

7. The Politics of Space in Joe Sacco's Representations of the Appalachian Coalfields

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In *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, Joe Sacco collaborates with journalist Chris Hedges to explore and expose conditions of extreme poverty, political marginalization, and ecological destruction in communities across the United States. Hedges and Sacco describe these conditions in terms of a proliferation of “sacrifice zones.” A “sacrifice zone,” as the concept is used in the book, is an area that has been set aside as an exception to democratic expectations of economic, ecological, and social protection, generally subordinating the well-being of residents and their environment to capitalist imperatives. By making these sacrifice zones visible, Hedges and Sacco generate counter-publicity for issues that are typically set beyond the pale of political discourse or deliberation. But it is clear that the goal is not merely descriptive or an attempt at consciousness-raising for its own sake. By tracing out geographically distinct locations in which similar patterns of intolerable conditions have emerged—and by highlighting the moments of resistance within each community—Hedges and Sacco encourage a sense of solidarity among politically engaged readers, especially those who may be in structurally similar positions of economic or political marginalization. Quite explicitly, Hedges and Sacco call on the reader to act alongside the subjects represented in their account to address the underlying causes that limit access to the institutional apparatus of the state, lead to disparities in socioeconomic status and political power, and entail environmental destruction and abuses of civil liberties.

Describing these areas as *sacrifice zones* focuses their intervention on a dimension of political engagement that has long been seen as problematic: the relationships between *a territory* (or *the land*) and *a people* (or *the folk*). On the one hand, conceptualizing political action in terms of localism, bioregionalism, or nationalism has ideological, practical, and organizational functions for those opposed to currently dominant economic and political formations; on the other hand, the left is (and should be) haunted by Romantic nationalisms which strategically asserted relationships between a land and a people, but underwrote the advancement of political and economic processes that worked

against egalitarian aims.² Even so, in political struggles marked by geographically differential environmental, economic, and public health impacts, the problem of *the territory* emerges with force and cannot be ignored. Departing from this observation that the “sacrifice zone” trope brings these questions of space and collective action into the foreground, this exploration seeks to translate vexing questions about the political and ethical potential of comics’ advocacy into questions about how space is constructed, performed, and complicated by Sacco’s illustrations of Central Appalachia. In brief, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* explicitly treats the impacts of the coal industry as an often unnoticed, but particularly egregious consequence of uneven development; anticipating the reading process, Sacco implicitly entangles this uneven development of space with the problematic relationship between his audience and the geographically distant subjects of his illustrations.³ The question underlying this inquiry, then, is how Sacco’s illustrations address an audience in order to generate the conditions of possibility for subsequent political action.

Though much of the analysis I perform here could be repurposed to read Hedges and Sacco’s examination of other sacrifice zones, this chapter focuses specifically on Sacco’s representations of coal mining. Given this, it will be helpful to begin with a very brief account of the contemporary political and economic developments that come to bear on the text, as the salience of Hedges and Sacco’s provocations will be much more obvious with this context. While the painful effects of poor employment prospects, the immiseration of many of the region’s residents, and the long-term environmental and public health legacy of the coal-mining industry described in Hedges and Sacco’s chapter on Appalachia will likely persist for some time, it appears that mining may cease being a profitable regional industry in the foreseeable future.⁴ This industry has defined the culture and economy of the region since before the turn of the twentieth century, but has begun to exhaust access to economically recoverable coal, with larger mines in the Powder River Basin and abroad becoming increasingly competitive suppliers for the international market.⁵ Meanwhile, domestic electricity generation has begun to shift towards natural gas as a fuel source.⁶ Consequently, the current historical conjuncture calls on both the region and the nation to answer several related questions: What kind of infrastructural, economic, environmental, and cultural residues of the formerly dominant industry will structure future developments? And, as the energy industry moves to other regions and/or fuel sources, what tactics on the ground will help constitute a new economic and cultural order? Against what new strategies of accumulation and political power will they be posed? And, how does the desire to shape a new order enact, complicate, or resist the articulations between “the people” and “the land” that emerged under the long

reign of “King Coal”? These are the kinds of questions that provide background for Hedges and Sacco's chapter on the Appalachian coal industry.

Reading Sacco's illustrations against this background, this chapter first examines how the impacts of the coal industry are deployed to frame the Appalachian landscape as a problem to be addressed through the generation of “new geographies of solidarity” which might enable collective political agency, even at a distance: the Appalachian landscape is treated not just as a site for intervention by the resisting agents introduced in the text, but as an occasion for political intervention by the distant reader.⁷ Following this examination of the Sacco's landscapes, this analysis turns to the agents that populate this terrain, examining the ways that Sacco's portraits help to generate the conditions of possibility for ethical and political engagements alongside or on the behalf of Appalachian communities. This essay unpacks the narrative techniques Sacco uses to link landscapes and their residents, making visible stories typically left at the periphery of mainstream political discourses that have accepted the logic of the “sacrifice zone.”

Sacrificial Landscapes from Above and Below

One characteristic shared by “sacrifice zones” and exemplified by the coal-mining regions of the Central Appalachian Basin is that they are constructed as “other” places. These “other” places are positioned conceptually as outside of the spatial regime of a national imaginary that ostensibly offers political protections against wholesale destruction to all within its borders. Frequently, such sacrifice zones are referred to as “internal colonies” to mark the way that they are positioned as “elsewhere” and “subject to” even as they fall within the national borders.⁸ Outside of the immediate experience of locals, such spaces are constructed in terms of an exclusion from community consensus about what locations can be considered or spoken for within political discourse. Given the way that this positions the sacrifice zone as a kind of absence within political “common sense,” it is significant that Sacco opens his contributions to the chapter on West Virginia with the comics equivalent of the establishing shot (see Figure 7.1). In this image, we view the site of an active mountaintop-removal mine alongside the gaze of Larry Gibson, a local opposed to the practice, to whom we have been introduced in Hedges's prose leading up to this illustration. Gibson's visage is provided in profile, gazing over a bluff at the manufactured landscape below, while his dog gazes across this scene of destruction at his side. On these side-by-side pages, Sacco's work illustrates the unfolding narrative provided by Hedges; indeed, the majority of the text above the illustration serves as a quasi-word balloon: it is mostly direct quo-

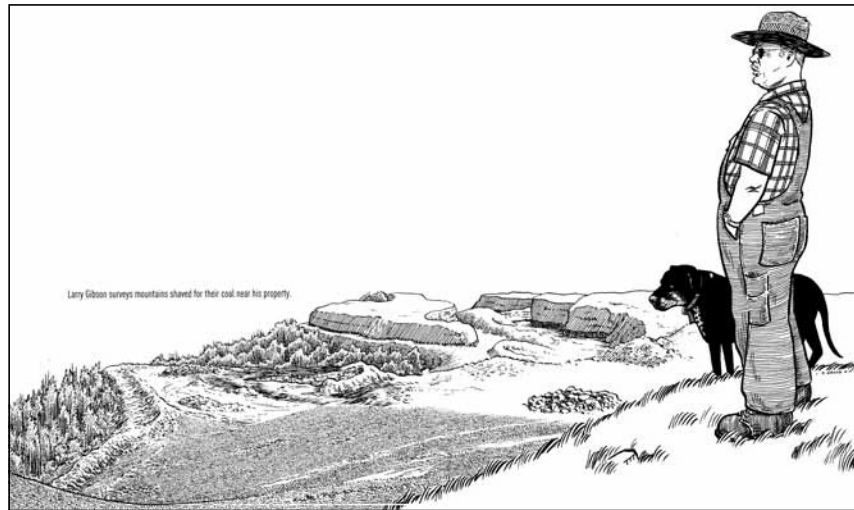


Figure 7.1. Larry Gibson surveys mountains shaved for coal near his property. Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (New York: Nation, 2012), 122–23.

tation from Gibson. In this passage, Gibson explicitly calls for revolutionary action with a paraphrase from Thomas Jefferson; while Hedges often positions himself as an advocate for nonviolent revolutionary action, here he leaves his position as a sort of lacuna within the text, allowing Gibson to speak for himself.⁹ There is something undoubtedly incongruous and unsettling about the juxtaposition of Gibson's appearance in the illustration and his call to violent action. This tension encourages a certain kind of distant or almost voyeuristic relationship to the text. Even so, as readers, we gaze across the landscape *with* Larry; though we may not agree with his prescription, our literal visual position is "at his side." As readers, we are positioned as Hedges and Sacco may have been; the presentation of Gibson's words positions us as an audience to a direct address, but in the illustration, our gaze directed outward at a devastated landscape. This juxtaposition of direct address and indirect gaze links Gibson's political call-to-action to a precise place that is already marked by a kind of violence.

Given the translation of politically charged relationships into questions about the perception of space that I am attempting to perform here, it is important to note a crucial problem with assessing scale in this illustration. Seen in-person, a mountaintop-removal site is of almost unimaginable vastness, but in this image, the sense of scale is difficult to establish. Gibson and his dog fill the foreground on the right-hand page, while the mountaintop-removal site is positioned at a considerable distance in the background on the left. The image

thus offers a reversal of a more familiar or generic way of representing distant natural spaces: photographs taken by tourists in national parks and forests. In such photographs, the gaze of the camera captures a friend or family member in profile as they stand on an overlook; such snapshots ordinarily attempt (and fail) to capture some scene of the natural sublime by positioning it at a distance as an object of contemplation and appreciation. These snapshots, as I am reading them here, are a kind of performance of the impossibility of capturing the natural sublime, constructing it as an excess that evades photographic representation. Little of the lived experience translates from the scene of photography to the photograph itself, other than the human image framed within, for which the intended subject of the photograph becomes mere background. In Sacco's illustration of Gibson at Kayford Mountain, rather than the natural sublime at the foot of a waterfall or at a mountain overlook, we are presented with a kind of capitalist sublime—an incomprehensible and almost unrepresentable destruction that seems to be the intended subject of the illustration, but which appears paradoxically primarily as a background for the human agent that appears at the image's edge. Where national parks are geographically cordoned off as special sites where those whose everyday lives are "outside" of nature can cultivate a relationship to the natural sublime, the Appalachian sacrifice zone is likewise cordoned off as "outside" of the everyday. Indeed, mountaintop-removal sites are exceedingly difficult to see, since they are typically remote and rarely visible from public roads. Gibson, then, is making visible to Sacco a relationship to the capitalist sublime that is not available within the everyday experience of most readers. In turn, Sacco is attempting to transport this relation to the capitalist sublime to his readers through the illustration. But, just as the natural sublime exceeds the technologies of representation through which tourists attempt to capture it, Sacco's illustration makes visible the way that Gibson's relationship to the capitalist sublime exceeds the limits of representation.

In the next movement of Hedges's prose, the problem of representing or even sensing the scale of these mountaintop-removal sites becomes an explicit issue. In this portion of the narrative, Hedges and Sacco fly in a small private airplane over active mountaintop-removal sites and waste ponds. In Sacco's illustration of this flyover, the breathtaking destruction is obvious (see Figure 6.3), but again, the scale is not: one of Hedges and Sacco's guides is quoted to underscore this point. Speaking about the huge dragline equipment, loaders, and dump trucks that appear like dots in this moonscape, she says: "Your eye tricks you from up here . . . Those are some of the largest machines on earth. They have twelve-foot tires."¹⁰ In an equally difficult-to-visualize passage, Hedges says that the dragline "can fill the back of a truck with sixty tons of bi-

tuminous coal rock in a few minutes.”¹¹ Hedges’s descriptions frame the scale of ecological destruction represented in Sacco’s illustrations, while implicitly linking the extreme poverty in the region to the increasing mechanization of the industry, which has in recent decades transitioned from mostly labor-intensive deep mining and small-scale surface mines towards increasingly vast mountaintop-removal mines.¹² Even so, as readers, it remains extremely difficult to imagine the relationship between sixty tons of coal and Sacco’s representations of the devastated landscapes. Rather than pointing to a shortcoming in the text however, this draws attention to the fundamental difficulties involved in making this sacrifice zone visible as a topic for debate within political discourse. Neither Hedges’s words nor Sacco’s landscape illustrations are adequate to the task.

A strong suspicion towards this kind of symbolic realism-from-above has been influential in both the visual culture and critical cultural geography literature. In Michel de Certeau’s poststructuralist account of “walking in the city,” knowledge generated by the “strategic” overhead view is associated with managerial power and its instantiation in built space, while the lived space of those whose everyday lives are thus structured is understood as the site of “tactical” resistance.¹³ Similarly, in the humanist Marxism of Henri Lefebvre, space is understood as a production of particular economic and power relations.¹⁴ For Lefebvre, like de Certeau, symbolic “spaces of representation” are associated with a managerial or instrumental production of space. Lefebvre suggests that these official “spaces of representation” tend to neglect or collapse the diversity of lived spaces and their cognitive correlates. In the visual culture literature, scholars like John Tagg have suggested that realism is fundamentally conservative, that it in some sense always serves the state or the power bloc, especially insofar as it contributes to the panoptic knowledge of a disciplinary society.¹⁵ Postmodern theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard has argued that realist aesthetics are fundamentally conservative insofar as they reproduce and normalize actuality while neglecting potentiality.¹⁶ Likewise, the aesthetics advanced by philosopher Jacques Rancière offers a strikingly suspicious account that contrasts the representative regime of art and characteristic strategies of mimesis and realism to the aesthetic regime, which enables potentially liberatory disruptions to the “distribution of the sensible.”¹⁷

But here, realism serves as a sort of revelation: West Virginia is a distant site for many of Sacco’s readers. There is little potential for mobilizing this kind of realism-from-above as a kind of managerial gaze in the service of capitalist power; instead, these moments of realism offer a necessary corrective. On the one hand, these images are an attempt to make visible conditions that are occluded from the perspective of those who consume electricity generated from

the coal mined at such sites. On the other hand, to the extent that the juxtaposition of Hedges's text and Sacco's illustrations draw attention to the failure of the representational arts in the face of the capitalist sublime, this is a realism that highlights the limited knowledge that most readers will bring to the text. Rather than a mode of conservative realism that accepts things as they are, duplicating the managerial perspective that positions the region as a "sacrifice zone," this is a realism that acknowledges its own limitations and draws attention to the politically significant gap between representation and experience. Since seeing the destruction of a mountaintop-removal site is excluded from possibility for most readers by legal and geographical mechanisms, public understanding of the relationships between economic (and geographical) privilege and cheap electrical power cannot, without such interventions as these, adequately consider mountaintop removal. As a realism that knows its own limits, it marks itself very clearly with its inadequacy in relation to what I have called the "capitalist sublime": a scale of destruction that escapes the possibilities of visual representation.

From here, however, Sacco scales down his representations to more human dimensions, symbolizing precisely the kind of anthropological perspective that de Certeau, Lefebvre, and the like suggest is flattened or occluded by a managerial realist representation "from above." In the illustration following the flyover view, Sacco shows the stakes of unsustainable industry: eventually, the coal companies will be done in the region (see Figure 6.2). According to many estimates, the coal industry will begin to exhaust economically recoverable coal within the next three decades¹⁸—and will leave behind a legacy of abandoned sites. In Figure 6.2, despite the Alpheus Preparation Plant's formerly superlative status, it is markedly dwarfed by the scale of the landscapes to which we have been just attending. We look on this facility from a dirt path or road. In the background, we see the thin coverage of grasses, scrub, and/or small trees that passes for reclamation under the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977.¹⁹ The landscape appears completely evacuated of human agents. The rendering of this evacuated space contrasts detailed and orderly crosshatching with more organic applications of curves and nearly pointillistic textures.

More than the overhead views, this rendering is in some unnerving sense aesthetically pleasing. Formally, the image fits the rule of the thirds, framing a coal elevator for maximum visual interest and balance; in the foreground, the road or path curves away out of view, establishing a strong sense of perspective. The coal facility fills the mid-ground, while the stubble-covered mountainside disappears into the distance. As I look at the image, the pleasure I feel as I gaze at Sacco's representation of this postindustrial landscape disturbs me. Many

critics following Theodore Adorno have critiqued representations of suffering and destruction in general, wondering whether the risk of extracting aesthetic pleasure from these representations poses an undue and unacceptable ethical problem; equally, by circulating these representations as commodities, this critical stance enables us to attend to the ways that such representations facilitate indirect but systematic extraction of economic value from political, economic, and social problems by creative professionals and media industries.²⁰ Despite the transformations of the comics form into a space for politically significant communication that is represented in different ways by nonfiction comics artists and contemporary adult comics fiction, the salience of this reservation here should be obvious. These images confront us with the tensions between the seduction of aesthetics, the commodification of suffering, and the desire to document and intervene in intolerable situations. The absence of human subjects in Sacco's illustration of the Alpheus plant suggests a peaceful silence that contrasts with the doubtlessly noisy atmosphere that characterized the site in operation. Those whose lives were structured by its operations, whose livelihoods depended on the industry, and who ultimately have been dislocated from the lives that unfolded here are just as absent from this image as those who live near active coal sites are from the everyday experience of using the electrical commodity.

Later, Sacco will offer illustrations of a less benign-seeming ruin: Jenkinjones, West Virginia, which is a coal town that was damaged by flooding (see Figure 6.2). Though it is not articulated explicitly within the text, these landscapes are linked through the mechanism of public policy—the flooding in Jenkinjones is far from atypical in the region and was likely exacerbated by the removal of tree cover and topsoil along creeks upstream by the coal industry.²¹ So, the scrub and grasses in the background of the Alpheus plant and the destruction in Jenkinjones are articulated together through a public policy that originally sought to mitigate the negative impacts of the coal industry, but which has proven to be an inadequate check on contemporary mining practices, has provided legal cover for malign neglect, and ultimately became an institutional site at which the logic of the “sacrifice zone” is most visible. In Jenkinjones, like Alpheus, the landscape is completely evacuated of human life but marked with the impacts of human action; again, the images are well-composed—beautiful even. And, like the illustration of the Alpheus plant, they bear immediate witness to the destructive legacy left behind when the coal industry moves on to another place.

In both the overhead landscape views and these more human-scaled representations of the postindustrial landscape, Sacco shows the way that the demands of capitalism have literally emptied the land, evacuating it of both

“natural” and “human” inhabitants. The political function of these representations is clear: a significant portion of the electricity that powers everyday technologies comes from coal, and a significant percentage of it comes from mountaintop-removal mining practices in the Appalachian region—but the violence done to the nexus of relationships between individuals, their communities, and the land on which they depend by this electrical commodity is completely occluded from the everyday perspective of the consumer. In the landscape illustrations in *Days of Destruction*, *Days of Revolt*, Sacco draws attention to some of the barriers that make this violence invisible to his often-distant audience. Again, this militates against a too-quick dismissal of realism. While it is, perhaps, an obvious observation with respect to nonfiction comics, this is a realism in which the human hand selects, frames, and decides what is before our eyes. The effect of this acknowledged subjectivity is a realism that is always “honest” and resists the temptation to present and occlude the conditions of its own production through an illusion of “transparent immediacy.”²² But, at the same time, as we move into a discussion of how Sacco positions agents within these distant landscapes, I want to underscore a synergistic relationship between the overhead and anthropological realisms Sacco has deployed here. Sacco’s illustrations implicitly acknowledge the problems involved with a representation of the capitalist sublime from above; likewise, his illustrations of a postindustrial beauty at a more human scale make visible the logic of commodity fetishism: where the fetishism of the commodity occludes the social relationships that produced the landscape and sustained the industry, Sacco’s illustration of postindustrial beauty shows these landscapes evacuated of the agents whose actions shaped them.²³

Faces at a Distance

As the preceding analysis has suggested, Sacco’s illustrated landscapes may be read as an attempt to make visible conditions that are not simply outside the experience of his readers, but at the edge of representability. In this section, I will argue that Sacco’s narrative portraiture establishes relationships with the residents of the region that take a comparable logical form. These portraits make visible agents and social relations that are occluded in the networks of exchange associated with coal and coal-generated electricity, while creating conditions that could enable feelings of solidarity. Simultaneously, these portraits mark the limits to this visibility by drawing our attention to particularities that exceed the limits of representation and call for a politics that acknowledges fundamental differences between the Self and the Other.

In the “Days of Devastation” chapter, the empty landscapes previously ana-

lyzed are matched with a number of highly personal portraits; in addition to Larry Gibson, these portraits offer glimpses of the faces of an ex-miner named Rudy Kelly, whose employment has afflicted him with black lung, three young men whose health and livelihoods have been adversely impacted by the ecological and economic impacts of the industry, and some older women who confronted the negative impacts of a coal facility on their small town. Here, I want to focus on just one portrait: that of Rudy Kelly, the ex-coal miner whose life provides the subject matter of an extended conventional comic narrative at the heart of this chapter.²⁴ His story personalizes and dramatizes the narrative of twentieth-century transitions in the political economy of coal and will be the focus of the next section; here, however, I want to focus strictly on the portrait that offers a sort of prelude to this narrative as a way to theorize the political possibilities opened by what I will call “faciality at a distance.”

In one of the most striking and now-familiar passages in *Understanding Comics*, artist Scott McCloud suggests that the iconicity of the comic face is a kind of invitation for readerly identification; that is, he posits a positive relationship between the level of “cartoonishness” of the comic face and the availability of this illustration for identification.²⁵ This reading of the iconic or cartoonish face doubtlessly makes sense in many circumstances, but as a frame for reading Rudy Kelly’s portrait, it may deserve some examination and qualification. First, as Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Life*, the condition of possibility for identification is non-identity: the aim of identification “is accomplished only by reintroducing the difference it claims to have vanquished.”²⁶ So, while the relationship of iconicity and identification may, at times, operate as McCloud suggests, a critical analysis of this identification should highlight the resistance put up by the illustrated image. Obviously, all illustrations will be selective about what they represent and will provide a particular perspective on a scene that is both less dynamic and less detailed than the image that might have presented itself to the artist’s eye or imagination. Though Sacco’s modulations of detail and rendering style may, at times, function as a rhetorical strategy for making characters more or less available for identification, let us identify the limit cases for McCloud’s account before we apply it blindly. Limit cases like a sketch of a smiley face, to cite McCloud’s example, and a photo-realist illustration fail to fully demonstrate the limits of readerly identification and disidentification: as Judith Butler, Susie Linfield, and Ariella Azoulay have observed, even the photograph can, under some circumstances, be made available for readerly identification.²⁷ Quite simply, discerning the conditions under which McCloud’s hypothesis might be applied to Sacco’s portrait of Rudy Kelly requires that we first acknowledge that there are other aesthetic choices that shape the possibility of readerly identification.

As a phenomenon that problematizes McCloud's simple frame, we might consider the role of essentializing iconic caricature in visual rhetoric intended to "other" the subject, to render the subject as more animal, less human, physiologically retrograde, or in some other way beyond the pale of readerly identification. Given the long history of racist stereotyping in comics genres, this seems to be a crucial observation to make. Caricature may be a simple and obvious counter-example to simplistic applications of McCloud's hypothesis, but I want to use it to stage a more nuanced critique of his claims. Sacco's earlier works on Bosnia and Palestine provide many sophisticated examples of a dimension of identification not marked so much by extent as by quality.²⁸ In these comics, Sacco often positioned a representation of himself within the unfolding narrative as a somewhat more cartoonish "subject" whose rendering contrasted with a more realistic or "objective" landscape and relatively more realistic secondary characters. This artist-character gives visibility to Sacco's role as the artist, determining the principles of selection and the patterns of inclusion and exclusion in both the visual frames and their textual inscriptions. It is Sacco-the-artist whose representational choices articulate the narratives he chooses to tell using a visual rhetoric that innovates on familiar norms from other comics. Given this shaping hand, the presence of a cartoonish illustration of Sacco within many of the frames contributes to a sense of identification with not just the Sacco-the-illustration, but with Sacco-the-artist's gaze. Interestingly, Sacco often used this cartoonish artist-within-the-narrative (that is, Sacco-the-illustration) to encourage a sense of critical distance at the same time that it encouraged identification: the ethical, empathetic, and political limitations of Sacco's privileged subject position in relation to the unfolding stories were often quite intentionally foregrounded. As Butler observed, identification presupposes a lack of identity—that with which we identify puts up a resistance. By creating this critical distance, Sacco encourages the reader to take a reflexive relationship to the narrative, to consider her own position of privilege, and her own role as a spectator in relation to subjects represented. Importantly, Sacco often undermined the strict relationship of cartoonish subject (e.g., Sacco-the-illustration) and realistic object (e.g., the characters and landscapes with whom Sacco interacted in the course of the research) by simultaneously modulating the cartoonishness of these other characters, informants, and sources. This tended to grant these characters varying degrees of unique subjectivity within the narrative space—a subjectivity that was at times inflected with particularity and specificity through "realistic" representations of the face, while it was at other times inflected with the weight of cultural ideology through more "stereotypical" or iconic representations. What this demonstrates is that we should not take on board a too-easy understanding

of identification, as tempting as this might be as we try to establish portraiture in *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* as an aesthetic intervention that could condition the possibilities for political intervention.

In *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, Sacco's visage is absent. For Sacco's longtime readers, this absence is conspicuous. And though each of the portraits in the book might stand in for a "type," it is difficult to identify the kinds of over-the-top subjective renderings we can see, for instance, in some of Sacco's early drawings of IDF soldiers or residents of occupied Palestine.²⁹ In *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, we are faced with relatively realistic portraits that bear witness to the uniqueness and particularity of the characters they represent: their suffering, their struggles, their movements through the landscape. Often, these characters speak directly to us—we are positioned as the audience of their stories. Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* deploys Emmanuel Levinas to examine the problem of representing the faces of suffering and oppression. In the image of such a face, Butler argues, we see the irreducible otherness of the represented subject; we recognize him as a subject. According to Butler, this image calls on us to imagine ourselves from the perspective of this other subject, whose position is fundamentally different than ours and whose experience we understand to be profoundly incommensurable with our own: paradoxically, the face of the Other allows us to see ourselves as subjects. The difference and incommensurability between the Self and the Other then calls into question the narcissistic action of the Self's gaze. In Butler's reading of Levinas, this "resistance" posed by the face of the Other provides the foundations for a relationship characterized by something that I will provisionally call here "justice": an engagement that exceeds the regimes of representation and discourse, which positions the other as an Other. This, in turn, places the Self in a relation to the particularity of the Other that calls for a human response that appreciates, rather than flattens, difference.³⁰ For Butler, representations of the Other's suffering can thus reveal the "precarious life" that we share—which, in turn, can provide the precondition for political action on the behalf of the Other.³¹ So, returning to *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*: when we look on the face of Rudy Kelly, his image calls on us to see the unbridgeable gap between us and him. We are asked to identify with Sacco's eye and Sacco's imagination. In this way, Sacco's illustration calls on us to appreciate not just Kelly's historicity, but also a unique subjectivity that is incommensurable with our own.

Without embracing the ontological and metaphysical claims that subtend Levinas's account, I think Butler's deployment of his philosophy with respect to representations of the face helps us articulate the political possibilities latent in Sacco's portraits. On the one hand, McCloud is undoubtedly right that the

iconicity of illustrated faces can, under some conditions, contribute to a visual rhetoric that makes a character more available for readerly identification; this iconicity may even set the conditions for a certain kind of relation of solidarity across difference on the basis of a shared experience of humanity. But, on the other hand, the realism of Sacco's rendering of Rudy Kelly resists a simple narcissistic identification, positions Kelly as a subject, and provides grounds for a politics attentive to difference. Much of post-Enlightenment political theory is predicated on an ideal of public, rational debate grounded in a consensus about what counts as relevant and real.³² But the radical *difference* we can dimly perceive through our relation to Kelly's face in Sacco's portrait suggests the limits to this consensus. As agents, our lived spaces and times are profoundly disjunct from those experienced by others. Typically, we bridge these incommensurabilities by articulating lived spaces in terms of overarching representations of space. Reading the Other through these homogenizing representations of space, rather than on the basis of the way that individual experiential worlds are organized, underwrites types of violence that we take as normal or beyond notice—for instance, the setting aside of some places as sacrifice zones to national or commercial gain and some subjects as exceptions to the guarantees of fundamental political and social protections. Here, engagement with Kelly's portrait provides a precondition for calling this way of understanding space into question by putting the reader in proximity to an Other whose difference resists identification.

Institutionalized as a sacrifice zone, the Central Appalachian Basin is a site where relationships-at-a-distance are constructed, even necessary, and Sacco encourages us to call this into question. As we see in the traditional comic narrative at the core of Hedges and Sacco's chapter on Appalachia, Kelly's experiences are, indeed, quite different than the largest majority of their readers. By dramatizing Kelly's life as an Other to his audience and by positioning Kelly's life within a spatial regime that has been previously excluded from consideration by many in his audience, I want to suggest that Sacco calls on the reader to think carefully about what it means to act on the basis of solidarity-at-a-distance and on the basis of radical difference. Taken together, these themes raise important questions about what preconditions exist for making a claim of "equality" on the behalf of those who are positioned differently.

Sacco's comics and Hedges's prose seek to make the sacrifice zone of the Appalachian coalfield visible and thinkable. This makes it possible, but by no means certain, that we might make a claim for equality on the behalf of—alongside—individuals like Larry Gibson and Rudy Kelly. Such action or political speech would, of necessity, be articulated from our own positions within global and national networks of capital and state power; in agreement with

curator Ariella Azoulay, I am suggesting that we must cultivate a “civil imagination” of that which is outside of our normalized modes of representation in order to effectively take action.³³ Sacco’s self-reflexive comic realism calls on us to imagine what is beyond the frame, including the parts of the narrative that are more immediately within the spaces we experience in our everyday lives.

This essay has established the ways that Hedges and Sacco make ethical, representative, and aesthetic interventions into an unspoken consensus that the concerns of the Appalachian sacrifice zone are peripheral to the everyday operations of power and economic exchange. In doing this, my overarching project has been to trace out the ways that they attempt to construct conditions of possibility for the kind of political action they explicitly advocate towards the end of *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*. I have, I hope, done so while registering my reservations about the limits to such an analysis: it is quite impossible, I would argue, to establish the political effectiveness of a text beyond these conditions of possibility without *post hoc* contact with audiences involved in identifiably political action. That said, I have advanced three points here about *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* that I think may be generalizable to many politically engaged nonfiction comics. *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* has

1. Attempted to make visible to us places or landscapes against which our own commodity consumption does a kind of violence while drawing attention to the problems of representation that encourage us to ignore these landscapes.
2. Created the conditions of possibility for identification of common ground between the reading Self and the represented Other as a foundation for a sense of solidarity across spatial distance.
3. Generated the possibility of a richly reflexive appreciation of the incommensurable differences between the reading Self and the represented Other.

This evident contradiction between solidarity and a politics of difference, I would argue, is not the grounds for political inaction, but provides a foundation for just interventions in our own spaces on the behalf of others who are situated differently.

NOTES

1. Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (New York: Nation, 2012), xi.
2. See Roger D. Abrahams, “Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics,” *Journal of American Folklore* (1993): 3–37.

3. See Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

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