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# Graphic Self-Consciousness, Travel Narratives, and the Asian American Studies Classroom: Delisle's *Burma Chronicles* and Guibert, Lefèvre, and Lemercier's *The Photographer*

By *Monica Chiu*

As graphic narratives find solid purchase in the literary marketplace and in academia, students flock to related courses. I recently experienced this enthusiasm when I offered an upper-level Asian American graphic narratives course that filled beyond capacity, the first time this umbrella course for the field of Asian American studies had ever over enrolled in the fifteen years I had taught at my New England-based institution. In the course, students first grappled with comics terminology, introduced through Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics*. After this basic introduction to reading verbal-visual texts, we discussed those by and about Asian Americans: Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*, Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim*, Tofic El Rassi's *Arab in America*, among others. These comics rely on recognizable (stereotypical) images of Asians and Asian Americans to expose accepted types and then to subvert or dismantle them.

Students were most challenged by the autobiographical *Burma Chronicles* (2008) by Guy Delisle and *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders* (2009), an artistic collaboration among Didier Lefèvre's photographs, which served as an impetus for the text; Emmanuel Guibert's comic art; and colorist Frédéric Lermecier's book design. Delisle's and Lefèvre's travel narratives by non-Asian Americans about Southeast Asians (Burmese) and West Asians (Afghans) asked students to consider the self-representation of the comics' Canadian and French protagonists, respectively, as they navigated foreign territories. *Chronicles* records Guy's one-year stay in Burma, occurring shortly before the 2010 release of political dissident Aung San Suu Kyi, when he accompanied his wife Nadège, an administrator with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). *The Photographer* traces Lefèvre's photographic journey through his autobiographical avatar Didier, documenting an MSF trek by foot from Peshawar (Pakistan) to Zaragandara (Afghanistan), where MSF establishes a hospital and trains locals in medical procedures. The task of reading representations of Asians seemed easier, students admitted, when addressing graphic narratives by and about Asian Americans who used comics stereotypes deconstructively. Clearly derogatory

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images that the students could easily contest included those of Chin-kee from Yang's *American Born Chinese*: he has a pigtail, wears a Mao suit, mixes his l's and r's, and eats fried cat gizzards for lunch in the high school cafeteria. Such easily critiqued images are absent in Delisle's and Lefèvre's narratives. For the predominantly untraveled, non-minority students growing up and/or now living in a state that is 98% white, they found it difficult to interrogate images of Burma, about which they knew nearly nothing, or see beyond the media-created images they already possessed about Afghans, with and against those images created by the non-minority authors circulating in Asian nations of which they, too, knew little.

In her study *Beclouded Visions*, Kyo Maclear implies that images create knowledge, not vice versa. The repetition of key visual images, such as the mushroom cloud firmly associated with the atomic bombs the U.S. dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, are cemented in a nation's imaginary. That so many lives were lost in an instant bewilders the viewer of the image, who is forced "to question the very notion of imaging itself" at the same time that the image of the mushroom cloud documents the real event, over and over again, for those who were not there to witness (4). In commemorating the cataclysm through this iconic image, Maclear begs for "new ways of seeing" (6). From that stance, I asked students to consider the knowledge that is created through what Maclear would call a "moral vision" (6) about Burma and Afghanistan in *Burma Chronicles* and *The Photographer*, and subsequently, what visual iconography is repeated and reinforced. With assistance from these class discussions and through the scholarship of travel writing, I proposed that *The Photographer* produces images of Afghanistan that counter iconic post-9/11 images circulated in the West that are already familiar to my students. This is not because photographs are more authentic than drawings, as my students initially argued, but because of the book's sophisticated comics-photo juxtaposition and the protagonist's self-effacing self-representation, or his visual iconography on the page. Delisle's protagonist of *Burma Chronicles*, represented in an uncomplicated cartoon style, eventually reveals a complexity of character and nation, demonstrating that simplicity (of drawing style) is not transparency, as assumed by many of my students. By the conclusion, his iconic self-confidence – imaged by the protagonist's ever upbeat and indefatigable personality – is replaced by humility. These texts invite students to approach visual icons with new theories and fresh eyes, to re-interpret what is familiar and foreign, and to interrogate the ethics of travel writing. They consider Jared Gardner's inquiry about "whether one can deploy a racial stereotype without empowering it" (133), not necessarily by deconstructing typed Asian figures as accomplished in Yang's *American Born Chinese*, for example, but by juxtaposing the white protagonists against their non-white counterparts to ask who has power and visibility in the narrative, in which situations, and why? They interrogate what Christina Meyer calls "stereotypical encodings" of images (59) or what Derek Parker Royal would call "referential icons," suggesting that each image is freighted with meanings already appended to them by author and reader (67). Because travel narratives are frequently critiqued for their

imperializing or neo-colonizing gazes, we are compelled to additionally ask, do these texts repeat common images in our cultural, visual vocabulary or do they produce new ones and to what effect?

In their productions of the self, the actions and reactions of Delisle's and Lefèvre's (autobiographical) protagonists to non-Asian American subjects in Southeast Asia and West Asia, respectively, produce images of people (Asians) with whom they do not share racial, cultural, or national heritage. They therefore contribute to approaches to self- and other-imaging taken up in the field of Asian American visual culture whose studied mediums often include materials from popular culture, including entertainment and advertisements. Related academic projects investigate which images of Asian/Americans have been popularized and for whom. In the nineteenth century and early-twentieth century, for example, the bound-footed Chinese woman Afong Moy, the so-called Siamese twins Chang and Eng Bunker, and Japanese and Chinese acrobatic tours were spectacles that contributed to visual stereotypes – fascinating and exotic Chinese subjects – popularizing particular images of Asians. Other studies of the visual investigate the surveillance and documentation of Asian American subjects, such as Japanese American internees during World War II as projected by the War Relocation Authority or by Japanese American internees themselves; or discussions of Asian/American stereotypes in film and on stage. While this essay contributes to the wider field of Asian American popular culture, it also enriches a growing academic focus on teaching graphic narratives by and about Asian Americans.<sup>1</sup> Because visual ethnic representation in these texts can be both troublesome and innovative, they provide an excellent site from which to discuss issues with respect to the visual constructions of race and ethnicity, particularly those in which non-Asian American protagonists move from West to East.

### **Travel, Travel Literature, and Student Cognition**

Robyn Davidson defines travel literature as “a non-fiction work in which the author goes from point a to point b and tells us something about it” (3). If we accept Davidson's basic rubric, then graphic narrative travelogues both *tell* and *show* us something about an author's journey from one point to another. That both travel literature and graphic narratives have faced an uphill battle for scholarly recognition makes a study of their combination – graphic narrative travelogues – especially appealing because it revisits the many thorny questions addressed in the field of travel writing about the figure of a traveler in a land foreign to him or her. Travel writers, tourists, journalists, ethnographers, anthropologists, and photographers ask: What does the traveler risk in obtaining information for publication? What do the locals hazard by supplying it? How does intent (artistic, academic, political, media) affect the final project? How does the narrating “I” position him or herself in a foreign nation?<sup>2</sup>

The critical consensus on popular travel books such as Bill Bryson's *Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe* (1998), Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia* (1977), and Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* (1989) is that contemporary travel literature has not

completely shed what Mary Louise Pratt identifies in *Imperial Eyes* as the superior position of the Western subject over those who are culturally, racially different from that subject. Debbie Lisle concurs, arguing that current travelogues either recreate empiric thinking and colonial envisioning (3) or profess a more liberal, “emancipatory,” and “*cosmopolitan vision*” while cautioning that some such texts still carry the colonialism of their predecessors (4, 6, emphasis in original). Other scholars of travel literature remark, often with anxiety, on its growth and popularity as a genre, which is fueled by a global mobility that simultaneously propels the travel industry.<sup>3</sup> That is, literary criticism shares insights with cultural studies in tourism, led by John Urry, Jonas Larsen, and Dean MacCannell, at the same time that it makes careful distinctions between (savvy) travelers and (ugly) tourists.

That many of my students are not well traveled contributes to their assumptions and expectations of representations of the East. A handful might study for a semester abroad in predominantly English speaking nations such as England and Australia, others vacation with family in Europe, and many venture only as far as crossing the border into Canada. Those few students who study abroad in non-English speaking countries and/or in nations of non-white people are likely to have had experiences that taught them humility: unable to successfully communicate in a foreign country, unable to navigate without a bit of anxiety. Those without such exposure possess little understanding of such discomfiting self-consciousness. The introduction of graphic travel narratives into the Asian American studies classroom thus provides an opportunity to talk about the self in relation to the other that travel invites. It is not difficult for students of travel literature to understand that the cultural familiarity of a traveler’s “home” (the intimate, expected, assumed, and routine) cannot but be associatively defined against “away” (different, strange, exotic, and surprising).<sup>4</sup> The course’s featured graphic travel narratives encourage discussions about Westerners’ economic and national privileges to traverse from home to away, for work and pleasure, and invite a scrutiny of the ethics of Western travelers abroad.<sup>5</sup> Delisle’s and Lefèvre’s narratives allow students to literally *see* how travel writers gaze – through visual depiction of their facial expressions, body language, and the placement of subjects on the page – as they gaze.

### **Profiles, Styles, and the Self in *Burma Chronicles* and *The Photographer***

French Canadian author and illustrator Delisle has published four popular comics travelogues, each featuring his perky cartoon avatar Guy. *Burma Chronicles*’ pared-down signature style in blacks, grays, and sepias is the illustrative simplification of what the narrative suggests are very complicated political systems in nations where he hunkers down to work.<sup>6</sup> In *Burma Chronicles*, Guy’s wife is in the field with MSF, so Guy often parents infant Louis in conjunction with a local caregiver while continuing his cartooning career as he can. In his adopted countries of residence, he weathers constant mishaps, but always through self-directed humor, often highlighting incidents that Westerners might find ludicrous or baffling.

After a first read, students are asked to question the text through the inquiries that opened this essay, particularly: How does the narrating “I” position him or herself abroad? Throughout 263 pages, Guy’s profile is always visually central and distinctive, iconized by an exaggerated (Western) nose and a flattop haircut enhanced by a jaunty colic (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Guy’s distinctive profile. Image from *Burma Chronicles* copyright Guy Delisle, provided courtesy of Drawn & Quarterly, p. 28.

This self-representation – always central in the panel frames, always distinctive among the Burmese – replicates the power and privilege his Western, middle-class identity provides him. Guy, not Burma, is the subject of a book called *Burma Chronicles*, for Guy is the visual and literal subject of the text. It’s virtually impossible *not* to quickly locate Guy in every frame; in fact, we look for him and depend on him to narratively guide us through Burma. Meanwhile, the Burmese he meets are relatively interchangeable. Guy’s typical comportment in T-shirt and shorts suggests that he is down-to-earth – just a “guy” – so much so that sometimes, when he turns away, we glimpse his butt crack, signaling a casual disregard for how this slovenliness might be offensive; at the same time, Delisle’s conscious inclusion of the crack on this self-representative avatar renders his audience Western, appealing to those who might get the joke and actually find it funny.<sup>7</sup> This self-deprecating visual depiction works ironically.<sup>8</sup> While it may offend the Burmese, its inclusion on the page does not prompt Guy’s humiliation in the text but rather creates for the reader an image of a self-confident character: Guy, son in hand, navigates about his new neighborhood with intrepid confidence and good will. It’s not the clothes that make the man, nor how he wears them, Guy suggests, but his attitude. His confidence, however, is grounded in his privilege as a white, Western, middle-class man. He can afford, literally and figuratively, to remain nonchalant. His Canadian citizenship provides national succor; his wealth as a man married to a Western administrator in the medical field provides stability and access to good healthcare. He thinks nothing of dressing down, of being

unimpressive; he seems oblivious that his unkempt look might lead to others' poor judgment of his character. He doesn't care because he doesn't need to.

Furthermore, that Guy's profile is frequently mouthless – he observes more than he talks – proves no obstacle to readerly comprehension. We grasp an understanding of new and unusual incidents not through his explanations of Burma's culture or politics, but through Guy's demeanor, his expressive eyebrows, and his body language. In fact, the more he exudes confidence, the less he needs to say. By the fourth vignette, readers intuit his reactions, for Guy's persistence to seek out new and unusual experiences – despite their often surprisingly uncomfortable consequences – convinces students that they know Guy well. And by “knowing” Guy, they claim that they understand Burma, when, in fact, they see and accept how privilege operates without having to travel to Burma themselves.

While there are other places to look beyond Guy, his iconic image is the text's focus, his reactions the reader's barometer. These other places, I argue, cache narratives that are necessary to more fully understand Burma, assuming that Burma, not Guy, should be central to a text called *Burma Chronicles*. I visit the book's cover to illustrate how Guy's curiosity reveals more about Guy than the nation in which he temporarily lives: Guy strolls his son Louis past a brick wall whose entrance is guarded by two soldiers (Figure 2). With pleasant surprise, he hears that the compound is that of then-jailed political dissident, Aung San Suu Kyi. The wall and its guards represent Guy's fascination with forbidden zones, evident in his penchant for drawing walls and working in countries like North Korea, China, and Burma that are less accessible (metaphorically walled) nations. Guy knows that the calm outside brick edifices or locked doors often contradicts the active, inflammatory political, religious, or ethnic divisions sustaining the walls' existence. This incites his inquisitiveness. His goal, then, is to enter the compound to catch a glimpse of Suu Kyi. Guy provides some brief explanations of cultural practices and political events, as when his captions address Buddhism, Burma's bureaucracy, and censorship. However, he does not really address

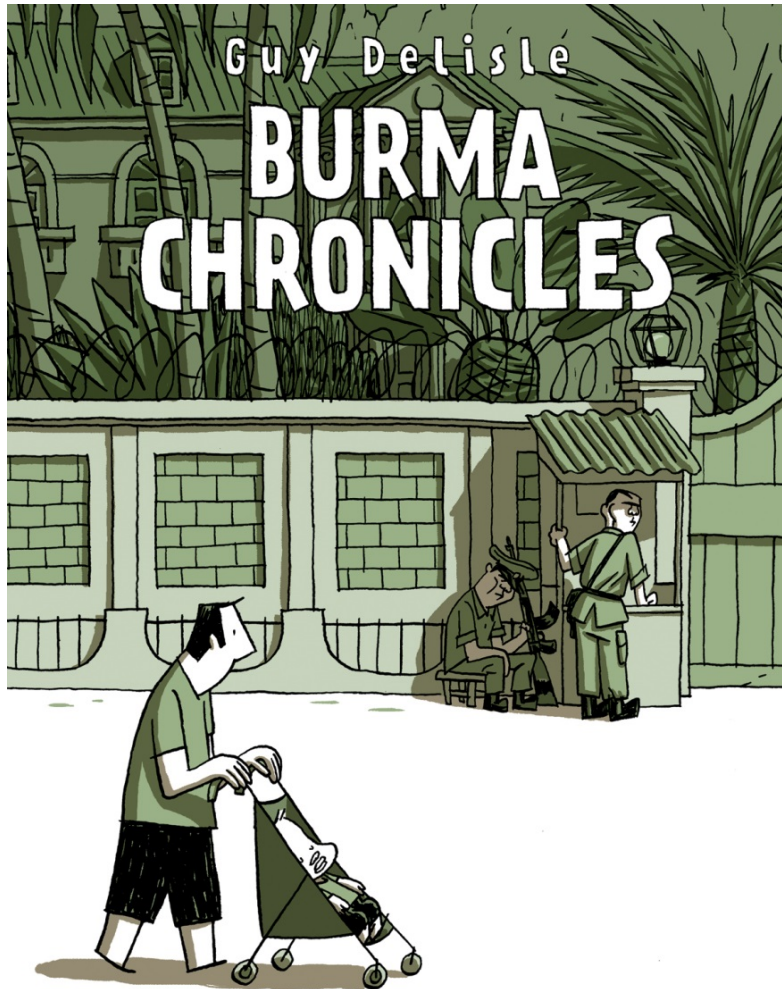


Figure 2: Guy's persistent curiosity about Aung San Suu Kyi's compound. Image from *Burma Chronicles* copyright Guy Delisle, provided courtesy of Drawn & Quarterly, cover illustration.

the global interconnections that assist in producing Burma's contemporary politics.<sup>9</sup> According to David I. Steinberg, these interconnections include British colonialism's policy of "divide and rule" (38); legacies of the East India Company (28-31); Chinese incursion at the Burma-China border during China's Cultural Revolution (48-50); disputes with Thailand and Bangladesh (20-23); French influence through Laos to the north (27); the Japanese invasion during World War II (36-37); foreign investors' greed for Burma's natural resources in the form of teak, opium, oil, and gems (6); and the 1962-1988 military coup (62-80). Guy becomes implicated in the critique of travel writers who freely cross borders, but neglect to remark how these places might be



affected by power relations (Lisle 9).<sup>10</sup> For the most part, the relations do not affect him except in prohibiting his ability to satisfy his curiosity. With no need to work outside the home, well fed and medically covered, Guy is the privileged tourist par excellence. Not surprisingly then, Guy's visual critique of Burma's present politics (he is disgruntled that he cannot access Burmese people's political hero, Aung San Suu Kyi, from his side of the wall) discounts the effects of colonial influences at the same time that his drawings make nostalgic Burma's colonial past by rendering its remnants aesthetically pleasing. Illustrations of a 1950 British Royal Enfield Bullet, a Daimler, colonial architecture, Japanese fire trucks (Figure 3), and a Japanese dental exam chair are set apart from other illustrations in their unique detail and more pronounced shading, an appealing, even softer, aesthetic difference contrasted to Delisle's starker, harsher drawings throughout (56, 122, 86, 122, 146, 230).<sup>11</sup> However, the objects remain visual reminders, without narrative explanations, of a past fraught by power relations between East and West.<sup>12</sup>

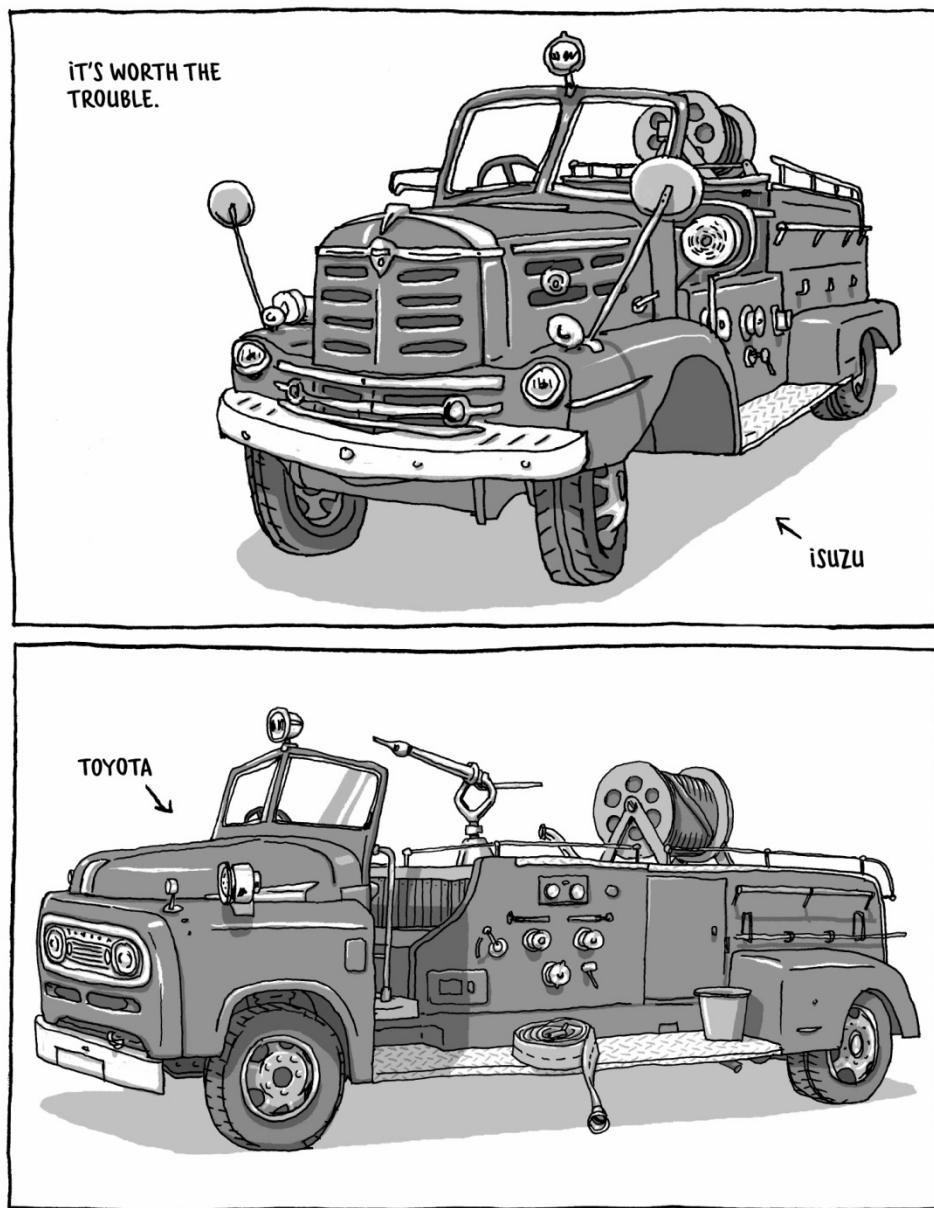


Figure 3: Remnants of Burma’s colonial influences are drawn in an aesthetic different from the rest of the book’s graphics. Image from *Burma Chronicles* copyright Guy Delisle, provided courtesy of Drawn & Quarterly, p. 146.

By design, the lighthearted *Burma Chronicles* carries none of the heft of George Packer’s *New Yorker* essay “Letters From Rangoon: Drowning” (2008) in which he enumerates Burma’s many human rights abuses.<sup>13</sup> Even if readers recognize Delisle’s intent to write a light travel account, the proliferation of such accounts for a mass reading audience produces culturally influential narratives about other places and people, the project Edward Said tackles in *Orientalism* to explain the cultural-ideological machinery behind a long-standing and devastating Western-centric literary approach to

representing, generating, and thus managing the Orient. In some cases, Guy intones, it is best not to attempt to say or explain anything at all, which is better than opening one's big mouth. In one vignette, a loquacious old woman bedridden for thirteen years following an accident speaks frankly against Burma, a brave verbal stance in a country whose repressive regime might punish such critique. "What a horrible country this is," she states, comparing the current government against "Rangoon in its golden days" (95, 96). Guy listens for a long time, duration inferred through the eight frames during which Guy sits at her bedside, glum and silent. The vignette closes with an overhead wordless shot of Guy, Maung Aye (the guard assigned to Guy's housing complex), and Louis playing ball, active bodies contrasted to the old woman's immobility. In the absence of any caption or speech balloon, the narrative's usually verbose commentator inquires through this woman what, if anything, one can say about the numerous tragedies the woman references, tragedies that illustrate by association the purportedly sad, confined lives of many Burmese.

Delisle's short vignettes, spanning an average of three pages, introduce cultural conundrums without resolving them, another example by which students can address the numerous ways in which privilege inheres in the text. The unexplained visual sketches initially are amusing to the students, but when we cannot discern their inclusion except as points of cultural bewilderment, they become disturbing. For example, when a large toad drops from Guy's living room ceiling, he calls for Maung Aye's assistance. The latter wraps the toad in a rag and dashes it – "SPLAT!" – onto the living room floor (65, Figure 4). In the scene's final frame, Guy stares open mouthed at the wet spot left by the battered toad. Why does Delisle illustrate scenes such as this, I ask my students. To what reading effect?<sup>14</sup> Is Guy's choice here and elsewhere not to explain Maung Aye's behavior a subversion of the travel literature genre, a postmodern approach in which authors do not allow "quests ... to come to a proper conclusion," as Carl Thompson argues about the playfulness and parody often used in travel writing (127)? Delisle's style assists the reader in identifying with Guy: "What would you do, dear reader?" the passage intones when the toad descends from the ceiling. Answers to such a question enable students to see how Delisle's artistic choices underwrite Guy's power over the text and within the culture he circulates. Here, Guy can depict himself as the rational subject amid the so-called irrational Burmese, for why wouldn't Maung Aye simply release the creature outside, I suggest in class. And is a typical Western approach to killing a mouse by trap – SNAP! – any more or less humorous or humane?



Figure 4: Maung Aye's method of removing a frog from the house. Image from *Burma Chronicles* copyright Guy Delisle, provided courtesy of Drawn & Quarterly, p. 65.

While *Burma Chronicles* is a Guy-centered approach to Burma, Lefèvre does not laud his own personal journey into and out of Afghanistan, but rather foregrounds MFS's humanitarian work. In *The Photographer*, photojournalist Lefèvre charts his own near-fatal journey to document MSF's medical mission, trekking by foot from Pakistan into Afghanistan with a group of doctors and nurses. The year is 1986, seven years after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the rise of local resistance movements, one headed up by Osama bin Laden, then assisted by the CIA through Pakistan's secret service (*Photographer* vii). His narrative documents simple procedures surrounding domestic injuries, such as burns from an indoor oven; bloodless ones, as when shrapnel severs a girl's spinal cord, paralyzing her from the waist down; and those that are visibly grisly, as when a semi-conscious teenager arrives by stretcher, the right, lower portion of his face missing. Lefèvre thus archives the impact of the Soviet invasion on Afghanistan's non-combat citizens – the indiscriminate horrors of war, especially those maiming innocent children – and reveals the intricacies of village rivalry and

cooperation. After returning to Paris, only six of his over 4,000 photos were published until he collaborated with Guibert and Lemerrier on *The Photographer*.

In a useful comparison to *Burma Chronicle's* visually distinct Guy, I ask students to note that Didier does not appear in his own photographs. Rather, he trains the camera's eye upon the MSF staff, its patients, caravan guides, and those on whom he depends for survival. If Guy's signature disposition in *Burma Chronicles* is a nonplussed naïvetè that assists him in navigating guilelessly about the country, Didier's is that of ignorance, a life threatening liability. While Delisle's curiosity and guilelessness often open doors (into strangers' homes, to opportunities for lecturing on cartooning, to embassy affairs), Lefèvre's naïvetè impedes his early return to Pakistan without the protection of the MSF team and its caravan guides. Character Didier learns of his own limitations and suffers from them physically years afterwards. In the introduction, translator Alexi Siegel informs readers that Lefèvre "is admittedly naïve about the geopolitical complexities that he is stumbling into," but also that "it would have taken a particularly effective crystal ball to understand the situation completely" (v). To trek across mountainous regions on foot, accompanied by local guides and their pack horses, the caravan must cross two exposed regions known to be surveilled by Soviet helicopters that shoot at anything that moves or shines, including exposed fingernails, as Didier is warned. He survives his early return, without the MSF team to guide him, only because a caravan stops to rescue him, but at a high financial and physical price.



Figure 5: Didier being pictured and taking pictures. From *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders* © 2009 by Emmanuel Guibert, p. 194. Reprinted by permission of First Second Books. All rights reserved.

Once home, Lefèvre continues to suffer from a chronic skin infection (furunculosis) that produces painful boils, contracted during his journey, and he loses fourteen teeth to the impossibility of good oral hygiene en route (262). Didier died of heart failure at the age of 40 in 2007 (262).

Didier dresses in typical Afghan clothes to guard against the “unbearably hot” midday sun (7), but while nearly indistinguishable from other similarly dressed men as such, he is the sole character with glasses (excepting occasional characters with sunglasses), rendering him as easily locatable in *The Photographer* as is Guy in *Burma Chronicles*. That none of Guibert’s other comics characters are drawn wearing them suggests that Didier – the photographer and his camera’s eye – depends upon others’ insight and foresight to navigate in the treacherous regions through which they traverse and thus to envision an Afghanistan invisible to most Westerners (Figure 5).

In routinely deflecting attention from himself, Didier documents dead or dying donkeys and horses (46, 47). He pays respect visually to these animals that assist Afghans in work and transportation. Only Buzkashi horses are treated well, he notes. The rest, though really indispensable to caravan travel, “go through martyrdom.... They’re overloaded, yanked here and there, subjected to freezing cold, and wounded by stones” (46). His photos record their sleek musculature, a tribute to their strength and beauty. Didier learns how to care for his horse and is bewildered by his own irrational behavior when ill, freezing, and left by his guides on the dangerous Koltac mountain pass, he beats the animal that has served him well out of fear over his own imminent demise (217). Later, when he must abandon the dying horse on the trail, the book offers no photographs of the perishing creature, perhaps too difficult for Didier to remember and document while his previous ocular hymn to horses captures his respect for them, his compassion and grief over their sometimes cruel and untimely deaths on the trail.

*The Photographer* is an example of how drawn (or fictionalized) images – here Guibert’s clear lines and bold colors, reminiscent of Herge’s Tin Tin series – enhance Didier’s photographs, creating an aesthetically pleasing combination. The juxtaposition of color comics against black and white photos is at first a jarring composition for students who expect mostly cartoon images in graphic narratives. Eventually, however, the narrative graphics become like the gutters: they provide narrative continuity to Lefèvre’s photographic archive, linking one set of photos to another (Figure 6). In fact,





Figure 6: Photographs juxtaposed against graphic images. From *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders* © 2009 by Emmanuel Guibert, p. 109. Reprinted by permission of First Second Books. All rights reserved.

*The Photographer's* cartoonist Guibert says himself that his comics were "to overcome the gaps between the photographs and to relate what happened when Didier .... was unable to take photographs" (quoted in Nancy Pedri n.p.).<sup>15</sup> The so-called "realist" photos cannot speak for themselves, according to Pedri, announcing the necessity for words and images to work together as "equal partners" (n.p.)

In class, we discuss how collaboration among cartoons, photographs, and print text mimics a necessary collaboration between Didier and the Afghan guides during the MSF mission. Somebody in the traveling caravan must know the route, impassable by any motorized vehicle, and he must verbally negotiate passage through territories ruled by local commanders. A knowledgeable guide will skillfully stock supplies and assist travelers in avoiding snowstorms, landmines, and arms fire from Soviet aircraft. Likewise, a collection of Didier's photographs without accompanying narration or the diegetic "glue" provided by Guibert's cartoons would be unable to successfully depict the logical diegesis of Didier's trip. Alone, ill, and prepared to die in the Kalotac pass, Didier captures the surrounding mountains' beauty, but how these landmarks function in the narrative and why their beauty is deceptive is made comprehensible only through Guibert's illustrations and narrative text boxes, arranged into a chronological, collaborative piece. Through this work, students appreciate how Didier's horrific near-death predicament brought us an Afghanistan we never see amid a Western, post-9/11 visual archive that shapes our perception of the Middle East as terrorists' territory, to which I will return in the conclusion. At one point, Didier stitches together his only pair of leather boots after enduring yet another 10,000-foot trek, stating, "It all brings home how powerless and vulnerable I am" (193). This statement, coupled with images of Afghanistan's harsh landscape, suggests the necessity of mutual cooperation, a message that is textually comprehensible only through *The Photographer's* combined artistic efforts.

### Ethics and Autobiographical Travel Writing

Lack of public interest in Lefèvre's MSF photos contrasts with the brisk sales of Delisle's comics travelogues, articulating readers' inclination toward lighter fare, a distinction I will address in *Burma Chronicles* before concluding with both narratives' weighty contributions to ethical travel writing. Because mass interest in travel writing in the twentieth century promoted works by what Thompson calls both "serious" and "hack writers" (1), the genre carried the stigma of low-brow literature until the middle of the last century when acclaimed travelogues such as Peter Matthiesen's *The Snow Leopard* (1975) or Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia* (1977), among others that Thompson lists, promoted academic interest in the field (2, 61). Thompson argues that the genre continues to "reinvent itself both in new media and in more traditional forms, so as to reflect new patterns of global travel [for pleasure, because of environmental disasters or conflict, for financial reasons], and new global concerns" (61). If we can learn much about the driving impetus behind nineteenth-century imperialists from their travelogues, Thompson declares, then contemporary travelogues, including those of the twenty-first century, certainly tell us about current "ideologies and practices" (3).

Through comics and photographs, *Burma Chronicles* and *The Photographer* visualize for students what contemporary terms like "globalization" and "internationalization" allude to in an age of leisure travel, including "adventure tourism" and "thanotourism" (visiting sites of genocide such as Phnom Penh or Dachau), according to Elizabeth Dauphinée (38).<sup>16</sup> "Being there," she argues, provides validity of the experience to one's academic department, to peers, editors, and an audience, and lends integrity and competence to the researcher (38). But because she is a North American with dual citizenship in both America and Canada, and thus also a Westerner (assuming the privileged positions of both Delisle and Lefèvre), she recognizes her numerous advantages and rights, including the privilege of money/funding to travel for research, respect from the locals for the most part, and access to people and places (38). "I have purchased the right to experience, to observe, and to witness," she says (38). And "The idea that 'everybody moves freely' in a globalized world is a fallacy ... While travel writers might be aware of these global inequalities, they are often unaware of how the act of writing about travel *itself* engenders contemporary power formations that are as unequal, unjust and exploitative as those forged during Empire" (10).<sup>17</sup> Tim Youngs argues about the traveller's power, which is vested not in his/her ability to range freely across borders, but rather "in circulating images and concepts ... descriptions in the service of the culture to which the traveller belongs," a "particular position that affects, if not determines, the view presented to us" (Hulme and Youngs 8, 9). *Burma Chronicles* and *The Photographer* participate in these endeavors at times, as argued, but my students and I were most interested in if and how travelers Guy and Didier are changed by their peregrinations; how their subjectivity is altered or remains the same after each expedition.

Joe Sacco, a comics travel writer and precursor to Delisle and Lefèvre, has received a modicum of glowing commentary. On the one hand, his work in autobiographical comics journalism exhibits the same Western neocolonialist practices



as other travel writers: he exaggerates his self-importance as a Western journalist abroad. For example, in *Safe Area Goražde* (2000), a war zone at the time, he disturbingly writes, “My colleagues and I, we were dancin’, giggly in Goražde, glorious by association” (6). Sacco exhibits self-irony, for no journalist would be dancing or giggling in a war-scape like Goražde; and their successful reporting relies on a network of collaborators to find them interviewees and safe spaces for obtaining information.<sup>18</sup> Without friends and fixers, journalists would flounder; Sacco implicitly acknowledges how others’ tragic experiences support journalists’ work, thus sharing in any accolades received abroad. He is separated from the travel writing pack critiqued by scholars because, I argue, he clarifies the many political and national forces that shape a region’s contemporary “being”: its government, its relations with other nations, its politics, its social and economic climate. His pages are dense with images of his informants as well as victims, perpetrators, innocents, criminals, many among them deceased, reminding readers of the human cost of war. His long historical prose narratives, embedded in densely drawn images, retard rapid reading, the latter perhaps once a hallmark of comics. When he informs us that the war among Serbs, Bosnians, and Croats was abetted by a lack of U.N. and international aid, Sacco intones that such a politics of war determines who receives help and when, who is a victim (of war, of the U.N.’s refusal to assist), who is a criminal, and why. The revelation of how international intervention (or lack thereof) affects civilians during war is a reminder of how countries struggle into the future under legacies of ethnic genocide, colonialism, and ongoing totalitarianism that affect a nation’s governing choices and the well-being of its citizenry. An audience must hear these legacies if it isto understand others’ attitudes and behaviors as nationals, as subjects of the travel writer’s gaze, as citizens of the global world.

In many ways, as fixers cater to Sacco, the MFS as well as Burma both cater to Guy. As the French-Canadian spouse of a French MFS doctor, the latter has access to medications not available to non-Western locals. He implicitly understands that some bodies (Western bodies) are privileged over others. After incessant badgering, for example, he finally receives Tamiflu, a vaccination against a bird virus that a World Health Organization member informs him is “mutating ... closing in [on Burma] at full speed” (147-148). Meanwhile, some luxuries are seemingly stocked for his convenience: after a week of arduous searching among local shops for a bottle of high-quality India ink for his graphic work, he buys a dusty, forgotten vial in a small stationery store. A week later, the product is surprisingly readily available at many of the establishments formerly depleted of the stock. The Westerner’s requests conclude in the East’s willingness to supply. Guy’s non-Burmese nationality is a boon, not an impediment, to his daily life in Rangoon.<sup>19</sup>

If Guy implicitly emphasizes differences between himself and the Burmese, Didier is explicitly instructed in human similarities the world over. In a conversation with Régis, an MSF physician on the same assignment, Didier announces his respect for a team that performs procedures without state-of-the art technology, often amid dust and in low light. To Didier’s admiring “It’s such a different world,” Régis responds,

“It’s the same world, though. ... The basis of medicine, whether here or in France, is always the same ... It’s the science of reading signs” (124). By teaching local Afghans to read these signs, MFS trains them as doctors. In turn, the MSF depends for survival upon the locals’ ability to read signs along the caravan trail for their mutual safe journey. Thus, jobs performed by French and Afghan, each demanding very different types of expertise, command respect. Régis tells Didier, “We’re all doing things that we weren’t trained for. Sooner or later we all have to shoulder some heavy responsibilities. That’s what binds us together” (126). But human greed (for land, power, materials) produces wars that separate through violence. If traversing Afghanistan’s mountain passes were the only impediment to international relations, some local guide would take the lead. Régis’ words ring in our ears: how can our unity bind us together?

### Moral Visions

In Maclear’s aforementioned study *Beclouded Visions*, she unites ethics, knowledge, and vision in her exploration of how visual representations of atrocities are cemented in our imaginaries through the repetition of key images. Maclear examines how visual culture shapes cultural knowledge of such traumatic events and to what ends. The oft-projected image of the mushroom cloud that has come to signify the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is itself an unreliable image because it sends contradictory messages: the eagerly anticipated end of the war and the appalling end of the world (6). Is there, then, a visual corollary to the verbal binary of travel narratives’ home/away, familiar/strange? Like Maclear’s argument, both *Burma Chronicles* and *The Photographer* send contradictory messages: a view that looks out at others while simultaneously providing an inner self-investigation, albeit arrived at late in *Burma Chronicles*. The narratives intertwine the illustrated observed with the characters’ invisible inward gaze. We might know the parameters of the former – the exotic, primitive, fascinating, odd, and mystical – but we cannot see the latter. Whether this privileges the invisible over the visible is not what we discuss in class, but rather how images “out there” in the world to be drawn and photographed are altered from “in here,” from within the authors’ interiority and made exterior, crafted into visual iconography.

Ultimately, the curious Guy is prohibited from entering Suu Kyi’s compound, so he depicts her for us as a white silhouette with no discernible facial or other features. That is, he is forbidden entry beyond the wall *especially because he is a foreigner*<sup>20</sup>; Guy suggests to Louis, “I can’t imagine they’d keep an innocent dad and his kid from going through” (32), but they do. In his rejection from this so-called inner sanctum, he turns inward, not only to his imagination (for himself and his readers, he imagines Suu Kyi as a silhouette) but also by retreating to a Buddhist monastery to meditate for three days. As argued throughout, Guy is repeatedly visually iconized and easily identified on the page as a big-nosed Westerner. Yet on the eve of his departure from Burma, Guy loses himself metaphorically at a meditation retreat in a Buddhist monastery “around the corner,” which, he finds to his surprise, “finally takes me most out of my element” (244). In this location, explicit references to his own foreignness hold gravity, not

humor. If once he imagined his French Canadian status would increase his chances of entering Suu Kyi's compound, it now dawns on him that his alienation from the Burmese as a French Canadian (with privileges and money) is a liability. In becoming uniquely self-conscious, gone are the visual markers of self-parody: sweat drops, a wry grin that earlier provided a collusive wink to the reading audience. In the monastery, he struggles with self-discipline. On the afternoon of his first day in meditation and strict silence, "i'm in a state of panic," the caption reads (250, lowercase "i" in original). Guy remarks to himself in a speech balloon, "What the hell am I doing here?" (250). Self-conscious expressions reveal a new inadequacy, or possibly humility; even though he can leave the monastery at any time, he refers to himself as a "stranded foreigner" (249); he is uncomfortable among those natives around him who know so much more about how to exist in peaceful silence, to concentrate on the body's mere mechanics of walking, to meditate motionless for hours. He nearly leaves the monastery on the second day, but persists to the third and final afternoon, when a senior monk praises his achievements at exploring his inner life over the last sixty hours. When Guy departs, he surreptitiously places a donation in the monastery box even though a nun has informed him that foreigners stay for free; direct donations are refused. Formerly exempt from many cultural customs as a foreigner in Burma, dependent on good humor and kind strangers, he suddenly feels obligated to pay his dues, so to speak.

Because his inner accomplishments are not visible to the eye – those sixty hours of inner exploration are not graphically depicted on the page – we understand that his final achievement is not that he lived in Burma, but that he has interrogated his otherness. In all seriousness, he abandons, if only at this juncture, the self-parodic Guy, the foreigner flaunting his foreignness. To acknowledge the stranger within is to "pierce the imaginary," to borrow from Dean MacCannell on ethical tourism (191). While travel writing can contribute to "homogenizing" tourist views, argue Holland and Huggan, it can ideally confront and overturn accepted notions of the other. Ideally, travel should provoke the kind of self-interrogation Guy experiences to dispel (now) conscious biases accrued about people and cultures encountered abroad (MacCannell 201). Guy seriously confronts his own foreignness in Burma, but only at this concluding juncture. Thus, it is not Suu Kyi, the secreted Nobel Prize winner, that he should find, but rather himself.

Didier, on the other hand, is turned outward and attuned to his environment from the start, his visual documentation of nearly inaccessible regions suggesting both egress and imprisonment, exemplified by his near-death experience. His camera often appreciates the vanishing point where earth meets sky at a "V," a path to pursue (beckoning) and one to fear (threatening) (Figure 7).



Figure 7: A vanishing point in the landscape. From *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders* © 2009 by Emmanuel Guibert, p. 228. Reprinted by permission of First Second Books. All rights reserved.

The invitation to see the beautiful and the caveat that insists on necessary collaboration with the locals work together to counter the overwhelmingly demonic images of Afghanistan that proliferated after 9/11. While few Westerners ever needed or desired to conjure up the country in their imagination, the 2001 terrorist attacks on American soil and the subsequent U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq relied upon a grainy image of a bearded, white-robed Osama Bin Laden as *the* defining cultural image by which we (Western teachers and students) imagined Middle Eastern men we deemed terrorists from a place to which most Americans rarely needed to pay attention. Documenting pre-9/11 events but published following the tragedy, *The Photographer* now offers a competing view and speaks to the non-Taliban humans at the heart of MSF's missions. According to Lan Dong, the text challenges her students' "preconceptions ... well beyond what the media have been reporting on: Taliban and extremists" (226). Lefèvre's focus on humanitarianism re-imagines Afghans for us – offers us a visual image other than that of Osama bin Laden – while Didier is irrevocably changed from his travels, not only and unfortunately physically, but more importantly psychically.

In the introduction to Peter Kuper's autobiographical comics *A Journal of Travels Through Africa and Southeast Asia*, the author revealingly reminds his readers that wherever you go, "you are still the same person ... no more magically enlightened in the wilds of Tanzania than you were in the wilds of Manhattan," suggesting that such enlightenment might be found instead by eating "a Magic Mushroom omelette" (n.p.). Why travel if we do not challenge our own subjectivity or change our outlook on "particular positions," to quote Youngs, that both determine how and what we see? Lefèvre's travel narrative offers students a new visual vocabulary by which to imagine Afghanistan and its people while Delisle invites us to look beyond the visual (cartoon) surface—a tribute, really, to the profoundly provocative issues that comics can foreground—to discern Guy's interior, psychological changes, albeit slow in coming, because of time spent in Burma. The narratives image for us while, from the comfort of our living room armchairs or college dorm rooms, we find ourselves "away."

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<sup>1</sup> See the section on ethnic studies in Lan Dong's collection *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives: Essays on Theory, Strategy and Practice*.

<sup>2</sup> Scholarship by Debbie Lisle and Elizabeth Dauphinée informed these inquiries.

<sup>3</sup> On the anxiety of its growth as a genre, see Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs *Travel Writing*; on how global motility fuels the travel industry, see Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan's *Tourists with Typewriters* (2).

<sup>4</sup> See Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan 5.

<sup>5</sup> According to Gillian Whitlock, globalization can be "defined relationally" (7). She critiques how contemporary life writing, under which travel writing falls, penned by authors living in the East is eventually legitimized and consumed by readers in the West through accepted "traditions of benevolence" (13). Relatedly, in her *The Ethics of Researching War*, Elizabeth Dauphinée's

reference to “researcher” easily could be replaced by “travel writer” and the term “fieldwork” by images and ideas recreated in graphic narratives like *Burma Chronicles* and *The Photographer*. She argues that “fieldwork is fundamentally implicated in representation, which is fundamentally implicated in relationships of power because it is the researcher who determines what counts in the narrative of the informant, and who interprets the objects of the gaze. The authority of the immersed researcher is necessarily achieved through the silencing or appropriation of local authority” (53).

<sup>6</sup> In *Shenzhen: A Travelogue From China* (2000), the then unmarried and childless Guy manages production in a French animation company. In *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea* (2007), Guy assists a cartoon network on an animated children’s TV. show. In his subsequent *Burma Chronicles* (2008) and *Jerusalem: Chronicles From the Holy City* (2012), Guy works on his comics while fathering full-time.

<sup>7</sup> According to Holland and Huggan, self-irony “affords a useful strategy of self-protection—as if the writer, in revealing his/her faults, might be relieved of social responsibilities” (7). They explain that travel writers “make light of their misadventures” as an alibi for “cultural gaffes” and sometimes “their arrogance” (6); they self-protect through “cool detachment” or eccentricity (7).

<sup>8</sup> For Lisle, a travel writer’s self-irony is a contemporary approach used by travel writers to render “difference ... ridiculous rather than threatening” and to emphasize “shared values” among “others” (101, 105). A writer and her readers may share a chuckle, but Lisle wonders if those who are laughed at share the same feelings, and how would we know? Thompson claims that self-parody is “a well-established rhetorical strategy” that reifies, not diminishes, a traveler’s power (179). Eric Newby’s *A Hike Through the Hindu Khush* is the humorous contrast to Lefèvre’s *The Photographer*, the former featuring the self-ironizing, Western-centric character Newby.

<sup>9</sup> In an interview in *The Daily Crosshatch*, Delisle claims “no obligation” to provide information about Burma (n.p.). While author interviews might push against travel writing critiques such as mine, the author’s graphic images, I argue, might provide contradictory readings.

<sup>10</sup> See Mia Kirshner’s *I Live Here*, “Alburma Thailand,” the collected and illustrated writings of Karen refugees, one of Burma’s many ethnic populations, living on the Thai-Burma border to escape Burmese military persecution. Refugees find work in domestic and manual labor and in the sex trade.

<sup>11</sup> I thank my undergraduates for pointing out how these detailed drawings differ from Delisle’s other drawings (English 738: Asian American Studies, spring 2013, the University of New Hampshire).

<sup>12</sup> Are these reminders “a sanctuary from contemporary ‘politically correct’ attitudes about race, gender, sexuality and class, asks Lisle, referencing Holland and Huggan’s argument about a “powerful sense of nostalgia that pervades contemporary texts” when authors “recapture the



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sense of discovery that was central to colonial travel writing by creating new and original ways to make the familiar world seem strange” (19).

<sup>13</sup> Packer mentions the military’s inhumane treatment of political detainees, the military’s killing of monks and students during the 2007 Saffron Revolution, the use of “forced child labor” to construct a new capital, and the mismanaged humanitarian crisis following the 2008 Cyclone Nargis, Burma’s worst natural disaster, after which the government refused international assistance for twelve weeks while the perishing sick, weak, and malnourished added to the already devastating victims of the storm (n.p.).

<sup>14</sup> I borrow these questions from Jessica Knight’s essay about teaching Mine Okubo’s graphic narrative *Citizen 13660* (100). She asks her students effective questions about Okubo’s use of “visual repetition” in relation to the book’s themes (101).

<sup>15</sup> According to Pedri, “Guibert’s verbal and visual graphic narrative supplements, expands upon, and ultimately adjusts all that Lefèvre said and that his photographs show” (n.p.)

<sup>16</sup> See Dean MacCannell’s chapter “Painful Memory” about touring such memorials ethically (167-181).

<sup>17</sup> Robyn Davidson concurs when she discusses “post-industrial time,” or the ability not afforded to many others in the world (she is comparing her privilege against that of Indian or aboriginal nomads) to jump into a jeep when in the bush to reach a large city and its amenities within hours (2).

<sup>18</sup> See Brigid Maher’s “Drawing Blood: Translation, Meditation and Conflict in Joe Sacco’s Comics Journalism” (121).

<sup>19</sup> Traveling without the knowledge of a nation’s language and culture is humbling, the latter suggests. But as if to distinguish between what Carl Thompson names the (prestigious) traveler and merely the tourist, Guy’s vacations to Bagan and Bangkok deploy thirteen to fifteen frames per page in contrast to his usual five to six. Between images of a plane ascending (departure) and descending (re-arrival), the wordless and numerous smaller frames document the frenzy of tourism. Once immersed in his daily, adopted life in Rangoon, Guy’s life elongates to six-panel pages to depict the slow, domestic pace of life for a family living abroad, now contrasted to the chaos of tourism.

<sup>20</sup> Day after day outside Suu Kyi’s barricaded compound, they are denied entry until a guard asks Guy if he is a foreigner. Guy responds affirmatively, hopefully. Much to his surprise, foreign status more strongly clinches the prohibition, sublimated in the armed guard’s response, “*Then you can’t pass by,*” or particularly because Guy is a foreigner, he is prohibited entry (32, emphasis added). If Guy assumes the innocence and privilege of the Westerner at the gate, Burma proves him wrong.