GRAPHIC ETHICS: THEORIZING THE FACE IN MARJANE SATRAPI’S PERSEPOLIS

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Complex personhood means that all people . . . remember and forget, are beset by contradictions, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others . . . Complex personhood means that even those called “Other” are never never that.

—Avery Gordon

In a 2005 *New York Times* comics-editorial, Iranian-French graphic memoirist Marjane Satrapi discusses her first trip to the United States in 2003 and her struggle to defend her birth nation of Iran during this trip. The editorial includes a telling collage. Colorful film posters fill the top of the panel: American men in aviator sunglasses aim guns and a timid-looking mother cradles her child. At the bottom of the panel, a throng of Iranians in chadors huddles together: just the hint of a single face with red lips is discernable in the otherwise all-black illustration. In this, Satrapi satirizes the Western representation of Iranians as fearful, helpless, and indistinct, a representation that facilitates American invasions in Western Asia. As she captions the collage, “I had . . . to try to explain to people what Iran was really like. That not every woman in Iran looked like a black bird. That the axis of evil also included people like myself. That it was a very bad idea to give democracy as a present to people by bombing them” (2005). Satrapi’s project of historical reclamation in the West is likewise apparent in her first major work, the émigré graphic memoir *Persepolis* (2003, 2004b). It is one of countless comics to engage serious political and autobiographical content in this once-marginal form since the great success of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, which was
published in two volumes in 1986 and 1991. In fact, scholars point to the form as an ideal space for interrogating epistemological assumptions and placing extra-textual “demands” on the reader.¹

Recent comics criticism, and in particular criticism of graphic memoirs, centers on the instabilities inherent in the multimodal text. Michael Chaney, Hillary Chute, Rocío Davis, James Hatfield, Theresa Tensuan, and Gillian Whitlock focus on the disjunctions between word and image, across panels, and in the present narration of a past self.² According to this scholarship, it is from the medium’s tensions and instabilities that it gains its political force, undermining hegemonic social structures, representing the unrepresentable, and positioning the reader as an intimate participant in its construction. Characteristic of this work, Davis contends that graphic memoirists “revise established genres to destabilize ideology and conventional strategies of meaning in order to enact distinct sociocultural situations. Readers who encounter these revisionary texts are thus obliged to reexamine their expectations and critical perspectives” (2005, 265; emphases added). Yet Davis does not articulate how exactly textual destabilization leads to the reader’s critical obligation. How does the text, in a state of tension, compel the reader to assess her ideological orientation to its subject matter? Critics indicate that the graphic memoir is uniquely capable of making an ethical appeal to the reader. But it remains unclear what this mechanism is and how it functions in the text. It is crucial that we recognize what representational practices do and do not communicate what Avery Gordon calls “complex personhood.” “Complex personhood,” she notes, “means that all people . . . remember and forget, are beset by contradictions, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others” (1997, 4). The graphic memoir, I aim to make clear, lends itself to the transmission of this complexity. In considering the ethics of the graphic memoir, I first trace the origin of the debate within comics criticism. Second, calling on Judith Butler’s theorization of the Levinasian notion of “the face,” I establish an ethical framework to substantiate the thus-far-unclear claims connecting formal destabilization to reader obligation. Third, I demonstrate this ethical import as it operates within Satrapi’s Persepolis.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CLOSURE

Although comics remain a growing site of interest among scholars, criticism of the form is in fact decades old. In his pioneering historical account of the comic strip, David Kunzle contends that comics are first and foremost a pictorial medium (1973, 2). The text of a panel, he argues, is subordinate to the work of the image, which “carries the burden” of narration (2). More than a decade later, Will Eisner attributes a similar precedence to the image.³ In his foundational work Comics and Sequential Art (1985), Eisner distinguishes the comics author from the traditional prose writer. Whereas a work of prose directs the imagination of the reader, Eisner argues, the comic strip determines it: “An image once drawn becomes a precise statement that brooks little or no further interpretation.
When the two are ‘mixed’ the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages” (122). Although Comics and Sequential Art remains a foundational text, opening up the since burgeoning field of comics criticism, Eisner’s ideas come in almost direct opposition to present scholarship. Comics, we now insist, do not require less interpretation than prose but more. The words are not ‘welded’ to the image but coexist in a precarious state of simultaneous alignment and discordance.

Scott McCloud, some would argue Eisner’s direct successor, begins to formulate this response in Understanding Comics (1994). He sees comics as a medium that is incomplete until it is read, until the reader sutures the numerous interruptions in the text. McCloud popularizes within comics criticism two essential concepts: the icon and the gutter. The icon is a representation of an object, and it can be more or less iconic—that is, more abstract or more realistic. McCloud contends that our self-perception is an iconic one (except when in front of a mirror), and therefore we can relate to or enter comics characters’ perceptions with greater ease (36). The gutter is the liminal space between panels, a gap, McCloud argues, that the reader must close (67). “Comics panels,” he indicates, “fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67). Unlike a film reel, in which sequential images blend together through mechanical processes, comics emphasize the space between images and leave the reader to bridge it. So with McCloud the reader is put front and center, instilling closure between panels, imbuing icons with meaning, and uniting word and image. Whereas Eisner suggests that comics demand little interpretation, McCloud sees little but interpretation in the reading of comics. Still recent scholarship focuses less on closure than it does on “dis-closure.” Whereas McCloud characterizes closure as almost inevitable, recent critics are more concerned with considering what happens when the gutter does not close, or when word and image do not come together, or when an iconic face does not welcome co-identification.

Such questions are at the center of current scholarship on graphic memoirs, or what Gillian Whitlock calls “autographics,” a term she coins in order to emphasize the concurrence of word and image in the medium and the peculiar subject positions through which the autobiographer offers her account (2006, 966). Charles Hatfield describes these moments of dis-closure as “tensions,” emphasizing the potential fissures in image/text relations, between the timeframe of the panel and that of the page, and in the self-conscious materiality of the form (2005, 36). Whereas McCloud suggests that the comics reader can generate a “unified reality” through closure, Hatfield suggests that the manifold tensions of comics can conflict with one another to the point that closure becomes altogether unmanageable (58). Hatfield’s notion of “tensions” aligns with what Julia Watson calls “splits” (2008, 29), Chute calls “cross-discursivity” (2010, 5), and Jared Gardner calls “double-vision” (2006, 803). The autographic is full of holes and interruptions, not all of which can be integrated through subconscious acts.
of closure. Sometimes comics refuse to cohere with familiar tropes and practices of signification.

Yet this destabilization is what makes the form a crucial counterbalance to other, more entrenched media. In its formal dis-closures, the autographic presses the reader to reconsider the assumptions she brings to the text and the basic framework through which she understands the so-called other. Chute contends that the autographic represents a medium capable of rethinking the common-places of institutional histories and trauma studies. Rather than representing the “unspeakability” of trauma, graphic memoirs work to materialize this past while still foregrounding the difficulties of narrating trauma (2008a, 459). The form does not construct a better or more accurate representation of trauma and otherness. Instead, it highlights the contractedness of representation in general, and thus facilitates understandings outside of our prescribed notions of difference. Hence, the autographic troubles genre boundaries (Davis 2005, 269), the isolation of the historical past from the present (Gardner 2006, 803), the teacher-victim relations of “rescue politics” (Smith 2011, 70), and the naturalized social scripts of class, gender, race, and nation (Tensuan 2006, 951-52). In sum, the autographic complicates epistemological certainties and thus makes possible a less abridged consideration of political and social issues. To paraphrase Gordon, we cannot “imagine otherwise” until we understand the constraints of the present order (1997, 5).

So it is from the formal tensions (and resultant epistemological uncertainties) that the autographic gains its ethical import. Tensuan suggests that such tensions force the reader to loiter in the autographic panels and, in doing so, shift her position as spectator to that of the iconic narrator (2006, 951, 961). The form of the autographic puts an unfamiliar demand on the reader to take part in the construction of the narrative and thus to comprehend it from the inside rather than as a detached outsider. Watson suggests that the “splits” that mark the form engage the reader “affectively and ethically” in a reconsideration of societal norms (2008, 53). Leigh Gilmore argues that the autographic representation of trauma “demands” that the author participate in the act of witnessing alongside the narrator (2011, 158, 162). Chute meanwhile contends that the form affords a “mapping” of the author’s precepts and thus offers a “sophisticated representational aesthetics and ethics” (2010, 27). It is not altogether clear from these accounts, however, what places this act of reading in the ethical realm. What compels the reader to meet the demands of the autographic? If the text encourages us to inhabit the precepts of the narrator, is this a site of ethics or one of egoism? Does the autographic accommodate the complex personhood of the one telling trauma or the one reading it? After all, to recognize oneself better is not to be ethical.

I would like to suggest that the graphic memoir does in fact facilitate ethical reading, as Chute, Watson, and Gilmore suggest. But this is a claim that still needs clarification and theoretical structure, an account of what I am calling ‘graphic ethics.’ Taking a step back from the judicious work of Chute, Davis, Hatfield, and Whitlock, I merge the discussion surrounding dis-closure in
autographics with the nonviolent ethics of Judith Butler’s interpretation of the face as a site of perpetual tension that can affirm the human in her fundamental precariousness. I further contend that the timeframe of the autographic enacts what Diana Taylor calls “the scenario,” a repeatable, repeating, and changeable instance that situates us, as spectators, as part of the act, “implicating us in its ethics and politics” (2003, 33).

**TOWARD A GRAPHIC ETHICS**

Writing after the September 11 attacks and the ensuing processes of containment (involving the USA PATRIOT Act and other immigration and intelligence-gathering policies), Butler considers the national “frames” that inflect and limit our affective responses to transnational acts of violence. In particular, she criticizes US media representations of Western Asian subjects after September 11, 2001 and during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In searching for an ethics that can counteract state violence, she distinguishes between two intersecting terms, what she calls “precariousness” and “precarity,” the former as the common condition of life—unguaranteed and exposed to injury and death—and the latter as a political condition in which a population is “differentially exposed” to life’s impermanence (2009, 25-26). Recognizing the precariousness or precariousness of another is to recognize that her life will at some point end; to be living is to acknowledge a future death (15). When we acknowledge that a person will die, we make that life, in Butler’s terms, “grievable” (15). That is, to see another person as living is to acknowledge that that person is in danger of dying and will at some point die, and vice versa. We must see a life as precarious and grievable in order for it to be a life in the first place.

Butler’s contention, then, is that US media represent the Western Asian subject so as to make her “ungrievable” and thus not murder able: killing someone who cannot die and is therefore not alive is not killing to begin with. Butler asks, “If we accept that affect is structured by interpretative schemes that we do not fully understand, can this help us understand why it is we might feel horror in the face of certain losses but indifference or even righteousness in light of others?” (2009, 41-42). Her cautious solution, and the ethical grounding I propose to introduce to autographics, is the Levinasian notion of the face. In the face of the other, in its precariousness, one is met with two warring desires: the desire to kill and “the divine prohibition against killing” (J. Butler 2004, 135). The first is an impulse of self-preservation in light of one’s own precariousness, and the second is an ethical impulse, a fear of committing an act of violence in the recognition of the other’s precariousness. In this, Butler (through Levinas) offers an ethics of nonviolence that is not a matter of peace but of conflict-in-suspension. One does not kill because the ethical prohibition that “thou shalt not kill” negates the opposing impulse (132).

The face belongs to the realm of ethics in part because it is incomprehensible. To use Gordon’s term, the face signals the complex personhood of the other: she cannot and must not be altogether discernable. We must understand difference,
Levinas suggests, not as a project of assimilation or categorical othering but in terms of what he calls proximity: “Proximity as the impossible assumption of difference, impossible definition, impossible integration. Proximity as impossible appearance” (1999, 138). Rather than demanding that the other be more like oneself or attempting to understand otherness through artificial and static categories of difference—the “ethno-racial blocks” of US multiculturalism come to mind—the face communicates the proximity of the other as irreducible to “a ‘kind of this or that,’” neither “unity” nor “ultimate difference” (138–39). The face positions the other not as alien but as a neighbor incomprehensible in her complexity. The face, as Levinas puts it, cannot “become a content. . . . it is uncontainable” (1985, 87). The ethical tension of the face thus engenders an “excess of sociality” that transcends the framework of self and other itself (1999, 137). Ethics is not a matter of lack—an absence of conflict—but of surplus, an irreducible complexity that arises from contradiction. The face tempts us with murder at the same time that it prohibits us from committing it. The face is neither the same nor different.

This ethical tension, though, is not a certainty. Western media, according to Butler, abolish this ethical tension in two different manners: capture and erasure (2004, 147). The former makes the face commensurable, allows it to mean—the face of Osama bin Laden as an embodiment of evil—whereas the latter offers no face at all. The result is, in one case, a representation of the inhuman and, in the other, the total eradication of human presence. For an ethical and nonviolent response, then, the face must aspire to represent the human but fail and show its failure to represent or “capture” the human in total (144). It is in this unrepre
ensible face, I argue, that the autographic finds its ethical import. As an icon, the face of the other of the graphic memoir comes through in its attempt but failure to represent the human, the memoirist’s past self.

The ethics of the face of the autographic finds reinforcement in the medium’s enactment of the scenario. Taylor distinguishes between what she calls the “archive” and the “repertoire,” the former as documentation that is somewhat stable and chosen for preservation and the latter as enacting embodied memory that is live and thus exceeds archival preservation (2003, 19). However, she troubles this binary with her notion of the “scenario,” which she characterizes as a situation that “bears the weight of accumulative repeats” (28). The scenario samples from both the realm of the archive, in its “reactivation” of the past, and the realm of the repertoire, in its potential for change, for the revising of that same past. Although not performance or repertoire proper, the scenario does implicate us in its discourse. As Taylor puts it, “We need to ‘be there,’ part of the act of transfer” (32). So, in Butler’s terms, the scenario precludes treating the iconic face of the other as either inhuman or absent. The autographic thus demands an ethical engagement from the reader as a sequence of in-tension scenarios representing the incommensurable face of the other. Satrapi’s Persepolis embodies this graphic ethics, emphasizing the complex personhood of those cast as other.
OBLIGATING THE READER IN PERSEPOLIS

One of the fastest growing subsets of auto­graphics is the Iranian émigré graphic memoir, now including Parsua Bashi’s Nylon Road: A Graphic Memoir of Coming of Age in Iran (2009), Roya Hakakian’s Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran (2004), Afsch­ineh Latifi’s Even After All this Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran (2005), and Azadeh Moaveni’s Lipstick Jihad (2005). Most prominent among this set of texts, all dealing with the Islamic Revolution and its impact on Iranian women, is Marjane Satrapi’s two­volume Per­sepolis. In Per­sepolis, Satrapi tells of her childhood and adolescence in and outside of Iran during the Islamic Revolution and the ensuing Iran­Iraq War. The child of radical leftist parents, Satrapi first represents her realization of the political, social, and religious realities of Iran in Per­sepolis and, in Persepolis 2, her struggle to reconcile her identification with the nation, seeing it as home but expressing frustration toward its politics and social structure. In the introduction to the 2003 US edition, Satrapi makes it clear that Per­sepolis is a project of historical reclamation. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, she notes, “[Iran] has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know this image is far from the truth” (2003, ii). Her autographic proceeds to trouble the mainstream Western understanding of Iran in offering an alternate and personal historical account.

In assessing Per­sepolis, it is important to consider the text’s intended audience, as Satrapi is candid about her target readership. With a first printing in France from 2000 to 2003 (and in the United States in 2003 and 2004), the memoir is meant for a Western audience.6 As yet, there is still no official Farsi translation in print. In a 2004 discussion of her work, Satrapi clarifies, “I wrote [Per­sepolis] for the other ones, not for Iranians. For Iranians I wouldn’t give so much explanation” (2004a). If her autographic is a work of historical reclamation, then it is one that takes place in the historical imagination of the West. Just like Butler, Satrapi’s chief concern is the perception of Iranians and Western Asians in France and the United States as either inhuman or missing, as either global terrorists or historical absences. Her autographic presents a past self that is at center frame, right in the reader’s line of sight, but that her drawings do not capture. She is there but as a human, not a figuration.

Taking account of its target audience—French and US citizens likely less than familiar with Iranian history—Per­sepolis is often characterized as a work of didacticism. Davis for one describes Satrapi’s autographic as a “didactic project” capable of presenting an “insider perspective” on Iran (2005, 265). The Bildungsroman is after all a form that tends to educate and moralize. Yet Satrapi’s autographic is, as her remarks in the introduction make clear, less about educating Western readers on Iranian history than it is about denaturalizing their prescribed understandings of Western Asia. McCloud suggests that the comics icon, in its abstraction, functions as “a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled” (1994, 36). Or, as Davis puts it, comics offer an “insider perspective” on their subject matter.
and thus a didactic one (265). In contrast, I am arguing that the icon of Satrapi’s autographic is not about the reader seeing herself as the protagonist—and thus, in effect, empathizing with herself—but about seeing the protagonist as complex, neither the same as herself nor irreducible to “a ‘kind of this or that’” (Levinas 1999, 138). Hence, interrogating the publication and reception of Satrapi’s autographic foregrounds the transnationalism of her account, one that falls outside US frames of understanding and thus works to unsettle them.

On the first page of *Persepolis*, Satrapi makes this aim clear. In the first panel, she introduces us to Marji, her childhood self (see fig. 1). She presents Marji sitting at a table and wearing a headscarf. Above it, the caption reads, “This is me when I was 10 years old. This was in 1980” (2003, 3). Alongside it, the second panel depicts four girls sitting in the same position next to one another and wearing the same hood and headscarf. Its caption reads, “And this is a class photo. I’m sitting on the far left so you don’t see me. From left to right: Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, Minna” (3). In this set of panels, Satrapi introduces the reader to a familiar image, an Iranian woman in hijab. But she complicates the more common presentation of Western Asian women just as she offers a familiar point of reference for the US reader. In separating herself from her classmates but at the same time pointing to her peripheral presence beside them, Satrapi is able to indicate at once the presence and potential absence of Marji. She singles her out in the first panel, pointing to the personal shape of the text at hand. But the second panel gestures to a possible erasure: she is lost in the throng of Iranian schoolgirls and does not appear in the frame at all. In the second panel, the text gestures to the historical practice of erasure against which it is working. As in the imagination of the Western audience, Marji is not “grievable” because she is not there in the first place. The text thus announces its intention to correct for this Western neglect at the same time that it points out the forces that necessitate this project.

As a repeating and altering act, the first panels of *Persepolis* signal the “once-againness” of the scenario. In articulating the scenario as a balance of setup and action, of formula and transformation, Taylor contends, “The frame is basically fixed and, as such, repeatable and transferable. Scenarios may consciously reference each other by the way they frame the situation and quote words and gestures. They may often appear stereotypical, with situations and characters frozen in time” (2003, 31). The scenario is much like the archive; it repeats and can transfer cultural imaginings as a result. Nonetheless, although the scenario is often “stereotypical,” it can be recast and gain different and oppositional meaning as it builds off preceding enactments.

In the first two panels of *Persepolis*, Satrapi sketches just one scenario, a scenario that repeats and alters itself from first panel to second. In the first panel, Marji is alone. She is ten, and it is 1980. In the second, Satrapi presents the same scenario again but with a different frame and additional information. This additional information—it is a class picture, and Marji is sitting beside her classmates Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, and Minna—pushes the reader back into the
first frame to recontextualize it in light of the second. The scenario remains the same but, in the mind of the reader, there is an alteration. This speaks to Thierry Groensteen’s notion of “iconic solidarity.” He contends that the comics form is “over-determined” in that its images are separated but nonetheless interdependent (2007, 18). The reader focuses on a particular panel at the same time that she remains cognizant of the peripheral content, a realization of the panel-in-sequence (19). Hence, although I read the panels from left to right in the present article, the panel-scenarios can be read “out of order.” The point is that Satrapi enacts and reenacts the same scenario again and again, creating not a linear pattern but a circling and self-amending one. The autographic panel thus holds the reader’s attention as it loops and shifts in meaning and reference.

Although the ‘once-againness’ of the panel-scenario can incite the reader to attend to the unstable nature of historical and textual representation, it also emphasizes and then reemphasizes the face of the other. Scott McCloud maintains that there is a difference between how one sees another and how one imagines oneself: “When two people interact, they usually look directly at one another, seeing their partner’s features in vivid detail. Each one also sustains a constant awareness of his or her own face, but this mind-picture is not nearly so vivid” (1994, 35-36). This less distinct image of oneself is, for McCloud, akin to the icon of comics. So, if the “mind-picture” of one’s own face is iconic, then the iconic representation of a character makes that character more relatable; the reader comes to see herself in the face of the iconic other. McCloud’s contention, although somewhat pop-scientific in its ease and assumptions, reflects the sentiment of much of the later scholarship, approaching but not articulating the nebulous ethical responsibilities of the autographic form (see Chute 2010, 27; Gilmore 2011, 158, 162; Watson 2008, 53). What is missing in McCloud’s proposition, though, is an obligation to the other rather than to oneself. If in the face of the other (in this case, Marji and her classmates) one sees not the precarity of
the other but one’s own precariousness, as McCloud suggests, then the obligation is no longer an ethical one. The reader’s empathetic reaction is not to the other; rather, she is in fact empathizing with herself, with the glimpse of her own plight that she sees in the face of the other. What McCloud articulates is less an ethics of comics than a narcissism, in which the reader attends to the text because of a fascination with herself—a fascination with her own, rather than another’s, complexity.

Instead, in order to recommend an ethics of the autographic, there must be an impulse of both selfishness and selflessness. According to Butler, in looking into the face of the other, “there is fear for one’s own survival, and there is anxiety about hurting the Other, and these two impulses are at war with each other, like siblings fighting” (2004, 137). In seeing Marji’s face in the first panels, with the knowledge that this is an Iranian girl living in the wake of the Islamic Revolution and during the Iran-Iraq War, Butler’s ethical subject must first cope with the impulse to perpetuate violence under the influence of fear for her own life. She sees, in Marji’s precarity, her own precariousness—the fact that life, including hers, must end. In order to eliminate the appearance of her precariousness and the potential danger of the unfamiliar other, one desires to kill, to eliminate this reality. But in Marji’s face there arises a second impulse, the ethical impulse that one cannot kill. The second, nonviolent impulse inhibits the first, violent one. It is the second alone that instills an element of ethics in the autographic form, an obligation to another rather than to oneself.

In this regard, it is crucial to consider that it is the nonviolent, ethical impulse that arrives second. If there is no encouragement to loiter in the panel, to return to it and reenact it, then no ethical obligation can declare itself. The other is made inhuman through a process of capturing, or absent through a process of disremembering, and becomes a target for unrepentant acts of violence. In order to be an ethical form that destabilizes acts of historicism and obligates the reader to attend to the other, the autographic must arrive as a series of scenarios that act and reenact archival structures of understanding, maintaining the reader’s attention on and in tension with the face of the other. The autographic relates the proximity of the other, “as the impossible assumption of difference” and “impossible appearance” (Levinas 1999, 138), thus generating an ‘excess’ that surpasses the discourse of self and other. So what is crucial about Satrapi’s self-representations is, as McCloud would contend, their iconic, two-dimensional form. In working toward a nonviolent ethics of the graphic memoir, it is important that the face is in a perpetual state of failing to represent the human and making this failure apparent (Butler 2004, 144). In order to demonstrate the dehumanizing process of representational capture, in juxtaposition to Satrapi’s iconic self-portraits, it is worth first demonstrating how an image can capture and thus dehumanize its subject.

Following the May 2, 2011, assassination of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, TIME published a special issue featuring a Tim O’Brien photographic illustration of bin Laden’s face with a large red “X” through it. In it, bin Laden is facing
straight ahead and wearing a white headdress. The image represents his head alone, against a white background, and his face is without expression. This is the fourth “X” image *TIME* has run on its cover, the previous images being similar representations of Adolf Hitler on May 7, 1945, Saddam Hussein on April 21, 2003, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi on June 19, 2006 (Gustini 2011). It is an image that captures the human, and in this capturing makes him inhuman. In O’Brien’s illustration, bin Laden comes to stand for and be commensurable with both wickedness and US triumphalism. In his blank countenance, O’Brien’s bin Laden communicates no human feeling, no precariousness. As a head floating against a white background, he seems to be at once more than human and less than human, a figuration of some ideal. “We personify the evil or military triumph,” Butler contends, “through a face that is supposed to be, to capture, to contain the very idea for which it stands” (2004, 145). O’Brien’s bin Laden, in capturing its human subject, works to position the Western reader as remote from the evil for which he stands, to compartmentalize it, and to thus rationalize acts of violence against the other as acts of patriotism and of national triumph. It is not surprising that the feature article includes a collection of photographs of people unfurling American flags and pumping their fists in celebration. Unlike the face of Butler’s ethics and the scenario of Taylor’s historicism, *TIME*’s bin Laden illustration does not instill tension; the reader can see it, understand what it signifies, and turn the page without a second thought or glance. So, in considering the ethics of the autographic, it is crucial to attend to what the text does not capture of the subject and where it shows the limitations and failures of representation, communicating proximity rather than sameness or categorical difference.

In a scene emphasizing the failures of representation, Satrapi juxtaposes a pair of conflicting images that highlight the strange reality of wartime Iran. During the Iran-Iraq War, the Iranian Islamic republic under Ruhollah Khomeini distributed keys to teenage boys meant to represent their “key to heaven” in exchange for joining the Iranian forces. In a two-panel page, Satrapi depicts faceless bodies flung into the air in a minefield bombing (see fig. 2). Keys hang from their necks, and the caption reads, “The key to paradise was for poor people. Thousands of young kids, promised a better life, exploded on the minefields with their keys around their necks” (2003, 102). Below it, in a panel approximately half its size, Marji is in the foreground in a scene depicting her and her friends jumping around on the dance floor. Her hair is up in the air, and her mouth is open. The present self of the caption narrates, “Meanwhile, I got to go to my first party. Not only did my mom let me go, she also knitted me a sweater full of holes and made me a necklace with chains and nails. Punk rock was in. I was looking sharp” (2003, 102). What is most shocking about this page, as Chute points out, is the simultaneous treatment of sweeping acts of violence and the ordinary goings-on of teenage life (2008b, 103). Still, like the opening panels of *Persepolis*, this is also a reflection on the process of representation itself: it mimes the historical neglect of the Western media in the first panel at the same time that it corrects for it in the second. In depicting the Iranian soldiers as faceless and with the false
The key to paradise was for poor people. Thousands of young kids, promised a better life, exploded on the minefields with their keys around their necks.

Mrs. Nasrine’s son managed to avoid that fate, but lots of other kids from his neighborhood didn’t.

Meanwhile, I got to go to my first party. Not only did my mom let me go, she also knitted me a sweater full of holes and made me a necklace with chains and nails. Punk rock was in.

I was looking sharp.

Figure 2. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris. Translation copyright © 2003 by L’Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.
offering of the keys around their necks, Satrapi is able to ridicule the historical record that forgets or makes absent the deaths of Western Asian soldiers—who fought in a war that the United States helped to bankroll (Khalidi 2009, 155-56)—but then counter it with the face of an Iranian, her past self, experiencing the normal growing pains of adolescence amid the atrocities of war.

This jarring gutter points to the impossibility of the face to represent or capture Marji, an impossibility that, Butler suggests, indirectly affirms the human (2004, 144). There is, of course, a degree of ambiguousness to Marji in the simple black-and-white depiction of her in Persepolis and in her changing appearance and numerous, conflicting identities. But the representation of Marji’s face in this panel also points to its failure to represent in relation to the neighboring panel. The sketch of Marji and her friends in midair on the dance floor takes on additional meaning alongside the mirror image of other Iranian teenagers in midair on the battlefield. Satrapi’s drawing of Marji seeks to represent her past self but fails, and points to this failure in highlighting the national backdrop to what, at first glance, appears to be a simple moment of carefree teenage fun. The tension across panels characterizes what Hatfield calls the “different order of literacy” comics demand: “there is always an underlying tension between different possible ways of reading, between serial and synchronistic timing” (2005, 58). Satrapi’s conflicting images refute the idea of a singular, correct reading. Placing the two panels alongside one another reminds the reader of the social and political realities of Marji’s adolescence: the Iran-Iraq War, the fallout of the Islamic Revolution, the West’s misremembering of Western Asian casualties, and its financial legacies in this conflict. So, unlike the Iranian soldiers, Marji is not made absent, nor is she captured or reduced to a figure of extremism or wickedness. Instead, she comes to stand for the impossibility of representation, a failure of representation that confirms the human in her precarity and complexity.

What also comes through in this scene, which Tensuan emphasizes in her reading of Satrapi’s memoir (2006, 957), is an amalgam of European and US influence. Throughout Persepolis 1 and 2, Western cultural icons appear and, for Marji, offer a form of rebellion. Her parents smuggle Iron Maiden and Kim Wilde posters for her from Turkey. She purchases cassette tapes of Western artists on the illegal market. And she adopts the dress of Westerners; ignoring hijab policies, she wears denim jackets, Nike sneakers, and slim-fitting jeans. In the party illustration, she is wearing a chain-and-nail necklace and torn clothing in the fashion of the late-1970s punk scenes in New York City and London. But this act of teenage rebellion is less straightforward when set alongside an image of a minefield bombing that implicates the US and Britain. At the same time that Satrapi condemns the censoring of Western culture in Iran under Khomeini, there are undertones of cultural imperialism in her representation of the War and in Marji’s deference to Western pop culture. In this light, the panels of the minefield and the teenage party begin to reflect one another’s critical projects, one pointing to political coercion and one to cultural consent.
Yet, outside of the clothing and music that she collects and admires, the Marji of 1982 is not aware of the West’s role in Iran. There is a sharp contrast between the past self of the images and the present self of the captions and design of Persepolis, what Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri refer to as the “experiencing-I” and the “narrating-I” of the autographic (2011, 338-39). As such, the narrating-I comes to reenact and adjust for the scenario of the experiencing-I. Whereas the images of distant minefield killings and of teenagers dancing do not alone represent something unusual or unfamiliar, the images together and the captions connecting them alter and change both scenarios, necessitating further consideration.

Just prior to the minefield image, Marji learns that the Iranian forces are recruiting her family’s maid’s son with the promise of paradise. On the other hand, she learns that her wealthier friends, with whom she is dancing, are not targets for recruiters. With this in mind, the images of the minefield explosion and the dancing come to emphasize an imbalance in the Iranian social structure. Some sacrifice and others benefit from this same sacrifice. Some fight in a war against troops with Western funding and others take pleasure in Western cultural icons. Satrapi recruits the tensions of the form and the “suspension of judgment . . . they demand from readers” (Hatfield 2005, 36) to underscore the complexity of Marji’s situation as it intersects with that of Iran. So what at first appears to be a pair of disparate images comes to implicate the Western reader on more than a single plane. The narrating-I reenacts this historical scenario, destabilizes its telling, and thus obligates the reader to reassess her position in relation to Marji’s and Iran’s histories.

Yet the reenactment of a historical scenario does not end, and Satrapi herself continues to rework and amend the scenarios of her personal and national histories throughout Persepolis. Whereas the minefield image in Persepolis mimes the Western media representation (or lack thereof) of Western Asian casualties, Persepolis 2 returns to this scenario, introducing a face, in her childhood friend Kia, and her father’s oppositional account of the Iran-Iraq War. After attending high school in Vienna from 1984 to 1988, Marji returns to Iran to find her birthplace in shambles. Buildings are bombed out. All of the streets are renamed after dead soldiers or “martyrs,” as the state calls them. Slogans of the Islamic Republic litter billboards and the walls of buildings. And her parents, idealists prior to the war, are disillusioned about the state of Iran.

In Vienna, Marji ignored the turmoil back home. The Austrian press did not report on it, and she was more focused on dating and socializing. In this, Marji represents the West’s disregard for Western Asia. Her Western friends know little about Iran or the region, other than their general opinion of it as, according to Marji, “the epitome of evil” (2004b, 41). But her father and Kia, a soldier in the Iranian forces, correct for this distance upon her return. Her father relates his understanding as a witness of the conflict, telling Marji, “This entire war was just a big setup to destroy both the Iranian and the Iraqi armies . . . The west sold weapons to both camps and we, we were stupid enough to enter into this cynical game. . . . So now the state names streets after martyrs to flatter the families
of the victims” (99). Although her father is shocked to learn that Marji had not heard of this, or the 1988 bombings of Tehran, or the Republic’s execution of tens of thousands of political prisoners, it is apparent to a Western audience that there is nothing unusual about it. Neither the Islamic Republic nor the United States wants this account in print, and there are abundant media and personal distractions, as Marji’s time in Europe demonstrates.

What Marji’s father’s account (and, in recording it, Persepolis) offers is a historical reenactment of a familiar scenario. His counter-historical account of the Iran-Iraq War compels the reader to reconsider the earlier panel of faceless Iranian teenagers caught in the blast of a landmine, Marji’s inattention to the turmoil in her home nation in the preceding chapters, and the media representations of Western Asia one does (or does not) encounter in the West. As Satrapi insists in her introduction, “One can forgive but one should never forget” (2003, ii). It is this memory-work that her autographic carries out, a perpetual process of remembrance in which historical scenarios are and must be sites of endless reenactments and debate, what Chute calls the “productive recursivity” of comics (2010, 8). Again, although Persepolis appears linear in arrangement, in part due to its initial serialization, its telling is in fact one of reiteration, encouraging the reader to return to preceding and succeeding panels.

Satrapi enacts the scenario of the Iran-Iraq War once more in Persepolis 2, instilling an ethical appeal in its telling through the introduction of Kia. Upon returning to Iran in 1988, Marji learns that her childhood friend Kia is, according to her grandmother, “almost dead” (2004b, 106). Kia had attempted to flee Iran at the outset of the war in order to escape conscription, but he was arrested and sent to the frontline. It becomes apparent, then, that Kia was among the faceless Iranians caught in the earlier image of a minefield detonation, or one of thousands just like it.

When Marji visits Kia, she finds that he has lost an arm and a leg. At first she is horrified and unable to get comfortable around him. As she takes account of his injuries, the panels jump in focus from his arm to his wheelchair to his face, representing Marji’s initial discomfort and struggle to reconcile Kia’s disabilities (the result of a war her father calls a “big setup”). It is a moment of self-reflection. Satrapi represents her past self’s neglect of the political realities of Iran and at the same time points to the process through which Marji comes to terms with this neglect. As the panels leap from detail to detail before centering on Kia in full, the formal structure enacts Marji’s piecing together of the intersecting pasts of her nation and her friend, a merging of the historical and the personal. In the Western media, as in Satrapi’s aping minefield image, Kia would appear only in the euphemisms of the national press, as ‘collateral damage.’ But in Persepolis, Satrapi emphasizes Kia’s life as eluding capture or summation and, like Iran’s past, incommensurable but still there. In Kia, Satrapi offers a final, personal reenactment of the initial, banal minefield scenario, further destabilizing Marji’s (and the reader’s) understanding of Iran’s past and compelling her to reassess her relationship to this Western discourse of capture and erasure.
So *Persepolis* does more than supplant Western representations of Iranians with more humanizing ones. Specifically, the autographic marks the limits of representation and denaturalizes the frames through which the reader understands the subject at hand. Not long after returning to Iran, Marji takes the national exam in order to enter college. The exam for the college of art includes a drawing component. Anticipating the subject as “the martyrs,” Marji prepares a sketch beforehand. “I practiced by copying a photo of Michelangelo’s ‘La Pietà’ about twenty-five times,” she recalls. “On that day I reproduced it by putting a black chador on Mary’s head, an army uniform on Jesus, and then I added two tulips, symbols of the martyrs, on either side so there would be no confusion” (2004b, 127). In the corner of a panel in which the drawing is reproduced, Marji’s hand appears, shading in the bottom of Mary’s chador (see fig. 3). The panel speaks to the coercion of cultural producers in Iran at the same time that it corrects for homogenizing Western assumptions about Iranians. Embedded in the larger

![Image](image-url)

*It’s said that red tulips grow from the blood of martyrs.*

Figure 3. From *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Anjali Singh. Translation copyright © 2004 by L'Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.
project of Satrapi’s émigré graphic memoir, the panel underscores the limitations of what Marji is able to represent. Whereas Satrapi, the narrating-I, offers a candid and critical account of Iran and Marji’s childhood in *Persepolis*, Marji, the experiencing-I, must work with a far more restricted set of icons and themes on the national exam. The capture of the sketch—the clear and ideological meaning of it—comes in stark contrast to the precarity of Marji’s childhood. Yet the coercion of the Iranian Islamic Republic also modifies the US media’s comprehension of Iran through its cultural products. Denaturalizing the production of a religious icon as coerced rejects assumptions of a homogenous Iranian subjecthood and thus gestures to the complex personhood of the so-called other. The iconic solidarity of the image, “over-determined by the fact of [its] coexistence in *praesentia*” with the rest of the autographic (Groensteen 2007, 18), emphasizes the potential for more than a single reading. The form thus destabilizes practices of signification and refuses representational capture.

Whereas the clichéd representation of a dead Iranian soldier, as a religious-national sacrifice for the good of Iran, communicates erasure-through-capture, the materialization of Marji’s hand signals her precariousness and opens up a space of ethical engagement. Watson notes that the positioning of the reader as the experiencing-I of the autographic can “induce readers to engage with ‘othering’ practices” (2008, 53). The panel does not altogether absorb the reader into the mind of the narrator, as McCloud suggests (1994, 36). But it does urge the reader to consider the construction of self-other relations from a different angle. With the hand emerging from the margin, the panel communicates the proximity, though not identicalness, of the other. The relation between reader and experiencing-I is, then, one of tension—a tension between sameness and radical difference, between a desire to kill and a prohibition against killing. From this is produced an excess of sociality, and it is this excess that is the realm of the ethical. Hence, what Chute calls the “excess of representation” of the autographic (2010, 9) is exactly that which generates its ethical appeal, its graphic ethics. The other is present, is *there*, but is not altogether comprehensible. She possesses a complexity that escapes representation.

Marji’s drawing presents still another moment of once-againness. Earlier, upon returning from Vienna, Marji finds Tehran plastered with public memorials honoring dead soldiers. Walking the streets, she sees one mural of a dead soldier in the lap of a woman in a chador (2004b, 96). Tulips fill the blank spaces around them. Her national exam drawing thus reactivates and revises this earlier moment. Marji (and the reader) learn just how such murals come to be: through the restrictions of the state that determine representational bounds. So Satrapi rearticulates this image through its reenactment as a scenario in which “viewers need to deal with the embodiment of the social actors” (Taylor 2003, 29). Through Marji’s account, her embodiment as the experiencing-I, the reader cannot ignore, as Taylor puts it, “the social construction of bodies” (29). Just like the bodies of the dead soldiers, Marji is made to mean something specific, to be comprehensible, in the imaginations of Europe and the United States. But
in returning again and again to the site of construction itself, Satrapi is able to
denaturalize the process by which Iranians are effaced through practices of cap-
ture and erasure. In particular, she reminds us that as an Iranian woman she is
not a fearful, helpless “black bird.” She reminds us “that even those called ‘Other’
are never never that” (Gordon 1997, 4).

CONCLUSION: NATIONAL FRAMES AND THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION

On the afternoon of January 11, 2012, in northern Tehran, a man on a motor-
bike fixed a bomb to the car of Iranian scientist Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan. It
detonated moments later, killing Roshan, demolishing his car, and causing chaos
amid Tehran’s rush-hour traffic. Roshan was a department supervisor at the
Natanz Nuclear Facility, a site the UN suspects of being a center for the produc-
tion of nuclear weapons (Cowell & Gladstone 2012). Hours after Roshan’s death,
Iranian officials accused the United States and Israel of organizing the assassina-
tion, an accusation both nations refuted. Still, regardless of the assassin’s purpose
and affiliation, the attack added to ongoing tensions surrounding Iran’s nuclear
program and further promoted anti-US sentiment in Tehran (Gladstone 2012).

Although the Obama administration condemned the killing, a number of US
public figures and publications did little to suppress their glee. Then-presidential
candidate Rick Santorum, for one, referred to Roshan’s assassination as a “won-
derful thing” (“Rick Santorum: US Wrong to Condemn” 2012). The New York
Post proclaimed, “whoever’s behind it, we certainly hope they keep it up” (“Bomb,
Bomb Iran” 2012). What is at issue, then, is not just Roshan’s assassination but
also the political positioning of his assassination as a righteous act, as a means of
rationalizing future imperialist acts of aggression in Western Asia. Although it is
not apparent in most Western media representations of the region, in the end, it
is Iranians like Kia and Marji who are lost in the aftermath of this righteousness
as the ‘collateral damage.’

Thus, as the US’s relationships in Tehran deteriorate and as USA PATRIOT
Act policies continue to construct and reinforce self-other boundaries, it is cru-
ial that we attend to what media enable (or fail to enable) an ethical response
to those cast as other in the present national discourse. When is representation
commensurable and complete, situating the other as no more than a stand-
in for abstract concepts (in Satrapi’s words, “fundamentalism, fanaticism, and
terrorism”)? When is it absent? Who is forgotten and to what ends? The au-
tographic, I have argued, facilitates an ethical response because it encourages
this questioning; it challenges our assumptions about otherness and about
representational practices in general. When Satrapi reminds us that “the axis
of evil also included people like myself” (2005), she alludes to the danger of
making someone comprehensible. When one is cast as a ‘content,’ as contain-
able according to this or that schema, complexity is obscured and the potential
for an ethical encounter is inhibited. So the autographic does not just offer a
more accurate historical account. Instead, it interrogates the limits of what can
and should be understood—and the pernicious effects of an unbending desire for comprehension. The human, Butler suggests, is neither represented nor unrepresentable: “it is, rather, that which limits the success of any representational practice” (2004, 144). Ethical representation must seek but fail to represent the human, and it must show this failure. The autographic form lends itself to this ethical work. It communicates through what Levinas calls the face of the other, encircling but not capturing the human. Whereas national frames often restrict ethical relations, differentiating the human national from the inhuman or absent non-national, autographics denaturalize this representational practice and press us to recognize the precariousness and complex personhood of someone made unfamiliar. Graphic ethics urge the reader to do more than see herself in or as the other. To act ethically is to first recognize that the other is neither oneself nor a figuration but an incomprehensible and precarious life; it is to recognize the other “as living, exposed to non-life from the start” (Butler 2009, 15).

NOTES
1 Charles Hatfield indicates that the “tensions” of comics demand that the reader reimagine herself—and, in this, what it means to be a reader—as a critical starting point for further “sociological and ideological analyses” (2005, 67).
2 In particular, Chute notes that comics recruit more than a single code “in their structural hybridity, their double (but nonsynthesized) narratives of words and images. In one frame of comics, the images and the words may mean differently, and thus the work sends out double-coded narratives or semantics” (2008a, 459). See also Chaney (2011, 25), Davis (2005, 264–65), Hatfield (2005, 36), Tensuan (2006, 951), and Whitlock (2006, 976–77).
3 Thierry Groensteen also sees the image as the dominant code of comics. “Its predominance within the system,” he argues, “attaches to what is essential to the production of meaning that is made through it” (2007, 8).
4 Julia Watson notes that the multiple “splits” in the form—between word and image, the self and the social realm, the reader and the autobiographical avatar, and the two-dimensional page and three-dimensional effects—complicate and disperse, rather than close, binaries (2008, 29). Charles Hatfield points out that the numerous tensions—the sites of dissonance that demand closure—run up against one another, complicating McCloud’s “pristine categories” (2005, 44). Michael Chaney meanwhile suggests that McCloud’s assertion that closure generates a “transhistorical ‘whole’” represents an imprecise universalism (2011, 40).
5 Butler’s emphasis on representational “capture” should be underscored, as it offers a counterargument to Slavoj Žižek’s dispute with Levinasian ethics. Žižek argues that Levinas’s notion of the face signals a “gentrified” otherness that masks what he calls the “monstrous” other, the “absolute other of the Real Thing” (2005, 143–44). He suggests that the face, rather than communicating the proximity of the other, gentrifies and distances one from the “monstrosity” of the absolute other (162–63). Butler’s “two distinct forms of normative power,” capture and erasure, speak to and address this gentrification of otherness.
6 The French publisher L’Association released Persepolis in four separate volumes between 2001 and 2003. In the US, Pantheon published the first and second volumes in 2003 as

WORKS CITED


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