Put your body on the line: autobiographical comics, empathy and plurivocality

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Abstract

Reference
PUT YOUR BODY ON THE LINE: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMICS, EMPATHY AND PLURIVOCALITY

I don’t remember when exactly I read my first comic book, but I do remember exactly how liberated and subversive I felt as a result.

(SAID 2001, i)

We may think that circulating alternative images will rally resistance, but we have to remember that graphic depictions can sometimes do no more than sensationalize events. When that happens, we respond with outrage periodically, but that outrage is not transformed into a sustained political resistance. Is there another way to act upon the senses, or to act from them, that resists both sensationalism and episodic outrage at the limits on the visual imposed by techniques of war waging?

(BUTLER 2010, xiv)

POPULAR GEOPOLITICS AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

It is a truism to say that we live in a specific political and historical context in which images, and their specific expressivity, are called into question in a number of ways (CAMPBELL 2003). In an introduction to Joe Sacco’s autobiographical comic book Palestine, Edward SAID wrote that “as we also live in a media-saturated world in which a huge preponderance of the world’s news images are controlled and diffused by a handful of men sitting in places like London and New York, a stream of comic book images and words, assertively etched, at times grotesquely emphatic and distended to match the extreme situations they depict, provide a remarkable antidote” (SAID 2001, iii). In this paper, I want to take this idea of comics as antidotes seriously, while remaining aware of the personal dimension of what SAID is talking about in the opening quote: that comics are read in particular places, and speak to us in very personal ways, feeding into and reworking our own personal histories. This could be connected to the literature on reading and the circulations of texts that has recently become of interest to geographers (KEIGHREN 2006; DITTMER 2010), as they have engaged not only with the strategic and situated production of knowledge, but also on its situated reception in multiple and uneven places.

That texts and images circulate is a given. Attempts to govern and control these circulations suffuse human history. Yet these are times when the specific control and dissemination of images of conflict – dead bodies, sites of bombing, atrocities – have taken on a new urgency. Marianne Hirsch, amongst many others,
has written that countless new restrictions on images of war shape a new and urgent context for a sustained discussion of words and images, of reading and looking (Whitlock 2006, 965). As Judith Butler has noted, forms of dissent are the object of intense scrutiny in such contexts, as these are systematically excluded or controlled in order to maintain a climate of fear that serves the interests of the powerful. Likewise, in a discussion of Susan Sontag’s work on the power of photographs to communicate the suffering of others, Whitlock argues that what is at stake are “fundamental questions about the interpretation of visual images and about their power to relay affect and invoke a moral and ethical responsiveness in the viewer regarding the suffering of others” (Whitlock 2006, 965). This is not just a theoretical debate: images can be deadly and dangerous, as during episodes of the so-called ‘comic wars’ when cartoons of Muhammad were instrumentalised in calling for violence against individuals in contexts where such images were considered sacrilegious (Norton 2011). This led Whitlock and Poletti to argue that attention to the specific productions, locations and relocations of the reproduction and consumption of comics “is a lesson of the controversies of 2005–2006, the so-called ‘cartoon wars’: images travel far from their origins into very different communities of interpretation; their meanings are always contextual, social, cultural, and political as well as aesthetic” (Whitlock and Poletti 2008, ix).

In this chapter, I aim to play with Judith Butler’s proposal to put ‘your body on the line’, by considering three recent autobiographical comics that focus on political border issues and divisions in the Middle East. That comics deal quite literally and theoretically with drawn lines – la ligne clair, most notably – seems to make this image particularly apt.1 Guy Delisle’s Jerusalem, Maximilien Lé Roy’s Faire le Mur, and Joe Sacco’s Palestine all provide different alternatives to dominant geopolitical narratives. I have chosen these as three very different autobiographical books are all located in Israel / Palestine. They each provide on-the-ground accounts of daily life in situations of conflict, dwelling on the experiences of division and violence. All three are narrated by outsiders, yet make different use of local voices. It is this diverse experience of plurivocality within autobiographical comics that forms the main focus of this chapter. These three authors address explicitly the question of representation and image production and circulation, as they depict themselves and others sketching, taking photographs, reproducing and redrawing iconic images of conflict: literally framing their daily experiences visually.

My approach is sympathetic to Pratt’s suggestion (2005) to use the materiality of the body as an opening for a politics of representation, making space for a non-essentialist ‘politics on the ground’, constituting new subjects. The daily geopolitics of divided spaces is explored through these tales of personal experience as narrated and encountered in autobiographical comics, drawing attention to the

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1 I thank Jason Dittmer for pointing this out – as my original title was a completely unnoticed allusion to this!
shared yet diversely experienced violence of boundaries as multiple material and political objects. Through this appeal to intrinsically visual texts that play on past memories of particular places yet assign universal meanings to the absurdity of division, I discuss the possibilities for developing graphical alternatives to the geopolitical ‘view from nowhere’. I aim to explore one visual medium for developing what Butler calls an “anti-war politics that focuses on the dispossessed and those rendered precarious in ways that require new vocabularies and new practices” (Butler 2010, x). Her work suggests questioning the framing of war directly, since “the frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality” (Butler 2010, xiii), instrumentalizing certain versions of reality. I want to suggest that comics can frame – quite literally, within boxes – alternative and polyvocal geopolitical visions.

**QUESTIONING THE GEOPOLITICAL GAZE: RETHINKING REPRESENTATION**

Within geography, there have been sustained feminist critiques of the specific viewpoint adopted by critical geopolitics (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2004; Sharp 2007). These proposals resonated within the discipline, calling for ground-level, local and embodied sites of moral propinquity or nearness (“direct, personal, honest and angry” – Toal 1996, 173). Hyndman’s invitation to develop a strong feminist geopolitics “to extend the work of arguably disembodied critical geopolitical analysis by (re)situating knowledge production as a partial view from somewhere” (Hyndman 2004, 309) made a lasting impression on many. In a similar creative and critical vein, an increased focus on popular geopolitics – i.e. on non-traditional, everyday discourses such as those of popular culture including film, fiction and (to a lesser extent) comics – has become apparent within geography, perhaps finding new legitimacy in this new appellation, distancing itself from Culture or Media Studies while drawing heavily from such approaches. But if we follow Holland this “has not adequately considered how the formats it interrogates are simultaneously appropriated as formats of resistance” (Holland 2012, 107). The role played by visuality is centrally identified as problematic in so-called traditional or realist geopolitics yet this is not interrogated adequately as problematic in the emerging counter-geopolitical work. That such productions of unofficial (i.e. non-state) art are necessarily and intrinsically oppositional and/or resistant should not however be taken for granted, as Campbell (2003) has pointed out in his discussion of cultural governance, drawing on Michael Shapiro’s discussion of the term. Kuus notes that a key challenge is to avoid glamorizing resistance and civil society in general: to show the diversity of resistance, the entanglements of domination and resistance, and the futility of looking for the ‘self-evidently good’ (Kuus 2010). She suggests instead that attention to passiveness, irony and anonymity is more fruitful. Taking the central feminist tenet that ‘the personal is political’ seriously, such work has argued that the personal is also ge-
political, leading to a scholarly focus on everyday political practice and more embodied accounts of power.

The following page taken from Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* is a good entry point: a short episode, almost a parenthesis, that illustrates how daily lives are transformed by division (Figure 5.1). As the narrator and his friend walk through a fenced, violent landscape, the daily strategies of survival are suggested in all their pathetic ordinariness. A young girl, on her way home from school, takes a shortcut through a fence: a small act of resistance, no doubt taking absurd risks to shorten her walk, or else simply to make it possible. That this is barely commented upon by the two men does much to show how such practices have become common place, taken for granted, banal. Yet this, of course, is staged indifference: the narrator has very carefully observed the scene, or at least enough to draw it in dramatic detail. The apparent nonchalance is a clever trick. Death-defying actions have become commonplace, vulnerability absolute.

So how can we make sense of these depictions of embodied, quotidian experiences of military power that although narrated by Western observers appear to capture and transmit something of the personal experiences of violence? Is this just a clever narrative trick, or could it be politically subversive? And what must we make of the positionality of the authors of many such comics – Western quasi-elites (although, by Western standards, I suspect you have to be pretty famous as a comic artist to consider yourself realistically as part of any social elite – able to extract themselves from such situations of violence when they choose? Although geographers have repeatedly called for such decentred critical geopolitical accounts, what this translates into in practice is not always clear in many such scholarly contributions, and the field is undoubtedly still seeking coherence. Nicely goes some way in suggesting what this might look like, arguing that we need a focus on “situated, meaning-laden practices of place-bound individuals heterogeneously constituted through racial, ethnic, class, gender and other identities (…) without lapsing into an uncritical reification of the place concept” (Nicely 2009, 20). He calls for “a commitment to thick description of the complex, hybrid geographies through which individuals construct their everyday lives (…) to unearth the causal processes that bind elite geopolitical language to the ways that people adopt, internalize and challenge such explanations” (Nicely 2009, 21). Nicely’s, like Hyndman’s (2004), is very much an agenda-setting position paper, with no clear method other than an indication that ethnography might provide useful material. Yet his central call to listen “to the voices of the marginalized and to achieve a greater sense of shared understanding of both our commonalities and differences” (Nicely 2009, 22) is poignant, and speaks to what many comic book authors are apparently trying to do when providing alternative political narratives that focus on individuals, both Western travellers and local people, in conflict situations. But how can we make sense of these polyvocal graphical geopolitical narratives?

Delisle frequently uses this explicit staging of his own observation of daily situations as a *mise-en-abîme* of his own subsequent image production, simultaneously drawing attention in this vignette to the plurivocality – and ubiquity – of
this process of visualizing and recording daily experiences. Politics, here, is also a performance, and recognized as such.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMICS**

WHITLOCK suggested coining the term “autographics” (WHITLOCK 2006; WHITLOCK and POLETTI 2008) for the specific comic genre of autobiographies presented as graphic memoirs in which the subject position navigates through different representations of selfhood, addressing truth and identity in a variety of changing discourses. Here, I am particularly interested in how autobiographical avatars engage actively with the conventions of comics, making us question the genre as self-reflective authors play with form, in particular by stepping outside of the gutters and frames of comics. Sorting selfhood and grief quite literally ‘into boxes’, as SPIEGELMAN has suggested (quoted in WHITLOCK 2006, 968), produces a unique aesthetics that combines drawing, design and writing, in particular within the self-regarding art of graphic autobiography. This creativity is particularly useful in presenting a traumatic, situated side of history, while refusing to “show it through the lens of unspeakability or invisibility, instead registering its difficulty through inventive (and various) textual practice” (CHUTE 2008 in HOLLAND 2012, 107).

As I have written elsewhere, bodies themselves are objects of resistance – and bodies represented in comics at times specifically so (FALL 2006). Bodies need not be subjugated to coercive power but can in themselves be objects of resistance – and particularly when they are very directly representing themselves in these autobiographical narratives. Following BUTLER, it is useful to remember that the body is fluid, not fixed, allowing for “a notion of matter, not as a site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” (BUTLER 1993, 9). Sites of performance in their own right, rather than surfaces for discursive inscription, bodies participate actively in their own making. Adding this layer of agency and potentials for resistance is particularly important in the case of autographics: the author, through their autobiographical avatar, is a particularly active, visible participant in crafting its own selfhood. Before being authors, these artists were witnesses, travellers, recorders and – in some cases – professional journalists, occupying what FARISH has called an interstitial position in conflict situations, “working between embodied proximity and disembodied detachment” (FARISH 2001 in HOLLAND 2012, 119), emplacing moral responsibility at certain geographic locations through their rescripting of their lived or narrated tales. This agency in scripting their own stories is crucial in avoiding the pitfall of revictimization by deploying “victims as an antidote to heroic images” (CAMPBELL 2003, 67), which risks producing a generalized and standardized visual account that anonymises victims and depoliticizes conflict.

But authors in this genre are also plural, and autographics are multi-layered. MILLER raises this in arguing that “the reportage is made more effective by the
capacity of *bande dessinée* for plurivocality as well as for the plurality of ways in which narratorial intervention can be made apparent. Ultimately, it is the essence of a medium that does not solely depend on mechanical reproduction but is mediated by the artists’ hands and eyes that accounts for the impact of this highly nuanced and personal portrayal of the political process” (Miller 2008, 115). I will return to this point in particular when discussing the specific plurivocality of Le Roy’s *Faire le Mur*, in particular regarding the gradations in detachment and subjectivity that this allows.

**PICTURING EMPATHY**

Whitlock (2006) mentions the importance of thinking about the pleasures and pains of reading autographics, as evidenced in the opening quote of this paper by Said (2001). She further notes that several authors have confirmed the potential in comics for distinctive mediations of trauma and cultural difference and for innovations that open up some new ways of thinking about the ethics of life narrative as they move across cultures. But what has been called the ‘comics wars’ – and the deadly impact of specific comics in contexts beyond their production – needs to make us wary of assigning them universal value. “The cartoon wars indicate that graphic art moves as a commodity in a global market across various econo-, ethno-, and ideoscapes, but at the same time they are a cautionary reminder that difference is not transcended or resolved in these transits, and visual images are processed within vastly different communities of interpretation, and easily co-opted as propaganda” (Whitlock 2006, 970).

Many analyses are however subtler in considering cultural issues. Discussing Marjane Satrapi’s marvelous *Persepolis* (2000), Whitlock notes how an active mediation of cross-cultural relations occurs unambiguously in certain autographics, “drawing on the capacity of comics to free us to think and imagine differently in times of trauma and censorship” (Whitlock 2006, 973), opening up new and troubled spaces of representation. In cautious attention to detail, such as in Satrapi’s subtle discussion of the introduction of the veil in post-revolutionary Iran, “we can begin to recognize the norms that govern which lives will be regarded as human and the frames through which discourse and visual representation proceed” (Whitlock 2006, 976). Yet we must be cautious of suggesting – as McCloud has done (2006) – that comics are universal⁶, even when “they seem to acquire a life of their own, with recurring characters, plot situations, and phrases

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⁶ Whitlock and Poletti would however run to McCloud’s defence, arguing plausibly that his world-vision is much wider since “although his avatar appears to be comfortably established in middle America and introduces himself with a chummy “Hi. I’m Scott,” his “nation” of comics is cosmopolitan and intertextual, a global industry shaped by Tezuka, Herge, Miyazaki, Tardi, Doucet – the list is extensive. Along with Will Eisner, Charles Hatfield, and R. C. Harvey, among others, McCloud insists on reading comics as a rich global cultural formation” (Whitlock and Poletti 2008, xii).
that turn their readers, whether in Egypt, India or Canada, into a sort of club in which every member knows and can refer to a whole set of common assumptions and names” (SAID 2001, i). Instead, I would follow WHITLOCK’s greater nuance in arguing that “there can be no simple universality in the associations produced by cartooning across very different relationships. (...) We find this elsewhere in representations of trauma in autographics, where troubled memories are held in the boxes of grief of sequential art” (WHITLOCK 2006, 977). She suggests further that comics free us to think, imagine and see differently, engaging with the pain and suffering of others, offering a clear link to what I mentioned earlier was a central ambition of feminist geopolitics.

The concept of empathy is crucial to understanding how such comics engage the reader. If empathy is grounded “not in affinity (feeling for another insofar as we can imagine being that other) but on a feeling for another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible” (BENNETT 2005, 10), then authors, as witnesses to particular situations, are indeed engaged in a form of “empathetic witnessing.” In her book on empathic vision, trauma and art, BENNETT argues that by combining affective and intellectual operations, empathy can actually be considered a mode of seeing (BENNETT 2005), a particularly visual way of conceptualising it that is apt here. This requires recognizing an alterity, irreducible to our own experience. However, while “empathetic witnessing” has been used to describe particular forms of photo reportage, using it to describe a drawn renditions of real situations in comic form could be more problematic, notwithstanding the crafting and politics also involved in photography.

A play on the format of comics as predominantly associated with fiction can also be strategically played up, as SACCO does in his book Palestine in noting that “Make no mistake, everywhere you go, not just in Marvel Comics, there’s parallel universes” (SACCO 2001, 102). As in his other numerous works (see HOLLAND, this volume), SACCO engages the reader by contrasting his often-unflattering naïveté and unease to the traumatic experiences recounted by those around him. Drawing upon an encounter with Jabril, a Palestinian living in Balata refugee camp, he recounts a very corporeal attempt to empathize with his interview partners. In detailing the experience of torture of another, recounted in a “middle class living room in East Jerusalem” (SACCO 2001, 102), a banal space of daily life and hospitality infused with the daily rituals of tea and snacks, he writes that: “I want to hear about his two months’ grilling in Nablus prison, the time the Israelis accused him of training with the Popular Front” (SACCO 2001, 93). As they speak, they are joined by Abu Akram, another contact of SACCO’s, who – when asked whether he has ever been interrogated – proceeds to engage in direct role play, placing SACCO in the position of detainee (Figure 5.3).

3 To put it in simpler terms, this means precisely not assuming that we can comprehend the suffering of others, or ever liken it to our own (i.e. never saying, to someone in pain, that “I know just how you feel”).

Despite his unease with this mise-en-scène of torture, SACCO cannot help but continue to pursue his attempt to experience empathy physically by requesting more ‘itsy-bitsy details’, more concrete material and narrative elements to make bodily sense of the unreality of another’s experience of violence, in a setting returned to the banalities of ordinary life: a family sitting room, where tea is served. This clear staging of the experience of empathy resonates with the reader’s own attempt to make sense of what is going on, as we follow the narrator through many similar interviews. That SACCO positions himself here, as elsewhere, as having been “raised a suburban schoolboy…” (SACCO 2001, 94), a clear outsider stripped of points of reference, and thereby making explicit how alien and how disembodied this experience of extreme violence is to him, helps the reader to align with his position. “Me?”, he writes, “I wonder how long I’d last getting the business behind a closed door… Not long, I bet, but I’m a Pussy First Class… a harsh word and a dirty look and I’d be screaming for Amnesty Int’l” (SACCO 2001, 97). Yet despite this constant distancing, the connections with people he weaves are effective in showing just how suffused with violence and absurd rules daily lives have become, and how mental toughness, ability to withstand humiliation, and cope through cynical and absurd humour become the only true measures of valor.

Because violence for SACCO is always experienced vicariously, this appears to reinforce his position as an outsider, and yet at the same time this also grounds his legitimacy as an outside observer. The reader is therefore empathizing both with SACCO’s ‘once removed’ experience of violence, and with the more immediate experiences of his characters, all the while remaining more or less aware that these are mediated and narrated by him. The seamlessness with which these points of view – this plurivocality – is staged is remarkable, made all the more concrete by SACCO appearing as a character in the images, one among many, narrator, actor, producer. That this constant de/recentering is staged visually removes all feeling that this is simply a God-trick, a point of view from nowhere.

Drawing on personal, mundane details to establish moral proximity and embed places and people with our own everyday experience is highly effective, as TOAL has noted in another context (1996, 176). Indeed the focus in many autographics is on the everyday, on “history’s losers, banished to the fringes where they seem so despondently to loiter, without much hope or organization, except their sheer indomitability, their mostly unspoken will to go on, and their willingness to cling to their story, to retell it, and to resist designs to sweep them away altogether” (SAID 2001, v). There is however a paradox here: in the comic SAID is referring to, as in the others discussed here, it is not the people themselves writing the book, but particular authors performing a form of reported speech, and a cleverly-crafted one at that. That many of these authors are part of a global elite of Western travellers or reporters must lead us to exercise caution in assuming these articulate or reproduce the voices of the voiceless. This is not, at least in the cases considered here, a ‘subaltern’ form of politics (SHARP 2011), despite being potentially emancipatory. Instead, it seems to me, their tremendous strength lies in their ability to give voice to what at least appears to be a plurality of positions, a plu-
rivocality of daily experiences of violence — including that of the author as both observer and narrator.

In many ways, it is precisely because their experiences as travellers mirror our own experiences of bafflement and unease when travelling to or living in new locations that their own empathy touches us so deeply (and by this I mean the ‘Western readers’ at whom these books are largely aimed). If it is of course impossible to anticipate how such comics will be received, as this is never straightforward, this does not mean that the authors do not have clarity of purpose when crafting them. These forms of post-reportage, speaking in “considered retrospect” (Walker 1995 in Campbell 2003, 73), can specifically highlight the often contradictory narratives of particular situations, serving to destabilize hegemonic or simplistic narratives by focusing on the vulnerability and individual suffering of those involved, specifically through the use of multiple voices and points of view. The gutters of comics, in particular, have been likened to aporia, or “blank spaces where new meanings can be generated and a distinctive cross-cultural translation can occur” (Whitlock 2006, 978).

Samson goes further in analyzing this ability of comics to move readers, suggesting that paradoxically by their very nature war and conflicts crush the individual, potentially providing scant detailed material for telling stories, other than grandiose – and depersonalized – tales of heroism. Yet the universality of the human experience of fragility means that, if well rendered, we cannot be indifferent to the complex material emerging from situations of conflict:

By crushing the imagination and conscience of those who pay tribute to it, war works to destroy individuality. That is if the singularity of individual experience hasn’t already been crushed by grandiose myths and idealized narratives. That would be all just another way of conflating the lives of ordinary civilians, making them nameless and faceless. […] If we consider war in its most singular or in its collective dimensions, then war can only show us how fragile human lives are, how close to meltdown humanity can get. We are by its very nature all touched by it, relating as it does to our own human experience. It is our concern, even in peacetime and even when we haven’t experienced it closely4 (Samson 2011, 255).

This reflexive experience of fragility and humanity can be made into a form that bridges distance, and engages readers. Samson argues that authors in this genre are able to build on deeply-held desires to know more about the people they meet, the situations and events they find themselves in. He suggests that this is not a search for forms of institutionalized knowledge that can be more or less removed from daily experiences on the ground, but rather a quest for forms of knowledge

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4 Own translation from: “En broyant l’imaginaire et la conscience de ceux qui lui paient un tribut, la guerre travaille à l’anéantissement de l’individualité. A moins qu’elle ne dissolve d’emblée cette singularité sur l’autel de mythes et idéaux intégrateurs. Ce qui est une autre façon de niveler la mêlée des sans-grades, sans-nom et sans-visage. (…) Qu’il s’agisse de l’envisager dans ses aspects les plus individuels ou les plus collectifs, la guerre ne montre jamais qu’une humanité fragilisée, en pleine débâcle. En cela, elle nous concerne tous, autant que nous sommes. Elle est notre affaire, même en temps de paix et même quand on ne l’a pas éprouvée de près.”
that bring him closer to grasping the complexities of the world in so far as these are experienced and felt by those he meets. “We are dealing with knowledge linked to life experience and that implies, because of that, a transitive dimension”\(^5\) (SAMSON 2011, 260). SAMSON argues that this is made possible by the depth of narrative that emerges from the carefully-built relationships of friendship and mutual respect between an author and his/her subjects. This ability to provoke real empathy is then passed on to the reader who can identify intimately with what it is to be human – rather than with grand historical narratives. The challenge, then, is to find an appropriate format to render this introspection and complexity graphically. It seems to me that this is very close to what SACCO explains as his project:

If you have to say what my motives for doing it are, what I’m trying to get people to get out of it, I’m trying to show a story of a town in a war in an artistic way. Because I think a lot of people are just totally turned off by these sorts of things. They feel that this sort of topic is beyond their comprehension or that it’s going to be too much to take. So the idea was to convey something that, at its heart, was journalistic. But I wanted to convey it in a way that would bring out the humanity of the people there. […] And, yeah, you want people to be moved by it […] I’m interested in informing, but that’s nothing compared to the impact I want to have […]. You should read about it because you care about it (SACCO 2011, 254).

EMPATHY AND ALIENATION: MAKING SENSE OF THE MUNDANE

Guy DELISLE’s tale of expat life in Jerusalem develops a sense of personal alienation associated with the need to combine a quasi-daily experience of violence with the rhythms of daily life. This is made even stronger through his apparent solitude in many of the images: appearing alone, or with a few chosen recurrent characters he is shown progressively making friends with. DELISLE’s position as a detached observer plays explicitly on his role as mediator, exploring and recounting his travels: he is the trailing spouse of a logistics specialist with Médecins Sans Frontières, an international medical charity, spending a year in Jerusalem running the household during what turns into a sort of sabbatical (DELISLE 2011, 226). In narrating and illustrating his own explorations of the city and the wider region as a detached and explicitly marginal participant, he draws the reader into empathizing with him simultaneously as a parent of two young children, a spouse, and a traveler. It is only towards the end of his tale that he reasserts his own professional identity, literally finding his own space within an improbably charming work studio attached to a church. DELISLE illustrates the daily rhythms of his new life (Figure 5.4), since in addition to the many narrated perambulations and explorations of the city, most of his time is spent as “the housewife” (la femme au foyer – his term) taking care of family logistics. These are given particular poignancy by the local geopolitical context that has a specific impact on the family’s expatriate daily life: his two young children attend daycare centres run respectively along

\(^5\) Own translation from: “On parle d’un savoir lié à l’expérience de la vie et comportant, de ce fait, une dimension de transitivité.”
Christian / Jewish and Christian / Jewish / Moslem weekly calendars, implying different ‘weekend’ breaks, while his wife has Fridays and Saturdays off. Particular events, in this extract Ramadan, further throw off the carefully-honed routines. The personal is inescapably (geo)political. His simple tabular illustration of this, with his own weekly routine having no particular pattern at all – always on, yet coming last, as many full-time parents could recognize – is a clever way of connecting the personal with the wider political context. His own exhaustion at the end of the day, with no energy to play, does much to show that this is not a life of leisure, or the carefree life of an artist on sabbatical.

These careful vignettes of daily life are clever strategies for giving depth to the characters, and to DELISLE in particular. We can empathize with his daily struggles, and what can be the grinding boredom of daily family routines. This works as a strong counterpoint to life outside the home, serving to offset the stark violence of division on the ground. It is here that his pure and almost naïve style of drawing serves him particularly well: the sheer size and volume of the Wall being built by the state of Israel fills frame after frame, with the narrator dwarfed by its sheer scale. Referring again to the weekly rhythms of violence – many Muslims wish to cross the checkpoints to go and pray in the Great Mosque on Fridays – he recounts a trip to Qalandiya with an international observer, and his first view of the Wall (Figure 5.5). “I had never seen the separation wall. I didn’t think it was that high”, he says, in his narrator’s voice. Yet, in the frame, all he finds to say is “Eh ben!”, a trivial exclamation similar to a matter-of-fact, understated “Wow!” For how can any outsider make sense of this spatial expression of territorial violence, conjuring up – for a Westerner – other half-forgotten images of division? This clever use of his own decentered plurivocality and his own slow attempts to make sense of the violence of such impositions – between the moment of encounter and that of drawing – are cleverly and carefully rendered in words and images. The immediacy of the encounter, the subsequent narration of his reactions as a memory, together with the carefully-chosen framing of the moment that plays on the crushing perspective viewed from the ground, builds up a geopolitical landscape built on daily encounters, lived experience and no longer solely on geopolitical maps.

In this alien landscape, the threat of violence is never far (“On va laisser la voiture ici. Je préfère qu’elle soit loin. On ne sait jamais” – “We’ll leave the car here. I prefer it to be far away. You never know”). Yet DELISLE makes clear that he stands outside this violence, he is just an observer, and an awkward and almost illegitimate one at that, as he wears the supposedly protective jacket of the observer-organization his guide belongs to.

This simultaneity of the production of images was illustrated earlier in Figure 5.2 where the taking and recording of images seemed a bizarre and integral part of the whole performance of violence itself. For, unlike in SACCO’s world, where violence is narrated and depicted repeatedly, and restaged for effect as in Figure 5.3, DELISLE’s experience of the violence of the geopolitical situation is more muted, but no less powerful in provoking intense empathy. Instead, his understated daily experiences are grounded in almost-permanent spatial confusion. He
spends his time mostly lost, disoriented, building up his own mental-map of the city as a divided space of multi-layered alienation and separated lives. Jerusalem only begins to make sense to him as he slowly connects its unmapped spaces to his own routines, new friends and simple daily habits: playgrounds for his children to play in, cafés to sit in peacefully, and finally his own workspace to think, write and draw in. If at the time, as he makes clear, he had expected to be finishing a book on Burma, not the Middle East, he ends up only sketching his daily experiences. The book itself was formalised subsequently, and he only contributed a few sketches to a blog during his time in Jerusalem, too involved in making sense of daily life to think of elsewhere.

Because his is a widely-shared experience of making sense of a new place, any new place, it leads to an easy empathy with the narrator. In a sense, this makes it less easy to connect with the other characters that appear in the book, appearing on the periphery yet giving body to the narrative. This apparent marginalization of others does not however make it any less powerful politically: DELISLE makes it clear that these are real people within his own biographical tale, individually occupied by making sense of the violent background in their own daily lives and routines, each finding space to exist in the absurdity. He makes no claims to speak on their behalf, and provides only scant background to each. This is understated empathetic witnessing, focusing on daily struggles, creating alternative narratives that directly connect with readers. It is, however, the tale of a baffled outsider, and unashamedly presented as such. The boundaries, walls and checkpoints he encounters are inconvenient, surprising, and absurd, but he is not threatened or made especially vulnerable by them – at most, these make him lose time. Instead, they are almost like a hidden code, a spatial language of territorial violence that has to learn to be able to maintain his mobility. It is clear that, at the end of the year, he can go home. This, however, does not make his portrayal of the daily strategies of others any less potent. On the contrary, these vignettes of human ingenuity, that depict others more adept at functioning within these bounded spaces than him, foil what could have been construed as an attempt to appropriate or assimilate their experiences to his own, avoiding what BENNETT (2005) calls ‘crude empathy’.

**REPRESENTING PLURIVOCALITY GRAPHICALLY**

In contrast to this detached yet also touching viewpoint, I want to spend the rest of this chapter discussing another more complex standpoint: LE ROY’s *Faire le Mur* that plays explicitly with the plurivocality that comics can develop graphically, through the use of multiple authors. Here again, I focus on the effects and impacts of division that are experienced differently, and how these are framed and represented. The title of the book is worth unpacking for an Anglophone audience: while *faire le mur* can literally mean ‘making the wall’ it also, figuratively, means escaping from somewhere undetected and unauthorised, an apt image in this case.
The book is the story of several encounters. It emerged from the friendship that binds Maximilien LE ROY, the author, with Mahmoud Abu Srour, a Palestinian artist of the same age living in the Aida refugee camp in July 2008. The narrative is woven around the unrequited love of Mahmoud for Audrey, one of the many Western women to pass through the camp, and who inevitably leaves. Lastly, it reflects the encounter between LE ROY and the Palestinian experience of confinement and bounding. The latter is viewed empathetically through another’s eyes: Mahmoud as his peer, his soulmate. What is unique however is how far LE ROY goes in playing explicitly on the plurivocality of the narrative: it is not only him narrating the tale — the biography — of his friend Mahmoud in his main character’s voice, since both provide starkly-different images throughout the book. Mahmoud, perhaps rather unsettlingly, does not however appear as co-author. Yet this is believably a story in two voices, made all the more striking by their different graphical styles and use of colour.

This book combines multiple media: the narrative itself, and three illustrative appendices that give body to the political context, providing background ‘facts’ to a comic format usually associated with fiction. The first annex is made to look like a family photo album, showing the real-life family of Mahmoud, his former childhood home and his now-occupied farmland, moments of past innocence and happiness in stark contrast to his present life in the refugee camp that is not photographed, only drawn. The second is a photo-reportage of iconic Israeli landscapes, including well-known graffiti on the Wall and photos of Palestinian children both in daily routines (on the school bus, in the street) and situations of violence (throwing stones at soldiers), and photos of checkpoints, destroyed buildings and gleamingly-new Israeli settlements. The third annexe is an interview with Alain Gresh, an internationalist thinker, apparently carried out by the author, and rather inexplicably but plausibly offered to provide a political alternative to narratives of inevitable ethnic divisions and identities.

The main body of the book is the graphic biography of Mahmoud, flitting between three different times: the present and the soulless boredom of his daily life selling wares in his parents’ corner shop; the distant past and his return to Palestine after years working in Israel to build a house, with its subsequent destruction and replacement with an Israeli settlement; and the near-past with the non-event of his failed seduction of Audrey. Unlike in the two books discussed earlier, LE ROY himself never features in the comic. The voiceover is meant to be Mahmoud himself narrating his own tale: this is not an autographic in the sense discussed earlier, but rather a polyvocal biography.

As the narrative flits between three epochs, drawn alternately by both authors, it provides a very direct visual experience of plurivocality. Mahmoud’s tortured, and colourful, retelling of the moment of exile, when his house was smashed up by Israeli forces to make way for a settlement, and the trickery involved in this as they politely detained his father and him for an apparent ‘simple formality’ while

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6 I use his first name here in the discussion, echoing LE ROY’s use.
in fact crushing their home, contrasts starkly with the dour interiors of his subsequent life in the refugee camp as drawn by LE ROY. In Mahmoud’s images, LE ROY still provides the narrative, composing and captioning the images himself as main author.

The differently experienced effects of boundaries features highly in the story: when Audrey requests to go and see some ‘real Palestinians’, he decides to take her to his family land, on the other side of the Wall. He hopes this will lead to a romantic encounter. While she can cross without trouble, holding an international (French?) passport, he has to risk detention by crossing undetected, running across a wasteland and climbing through a fence. Their encounter is presented as impossible, and doomed: she simply has no idea of his experiences, or the risks he has taken to get there, and flippantly decides to go back on the first day. She is apparently oblivious to Mahmoud’s attraction and the sacrifices made to be there: two lives in different worlds. When they briefly meet up again, several weeks later, she briefly asks him how his return was. He got caught by soldiers, and was detained. She lives in a political geometry where boundaries are mere inconveniences (Figure 5.9).

The image of the bird, a clear signalling of Mahmoud’s own caging, contrasts with the apparent triviality of the dialogue. Mahmoud realises it is pointless to try to explain what happened to him to Audrey, and in any case she is leaving the country.

These alienated souls, caged in different worlds, cannot have any meaningful connection: Audrey through her apparent inability to connect to Mahmoud or to his experience; and he through his position as an exiled Palestinian seeking escape through his art while physically bounded by political divisions. She, like DELISLE and SACCO discussed earlier, is part of the global elite, endlessly mobile, just passing through these landscapes of violence. Unlike them, however, she appears unaffected by it, or simply ignorant. Yet this is only Mahmoud’s/LE ROY’s viewpoint: we could suppose that she might be understandably cautious of a romantic entanglement in such a highly-charged setting. In any case, the author is not trying to foster empathy with her: her other-worldly, haunting appearance within Mahmoud’s drawings reduce her to an icon, a dream of escape, while simultaneously cast as a body desired, lovingly and repeatedly drawn. An unattainable muse, on the other side of a fence.

I argued earlier that comics can highlight the often contradictory narratives of particular situations, destabilizing hegemonic and simplistic narratives by focusing on the vulnerability of individuals suffering, specifically through the use of multiple voices and points of view. It seems to me that this particular book does this admirably, while maintaining unity of narrative: Mahmoud, although ‘written about’, is given his own voice through his drawings, as LE ROY connects empathically with him as a young man and artist of his own age, but one stuck in an impossible political situation. LE ROY is thus a witness and invisible narrator, but narrowly avoids the trap of ‘speaking for’ his main protagonist. Grief, as Spiegelman was quoted as saying earlier, is indeed sorted into boxes in this book – on the page, of course, but also graphically in drawn bird cages, walled interiors and
scarred landscapes – allowing the reader to encounter the mad, bad, sad geopolitics of the Middle East through diverse but specific viewpoints, connecting to the daily experiences of particular people.

CONCLUSIONS

The genre of autobiographical reportage comics has become a phenomenon (Miller 2008). Comics are a fantastically creative format in their use of drawings, photos, drawings and animated or semi-animated images, reflecting constant experimental innovations (see for example Chappatte’s recent online use of semi-animation; the combination of photos and drawings in Guibert, LeFèvre and Lemerçier’s in Le Photographe (2003–2006); the use of photographs and drawings in Sacco’s essay published in the special edition of Safe Area Gorazde (2011) that give fascinating insights into his reportage and writing processes; or Kubert’s Fax from Sarajevo (1996) that mixes photos and real-life documents and correspondence). The use of new media, in particular within websites and author blogs, has also provided new sites for additional graphic innovation, further changing the landscape of creation and diffusion of comics. In many such narratives, moments of historical interlude, flashbacks, reproductions of iconic images or photographs or simply banal everyday situations, are rendered subtly absurd through their retelling, and play on deeper and multiple meanings to create productive counter-hegemonic readings of geopolitical events. In this paper, I have considered three (auto)biographical comics set in Israel / Palestine, written by Western authors, arguing that the potential for plurivocal narrative offers a useful format for counter-geopolitical narratives that make use of empathic witnessing.

I have suggested that the three authors’ aims of creating multiple, yet legible, stories that focus on encounters with marginalized, individualized characters, and the authors’ slow integration and absorption into the local political contexts, are effective strategies for making the experience of marginalization and violence legible across contexts. In these oppositional works, as Holland has written, “there is no predictable storyline, relying on pre-established histories, backgrounds or character tropes. More important, however, is the blending of complex subject and diverse narrative practice” (Holland 2012, 114), unsettling conventional and popular portrayals of the experiences of conflict. Butler (2010) was quoted at the outset of this chapter, writing about the powers of images to act upon the senses. She is concerned by how the framing of war by the media, through and within key images and events, enshrines certain populations as more or less grievable. In battling the key role of images in such framing, she wonders whether the visual could also become the field in which we are solicited to assume responsibility to resist unjust war and the affirm convergent precarious conditions. In this chapter, I hope to have shown how comics can provide counter-frames of geopolitical conflicts that bring distant others into view. In a format that avoids conflict fatigue, comics can depict and make visible the vulnerability of individu-
als, focussing on their agency and autonomy beyond their status of victims, and can move beyond simply taking note of their precariousness to provide instead a political basis for critical outrage grounded in empathy. That they are also beautiful, aesthetically pleasing objects makes them all the more potent.

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