, head shops, which were the main source of distribution for underground comix, were shut down in America as a result of new "anti-paraphernalia" laws. The downward turn the economy took between 1974-75 was a terrible blow for comic artists struggling to produce art and still eat. Historian Mark Estren comments on the recession saying, "comics may not have been drawn for economic reasons, but economic realities still hit hard" (10). And R. Crumb's work was not the only target of obscenity busts. A series of crackdowns put pressure on comic sellers to police themselves or risk costly lawsuits.

Despite the anticorporate stance of nearly all underground cartoonists, one of the most important consequences of the underground movement was the shift it made toward empowering artists and altering the way comics were distributed through a new method called direct market distribution. Sacco and Brown are not only the inheritors of the underground's creative legacy, but also of the new modes of distribution it established. Under the old industry-dominated system, a retailer would request a certain number of issues of a comic and then have the right to return unsold copies. With direct market sales, the retailer was not allowed to return the comics, but would keep them until they sold. Unlike those working for the larger comics publishers (Marvel, DC, DC Thomson, IPC), creators retained all the rights to their work and characters and would receive

royalties. Since print-runs of small press or self-published comics were so small, profits were not very substantial. But as Roger Sabin notes in *Adult Comics*, this system "did at least secure an equal distribution of poverty" (45) and allowed artists to bypass the Code. By the eighties, direct market distribution would grow to be a competitive force and establish both a culture and market for adult comics.

Prior to the underground comix, mainstream publishing houses had discouraged artists from even signing their name to their work. Without a star system, costs could be kept down and a factory style system of production could be used to generate products efficiently and regularly. Roger Sabin locates the evolution of the star system in comics with the introduction of the direct market (*Adult Comics* 67). Underground comix asserted the importance of the name which was signed to the work.

Attention was drawn to the author of a comic not only because the underground and alternative artists had established a community of readers who valued the name that signed the work, but also because many of the stories being published were largely autobiographical. As Charles Hatfield notes in his introduction to the autobiographical anthology *Streetwise*, "The underground is our inevitable point of departure for discussing today's alternative comics, and the rise of autobiography in particular" (9). An explanation for why autobiography became such a popular genre in adult comics is that it was a reaction against the escapist fantasies in mainstream comics. Underground comix were fueled by radical individualism and a desire to push the limits of free expression, making autobiography a productive genre in which to work because it served as a gritty antidote to and retaliation against the flights from reality that dominated the comics market.

Phillip Lejeune in "The Autobiographical Pact" has argued that the act of recognizing a work as autobiography is the result of a contract between creator and reader: "What defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name. And this is true also for the one who is writing the text" (19). Since there is little difference between the rhetorical devices for fact-based literature and for fictional literature, Lejeune argues that the main distinction is that there is a tacit agreement taken by the reader on an act of faith that the stories have a referent in reality.

The assigning of what Foucault termed an "author function" to a work alters the performance of reading by demanding that a reader direct his or her attention toward a metatextual figure who informs and guides their interpretive practices. Foucault's essay "What is an author" theorizes the way the concept of an "author" functions in a text:

> The author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. [...] The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning. (118-19)

Foucault argues that the role of the author in a text is not to produce meaning, but rather to limit it. And it is in the content of the form that I believe the most revealing traces of this restrictive "author function" are embedded in the comics that I am discussing. These traces not only articulate the encounter between the writer and subject matter, but they also project an imaginary subject position that cues the reader on how to interpret the

work.

An example of the way in which the content of the form is linked to the concept of an authorial identity as it relates to drawing style can be seen in R. Crumb and Aline Kominsky's collaborative, autobiographical work *Self-Loathing #2*. In *Self-Loathing #2*, Charles Burns makes a guest appearance along with Art Spiegelman and Peter Poplaski. Each artist draws him or herself. The comic becomes a forum in which they discuss the relationship of their work to a concept of self. In one scene, Burns drawn in the Crumb style is depicted sweating profusely and having an anxiety attack while examining some drawing boards of the current issue of *Self-Loathing*. The tension mounts as Burns finds himself increasingly imprisoned in the claustrophobic, neurotically crosshatched style of drawing (see figure 2). When the reader turns the page, Burns "bursts" out of Crumb's drawings into his own signature style exclaiming "Ahh! There! That's better! Ummm...The Darkness! Soothing black ink! Hard straight lines! Ahh! Uhnn! Uh!" (8).



Figure 2. Cartoonists call attention to the marriage of style and selfhood (8).



Figure 3: Charles Burns finds himself (13).

The content of the form can act in harmony with a story or it can send contradictory messages that read against the storyline. Burns' incarceration within Crumb's style externalizes this dialectic between form and content. In *Self-Loathing #2,* Kominsky further shows the importance of form when her persona makes the comment "Sorry I look completely different in every panel...but that's how much I change to myself" (17). Unlike Burns who seeks the comfort of a set style and by extension, identity, Kominsky shows the close relationship between her drawings and a self-image that is in a constant state of transformation. In *Self-Loathing #2*, Burns and Kominsky view their drawing styles as direct and essential expressions of self.

The sorties into autobiography which the undergrounds initiated would allow for

advances into much broader territory by Chester Brown and Joe Sacco's generation of comics artists. The eighties and early nineties saw a flourishing in the genre of autobiographical comics, particularly in Canada. Chris Oliveros' Montreal-based publishing house Drawn and Quarterly gathered under its roof a group of independent artists which included Brown. Brown was part of a vibrant Canadian alternative comics scene. Julie Doucet, Chester Brown, Joe Matt and Seth all had radically different styles, but were grounded in autobiographical modes of storytelling.

Chester Brown, Joe Matt and Seth, all based in Toronto, incorporated into their friendship the stories they drew. Their use of each other as characters generated a cult of personality around the three comic book auteurs. In Joe Matt's *Jam Sketchbook* (1998), which was a series of comic book jam strips that Matt organized between 1995-1998, there is a short collaborative comic strip in which Matt, Brown and Seth satirically portray their collective popularity.



Figure 4. Stan Lee is rejected in Brown, Matt and Seth's collaborative strip (69).

In the strip, an arrogant man whom Joe identifies as Stan Lee, the creator of Marvel's line of "superheroes with super problems" such as The Fantastic Four, Spiderman, The Hulk and X-Men, walks in while the three play cards. He sports dark sunglasses that approximate, but are not quite the signature dark sunglasses associated with the living Stan Lee. The man approaches the three eagerly: "There's quite a buzz about you guys down in L.A...'Toronto three'—Hip!" (69) Interestingly, Chester as drawn by Joe Matt refuses to accept Stan Lee's identity while Joe Matt as drawn by Brown is in awe. The final panel, drawn by Seth, depicts Chester yelling ,"Go away you old bum! We hate you!!" as Joe Matt is depicted falling backwards with only his feet showing, in what is an iconic symbol of cartoon astonishment (69). The short strip shows a moment of collaboration between the three artists who represent themselves in opposition to a pseudo-Stan Lee. Stan Lee, who has in many ways operated as the arbiter of taste in mainstream comics, symbolizes the potential for the cooptation of their personae into the mainstream—they are the new comic book heroes. Brown, Matt and Seth satirize their marketability as three close friends, actively publishing their respective series and poised at the time, as the pseudo-Lee points out, to be a Torontonian triumvirate in the comics community. While the work is more of a gag strip, ending with the one-panel punch-line of uncharacteristically hostile Chester making Stan Lee cry, than a commentary on the men's position within the subculture of comics, it does expose how connected each artist's persona is to his work.[5]

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[5] Another collaborative strip between Joe Matt and Seth in Matt's *Jam Sketchbook* involves an encounter with a famous cartoonist: they depict themselves going to visit Charles Schulz. When Schulz opens the door to greet them, they tie him up and begin lecturing him on the wrong direction in which they believe he took *Peanuts*, particularly with the creation of Woodstock. The scene is interrupted by the appearance of a

Their choice of Stan Lee as a foil in this strip is appropriate because of his contribution to comics not only as an impresario, but also as a writer. Stan Lee's writing was successful because of the formula he advanced of taking contemporary social issues and "realistically" depicting superheroes with recognizably human problems. His comics were as socially relevant and urbane as they could be while still working within the guidelines of the stultifying Comics Code, which demanded that "in every instance good shall triumph over evil" (Nyberg 165).[6] Furthermore, Lee established a style of comic book narration in which the objective, third person narration of traditional comics is replaced with a quirky, first person narrator. "Stan Lee" was the reader's flamboyant guide through the fictive universe. While Lee imported reality into fantasy, Matt's collaborative strip points to the way in which the new wave of autobiographical cartoonists sought to convert reality into fantasy by establishing themselves as characters in their stories.[7] The pleasure of Matt's newspaper style gag strip is derived from the

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potbellied figure with Snoopy's head whom they refer to as "The Snoopy Lady." "The Snoopy Lady" rescues Schulz and violently kicks Joe and Seth out. Seth and Joe then urinate on a hedge in the shape of Woodstock and Joe vacates his bowels on Schulz's lawn. In the final panel, a copy of the Monday morning comics is shown in which Schulz has drawn Snoopy imitating Joe by vacating his bowels muttering, "And here's something for that Woodstock bastard" (5). Matt and Seth are drawing attention to the intense self-figuration in *Peanuts*, which although not explicitly autobiographical, was beloved by so many readers because it conveyed so much of Schulz's personality and incorporated events from his life into his work. Matt and Seth's strip shows the crosspollination between art and life, and the gag delivered at the end is that Schulz has taken their belligerently delivered advice and incorporated their thinking into his own work. In this scene, Matt and Seth's Schulz has adopted a tone that is much closer to the black humor of underground and alternative comics than the milquetoast humor that pervades much of syndicated newspaper strips.

[6] This rule was removed from the revised versions in 1971 and 1989.

[7] Seth had a pseudo-autobiographical storyline in his comic in *Palookaville* about a search for an obscure *New Yorker* artist named Kalo in which Chester Brown appeared as a character. Seth deceived his readers into thinking Kalo had actually existed. He only later revealed that the story about his introspective search for the obscure cartoonist was a fabrication.

understanding that these characters refer back to living persons, while recognizing that there is a lack of equivalency between the artist and their flat, caricatured personae who interact in fictional scenarios.

This collaborative strip places the three autobiographical cartoonists in opposition to Stan Lee and superhero comics, the juggernaut of the comics world. However, while superhero comics may have enjoyed a significant amount of cultural hegemony, they have not received critical validation in the same way the less popular autobiographical comics have. When Will Eisner makes the sweeping claim in *Streetwise* that, "[a]rguably the most important development in the history of comic books has been autobiography" (5), he is referring to the way in which autobiographical comics have thrust the medium onto a new stage in which it could be considered equal to text-based literature and might flourish, having been awarded a new respectability by North American cultural elites.

The twentieth century witnessed the expansion of both the fields of life writing and comics. This has been followed by the growth of scholarship and criticism in these areas. James Olney, a scholar of autobiography, has remarked that "Autobiography, like the life it mirrors, refuses to stay still long enough for the genre critic to fit it out with the necessary rules, laws, contracts, and pacts; it refuses, simply, to be a literary genre like any other" (24-25). However, as expansive and amorphous as the concept of autobiography has been theorized to be by Olney, it is still a historically specific discursive act. In *Reading Autobiography,* Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson provide a history of the term "autobiography". Their point of departure is the early modern period in Western civilization and the "rise of the self-interested individual intent on assessing the status of the soul or the meaning of public achievement" (2). Smith and Watson then

move to contemporary visions of autobiography in which this model of an essential, unified self has been substituted for a more polyphonic vision of identity. The understanding of autobiography is being constantly renegotiated and shaped by the cultures in which it is located.

Since 1976 when he began serializing his life in *American Splendor,* Harvey Pekar has been one of the most dogged users of autobiography in comics. In an interview with Gary Groth in *The Comics Journal #162*, a special autobiographical comics issue, Pekar places his autobiographical work in opposition to genre literature. In the same way Brown, Seth and Matt's collaborative strip set them against Stan Lee, Pekar makes superhero comics his target:

> Pekar: Autobiography is not genre literature, whereas the stuff they do at DC and Marvel *is* genre literature. You know, there are parameters within which Marvel and DC writers have to stay, and that means they're limited...
>
> Groth: *[Autobiography doesn't] have self-limiting boundaries?*
>
> Pekar: That's right. Science fiction fans and mystery fans want their stuff written to conform, to fall within certain parameters, to follow certain rules...Autobiography does not have those kind of fans, does not have the kind of readership that demands certain kinds of heroes[...]. [I]t's a non-genre form. (38)

Pekar argues, as does Olney, for the privileged position of autobiography as a kind of antigenre. While Pekar does not explicitly define his understanding of "genre" and "autobiography," an implicit definition emerges in which genre is negatively associated with formula fiction. Whether it is formulae set by the industry or the expectations of fans, genre literature leaves little room for creative autonomy, and this, *ipso facto*, is

grounds for Pekar to dismiss these works as literary ephemera. While both Pekar and Olney argue that the uniqueness of autobiography is in its amorphousness, I would suggest that their desire to privilege the mode as a literary form might blind them to the fact that such flexibility is not exclusive to the realm of autobiography, but it is in many ways characteristic of the entire study of genre. As David Buckingham remarks "genre is not... simply 'given' by the culture: rather, it is in a constant process of negotiation and change" (137). The circumscribing of generic conventions is not a neutral act. This is evident in the way Pekar defines autobiography in relation to genre literature as a way of strengthening his position. Pekar's elitist thinking about genre does not acknowledge that auteurist comics which put emphasis on artistic self-expression and mould-breaking might constitute a viable genre in which these are the key elements to the formula.

Despite Pekar's antigeneric claims for autobiographical comics, there has been a certain amount of consistency in the types of autobiographical comics being produced. In many ways, the story of the independent cartoonist's development has followed a conventional script. R. Crumb has acted as the luminary for later generations of cartoonists serving as both inspiration as well as constant source of anxiety. The character of the obsessive compulsive, gawky cartoonist who is sexually frustrated, immersed in nostalgia for the past, harboring various levels of misanthropy and almost invariably white and middle class is a well-worn formula in comics. In a group interview with Brown, Matt and Seth in a special autobiographical issue of *The Comics Journal*, they express their mixed feelings towards the inescapable influence of Crumb in a group interview with Mark Daly and Rich Kreiner:

Matt: Like, I feel I have way too much in common with Crumb, and that bothers me [...] his neurotic behavior...

Seth: It's too small. There's too few people doing it. You start to say, "Well, obviously if I'm neurotic and I'm thinking about sex all the time, I'm just like Crumb!" There's not the wide spectrum of people all over who...

Matt: The nature of cartoonists, though, have an awful lot in common. The introspective nature...

Seth: I know what you mean. I worry about being like Crumb too, because I'm so interested in the '30s... But I think when it really comes down to it, you may have a lot in common with the other cartoonists but your life stories are different enough that that's not really a big worry. That's the whole point of doing autobiography. It's how you related to things... His influence was formative and you're speaking what you're about.

Brown: Certainly all of us could do stories that would concentrate on how we're just like Crumb and we could make it seem that we're just like Crumb. Also we could do stories that make us seem completely unlike Crumb, because, in fact, we are different people. (Daly 54-55)

While Matt and Seth recognize that their work is affected by the unique historical circumstances of the place of comics in society and the influence of a few preeminent figures such as Crumb in establishing both certain styles and themes in comics, Brown's response to the issue is a bit pat. His assumption that being a different person will somehow necessarily result in a different story is almost an evasion of the fact that even amongst an "alternative" tradition, certain master narratives emerge as models for constructing identity. However, he does not refute Crumb's impact, merely the potential consequences it has on artistic production.

Perhaps because of the popularity of autobiographical writers typified by Brown,

Seth and Matt, there has been a feeling since the late nineties that autobiographical comics—particularly those featuring neurotic white men tormented over sex—had spent its seed. With the growth in popularity of any genre, there follows the growth of hack imitators which has resulted in a growing disillusionment with the potential of autobiographical comics. In an article in *The Comics Journal* titled "Whatever Happened to Autobiographical Comics," Rich Kreiner expresses this idea when he suggests that the field of autobiographical comics "appears at once to be both over-harvested and under-cultivated" (54). Kreiner suggests that the drying up of sources for publication in the nineties has produced a conservative market that relies on only safe ventures. The result is that established artists are able to stay afloat, but the market goes stale from a lack of fresh talent being infused into the genre.

In answer to Kreiner's question of 'whatever happened to autobiographical comics?', I would suggest that they transformed into works such as those that I am discussing in this paper. Sacco's *Palestine*, for example, is a personal travelogue in which, basically, the North American "autobiographical cartoonist" is transplanted from a domestic setting into the Middle East. Sacco's comics journalism is factually accurate, yet rooted in a heavily personal and subjective style that is a holdover from his own earlier autobiographical comics. Chester Brown's *Louis Riel* can also be understood as a mutated form of autobiography in the way it operates for the reader as both an exploration of Brown's psyche as well as a retelling of highly selected events from Riel's life. Like *Palestine* does for Sacco, *Louis Riel* carries forward many issues from Brown's earlier autobiographical comics, such as his multivalent interest in themes such as religion and madness and the use of silence as discourse. One reviewer commented in the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* that, "Brown has invented a biographical form unique to his

medium. *Louis Riel* has too vivid a personal spin to pass as documentary, but it's not quite historical fiction" (Wolk). The two artists whom I will discuss in this paper have taken us beyond the traditional themes and techniques of comic book autobiography through their unique treatment of the content and form of their subject matter.

Chapter 2 – Through Sacco's Looking Glass: The Self, the Other and the Audience

Joe Sacco was born in Malta, but has led a peripatetic lifestyle spending his childhood in both Australia and America. He has traveled widely throughout Europe and lived in Berlin for two years. Some of these experiences are depicted in his collected early comics *Notes from a Defeatist* (2003). It wasn't until after graduating from the University of Oregon with a degree in journalism that Sacco found his voice in comics. His early autobiographical works are foretastes of the journalistic style of graphic storytelling that was introduced in *Palestine* (2001) and then continued in short journalistic pieces for newspapers and comics like *Safe-Area Gorazde* (2002), *Soba* (1998) and *The Fixer* (2003).[8]

There is a discernable trajectory in the evolution of Sacco's style. He has steadily moved towards more detailed, realistically drawn images while simultaneously creating more developed narratives by narrowing his focus geographically and concentrating on individual characters. For this paper I am going to examine *Palestine*. *Palestine* was Sacco's breakthrough comic in which he transfigured his former autobiographical approach into the signature style of comics journalism he has worked in ever since.

Palestine chronicles Sacco's experiences traveling through the Occupied Territories between 1991-1992. Unlike his later comics, which demonstrate a more self-assured hand and fleshier, less caricatured depictions of characters, *Palestine* is drawn in a much rawer, expressionistic mode that communicates a more immediate and intensified subjectivity. *Palestine* is an effort to mediate distance between an imagined Western reader and an often mystified and misrepresented flashpoint in the Middle East. This is accomplished through Sacco's persona, who is both *Palestine*'s protagonist and the audience surrogate. His stylistic techniques also articulate an authorial subjectivity that

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[8] Sacco is currently working on a not yet published story that revisits the Gaza strip. He juxtaposes an event in Palestinian history from 1956 with the present as a means of narrating not only the historical information he uncovered, but the process of uncovering that information.

has the function of drawing the audience in, making them receptive to receiving the messages in the comic.

Sacco's skillful manipulation of his persona is rooted in the fact that he was part of the group of autobiographical comics creators that flourished in the eighties, but he is even more heavily influenced by the techniques of the New Journalists. An examination of their relationship to Sacco's work reveals how his stylistic choices were heavily informed by their practices and values. Sacco shares one of the main goals of the New Journalists, namely the desire to engage a reader as much as possible by blending the stylistic elements of literary realism with journalistic nonfiction. At the same time, Sacco's persona, which shares many commonalities with the gonzo persona of Hunter S. Thompson, is a key element that guides the reader's response. Sacco hails a reader to identify with his perspective by departing from the detached and objective journalistic persona of traditional newspaper journalism.

Palestine is targeted toward an audience which has little knowledge of Middle Eastern politics. Sacco himself has said that the book was primarily "meant for an American audience" or "people who don't know anything about the [Israel-Palestine conflict]" (Tuhus-Dubrow). Sacco's persona is the young cosmopolitan traveler with whom the audience identifies. However, this connection between audience and persona does not exist in a simple one-to one correspondence because of the multiple ways in which Sacco manifests his subjectivity. In this paper I will refer to the authorial presence or "author function" in *Palestine* as "Sacco." When discussing his portrayal in the text I will use the term "Joe" and I will specify between Joe the narrator and Joe the participant (who are not always homologous). My analysis of the "audience" is text-based. When discussing this relationship between Sacco's subjectivity and the audience I am referring to the ideal, Western reader projected by the work who knows little of Middle Eastern politics.

In *Palestine,* the only recurring character is Joe. Neither Sacco's drawing style nor the other characters remain constant, but everything remains in a perpetual flux around his character (which is in itself a demonstration of Sacco's subjectivity). *Palestine* gives the reader a feeling of "channel surfing" as the storyline cuts from city to city. Almost no character is present for more than a chapter.

Sacco portrays Joe as fallible and self-deprecatingly depicts him as a wimpy, horny antihero who is a familiar figure in underground comics. The reader is asked to sympathize and become further invested in this position that literally is that of the "average Joe"—average of course being coded as a young, white, Western male.

Sacco has on multiple occasions described *Palestine* as "organic."[9] What he is referring to is the fluidity of *Palestine* which operates episodically and passes from topic to topic using stream of consciousness logic. Part of this is a result of the way in which Sacco wrote the comic in installments and published them in serialized format over ten issues. The stylistic transformation also reflects Joe's shifting impressions of the Middle East. *Palestine* is initially drawn in a cartoony, exaggerated style marked by overt cynicism and black humour (see figure 5). The story begins *in medias res* with a dizzying scene of drinking in Cairo. Every sentence is punctuated by an exclamation mark as the text captions swirl and snake to the ground.[10] The page's central image is one of Joe's drinking companions laughing maniacally. The reader is immediately thrown into a loud, disorienting whirlwind of text and image. The visual chaos reflects Joe's disorientation.

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[9] He describes *Palestine* in this way in his interview for January Magazine, his interview with Gary Groth for *The Comics Journal* (59) and in "Questions and Answers with Joe Sacco" which is part of Fantagraphics promotional website. <http://www.fantagraphics.com/artist/sacco/sacco_qa.html>.

[10] The breaking up of the narration into small text boxes for dramatic effect which are then given further meaning by their strategic placement on a page is a unique feature of Sacco's work.

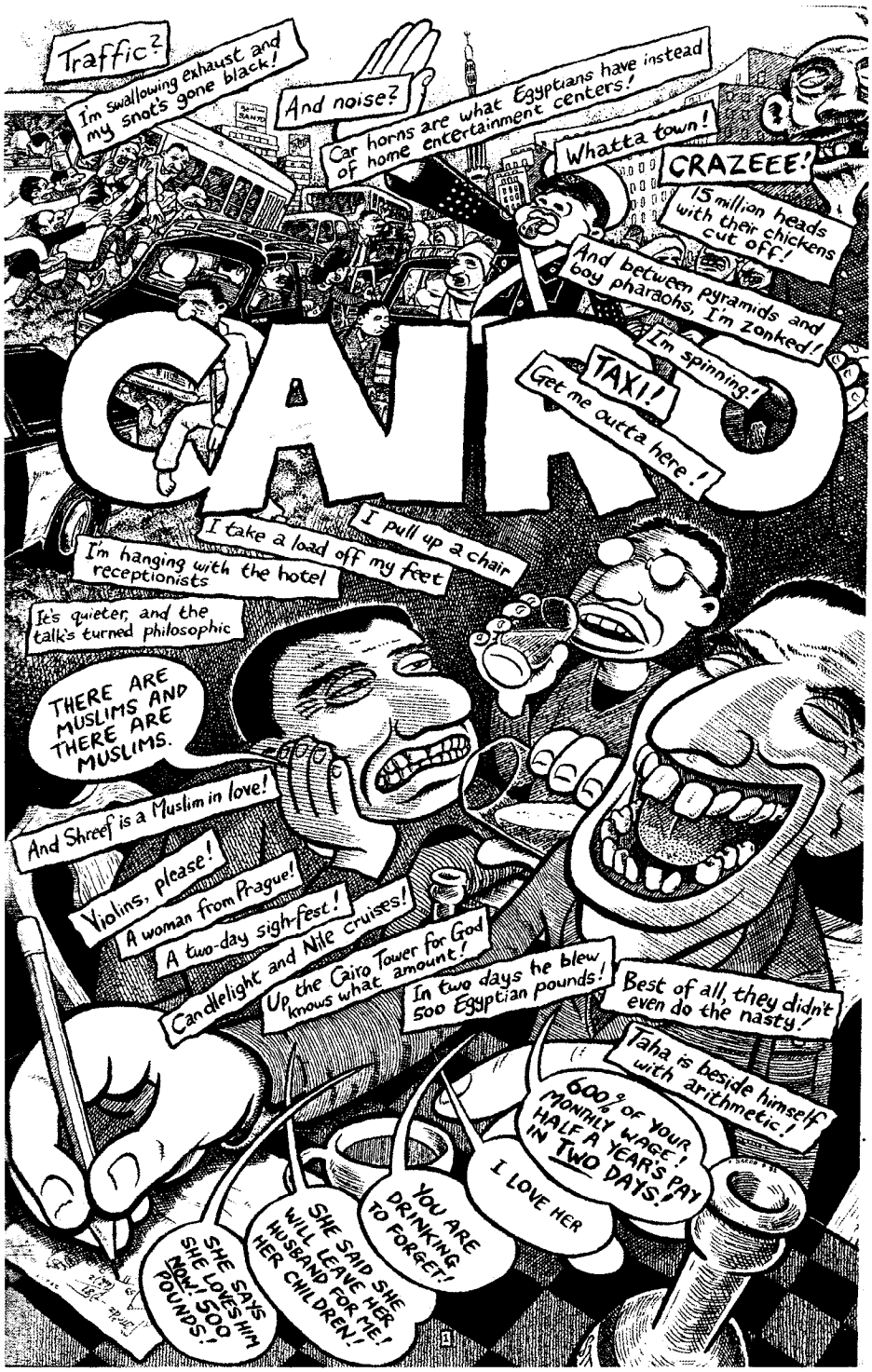


Figure 5: The tempestuous introduction to *Palestine* (1).

Palestine undergoes a dramatic change in tone after the first two episodes. Sacco explains the reason for this change in his interview with Gary Groth in a special edition of *The Comics Journal*:

> It was a conscious choice [...] The first two comics in the *Palestine* series, say the first 60 pages, are rendered in one way, and in a certain tone. And then I realized the subject matter needs something else. It needs less that's cartoony, more that's realistic. (60)

Despite this shift, no transformation takes place in the way Sacco depicts himself. Joe remains a broad nosed, fat lipped caricature. In the same way that we perceive moving objects as standing still if they travel at the same speed we are traveling, Joe remains static while his environment is in flux—this is because he is our relative frame of reference. The consistency with which Sacco draws himself does not mean that he transmits a uniform representation of his identity. The change in his drawing style testifies to the way in which his perceptions of the Occupied Territories have been transformed. This diachronic transformation in drawing style is not the only way in which Sacco depicts what Teresa DeLauretis has described as "the concept of a multiple, shifting and often self-contradictory identity" (9). There is also synchronic differentiation through the tension that exists simultaneously between Joe the narrator, Joe the protagonist and Sacco the author.



Figure 6. Joe the journalist as intrepid explorer (27).

This dissonance between Joe as narrator and character can be seen in the way Joe the narrator makes sardonic comments over the action about his journalistic and ethnographic explorations. The high angle viewpoint allows for a panoramic display of the densely packed taxi stand and creates a visual distance from Joe who organizes a taxi ride. In *Palestine,* Sacco constructs an identity not only in relation to the Palestinians and Israelis he encounters, but also against these heteroglossic inscriptions of self.

Joe the narrator's irony is effected through a self-effacing comparison that mocks his travels as being touristic when contrasted with T.E. Lawrence, Dan Rather, Tim Page and Henry Morton Stanley—writers who placed their lives in much more immediate peril

for their stories.[11] At the same time, Sacco is also showing the colonial and patriarchal underpinnings of his discourse with his wide-ranging list of white men who traveled into "Oriental" lands for their stories. The narrator pokes fun at his journalistic efforts with labels such as "the first white man into Jenin" that juxtapose Joe's taxi ride with David Livingstone who was the first white man to see Victoria Falls in Africa. What is interesting about Sacco's quotation "Dr. Livingstone, I presume" is that there is a double voicedness in it. While the narrator is associating himself with David Livingstone, he is simultaneously aligning himself with the original speaker of that quotation, the journalist Henry Morton Stanley. The quotation represents the Janus face of colonialism—the gentle philanthropy of David Livingstone, who was a committed anti-slave activist that aligned his sympathies more with the Africans than the white settlers, and Henry Morton Stanley whose "life-work as an explorer and colonialist made him personally rich and inaugurated a pattern of invasion and exploitation that was to lead to the death of millions of Africans and the cultural ruin of the Congo basin, a legacy which still mires efforts at the cultural reconstruction of this crucial part of the earth's ecology" (Clark). The split between the speaker and the addressee is articulated through the way in which Joe the narrator and Joe the character can dialectically interact with each other such that Sacco can create an identity in relation to both Livingstone and Stanley. Sacco mocks the pretension of connecting his tamer form of journalism with individuals whose stories involved much more personal risk (he is faced neither with the hazards of full-scale war nor life-threatening bouts of malaria and dysentery). At the same time it is an admission of the colonial opportunism and potential for personal gain he has by acting as a voice for a subjugated people. The narrator is drawing attention to the awkward and ambivalent position of Joe who navigates between the motivations of self-interest and altruism that are bound together in his attempts to make both art and a living by adopting the role of

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[11] This is not to suggest that Sacco's journeys through areas of perpetual low-intensity conflict weren't without its own significant risks and dangers.

spokesperson for the colonized. Joe initially attempts to conquer the unfortunate reality of social inequality through irony. When he makes an effort to mitigate one Palestinian woman's racism towards Israelis, his appeals as cultural mediator fall on deaf ears. He compensates for his failure by remarking, "and let's face it, my comics blockbuster depends on conflict; peace won't pay the rent" (76). Rich Kreiner has commented on the use of humor in Sacco's writing: "The psychic distance inherent both in callousness and in laughter is likely a key element to Sacco's own strategy of self-defense and stability. It is the means by which doubt and despondency are kept at bay, *a la* Byron's 'I laugh so that I do not weep'" (37). When Joe begins to experience retaliation from his Palestinian subjects who are unwilling to offer themselves up for journalistic scrutiny when it brings no relief from their situation, Sacco's satirical edge is blunted.

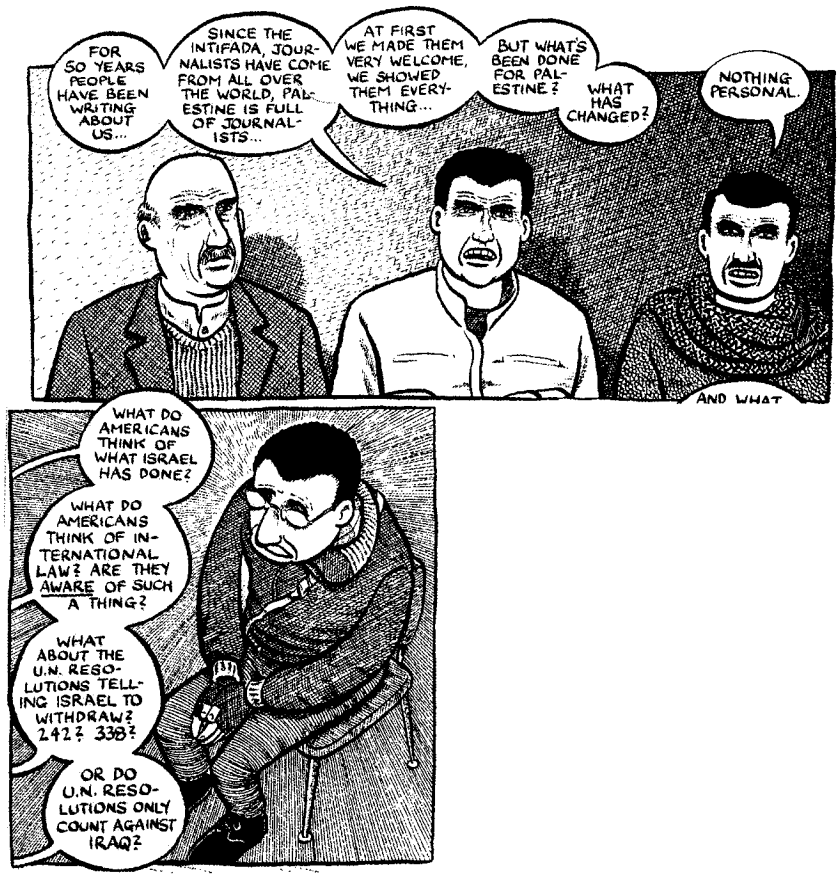


Figure 7. Joe is put on trial for America's unresponsiveness (162).

Pressure is applied on Joe to be answerable for all of America's and the international community's policies as the interviewer becomes the interviewed. As representative of America's failure to intervene on the Palestinians' behalf (despite the fact that he does not have American citizenship), Joe no longer resorts to irony as a coping mechanism but absorbs the overwhelming flood of questions the Palestinians are posing. The man's comment of "nothing personal" as a postscript to his friend's discussion of the Palestinians collective distrust and disenchantment with journalists is particularly loaded. It mirrors back the journalistic credo of unbiased and disengaged reporting. Sacco represents Joe being forced to acknowledge the way in which he is implicated within hierarchized social structures. Sacco has remarked, "It bothers me that people are suffering in Gaza. And I want it to bother other people, too. It's as simple as that" (Adams). Sacco's approach in *Palestine,* of detailing the daily frustrations, annoyances and barriers that the Palestinians encounter, communicates the consequences of protracted internecine conflict. However, included in Sacco's social critique is a self-consciousness about his own discomforting position from which he writes.

In an interview for *January Magazine*, Sacco remarked on the topic of his self-portrayals:

> Of myself—it's not that I create a character, it's that I take out parts of my character. It's not a full character. I think my character in *Gorazde* is more like me. The character in *Palestine* is more apparent, more there, sort of part of the story but I've cut out certain aspects of my personality. (Tuhus-Dubrow)

Sacco's repetitive use of the term "character" is telling because it signals the way in which he slips between the different meanings of the term, which can be used to describe both the unique and distinguishing features of a person as well as the portrayal of a person

in an artistic work. Sacco views his self-portrayals as a pared down character (one could even say caricature) when compared to his embodied self or even his later self-portrayal in *Safe Area Gorazde*. This stripped down character is the engine that powers the story in *Palestine*, as Sacco argues, but another important quality is that he is simultaneously the audience surrogate.

One reviewer described Sacco's character as "a formlessness that, curiously, invites identification." Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* offers a theory explaining why Sacco's cipher-like quality is such an effective means of producing reader participation. McCloud argues that the more cartoony or iconic an image is, the more easily a reader will be able to identify with a character. Accordingly, the more photorealistic an image, the less a reader will see him or herself because they are seeing the image of another. Thus, realism acts as a form of othering and stands in the way of audience identification. McCloud suggests that the roots of this process lie in the fact that when we interact with people and our environment, we are able to receive vivid sensory images of the people and space surrounding us.

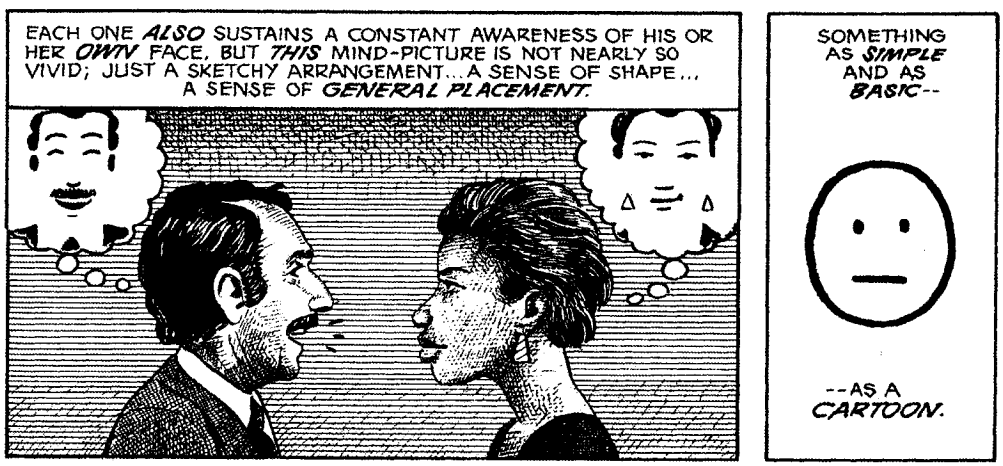


Figure 8. McCloud's theory of how we perceive self *vs.* other (36).

But as far as imagining ourselves is concerned, we retain only an image that is vague and abstract. The more detail perceived, the less we identify. McCloud suggests that the stripped down cartoon icon is a closer approximation to the vague, abstract image of ourselves that we retain in our minds. Thus, the icon offers the possibility of a more universal identification because it removes the unnecessary particularities of individuals: "The more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe" (31). However, it should be noted that in this section (fig 8), McCloud offers a white cartoon face as this universal image. At the same time, McCloud gives as an example a person of color who perceives her iconic face as an undefined and unfilled blank similar to that of the man who speaks with her. His image runs perilously close to essentializing whiteness as the universal standard of recognition.

Sacco's pared down self-representation fits the theory of iconic abstraction that McCloud proposes. The visually as well as conceptually simplified image of Joe allows for greater participation on the reader's part. The trimmed, "formless" version of Sacco's "full character" (as he described his corporeal self in the interview with *January Magazine*) is a powerful rhetorical device for breaching a reader's defenses and persuading him or her to inhabit the particular perspective he wishes to communicate. Scott McCloud would argue this is because a more complete character would have made the reader "far too aware of the messenger to understand the message" (37).

Both Sacco's cartoon persona and that of Scott McCloud, who appears throughout *Understanding Comics*, are extremely compelling creations that bear witness to the use of iconic abstraction as a way of inviting the reader to step into a character's shoes. However, not all iconic images have this psychological effect. McCloud limits his theory of iconic abstraction to a discussion of its potential for greater reader identification. But

as I will discuss with *Louis Riel*, iconic drawings can also be part of a process of alienating the reader and barring identification with the characters as opposed to acting as a call to build the cartoon characters in their own image.

Sacco's style is indebted to the New Journalists for developing a type of reportage which aimed to draw a reader more closely into a story than did traditional newspaper journalism. New Journalism began in the sixties with writers such as Tom Wolfe. It emerged at a time when the literary world was lamenting the demise of the novel. Taking advantage of the waning interest in fiction, a new style of literary nonfiction flourished which, according to Ronald Weber in *The Literature of Fact,* "provided all of fiction's pleasures while paying the added dividend of being true" (19). Wolfe rooted New Journalism in the techniques of literary realism (stream of consciousness, conversational speech and an "unreliable narrator" in the form of a reporter who revealed his biases and perspective). However, the main appeal of New Journalism to writers was that this literary nonfiction had the power to draw a reader deeper into the story than fiction. As Tom Wolfe wrote, this new realism was "one step closer to the absolute involvement of the reader that Henry James and James Joyce dreamed of and never achieved" (*The New Journalism* 34). *Palestine* is informed by the same goals as New Journalism in the way that it is the "psychological effectiveness of realism" (Weber 17) that preoccupies Sacco's thinking with regard to style and technique. Sacco's use of form is governed by the question of how it can be used to most effectively engage a reader and not by the "ideological purity" (17) of making a work accord with any particular socially constructed definition of realism. This is seen in the way *Palestine* contains an extensive range of dramatic techniques that explore different and even contradictory ways to represent an event "realistically." Whether it is through Sacco's use of explosive

expressionism or a mellower naturalism, tiny claustrophobic panels or expansive tableaus, these techniques are united by the common purpose of drawing a reader in.

In keeping with the New Journalism's re-theorizing of what constitutes literary realism, Sacco renegotiates the meaning of realism in his comics. Art Spiegelman has praised Sacco's comics journalism declaring: "In a world where Photoshop has outed the photograph to be a liar, one can now allow artists to return to their original function - as reporters" (David Thompson). Spiegelman points out the fallacy of associating photographic realism with objectivity. Spiegelman suggests that comics offer an effective means of journalism because, along with not being subject to the same standards of realism, they can distill ideas and capture the artist's perspective of a place in a way that photography cannot. This, for example, is why the United States commissioned frontline artists who were "embedded" in the army and entered into combat with the soldiers during World War II. Even though there were war photographers who could immediately capture the moments as they unfolded, the reconstruction of an artist could convey the meaning and atmosphere of war more effectively than a photograph which was limited to whatever angle or moment in time at which the picture was snapped.

Sacco's comics circumvent the fraudulent claims of photorealistic objectivity and traditional journalism which passes work off as impartial. Sacco has been vocal in expressing his distrust and distaste for traditional reportage:

> I don't really believe the idea of objective journalism as it's portrayed. I find, a lot of the journalism that's written as if you're a fly on the wall [...] has this pretense of being very fair-minded and removed, and that's not true at all. I mean, an American reporter has all the framework of an American person inside him or her. And it shows in the work whether they think they're being objective or not. I'd rather just

> get rid of that completely and say: It's me, these are my prejudices, these are my doubts, and I'm writing about this, and you're seeing it through my eyes. [...] Like anyone does, like any reporter does, but I'm just sort of fessing up to it. (Tuhus-Dubrow)

Tom Wolfe's New Journalism was narrated from this "fly on the wall" perspective that Sacco distrusts. By contrast, Hunter S. Thompson's "gonzo journalism" as it appears in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a style which rejects the idea of the reporter as passive observer. Sacco has named Thompson as a significant influence on his work (Tuhus-Dubrow). William McKeen writes of Hunter S. Thompson's journalism in *Hunter S. Thompson* that "getting the story *is* the story" (35). *Palestine* adopts the same autobiographical and metajournalistic approach. In both Thompson's and Sacco's style, the centerpiece of their work is the authorial persona who is both narrator and protagonist. What is distinct about Thompson's gonzo persona is that its force is not derived from being a rounded, complex figure, but a simplified self-parody. John Hellman analyzes Thompson's construction of his authorial persona in *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction.*

> He has virtually no complexity of thought or motivation, and he does not undergo subtle changes from experience. He is instead a two-dimensional cartoon character, a caricature resulting from Thompson's "flattening" and exaggeration of certain of his own characteristics. Thompson identifies his persona closely with certain vivid trademark objects and mannerisms as a substitute for the subtle complexities of a realistic characterization. (69-70)

Thompson's persona is a textual corollary to McCloud's theory of iconic abstraction. Just like Sacco's persona in *Palestine*, Thompson's persona relies on removing aspects of his

personality: "He can flatten and warp his representations of actuality without falsifying them, because he has clearly represented than as products of a flattening and warping mind" (69). The first episodes of *Palestine* most closely mimic Hunter S. Thompson's brash, gonzo style. However, Sacco's persona is very unlike Thompson's aggressive and fiendish persona who would ensure action by creating disturbances. Sacco depicts himself as much more passive. As Sacco satirically shows, merely walking down a street and greeting a man is enough to generate his story.



Figure 9: Joe's journalistic triumph (10).

Unlike Thompson who instigates action, Joe is a gentler, less obtrusive catalyst. Yet Sacco still communicates the sense of frantic and exaggerated emotion that characterizes

Thompson's febrile, disoriented writing style. Sacco applies a gonzo lens to this scene by drawing images that appear as if they have been distorted through a fun house mirror. The birds-eye view foreshortens the body of the man who is reaching over to shake Joe's hand. Overlaid onto this scene is another panel in which the "camera" tilts up from a low angle to provide a worm's eye view of Joe strutting off with his journalist's swag. Like Thompson's persona who "deflat[es] his brutal criticism with statements of his own prolific shortcomings" (McKeen 42), Sacco's black humor is palatable in that it emerges from Sacco's self-caricatured and self-deprecating persona: "I will alert the world to your suffering!// Watch your local comic-book store!" (10).

Sacco is also indebted to contemporary cartoonists like R. Crumb. Sacco's early strips, like Crumb's, feature madcap characters representing the corrupt American social fabric while displaying a characteristically underground preoccupation with sex that often sinks into depravity. Sacco's lovelorn Mark Victorystooge, for example, tries to stay pure to his Marxist ideals in light of overpowering sexual urges, recalling Crumb's mix of sex and socialism in his "Lenore Goldberg and Her Girl Commandos" series (see figure 10). Similarly, Sacco's Oliver Limpdingle evokes Crumb's characters Whiteman and Flakey Foont. And stylistically speaking, Sacco's intensely crosshatched, cartoony figures could cohabit Crumb's world without anyone taking notice.

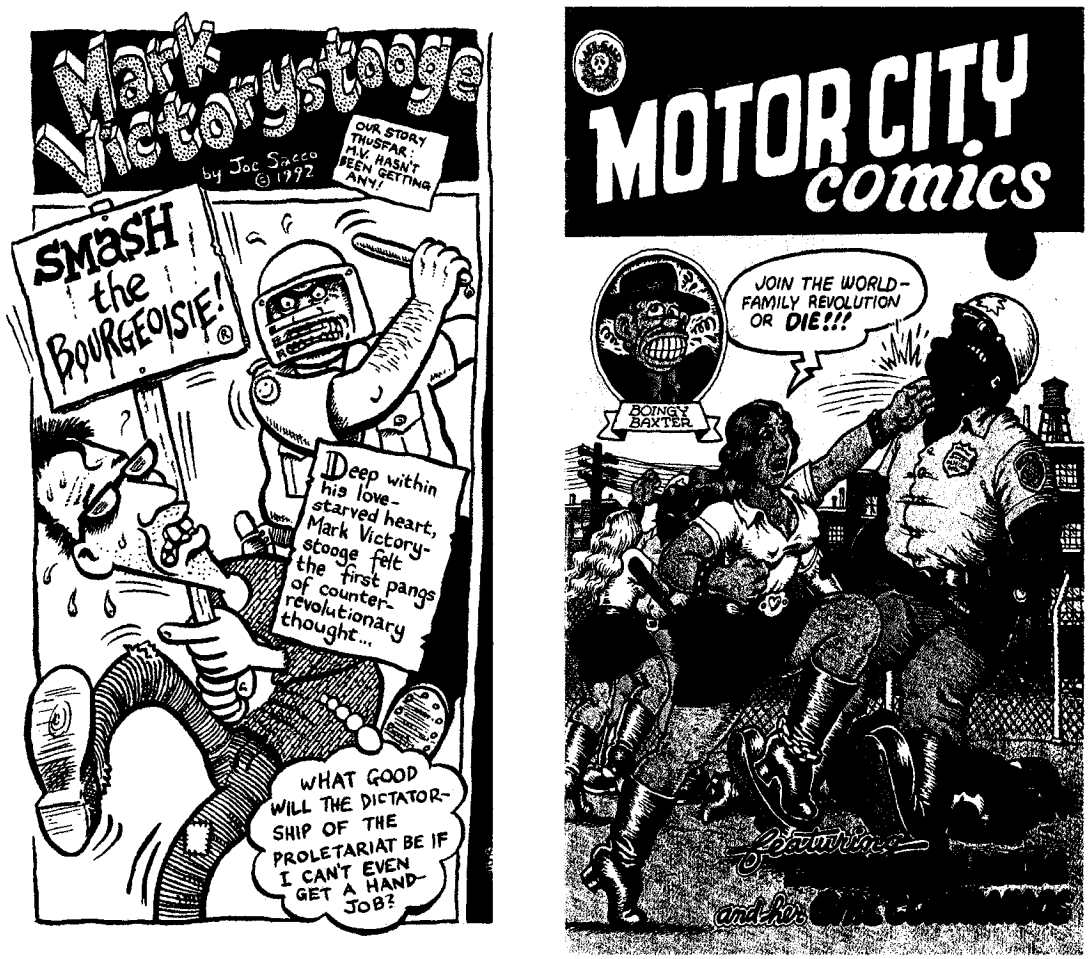


Figure 10:The people's hero and heroine: Mark Victorystooge in *Notes from a Defeatist* (45) and Crumb's Lenore Golberg in *Motor City Comics #1*.

Robert Hughes named Crumb "the Bruegel of the last half of the twentieth century" in Terry Zwigoff's documentary film *Crumb*. However, Sacco's relationship to Pieter Bruegel the Elder is not just indirectly through Crumb's influence on his work. The 16th century Flemish master caricatured the everyman and cast a sometimes sympathetic, sometimes critical eye on the downtrodden subjects of his paintings, a sentiment also in evidence in Sacco's work. Sacco also borrows visually from Breugel such as in his two-page spread of a refugee camp in Gaza:

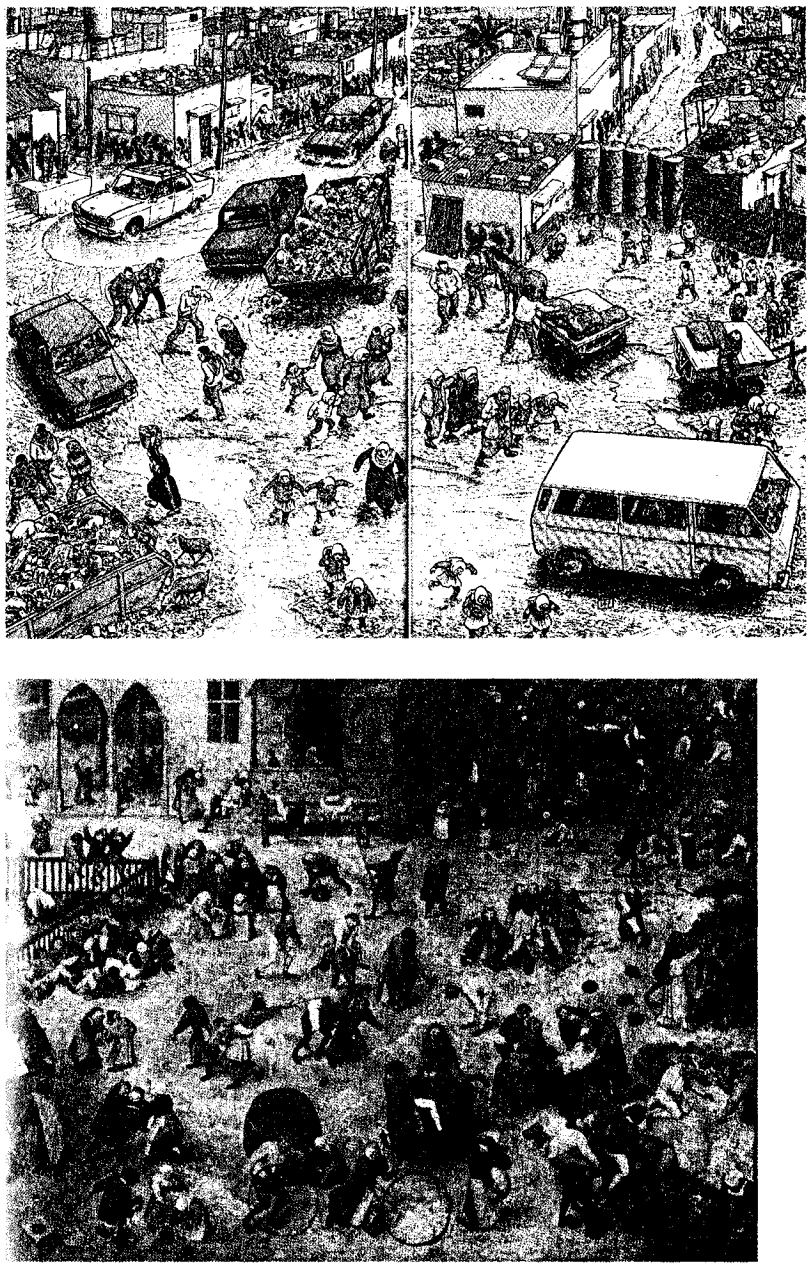


Figure 11. Life in the Gaza Strip (146) and Bruegel's *Children's Games* (1559-60, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

The high angle, the stage-like foreground enclosed by buildings on the horizon, the bubbles of space around groups of characters and the equally-sized figures that each tell a narrative are artistic devices that Sacco borrows from the Early Northern Renaissance painter.

Yet, Sacco has maintained that his most significant influences are taken not from

artists, but writers:

> I think the problem with a lot of cartoonists is they look at other cartoonists as their models, and that probably [...] I still do it to some extent, [...] but I'd rather look at writers, because the writing to me is the most important thing, basically. (Bennett 17)

Sacco's style was established by importing the techniques of the New Journalists into the medium and combining this with an underground comix aesthetic. While Sacco may have been unique in the way he combined first person journalism with comics, this "new, uncharted genre of graphic reportage" (David Thompson) was not without its precedents. *Palestine* has been praised for its genre-making/genre-breaking ability and for the way in which it created "virtually a new genre, both of comics and of journalism" (Bennett 13). Such definitions classify works in different media as mutually exclusive. Many of Sacco's reviewers regarded him as existing in a separate category from the New Journalists because of the assumption that a different form equals a different genre. The definition of genre is not a stable entity, but is continually being negotiated and shaped by culture. Gramsci's idea of the way hegemony is a "moving equilibrium" continually working to win and shape our consent applies to the way in which generic categories are created and used to promote specific interests. In his essay "Inventing Comics," Dylan Horrocks has critiqued the point of view that form constitutes genre, preferring an approach which explores the interconnections as much as the distinctions between socially constructed genres:

> So when 'form' is conceived of as 'genre,' distinctions such as 'novel,' 'poem,' 'comic' or 'illustration' work the same way as 'detective story,' 'science fiction,' or 'superhero story.' An author sets out to put ink on paper (or whatever). There is

> no natural law that forces them to arrange the ink one way or another - just a set of social conventions that lead us to expect a 'novel' to look like *this* and a 'comic' to look like *that*. The strength of those expectations will determine how much they effect (*sic*) our critical judgements when faced with works which confound them. (screen 5)

If we examine Hunter S. Thompson's technique of gonzo journalism in relation to Sacco's comics journalism, some interesting relationships emerge that erode these generic boundaries. As Hellman wrote of Hunter S. Thompson's style: "The result is journalism which reads as savage cartoons" (68). Sacco converts Thompson's techniques into cartooning which reads as savage journalism.

The suggestion that there may be some crossover between the world of letters and the world of comics is met with hostility on both sides. Hellman's assumption that a flat character is an intrinsic element of cartooning relies on a limited view of the potential of comics. While Thompson's persona may be a drug-besotted version of Bugs Bunny—a shit-disturbing trickster figure who permanently smokes a cigarette from an elongated cigarette holder instead of gnawing on a carrot—it is myopic to suggest that the iconic power of cartooning is a defining feature of comics. Secondly, pushing the limits of what constitutes cartooning through this kind of synesthetic overlap between writerly books and comics has met with staunch resistance. The threat that words pose to the tenuous existence of comics has resulted in a logophobia that "is so pervasive among cartoonists as to be almost universal" (Horrocks screen 5). Although comics are a hybrid form, this concept of hybridity has been converted into a kind of purist manifesto in which, if a work is not a perfect marriage of text and image, it is disqualified—particularly if the latter component is dominated by the former. In the case of the relationship between

Sacco's journalism and gonzo journalism, there is more than just a writerly resemblance that Sacco draws from. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the defining work in the gonzo style, was a collaboration between Hunter S. Thompson and artist Ralph Steadman. The text is illustrated by Steadman's drawings, a mish-mash of clean lines, heavily crosshatched areas, and pools of blackness.

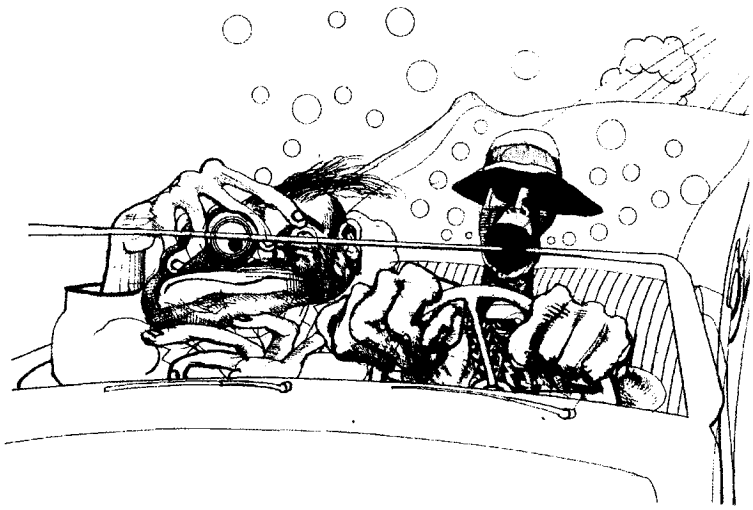


Figure 12. Steadman's illustrations to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Thompson 14).

Steadman's psychedelic and expressionistic drawings are more influenced by the deformed political caricatures of single-panel editorial cartoons than the figures found in comic book narratives. However, I don't think it is just a pedantic question to ask, "Is *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* a comic?" because of the way it combines text and image. And if we look to *Palestine*, Sacco also erodes these generic boundaries by including chapters such as "Remind Me," in which the text clearly dominates the image.

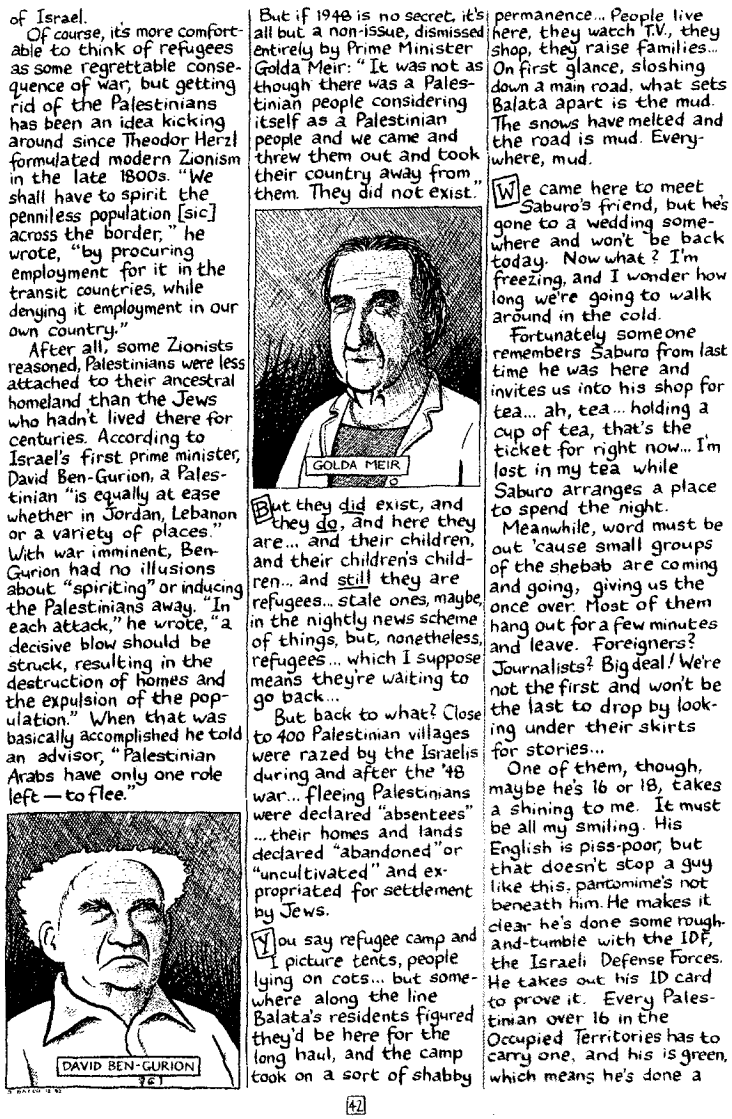


Figure 10. Is this a comic (42)?

In the chapter "Remind Me," Joe tells the story of his experience in the refugee camp Balata, but only uses images as illustration to his text. Sacco uses a text-based form as a means of employing digressions in order to put his experiences in a wider context. Joe historicizes the refugee camps and situates the camps within overarching economic structures in which the residents serve as a conveniently cheap pool of labor. Both Sacco and Thompson's works are firmly located in different genres, yet they both push at these distinctions that have been imposed on their work.

Thompson himself would erupt at the suggestion that his book is a comic. In the film *Breakfast with Hunter* (2003), director Alex Cox suggests using animation in the film version of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Thompson explodes with an extended invective against cartoons because of the way in which they would trivialize his work. While defining what constitutes a form is an arbitrary act, Thompson's cartoonphobia is matched by a logophobia in the world of comics. With the development of new technologies such as video games, DVDs and internet-technology, comics need to claim space as a valuable and distinct mode of communication and this begins with their very definition as an indivisible fusion of text and image. Because of the waning of comics as a mass cultural medium and because historically,[12] comics were held with so little regard in comparison to text-based literature, practitioners have lashed out against the logocentrism that has made images subordinate to words: "It's as if the very presence of words - *any* words - in a comic is a potential threat to its identity as a comic. To protect that identity, it is essential for the pictures to *dominate* the words" (Horrocks screen 5). This is why both *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and Joe Sacco's chapter "Remind Me" are dangerous material. They gnaw away at the protective borderlines drawn around comics. To suggest they cross these thresholds is to invite a logocentric Trojan Horse into a logophobic realm that could potentially leave the land devastated.

Sacco's heterogeneous style that dares to push the limits of what is defined as

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[12] I deliberately put this in the past because of wide shifts in public perceptions of comics, and the moral panic that led to the scapegoating of comics as corruptor of the nation's youth has been transferred to other mass cultural media such as video games and television. However, in the same way racism, sexism and homophobia have not disappeared, this does not mean that disparaging, retrograde perceptions about comics no longer exist. *The Globe and Mail*'s overwhelmingly positive review of Sacco's *Safe Area-Gorazde* still felt obligated to redefine Sacco's work using pretentious epithets that distanced *Safe-Area Gorazde* from the reviewer's narrowly conceived definition of comics: "But to call [Sacco] a comic-book artist is at once to understate and misstate the case since his forte is neither ultramuscular superheroes in tights nor sassy talking cats enduring endearingly inept human owners. He is, rather, a kind of illustrative journalist, a war correspondent with pen and brush or, if you prefer, a creator of non-fiction illustrated narratives" (Adams).

comics, does not just randomly shift from one visual experiment to another. There is a stylistic transformation in his work that moves from cartoon exaggeration to a more realistic drawing in which Sacco's gonzo personality becomes more subdued in order to let other characters tell their stories. The cynical irony which informed his earlier style of drawing recedes when he vivifies Palestinian hardships by adopting a more naturalistic drawing style. While the first half of *Palestine* lacks memorable characters, toward the end of the work Sacco begins introducing rounder characters. One of the most moving figures in *Palestine* is Sameh, and he is drawn in a style that lacks the expressionistic extravagance of the earlier chapters

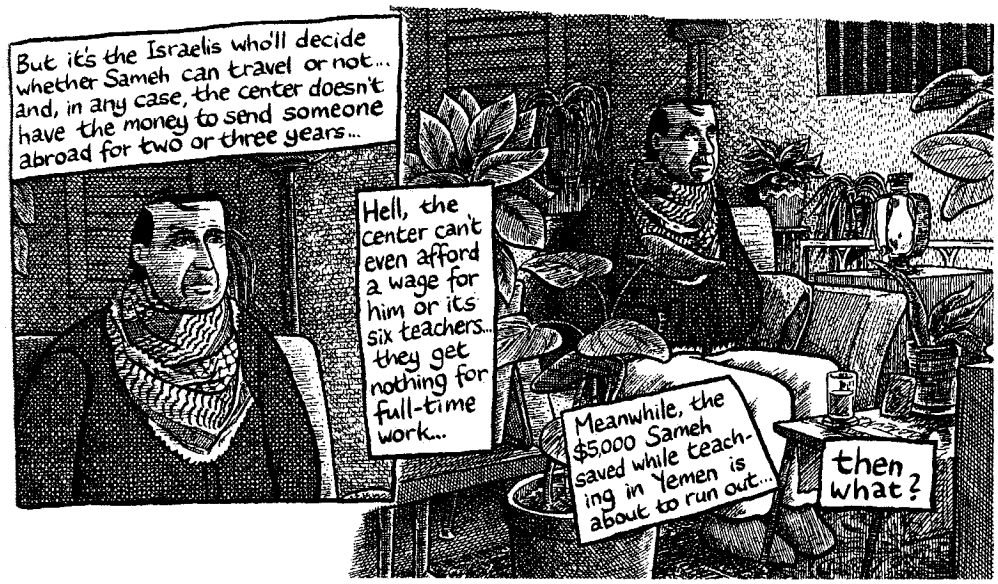


Figure 13: The tone and drawing style shift with Sameh in *Palestine* (207).

Sacco depicts Sameh's quiet, understated stoicism using a style that resists hyperbole. Sameh is an educated, out-of work teacher who volunteers at a center for children with disabilities. His personality is more familiar to Western eyes because he is neither overtly religious nor aligned with any particular resistance organization. As he hosts Joe during his stay in Jabalia and helps translate Joe's interviews, Sameh wears a look of perpetual weariness. The convincingly drawn frown-lines, receding hairline and shoulders that

seem prematurely hunched from shivering in unheated rooms are far more effective at generating a sense of pathos than characters who are drawn in Sacco's earlier style. In the latter half of *Palestine*, Sacco tones down his stylistic expressionism to allow for fuller, more developed depictions of the Palestinians. But as Scott McCloud aphoristically declared, "One set of lines to be, another set of lines to see" (43). The more realistic the images, the greater the *otherness* of the characters is inscribed. That *otherness* reflects just how far characters like Sameh are removed from the luxuries and privileges Sacco has (and by extension, the reader). As Joe remarks when Sameh offers him a change of clothes: "You can eat a refugee's food and you can sleep in his bed...you can walk in his mud and step over the same dead rats...// But wearing his underwear? // You gotta keep some distance..." (189). Joe's comical showing of squeamishness at the idea of wearing Sameh's clothes is a symbolic act of setting himself apart. Clothes are a part of the language we use to construct an identity and show solidarity with a particular group (as indicated by Joe's decision to start drawing himself wearing a keffiyah midway through *Palestine*). However, in Joe's efforts to bridge the distance and temporarily occupy the subject position of an occupied people, he withdraws at a certain point and shows his unwillingness to fully inhabit that position which putting on Sameh's clothes would signify.

Sacco's early autobiographical work "How I Loved the War" collected in *Notes from A Defeatist* stylistically and thematically foreshadows *Palestine.* In this story, Joe depicts a classroom drama that takes place with several Palestinians who are attending a German second-language class with him. They are drawn in accordance with Scott McCloud's theory of iconic abstraction. Using a heavily caricatured style, he depicts the Palestinians in collective laughter with gaping mouths and bug eyes. After having been violently subdued by the teacher, they are drawn with shaggy eyebrows that completely obscure their eyes.

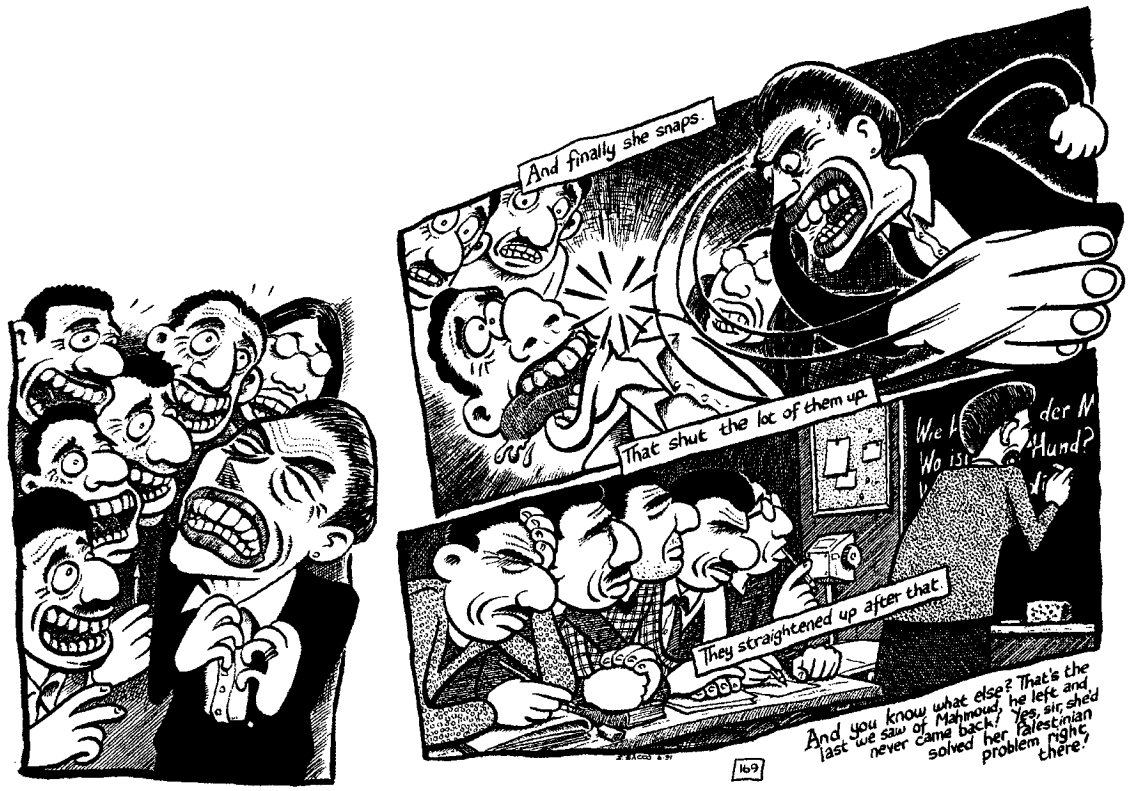


Figure 14. Sacco's stereotyped caricatures of some Palestinian classmates in his pre-Palestine comic "How I Loved the War" (*Notes From a Defeatist* 168-69).

Sacco deliberately stereotypes the Palestinians and the teacher in the comic in order to convert the scene into a classroom farce. The Palestinians are depicted as troublemakers who only quiet down after the teacher applies physical force. Sacco uses the teacher's slapping of one of the students to draw a parallel with the power relations involved in the Israel-Palestinian conflict: "Yes, sir, she'd solved her Palestinian problem right there!" (169). In Homi Bhabha's essay "The Other Question" he discusses the use of stereotypes as a discursive strategy in colonial discourse. He announces at the beginning of his paper that a stereotype is dependent on the concept of "'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness" (37); what empowers a stereotype is that it must be stable and repeatable. However, there is a "*productive* ambivalence" (38) in the stereotype that occurs from the moment of its enunciation. Bhabha theorizes this ambivalence– the "stereotype-as

suture" (49)— as the stereotype's capacity to hold multiple and contradictory beliefs. Colonial discourse attempts to negotiate and cope with these contradictory representations:

> The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child [...] Despite the structural similarities with the play of need and desire in primal fantasies, the colonial fantasy does not try to cover up that moment of separation. It is more ambivalent. On the other hand, it proposes a teleology—under certain conditions of colonial domination and control the native is progressively reformable. [...] Colonial fantasy is the continual dramatization of emergence—of difference, freedom [...] which is repetitively denied. (52)

Sacco's story parodies this process of colonial transformation through domination. The stereotyped Palestinians change from being classroom agitators to submissive students. They are partially reformed through a process of violent oppression. However, there is always the threat that they will return to their previous state, which justifies the teacher's occupying a position of power over the students. Joe parallels the students' being denied equal status with the Palestinian social position in Israel.

In appropriating stereotypes in his social satire, Sacco simultaneously announces their failure. Bhabha argues that this is the characteristic of all stereotypes. While colonial discourse may attempt to contain ambivalence with a reformist teleology, Bhabha argues the stereotype is an "impossible' object" (5). Thus, it must be compulsively repeated because it is continually under attack. There is always the possibility of a moment where it will fail to repeat and that there will be a "threatened return of the look"(50). Sacco's story gestures toward this failure. From this group of

look-alike faces, Sacco befriends a classmate named Ali, who is initially difficult to differentiate from the other Palestinians. At the conclusion of the story, Joe returns to his friend Ali, one of the Palestinians from his German class, and asks him his thoughts on the Gulf War which had just ended with the withdrawal of Iraq from Kuwait.

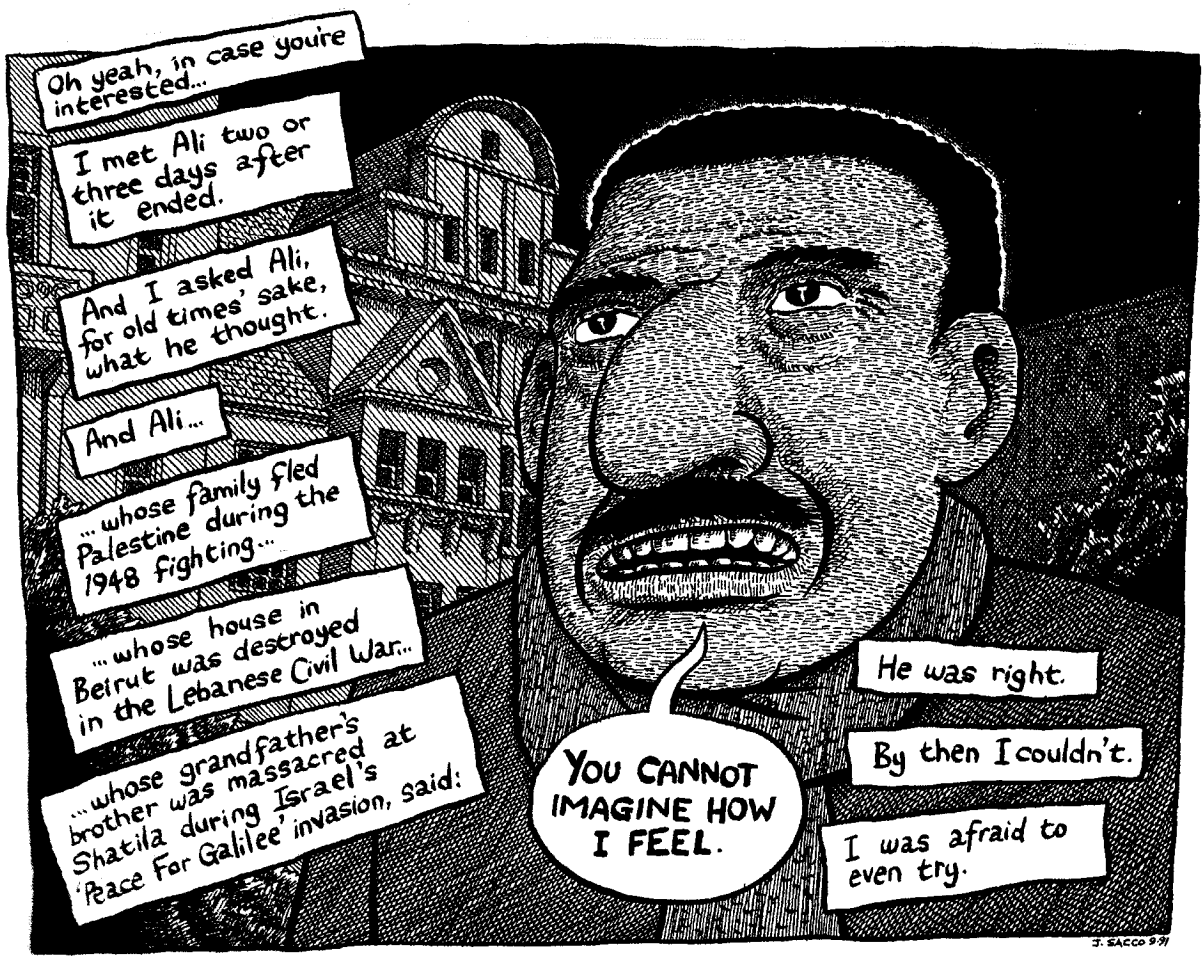


Figure 15: The earlier stereotyped caricature of Ali fails to repeat (188).

With the tone having shifted from the satirical to the somber, Ali stares out from the page and replies to Joe (and the reader) "You cannot imagine how I feel" to which Joe, having been inebriated with the blitz of media coverage on the Gulf War responds "He was right// By then I couldn't// I was afraid to even try" (188). At this moment, Sacco draws a low angle close up of Ali's face, which is strikingly more detailed and texturized in comparison to the former drawings, to give an even greater sense of *gravitas*

to Ali's words. In earlier representations of Ali, Sacco drew him with his eyebrows masking his eyes. Here, Ali's eyes are drawn and he returns a gaze out toward Joe that looks past the gaze of the reader. The effect is almost of a camera lens coming into focus as Joe begins to clear his mind from his temporary subjugation to CNN's coverage of the war. Sacco remarked in an interview "I came from a standpoint of Palestinian equals terrorist" (Dave Thompson). In this scene, Ali is "unmasked" from his earlier stereotyped caricature and through this unmasking, Sacco reveals the ambivalence of the stereotype, its failure to repeat and to fully articulate experience.

Sacco's early work establishes a pattern of strategically playing with the levels of naturalism in his image, in order to both bring life to his characters as well as to reinforce their *otherness*. In the same way Joe resists wearing Sameh's clothes as a way of marking the impossibility of being able to fully understand or identify with his position, Sacco judiciously applies a more realistic rendering of Ali at a moment where Ali is calling attention to the inescapable difference in their worldviews.

In *Palestine*, the most palpable marker of difference between Joe and the *othered* characters is his mobility. The gridlocked social conditions of the Palestinians are amplified by the way Joe, who is the audience surrogate, relates to them. Before the reader can get too depressed, a swift jump cut to another town or party or interview will provide respite. As Joe declares, "I'm the king of all the fucking roadblocks!" (275).

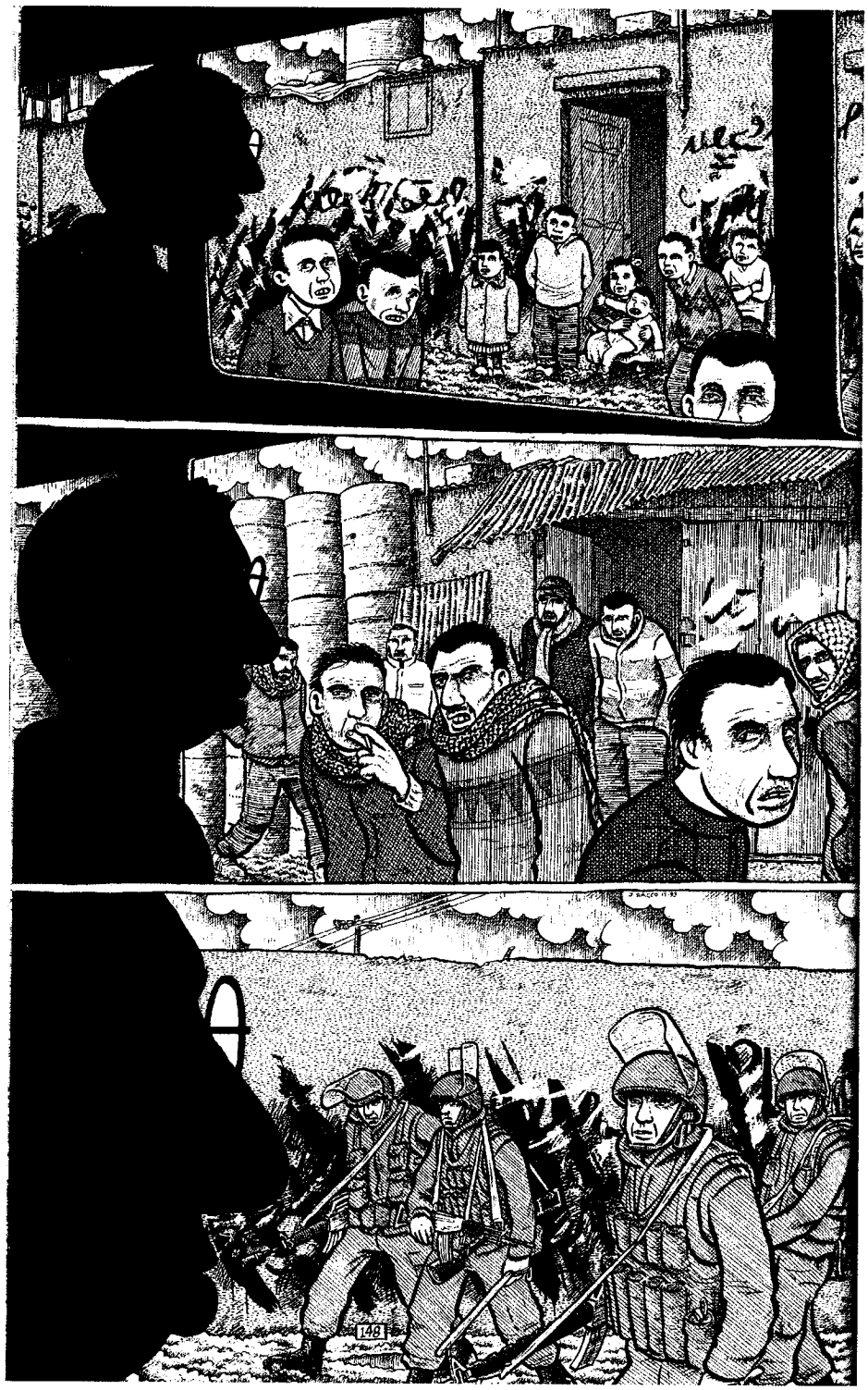


Figure 16. Who is looking at who (148)?

In the three panels lifted from the chapter "Refugeeland," Sacco depicts his touring of a refugee camp on a U.N. bus in Gaza. The satirical title alludes to the way the bus tour might be compared to a pleasure-seeking trip through a theme park. On the page, the reader's gaze is aligned with Joe's. We see poverty everywhere—haggard children who look like wizened miniature adults, glaring, angry men and finally weary and nervous Israeli soldiers. Whereas Sacco and the reader can leap across the comic panel borders to cross geographical borders, the other characters are denied this fluidity. On this page he captures their immobility through this series of tableaus that freeze the different groups, each in their own individual panels. By contrast, Joe's silhouette not only appears in each of their panels, but his face grows progressively larger in each subsequent frame.

The zoom effect on Joe's face speaks to his growing awareness of the plight of the Palestinians. In panel one, we see Joe looking at the children through the bus window. In panel two, Joe's silhouette has grown and the reader sees less of the bus window. We are getting closer to the Palestinian reality until in the last panel, we see Joe's very large silhouette looking at the Israeli soldiers. The reader sees nothing to indicate that Joe is still on the bus. This final panel blurs the distinction between inside and outside. Joe and the reader have lost the deceptive sense of safety and distance that the enclosing frame of the bus provides.

The black silhouette that stares out contrasts with the people who glare back into the bus. They are not willing subjects to Joe's voyeuristic cruise through the refugee camp. They return Joe's gaze, but in a hostile, accusatory manner. The zooming in on Joe's face indicates that the images he is witnessing are having an effect on him. However, the reader is unsure of exactly how Joe is being affected because we don't see any expression on his face. The result is that Sacco's silhouette acts as a mediator between the reader and the images. We fill the black, empty space with our own interpretations of the scene.

Attendant to a discussion of how Sacco treats the concept of physical mobility in his work is the way in which Joe's cosmopolitanism allows him to move between and inhabit different subject positions. This is nicely illustrated through a comparison of the way in which Joe experiences fear from both the Palestinian and Israeli perspective. On different occasions, he is interpellated into these subject positions. As the audience surrogate, he mediates the realities of living in the Middle East because he experiences these adversities from the perspective of an outsider with whom the reader can identify. On the chapter title pages of the comic, Sacco usually takes a scene from the chapter to act as a visual epigraph to the chapter's themes. He puts himself in bold leaving everything else in faded grey.

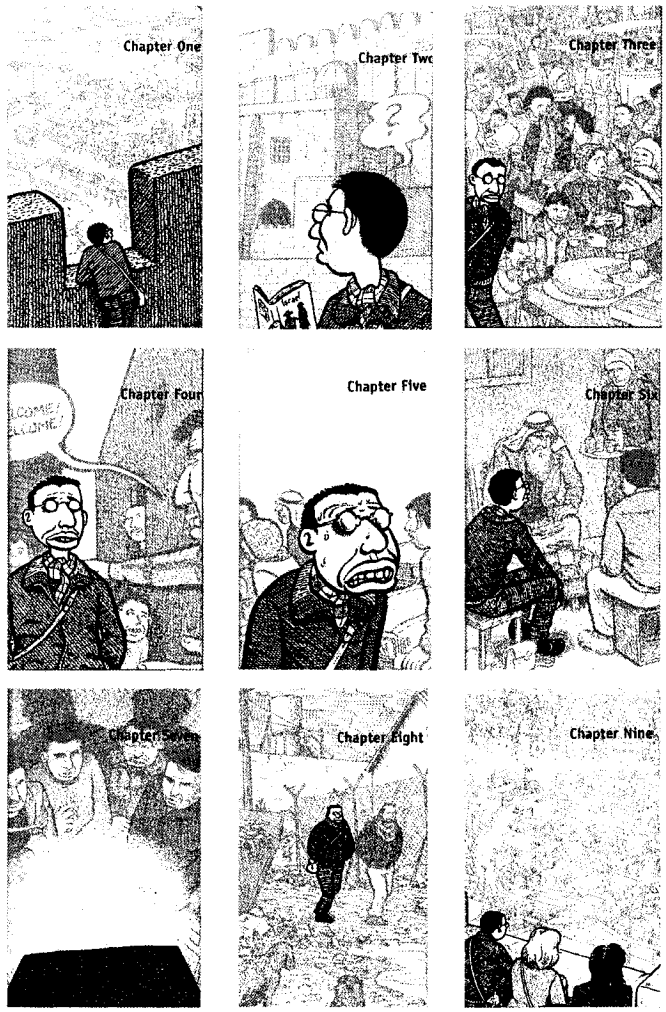


Figure 17: What *Palestine* is really about (vi, 25, 51, 77, 115, 143, 179, 215, 251).

These chapter titles foreground Joe, suggesting that it is his subjectivity that is the source from which the story takes it shape. The only anomalous chapter title pages are exceptions which work to prove this rule. On the title page to Chapter 7, Joe joins his Palestinian companions in the faded background watching a television set. Here, the television set is in bold. In Chapter 9, Sacco draws himself and two Israeli women in bold.

In Chapter 7 in which Sacco cedes the bold space to the television set, Joe breaks an 8:00 pm curfew imposed on the town he is visiting.



Figure 18. Life from a Palestinian perspective (212).

Joe the narrator comments ironically over the action of Joe the protagonist walking the dark streets of Jabalia with his friend Sameh that "one could be mistaken for a Palestinian out here" (212). Ulf Hannerz writes of the cosmopolitan in his essay "Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture" that "[the cosmopolitan's] surrender is of course only conditional. The cosmopolitan may embrace the alien culture, but he does not become committed to it. All the time he knows where the exit is" (240). In the darkness, Joe has involuntarily relinquished his privileged status. The darkness interpellates him into the same position as that of the Palestinians. Joe is no longer able to epitomize Hannerz's model of the cosmopolitan as he could earlier when he boasted: "And if it's too much, if the scene gets too heavy, if my stomach's knotting up, I jump into a taxi...//...and I'm outta there, man!" (28). Sacco's temporary interpellation into the subjugated position of a Palestinian in this chapter is established at the opening with the chapter title page in which he yields the bold space normally reserved for himself to a television set.

In the final chapter titled "Through Other Eyes," in keeping with his cosmopolitan mobility, Sacco presents the Israeli perspective (see figure 19). Joe escorts his Israeli friend Naomi through the Arab quarter in Jerusalem despite the panic filled warnings of a friend that "Jews get stabbed there" (256). Sacco uses a different stylistic device from the discrete and uniform panels that claustrophobically render Joe's nighttime walk through Jabalia. He layers panels upon panels with what, once again, is a zooming in on Sacco's fear-ridden face as our eyes move downward on the page. On the following page, when Sacco pans out to show an overhead view of the market, the expressionistic way in which Sacco had communicated Joe's anxiety on the previous page seems slightly extravagant and overstated. However, this depiction of the imagined hostilities from both sides, whether the fear and mistrust is justified or not, will ultimately produce more long term damage and serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy. In a book in which the Palestinian perspective is foregrounded as corrective to what Sacco sees as the dominance of Israeli perspective in mainstream North American media, *Palestine*'s final chapter has a moment

when the reader sees "through other eyes." But despite his persona's opportunity to experience fear from both a Palestinian and an Israeli perspective, he fits this into what is his reading of the overall balance of power in the region. It is no accident that the Israelis occupy the bold space while the Palestinians are left in the faded background of the chapter title pages.



Figure 19. Life from an Israeli perspective (258, 259)

It is also revealing that in the Chapter 7 title page, Sacco chooses to draw himself in a position subordinate to the television. Sacco juxtaposes his firsthand experience of living as a Palestinian and fearing the sudden appearance of Israeli soldiers with watching a video of a funeral in which the participants fear the intrusion of Israeli soldiers.



Figure 20. Reality television (213).

Joe remarks that "the good thing about video" is that "*you* can rewind it, watch it over, eliminate all surprises...it's easier on your nerves, you can sip tea...you know the soldiers won't come guaranteed...step outside, however, in present time, and all bets are off..." (213). Sacco's use of the pronoun "you" is slippery. On the one hand, Sacco is including Joe the character in this "shifter" as Joe the narrator is addressing him as he screens the video for the second time on the television. There is a split between the self as narrator and the self as character. On the other hand, he's marking the difference between his readers and Joe who experienced the "real" fear of soldiers on the previous page when he stepped out into the hazardous "present time" of the storyline. By stressing the "you" in these lines, our attention is drawn to what Sacco reveals as one of the surreal

features of second-hand spectating—the ineluctable dislocation between the viewer and the event being viewed; the ability to drink tea and eat sweets while watching soldiers "methodically breaking [children's] arms" (211).

While it doesn't matter how close you put your nose up to the television or the comic book, you'll never actually inhabit the space being represented. Sacco's style of storytelling is designed to counter reader aloofness and bring the reader into the world of the Middle East, even though this feeling of entering into the mise en scène is an imaginary act of reader participation.

In "How I Loved the War," Joe communicates his tortured relationship to CNN news reportage by depicting the way in which he becomes utterly absorbed by televised war footage (see figure 21). Joe's total involvement and participation with the television reaches a point where he starts speaking to the television as if the journalist is addressing him personally. Sacco depicts a relationship which runs close to the subject position that is created for the reader of *Palestine*. However, while *Palestine* is designed to similarly engage the reader, it aims to make a deeper moral impression about the costs of war. In "How I Loved the War," the central conceit is the juxtaposition of the Gulf War with Sacco's long-distance relationship with a girl living in Iowa; world crisis is fused with personal crisis in Joe's psyche. Neither Sacco's girlfriend nor images from the Gulf War are ever depicted, but what is displayed are the television and the telephone—the media that attempt to bridge the space between Sacco and his two long-distance relationships which he pursues at the sacrifice of more immediate social relations. Joe is seen in a completely submissive position to both media. When he speaks on the phone to his girlfriend, he is almost always lying on his back on the bed (see figure 22).



Figure 21. Joe's long distant relationship witht the Gulf War, mediated by the television (*Notes From a Defeatist* 178).

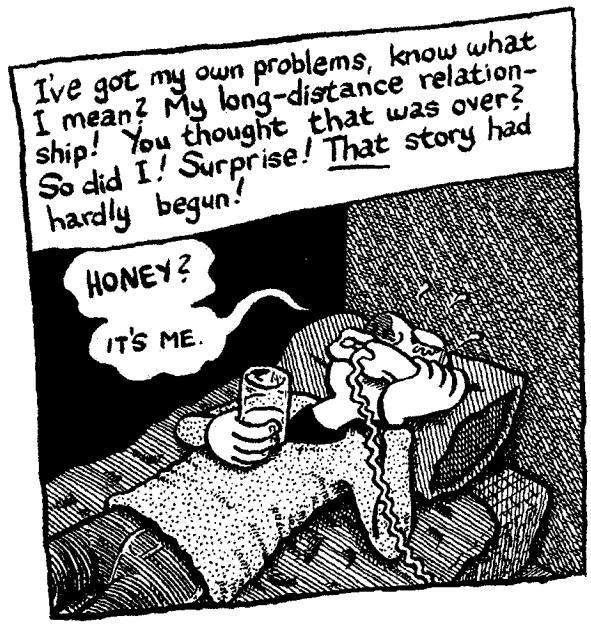


Figure 22. The telephone mediates Joe's long-distance relationship (*Notes From a Defeatist* 188).

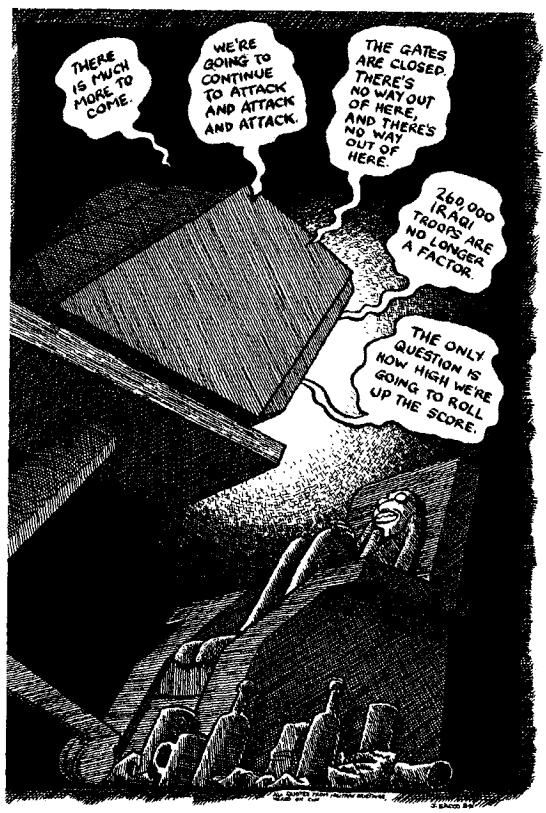


Figure 23. Enslaved by the television. (*Notes From a Defeatis*t 186)

As Joe's relationship with his girlfriend falls apart, the television exerts an even greater power over him. Joe is an "ideal spectator" that far exceeds what any CNN marketer might hope for. Despite being staunchly against the war, Joe still obtains voyeuristic gratification from the footage CNN provides. After the combat ends, Joe feels the inadequacy of his spectating habits. Ali, Joe's classmate who was mentioned earlier in this paper, tersely reminds Joe about his inability to be truly empathetic toward his feelings to which Joe responds "I was afraid to even try" (188).

What informs Joe's feeling in this exchange is his knowledge about his lack of firsthand war experience in the Middle East and the feeling of numbness and disconnectedness that he has been left with after inundating himself with CNN's specific style of war footage. The creation of *Palestine* can be seen as a direct response to this final scene in "How I Loved the War" in terms of the fact that Joe literally bridged the space between himself and the images he saw on television by traveling to Palestine so that he could directly witness what he was only seeing filtered through news footage. In *Palestine*, Sacco creates a reading experience that aims to reproduce the pleasure of total engagement (and submission) Joe had with CNN. At the same time, this is not for the sake of pure entertainment, but as a vehicle for communicating the complexity of military occupation and the humanity of those occupied.

In relation to the character of Joe, the trip to Palestine is a pilgrimage: "but that's the thing about coming to the Holy Land or Palestine or Israel or whatever you want to call it...no one who knows what he's come here looking for leaves without having found it..." (280). Joe came to Palestine seeking to understand the conflict with biases and beliefs that he did not shed, but rather had confirmed. *Palestine* is replete with scenes of Joe traveling on taxis and buses. His mobility and ability to pass through checkpoints and roadblocks is one of the privileges he enjoys that sets him apart from the Palestinians. It is apt that the final page of the story appropriately depicts Sacco once again on a bus attempting to leave the Occupied Territories. The bus driver gets lost and the bus is the

target of stone-throwing from children. The final panel shows the bus driver looking at a map and asking for directions at an army post.

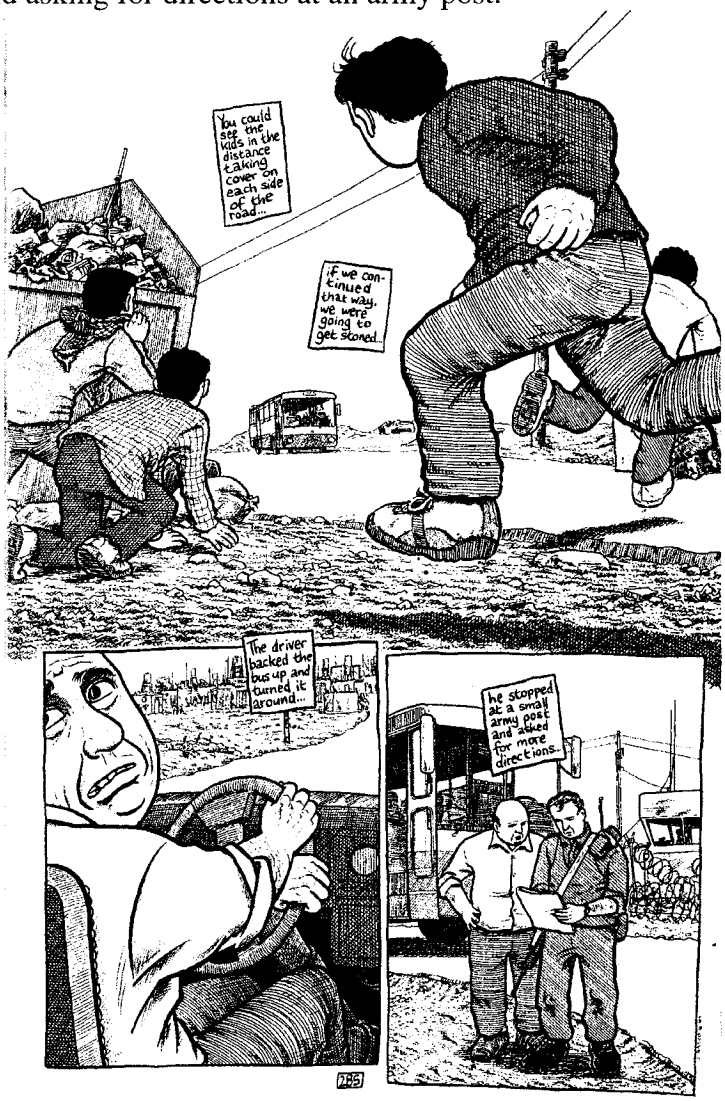


Figure 24. The final scene in *Palestine*. (285)

The disorientation stands as a metaphor for Sacco's view of the Israel-Palestine conflict with the children preparing to throw stones representing one possible outcome. On the previous page, Sacco depicts a child being forced to stand in the rain while being interrogated and humiliated by soldiers who take shelter under an awning.



Figure 25. An uncertain future (283).

Sacco depicts his leaving the Occupied Territories as a response to the question about the boy's future. He sees and offers no easy "roadmap to peace" for navigating out of this No-Exit situation. *Palestine* begins *in medias res* with expressionistic representations of Joe's emotional disorientation and culture shock, and fittingly concludes the story with a scene of spatial disorientation that lacks closure. Joe is no longer suffering from sensory overload and his pilgrimage has confirmed opinions he has long held. While Sacco's images have come into focus to reflect this awareness, the symbolic disorientation of the final pages prevent a reader from drawing easy moral conclusions or feeling as if there is a obvious direction to travel in towards a resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Sacco's drawings have become clearer, but they are not clairvoyant.

Chapter 3 - Chester Brown's Unreflective Mirror: *Louis Riel* and the Aesthetics of Silence

Prior to publishing the series *Louis Riel*, Brown had a series titled *Yummy Fur* which ran from 1983 to 1993. Brown then changed the serial's name to *Underwater* and this ran from 1994 to 97. In mid-1998, I remember wondering why Brown had been so slow to release the latest installment of *Underwater.*[13] I went to my local independent comics retailer and asked why Chester Brown hadn't published anything recently. I was surprised and disappointed to hear that he had abandoned, midway, the storylines he was working on in *Underwater.* My enthusiasm returned when the salesperson told me that the reason Brown had shelved his series was to begin another, even more ambitious project. Brown was now endeavoring to undertake a biography of the controversial Canadian legend Louis Riel.

The next question I asked was why Brown had chosen Riel. At the time, Riel was a nebulous Canadian icon whom I had been made aware of through half heard high school lectures, CBC specials and public monuments. I was intrigued that Brown would select him as the focus for his work. Because Riel has remained such a controversial figure, a prolific body of Canadian "Rieliana" has arisen since his death in 1885.[14] I wondered why Brown had found his muse in this particular man. His choice of Riel, a titan on the Canadian historical landscape whose story is inseparably tied to the birth of a nation's identity, seemed to me to be almost hubristic. Was Brown attracted to Riel's millenarian politics? His disputed insanity? His Canadian-ness?

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[13] I distinguish between *Underwater* the serial which contained multiple storylines and "Underwater" a story contained within the *Underwater* serial.

[14] For an extended discussion on the proliferation of Louis Riel as an icon in Canadian culture, see Donald Swainson's "Rieliana and the Structure of Canadian History" in *The Journal of Popular Culture,* 14.2 (1989), 286-97 or Albert Raimudo Braz's *False Traitor: Louis Riel and Popular Culture.*

As leader of the Métis people, Riel organized two rebellions in 19th century western Canada. The first has become known as the Red River Rebellion of 1869 and resulted in the creation of the province of Manitoba. The second, called the Northwest Rebellion of 1885, concluded with Riel's surrender to the Canadian army and his hanging for treason. Between the ending of the first rebellion and the beginning of the second, Riel went into exile in the United States, intermittently returning to Canada in secret. It was during this period that Riel, suffering from nervous exhaustion, experienced an epiphany in which he came to visualize himself as a prophet and saviour of the Métis people and was committed by his uncle to an asylum in Quebec.

When Brown did finally begin publishing installments of *Louis Riel*, it immediately became clear to me that I had been wrong to think that he had truly abandoned his earlier storylines.

In *Yummy Fur*, Brown began creating adaptations of the Gospels (which were juxtaposed to his other storylines in the comic). These adaptations can be seen as an ur-text to *Louis Riel.* In an online interview Brown remarked of Riel, "I can probably relate to his sense of messianic destiny" (Epstein). The figure of Louis Riel is doubly inscribed, relating at once to Brown himself as well as to the religiously zealous Riel who mirrored Jesus's life when he declared himself "prophet of the new world" and broke away from traditional Catholicism to become the spiritual as well as political leader of the Métis. The autobiographical traces in *Louis Riel* work to link it not only with Brown's adaptations of the Gospels but his entire work in *Yummy Fur* and *Underwater.*

Concurrently with continuing his work on the adaptation of the Gospels, and before he started *Louis Riel*, Brown was working on an ongoing story titled "Underwater," a surrealist tale that traced the development of twins from birth. In presenting the children's

perspective, Brown creates a special "underwater" speak which is initially impenetrable to the reader. Mimicking the garbled effect of hearing people underwater, we learn to understand the language, not from the meaning of the words, but from the context, just as the children do in the story. As the children age throughout the storyline, the language begins to come into focus. Brown controls the amount of English he releases in the dialogue, which slowly orients the reader and allow them to understand the plot of the story. In this story, Brown is very much the puppet master, withholding and controlling how much meaning he will grant to the reader. "Underwater" is an exercise in audience denial. Through his private language game, he guards the semiotic meaning of words, making them discernible to him alone and releasing their significance at his will. He initially strips language of its power to make meaning and the reader is plunged into a world where they are deprived of language as a life raft to navigate the strangeness of this landscape. "Underwater" is such an exercise in audience denial that he has yet to give the audience the satisfaction of an ending, since he halted the writing in order to undertake a retelling of Riel's biography.

Louis Riel is an extension of Brown's aesthetic project of creating storylines using alienating devices that hold the reader at a distance. However, in *Louis Riel* he continues his semiotic investigations into the function of language in such a way that the publication gathered a much wider and sympathetic readership than "Underwater."[15] In looking to

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[15] "Underwater" was a little too outré even for many of Chester Brown's regular readers who were, in general, fairly sympathetic to his artistic experimentation. Many of the negative reactions that Brown published in his letters section of *Underwater* centered around the readers' discomfort from being utterly confounded by the work: "Have you went crazy? Man, I was totally lost trying to read UNDERWATER...Did it mean anything?—David Delahoussaye" (*Underwater #2* 13); "Maybe I'm stupid because I just don't get it. I'll probably read #2 in the store first before I'm willing to shell out $3.00 for another copy of this—Robert Berry" (*Underwater #2* 13). These reactions suggest

Louis Riel's story, Brown makes meaning by concentrating on the moments from Riel's life in which he was silenced and by using an aesthetic of silence in which to tell this story. *Louis Riel* pushes the limits of the communicative potential of silence, but in a way that is more palatable to readers than the technique used in his earlier minimalist and experimental comics that were commercial failures. Brown discovered in *Louis Riel* a way of keeping his readers at a distance without discomfiting them to the extent that they actually put down the book and pick up an issue of Joe Matt's *Peepshow*. This chapter examines how Brown does not treat silence as the absence of either speech or images, but uses silence expressively to comment on the nature of signification and trace the limits of expression and the communicable in a historical narrative.

Brown's verbal and visual economy in *Louis Riel* is such that backgrounds are solid black or white (or more literally maize which is the paper color on which Brown chose to print his comic), faces and bodies remain static until the plot demands that they change position, and no words are superfluous. While Brown's early work used looser lines and contained much more dramatic and outrageous stories that were in the tradition of superhero storytelling techniques, he has steadily developed a more muted style. Silence is also an important aspect of Brown's earlier works. This is particularly so in his autobiographical stories which closely associate this quality with his persona.

Through Brown's experimentation in *Yummy Fur* and *Underwater*, he developed a more holistic autobiographical approach which pushed even further beyond the autobiographical tradition that artists such as Harvey Pekar and Art Spiegelman established. Whether Brown's stories are stream of consciousness fantasy tales,

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that Brown's goal of creating a story in which a reader must initially abandon all hope of using any apperceptive tools for orienting and interpreting the story, was an artistic, if not financial success.

traditional autobiography or adaptations of the Gospels, a complex set of connections and interrelations emerge which break down the borders between the stories. What links the storylines together are the autobiographical traces that make *Yummy Fur* into a kind of extended chronicle of Brown's consciousness—a public diary of an artist's artistic process—that is refracted through the experimental stories he develops. This process is replicated in *Louis Riel*. *Louis Riel* is not a mimetic study about the 19th century historical figure, but a psychological portrait of Chester Brown and his exploration of the nature of language and meaning. The silence and lack of affect that characterizes Brown's persona in the autobiographical works also characterizes his work as a biographer. *Louis Riel* embraces the slippage between biography and autobiography.

Most of Brown's work that emerged from *Yummy Fur* was later made available in revised paperback editions. However, he did not merely collect his stories and republish them. Along with removing the letters section and isolating storylines, Brown edited his work by redrawing panels and altering the panel arrangements to change the pacing of his story. *I Never Liked You* and *The Playboy* were collected editions of individual autobiographical storylines of Chester Brown's early childhood and adolescence. But when they originally appeared as installments in *Yummy Fur* they were not isolated and neatly packaged in a continuous form. Rather, they were embedded within *Yummy Fur,* which had multiple storylines running simultaneously. For example, the story that was collected into *The Playboy* initially appeared in issues 21-23 of *Yummy Fur*. Since this storyline is more often read in the collected version, it is often neglected that Brown's rendition of the Gospel of Matthew appeared alongside "The Playboy" in issues 21 and 22. Brown's unique adaptation of the Sermon on the Mount is included with the first appearance of "The Playboy" storyline, subtitled "Disgust". His depiction of Jesus's

sermon has no action whatsoever, but it features head shots of an angry Jesus preaching. If a reader remembered the former issue, they would know that Jesus is situated on a mountain with a crowd of testy followers anxiously waiting to be healed. However, this issue provides no contextual clues to the fact that Jesus is surrounded by his impatient audience. Thus, the effect is a menacing Jesus set against a blank background[16] with his speech occupying most of the panel space. Jesus's sermon is directed at the reader in the absence of any audience surrogate.

The series of head shots of Jesus in the same unrelenting, repetitious pose matches his furious, unrelenting sermon. Ng Suat Tong's article "The Gospel According to Chester Brown", which appeared this year in *The Comics Journal #261*, is critical of Brown's depiction of The Sermon on the Mount:

> Jesus is shown in close-up for nearly seven pages, and Brown strays perilously close to the kind of boring conception that he accuses Scorsese of in his remarks on the film adaptation of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (in *TCJ* [*The Comics Journal*] #135) They differ little from Brown's handling of the section in *Mark* dealing with Jesus' parables and come across as tedious and uninspired, the familiar stories and words floundering on bland imagination. (35)

While earlier episodes of Brown's Gospels contain Jesus's sermons, this episode marks a new level of minimalism for Brown. While the criticism Tong levels at Brown is understandable, it assumes that these stories exist independently of the other stories in *Yummy Fur*. Brown's Gospels have been intermittently incorporated into *Yummy Fur* and then *Underwater* since 1987. Tong's criticism takes for granted that "Mark" and

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[16] As far as I know, this is Brown's first use of this style of storytelling in which he uses repetitious, individually drawn panels against solid backgrounds.

"Matthew" operate as a coherent unified story as opposed to installments that are embedded in the comic series.

The dialogue heavy "Matthew 5:11-7:27," which has little visual variation, is set against a white background. This is in contrast to "Disgust," the first episode of "The Playboy" in which the story is set against a black background. The two stories are in stylistic opposition to each other. In "Disgust," instead of using narrative text boxes, Brown incorporates his narratorial persona into the diegesis. This version of Brown's self is drawn with demonic bat wings and his roguish commentary is sometimes addressed to the reader and at other times to the young Chester who does not acknowledge him.[17] The voice of this impious narrator contrasts with the voice of Jesus as Brown depicts him in "Matthew 5:11-7:27," which immediately follows "Disgust" in this issue of *Yummy Fur.* In the case of Brown's rendition of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus's emotive speech is fear-and-guilt-inspiring. This connects back to "Disgust" which opens with Chester sitting in church fantasizing about *Playboy* magazine. After church, Chester bicycles to a convenience store to purchase the issue of *Playboy* that had consumed his thoughts during the sermon. Much like Jesus's unseen and indifferent audience in "Matthew 5:11-7:27," the young Chester is not interested in listening to sermons.

[17] In the same way that I referred to Sacco's personae, I will refer to Chester Brown's autobiographical characters as "Chester" and specify whether I am speaking of the protagonist or the narrator in the story.



Figure 26. A hand reaches out for *Playboy* at Bonimart (*Yummy Fur #21* 8).

When Brown draws a withered looking hand reaching for an issue of *Playboy*, the narrator exclaims, "Jesus! What's the matter with you!". Chester is conflated with Jesus through the narrator's loaded speech and the indeterminacy of the hand which we assume belongs to Chester (although the rest of his body lies outside the panel border). This converts Chester into a kind of fallen saint. The narrator's ambiguous question can be read as either a condemnation of Brown's activity or as a taunt in order to encourage Chester to buck up and buy the magazine.[18]

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[18] Along with the adaptation of the Gospels, Brown removed from his collected version of his autobiographical story *The Playboy* a short story titled "Racism" that prefaced "Disgust" in *Yummy Fur #21*. In "Racism" Brown depicts himself as a child: "God, please let the black people still be having all these problems when I grow up so that I can go to the south and help them" (1). Upon realizing the twisted logic behind this seemingly pious request, Chester declares, "Forget I asked for that, God—I must be a wicked person" (1). The young Chester's flawed messianic tendencies prefigures the depiction of his adolescent anxiety with porn in "Disgust."



Figure 27. Chester's holy spirit (*Yummy Fur #21* 15).

Chester's masturbation is framed as if he is kneeling before an alter praying. Brown shades the panels such that Chester appears to be bathed in a celestial glow. Chester's masturbation technique appears as an inversion of hands upturned in prayer. He rubs his hands together until he ejaculates and his outstretched hands dripping with semen are a

profane imitation of the stigmata.

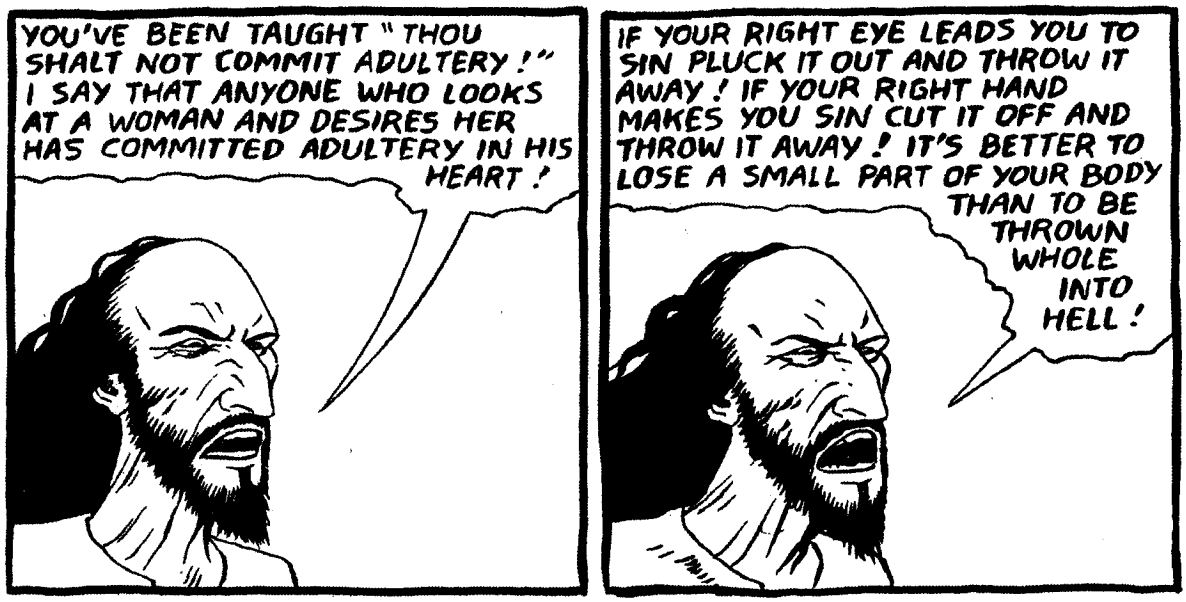


Figure 28:A furious Jesus preaches about sex and sin in the same issue as "Disgust" (*Yummy Fur #21* 19).

The relationship of "Matthew 5:11-7:27" to "Disgust" is open to interpretation. For the reader, this emphatically angry Jesus offers an explanation for why Chester in the earlier story is so tormented. One can read the depiction of the Sermon on the Mount as an extension and externalization of his internalized feelings of guilt. Abuse and condemnation continue to be heaped upon Chester when Jesus declares "I say that anyone who looks at a woman and desires her has committed adultery in his heart // If your right eye leads you to sin pluck it out and throw it away! If your right hand makes you sin cut it off and throw it away! It's better to lose a small part of your body than to be thrown whole into hell!"[19] In "Disgust," Chester is mainly silent as the narrator speaks on his

[19] This sequence also relates to an episode in Brown's *Ed the Happy Clown* (which appeared in *Yummy Fur #1-18*) in which a character named "Chet Doodley" loses his right hand—the phobia of a cartoonist whose strength is dependent on that body part. Fueled by religious fervor, Chet restores his right hand through a violent interpretation of

behalf. The depiction of Jesus in "Matthew 5:11-7:27" externalizes Chester's inner conflict which in "Disgust" is visually expressed and, except for the speech of the narrator, left largely unspoken. At the same time, one can view this scene as a means of taking control over a tyrannical authority. The spell these religious ideas hold over Chester in the earlier story is broken by making them manifest through Jesus's strident to the point of being farcical speeches.

Regardless of whether "Matthew 5:11-7:27" is regarded as one final, punishing lash delivered to the Chester of the earlier story or as a means of defusing the power of these thoughts, the representation of Jesus as a deliverer of threats more than good news acts as a cathartic expression of the moral superego that plagues the adolescent Chester. The two stories function symbiotically in *Yummy Fur* and act to inform and explain each other. While the Sermon may justifiably seem the product of a "bland imagination" when isolated, as suggested by Tong, it does not exist in isolation in the comic. As Tong further comments "'Matthew' feels more like a diary of the artist's feelings, which range from a sudden interest in the text which is then periodically overtaken by boredom resulting from lack of inspiration. A meticulously crafted, undeviating plan is rarely in evidence" (36-7). While Tong points to the autobiographical quality of the writing, he fails to understand the work as being incorporated into a larger story, which results in his dismissal of the work as facile and rambling.

Brown never collected his biblical adaptations into a single volume; they exist only in his comic book serial. Tong's point that Brown's use of the Gospel has been inconsistent is further suggestive of the fact that they do not function alone, but as a

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this passage of the Bible and the story of St. Justin who cut off his hand to prevent himself from sinning. This prompts Chet to brutally murder the woman he is having an adulterous affair with.

commentary on the other works that were simultaneously published in *Yummy Fur.* What seems most disturbing to Tong is that Brown is comfortable presenting a highly subjective and personalized vision of the Gospels that refuses to give the biblical adaptations privileged treatment. Rather, these stories become grist for the autobiographical mill. In creating them, Brown situates himself in an established tradition of autobiographical cartoonists who have recounted their conflicted relationship to religion. There is a consensus that the first autobiographical comic emerging from the underground is Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary,* which details Green's tortured and guilt-ridden boyhood growing up in a heavily repressive religious environment.[20]

In *Mirror Talk*, Susanna Egan suggests that "Literary autobiography is a shape-shifter, a chameleon, blending and distorting genres in response to the pressures of life circumstances" (84). Tong is frustrated at Brown's use of the Bible because it is a crosspollination of autobiography with a biblical adaptation. While the manifest content is a retelling of the gospels, it ultimately reveals more about Brown than the Bible. Bob Levin offers an alternate interpretation of *Yummy Fur* in his article "Good ol' Chester Brown: A Psycho-literary Exploration of *Yummy Fur*":

> The continuity, the development, the regularity of the issues appearing over time, under a single title, product of a solitary consciousness, makes it like scheduled visits from a strange but evolving friend. *Yummy Fur* become one unified, wondrous work, familiar and cohesive, not some fragmented series, distanced, strange. (47)

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[20] Chester Brown has also inspired a new generation of artists to convert their religious crises into comic books. Craig Thompson's close to six hundred page tome *Blankets* (2003) is a descendent of Brown's autobiographical work.

Levin's "Psycho-literary" exploration speaks as much to Brown's work as it does to Levin. Levin's reaction to *Yummy Fur* as "visits from a strange, but evolving friend" can be regarded as a response to what Benjamin described as the "decay of aura" in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (*Illuminations* 222). For Benjamin, the creation of an aura is a "phenomenon of distance"(222) that is produced by the uniqueness or inimitability of a work of art. The decay of the aura is an effect of the desire to make art reproducible as a way of closing this distance between object and viewer. It is a result of "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly" (223). In Benjamin's discussion of film he describes the way "film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the 'personality' outside the studio" (231). Benjamin's notion can be related to Levin's response which conceives of reading *Yummy Fur* as a conversation. The conversational mode the comic encourages can be interpreted as an attempt to overcome its mass-produced quality. Readers feel as if they are being directly addressed and that they have established a "unique" relationship with the work of art.

Brown's letters sections give the appearance of an interactive community evolving between fans (who were often themselves cartoonists) and the artist. Yet, the letters still appear as part of Brown's overarching narrative of the comic series, and an extension of his personality because Brown edited and included letters at his discretion and re-wrote them in his own minute hand. The inclusion of a letters section is one of the differences between the serial and the collected edition. This type of reading pleasure Levin describes is lost in the collected editions, in which the reader is instead asked to scrutinize the work as a deracinated objet d'art.

Another difference between reading an on-going series versus the collected editions

is that the reading gets embedded into the rhythm of a reader's life. Benjamin describes the way in which the "aura" or authenticity of a work "originated in the service of a ritual" (222). Attendant to a ritualistic reading practice that characterizes the reading of a comic series is a fetishism in the collector "who, by owning the work of art, shares in its ritual power" (244). In order to counteract the "phony spell of the commodity" (231) in which social relations are organized around exchange value, the book becomes a precious, valuable object not as a result of its price tag, but as a result of the collector's personal experience with the work. As Benjamin writes in "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting" when he describes the relationship of a bibliophile to his books, "the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories" (*Illuminations* 69). By treating *Yummy Fur* as a regular, interactive visit from a personal friend that can be collected and cherished, Levin's ritualistic reading practice can be seen as a response to the decay of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction.

In *Understanding Comics,* Scott McCloud uses the term "closure" to refer to the unique process whereby a reader fills in the space between the comic book panels to link them into a coherent story. Closure is not limited to comics, but the process of "observing parts but perceiving the whole" (63) is a practice we depend on in our daily lives. Since we perceive things only partially, we fill out what is missing with our own assumptions based on prior experience. We assume, if we see the front of a building on a city street, that it is not just a movie set façade. If we look at a picture and it shows only the top half of a person's body, we infer it is attached to a bottom even though we may not see it. The medium of comics offers a unique opportunity for manipulating the spaces between the panels that have been termed the "gutters." It is in this space that "the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of time, change

and motion"(65).

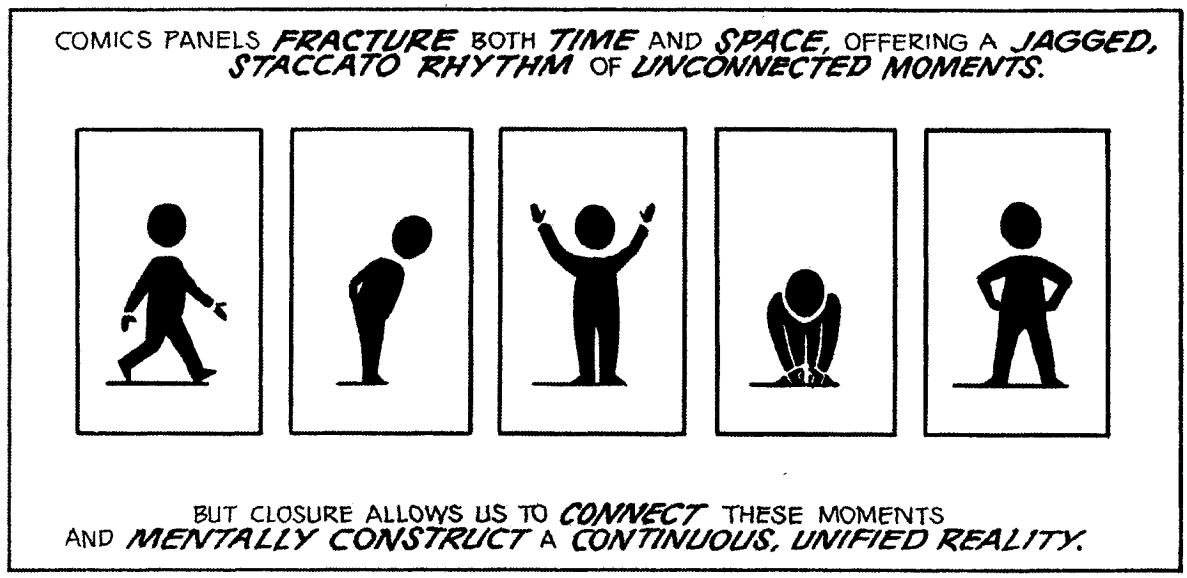


Figure 29. Understanding Closure (67).

It is through the process of closure that, for example, we assume the hand reaching for the *Playboy* discussed earlier was Chester's. We suppose this because he is shown at the Bonimart cash in the next panel making the purchase. However, Brown plays with the ambiguous gutter space in order to create a relationship between Chester and Jesus. Likewise, Levin's reading of *Yummy Fur* in which "*Yummy Fur* becomes one unified, wondrous work, familiar and cohesive, not some fragmented series, distanced, strange" (47) involves taking the fragmented moments of time and space and mentally fusing them together into a coherent whole using the process of closure. Levin's participation in writing the story of the comic goes beyond making connections between panels in the individual storylines. He subsumes all the contents under the title into a larger narrative. As Eco has discussed, a text cues our responses on how to read a work. This is not a random interpretive act on Levin's part. However, Levin's method of closure situates

him in a different interpretive community of readers than that of critics such as Tong who read against the work by taking material out of context. Tong's refusal to collaborate with the work by mentally filling in the blanks results in a reading of Brown's comics that finds nothing but "excessive restraint, a lack of coherence and a paucity of invention [...] resulting in an ephemeral experience"(37). By contrast, Levin's reading of the autobiographical nature of the comic involves the use of closure on a wider range of material, which allows him to obtain pleasure and make meaning from *Yummy Fur.*

Scott McCloud has remarked: "Comics is a great balancing act. An art as subtractive as it is additive" (206). What he means by this is that the artist controls just how much or how little information to include. The reader's process of closure will then fill in the story that lies in the gutters. In the case of Brown's work, an interesting relation between addition and subtraction emerges in which they become the same operation by his calling attention to what it is that he is deleting and editing. Brown's stories about the revision process, which very often involves the act of excision, show one approach through which he achieves an aesthetic of silence. On the cover of *Yummy Fur #20,* Brown depicts a hand whiting out text in a panel from the short story "Helder" that appeared in the previous issue

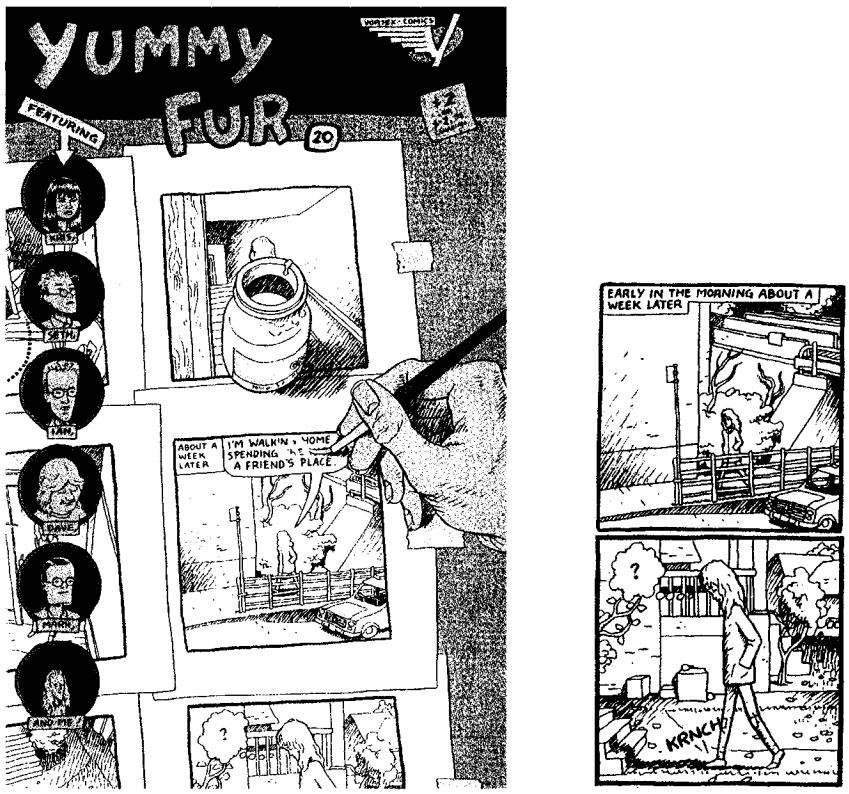
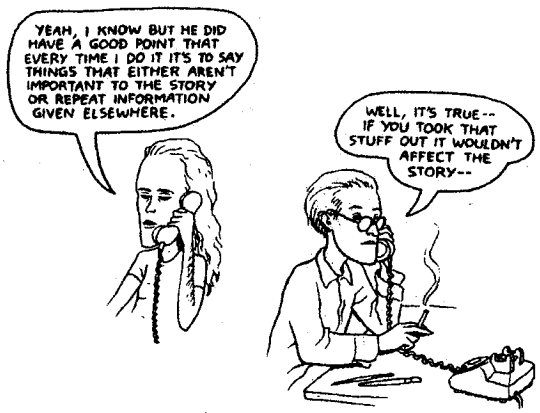


Figure 30. A double gesture: display and deleting on the cover of *Yummy Fur #20,* and the resulting "corrected" panels that appeared, previously, in *Yummy Fur #19 (18).*

The featured story in *Yummy Fur #20* is "Showing Helder" which is a metacomic about the process of drawing "Helder." Compared with the closed panels of "Helder," "Showing Helder" is drawn without panel borders.



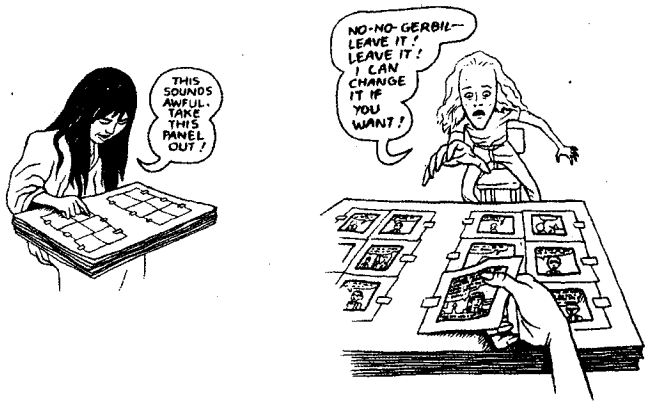


Figure 31. The borderless panels of "Showing Helder" (*Yummy Fur #20* 12, 15) frame the story "Helder" (*Yummy Fur #19* 18)

The various moments in "Showing Helder" are separated by blank space, with no borders separating them, unlike "Helder." "Showing Helder" comments on the creative process as Brown struggles to make his vision of the story amenable to the tastes of his friends. Although Chester Brown is labeled as the creator of the story, he draws attention to his persona's dependency on the criticism and advice of others. "Showing Helder" adopts the contradictory stance of being at once a supplement to "Helder," while at the same time being a vehicle for drawing attention to what has been left unsaid in "Helder." One friend advises him to remove the narration and another orders Chester to remove a panel. Brown further gestures toward the unsaid by the fact that "Showing Helder" is framing another story which draws our attention to the silenced moments not only from "Helder," but "Showing Helder" as well, which future issues could potentially recuperate into yet another story about the process of writing a story. While we may fill in the blank spaces between the panels of "Showing Helder" with our own readings, there is the implication that these blank spaces could come into view in other stories. As cartoonist Bill Wray

exasperatedly remarked in Brown's letters section in the following issue of *Yummy Fur*: "Christ! It's an autobiography of an autobiography! Damn! Brown's getting so anal-retentive. I guess the next issue will be an autobiography of the autobiography's autobiography!"(*Yummy Fur #21* 25). "Showing Helder" performs a form of erasure in which there is a presencing of that which has been effaced or left unsaid. The distinction between absence and presence or addition and subtraction is collapsed.

Another instance of erasure can be found in *Louis Riel #7*. Brown advertises a recall notice for *I Never Liked You* which is the collected version of the story "Fuck" that appeared in *Yummy Fur #26-30*. Brown claims that the first 600 copies of the book are printed on paper that is too transparent. Brown also mentions that the way to tell if one has this print-run is that it contains an "error" because the words "I decide to say nothing" were left in a panel (*Louis Riel #7* 26). Although Brown chooses to label this an error, the words originally appeared in "Fuck." This "error" is not only revealing of the quality of the printing, but of Brown's thinking as he replaced a declaration of silence with silence proper with his decision to literally say nothing by removing the text and letting the images speak. Ironically, by announcing this, he sends out an all-points alert to his readers about his decision to be silent. In the same way Heidegger crosses out the term ~~being~~, Brown's "recall notice" literally recalls that which has been crossed out leaving the memory trace of its presence even though it has been removed from the work.

Brown's collected versions of his comics are never the same as what was published in the serialized version. This is yet another instance in which Brown's supplementing and supplanting of his earlier work funnels the comics back towards the concept of an authorial subjectivity that hails the reader to read the work as an autobiographical chronicle of an artist's artistic process. At the same time, this poses some interesting

problems for the comic book critic in choosing which version to discuss. The collected version of *Louis Riel*, for example, is not just an assembly of the ten serialized issues. Brown redrew the comic completely, altering the dialogue and images. No version is more definitive than the other, so the question arises as to which version of *Louis Riel* to use.

I look to both versions of the comic because examining the deletions and additions are fissures through which the traces of an "author function" are revealed. While the collected version offers a refined, uniformly drawn story, the serial version contains cover pages, letters section, and a greater sense of the writing of *Louis Riel* as performative. In the series, *Louis Riel* does not emerge *in toto*, but the reader witnesses not only the story of Louis Riel unfolding through time, but also the story of the writing of Riel.

One of the main differences between the serialized version and the collected version is that in the collected version, Brown standardizes the body types. By contrast, there is a subjective transformation of the characters' appearances. From the beginning of the story in the collected version, the magnitude of certain characters is announced by their oversized, heavyset figures.

Brown deliberately scales his characters according to their importance. Brown monumentalizes his central figures by increasing their trunk and swelling their hands to sizes that recall the proportions of socialist realist statues, as well as the hierarchized designs of medieval imagery in which the importance and prestige of a character was reflected by their relative size to others. The heads that Brown draws remain curiously shrunken in relation to the size of the rest of the body in what is a departure from the more traditional technique of drawing large, baby-sized heads with distended eyes. While the heads may be petite, the added physical bulk of Brown's main characters gives weight

to their personalities and actions. The figures may be iconic, but contrary to McCloud's argument, they do not invite reader identification.

At the beginning of the serialized version, Louis Riel is much more slender and drawn with softer, wavier hair than in the collected version.

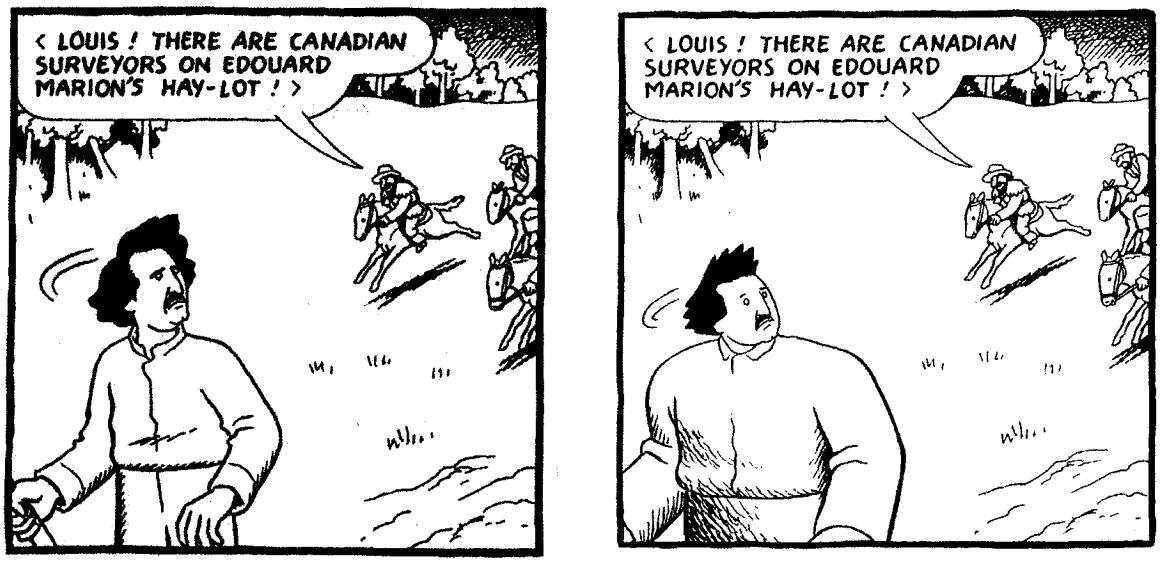


Figure 32. An early Riel from *Louis Riel #1* (6) and his re-drawn proportions in the *Louis Riel* collection (11).

Along with gaining some weight, his hair is modified to a more angular firebrand hairstyle that again hints at socialist realist art through the use of sharp, clean lines. Likewise, John A. McDonald's appearance does not remain uniform throughout the serial. He is initially drawn as a bulbous-nosed ectomorph (a more archetypally villainous physique). In the collected version Brown keeps the flabby nose, but beefs up the formerly gangly-limbed McDonald to about the same stature as Riel.

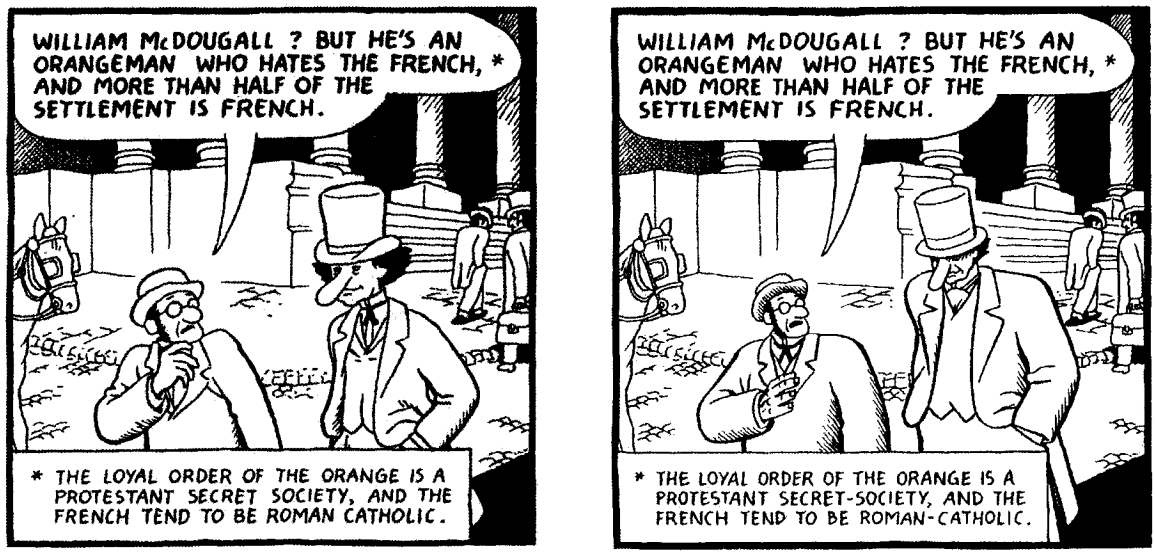


Figure 33. John A. MacDonald gains weight (*Louis Riel #1* 3, *Louis Riel* 8)

Brown has remarked that his political sympathies shifted during the writing of *Louis Riel* and that he ceased identifying himself as an anarchist and began believing that there was a place for government in the world. Perhaps the modification of MacDonald's body image is a physiognomic reflection of Brown's ideological transformation. However, while Riel maintains an appearance untarnished by age, Brown does have McDonald age dramatically over the fourteen years that the comic spans.

Brown has cited Harold Gray, the creator of *Little Orphan Annie* as having had an influence on his work. The broad frames with small heads, the small box panels and the signature empty saucer eyes are elements of Gray's aesthetic that Brown borrows.

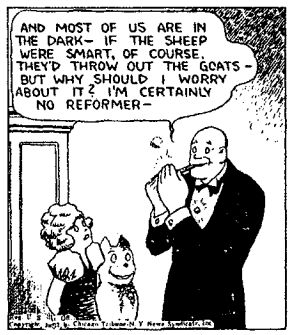


Figure 34. Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie* (March 13, 1937).

Brown has commented on the role of Gray in his work in an online interview, "I'm *trying* to draw like him, but it keeps ending up looking like it was drawn by me" (Epp). What is common to and striking in both Gray's and Brown's aesthetic, is their use of hollow eyes which peer out at the reader in an empty gaze. According to Richard Marschall, the eyes in *Little Orphan Annie* are "symbols of the bleak space they observed and in which Gray placed his characters in a spirit of foredoom [...]" (168). Beyond the visual likeness, *Louis Riel* conveys a similar attitude through its protagonist whose well-known end, along with the fate of Métis culture in general, can offer little comfort to the reader. In Benjamin's essay "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," he theorizes the meaning of an empty gaze:

> Baudelaire describes eyes of which one is inclined to say that they have lost their ability to look [...] The deeper the remoteness which a glance has to overcome, the stronger will be the spell that is apt to emanate from the gaze. In eyes that look with mirrorlike blankness the remoteness remains complete. It is precisely for this reason that such eyes know nothing of distance. (*Illuminations* 189-90)

What Benjamin argues about eyes that look with mirrorlike blankness is that their power is located in the fact that there is no recognition of a returned glance—no fantasy of

connectivity. While Benjamin's concept of the aura was dependent on distance, in this essay he formulates a new type of relationship in which the semblance of distance and presence is no longer necessary because the illusion has been shattered. A new relationship not based on the former false consciousness is established. It is for this reason that paradoxically, the spell of this blank gaze becomes even more captivating. In *Louis Riel*, the hollow eyes he appropriates from Gray can be seen as synecdochically representative of a more ubiquitous ethos. It is not just that Brown is creating a sense of distance between the reader and the work, it is that he has imploded the idea of absence and presence. A new kind of spell is cast over the reader in which we "submit to their sway without illusion" ("Some Motifs"190). We are made completely aware that Brown's story is not making the past present and the text obstructs the possibility of a reader finding a point of entry into the story. But, as Benjamin would theorize, in doing so—in presenting hollow eyes that do not call out to us or ask us to make illusory bonds of identification, this achieves a new kind of authenticity—a cynical realism that embraces the impossibility of identification as the new mode of identification. Many critics have also likened Brown to Hergé, creator of *Tintin* and most prominent developer of the ligne-claire or clear-line style.



Figure 35. Capitaine Haddock (Hergé 40).

Although Brown denies in his foreword to the collected edition of *Louis Riel* that Hergé has had a direct influence on his work, *Louis Riel*'s economic and simplified drawing style invites comparison. In an interview, the comic artist Moebius described Hergé's ligne-claire as indicative of a "suppression of the ego" (Gravatt 32). The drawing style in *Louis Riel* seems to garrote any excess meaning or affect that might accidentally seep out to a reader. One might be tempted to call this a form of anti-expression if one contrasts this to the loud, exaggerated lines of Sacco that can be read as a boiling over of ego. But I would suggest that Brown's numb, inscrutable drawing style is a different register of a "psychologically realist" mode of representation. One can argue that with any suppression, there is always a return of the repressed. The absence of a "body" only further inscribes Brown's authority and subjectivity over the work. This is a similar strategy to the way in which the blank gazes of Brown's characters can be said to exert an even greater power by their complete remoteness. In comparison to *Palestine*, Joe is the only figure whose eyes we do not see. His eyes remain hidden behind the unreflective lenses of his glasses. Joe's eyes do not return a reader's gaze, yet the text is constructed such that we are spellbound by the subjectivity of this cipher. This phenomenon of collapsed distance in *Louis Riel* is not concentrated on a single character but diffused throughout the work.

If Brown's style reflects a "suppression of the ego," we can see the way in which this is displaced on to the historical figures he depicts. Brown actively imposes a silence over them, most forcibly on Louis Riel. Susanna Egan's study of auto/biography in *Mirror Talk* looks to the blurred and hybrid space of lifewriting. She defines "mirror talk" as "the encounter of two lives in which the biographer is also an autobiographer" (7). For

Egan, mirror talk is understood as an intimate, dialogic exchange. Egan sees the process of mirror talk best represented by stories which involve biographers who are related to their subject such as the father/son relationship that is narrated in *Maus* and Harvey Pekar, Joyce Brabner and Frank Stack's *Our Cancer Year,* which is a collaborative work that narrates Pekar's fight with cancer. Brown's adaptations of *Louis Riel* can be understood as "mirror talk," but he has replaced living subject matter with material from books. In using Louis Riel as a self-reflecting mirror, Brown engages in a double suppression of Riel. He refrains from expressions of Riel's interiority and inner conflict. At the same time, Brown's representation of Riel selectively emphasizes moments in Riel's life when his public attempts to make his voice heard were stifled.

In the collected edition of *Louis Riel*, Brown does not divide the works up into ten sections in the same way he published *Louis Riel* as a serial. The book is divided into four sections that divide Riel's life into four phases—the Red River resistance of 1869, his exile and emerging sense of divine mission in the United States, the North West Rebellion of 1885 and finally his surrender to the Canadians. Brown uses the conclusions of these sections in order to overtly strip Riel of his voice and power ending with the ultimate silencing of Riel—his death.

At the end of part one, Brown deliberately takes license with historical facts in order to dramatize Riel's isolation and defeat. Riel's hope for a future in parliamentary politics has been dashed by the fact that he was denied an amnesty as a result of his participation in the Red River resistance. Fort Garry is about to be overtaken by English soldiers and Riel has already dismissed the men who were occupying the fort with him. Historically, a man named William O'Donoghue remained with Riel, however, Brown removed him from the storyline. Riel is depicted waking up in the morning with the

realization that the resistance has ended: he eats his breakfast, prepares to leave and then walks away into exile in the pouring rain (see figure 36).

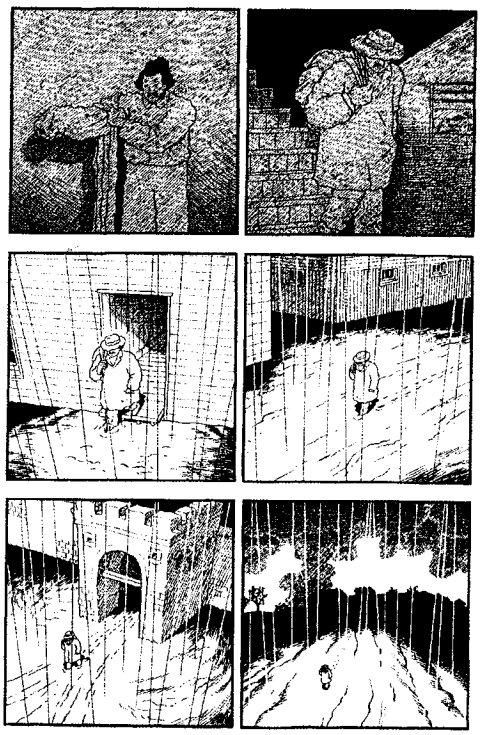


Figure 36. Riel's silent departure from Fort Garry (85).



Figure 37. Riel's frenzied departure from Fort Garry in Freynet's *Louis Riel en Bande Dessinée* (35, 36)

In Robert Freynet's comic *Louis Riel en Bande Dessinée*, he depicts this historical event as a moment of high-octane drama. In this scene, horses hooves are thundering, hats are flying and Riel is seen desperately fleeing with his men in order to get to safety. By contrast, Brown strips this moment of climactic tension in order to place attention on Riel as a solitary figure. Forced to leave his home and people, Riel walks mutely into a silent landscape and away from the settlement silhouetted in the background, a settlement that represents the future he had hoped for in Canadian politics. While this scene is far less suspenseful than Freynet's, I think it is more effective in expressing Riel's loss. The Red River resistance was a triumph for the Métis in that they were guaranteed their language, religion and land (land which later became a contentious issue) in the Manitoba Act which created the province of Manitoba. However, it was a pyrrhic victory for Riel who was not able to stay in the Red River settlement to enjoy the fruits of his labor. Because of the decision of Riel's provisional government to execute Thomas Scott, whom I discuss later on, he was not given the amnesty that the Canadian government had promised him and retreated into exile in the United States.

The end of part two in *Louis Riel* depicts yet another suppression of Louis Riel's voice as it concludes with his institutionalization in an asylum.

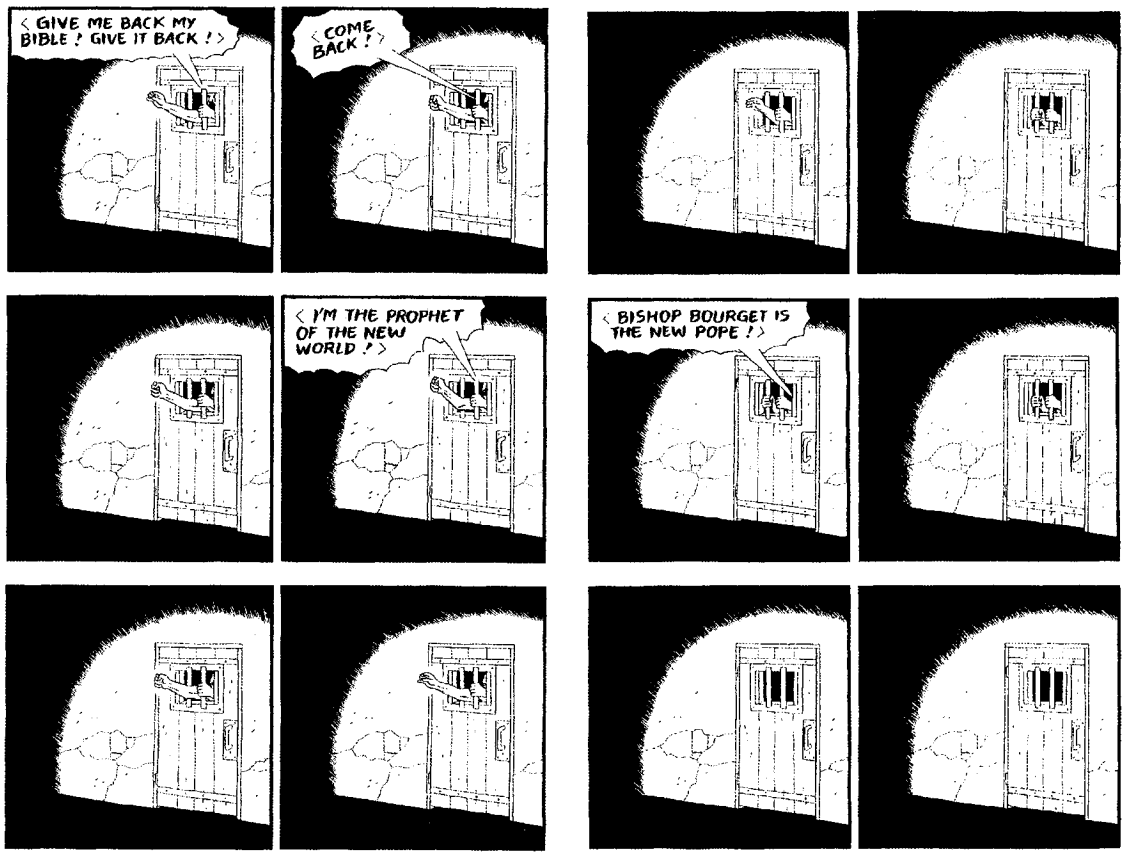


Figure 38. Silenced by doctors (113-14).

His religious zeal is dismissed as madness. The repetition of the panels and the cramped boxes that spotlight on Riel's cell create a sense of entrapment. These final images of Riel's outstretched hands retreating into the cell communicate his impotence as he is forced to withdraw into an acquiescent silence.

In the third section of the book, Riel reluctantly returns back to Canada at the request of Gabriel Dumont in order to help the Métis negotiate with the Canadian government. However, after his religious awakening, he has moved beyond political leadership towards a belief that he is the "prophet of the new world" and that the Métis are the new chosen people. Riel changes his name to "Louis David Riel" after God

speaks to him and bestows this new name on him. While many writers framed these events as Riel's madness, which has contributed to the mystique Riel still has in Canadian consciousness, J.M. Bumstead writes in his article "Louis Riel and the United States" that the question of whether Riel's "visions and revelations were part of his madness is as relevant a question as asking whether Jesus Christ or John the Baptist were sane men" (26). The question of whether Riel was a prophet or a madman (or both) has a peculiar resonance for Chester Brown. His mother, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia, had an uncannily similar vision to Riel's. According to an online article in *Exclaim!*, "Brown's middle name was changed to David after his mother had a dream in which God appeared to her and told her to rename her son" (Young).

Brown has been active in expressing his criticism of the concept of schizophrenia and of altered states of consciousness as transgressive. Most notable was his comic essay, "My mother was a schizophrenic" that appears in *Underwater #4*. "My Mother was a Schizophrenic" attacks contemporary psychiatric beliefs and practices regarding the diagnosis and treatment of schizophrenia. Brown rejects the opinion that schizophrenia is a somatic illness, arguing that the inability of schizophrenics to function is exacerbated by their having to live in a culture in which their behavior is seen as non-normative and punished for being so. Brown does not recognize a difference between schizophrenic delusions and the religious beliefs that individuals adopt as an act of faith. In *Louis Riel*, he treats them both on a characteristically literal level. Thus, Brown withholds his judgment of Riel's personal accounts of his mystical experiences. Riel claimed that the same spirit that visited Moses visited him on a mountaintop in Washington, D.C. and that a spirit then transported him to the fourth heaven. Brown's depiction is faithful to Riel's recollection of the events.

In Hal Niedzviecki's review of *Louis Riel* in *Broken Pencil*, he argues for the inability of Brown's technique to appropriately represent Louis Riel's inner state.

> [...] Brown's stripped-down style and focus on linear story-telling ultimately is not up to the challenge of portraying the Métis leader's inner delirium. I would have like to see more variation in the boxy comic-strip style during moments of mental crisis that Brown deftly shows to have left Riel stronger and more vulnerable. (70)

What Niedzviecki is calling for seems to me to be precisely what Brown is repudiating. He avoids melodramatic techniques such as shattering the panel frames to reflect altered states of consciousness. For Brown, to apply a different aesthetic treatment to Riel's visions would privilege a normative mode of perception by establishing it as an objective reality, thus coding Riel's visions as deviant.

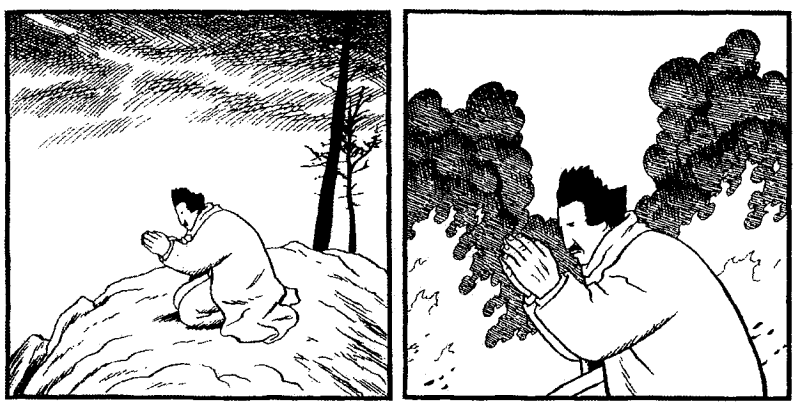


Figure 39. Riel the visionary (106).

El Hadj Moussa Toufik and Zoran Vanjak's *Louis Riel: Le Père du Manitoba* (1996) comes closer to the kind of historical retelling Niedzviecki calls for:



Figure 40. Riel's madness according to Toufik and Zoran in *Louis Riel: Le Père du Manitoba* (25).

In Zoran and Toufik's depiction of Riel's nervous collapse, there is a fluidity between the panels that depict Riel's inner frenzy and demonic hallucinations. In contrast to these borderless panels, the boxed panels that follow signify that social order has been reestablished and that the reader is once again viewing a more objective reality.

Brown deliberately places Riel's "hallucinations" within the same style of boxes as "reality" in order to not mark the difference between normative and transgressive states. He also deliberately avoids depicting the private, inner life of Riel to concentrate

on the moments in which Riel clashes with public institutions—the political, legal and medical bodies that imposed their demand for silence on Riel. Instead of adopting the "primal scream" approach as exemplified by Zoran and Toufik, Brown prefers an emotionally flat register, and on the subject of Riel's inner conflict, remains largely silent.

After the final defeat of the rebels at the Battle of the Batoche during the Northwest Rebellion, Louis Riel turns himself in—not so that he can be a religio-political martyr, but so that he can be a voice for his people's causes. However, Riel's strategy to use the court as a stage on which to present his case for the Métis fails and what Brown emphasizes is how the court system systematically silenced Riel (see figure 41).

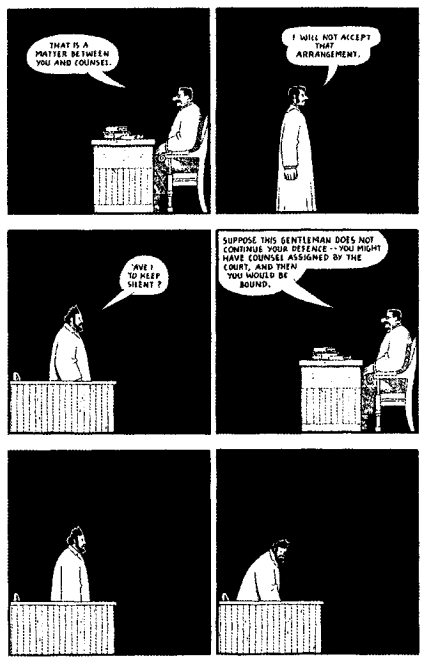


Figure 41. Silence in the court (215).

In the courtroom, Riel is muzzled through the complicity of both the court and his counsel. On the one hand, the courts of English Canada were categorically biased against him and on the other hand, his defense hoped to vindicate him by constructing an argument based on Riel's alleged insanity. Wedged between these two authorities who

refuse to let him act in his own defense, Riel helplessly asks in English "'ave I to keep silent?" (215). Brown's libertarian leanings are evident as he depicts both the legal system that would marginalize Riel as a traitor and the mental establishment that would diagnose him a "megalomaniac" (even if done so in a benevolent attempt to save his life) as partners in the silencing of Riel. Again Brown plays with the facts of history in order to emphasize his point. While Brown's courtroom scene emphasizes Riel's silence and ends with the judge's harsh sentencing, the historical Riel babbled in a three hour unprepared speech after he had been convicted (Siggins 432).

The final imposition of silence occurs in the preparation for Riel's execution.

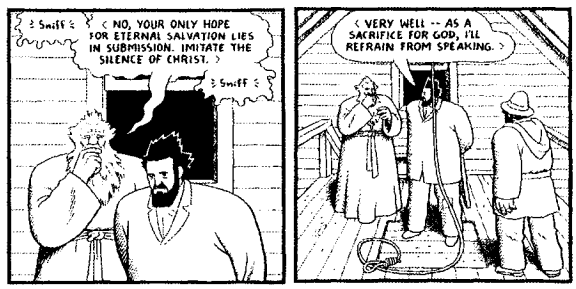


Figure 42. An imposed hallowed silence (237).

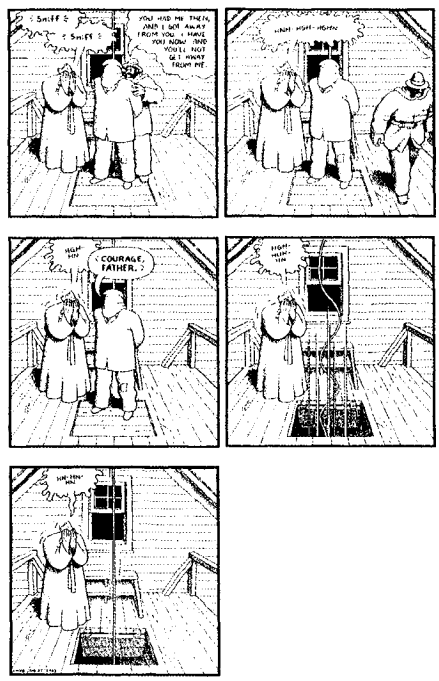


Figure 43. The final silencing of Riel (238).

Riel wishes to give a final speech in order to justify his actions, but he is told to imitate the silence of Christ by the priest who walks with him to the gallows. Riel submits and while the priest himself dissolves into inarticulate sobs, Riel stands fast. However, a religious authority imposes an unwanted silence in Riel's last moments just as the doctors, lawyers and politicians had actively sought to prevent Riel from speaking. Louis Riel's imitation of this silence of Christ could be seen as an act of defiance and silent accusation against his executioners. However, he only assumes this position reluctantly. The fact that he wishes to speak, but submits to a higher authority only when told to, makes Riel's silence all the more suffocating than the actual noose tied around his neck. Riel remarks to his executioners saying "To my way of seeing t'ings, you are releasing me from captivity—I am genuinely grateful to you" (235) which converts his death from an act of silencing to one of empowerment. Death is a liberation from the incarceration

he endured while living. In the same way that Brown's earlier work drew attention to that which was suppressed or excised from his comics, Brown invokes the presence of the unspoken by stressing Riel's unwillingness to keep silent while living.

The only time Brown changes his structure of six boxed panels per page is on the final page. An empty, borderless panel marks the cessation of Louis Riel's life. Brown leaves the final panel unfilled as a marker of Riel's passage into permanent silence. In leaving the final panel blank, however, he opens this panel up to the audience to fill with their own interpretations. Brown's choice to apply an aesthetic of presence and absence to this particular figure from Canadian history was not arbitrary. According to Tom Flanagan, Riel has operated as a "portmanteau symbol" for the "fashionable causes of the political left, including national liberation, Canadian nationalism, human rights, aboriginal rights, multiculturalism and bilingualism" (8). Albert Braz has written a history of Louis Riel as an icon (beginning with the way Louis Riel fashioned his own public persona). Braz remarks that with the proliferation of so many contradictory representations, one cannot "help but wonder if they refer to the same individual" (1). Braz argues that "the reason Riel changes so markedly over time, and across space, is that most of the purported representations of the politician-mystic are less about him than about their authors and their specific social reality" (3). While on the one hand this is an argument that can be made about any historical moment or figure, there is a particularly labile quality to Riel that has allowed generations of individuals to fill this inscrutable signifier with their own significations.

On Riel's tombstone, only the name "Riel" is carved into the stonework. The lack of inscription on Riel's tomb is similar to the panel Brown reserves for the end of his story. This blankness signifies both the death of the man and the birth of a heteroglossic

Canadian legend.

Riel is not the only figure Brown depicts who is both sentenced to death and whose sentences are silenced. Thomas Scott was a fractious Ontario Orangeman whom Riel's provisional government voted to execute. Scott's death would prove to be Riel's albatross. The vituperative 25 year old was converted into a martyr that entrenched public sentiment against Riel and the Métis. In Brown's rendition of Thomas Scott's jailing and execution, he uses 'X's instead of giving voice to the racist slurs with which Scott bombarded the guards. Scott's relentless verbal assaults against the guards using intensely vitriolic speech have become legendary (his fellow prisoners actually requested he be moved to other quarters).



Figure 44. Thomas Scott's loud silence (67).

Brown writes a footnote stating, "these Xes indicate racist comments and profanity"

(61).[21] Although most readers would have no difficulty understanding the basic function of the 'X's as a substitute for swearing, Brown creates a self-contained system by defining his use of the term, once again exerting an authorial control over the significance of his communicative device. The jail scene becomes both a site of comic excess as the 'X's go on for pages and pages as well as a means of communicating without a surplus of meaning. Brown's use of 'X's as a substitute for more specific speech recalls his language games from "Underwater" when he invented his own language as a way of de-familiarizing the story for the reader. Without understanding the specific meanings of the words, the function of language is still understood by other revealing signs and gestures.

Brown's use of 'X's poses some interesting interpretive questions on how they affect the representation of Thomas Scott. As many feminist, queer and postcolonial scholars have noted, denying a voice is a sign of disempowerment. It is possible to read this scene as a dehumanization of Scott because his voice is suppressed and Scott is converted into even more of a caricature when compared with the other characters. Visually, Scott is also an exaggerated figure. Although all the characters are more iconic than "realistic," Scott's elongated face and jaw that hangs down to his chest make him appear distinctly more grotesque than the other characters.[22] Brown vilifies Scott in order

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[21] The 'X's also serve as an ironic intertextual reference to scenes from Brown's autobiographical story "Fuck" which appeared in *Yummy Fur#* 26-30 and was collected into *I Never Liked You.* In this story he is taunted by schoolboys for not swearing. Chester is continually goaded with the taunt "Say Fuck Chester." Brown concludes this episode with a moment of victory for the bullies when he is tricked into accidentally swearing. Brown's refusal to swear is a form of non-conformism. In certain contexts, swearing can be a subversive resistance to authority. For Chester, the act of silence through choosing not to swear is equally a form of linguistic resistance.

[22] Scott is not just visually exaggerated, but Brown purposefully exaggerates his viciousness. He represents Scott as a rabid axe-murderer during the slaying of Norbert Parisien, a Métis who had attempted to escape after being captured by the English. Scott

to make Riel appear as more of a victim to historical circumstances. On the other hand, it is also possible to read these 'X's as a way of offering a more sympathetic portrayal of Scott. By masking his offensive language, a reader's potential feeling of indignation is redirected into a feeling of mild amusement.

However, an alternate interpretation to the suppression of Scott's language is to understand it as a form of literalism. Brown isn't censoring or deleting the text because he did not have access to all of the particular words uttered by Scott. Instead of inventing fictional language, Brown voices the silence as a form of historical accuracy. He lays bare the irretrievability of the past by exposing instead of concealing or fictionalizing its gutters. Once again, recalling Benjamin's notion of a gaze whose look of "mirrorlike blankness" knows nothing of distance, Brown neither distances nor presences the past; it is incommensurably remote.

Brown's drawing style is in harmony with his storytelling approach in that it works to keep the reader visually aloof from the action. Brown rarely uses close-ups, and he draws events either from a high angle or at eye-level. Compared with close-ups or low angles which draw the reader into the action, these panel arrangements keep the reader at a distance. Furthermore, the swift, efficient way Brown moves the plot along denaturalizes the story. A good demonstration of Brown's paratactic style is when he depicts Riel and fellow Métis in a meeting, deciding whether or not to take direct action against the government by capturing Fort Garry.

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hacks away at Parisien long after he is dead despite the fact that, historically, Scott was neither the sole perpetrator of the murder, nor did Parisien die immediately on site.

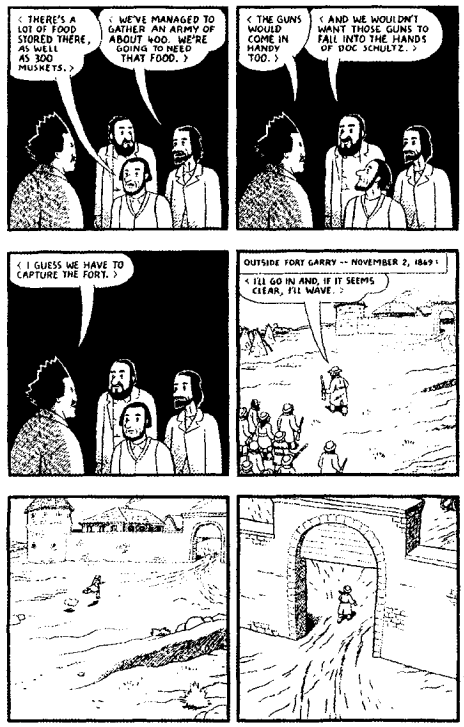


Figure 45. The Métis decide to capture Fort Garry (17).

The page is visually satisfying, with its yin-yang effect; the first three panels are dominated by black and the second half by white. The first half of the page details the process of deciding to capture the fort while the second half is devoted to the execution of this decision. There is a tongue-in-cheek humor to the way Brown depicts the deadpan expressions on his characters' faces even though they are discussing emotionally charged issues. The staccato, matter of fact dialogue reads as if Brown self-consciously modeled their speech on the voiceovers of Hong Kong chop-socky films. In keeping with the ethos of minimalism, Brown doesn't alter the position or body posture of the characters as one might expect if a naturalistic style were being used. In this way, Brown eliminates superfluous distraction and is able to break up the ideas. When Brown represents the implementation of Riel's plan, he again distances the reader from being absorbed in the action by using exclusively high angle shots in which white space predominates and the

tiny characters take up very little of the panel spaces. Stanley Fish, in an indictment of biography titled "Just Published: Minutiae without Meaning," accuses biography of offering nothing but "transitions that creak and analyses that you don't believe for a minute" (A19). The paratactic speech in *Louis Riel* bypasses Fish's querulous discussion of biography through storytelling techniques that avoid naturalizing causal relations. The teleology in *Louis Riel* is self-consciously artificial.

While other artists, such as Samuel Beckett, have made use of minimalism and the language of silence, Brown's storytelling frugality exists on a semiotic level as well. If Brown's style reflects, as Moebius argued of Hergé, a suppression of the ego, the ego can be said to be held in reserve throughout the comic until the explanatory footnotes. Here, a strong authorial presence is inscribed through the compulsively literal justifications that are provided for every action. Beckett's use of minimalism is self-consciously polyphonic by the way in which it embraces the ambiguity of language and the possibility of reading on multiple levels. By contrast, Brown's highly restrained and distancing style, combined with the explanatory footnotes, resist (although they can never prevent) a reader's attempt to colonize a text either through intense identification with the work or promiscuous interpretations.

Louis Riel reflects an ambivalence to metaphor or "second-order" meaning that runs throughout Brown's work. This conflicted relationship is self-consciously voiced in an episode from *I Never Liked You* which first appeared in issue 29 of *Yummy Fur*. When Chester draws a picture for Sky, a girl he has a crush on, he represents himself as a skeleton reaching for a bird. Chester says to himself, "the bird represents Sky// and the skeleton represents me" (5). However, when Carrie, a girl who is jealous of Brown's affection for Sky, deciphers the symbolism in the picture, Chester says, "No—I never use

symbolism. I just like to draw skeletons. And the bird—that song 'Fly Robin Fly' was playing on the radio so I drew that bird flying" (7). Realizing how he's made himself vulnerable to unsympathetic readers, Brown silences the obvious metaphoric connotations of his drawings.[23] The images in *Louis Riel* are subject to this same struggle between imparting and withholding meaning. While the images are loaded —the significance of the powerful, swollen hands, for example, can be read for their psychosexual significance —Brown uses the power of an authorial presence in the text to undermine these interpretations with a literal reading.[24]

And yet, despite Brown's uneasy and self-conscious relationship to language and signification, I think both Brown's self-figuration in *Louis Riel* as well as his turn toward silence is best expressed through the symbolic significance of one scene. In an episode in which Louis Riel is on a journey back to Canada, a script that he has been writing falls off his wagon. As the pages blow away, Riel races to gather them up.

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[23] In interviews Brown has used this same strategy of withholding meaning. When asked about the significance of the title *Yummy Fur*, Brown claims that "*Yummy Fur* doesn't mean anything, so I called it that" (*The Comics Journal #135* 79-80). Of course, Brown's refusal to load his allegedly arbitrary signifiers with added meaning doesn't stop readers from seeing the relationship to female genitalia as well as the relationship of the title to Brown's early representations of his persona using the figure of a rabbit.

[24] While it is outside the scope of this paper to undertake an analysis of the hand imagery that runs throughout Brown's work, hands are manifestations of power and virility, whether they be the exceptionally gaunt, skeletal appendages that Brown uses to draw his own hands, the lopping off of St. Justin's hand, Chet Doodlez's missing hand or the engorged hands of the *Louis Riel* characters. Because a cartoonist's livelihood is in his drawing hand, the loss of this hand is the most devastating scenario imaginable.

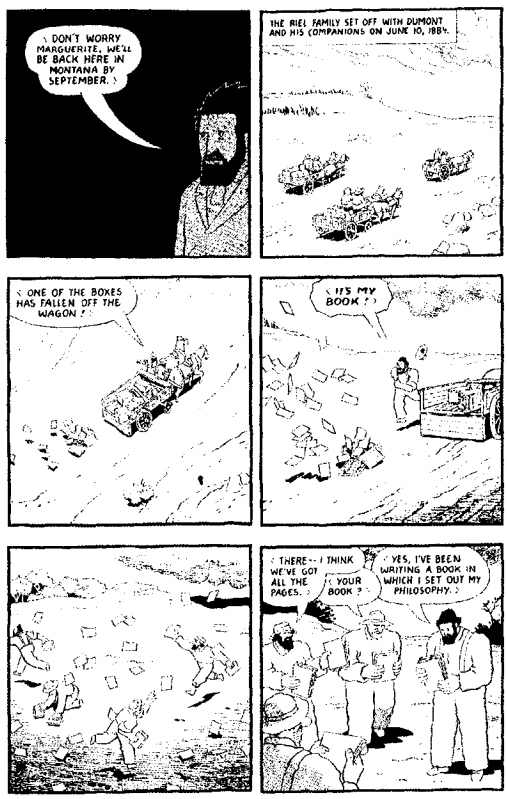


Figure 46. Brown and Riel lose control of their story (129).

Brown indicates in the footnotes that the scene is a "fabrication" (257). The historical Riel sent his script up in advance for fear of having it confiscated. This opens up the text to the question of why Brown would choose to depict Riel attempting to recover his writing that has scattered in every direction.[25] I think Egan's theory of "mirror talk" in which Louis Riel can be seen to represent Chester Brown, is a useful interpretive device for examining this scene. On the one hand, we see Louis Riel losing control of his story. This speaks to the countless ways Riel's image has been constructed and reconstructed. In the same way he is forcibly coerced into silence in the asylum, law courts and on the scaffold, Louis Riel fights to regain authority over his life's story. On the other hand, if

[25] His declared reason for inventing the scene is that it refutes some of Charles Nolin's perjured speech in court about a book Riel had allegedly written (265).

we substitute Louis Riel for Chester Brown, we can read it as a metaphor for Brown's own attempt to control and hoard meaning as his comics are disseminated. The reader is left with a silence that recalls Foucault's description of the function of the author as one that "impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction" (118). The image of Brown's Riel attempting to rein in the pages of his life's story speaks to both the sundry ways in which the actual Riel was dwarfed by future appropriations of his image as well as Brown's attempt to convert this cacophonous glut of Louis Riel's contradictory representations into an expression of silence. The comic points to the impossibility of achieving an authentic and unmediated understanding of the historical moment. "Louis Riel" is emptied of as much meaning as Brown can elide while still providing a coherent chronicle of the historical figure's life. Nevertheless, although Brown may be voicing a silence on the subject of Riel, his work continues to act as a portrait of its artist, reflecting Brown's attitudes toward the representation of history in a comic book narrative.

Conclusion – Looking Ahead

> *He's definitely an oddball cartoonist, because he has very excellent social skills.*
>
> Seth on Joe Sacco (McGrath 46)

> *I think Chester's a real good artist, but I think he's become a little full of himself in the last ten years. –*
>
> Gilbert Hernandez, one creator of *Love & Rockets* (Hussey 84)

Both born in the same year (1960) and working during the same period, Sacco's style has steadily become more fleshy and realistic while Brown's style is in the process

of being refined to the essence of iconic simplicity. Each having garnered a considerable amount of respect and financial stability, they are free to pursue their respective aesthetic directions as they both enter middle age and an artistic midpoint in their careers. As the titles of Sacco and Brown's comics suggest, *Palestine* and *Louis Riel* represent a difference between a concern with the collective and a concern with the individual. Sacco's techniques are informed by a fairly traditional approach in that he aims for the highest degree of reader identification with the subject matter. Sacco has consistently proffered this view arguing in various interviews that the "main benefit is that you can make your subject very accessible" (Campbell); comics are more "palatable" than other media (Bennett 16), and "engaging" (Sacco "Questions & Answers"). Sacco summarized his position in a lecture he gave at the 2002 Conference on Comics and Graphic Novels which was published in the online journal *ImageText*, "there is nothing like thrusting someone right there. And, that's what I think a cartoonist can do" ("Transcript"). Meanwhile, Brown has written in a defense of Joe Matt's *Peepshow* after it received a negative review: "An artist should follow their muses first and worry about their audiences second" ("Who's All Wet" 5). Brown's stance towards his audience is reflected in his work and also in irked reviewers' reaction to his material. Gregory Cwiklik had a representative response when he wrote: "I find the artwork off-putting with its simple outlines and tiny figures in tiny panels. It reminds me of the old *Little Orphan Annie* strip but without Harold Gray's meticulous shading which set the mood and made it engaging" (45). While disliking Brown's technique is a perfectly valid point of view, such reviews do not give Brown the benefit of the doubt by suggesting that his refusal to provide "engaging" material just might be his intention.

Chester Brown is not taking up the story of Louis Riel as a way of exposing the

political injustices that have been done to an oppressed people (although this is the context of his story) or co-opting Riel as a symbol of a collective movement (such as French Nationalism or aboriginal rights). Brown's rendering of Riel concentrates on the multiple ways in which Riel is silenced as an individual—by institutions, by history, by his death and by Brown himself. Brown creates a comic which is informed by a different epistemological vision. He rejects the imaginary sense of *being there* that Sacco's work aims to recreate in the service of informing and stirring a reader's political consciousness. Brown dismantles this distinction between absence and presence by focusing attention on the work itself. There is no "original" referent outside the artwork or an interiority that Brown wishes to communicate—*Louis Riel* is focused on its own phenomenology. While *Louis Riel* lacks the guiding figure whose individual personality steers the reader's response, Brown's work is more concerned with individualism. *Palestine* may be visually eclectic, but Brown is more of an aesthetic maverick through his conscious breaking of the cardinal rules that both popular taste and comic book purists might impose on comic book production. By contrast, Sacco's work challenges a reader by applying pressure to confront global issues of injustice and shake uninformed readers out of political quiescence.

Joseph Witek's study of Jackson, Pekar, and Spiegelman was written at a time when a new generation of cartoonists was emerging—Sacco and Brown among them. Roger Sabin likened this surge of new talent in the eighties and early nineties to "a kind of golden age for nonconformist titles" (177). However, talk of "the golden age" in comics usually recalls a period in the nineteen-forties that saw the birth of the superhero genre and the flourishing of comic books as a mass medium, growing out of newspaper serial strips. Speaking of a "golden age" and "comics" in the same breath generates nostalgia associated with this pre-Code, prelapsarian state in which comics had an aura of childlike

purity. To associate Brown and Sacco's generation with this gilded period of innocence and sentimentality is somewhat incongruous. However, the eighties and nineties were golden years for newly created comic book shops which were flourishing, and there was a trickle-down effect through which independent artists could count on a small, but secure readership from the wider pool of comic book readers that existed during this boom period. At the same time, these independent comics had a kind of subcultural innocence and purity in that they had yet to be co-opted to the point where now, comics are being regularly reviewed in *The New York Times Literary Supplement* and big budget studio films are being produced based on independent titles. If we elaborate on Sabin's thinking, the generation following Brown and Sacco, comic artists who have emerged in the past ten years, would belong to a "silver age." And in this age, the conditions are reversed—comics have achieved literary status, but comics shops have gone into a period of decline. Yet, as I write this paper, this new generation who were raised on the "golden age" of Brown and Sacco are equipped with the ability to revitalize the medium because of the increased level of self-consciousness and confidence in the potential of comics. Artists such as Craig Thompson, James Kochalka, Jessica Abel and Adrian Tomine can benefit from the fact that there is now less of a feeling that comics are defined by what was once narrowly-conceived content. The iconographic grammar, autobiographical conventions and the visual design of this "golden age" are contributing to a new generation who can further refine the techniques through which comics can communicate both as an art form and a language.

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