



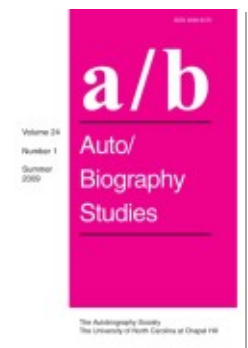
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Drawing History: Interpretation in the Illustrated Version of the 9/11 Commission Report and Art Spiegelman's *In The Shadow of No Towers* as Historical Biography

By Mary Louise Penaz

As a hybrid genre that contains narrative and methodical research techniques, (auto)biography and its various modes remain contested. In *History, Historians, and Autobiography*, Jeremy D. Popkin acknowledges these difficulties in his appraisal of Paul Ricour's essay *Temps et récit (Time and Narrative)*. Popkin follows Ricour's attempt to divide history from fiction during his global analysis of all narrative. Arguing contra Hayden White's statement in *Metahistory* that erases the fiction/history boundary—historical writing is a “verbal structure” in the form of narrative prose—Ricour believes that historical narratives, wed to the framework of calendar time, extend understanding of a subject in a way that novels, as fictional narratives, cannot (Popkin 39). Novelists create discrete universes that are generally unextended by the work of other novelists. Therefore, Ricour preserves each narrative form and its distinct contribution to knowledge.

Autobiography and biography, then, complicate the historical/fictional narrative dyad. Popkin writes, “[h]istory is a narrative form of the public world, of intersubjective experience. . . . Fiction is the form of narrative that reflects private experience” (42). Yet he believes that autobiography, and I argue biography as well, contain facets of both. Popkin suggests, “If a narrative can be at the same time historical and fictional, the divisions between public and private, truth and imagination, also threaten to collapse” (42). It is in this third space we find historical biography. I posit that historical biography is a narrative that contains historical, fictional, and personal/autobiographical elements, but the historical elements dominate the text in that they implicate,

re-inscribe, or contest an authorized/dominant historical discourse of a people or nation in a specific epoch as individuals or groups of individuals.¹ In addition, historical biography contains ideas of the classical Greek rhetorical autobiography where the private is inseparable from the public, *pace* Bakhtin (131–32). Historical biography is a contaminated (sub)genre of biographical studies. As Jacques Derrida argues in “The Law of Genre,” once a genre announces itself, one must respect its demarcation and “must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity.” However, Derrida speculates on the impossibility of pure genres: “What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination?” (Derrida and Ronell 56–57).

Such a proposition grounds this article. According to William H. Epstein’s introductory essay to *Contesting the Subject*, historical biography is a contaminated mode because of its location at the crossroads of important Western conceptual dyads, such as objectivity and subjectivity, fact and fiction (2). While Epstein links these dyads to all biography, they are crucial to the historical mode because the West’s representations of history as a discourse traffic in claims of truth or contingent truths based on best practices.

This article engages not narrative texts but graphic narratives. Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* is a highly idiosyncratic graphic narrative of his experiences during and after the 9/11 attacks. *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* (written by Sid Jacobson and illustrated by Ernie Colón—representing sixty years of combined experience in the graphic medium²) is an illustrated version of a public-policy document, traditionally a source document for historians. Incredibly, Jacobson claims that the graphic medium version of *The 9/11 Report* is an “unembellished” adaptation: “Our concept from the beginning,” he told the CBC’s Andre Mayer, “was to take the document per se and not embellish it but explain it as best we could, using graphics and words” (Mayer 2).

This claim about the illustrated *9/11 Report* makes it an important, yet troubling, historical biography. First, it ignores the long-standing task of historians, which White claims resides in “the consistency with which he reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterization of events” (“Historical” 1713). Second, *The 9/11 Report* re-inscribes a public-policy document as a graphic historical biography. This signals a new direction for biographical studies because of this abduction, because of Epstein’s theoretical contribution to our field, because of the detaining and defiling of the biographical subject of 9/11, and because of Jacobson and Colón’s spurious truth claims and problematic use of voice and perspective. I argue this not as novelty but as a potentially disturbing trend of

abducting important public-policy issues only to explain them in graphic narratives. (Jacobson and Colón recently published another graphic *explanation* entitled *After 9/11* [Ybarra and Peck].) The first part of this article centers on the theoretical dimensions of the graphic narrative as history and its effect on the reader. In other words, what differentiates a textual from a graphic rendering of similar events? In the second section, I apply these theoretical models to *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* and *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

Traditionally, biography deploys a close reading of an individual or group of individuals in a specific historical context.³ In *Reflections on Biography*, Paula Backscheider posits the clearest parsing of the historical mode from all biography. She believes that “a cultural history of any nation, its anxieties, needs, and aspirations, decade by decade, could be built of its biographies” (39). Using an example from the US Civil Rights Movement, Backscheider writes, “a stream of biographies of nearly forgotten Civil Rights workers have appeared, and the meaning, issues, and resolutions of that era are being reconsidered and contested” (39). Wildly popular, post-Renaissance Western biography, according to Epstein (here quoting Derrida), is “one of the Western world’s ‘master-sign[s] and . . . generative models’” (“(Post)Modern” 51). Biography reassures its readers of life’s coherence and narrative flow as it goes over and against the impersonal forces of social movements, be they eighteenth-century individualism or twenty-first-century Islamic fundamentalism. Moreover, as Arnaldo Momigliano reminds us, “the word is *bios* . . . , not [only] a word for the life of an individual man . . . [but] also used for the life of a country” (qtd. in Epstein, “(Post)” 225). In other words, historically, biography has mixed individuals and the faceless masses.⁴

In his essay “(Post) Modern Lives: Abducting the Biographical Subject,” Epstein uses Norman Mailer’s “novel-biography” of Marilyn Monroe to explain the complex scene of abduction that he argues is at the heart of the discursive practice of biography. He argues that biographers “simultaneously abduce (lead away from) and adduce (lead toward) the emergence of specific human individuals in a cultural discourse” (219). In other words, Mailer *abducts* Monroe as a subject; he then detains and defiles her so he can re-position her as he wishes in his authorial project. Epstein calls this process the “defiling of the biographical subject” (223). Biographers use it, argues Epstein, to heal the gap between the biographer and his or her subject. Furthermore, Epstein recognizes Monroe as an “extra-discursive figure in cultural and literary history,” and he states that historically very few individual subjects enjoyed extra-discursivity beyond “saints, heroes, and leaders of hierarchical authority structures” (223). We need only substitute “historical event” for “human individuals” to

recognize the extra-discursiveness of the 9/11 attacks. Like Monroe's life and death, 9/11 misconceptions and half-truths persist; many people believe they know what happened and who bears the responsibility. Perhaps unique in its breadth and scope, 9/11 is problematic because it unfolded in the electronic media's omnipresent gaze. This freights 9/11 with many uncontainable, excessive, extra-discursive elements.

These graphic historical biographies may appear as uniquely discursive Derridian monstrosity, but like the Twin Towers, their similarities far outweigh their differences in a formal comparison of historical texts that attempt to delimit an event. *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* and *In the Shadow of No Towers* both recognize Epstein's biographical subject/event and then abduct it into their own historical biographies. One account works from official documentation, the other from personal experience. Although these starting points differ, their ends are identical: through abduction the authors wrestle the 9/11 subject/event from the Bush Administration's "official story" and position it differently. Jacobson and Colón seek to clarify the event through a visual medium and Spiegelman seeks to undermine or complicate 9/11. Finally, however, one text limits our understanding and the other text extends our understanding.

I

In a sense, the historical is the opposite of the mythical, and to tell the historian that what gives shape to his book is a myth would sound slightly insulting

—Northrop Frye

April 12, 1861. Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. In the predawn hours, the Confederate Army's canons fire the opening shots of our Civil War, perhaps our most deeply felt national historical trauma. Later, politicians argued their positions. Generals developed strategies in the field where brother fought brother. Historians agree that approximately 618,000 people died in this war (Mintz). But why should the war originate at Fort Sumter? In the decade-long run up to open hostilities, surely historians might pinpoint other events ending in bloodshed as the start of the war. In *Comic Books as History*, Joseph Witek writes that the shots of April 12, 1861 are "the watershed event . . . and none other, and no account of historical research or fortuitous documentary discovery can change its status as an epochal event" (16). Or, as Frye would agree that, despite any evidence to the contrary, the mythical start of the Civil War is the Battle of Fort Sumter. In his book, Witek compares three renditions

of that event: Shelby Foote's *The Civil War: A Narrative*, and two comic book versions—the Gilberton Company's *The War Between the States, Classics Illustrated Special Edition*, and William M. Gaines's E. C. Comics' *Frontline Combat*. A formal comparison of historical texts must, Witek argues, account for a "complex set of prior narrative choices which establish the field and boundaries of each particular telling of the event" (16). Distinctions exist among these texts for Witek; however, he focuses on the ways they "deploy the conventions of each medium to make claims of truth about an event that is 'already told,' already so weighted with cultural significance that any telling risks the loss of its individual rhetorical force in the face of previously established readings and individual associations" (17). In 1989, Witek, like all Americans, had no way of predicting the impending disaster that would be weighted with cultural significance and contested.

II

We have some planes . . .

—U.S. National Commission

September 11, 2001. New York City Harbor, New York. Two commercial airlines hijacked by members of Al-Qaeda slam into the World Trade Towers, the Twin Towers, a mythic landmark on the lower Manhattan skyline. The Bush Administration will later brand this attack as the opening shots of our "War on Terror." On this crisp September morning, Americans absorb a historical trauma on their soil rivaled only by Pearl Harbor. According to CNN, 2,973 people died in the attacks on September 11.⁵ Pressed for answers, politicians and pundits argued the meaning of the attacks in the national media. Government agencies developed wartime strategies. Of the many long-standing international disputes contemporary to September 11, 2001, that historians might choose as the alpha to the yet unseen omega of The War on Terror, "9/11" became that event's emotion-iconic emblem. Americans now distinguished between a pre- and post-9/11 world. Suddenly, a myriad of cultural forces reified 9/11 as the newest etching on our national mythology by fusing it with another. On February 3, 2002, during the Super Bowl XXXVI halftime show held in the Louisiana Superdome in New Orleans, the Irish rockers U2 sang "Where the Streets Have No Name" as a giant screen unfurled to display the names of those lost on 9/11 (Associated).⁶

As White warns us in "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," "In history what is tragic from one perspective is comic from another" (1714–15). White argues, with the guidance of Frye and R. G.

Collingswood, that story elements are the best a historian ever has at his or her disposal. Historical events are “value-neutral” before they are transformed into coherent narratives “by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others” (1715). White suggests that all great historians select cultural events, “‘traumatic’ in nature,” whose significance is “either problematical or overdetermined” (1718). Enter 9/11. Quickly absorbed into our national psyche, 9/11 is the stuff of great historical narratives. If a solitary historian sifts through archives to portray an event “as it actually was” (*pace* Leopold von Ranke), imagine the task’s complexity when a governmental committee composes the source text; now, imagine that source-text transformed into a graphic historical biography.

After much off-stage Beltway plotting and political negotiation, on November 27, 2002, Congress and President George W. Bush enacted Public Law 107-306 to create the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks against the United States that empanelled a bipartisan committee to answer the questions swirling around 9/11. On December 5, 2005, in a highly anticipated press conference, the committee issued its final report on the US government’s actions before and after the attacks. While allegations and attributions of negligence were cherry-picked and leaked to the media, the full report arrived simply titled *The 9/11 Commission Report*.

III

As I was reading the four different plane flights, I found it difficult to follow. By placing all four flights on the same timeline we get a picture of what was planned and what occurred. That’s an important finding and showing.

—Sid Jacobson

In an interview with the CBC’s Mayer, Jacobson defended the 9/11 Commission’s decision to endorse *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* that even Mayer characterizes in the accompanying headline of his piece as a “graphic ‘makeover’” (Mayer). Jacobson argued that even he had heard that most people who read the report in its original, jargon-filled form could not understand it. Jacobson continued, “Our concept from the beginning was to . . . explain it as best we could, using graphics and words” (Mayer). This was a pop culture coup for Jacobson as the *Report’s* graphic version allowed the participation of more Americans in our democratic discourse. Jacobson’s argument is easy to follow: as an American citizen abducted by the 9/11 moment, he will explicate it for his fellow citizens “as it really was.” Isn’t a transparent governmental process the best process? Is there any

harm in that? Yet, this seemingly innocuous statement elides several troubling issues. First, *exactly* who comprises this greater audience? Second, who will assign value and privilege as they frame and interpret this democratic discourse? And finally, whose guarantor's voice authorizes this discourse?

Comic book theorists Witek, Scott McCloud, and Douglas Wolk explain specifically what sequential art does to and for its readers as they decode a text and how this process differs from prose. Though very many graphic contemporary biographical narratives are well done, Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, as compared to the graphic version of the *9/11 Report*, offers its readers a far richer and more transparently subjective historical biography of 9/11. But one pink cartoon elephant remains. Did Jacobson and Colón "clarify" this massive document compiled by the ten commissioners and their eighty-one staff members so that traditionally marginalized groups could better understand the democratic process? Or does their work instead offer a visual sleight-of-hand that obscures the truth? As Wolk writes, comic book collectors "treasure [comics] as physical artifacts—not just as a vehicle for stories but primary documents that tell us something about our history" (3). Each author's abduction of the 9/11 biographical subject becomes an important cultural artifact—Jacobson and Colón's encomium and Spiegelman's scathing critique—for future historians' and biographers' consideration.

McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* is a comic book aficionado's bible; it is a theoretical examination of the graphic medium disguised as the thing itself: a comic book. McCloud details how the mind processes the language of comics that are designed for a mainstream audience, how the interaction of words and pictures work to tell a story. He also argues that there is a "hidden power" in sequential art, something that happens between the panels, between the interaction of words and pictures that when combined, complete the story. As with vocal music, the combined sounds of the individual voices create another "voice" through blending. McCloud admits that most people belittle comics as a crude art produced for the semi-illiterate and illiterate alike, but he argues against this longstanding prejudice.⁷ Regardless, readers love how comics reduce complex narratives to a few easily digestible panels.

For Witek, Wolk, and McCloud, the problem of what we talk about when we talk about comics and how we talk about them remains. Praising Samuel Delany's essay "The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism" for creating a vocabulary and aesthetic for their critical reading, Wolk uses Delany's definition of comics as "*paraliterary*, comics are *sort* of literary," and Wolk, like McCloud and others, seeks to locate the medium's unique power source (Wolk 17).⁸ Witek posits that comic

books are worthy of critical analysis as cultural productions (3). McCloud argues that the graphic-medium reader continually makes complex and subjective connections between two, often densely packed, sequential pictures, and refers to this process as “a silent dance of the seen and unseen, the visible and invisible” (92). While Wolk accepts the critical terminology of prose and film for comics when appropriate, McCloud relies on theories of modern art for his analysis.⁹ However all three men agree what happens in the gutter makes this medium unique.

For McCloud and all illustrators, the space between the panels, the gutter, is “the host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the heart of the comics” (66). It is the ballroom for his Dance of the Seen and Unseen. Witek argues that successful comic book narration comes from selecting “from the nearly infinite potential choices the most effective points and moments to match the thematic elements of the story”; these moments bridge the panels and are “readable” as any other part of the comic (22).¹⁰ Certainly, any literary critic would agree that a reader invariably writes text or fills in between lines of prose, too. After quoting Shelby Foote’s prose in *The Civil War: A Narrative*, Witek writes it is “as any passage of historical narration must be . . . highly manipulative rhetoric” (18). Yet this gap is decisive in the graphic medium; McCloud argues it is here that “human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (66). Gutters are the sites of unregulated, extra-discursive meaning. Witek discusses the cumulative effect of the technical consideration in comics, such as placement of verbal elements, compositional effects of panels, the framing of human figures in a panel; these create a “world solidly grounded in space and with clear and logical power relationships in it” (24). Yet later, he discloses that graphic artists “can have it both ways, using the necessary contiguity of panels to create suggestive but subliminal connections which need not correspond to the linear logic of narrative sequence” (28). Of the cartoonists Witek analyzes, he states, “all three creators are concerned to varying degrees with the connections between the historical and fictional narrative” (4).¹¹

This is the fault line for the historian, biographer, and memoirist because, as John Lewis Gaddis offers in *The Landscape of History*, “the past is a landscape and history is the way we represent it”; a map, for Gaddis, represents rather than replicates; it is the art of distillation (32–33). Observing the work of Thomas Babington Macaulay and Henry Adams, Gaddis writes, “Historians have the capacity for selectivity, simultaneity and the shifting of scale” (22). While the nomination—historian, biographer, memoirist—may change, the task remains the same: offer valid representations of the past as filtered

through the writer's historical consciousness. All three consider the past; all three follow similar guidelines in composition. Can we not consider *The History of England* as a historical biography of the English people? Or consider *The Education of Henry Adams* as a mixed genre (auto)historical biography? Biography is as varied as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* or any David McCullough or Stephen Ambrose bestseller, but the terms of the Lejeunian writer-reader contract must remain sound. Writers submit themselves willingly to that pact.

Further complicating the graphic medium is its additional label of "creative nonfiction." In such texts, the graphic illustrator imaginatively (re)interprets a subject. Clearly, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Spiegelman transformed our understanding of the graphic memoir/biography with *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, his complex account of his surviving his Holocaust survivor parents. Similarly, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Spiegelman explores the gestalt of 9/11 and its horrific aftermath. While some read it as an anti-Bush tirade, graphic artists and their enthusiastic fans defend the significance of Spiegelman's 9/11 book. Yet, simultaneously, they deplore the inherent danger in the adaptation of public-policy documents into graphic historical biography because they offer neither reconsideration nor historical critique of the abducted subject. "Biography is," writes Backscheider, "of all the major literary genres the most political," and therefore, biographers can record, transmit, and feel history in many ways (216–17). Nonetheless, as Gaddis warns, biographers determined to map the past (*pace* von Ranke) cannot capriciously change the metrics of measurement, which is exactly what happens as prose converts into the visual.

Indicative of the new audience that 9/11 Commissioners Kean and Hamilton hope to reach, Barnesandnoble.com summarizes the graphic version as "[u]sing every skill and storytelling method Jacobson and Colón have learned over the decades, they have produced the most accessible version of *The 9/11 Report*" ("Synopsis").¹² It is reasonable to assume that Jacobson and Colón knew exactly how comics manipulate when transforming prose into the graphic medium. Jacobson told Mayer, "the difference between the two graphic novels is that only Spiegelman's should be considered *art*" (Mayer). Perhaps snobbishly, Jacobson believes the airy realm of "art" suits Spiegelman, but what he and Colón have created has real-world utility as a public service message that may kick-start the national debate on the 9/11 Commission's findings. *Let others debate Spiegelman's aesthetics*, he may be saying; *we are involved in Homeland Security*. However, historical representations always reveal more about the author's interpretation of the events through voice and perspective. Therefore, Spiegelman and Team Jacobson and Colón offer their

ideological perceptions of events for readers to endorse. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud argues the medium “is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images. The content of those images and ideas is, of course, up to the creators” (6). We Americans abhor censorship. All people are entitled to their version of the events and to their unique emotional and political responses to 9/11 as it resonates, myth-like, in the American psyche. Ultimately, the graphic and the government-issued prose versions of *The 9/11 Commission Report* remain important cultural artifacts, but not as different, but equal versions. One need only consider the cover of the Jacobson and Colón book to determine the differences.

The dust jacket of the original *9/11 Commission Report* is markedly different from the graphic version. In advertising/marketing parlance, the original dust jacket “gives you America.” It displays a patriotic red, white, and blue color scheme, and prominently places the commission’s official seal that trades on the authority of other no-nonsense, government-sanctioned documents. “Authorized Edition” hovers over the cover’s bottom edge in white capitalized letters. This underscores Kean’s and Hamilton’s Preface, which states that “We have endeavored to provide the best account we can of the events of September 11th and why they happened” (xvii). As Frye and White argue, it is crucial for historians to alert the audience to the provisional nature of the “the facts” they stitched together, making it clear that they reconstructed the past as best they could. In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that “[in] biography, scholars of other people’s lives document and interpret those lives from a point of view external to the subject” (4). This underscores Epstein’s notion of the abducted biographical subject and historians’ (Gaddis’ as well as others’) use of emplotment.

The dust jacket cover of the Jacobson and Colón graphic version is wildly different. Advertisement theorists maintain that a cover design must grab the consumer’s attention, as it powerfully influences the reluctant buyer. If he or she loses interest, it is a deal breaker. Distractions strike quickly. McCloud maintains that cartoons are “a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled” (36). The graphic artist employs sensational colors to turbo-charge the reader’s initial reaction and imagination; comic “icons” are another part of the magic. McCloud explains that icons amplify an image meant to represent a noun through simplification: a hand holding a martini glass represents a playboy or a foot with electric squiggles around it represents a sore foot. When stripping an image down to its essentials “biological selves are simplified as conceptual images” (27–37).

Carefully placed to the left of the smoking Twin Towers on the graphic version's cover, the firefighter icon is the cover's true focal point. His presence evokes an immediate, visceral response, and the reader quickly understands the importance of the firefighter "character" to the overall impression of the dust jacket and, gleaned from the numerous news photos of the day, how the overall composition of this collage evokes the heroism and the senseless loss of so many first responders. Nevertheless, this swerving shamelessly editorializes; it is a rhetorical appeal to pathos. McCloud warns us that we are vulnerable to such influences when reading cartoons that employ icons because "[w]e assign identities and emotions where none exist" (33). The firefighter appears strong yet overwhelmed by the event; his face hides in his glove, perhaps because of the thick smoke nearby stings his eyes or because of his tears. Perhaps we read him as the epic "superhero" figure, much like the Green Lantern or Spider-Man, which Colón drew at DC Comics and Marvel Comics respectively. Here, the firefighter is the only human figure present. Directly below the firefighter icon, a tightly summarized account of 9/11 appears in a white box with black lettering, lest the reader forget the magnitude of the event: "September 11, 2001, was a day of unprecedented shock and suffering in the history of the United States." Further to the right is another news photo of the Twin Towers rendered into a graphic form seconds after the crash, foregrounding the iconic Empire State Building. The Barthian *punctum* this image carries is that through televised news; this shot is as recognizable and as rhetorically charged as the World War II news photo of the U.S.S. Oklahoma sinking in Pearl Harbor that Jacobson and Colón use later in the text. One can almost smell the smoke in both instances. At the very bottom, against an impressionistic graphic of the charred steel frame that once surrounded the Towers is the notice that Commission Chair Kean and Vice Chair Hamilton have penned the book's forward. Gone are the patriotic color scheme, the claims of an "authorized edition," or any careful reconstruction of the facts. Instead, the graphic artists have handed the reader a strong visual impression, one that suggests the jury has already weighed-in long before the presentation of the evidence. It is a historical biography that swerves wildly in the visual get-away car during the event's abduction.

The original report's back cover dust jacket is straightforward. It lists the important names of the executive members. However, the back cover of the dust jacket of the graphic version includes a blurb that propels it from objectivity: "Never before have I seen a nonfiction book as beautifully and compellingly written . . . and [it] should be required reading in every home, school, and library." That this warning trumpet blast issues from the horn of Marvel Comics legend

Stan Lee is perhaps deliberate. Directly below Lee's quote looms the Pentagon icon engulfed in fire and smoke moments after its attack. Witek writes of a previous generation of informational comics, such as *True Aviation Picture Stories* and *It Really Happened*, which combined sensational and informational impulses (14). Here Jacobson and Colón do the same, but this visual placement over-charges both impulses. Finally, the illustrators' names and their individual bio-blurbs figure prominently.

In dry, matter-of-fact language, the inside flap of the original version announces that nearly three thousand people died and briefly outlines the Commissions' Congressional mandate in this matter. Yet the internal flap of the graphic version uses a completely different strategy and language—symbols and icons instead of paragraphs—and uses the chapter titles taken from the *9/11 Report*, such as “We have some planes . . .” next to four plane icons and “The Foundation of the New Terrorism” matched with compelling graphic icons. Here we encounter our first “Arab terrorist” icon, including a dangerous man behind dark glasses and framed as if in a police mug shot. “From Threat to Threat” shows a desk-bound FBI agent talking on a cell phone; on the wall directly over his shoulder is the official photograph of President Clinton that locates us during his presidency. These differences have enormous implications. McCloud argues icons fix meaning: “These are the images we use to represent concepts, ideas, and philosophies” (27). Again, the difference between the two versions is clear. Both versions of the report later identify the mug shot Arab as Abu Hafs al Masri (Jacobson and Colón 35; United States 145). Without context on the dust jacket flap, al Masri, like the FBI agent, can be anyone; however, the man behind the sunglasses and under the turban panders to the worst nightmares of American patriots. While discussing how comics simplify faces, McCloud writes of the universality of cartoon imagery, “the more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe” (31). In other words, as do most graphic narratives, the opening flap erases individuality in order to provide the universal.¹³ McCloud argues correctly that icons need our participation for their effectiveness; they have no “life here except that which you give to it” (59). Jacobson's and Colón's historical biography is complicated because these graphic elisions establish a voice and perspective that prompts the reader to a closure inflected far differently from a prose text.¹⁴ Closure is, according to McCloud, “observing the parts but perceiving the whole . . . on something that is incomplete based on past experience” (63). This is fundamental to an icon-filled graphic medium that elides meaning. When the reader sees the firefighter or the al Masri mug shot images, he or she closes that image with (pre)conceptions based on

other sources. In the shorthand of comics, icons render the complex simple. And, Jacobson and Colón repeatedly embellish the original report with such extra-discursive meanings and (fore)closures.

Nowhere in the Jacobson and Colón text is there indication that any Americans bled on 9/11. In their adaptation of “The Rise of Bin Laden and the al Qaeda,” the panels depict warfare between the Russian soldiers and the Afghan resistance movement. Here Russian soldiers shed blood (14–17). In “Chapter One: ‘We have some planes . . . ,’” a wounded hijacker at the controls of a plane bleeds (6). However in “Chapter Nine: ‘Heroism and Horror’” detailing events at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, no one bleeds. Several people appear to be dead, but there is no blood (69–81). In a panel representing the attack on the U.S.S. Cole on October 12, 2000, there are no figures depicted (46). Here is the selectivity of story elements that Witek and White see as crucial to the historical text: what story is told, what is included, what is excluded. Witek discusses the anxiety caused by the *War Between the States* comic book, as it was part of the cultural products of the Civil War centennial celebration. With this potentially polarizing story, the writers wanted only to “glorify heroes in a national conflict but damn no villains” given the racial tension surrounding the nascent Civil Rights Movement (Witek 28–32). While we will later observe how Spiegelman handles heroes and villains, Jacobson and Colón clearly signal that villains bleed, but Americans do not. Even in panels where Americans are in harm’s way, the reader cannot be certain they are dead, and in this version, Americans never dive to certain death from the windows of the Towers.

Jacobson and Colón have it both ways because of their compositional sleight-of-hand as Witek suggested. One questionable sequence of events in their report demonstrates the accretion of compositional effects that mysteriously elide time and meaning. In “al Qaeda’s Renewal in Afghanistan (1996-1998),” Bin Laden stands near a small propeller plane shaking hands with a uniformed figure (Jacobson and Colón 21). The lettering tells us that he, his family members, and his terrorist entourage left Sudan and are now in Jalalabad. Since the plane has “Sudan” lettered on its tail, we assume he is in Sudan with a Sudanese military official. In the next panel, Bin Laden rides in an open military vehicle, perhaps a jeep, as throngs cheer him along the roadside. It appears as though Bin Laden arrived in Afghanistan to his adoring fans, which is for the reader a simple case of interpolative cause and effect. Next, under the lettering “They traveled freely throughout the country,” we see a turbaned and bearded Afghan jihadist leaning on his assault rifle as he instructs, or speaks to, a group of young Arab men. As the eye travels further to the right, there is

a blood-red inked “BLAM!” Once again, this registers as cause and effect. Below is a large panel that flows back across the page to the left of the truck bombings of the American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. The specific location is unattributed; it is either one or the other or both (21). Even though the lettering states May 19, 1996, under the airplane and August 7, 1998, adjacent to the explosion aftermath at an embassy, the authors want it to appear as a continuous flow of historical events. Finally, in those panels of Afghan fighters routing a Russian patrol on the page’s center panel an Afghan soldier, shod in sandals no less, gives chase to the retreating Russians. In his left hand is an AK-47; in his right hand is a curved scimitar (17). This sword is drawn, but not inked; it takes its color from the white page below. This stereotypically racist depiction of the scimitar-wielding Muslim horde swarming over Christendom dates back to the Crusades. Why is the sword without inking? Adjacent to a box with lettering, it is at the center of the page. Are we to *scan* it, *absorb* it, but not *see* it or *read* it as an embellishment?

White wrote, “[t]he evasion of the implications of the fictive nature of historical narrative is in part a consequence of the concept of ‘history’ for the definitions of other types of discourse” (“Historical” 1719). Jacobson and Colón participate in such an evasion in their graphic “makeover” of *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Following White, “history” is set against “persuasion” by virtue of its unacknowledged editorializing. As a graphic text, this adaptation functions as a symbolic structure in the sense that Jacobson and Colón rely on graphic icons. Here, following Frye’s categories of historical myths, they chose the Ironic one, which covers “myths of recurrence or casual catastrophe” (qtd. in White, “Historical” 1713). Therefore, as White himself writes later of history’s symbolic structure, “the historical narrative does not *reproduce* the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events” (1721), or, one might add, in the case of the graphic *9/11 Report*, what direction to *feel* about them, as Backscheider claims biography can do. However, the 9/11 Commission’s mandate was to gather evidence and make a finding, not indicate how its readers should *feel*. Here, Jacobson and Colón (mis)recognize the biographical subject.

IV

After all, disaster is my muse!

—Art Spiegelman

In the Shadow of the Towers is Spiegelman’s addition to the national 9/11 conversation that Commissioners Kean and Harrison had hoped

to inspire. This denizen of lower Manhattan and self-defined narcissist witnesses 9/11 in his unique style. In his introductory essay “The Sky is Falling!” Spiegelman reveals the genesis of his project. The attack, he said, “left me reeling on that fault line where World History and Personal History collide” (iv). Unlike either of the *9/11 Commission Reports*, Spiegelman turns his civic eye to his life under the cloud of the Global War on Terror. He outlines the attack’s consequences, not so much the attack itself. Obsessed to the point of distraction, in #6 of the *Shadow of the Towers* series,¹⁵ Spiegelman casts himself in third person (alluding to the *punctum* of Barthes): “He is haunted now by the images he *didn’t* witness . . . images of people tumbling to the street below” (6). In frame #8, as a tiny Spiegelman jackhammers into the skull of a much larger Spiegelman, he portrays himself in first person: “I’ve consumed ‘news’ ’till [sic] my brain aches” (8). Then using the turn-of-the-century cartoon characters from George McManus’s “Bringing Up Father” as stand-ins for himself and his wife Françoise, Spiegelman casts himself as the paranoiac Jiggs who is both addicted to and repulsed by the news, while his wife Maggie attempts to soothe him (8). Spiegelman writes in #8 that the “disaster disinterred the ghost of some Sunday supplement star born on nearby Park Row” in Manhattan, the former home of William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*. He uses this conceit to displace the 9/11 attacks on the previous turn of the century to defamiliarize them. *Pace* Victor Shklovsky, Spiegelman keeps the Towers *towery*. Additionally, Spiegelman references the Hearst-inspired Spanish-American War, “American’s first colonialist adventure,” implying similarities between that war and our adventures in Iraq (Supplement 1).

White writes that the meditative view of history with its “nondisconfirmability” allows us to perceive the literary nature of history, and it “permits us to speak of historical narrative as an extended metaphor” (White, “Historical” 1720–21). Visually, Spiegelman’s protean Towers change throughout his ten installments. The book’s cover features the black Towers on the black sky, a variation on his famous post 9/11 *New Yorker* cover. Inside he has digitized the Towers to reproduce the glow he witnessed before they fell, and in #2, his top panels slowly rotate to the right and turn into the Towers. Later, the two Kinder Kids wear them as headpieces. In #3, an inverted cigarette mirrors a glowing Tower on the opposite side of the page. In #8, Spiegelman, as a mouse, carries a Tower; in Jiggs’ dream, a Tower is sawed in half; in #10, they are authentic commemorative kitsch. Finally, as opposed to the regularity of the Jacobson and Colón text, Spiegelman’s text is polyvocal; others carry the narration. This vocal texturing mirrors the visual texturing

deployed in the technical considerations of inking, lettering, panel sizes and placements, as well as his cartoon icons of yesteryear. Ultimately, Spiegelman offers a richer historical biography that appraises as he contests the post 9/11 jingoistic fallout.

V

“What really happened?” Nikita Khrushchev, expressing incredulity at the official account of JFK’s murder to journalist Drew Pearson during a meeting in May 1964.

—JFK assassination Quotes

Imagine for a moment another American historical trauma. November 22, 1963. Dealey Plaza, Dallas, Texas. 12:30 p.m. A Presidential motorcade passes the Dallas Book Depository as shots ring out. Later, the nation swallows the first bitter pill of the 1960s. It traumatizes Americans. Men and women weep openly. Newscasters are stunned. Politicians argue its meaning. Unexpectedly, the assassin himself is assassinated. One week later, November 29, 1963, President Johnson authorizes the first official investigation into the assassination of John F. Kennedy, The Warren Commission. The final report leaves as many questions as it offers answers. It satisfies no one. Now imagine the graphic adaptation of that highly contested government document into a comic book as historical biography. Could sequential art capture all the nuances of such a document? It is a tantalizing question.

In his 1974 essay, White posits, “I do not suppose that anyone would accept the life of President Kennedy as comedy, but whether it ought to be emplotted romantically, tragically, or satirically is an open question” (“Historical” 1715). Later, White explains why Jules Michelet can construct the French Revolution as a romance and Alexis de Tocqueville can construct it as a tragedy: “Neither can be said to have had more knowledge of the ‘facts’ contained in the record; they simply had different notions of the kind of story that best fit the facts they knew . . . they sought out different facts because they had different stories to tell” (1715–716). Similarly, there is no doubt that Jacobson and Colón and Spiegelman tell different stories.

As cartographers of the past, biographers and biography scholars can find useful theories in the work of Epstein, Backscheider, and Gaddis. Ultimately, all biographers must answer one question: have we reminded our readers of the contingency of our “truth,” or have we only pushed ahead, obscuring the selectivity we exercised in the emplotment of our narrative? If, like Jacobson and Colón, we disguise the visual (fore)closures while mapping a historical biography, we posit biography as a lesser mode of discourse, less inclusive, that

contains citizenship rather than expanding it; it short changes our own true worth. Only by recognizing the fictive elements of history, White argues, can historians offer “a potent antidote” to those blind to their own preconceptions, personal or political (“Historical” 1728). Here is the limitation of Jacobson and Colón’s *The 9/11 Commission: A Graphic Adaptation* and the true quality of Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*. As Epstein writes, a biographical subject is “always already off-center,” the agenda of the (post)modern biography is to *make* a difference, then it will constitute itself and function as difference (“(Post)Modern” 225). Jacobson and Colón settle for the reproduction of the self-same while Spiegelman extends understanding by creating difference in the discursive practice of reading and writing that genre monstrosity that is the graphic historical biography.

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Notes

1. Ellis quotes Nadel’s claim that “[i]n the composition of biography, fictive rather than historical content dominates as the elements of a life become the elements of the story” (13).

2. Jacobson created Richie Rich and Colón drew and supervised production of Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, and Spider-Man.

3. Hamilton notes that “[f]or students of biography in the West, the late seventeenth-century coinage of the word ‘biography,’ as a term for literary rather than graphic depiction,” was understandable with the rising literacy and book printing. He believes this “narrowed rather than expanded” the lay reader’s notion of biography (3). As our culture increasingly relies once again on visual representations, perhaps this will change.

4. Since the Classical Era, biography has performed, according to Hamilton, a dual function of “commemoration,” and what Edmund Gosse called providing “the portrait of a soul in its adventures through life” (qtd. in Hamilton 21). However, these two functions increasingly collapse onto each other. For example, Hamilton defines Sir Walter Raleigh’s *History of the World* as historical biography. As the biographical narrative shed Christian hagiography and reaffirmed its critical dimension, Hamilton argues of Raleigh’s work, “even *historical* biography had a *current* subversive agenda” (76).

5. According to the CNN story later posted on their website, “The 9/11 attack killed 2,973 people, including Americans and foreign nationals but excluding the terrorists.”

6. In a grimly comic historical foreshadowing, the Louisiana Superdome was the site of the next great American historical trauma.

7. Wolk maintains that the newer comic/graphic medium contains few “simple ideas.” In fact, Wolk believes that we are living in the Golden Age of comics. Moreover, what links these varied graphic works is that they are “somewhere between ambitious-and-very good and the sort of flat-out phenomenal work people will be recalling for years” (9).

8. In his historical overview of the graphic medium, McCloud believes the mystery of comics will remain somewhat mysterious (23).

9. In his “Selected Bibliography” McCloud cites both Herschel Chip’s *Theories of Modern Art* and Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*.

10. An example of this is the reconfiguring of the four flights onto one timeline in the Jacobson and Colón text.

11. The three authors Wittek examines in his book are Art Spiegelman, Jack Jackson, and Harvey Pekar.

12. 9/11 Commission Chair Thomas H. Kean and Vice Chair Lee H. Hamilton penned an almost five hundred word “Forward” to the Jacobson and Colón book. “We are pleased,” wrote Kean and Hamilton, “to have the opportunity to bring the work of the 9/11 Commission to the attention of a new set of readers.” As more Americans read this book, Kean and Hamilton write with reference to their “original” preface to the Commission Report, “we hope that this graphic version will encourage our fellow citizens to study, reflect—and act” (“Former”).

13. In another appeal to the universal, the firefighter icon reappears on the title page of the graphic version. “9/11” is in the same blood red hue as the inner pages of the front and back of the book. The original report maintains the standard white pages of a government report.

14. In another inexplicable bit of illustration, when Jacobson and Colón feature the full panel as if issuing their recommendations at the end of the first chapter, many of the commission members feature odd facial expressions such as smirks in light of the information we have finished. Moreover, Jamie Gorlick, the commission’s lone female, is at the very bottom of this group portrait, but between her and the majority of the group are two other male commissioners, one whose sightline is to the reader, the other toward Ms. Gorlick (12).

15. I am following Spiegelman’s own referencing as printed in “The Comic Supplements” at the center of the book.

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