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Collections of “Old Comic Strips” in Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*

Nicole Stamant, Agnes Scott College

“The only cultural artifacts that could get past my defenses to flood my eyes and brain with something other than images of burning towers were old comic strips; vital, unpretentious ephemera from the optimistic dawn of the 20th century. That they were made with so much skill and verve but never intended to last past the day they appeared in the newspaper gave them poignancy; they were just right for an end-of-the-world moment.”

—Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*

ART SPIEGELMAN’S *IN THE SHADOW OF NO TOWERS* (2004), a graphic memoir of grief and mourning following the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers on September 11, 2001, chronicles the author’s actions and emotions on the day of the terrorist attacks as well as the two years that followed as he assembled the text. The book itself is huge, its cardboard pages modeled on the “giant scale of the color newsprint” sheets and the comic inserts of the early twentieth century, and he explains that the color comics inserts were “a Big Deal back then (literally as well as figuratively—a 17”x23” free insert in the nickel paper).”¹ The memoir begins, in fact, with the image of the front page of Joseph Pulitzer’s newspaper *The World* from September 11, 1901. Spiegelman starts his narrative with an introduction, titled “The Sky is Falling,” and follows it with his own ten graphic plates. These pages are to be read vertically, mimicking the size of newspapers and the pages of comic strips contained therein. After his original comics plates, Spiegelman includes a section titled “The Comic Supplement,” which gives a brief history and discussion of comic strips at the beginning of the twentieth century, and in which he expands on a few strips in particular. The strips referred to in the “Supplement” are included after their historical context, in seven separate plates. The structure of this memoir ultimately repeats itself, as Spiegelman’s own images reflect upon and are reflected by the comics collected in the second half of the memoir, thereby working as palimpsest of New York life and history.

Newspapers are a clear inspiration for Spiegelman’s text in form, structure, and in their serial production. As he points out in the introduction to *No Towers*: the “collagelike nature of a newspaper page encouraged my

impulse to juxtapose my fragmentary thoughts in different styles."² On each page, Spiegelman presents his readers with several different, self-contained original strips, and makes use of the entire frame. As comics artist and scholar Will Eisner points out, there are two different kinds of frames in comics: "the total page, on which there are any number of panels, and the panel itself, within which the narrative action unfolds."³ Spiegelman uses both kinds of frames, as his large individual comics pages contain a variety of strips and, because they are so visually complex, readers must slow down their reading process. The panels of the strips themselves vary in size, shape, and placement, further complicating the reader's progress through the narrative.⁴ The comic strips may be placed horizontally or vertically; the "headline" for each page—"In the Shadow of No Towers"—varies in location, size, and font; no direction is given to the reader about the order in which the narrative should be read. Together, the strips collected on each page represent an episode in the development of how Spiegelman reflects on and remembers both the actual destruction of the World Trade Center Towers and the cultural and political climate that followed. The episodic, newspaper-inspired format, in which different stories are told in different places on the page, emphasizes the cacophony in the wake of the terrorist attacks: on the first plate there are comics as newspaper articles which range from a strip titled "Etymological Vaudeville" to a faux-advertisement for "Jihad Brand Footware [*sic*]" which comes in "extra-large sizes only."⁵

While eschewing the traditional forms of a single comic strip and the continuous narrative of graphic memoir, Spiegelman uses graphic cohesiveness within the individual strips and the serial production of stories. For example, in the tradition of the superhero comic book, Spiegelman gives his readers an "update" on the first plate of the memoir: "In our last episode, you might remember, the world ended . . ."⁶ Here, Spiegelman relies on the reader's familiarity with conventions of comic strips and comic books as he underscores the importance of the episodic in constructing this memoir. Initially, the series of ten episodes which make up the first half of the memoir were to be published weekly, as comics in supplements were at the turn of the twentieth century; however, laments Spiegelman in the introduction, "many of the pages took me at least five weeks to complete, so I missed even my monthly deadlines."⁷ He continues: "the idea of working in single page units corresponded to my existential conviction that I might not live long enough to see them published."⁸ Serial publication, then, was a way for Spiegelman to, from the beginning, think of his project as both open-ended and repetitive, without time constraints or deadlines.⁹ This open-ended approach allowed

Spiegelman to do what Jean Baudrillard suggests one must in order to make any sense of a catastrophic event: “You have to take your time. [...] [Y]ou have to move more slowly—though without allowing yourself to be buried beneath a welter of words, or the gathering clouds of war, and preserving intact the unforgettable incandescence of the images.”¹⁰ It is this preservation of the image that Spiegelman is most concerned with in *No Towers*, as the one image that is repeated on every page, thirty-five times in ten plates, is the unforgettable image of the “glowing bones.”

The “glowing bones” of the North Tower just before its collapse is the central image in this memoir and it was a difficult one for Spiegelman to manage. He writes in the introduction that

The pivotal image from my 9/11 morning—one that didn’t get photographed or videotaped into public memory but still remains burned onto the inside of my eyelids several years later—was the image of the looming north tower’s glowing bones just before it vaporized. I repeatedly tried to paint this with humiliating results but eventually came close to capturing the vision of disintegration digitally on my computer.¹¹

The tension between needing to present the image that was the most central to his eyewitness account and how that image gets represented is significant as Spiegelman continues his narrative. Essential to this memoir, however, the image doesn’t remain static: the tower is presented in various states of collapse. It is shown from different angles and in different sizes—in the third, fourth, and sixth plates the image runs the length of the book, while in the eighth plate it is reflected in the narrator’s glasses and presented in round panels—which indicates the degree to which this image permeates and comes to define the narrator’s traumatic experience. He thereby reinforces the significance of the visual: in this plate, readers can see its searing “onto the inside of [his] eyelids” reflected in his glasses—glass which, following the disintegration of the tower, is startlingly absent in the skyline. The serial representation of this image, in its different states of collapse, is at the heart of the memoir. Foundational to seriality, Mark Seltzer points out in his work on serial killers, is the “internal competition between repetition and representation.”¹² The struggle between representation and repetition is seen frequently in *No Towers*, as Spiegelman tries to find the best way to represent both this catastrophic event and his reaction to it, particularly as it is the most important and spectacular collective traumatic event for the United States in decades, and perhaps ever.¹³ Indeed, as many scholars have argued about *No Towers*, this is also the most important traumatic event that Spiegelman has lived through himself.¹⁴

The seriality with which these images are produced and collected imitates the repetition of anxiety, of mourning, and of the trauma of September 11, 2001, both for contemporary American society in general, and for Spiegelman in particular. As Karen Espiritu argues in her essay on trauma and politics in *No Towers*, "the 'obsessive' labor involved in creating a graphic novel parallels the harrowing interminability not only of grief itself, but also of attempting to 'master' or understand—though *never completely*—a particular traumatic experience."¹⁵ That is, the act of writing and creating these pages is akin to the process of mourning, as Spiegelman must continue to go over the moments of loss and perceived political and governmental betrayal. Such a process is one Spiegelman acknowledges in the introduction, as he made a decision to "return to making comix full-time despite the fact that comix can be so damn labor intensive that one has to assume that one will live forever to make them."¹⁶ Many have pointed to the fifteen-year gap between the end of the publication of *Maus* (1986) and *Maus II* (1991) and the publication of *No Towers*, and while Spiegelman says that he "spent much of the decade before the millennium trying to avoid making comix,"¹⁷ the ability to publish *No Towers* serially gave him the opportunity to consider the pages and the events slowly and, as Baudrillard suggests, to "take [his] time."¹⁸

As Spiegelman explains in his lecture "Ephemera v. the Apocalypse," given in September of 2004, "these monthly pages ran from September '02 to September '03. Each of those pages was done like a diary entry, and the first five or six, I didn't think I would be around to see it printed. So I wasn't thinking about [writing a book], I was thinking about ephemera."¹⁹ Spiegelman's thoughts about ephemera ground the way both seriality and collection work in *No Towers*: Spiegelman collects his own previously published comic plates and also presents his readers with a collection of preserved "old comic strips," from the turn of the last century. In fact, interrogating what constitutes ephemera at this precise historical moment is one of the projects that *No Towers* undertakes. What kinds of things are meant to last? Are architectural structures, like buildings, built to stand for generations, ultimately ephemeral? What about art that is produced for a newspaper or a magazine, like those produced by Spiegelman? by early twentieth-century comics artists? The serial production of both Spiegelman's comics and the comics he collects in the supplement underscore the idea that the final product is not a given, as everything is or could be ephemeral. Thus the "fishwrap disposability of newsprint," as Spiegelman calls it in "The Comic Supplement," becomes the space in which to express his anxiety and grief.

Through the technique of palimpsest, the materiality of ephemera, and an understanding of seriality as both a mode of production and a way to represent the self and daily life, Spiegelman assembles images and artifacts into a substantial text employed in collecting and archiving memory. As Jared Gardner points out, “Comics chronicle the twilight world, the liminal space between past and present, text and image, creator and reader.”²⁰ The things that Spiegelman believes shouldn’t be ephemeral, like the towers or democracy itself, are shown in this memoir as fleeting and warped, while the things that would seem to be solely ephemera, daily comic strips or an image witnessed before the towers collapsed, may be indelible.

ARCHIVING EPHEMERA AT THE TURN OF THE 21ST CENTURY

The object of curiosity enters history [. . .] by the overdetermination introduced by the individual collector who decides to give it a narrative, which will be, to a greater or lesser extent, historically significant.

—Stephen Bann²¹

Collections often serve as extensions of the self and “the time and effort spent in assembling a collection means that the collector has literally put a part of self into the collection,”²² or, as Gardner suggests in his essay, “Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics,” “the collection [can be seen] as fundamentally an autobiographical narrative, one told by the arrangement of texts and images from the past to tell a story to the present. It is not only that the archival and the autobiographical are intimately connected in many of these works [but that] the comic form is the ideal space for precisely this kind of collaborative archival work.”²³ In *No Towers*, Spiegelman presents readers with a truly collaborative text housing two different yet parallel collections: a collection of his own ten graphic pages which represent the memoirist’s struggle after the World Trade Center attacks, and a collection of “old comic strips” which were “the only cultural artifacts that could get past [his] defenses” at that time.²⁴ This particular collection of comic strips reflects Spiegelman’s own mourning process after September 11; including old comic strips about New York City, patriotism, and the tension between high and low culture in the United States at the turn of the last century, he is able to reflect a certain historical nostalgia about New York City specifically, and about the United States more generally.

In *No Towers*, Spiegelman makes the reason he (re)turned to these comic strips from the early twentieth century clear, and presents his

readers with his collection as a reflective and reflexive form of mourning. Collections are assembled for reasons that "may range from such concrete incidents as physical hurt or emotional trauma or actual neglect to more or less tangible states of alarm and anxiety, particularly when no real help and comfort was forthcoming."²⁵ Further, as a way to express the self, collecting is an extremely personal and solitary activity, much like mourning. In the final of his own plates, the page which structures its panels in the form of the two towers and illustrates the plane crash, the explosion, and visually chronicles the disintegration of the towers, Spiegelman returns to the moment of anxiety and trauma and reconfigures it. He writes, "Right after 9/11/01, while waiting for some other terrorist shoe to drop, many found comfort in poetry. Others searched for solace in old newspaper comics."²⁶ Looking for comfort in a seemingly unlikely place, situated in palimpsest and relics, Spiegelman indicates to his readers on the last page of his plates that he physically sees himself in the towers, waiting "for the other terrorist shoe to drop."²⁷ Twinning the structure of his memoir with the two sets of comic plates—his own and those from the past—Spiegelman visually indicates the trauma and mourning that has taken place over the course of the two years it took him to complete these pages.

The collections of comics here are unusual because they are collections of ephemera, of kitsch, of episodes in larger narratives. Walter Durost, in one of the earliest studies on collecting, suggests that "a collection is basically determined by the nature of the *value* assigned to the objects, or ideas possessed. [. . .] [I]f said object or idea is valued chiefly for the relation it bears to some other object or idea, or objects, or ideas, such as being one of a series, part of a whole, a specimen of a class, then it is the subject of a collection."²⁸ This idea is reiterated by Baudrillard in "The System of Collecting," as he asserts that "any given object can have two functions: it can be utilized or it can be possessed."²⁹ Durost and Baudrillard make a clear distinction between the value of objects based on their use, but it can be difficult to ascertain how a particular collection is used. Durost and Baudrillard also emphasize the significance of seriality in collecting; the object should be part of a series or of a whole, Durost suggests, while Baudrillard writes that collecting is "a serial game,"³⁰ and Susan Stewart points out that, "the collection must be acquired in a serial manner."³¹ In her discussion of collecting postcards of Paris, Naomi Schor agrees. She poses the question, "What then defines the collection?," and answers "seriality."³² The serial production and consumption of comics in any form, then, lend themselves to being read and understood in series. Usually, however, it is the more durable comic book form that is the focus of a collection.

The archive of comic strips that makes up the second half of *No Towers* is not a traditional kind of collection, then, because it is made up of objects that were not created for durability; these comic strips were given, in Spiegelman's words "fishwrap disposability," "never intended to last past the day they appeared in the newspaper."³³ It is clear that the comic artists who penned these images worked hard to create stories and panels that, while "not penned for posterity, [. . .] were made with all the energy somebody could muster."³⁴ Collections of ephemera, suggests Stewart, "might present an aesthetic tableau" functioning as "'intrinsic objects,'" or "serve to exaggerate certain dominant features of the exchange economy: its seriality, novelty, and abstraction."³⁵ A collection of "old comic strips," to use Spiegelman's phrase, doesn't necessarily underscore the exchange economy, nor does it simply make interesting use of space. Rather, comic strips are more likely to work in the same way collections of kitsch objects would: as serving "to subjectify all of consumer culture, to institute a nostalgia of the populace which in fact makes the populace itself a kind of subject."³⁶ These relics of mass and popular culture are treated differently than other kinds of objects because of the fact that they are considered a "low" art. In fact, Pulitzer had intended for the *New York World's* readers to see full-color reproductions of high art—of the masterpieces of visual art and sculpture—and created a color newspaper press specifically for this purpose. But, Spiegelman writes in the "Comic Supplement" to *No Towers*, "the garish and off-register results weren't up to the task" of reproducing the great masterpieces of world art and "in 1893, the first Sunday color cartoon supplement entered the world and elbowed out the High Art planned for the masses."³⁷ Instead, Pulitzer printed comic supplements that were meant to entertain mass society; in many of the strips, like "Bringing Up Father," "Gasoline Alley," or "Happy Hooligan," ordinary people were the focus of the narrative.

For Stewart, then, kitsch objects or ephemera are not understood "on the level of the individual autobiography; rather, they are apprehended on the level of collective identity. They are souvenirs of an era and not of a self."³⁸ Spiegelman's collection of comic strips in *No Towers*, however, challenges the opposition in Stewart's statement: his collection works on both the level of individual autobiography and on the level of collective identity, as his memoir is located on the "faultline" between world history and personal history. The comic supplements are undoubtedly souvenirs of an era, as they represent a unique historical perspective about New York City and about the United States. And yet, Spiegelman incorporates these strips into his own self-referential narrative in order to illustrate how he found solace after the terrorist attacks; the construction of his ten plates reflect, and are reflected in, the century-old comics.

Each item in a collection has a particular and significant meaning for its owner, and when a collection is archived or displayed for readers/viewers, the relationship between the pieces must be evident. The collected items must be in clear conversation with the other objects within the collection, for, as Walter Benjamin suggests, as the collector engages with the items "he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past, inspired."³⁹ It is this past-ness of the comic strips that give them the power to "get past [Spiegelman's] defenses," ultimately inspiring the foundation for *No Towers* itself. This section begins, as the first half of the memoir does, with an introduction to the plates, titled "The Comic Supplement." One way to read it would be that Spiegelman offers these "old comic strips" as a supplement to his first ten plates, although it could be argued that his plates are the chronological supplement to the older strips. Nevertheless, both "The Comic Supplement" and the collection of comics it precedes are vital to a more complete understanding of Spiegelman's original pages.

In "The Comic Supplement," Spiegelman offers his readers an historical perspective on the comics presented in the collection. This history is given from Spiegelman's contemporary point of view, as he discusses the history of the production of comics in New York City. Chronicling the rise of Pulitzer and Hearst's Yellow Journalism, for example, Spiegelman remarks that "[t]heir distorted reporting of the Spanish-American War [. . .] would have made Fox News proud."⁴⁰ Examining his collection through a post-September 11, 2001, Manhattan perspective, it is clear that each comic strip in the seven-strip archive has been selected in order to give readers the kind of lens through which Spiegelman himself looks at these comic strips. As he discusses the history and tradition of comic strips, he alludes to a particular one and discusses it in depth. This technique allows his reader to read the history without simultaneously being presented with the comic itself. While Spiegelman does indicate to which panel he refers, he gives his readers the option to examine the strip during a reading of the introduction, or later. In providing a narrative of his collection, extremely helpful to those readers who lack an historical background of the tradition of comics, Spiegelman also provides his readers with the collection itself, allowing readers to examine the pieces of ephemera.

This collection assembles seven comic strips, published in New York or by a New Yorker at the turn of the last century, and features a wide variety of artistic styles. Spiegelman includes George Herriman's "Krazy Kat," Lyonel Feninger's *Kinder Kids* in "The Kin-der-Kids Abroad," Richard Outcault's *Yellow Kid* in "The War Scare in Hogan's Alley," "The Upside-Downs of Little Lady Lovekins and Old Man Muffaroo,"

by Gustave Verbeck, a collaborative effort by four of Hearst's artists to create "The Glorious Fourth of July," Frederick Opper's Happy Hooligan in "Is This Abdullah, the Arab Chief?," Winsor McKay's "Little Nemo in Slumberland," and a poignant "Bringing Up Father," by George McManus, in which Jiggs is able to prop up the Leaning Tower of Pisa in order to keep it from falling. Images of Manhattan and New York City are combined with commentaries about patriotism, immigration, terrorism, racism, surrealism, and fear, all of which illuminate Spiegelman's original strips while reinforcing a common historical position. Moreover, this collection emphasizes the importance of the role of graphics, of visuality, and of comic strips in particular in telling these narratives. Sequential art, as evidenced by the strips in this collection, has a significant and unique place in storytelling; the serial production of these strips assures readers that the story will not—does not—end.

While "disposabl[e]" newsprint was an inspiration for this memoir, Spiegelman creates an oversized and sturdy book—architecturally sound—that is engaged in the collection and preservation of kitsch and ephemera: what was once disposable waste has been transformed into an archive. As Aleida Assmann suggests in her essay "Beyond the Archive," "[i]n order for waste products that have lost their primary context of use to have any chance of an afterlife in an archive or museum, they must possess something of the relic, which resists the ravages of time by its robust materiality."⁴¹ Newsprint is not "robust," but the art contained within the pulpy papers is, and the characters created at the dawn of the twentieth century work as relics within Spiegelman's text. Collecting relics, however, is different than other kinds of collections, as Werner Muensterberger suggests in his discussion of collecting historical objects: "The accumulation of relics epitomizes what the whole process of collecting is about. People tend to attribute intrinsic power or life-substance to important parts of the body or, in an emotionally more detached spirit, to remnants of the past."⁴² While Spiegelman is not collecting the bones of comic book artists, he does assemble a collection of relics, of remnants of the past. These scraps of newspaper are literal fragments, ephemeral, and, in Spiegelman's own words, "crumbling."⁴³ The power that these comic strips have is one of being unpretentious and fleeting, and yet lasting. For Spiegelman, the strips are personal and professional touchstones, "made with so much skill and verve but never intended to last past the day they appeared in the newspaper."⁴⁴ Thus the daily comic strips and their unforgettable characters are elevated to the status of historical relic; even as the paper on which they were originally printed erodes, collectors of comic art preserve them.

In an age of digital images and electronic archives, collections of ephemera can be protected, no matter what the original medium of publication. Spiegelman is aware of this prospect, having preserved much of his familial history in the CD-ROM companion to *Maus*. One problem with digital archives, however, is that technological advancements may move too quickly for the researcher. Indeed, the *Complete Maus* CD-ROM (1994) is formatted in such a way that contemporary computers are unable to access the information. To combat the speed at which technology advances, a collector may choose to (re)collect the items often, using the most advanced means. Spiegelman's DVD version of *Maus*, *Meta Maus*, updates and incorporates what was once on the CD-ROM to a more contemporary and compatible medium.⁴⁵ Another way to deal with archiving collections of ephemera, though, is to transfer the object to a materially sturdier format, which is what Spiegelman has done in *No Towers*. Rather than provide readers with a digital version of all the comics he read after September 11—technologies destined, in some way, to succumb to obsolescence—he chose seven strips, exemplary in form, content, and with personal and historical significance, and transferred them from the "century-old crumbling newspaper pages" to the architectural cardboard pages of *No Towers*. Spiegelman is able to assure our ability to read and enjoy the comic strips: past, present, and into the future. Giving us this small, powerful collection within his own text underscores the significance that the past has on the present as traces of Krazy Kat, Happy Hooligan, and the Kinder Kids are visible throughout Spiegelman's ten strips.

**NEW YORK CITY AS PALIMPSEST:
(RE)COLLECTION IN *IN THE SHADOW OF NO TOWERS***

I'd often harbored notions of working for posterity—notions that seemed absurd after being reminded how ephemeral even skyscrapers and democratic institutions are.

—Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*

As collection is significant in *No Towers*, so is (re)collection: Spiegelman constantly recalls the events of September 11, 2001, in order to write about them while collecting and arranging his own strips and collecting again—re-collecting—the old comic strips provided in the second half of the memoir. Collecting and (re)collecting work as palimpsest in *No Towers* as the traces of New York City during the early twentieth cen-

ture haunt New York City during the early twenty-first century, and the traces of earlier versions of Art remain for the later versions to consider. While palimpsest is most frequently associated with manuscript culture and writing, referring to a writing surface which has been effaced and reused while retaining traces of its earlier forms, Spiegelman incorporates palimpsest in *No Towers* to illustrate the ways in which both history and he are composed of multilayered records. Etymologically, palimpsest stems from the physical material—either parchment or paper—which has been written on again and again, although in Greek it connotes the notions of being “scraped again” and/or suggests “a parchment from which writing has been erased.” (Compellingly, palimpsest shares the same Indo-European base as the Sanskrit words for “to crush, [to] chew, [to] devour”—a compellingly corporeal version of palimpsestic subjectivity.)⁴⁶

Spiegelman creates visual palimpsest on the inside of the front and back covers: the title and the author biography pages. He bookends his memoir with images from the September 11, 1901, issue of *The World* as he superimposes two dominant images from within his own pages: the “glowing bones” of the North Tower of the World Trade Center just before its collapse are placed on top of Pulitzer’s front page, while the “Tower Twins”—Spiegelman’s transformation of the Katzenjammer Kids in “The Glorious Fourth of July” strip, provided in the collection—usher in the back cover. The Tower Twins are joined in the top layer of the palimpsest by headlines from the turn of the twenty-first century, including “Fire! The World Trade Center is on Fire!” from *Time*, “Traumatic Moments End, But Reminders Still Linger,” from *The New York Times*, and “Soda Spill on Lobby Floor of FBI Causes Commotion,” from *The Oklahoman*.⁴⁷ At this metatextual moment, readers might expect praise for *No Towers*, and instead are given the palimpsest of historical headlines. In addition, this collection of headlines gives readers another way to think about the issues Spiegelman discusses within the memoir, thereby folding the narrative back on itself.

The circularity employed and encouraged by the title page and the inside of the back cover reinforce the idea of palimpsest, as they suggest the simultaneous permanence and ephemera of daily life. On the inside of the back cover, for example, Spiegelman uses headlines, both serious (“Muslims Say They’re Avoiding July Fourth Events Out of Fear of Being Mistaken for Terrorists”) and humorous (“Bin Laden’s Vegas Video! High Stakes, Hookers, and Hummus”) through which to illustrate the palimpsest of history in which we live.⁴⁸ Headlines, not meant to last longer than the day the paper is printed, are collected here as a

way to emphasize the importance newspapers and other media have for readers/viewers. News headlines, too, however, are sensationalist and specific to a particular audience. While Spiegelman's graphic plates take inspiration from the collage-like layout of newspapers, he points to the subjectivity that is involved in creating newspaper stories and headlines. The specters of Pulitzer, Hearst, and Yellow Journalism are visible in some of the more outrageous or absurd headlines.

Spiegelman visually illustrates the persistence of historical documents and memory through a clear and tactile superimposition in order to present the palimpsest from the beginning of his narrative; he places his image just underneath the century-old headline. Katalin Orbán, in an essay on visuality in *Maus* and *No Towers*, remarks that on the inside of the front and back covers "the words of the title, and two circles [. . .] all in color and superimposed on a faded grayscale newspaper background are [. . .] layers of foil pasted on the image of the hundred-year old paper."⁴⁹ These images are bright, glossy, and raised against the backdrop of the newspaper, thus asserting the newness of their creation, particularly when juxtaposed with the old, sepia-toned newsprint. In addition, these "layers of foil" are linked directly to their essential property—metal—which is easily associated with the metal permeating this memoir of the World Trade Center towers. In many ways, the metal of the towers, culturally understood to be permanent, are placed in direct relief to the paper of *The World* (and, indeed, to the heavy cardstock of *No Towers* itself), which are usually considered ephemeral; Spiegelman, of course, inverts these categories. Spiegelman writes in "The Comic Supplement" that "[i]t's hard for our jaded 21st century eyeballs to gauge the impact of Pulitzer's exuberant splashes of color in a world of gray type, but it was a Big Deal back then."⁵⁰ And yet, it isn't so difficult for the jaded eyes of his own readers to understand, as his palimpsests make clear: the glossy image of the tower's glowing bones is in stark contrast with Pulitzer's paper.

Spiegelman himself explains that "[t]he title page of the book is a kind of palimpsest of that past and present. [. . .] I found that the past was talking to us now. So this kind of palimpsest of past and present took place for me and informed these comic strips."⁵¹ The palimpsest created by these two images, the one-hundred year gap between Pulitzer's newspaper and the images published in *No Towers*, underscore the significance of history and the visual for Spiegelman. As he points to the text of his memoir as palimpsest, most obvious in the cover and the title page, he also suggests that New York City is itself a palimpsest. Traces of the people who came before him, of the cartoonists who worked at the turn of the last century or of former presidential administrations, have

been left behind. His collection of old comic strips, then, is an illustration of the recursivity of history as he reinvigorates century-old comic strip characters with twenty-first century perspectives. The collection, the history, and the palimpsest which they represent are not solely artifacts for Spiegelman's self-referential narrative; rather, Spiegelman specifically places himself in a larger, popular culture and memory.

Presenting readers with a collection of mass produced comic strips is a very different technique than giving readers drafts of his own strips. "These are archives in the loosest, messiest sense of the word," Gardner claims, "archives of forgotten artifacts and ephemera of American popular culture, items that were never meant to be collected."⁵² And, as Assmann suggests, "personal and cultural memory [. . .] is grounded on an identity value that provides the criteria for what is remembered and what is forgotten"⁵³; *No Towers* truly disinters an important part of cultural memory. Spiegelman doesn't allow his readers to forget the impact that art, testimony, and witnessing have for the creation of narratives—either of one's personal narrative, a narrative about world history, or of the relationship between the two. Here, to use Spiegelman's words, "on that faultline where World History and Personal History collide,"⁵⁴ Spiegelman uses graphic memoir in order to expose the palimpsest of history in the United States and, specifically, in New York City. Graphic memoirists are self-reflexive, placing issues of representation, unified identities, and narrative construction under scrutiny; through serial production, serial self-representation, and the presentation of a collection of ephemera reinforce the idea of palimpsest, Spiegelman ultimately challenges readers to think about loss and grief as recursive and linked to geographical space.

As much as palimpsest is associated with manuscript culture and the possibilities inherent in reusing paper, the term palimpsest is also used in disciplines like architecture, media studies, technology, literary theory, and geography. In geological terms, palimpsest is a "structure characterized by superimposed features produced at two or more distinct periods"⁵⁵—a definition easily extended as a theoretical model for approaching *No Towers*. Indeed, when examining the palimpsestuous nature of contemporary, urban, built environments, the relationships between material, visual, cultural, and social understandings of space and place are particularly evocative. For *No Towers*, Spiegelman locates himself and his various avatars in a precise moment in time, in one of the most public of spaces: early twenty-first century Manhattan. As geographer Kenny Cupers reminds us,

The notion of a stable public geography not only implies the unproblematic mapping of public spaces to fixed locations, it also tends to envisage public space merely as a passive and abstract stage on which dramatization takes place. This vision does not take into account the fact that *space actively remembers*. Indeed, what about the traces that human actions leave in urban spaces, even apart from buildings and other physical constructions, waste, etc?⁵⁶

It is these traces, the memory of the space of New York City, on which Spiegelman builds *No Towers*. In no sense is the Manhattan depicted therein "passive" or "abstract"; rather, *No Towers* presents the active memory of a physical space or place through palimpsest. This memoir is dedicated to the archival of memory, to preserving the "unforgettable incandescence of the images"⁵⁷ of the morning of September 11, 2001, and to refracting those images through others stemming from the turn of the twentieth century.

Assembling Spiegelman's memories of that morning and of the years to follow, presenting a collection of old comic strips, and revealing the palimpsest through which New York City and history must be viewed, this memoir is a testament to the power of comics in narrating personal history as well as national and spatial history. In his essay "Requiem for the Twin Towers," Baudrillard concludes that "although the two towers have disappeared, they have not been annihilated. Even in their pulverized state, they have left behind an intense awareness of their presence. No one who knew them can cease imagining them and the imprint they made on the skyline from all points of the city."⁵⁸ Baudrillard's assertion about their imprint, the impression of them on the skyline, is borne out most clearly by Spiegelman's now famous black-on-black image of the towers on the cover of the September 24, 2001, issue of *The New Yorker*. This image, which became the foundation for the cover of *No Towers*, is a poignant illustration of permanent and palpable absence as it also images palimpsestual memory in presenting a multilayered record—even one which has been "scraped clean." In my research into palimpsest and history, I found an article titled "Relict and Palimpsest Depositional Patterns on the Nile Shelf Recorded by Molluscan Faunas," published in the Society for Sedimentary Geology's journal *PALAIOS*, written by Daniel Jean Stanley and Maria Pia Bernasconi. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, much of the essay is not relevant to this discussion, but I was struck by one quotation in particular about these mollusks, which noted that Stanley and Bernasconi's research "indicates that these shallow forms are

not now in their original living environment. Some of these reworked taxa are *relict* (in situ, remnant, not laterally displaced), while most are *palimpsest* (i.e., relict and at least somewhat reworked).⁵⁹ In light of recent scholarly conversations about the potential for graphic narrative to reaffirm a contemporary investment in archives, and in relation to my argument here, the comparison between *relict* mollusks and *palimpsest* mollusks was striking: the relicts are remnants, they are “in position,” while the palimpsests—more common in their findings—are all these things but in a new way.

The relationship between relic and palimpsest is evident in *No Towers* as it materializes a contemporary, urban, traumatic understanding of 21st century subjectivity. Absence and trauma, this memoir suggests, provide an opportunity for interrogating palimpsest and ephemera. The black-on-black cover is a physical representation of palimpsest; the image or object that was once visible is gone, but has left an indelible trace. Spiegelman’s recognition of both palimpsest and ephemera in his visual representations of the terrorist attacks underscores Baudrillard’s assertion about the significance of preserving the “unforgettable incandescence of the images.”⁶⁰ In this memoir, both the image of the tower’s glowing bones as well as the images of the classic comics characters are unforgettable for Spiegelman, and thus for his readers. On his eighth plate, he writes that “[t]he blast that disintegrated those Lower Manhattan towers also disinterred the ghosts of some Sunday supplement stars born on nearby Park Row about a century earlier. They come back to haunt one denizen of the neighborhood addled by all that’s happened since.”⁶¹ The haunting Spiegelman experiences is a manifestation of the palimpsest he observes about New York City: the past leaves a trace, and he (re)presents that past and its characters in his memoir. He places the disintegration of the towers in a national- and city-specific historical context, and although he only speaks for himself, his perspective uses the techniques of palimpsest, ephemera, and seriality: these everyday ideas and concepts with which we are all familiar make claims about cultural memory and how that memory works. Figuring his trauma, grief, and mourning through these particular techniques, Spiegelman uses icons of mass culture—comic strip characters, the World Trade Center towers, the newspapers of Pulitzer and Hearst—in order to (re)collect himself after those things which he believed to be permanent, the Twin Towers or democracy, for example, now seem to be ephemeral, and those always-ephemeral objects, comic strips or images witnessed for a brief moment, remain.

NOTES

1. Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon, 2004), n.p.
2. Ibid.
3. Will Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art* (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985), 41. Eisner continues: "the creation of the frame begins with the selection of the elements necessary to the narration, the choice of a perspective from which the reader is allowed to see them, and the determination of the portion of each symbol or element to be included in the frame. Each panel is thus executed with respect to design and composition, as well as its narrative consequence" (41).
4. Katlin Orbán suggests that "*No Towers* stresses the tableau, investing in the image to the point of resisting narrative. Its painfully slow progress is punctuated by repetition [. . .] but the book is first and foremost a monument to 'when time stopped.' It incorporates many small stories into its individual pages, and these individual pages all contribute to an overarching, though lacunar, narrative of the event and its aftermath, but the narrative is predominantly contained within the original tableaux" in "Trauma and Visuality: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and *In the Shadow of No Towers*," *Representations* 97 (2007): 82.
 5. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Ibid.
9. The strips which became *No Towers* were originally published as a series of pages for the German newspaper *Die Zeit*. In the introduction to *No Towers*, Spiegelman writes, "As the series got rolling I found my own 'coalition of the willing' to publish it along with *Die Zeit*. Most of the distinguished newspapers and magazines that found a way to accommodate the large format, quirky content, and erratic schedule were in the 'old Europe'—France, Italy, the Netherlands, England—where my political views hardly seemed extreme. [. . .] [In the United States] only the weekly *Forward*, a small-circulation English-language vestige of the once-proud daily Yiddish broadsheet, enlisted and ran them all prominently." *Forward* had also printed serialized pages of *Maus*.
10. Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, (London: Verso, 2002), 4.
11. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.
12. Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1998), 64.
13. Karen Espiritu, in "'Putting Grief into Boxes': Trauma and the Crisis of Democracy in Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of the No Towers*," *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 28 (2006), calls it a "spectacle of destruction" (181) while Orbán writes that "in the case of September 11, and most acutely in the attack on the World Trade Center, the destruction is functionally visible and, with certain limitations, extensively recorded in contemporaneous images. It is functionally visible in the sense that it is designed as a constitutively visual event that can (and did) become a real-time global media spectacle, where maximum exposure, rather than concealment, ensures terror's success as an act of communication." "Trauma and Visuality," 59.
 14. See Espiritu and Versluys, among others.
 15. Espiritu, 182. Emphasis original.
 16. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.

17. Ibid.
18. Orbán, for example, writes that after *Maus*, “over the next decade and a half Spiegelman was many things—the creator of memorable, at times scandalous *New Yorker* covers; a comix expert; a writer of introductions; the promoter and illustrator of little-known, unusual work by others; the editor of comix collections—he was everything but the writer of his own next major book after *Maus*.” “Trauma and Visuality,” 57.
19. Spiegelman, “Ephemera vs. the Apocalypse,” *Indy Magazine*, 2004, http://web.archive.org/web/20080615145704/http://64.23.98.142/indy/autumn_2004/spiegelman_ephemera/index.html
20. Jared Gardner, “Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics,” *MFS* 52.4 (2006): 801.
21. Stephen Bann, “Mould, Rubble, and the Validation of the Fragment in the Discourse of the Past,” in *Waste-Site Stories: The Recycling of Memory*, eds. Brian Neville and Johanne Villeneuve (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 135.
22. Russell W. Belk, “Collectors and Collecting,” in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994), 321.
23. Gardner, “Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics,” 801.
24. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.
25. Werner Muensterberger, *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 8–9.
26. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.
27. Ibid.
28. Walter Durost, *Children’s Collecting Activity Related to Social Factors* (1932) quoted in Susan M. Pearce, “The Urge to Collect,” in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce, 157–159 (London: Routledge, 1994), 157. Emphasis his.
29. Jean Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting,” in *The Cultures of Collecting*, eds. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 8.
30. Ibid., 11.
31. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 166.
32. Naomi Schor, “*Cartes Postales*: Representing Paris, 1900,” *Critical Inquiry* 18.2 (1992): 200.
33. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.
34. Spiegelman, “Ephemera.”
35. Stewart, *On Longing*, 167.
36. Ibid.
37. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.
38. Stewart, *On Longing*, 167.
39. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (1931); rpt. (London: Fontana, 1973); quoted in Muensterberger, *Collecting*, 14.
40. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.
41. Aleida Assmann, “Beyond the Archive,” in *Waste-Site Stories*, 71.
42. Muensterberger, *Collecting*, 56.
43. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.
44. Ibid.
45. I provide a more comprehensive discussion of *The Complete Maus* CD-ROM and *Meta Maus* in my book *Serial Memoir: Archiving American Lives* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

46. "Palimpsest," *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 2014, accessed March 2, 2014.
47. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.
48. Ibid.
49. Orbán, "Trauma and Visuality," 75.
50. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.
51. Spiegelman, "Ephemera."
52. Gardner, "Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics," 787.
53. Assmann, "Beyond the Archive," 81.
54. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.
55. "Palimpsest," *OED Online*.
56. Kenny Cupers, "Towards a Nomadic Geography: Rethinking Space and Identity for the Potentials of Progressive Politics in the Contemporary City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29.4 (2005): 731. Emphasis mine.
57. Baudrillard, *Spirit*, 4.
58. Ibid., 48.
59. Jean Stanley and Maria Pia Bernasconi, "Relict and Palimpsest Depositional Patterns on the Nile Shelf Recorded by Molluscan Faunas," *PALAIOS* 13.1 (1998): 83. Emphasis mine.
60. Baudrillard, *Spirit*, 4.
61. Spiegelman, *No Towers*.