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# Engineering Realities: Historical and Emotional Truths in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*

Just shy of two years ago, *The New Yorker* ran an article by columnist Clare Malone titled "Hasan Minhaj's 'Emotional Truths.'" In the article, Malone fact-checks several stories standup comedian and former correspondent for *The Daily Show*, Hasan Minhaj, had told in his first two *Netflix* specials about specific experiences of racism he had encountered. Malone writes about how she found evidence of exaggeration and fabrication within these stories and, in turn, questions whether Minaj's anecdotes constitute dishonesty from a comedian whose "projects blur the lines between entertainment and opinion journalism." As Malone points out, Minhaj acknowledges that his comedy is, as standup comedy tends to be, not entirely fact-based, but that "[e]very story in my style is built around a seed of truth. […] My comedy Arnold Palmer is seventy per cent emotional truth—this happened—and then thirty per cent hyperbole, exaggeration, fiction" (qtd. in Malone). After the article's publication, Minhaj faced a swath of criticism and later released a video providing context and evidence of crucial facts that *Malone* omitted to better serve her own narrative (the very definition of irony). In a *Vox* article covering the public fallout of Malone's article, Aja Romano asks, "So now the question we're left with is two-fold: Is Minhaj's explanation enough to get him off the hook—or should he have ever been on the hook to begin with? The answers seem to lie in our understanding of storytelling, and in

the expectations we have of specific comedic genres" (Romano). Sometimes in a quest to effectively show 'how something feels,' a portion of 'what actually happened' needs to be sacrificed and vice versa.

Having seen the title of this essay, this may seem disconnected from a discussion centered on two graphic novels, but Minhaj's artistic choices and the different kinds of truth they represent are pertinent. While pulling from real personal experience, his attempts to distort factual truth allowed him to make his emotional truth more engaging to connect more profoundly with audiences. While this may seem deceiving, practically every storyteller is involved in the engineering of truth that may not align with the cold, hard facts of reality. Some invent personas or play caricature versions of themselves through which they investigate the world while others pursue truth through the creation of fabricated worlds with varying degrees of similarities to our own. Whichever the approach, the mere act of telling a story is a kind of fabrication—of construction—in which truth, not fact, is generally held as the ultimate objective.

In both Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*, the authors call attention to their own construction of truth through the post-modernist framing convention of writing about the writing. By using this tactic, not only do they mitigate some of the criticism for engineering a narrative around experiences that are not their own, but they are also able to maintain a perception of honesty while attempting to interpret events, sifting through eyewitness accounts of sometimes dubious credibility. Equally true of *Maus*, Maureen Shay notes that *Footnotes* "delves into the nuanced currency of memory, trauma and forgetting, as well as postmodernist and poststructuralist questions of form and the reliability or instability of oral testimony" (204). They are aware of the flawed nature of memory and therefore accept the ambiguity of human testimony which allows them to uncover truths that official documents omit.

Neither author is able to construct a single unifying, exact, undeniable, objective truth; instead, they offer a hybrid reality that couches the emotional truth into the agreed upon facts of their narratives, allowing for a nuanced chemistry between emotional truth and factual truth along the way.

One of the central conflicts in the frame narrative of *Maus* is caused by Art's desire for raw data in the form of an unfiltered chronological stream of memories from Vladek's mind that then he, the artist, can shape into a narrative. However, Vladek pushes back on his son's construction of story, thus narrativizing his own experiences. In the very first portion of the story Vladek recounts, he immediately expresses a desire to remove what he has just divulged from Art's project. Art disagrees, saying, "But pop—it's great material. It makes everything *real*—more human. I want to tell *your* story, the way it really happened" (*Maus I* 23—emphasis his). Vladek makes Art promise to *not* include this story we have just read in the finished work we are currently reading in a classic bit of dramatic irony. By setting the tone in this way, Spiegelman hints that both he and his father are untrustworthy narrators: his father because he expresses a penchant for editing in real time, and himself because he shows a willingness to disregard the emotional truths of others to tell a story that better serves the story he is after. Their nature as flawed storytellers becomes part of the story. Another conflict in storytelling occurs when Vladek begins to jump from an event that occurred in 1941 to an event in 1943. Art cuts in, saying, "Wait! Please, dad, if you don't keep your story chronological, I'll never get it straight" (82). Vladek relents and continues his story linearly. Vladek attempts here to tell his story through a proximity of meaning rather than a series of disconnected events. In her essay situating *Maus* in the genre of postmodern ethnography, Rosemary V. Hathaway notes that this is "one of the critical pitfalls of the ethnographic process: the ways in which the ethnographer's voice so easily subsumes and

even silences the subject's" (260). However, by including these dissenting opinions between himself and his father, Spiegelman takes ownership of this narrative decision in full view of the reader. He goes as far as to undermine his own likability, drawing himself with a scowl as he makes bullish demands of his father. In this way, instead of being an artistic decision made behind the scenes, Spiegelman makes it part of the growing narrative, thus shaping both the frame narrative and the events in early 1940s Poland.

(Spiegelman, *Maus I*, 82)

Sacco, too, narrativizes the process of gathering sources for his oral history and is, like Spiegelman, transparent in his own biases that shape the truth. In discussing the editorial process, he explicitly ruminates on questions of accuracy:

> Who decides what is credible and what is not? Abed and I, that's who, sitting in our room drinking coffee. We decide. We edit. We determine. In the absence of UNRWA records, of Israeli records—and could we rely on them if we had them?—it's up to us to fill history's glass with as much truthful, cogent testimony as we can. If some truth spills along the way, we apologize. (277)

This mission statement is declared with seeming confidence; however, the context in which we receive it complicates the messaging. On the previous page, Sacco explains that he and Abed were looking for an eyewitness to a particular set of killings and finding one in a man who was a

young boy at the time. Though much of what the man says is verifiable, Abed's skepticism about the man's presence at the time of the mass-murder leads Sacco to label the testimony as non-credible. However, if Sacco was totally confident in Abed's assessment, would he include this account? After all, Sacco interviewed many subjects who were not included in *Footnotes* and segments of some of those who were included were left on the cutting room floor due to a lack of provable veracity. Sacco not only tells us of this interaction but has drawn the scene of the man looking on as a group of men are gunned down. He sees in the man's testimony enough truth to include it in both text and image, yet the doubt that remains forces him to recapitulate the editing process. This is one of many tactics Sacco uses to account for a margin of error, like in other places where he overlays several accounts of the same event with varying degrees of discrepancy to achieve a sense of median truthfulness. Sacco's overall method appears to be as follows: as the validity of truth becomes murkier, his transparency as editor must become clearer. However, during one of his final interviews before leaving Gaza, he feels "ashamed of [himself] for losing something along the way as I collected my evidence, disentangled it, indexed it, and logged it onto my chart" (384). Here Sacco is conflicted in his role as narrative surgeon. In his relentless pursuit of factual truth, he has excised misremembered details, unfounded hearsay, emotionally-charged exaggeration, and rhetorical fabrications to preserve a sense of factuality; however, he is expressing a remorse for his "ethnographic pitfalls" of subsuming and silencing his subjects with exasperation because of a sense that he "knew more about that day than they did" (385). Maureen Shay calls this confession "bold," saying that, "Sacco realizes that in assuming the role of an ethnographer-artist chronicling two historical episodes with hundreds of interviews he has become impervious to the enormity, fragility and messiness of traumatic testimony" (212). The Palestinian emotional truth was often pushed aside because it was an obstruction in the path of

objective fact and "Sacco worries that he has put his interviewees through the pain of remembrance simply to establish a factual narrative for his own satisfaction as a privileged outside observer" (Owen 218). Both he and Spiegelman express an anxiety born from the privilege of emotional distance.

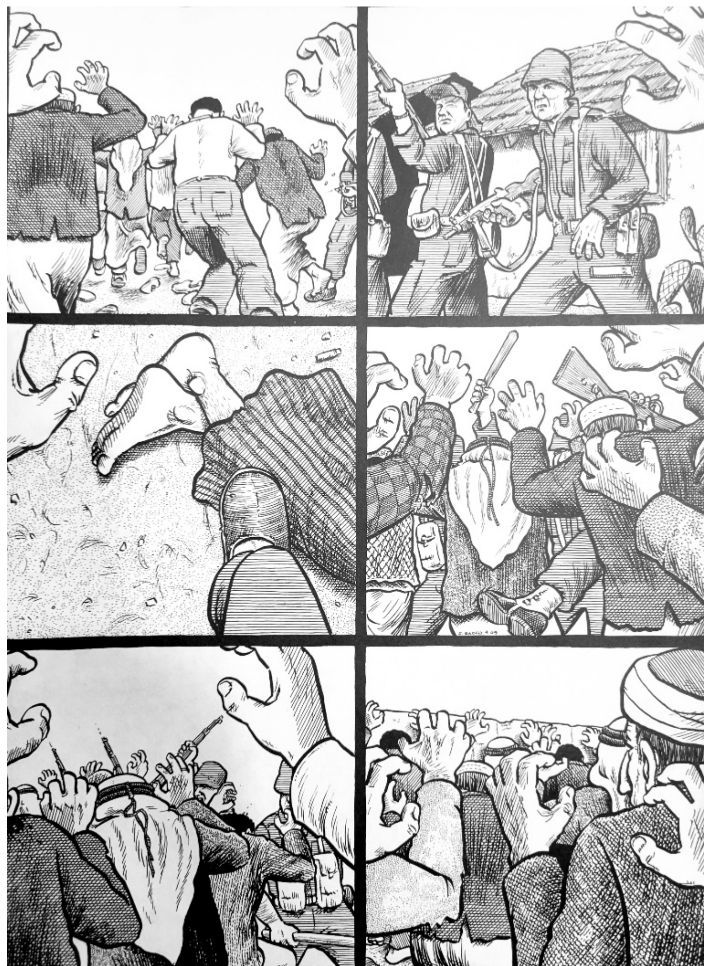
Early in *Maus II*, Spiegelman presents his own crisis of authorial consciousness to the reader. While blurring the line between Spiegelman-author and Art-character, he appears in human form, wearing a mouse mask rather than his usual portrayal as an anthropomorphic mouse. Here he considers the timeline of his life and those of his parents, the imminence of his own transition into fatherhood, the looming presence of the holocaust in the life of his family and in his work, the success of his work, his mother's suicide, and his own mental health. This scene of contemplation takes place at Art's workstation, which sits atop an open mass grave of Jewish (mouse) bodies with flies buzzing around Art's office. Kincaide explains that "the pile of dead mice under Spiegelman complicates the message, as it emphasizes the disparity between Spiegelman, who wears a mask and did not actually experience the Holocaust, and the mice in the pile, those who did experience the event" (10). More than just a visual pun, the "time flies" signify the residuality of the death and rot that Auschwitz maintains in Spiegelman's life and his draw to this subject in his work. Further, as Art's contemplation is interrupted by media and

(Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 41)

corporate actors emerging from the pile of corpses, they too become like flies swarming his personal space with inane questions, commercial opportunities, and preconceived narratives surrounding his work. The flies eventually disperse with the crowd as Art, now shrunken to a child-like version of himself, contemplates intergenerational trauma as he says, "Sometimes I just don't feel like a functioning adult. I can't believe I'm gonna be a father in a couple of months. My father's ghost still hangs over me" (43). Art feels guilty, as he intimates, in his subsequent meeting with Pavel, his therapist, that regardless of his success, his relationship with his father feels as illusive as ever. The survivor's guilt he inherited from Vladek, his struggle to reconcile authorial objectivity with his feelings of anger toward his father, and the mammoth task of representing Auschwitz second-hand all inform Art's reluctance to move forward with his work or in reconciling his relationship with Vladek. Even though Vladek has passed, Art's relationship with him continues to evolve through the construction of the concurrent narratives as he writes them. This shows that the thematic mission of *Maus* is not to construct an authentic picture of who Vladek was, but an authentic picture of who Vladek was to Art.

Sacco ends his book with three and a half pages of wordless panels depicting, from a first-person point-of-view, chilling images of oppression followed by blackout. Ben Owen says of this coda, "Read in isolation from the rest of the book, [it] could be taken as the view of one person. But because it comes at the end, the reader understands that it combines repeated points of agreement among dozens of oral histories; it is a representation of the consensus among Sacco's Palestinian interviewees" (217). However, it also explains the points of disagreement between the oral accounts of Sacco's interviewees. In the panels, "[t]he journalist disappears, as does present time and language, and what we are left with is sheer vision" (Shay 213) in which we are presented a series of moments that add up to a sequence of fear, confusion, and

unadulterated brutality. In these crowded, obscured, single-focused images it is often difficult to make out what exactly is occurring on a moment-by-moment basis. Even if memory did not radically distort reality, this scene shows that a cacophony of chaotic violence will shape the subjective perception of events. Abu Juhish told Sacco that what he remembered most from that day was the fear. In his coda, Sacco shows that this fear is the most consistent common denominator of his oral history—a fear so powerful that it



(Sacco, *Footnotes in Gaza*, 387)

is able to bring this man to tears some fifty years later. The Israeli occupation uses extreme violence to instil this fear in the Palestinian population in an attempt to destroy the entire culture. In the book's forward, Sacco recounts a conversation with Abed El-Aziz El-Rantisi, a member of Hamas: he tells Sacco that by killing his uncle in Khan Younis in 1956, the Israeli soldiers "planted hatred in [their] hearts" (ix). Sacco's dedication to factual accuracy and painstaking attention to visual detail unearths a huge amount of indisputable evidence of the massacres committed by the Israeli army in Khan Younis and Rafah in 1956 that were previously diminished to footnotes in UN reports, but it is his willingness and ability to incorporate the emotional truth in equal measure that allows him to show how this hatred was planted and how

trauma of the past is entangled with contemporary events—as an unnamed Gazan said to Sacco, "events are continuous" (xi).

Both Spiegelman and Sacco are beyond competent storytellers, but it is their dedication to, and tactical acumen of transparency that makes them effective truthtellers. In *Footnotes in Gaza*, Sacco "draws the suffering of people in terrible situations, but also tries to think through the trickiness of his own role as a journalist, a cartoonist, and a Westerner potentially implicated in that suffering" (Owen 203). By incorporating this meta-awareness, he is able to weave together fact-based reporting with the emotional truth of a cultural zeitgeist seamlessly. Spiegelman's approach is slightly more circuitous in that he "uses authorial voice to draw the reader into the narrative world, including the facts, in retrospect, of the event depicted. In keeping with the abstract nature of the mouse icon, the reader becomes what Spiegelman is within this scene—people wearing masks to assume the trauma of an event passed" (Kincaid 10-11). Both authors broach the topic of genocide in a medium long thought to lack the sincerity and severity necessary to approach themes of this magnitude. By opening the curtain on their process of construction, they pursue both factual and emotional truths and explore the nuanced relationship between the two. What Owen says of *Footnotes in Gaza* is true also of *Maus*: namely, "that the history of the event can only appear as a dialectic—the emotional truth and the factual truth cannot coexist as a single, seamless narrative, but must instead serve as discontinuous indexes of one another, their discontinuity prompting the reader to further investigation" (218). Hasan Minhaj received some backlash for his employment of the term "emotional truth" but Sacco and Spiegelman, show the relevancy of personal, subjective, feeling narratives to the historical record. Truth encompasses more than mere documentary.

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