

Reading 9/11 through the Holocaust in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* and Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*

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Synopsis

This essay argues that Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* and Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of New Towers* open up new spaces for reading the trauma of 9/11 not simply as the tragic story of a single day in 2001, but as a traumatic event that shares referents with other catastrophes in history, most notably the Holocaust. Further, the author demonstrates that these works are more concerned with the politicization of 9/11 than they are with the terrorist attacks themselves.

Biography

Stella Setka is a doctoral student at Purdue University, and is currently examining the representation of Jews and the Holocaust in post-9/11 American fiction and literature. Her dissertation will explore the parallels in representation of cultural traumas by American ethnic writers, with an emphasis on Jewish American and African American fiction.

Essay

Much of the literature published in the decade following 9/11 has attempted to define, identify, or explain the terrorist figure.¹ Two notable exceptions to this rule are Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* and Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, both of which are marked by the relative absence of an external terrorist threat. In these texts, what terrorizes is not external, but is rather a threat that comes from within. These works open up new spaces for reading the trauma of 9/11 not simply as the tragic story of a single day in 2001, but as a traumatic event that shares referents with other catastrophes in history, most notably the state-sanctioned, systematic destruction of Europe's Jews. This connection becomes more apparent when we remember that the Holocaust began with the implementation of laws that denied Jews their civil liberties and human rights. Similarly, the works of both Roth and Spiegelman identify the repression of civil liberties in America following 9/11 as the source of their terror. In a sense, the authors of these works are infinitely more concerned with the politicization of 9/11 than they are with the terrorist attacks themselves.

As Margaret Scanlan notes in her essay, "Strange Times to be a Jew: Alternative History After 9/11," the patriotic narrative of the War on Terror that was constructed in

the immediate aftermath of 9/11 “overwhelmed subtler or more critical accounts of September 11,” thus potentially making it problematic for writers who, like Roth and Spiegelman, wished to explore the ramifications of mobilizing military and political forces under the banner of patriotism (503). Spiegelman himself speaks to this in his preface to his book, where he says that unlike the “distinguished newspapers and magazines” of Europe, mainstream American publications—which “had actively solicited work” from him prior to 9/11—“fled” when he sought to publish excerpts from his text. Roth, on the other hand, preempted any such expression of mainstream disapproval by publishing an essay, entitled “The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*,” in the *New York Times Book Review* just prior to his novel’s release. There, Roth describes the genesis of his novel, and explains that, contrary to the assumptions of reviewers who assert that the book was written as a critique of the Bush administration, his book was instead an “exercise in historical imagination” that asks why a Holocaust didn’t happen in American when it could have.

Most significant for my analysis is Roth’s insistence that *The Plot Against America* is not a “roman a clef to the present moment,” but a strict reconstruction of the early 1940s as they would have been with Charles Lindbergh as president. However, his conclusion that the election of George W. Bush “reaffirmed” his understanding of history as radically unpredictable seems to only reinforce the reading of this text as, if not a novel dedicated to the memory of 9/11, a novel that is instead profoundly influenced by the aftermath of the event. Roth writes within the frame of a realist narrative, but rather than directly challenging the mainstream desire for a grand narrative of 9/11, he engages in subterfuge by representing post-9/11 America as seen through the lens of the 1940s—albeit through an alternate history in which Lindbergh wins the 1940 election and fans the flames of fascism in the US.

However, it must be noted that *The Plot Against America* does not present direct one-to-one allegorical representations of present-day figures or situations. Unlike Bush, who relentlessly pursued war, Lindbergh wins the approval of America’s Greatest Generation by running on an isolationist platform and, as a result, delays America’s entry into World War II. The other under attack in the novel is not Muslim, but Jewish, and the plot against America is not a terrorist plot concocted in the Middle East, but the “infiltration of inferior blood” of war-mongering, “loudmouthed Jews” whose presumed goal is to take over the God-fearing, Christian United States (*Plot* 14). I want to emphasize that the text is not as interested in faithfully mirroring the present as it is in revealing the equally constructed and contingent nature of both history and fiction.

Roth explains in both his novel and his essay that “Turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as ‘History,’ harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time was chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic” (*Plot* 113-4). Here, Roth’s use of “terror” calls to mind Bush’s declaration of war on “terror,” and the way that the narrative of this war began with an act of storytelling that reached epic proportions leading up to the invasion of Iraq. Further, as Dan Shiffman argues, “it is hard to read Roth’s statement about the tendency to turn disaster into an epic without thinking of former President Bush, a man

Roth describes as ‘unfit to run a hardware store let alone a nation’. . . who envisioned the nation’s response to the terrorist attacks as a crusade of good against evil” (62).

I suggest that Roth’s narrative does not rewrite history simply to imagine what would have happened if America had adopted a pro-Nazi stance at the outset of WWII; indeed, revising history in this way would do little more than glorify the perceived righteousness of America’s Greatest Generation by contrast, and either be read as a nostalgic yearning for the good old days, or, worse, an implicit endorsement of America’s foreign policy post-9/11. Rather, it is in the text’s selective alteration of historical references that Roth’s critique of post-9/11 America, and in particular, the Bush Administration, is laid bare. The most notable example of Roth’s historical revisions pertains to Lindbergh’s “Who are the War Agitators?” radio speech, delivered at an America First rally in Des Moines, Iowa on September 11, 1941. In this speech, Lindbergh excoriates those who strive, “for reasons which are not American,” to influence American foreign policy (371), reminding the conscious reader of Bush’s repeated use of the term un-American to refer to those who protested the Iraq War. In Roth’s rewriting of this event, Lindbergh delivers the speech a year earlier, in 1940, as the kick-off to his presidential campaign. Roth does not note the date of the event—September 11—in the diegetic narrative, but instead relegates this fact to the extradiegetic postscript. Roth’s positioning of this date in the postscript underscores the intertextuality of the novel with both the past and the present. Indeed, the postscript’s self-declared “true chronology” prompts the reader to call into question what we can truly “know” about history, and reminds us of the way that history, like narrative itself, is constructed (363).

Further, as Hans Bertens suggests, our recognition of Roth’s manipulation of history, and “the subsequent breaking of the illusion of reality,” depends on our “familiarity with history,” which calls into question what we can really know about the present (56). By manipulating the facts, Roth reveals just how historical alternative history—the achronic—is in producing historical thinking. Drawing on the early 1940s, Roth evokes “an undercurrent of Holocaust-born terror and [the] trauma beneath it all” to provide a foundation for the “perpetual fear” that pervades both his text and the post-9/11 landscape (De Cusatis 706). In this way, Roth cleverly melds the fictional past with the present, creating an allegorical reading of the Bush Administration that challenges Republican-generated interpretations of the “facts” of 9/11 and the resulting political and military actions, all set against a backdrop that draws on our cultural knowledge of the Holocaust as a lens through which to interpret post-9/11 America. By distancing us from the present and challenging the means by which history is crafted, Roth creates a critical space from which to respond to traumas engendered by the gradual decay of civil liberties following the events of September 11.

Like *The Plot Against America*, Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* suggests that the true trauma of 9/11 is what happened in its wake. As with his earlier graphic novel *Maus*, Spiegelman’s project here is “to produce the traumatic event as an object of knowledge and to program and thus transform its readers so that they are forced to acknowledge their relationship to posttraumatic culture” (Rothberg 103). The challenge that Spiegelman undertakes in rendering the trauma of 9/11 is not simply a matter of

recounting the isolated events of that day, but rather one that requires him to confront readers with the much larger trauma inflicted on the American public by the hijacking of US international and domestic policy by the Bush Administration.

For many readers, the connection between *In the Shadow of No Towers* and *Maus* is obvious, but the fact that they make this comparison is not accidental, for it is through the conceptual lens of the Holocaust that Spiegelman initially experiences 9/11. In his introduction to the text, “The Sky is Falling!” Spiegelman himself invites the connection between these two graphic novels by explaining the relationship between the Holocaust and 9/11:

Before 9/11 my traumas were all more or less self-inflicted, but out-running the toxic cloud that had moments before been the north tower of the World Trade Center left me reeling on that faultline where World History and Personal History collide—the intersection my parents, Auschwitz survivors, had warned me about when they taught me to always keep my bags packed.

As a child of survivors and a secondary witness to their trauma, Spiegelman has been conditioned to view the world and his own life through the “conceptual screen” of that experience (Versluys 50). As a primary witness to 9/11 and its traumatic aftermath—indeed, his introduction describes not only the burning towers, whose destruction he witnessed, but the fact that the Bush Administration “immediately instrumentalized the attack for their own agenda”—Spiegelman returns to some of the visual motifs he employed in his earlier work as a means of articulating the burden of his “still-fresh wounds.” This is most notable in his inclusion of the mouse figure.

Spiegelman vividly illustrates the imbrication of his secondary Holocaust trauma with his primary 9/11 trauma on the left panel of the second full page of his manuscript. In this section, we see two hulking figures hovering menacingly over a sleeping mouse-man who is slouched over a drafting table. Featured to the right of these figures is a series of stacked boxes that, taken together, resemble a smaller replica of the tower that he witnessed crumbling. Each of the four descending boxes contains a rendering of Spiegelman, who is struggling to recognize himself in a hand mirror. The self-proclaimed “heart-broken narcissist” seems to be drowning in his unfamiliar reflection. His trauma has so disoriented him that he is no longer able to recognize himself in the context of the traumatic landscape in which he lives. Read this way, we can interpret the evolution depicted in this series of frames as resulting from the traumatic aftermath of 9/11. He is “clean-shaven” prior to 9/11, and then, paralyzed by the Bush Administration’s war-mongering appropriation of the event, grows a beard “while Afghans were shaving off theirs.” In the third box down, we see again a clean-cut Spiegelman, who confesses that he has removed his beard after receiving some “bad reviews,” likely referring to his experience of being shunned by the more prominent print media outlets for his unpatriotic views. The final box, in which Spiegelman appears with the head of a mouse, invites readers to recall his earlier work, in which the Jewish victims of Nazism are depicted as mice.

The transition between the third and final boxes is particularly significant. In the third box, Spiegelman has attempted to amend his response to traumatic events to suit prevailing social attitudes that would interpret his questioning of American geopolitical strategy as unpatriotic, an act which ultimately leaves its own little wound. Rather than curbing his anxiety, however, this act of self-censorship ultimately causes him to reassume the guise of a mouse. Just as the mouse image signifies the victimized and suffering Jews in *Maus*, in Spiegelman's more recent text it represents his sense of powerlessness in the face of forces greater than he. When asked why he reassumed the mouse mask, Spiegelman explains "I felt I'd really lost a personal sense of self in a way And there were certain sequences where that *Maus* mask was very convenient to have in place again" (Gross, "Interview"). The helplessness that Spiegelman describes here helps to explain why the central mouse figure is slumped unconsciously over his drafting table in the frame to the left of the minitower. He is overwhelmed by the ominous figures flanking him on either side: to the right is a rather feline-looking Bush pointing a pistol at a mouse-like depiction of Osama Bin Laden, who, in turn, wields a bloody scimitar. I agree with Kristiaan Versluys that the prominence of these opposing figures shows that Spiegelman is "equally terrorized by Al-Qaeda and by his own government" (2), but there is more to this image. Spiegelman's decision to render Bin Laden as a mouse-like character indicates, perhaps, that he recognizes them as victims of America's foreign policy, suggesting that terrorist enemy is ultimately a creature created by our own government. In this sense, Spiegelman's rhetorical strategy mirrors Roth's substitution of the Muslim Other with a Jewish Other.

The return of the mouse in this graphic novel represents the displaced return of history, marking the moment where the trauma of 9/11 recalls the earlier traumas represented by the "twin towers of Auschwitz and Hiroshima," from which America learned nothing and is thus destined to repeat in the course of its "same old deadly business as usual" (8). Indeed, the historical connection between Auschwitz and 9/11 is so pervasive for Spiegelman that he can literally smell it. "I remember my father trying to describe what Auschwitz smelled like," he muses. "The closest he got," Spiegelman continues, "was telling me it was . . . 'indescribable' . . . That's exactly what the air in Lower Manhattan smelled like after September 11!" For Spiegelman, the direct experience of trauma during and after 9/11 recalls the Holocaust trauma of his parents. While it is problematic to equate the smoke arising from Ground Zero with the human ash filtering down from the smokestacks of Auschwitz, the traumatic associations that Spiegelman makes indicate the potential of history to haunt us and to compound the effect of current and future traumas.

The Plot Against America and *In the Shadow of No Towers* expand our view of 9/11 as an event that, like other events in the past, has become the subject of contradictory historical narratives. Both works engage the transhistorical by merging "fact and fiction, factuality and invention, historicity and imagination" as a means of testifying to a traumatic event that recalls, for the narrators of these texts, previous historical traumas (Palacios 82). Prescriptive demands to the contrary—namely, that successful 9/11 literature should act as a site of healing and working through—seem to overlook the important function that works like *The Plot Against America* and *In the Shadow of No*

Towers serve, which is not only to testify to their readers the experience of trauma, but to resist the notion that widespread cultural traumas can be so easily resolved. For Roth and Spiegelman, the impetus to enact such swift healing makes the possibility of forgetting and repeating history all the more possible.

¹ Some notable examples of this trend include John Updike's *Terrorist*, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and Jess Walter's *The Zero*.

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