Navigating Movement and Uncertainty in Sarah Glidden’s *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less*

Sigrid Thomsen

Abstract In her autobiographical comic *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less*, Sarah Glidden depicts her travels around Israel, which she undertook as part of a Birthright Israel trip funded for young Jews in the diaspora. Using watercolors to paint her comic, she depicts two kinds of mobility: firstly, Glidden portrays her own body, and those of others, traveling to and within Israel. Secondly, Glidden’s avatar Sarah moves from a place of certainty regarding the situation in Israel/Palestine to one of uncertainty, ambiguity, and doubt. In this paper, I focus on how the images and the text come together to show this doubled mobility, focusing on the panel structure (including the space of the gutter), the use of watercolors, and specific affordances of the medium of comics such as fantastical elements and playing with size. In carving out the way different mobilities are navigated and negotiated in this comic, I point out one instance in which the interplay between image and text can mediate an experience of travel that is at once open, processual, and highly site-specific.

Keywords Glidden, graphic memoir, comics, autobiography, Israel, Birthright

DOI 10.25364/08.6:2020.1.10
Introduction

In her 2010 autobiographical comic *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less*, which is “part of a tradition involving accounts of journeys to the Holy Land” (Fischer 2013: 235), Sarah Glidden depicts her travels around Israel, which she undertook as part of a Birthright Israel trip organized for young Jews in the diaspora. Using watercolors to paint her comic, she draws her own body, and the bodies of others, traveling to and then within Israel.1 She paints them as part of large mobile hubs such as airports, on mobility-enabling vehicles such as buses, and as mobile agents walking around and exploring Israel. In the comic, the bodies are in motion because they move, are moved, and are placed in different contexts. The people depicted are, however, also mobile in a different way: Glidden’s avatar Sarah2 starts the journey certain in her opposition to both Israel and Birthright trips, saying that she is “prepared for whatever propaganda they try and throw at [her]” on the trip (Glidden 2016: 6). Over the course of the comic, however, she “move[s] from a position of certainty to one of uncertainty” (Reingold 2019: 536), ambiguity, and doubt. Her successively more complicated feelings about the situation in Israel manifest themselves in her facial expressions, in the movements of her body, and in the text accompanying these visual elements. In my paper, I will focus on the way the images and the text come together to show this doubled mobility — the mobility of travel through Israel, and the mentally mobile process of grappling with a complex political conflict and one’s own place within it. To do so, I will focus on three essential visual aspects of Glidden’s work.

Glidden’s memoir is usually classified as a “graphic novel”; on the website of her publisher, Drawn & Quarterly, it is listed as a “graphic memoir”. However, I prefer the term “comic” for several reasons: Firstly, though it was pioneered by some comics artists, such as Will Eisner in relation to his book *A Contract with God*, the term “graphic novel” often has the ring of a marketing ploy to it. Where comics are often looked down upon or seen to only be funny, “graphic novels” are seen to elevate the art form. By using the term “comic”, I wish to counter such a reading. In fact, comics have been serious from early on; and humor does not preclude art from seriousness. The term “comics” not only “applies to the medium as a whole, regardless of the form it takes” (Parker Royal 2011: 1), but also insists that the art form has always been worthwhile, long preceding its rebranding as “graphic novels” in recent decades. Glidden’s memoir can thus be read as one instant in a long line of comics history; more specifically, it can be read as part of a history of comics depicting Israel and Palestine, such as Joe Sacco’s comic *Palestine* (originally published between 1993 and 1995) and Guy Delisle’s 2011 comic *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City*.

Comics and Travel Writing

Despite a plethora of comics depicting different kinds of travel, they are not typically studied as, or alongside, travel literature. While there are many comics about various kinds of experiences abroad, ranging from life as an “expat” (Guy Delisle) to travel to war zones (Joe Sacco), to

---

1 Although Sarah originally plans to go to Ramallah in the West Bank after the Birthright trip is over, she decides against leaving Israel. I thus use the term “Israel,” rather than phrasings like “Israel/Palestine,” throughout this paper.

2 Throughout this article, I will be referring to the comic’s protagonist as “Sarah” and to its writer as “Glidden.” I occasionally refer to Sarah as Glidden’s “avatar” in accordance with Sidonie Smith’s use of the term (2011).
touristic mobilities (Enrico Casarosa), and while these comics are widely read and studied, this does not happen under the banner of travel literature. There is, however, much that unites these two fields of inquiry. Steven D. Spalding traces the rise of scholarship on travel literature to the way it participates in the “move from canonical literary sources to both marginal and popular ones” (Spalding 2013: 200). Comics, of course, were seen as so popular as to be below academic consideration for a long time; this changed only with the publication of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* in 1980. There are other ways, however, in which comics about travel, and Glidden’s comic in particular, can be seen as relating to the field of travel writing. Spalding argues that, in travel literature, “a kind of mobility knowledge is produced […], a subjective shaping of perspective and perceptivity that endows the traveler with a distinct mode of knowledge generation” (Spalding 2016: 118).

Comics, too, are a distinct mode of knowledge generation; as will become clear over the course of this paper, Glidden is able to use comics to generate a kind of knowledge which is open-ended and ambivalent as well as specific to the medium. In the afterword to their volume *Mobility at Large: Globalization, Textuality and Innovative Travel Writing*, Rune Graulund and Justin D. Edwards write that travel writing can “challeng[e] the unified sense of the self in motion” (Graulund/Edwards 2012: 199) and that “the genre allows writers […] to write the travelling subject as a possible site for active cultural and ideological struggle” (Graulund/Edwards 2012: 199). This is what comics does — it breaks up the unified self even through the structure of the panel — a mechanism that is heightened in Glidden’s comic when there are several Sarahs on the page. In addition, both forms are entangled in the mobile; while “the subject and the text are consistently in motion” in travel writing (Graulund/Edwards 2012: 201), I will argue that the same can be said for comics. Finally, in both forms, this sense of being in motion can extend to a mobility between different genres, as there are “fluid movements between non-fiction and fiction autobiography and memoir, history and the conventional travel narrative” (Graulund/Edwards 2012: 201).

At the same time, however, travel literature and comics have to navigate different tensions. Whereas comics is frequently seen as a highly democratic medium, one which has been actively resistant to the status quo, travel literature “is a textual form that is caught up in the rhetoric of Empire” (Graulund/Edwards 2012: 3, drawing on Lisle and Spurr). Despite this, Graulund and Edwards argue that “a progressive politics of mobility” (Graulund/Edwards 2012: 4) is possible in travel literature. Whether Glidden’s comic succeeds on that count is open to debate, but bringing together comics and travel literature, with their often opposing investment in power structures, can contribute to a further unsettling of travel literature’s investment in Empire and its aftereffects.

**Comics and Mobility Studies**

In addition to travel literature, I want to bring comics into conversation with the field of Mobility Studies, which emerged out of the social sciences in the early 2000’s, and which was shaped

---

3 The phrasing “comics is” here is in line with scholars such as Hillary Chute, who use the singular to denote comics as a medium. Throughout this paper, I use “comics” as a singular noun to indicate the medium, and as a plural noun when talking about different works within the medium.

4 One example of which is the underground comix published in the U.S. between the 1960’s and 1980’s by figures such as Robert Crumb. Comics have also, however, been used for propagandistic purposes (cf. Kerr 2016).
by scholars such as Mimi Sheller and John Urry (cf. Sheller/Urry 2006). What is particularly useful about Mobility Studies when thinking both about travel literature and about comics depicting travel is the field’s capacious understanding of mobility, which includes both a wide variety of mobilities and a focus on how these mobilities intersect both with large structures and with individuals’ lives. Looking at Glidden’s comic through a Mobility Studies lens makes it possible to differentiate between different mobilities in the text: In addition to Sarah’s journey from the U.S. to Israel and to her travels around Israel with Birthright, our focus is also pulled to the “regimes of mobility” (Glick Schiller/Salazar 2013) surrounding such acts of mobility, such as the way her Jewishness is probed at the airport in New York. Importantly, however, Mobility Studies includes both physically observable movements and “imaginative travel, virtual travel, and communicative travel” (Sheller 2014: 793). In a recent article, Noel B. Salazar expands on imagination in mobility when he writes that “imagination is an embodied practice of transcending both physical and sociocultural distance” (Salazar 2020: 773), thereby not only highlighting the simultaneity of imaginative and material aspects of travel, but the importance of the former in transcending the latter.

In order to tease out the mobile in How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less, I will focus on three aspects of the comic: firstly, on the panel structure; secondly, on Glidden’s use of watercolors; and thirdly, on Glidden’s use of certain visual affordances of the medium — that is, possibilities opened up by the medium of comics — such as the inclusion of fantastical elements and a playing with size. In carving out the way different mobilities are navigated and negotiated in this comic, I will point out how the interplay between image and text can mediate an experience of travel in a way that is at once focused on the processual and highly site-specific.

Before turning to my analysis, I will briefly give some background to Birthright Israel.

**Birthright**

*Birthright Israel*, also known as *Taglit*, is an organization which offers fully funded trips to young Jews in the diaspora, aged 18 to 32. On their website, they state that “Birthright Israel aims to strengthen Jewish identity, Jewish communities, and connection with Israel and its people” (*Taglit Israel*). The program is especially eager to foster an engagement with Israel for young Jews who do not already have a lively connection to their Jewish identity or to the state of Israel. The trip, of which there are different versions — along with the original Birthright trip, there are ones geared toward Orthodox Jews, ones with a focus on nature, ones that are medically accessible, and ones for LGBTQ participants — has become “a rite of passage for American Jews” (Stockman 2019). Despite the official credo being that “[e]the Birthright Israel journey is committed to a culture of open discussion and dialogue about all issues: identity, geopolitics, religion, and Jewish life” (*Birthright Israel* website), there has recently been increased critique of it, and, in recent years, some participants have walked off the trip as a...
sign of protest against Israel’s treatment of Palestinians (cf. Stockman 2019). Scholarship has often either focused on Birthright as a “diasporization strategy” (Abramson 2017; Abramson 2019) or on Birthright’s influence on Jewish Americans’ understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Ben Hagai 2018) and their stance on Palestine and Palestinians (Waxman 2017). There is consensus that Birthright was created in the 1990’s “to solve the problem of waning Jewish-American affiliation with the Israeli state” (Stein 2011: 212); Abramson stresses that Birthright “emerged not as a strategy to strengthen Jewish identity but as a way to perpetuate a diasporic identity” (Abramson 2019: 657; emphasis in the original). He argues that, by the 1990’s, Jewish Americans had become so ontologically secure that their investment in Israel, and in the diasporic community, was fading; Birthright was thus seen as a way to reinforce those diasporic ties. This helps explain Sarah’s conflicted feelings about Birthright: while she starts the comic comfortable in her Jewish identity, this identity does not extend to, or encompass, the state of Israel. By creating an “intersubjective,” “active,” and “embodied” encounter with the land of Israel (cf. Abramson 2018: 19), with the physical site itself, Birthright is thus attempting to transform Sarah’s Jewish identity into a diasporic Jewish identity. For Sarah, feeling more connected to the diaspora means that she has to navigate her conflicted feelings about the state of Israel to which, according to Birthright, she belongs as a diasporic subject.

Panels and Gutter

The medium of comics, with its interplay of words and images, seems a natural fit for a special issue on the interrelation of images and text in travel narratives. Though Giorgia Alù and Patricia Hill argue that the co-existence of textual and visual elements in travel narratives create “in-between spaces” in which “words and pictures mingle through ambivalent relationships, sometimes of complementarity, but often of tension” (Alù/Hill 2018: 2), this relationship plays out in a specific way in comics. Describing how comics can be used to depict a life narrative such as Glidden’s, Candida Rifkind writes that

1. comics have unique tools and techniques to externally focalise a life narrative. For instance, cartoonists can play with temporality (multiple moments on the same page), irony and disjuncture (words and images do not match), visual style (realistic, painterly, minimal, surreal, abstract, retro, parody, pastiche), visual code switching (from comics to photographs, newspaper clippings, letters, diaries, diagrams, and other signifiers of the “real”), and perspective (focalising what the character sees, remembers, dreams, or imagines). (Rifkind 2019: 70)

Comics, then, are always multimodal. Travel narratives in prose may have been conceived first and foremost as text; images accompanying the text may then be based on the text or may be placed alongside it, such as on a foldout page or in an otherwise clearly delineated part of the page or book. In comics, however, no such division is possible, as comics nearly always include both. This hybridity between the verbal and visual in comics is described by Hillary Chute when she writes,

7 Janet Krasner Aronson (2017), meanwhile, focuses on the effect Birthright has on the participants’ parents.
8 There are also some examples of comics which consist of panels and images, but no words, such as Shaun Tan’s The Arrival (2007). This is, however, very much an exception.
Comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially [...]. Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn’t blend the visual and the verbal — or use one simply to illustrate the other — but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of reading and looking for meaning. (Chute 2008: 452)

This back-and-forth between images and text is present not just over the course of a comic, but is often present within a panel. Panels, equivalent to sentences in a novel or other prose text, can be seen as the building block of a comic. In fact, Raphaël Baroni links panels and travel when he writes that “more than in any other narrative medium, comics are designed to promote travel back and forth between the panels and throughout the book” (Baroni 2016: 11). Panels can consist of just an uninterrupted image but more commonly include a speech bubble, thought bubble, or caption. The panel therefore draws together the text and the image, a process in which there can be tension. In addition to words and images, there is a third key component of a given comics page — the space between the panels, called the gutter. As Rifkind writes, “One of the central tenets of comics theory is that comics depend on seriality, juxtaposing framed images across and down pages, between which there are gaps, known as the gutter, into which the reader projects meaning” (Rifkind 2017: 649). The gutter’s most defining feature seems at first to be contradictory: on the one hand, it is a gap, a lack, an intrusion of white and empty space into what is otherwise filled with colors and words. But on the other hand, it creates a dynamism and movement between those very words and images. As comics present us with what happens in panel A and what happens in panel B, both in showing us an image and in giving us text to read, the gutter is the blank space in between, one which the reader has to contend with: she has to decide what happened between panel A and panel B in order to get from one to the other. Most of the time, this happens automatically. This process, in which the reader is presented with fragments and then imagines the movement that collects these fragments into a story, is called “closure” in comics studies. As Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester write, “the author’s task is to evoke an imagined sequence by creating a visual series (a breakdown), whereas the reader’s task is to translate the given series into a narrative sequence by achieving closure” (Heer/Worcester 2008: n.p.). In his book Die Sprache des Comics (The Language of Comics), however, Ole Frahm sees the meaning of the gutter differently. He argues “dass es bei der Lektüre von Comics gerade nicht darum gehen muss, eine Einheit herzustellen, sondern vielmehr darum, ihre heterogenen Zeichen, Schrift und Bild, in ihrer Besonderheit, in ihrer Materialität zu genießen, die sich in keiner abschließenden Einheit bündeln lässt” (Frahm 2010: 32). He goes on to say, “Nur weil die Comics das Begehren nach einer Einheit erzeugen, können sie es zerstreuen” (Frahm 2010: 54). What both approaches agree on, then, is that the gutter itself works against unity.

Purely on the level of the page structure, then, comics have specific ways to portray memories, such as in Glidden’s graphic memoir. While drawing something always, by necessity, fixes it in space — this is what happened and this is how it physically played out — I argue that the

---
9 “Reading comics does not have to be about creating unity, but about enjoying its heterogeneous signs, its writing and image, in their materiality, which cannot be subsumed into a final whole.” Author’s translation.
10 “It is only because comics create the desire for unity that they can diffuse it.” Author’s translation.
gutter can serve as a kind of corrective or counterbalance, as it punctures any fixity created and generates space for doubt and ambiguity. In doing so, it also creates space for humor, one example of which is on page 49, where Sarah imagines the Six-Day War of 1967 [cf. Fig. 1].

In the middle row of panels on the page, there is one on the left in which she says she is too drained to ask the guide Gil about the war; this thought is coupled with the image of a man punching one of his fellow soldiers. In the panel next to it, a helicopter and a tanker are bombing one another, while in the panel after that, tiny soldiers ride atop dinosaurs while firing at one another. While these panels are meant to underline the fact that Sarah struggles to understand the reality of that war, each scenario is less likely than the one preceding it, with the dinosaurs being so far off the mark as to both be humorous and to unsettle any notions about what the war may have been like.

![Fig. 1: Sarah imagining the Six-Day War. Glidden 2016: 49](image)

**Watercolors**

To this breaking up of fixity in comics, Glidden adds watercolors, which remain an unusual medium within comics; accordingly, not much work has been done on the use of watercolor in comics. In his study of David Small’s *Stitches*, however, Øyvind Vågnes argues that Small’s use of watercolor “effectively describes a gradual loss of contours” (Vågnes 2010: 306) and contributes to the graphic memoir “involv[ing] its reader/spectator in the problematics of inexpressibility” (Vågnes 2010: 312). Ironically, in Mariana dos Pintos’ reading, the Portuguese painter Eduardo Batarda used watercolor to approximate the language of comics, since watercolors are “less prestigious” than other techniques (Pinto dos Santos 2016: 45). What ties dos Pintos’ analysis into mine is that in these paintings, “rigidity ends up being shattered by the interpretative fluidity that is allowed” (Pinto dos Santos 2016: 56), a fluidity to which the use of watercolor contributes.

Although the use of watercolor is an understudied aspect of Glidden’s comic and of comics more generally, it is a salient feature of Glidden’s work. The contrast between the precise way
she outlines the comic and the watercolor achieves several things. The subdued palette can be seen to create a kind of unified impression, as the different conflicting feelings and even media, including maps, are brought together by the overall unified look of the page. At the same time, however, and despite the lines remaining sharp, and the work not veering toward the abstract, the watercolors create a sense of fluidity, of motion, of liquidness, in a way that comics created with stark ballpoint pens, arguably, do not. Glidden is not carving anything into stone, but rather drawing even Sarah’s starkest moments in water, thereby keeping ambiguity alive.

The watercolors are also linked to Glidden’s depiction of Sarah’s face. While Sacco, who many credit with creating and pioneering the form of comics journalism, overaccentuates certain aspects of his face to the point of almost satirizing them, Glidden’s face functions as a blank canvas. This is due to her painting style, in which she uses clear black lines to draw the face and rudimentary facial features — eyes, a mouth, and a nose — but then washes over them with watercolors. I would argue that this is not, as comics practitioner and theorist Scott McCloud argues, due to comics enabling the reader to project themselves onto the character, though that may also play a role. Mostly, Sarah’s simple facial features function as a blank canvas for her own grappling with Israel, and for her journey from a strong, decisive stance on Israel to one of indecision and doubt. Although this is Glidden’s drawing style and therefore not limited to her depiction of Sarah, the way a face can serve as a blank canvas becomes especially clear in her drawing of her avatar, one example of which is on page 19 [cf. Fig. 2].

On this page, where Sarah is on the Birthright bus next to her friend Melissa, her face, every time it is depicted, and even though it consists only of some lines and dots, looks markedly different in each panel — she first turns the back of her head to us in order to look out at the landscape; she then looks quietly confused, almost disappointed, that “you just can’t see any signs of the troubles at all” (Glidden 2016: 19) when looking out at the nondescript landscape outside the bus; she looks excited about the trip’s itinerary and then grim and displeased when she explains to her friend Melissa that “Arabic was here for a long time before Hebrew came back…” (Glidden 2016: 19). In the last row of panels on the page, Sarah first looks apologetic about continually lecturing Melissa, then briefly neutral, and then smacks her forehead, laughing, when she remembers that this is Melissa’s first time abroad. This single page at the beginning of the comic thus functions as both a synecdoche and a prelude to that which comes later. It prefigures the heightened emotion and doubt that color her experience in Israel, and it’s a mini drama in which the larger conflict of Sarah’s trip is condensed. For Sarah, being in Israel is such a complicated experience that even ten minutes on a given bus ride can serve as a jumping-off point for feeling confused, apologetic, let down, and giddy, a rollercoaster ride of emotions that, while punctuated with her exclamations to Melissa, is mostly communicated to the reader through the images of Sarah’s facial expressions.

11 Art Spiegelman’s comic Maus about his father’s time in Auschwitz, which significantly changed the way comics as a medium was seen by the mainstream reading public, was drawn with a fountain pen (cf. NPR 2011). Joe Sacco, whose work includes Palestine (which was published serially from 1993 to 1995, and published as a collected volume in 2001) and Footnotes in Gaza (2009), similarly draws his reportages in stark black lines. While these drawing materials are in no way less suited to depicting fraught, complicated situations and traumatic events, Glidden’s use of watercolor creates a fluidity specific to her work.

12 “When you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face — you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon — you see yourself. […] The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled” (McCloud 1993: 36).
Fig. 2: Sarah and Melissa on the bus. Glidden 2016: 19
Fig. 3: Sarah at passport control. Glidden 2016: 8
Fig. 4: Sarah’s imagined courtroom scene. Glidden 2016: 27
Interiority and Fantastical Elements

Glidden’s text is an autobiographical comic. As Wibke Weber and Hans-Martin Rall argue, “the roots of telling stories based on real events can be seen in the underground comics movement in the US between roughly 1967 and 1975” (Weber/Rall 2017: 381), it has since become a popular and prolific subgenre. The genre of graphic memoirs, and the medium of comics more generally, has its own ways of making a character’s interior life understandable to the reader. Along with the push and pull between words and images and the gap created by the gutter, comics can play with perspective and size or add fantastical elements. Along with the heightened expressions on Sarah’s face, Glidden shows the reader how Sarah is feeling by varying Sarah’s size in the panel. This is particularly evident in a scene early on in the comic, when Sarah has to go through passport control in New York City before boarding her flight to Israel [cf. Fig. 3].

Here, Sarah’s shrinking in size is linked to a proliferation of speech bubbles. When Sarah first steps toward passport control, her face looms large in the panel and there is just one speech bubble coming from the border guard saying “Passport, please.” When the border guard then starts asking her questions, he and Sarah are the same size in the panel. As he continues questioning her, she gets smaller in size while there is a growing barrage of speech bubbles. The border guard’s insistent questions, and Sarah’s uncertain responses, successively crowd Sarah out of the panel. When the border guard asks Sarah about her bat mitzvah reception, an event she barely remembers, Sarah gets not only smaller, but younger; we see her as the blushing, insecure 13-year-old she was at her bat mitzvah. This signals the way the border guard reduces Sarah and puts her in a powerless position not just through the relentlessness of his questions, but also through their content. In the last two panels, when the border guard finally relents, saying first “Mmm” and then “Okay. Thank you.”, Sarah is absent from the frame, but here, her absence reads not so much as being crowded out of the room, than as finally being freed from the guard’s gaze.

In addition to this playing with size, perspective, and absence, Glidden uses several fantastical elements to depict Sarah navigating her inner and outer mobility. In two such instances, Glidden breaks Sarah up into different parts as part of a courtroom scene. In the first such scene, Sarah is on the Birthright tour bus when Gil gives an account of the peace process between Israel and Palestine [cf. Fig. 4]. After her initial skepticism toward Birthright, this is the first time Sarah thinks that Gil may be giving a relatively objective, broad-minded account, but is immediately unsettled by her own softening toward the program. When Gil is ready to take questions, there is one panel in which Sarah sits with a speech bubble, empty except for ellipses, floating over her head. The next panel functions as a kind of in-between step between Sarah’s physical state of being on the bus and her mental state of being in the courtroom. She is still dressed in her clothes from the bus but is moved slightly to the left of the center; a lectern pops up over her right arm, from which there emerges a speech bubble saying “Order! Order in this court!” (Glidden 2016: 27). While the text in the form of the speech bubble is thus part of the courtroom scene that is to follow, the image in the panel is in the process of dissolving into the next scene.

The case that will be argued in Sarah’s internal court is whether “Birthright is trying to

13 As Hillary Chute writes, “the genre of comics nonfiction, especially by women, is resonating deeply with readers around the globe: it is intimate and political at the same time” (Chute 2011b: 176).
brainwash [her] vs. Birthright is actually pretty reasonable” (Glidden 2016: 27). To do so, the courtroom is peopled with SARAhS: not only is the judge one iteration of Sarah, but so are the witnesses and the members of the jury, each one representing a different view on whether Birthright is giving a subtle historical account or trying to sway the participants’ minds. As Matt Reingold argues, “These mini-SARAhS act as both conscience and devil’s advocate; they judge, they accuse, they defend, and they enforce” (Reingold 2019: 531). This sudden plethora of SARAhS on the page works on two levels: firstly, it makes her confusion literal and tangible for the reader. She is torn, as she is not just of two minds but of several minds, and each of these minds is represented by a separate Sarah. But secondly, within the text, it is an attempt of hers to work through her confusion, and to solve it, as each Sarah is either making a different argument or listening and having to make up her own mind based on what she hears. This difference and variety in argument on the textual level, however, is contrasted with the striking sameness on the visual level — though the arguments vary, the look of the person saying them does not. All of them are Sarah. Writing about nonfiction comics, Sara Kersten argues that “[t]hrough multiple modes, we read multiple truths” (Kersten 2017: 24) — the simultaneous multimodality of comics can present us with different truths at one and the same time. Something related happens here — in presenting us with a diversity of opinion, Glidden is showing us that the truth, for Sarah, is not just multiple but absent; in its place, Sarah finds a variety of argumentative strands and perspectives.

In reconstructing this autobiographical comics narrative some time after the trip, Glidden is once more navigating the uncertainty she was faced with on the trip itself. In travel writing, the author aims “to articulate him or her self through the writing process” (Graulund/Edwards 2012: 7); here, this happens through Glidden’s “boxes of memory” (Smith 2011: 67). What we are seeing and reading is uncertainty felt in the moment and depicted at another. In autobiographical comics, both is true at once: we are witnessing the story as well as the act of the story’s narration. Though this is not so different from other literary forms — there is always the level of narration and of plot, the level of what is told and the level of the telling — it is particularly overt in comics, since we always see traces of the physical presence of the hand. As Hillary Chute writes, “Comics is largely a hand-drawn form that registers the subjective bodily mark on the page; its marks are an index of the body” (Chute 2011b: 112). While this is generally the case in comics, Glidden draws on this when she “returns us, and her protagonist, to bodily experience, and suggests that truths must be embodied” (Kahn 2016: 245). Through the embodiment of Sarah’s physical presence in Israel, the multiple depictions of Sarah, and the marks on the page, Glidden depicts how Sarah is moved to change her views while traveling: Moving from one truth, her clear-cut stance from early in the comic, to one where “truth” is continually destabilized. There is no one truth that the quarreling SARAhS will ever arrive at.

Conclusion

*How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less* “is for a large part a journey of exploring [Glidden’s] American-Jewish identity through the encounter with Israel” (Fischer 2015: 303). In it, Glidden makes use of the panel structure of the comic, along with the fluid-seeming watercolors, to make visible and render legible her undecided, ambivalent stance with regard to Israel. In “Facing the Arab ‘Other’?: Jerusalem in Jewish Women’s Comics,” Nina Fischer argues that Palestinian life
stays “muted” in the comic and that the Palestinians Sarah encounters are “indistinct” (Fischer 2015: 304). While this is a fair critique, it is one with which Glidden herself might agree and which the gutter can be seen to point toward, as it indexes Sarah’s own blind spots and the gaps in her knowledge. They are, then, not just spaces which the reader has to move across, but ones Sarah herself moves across. The watercolors, meanwhile, though still firmly encased in panel lining, underscore Sarah’s geographical and bodily movements while visually translating her growing uncertainty, as they create images which seem fluid rather than fixed. It is this flexible form of the comic which allows Glidden to navigate her relationship to Israel in a way both processual and site-specific.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Matt Johnson for his helpful suggestions, insights, and edits.

Bibliography


Abramson, Yehonatan. 2017. ‘Making a Homeland, Constructing a Diaspora: The Case of Taglit-Birthright Israel’, *Political Geography*, 58, 14–23


Baroni, Raphaël. 2016. ‘(Un)natural Temporalities in Comics’, *European Comic Art*, 9(1), 5–23

Ben Hagai, Ella. 2018. ‘“We Didn’t Talk About the Conflict”: The Birthright’s Trip Influence on Jewish American’s Understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict’, *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 24(2), 139–149


Fischer, Nina. 2015. ‘Facing the Arab ‘Other’?: Jerusalem in Jewish Women’s Comics’, *Studies in Comics*, 6(2), 291–311

Fischer, Nina. 2013. ‘Graphic Novels Explore an (Un-)Holy Land’, *Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, 6, 201–236


Glidden, Sarah. 2016. *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less* (Montréal: Drawn & Quarterly)


Reingold, Matt. 2019. ‘American Jews Explore Israel: Jewish and Israel Identity Exploration With Harvey Pekar and Sarah Glidden’, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 10(5–6), 525–541


Spalding, Steven D. 2013. ‘Travel Fiction Revisited: Reading Mobility in Experimental Travel Narratives’, Transfers, 3(1), 199–201
Tan, Shaun. 2007. The Arrival (New York: Scholastic)
Van Gennep, Arnold. 2004. The Rites of Passage (London: Routledge)
“How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less by Sarah Glidden.” Drawn & Quarterly, <https://www.drawnandquarterly.com/how-understand-israel-60-days-or-less> [accessed 24.05.2020]

Author’s affiliation

Sigrid Thomsen is a scholar of Comparative Literature and American Studies at the University of Vienna and a member of the Research Platform Mobile Cultures and Societies. In her doctoral thesis, she studies imaginative mobilities in contemporary Caribbean diaspora literature. She holds an MA in Comparative Literature (Africa/Asia) from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. Sigrid also has BA degrees in Comparative Literature and in Philosophy from the University of Vienna. She has published on Caribbean diaspora literature, Mobility Studies, and comics; further research interests include postcolonial and decolonial theory, South African literature, popular culture, debates around World Literature, and poetry.
sigrid.thomsen@univie.ac.at