

The repeatable hand and the mediated self in Mira Jacob's *Good Talk*

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ABSTRACT

The handmade mark is privileged in non-fiction comics studies, the reproduced hand offering embodied, subjective immediacy. In *Good Talk*, Mira Jacob digitally collages vector-drawn 'paper dolls' with various media, presenting an authorial subject unaccounted for by such scholarship. What is at stake in this article, then, is the relationship of the hand to the subject. Considering this relationship through a departure from a too facile semiotic distinction of indexical as opposed to merely iconic and symbolic signs, this article reconsiders indexicalities beyond the ostentatiously handcrafted aesthetics of some graphic memoirs to examine the effects of digital lettering, of re-contextualized photographs, and of other interventions to examine and move beyond some media-specific associations of immediacy and authenticity with the individualized gesture. Examining Jacob's decontextualization and repudiation of such forms on the terms of her refusal to perform a subjectivity expected from a racialized subject, it explores instead the possibilities of re-contextualizations of 'paper-dolls' in the conversations opened by her 'scrapbook' aesthetics. Shifting much of the intersubjective emotional work from the autobiographer to the reader, Jacob's innovative digital mode presents a risky but ethically productive formal invitation to read off and see the other's experience without the illusion of subjective equivalence.

Hence, this article reinterprets non-fiction comics' representation of reality beginning with the underappreciated material mark, not as a semantically conventionalized unit but as the material grounds of any such signification. In this

ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: 07

Issue: 02

Winter 2021

ISSN: 2459-2943

DOI: 10.18680/hss.2021.0017

Pages: 45-71

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KEYWORDS:

Comics

Autobiography

Collage

Digital materiality

Alterity

perspective, it addresses the materialist discourses implicit in the handmade mark by entering into a conversation with Hillary Chute, Aaron Kashtan, and Hannah Miodrag's discussions of comics marks as media indexing process and instantiating meaning as well as Ariella Azoulay, Friedrich Kittler, and John Berger's writings on the subjective presence and Susan Kirtley's discussion of scrapbooking in comics.

I'm not going to make sense of my humanity for you. Because, on some level, you don't want my humanity to make sense to you, and I can't argue against that, so I'm just going to show it to you. You see it if you want.

Mira Jacob (2019a)

Introduction

In *Good Talk. A Memoir in Conversation*, Mira Jacob articulates her experiences as an Indian-American woman in the twentieth and twenty-first century United States through dialogues between vector-drawn 'paper doll' figures layered with personal or cultural objects and stock photographs. She accentuates this digitally scrapbooked aesthetic through characters' abstracted forms and static expressions and by insistently reusing illustrations. These repeating faces also visually structure the reader's relationship to Jacob and her material. Jacob eschews shot/reverse shot and naturalistic compositions, which might allow the reader to act as an unseen observer, opting to illustrate all her interlocutors as making eye contact with them. Through these techniques, Jacob details her personal and professional life, including her parents' marriage and immigration, her upbringing in New Mexico, her marriage with documentary director Jed Rothstein, and her successful novel *The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing*. Responding to the divisive 2016 election, Jacob nuances American racial politics through personal accounts, insight, and wit while underscoring her memoir's specificity as only one among many heterogeneous non-White American experiences.

Jacob's remarkable techniques shape her text and this article. Jacob first developed *Good Talk's* format in "37 Difficult Questions from My Mixed-Race Son," in which she depicts their conversations through arranging and photographing two cut-out drawings. This short comic reappears, digitally recreated, as *Good Talk's* first chapter. Jacob's turn from pen drawing and improvisational collaging that visually evidence her manual creative practice (Figure 1) to more restrained tablet drawing, digitally compositing, and lettering in font developed for the project (2019b) might be mistaken as only rationalizing her process, imitating her prior collaged materiality. However, her altered techniques – her remediating, or as Paul Reyes describes it, "translate[d...] skills" (2017:n.pag.) – are better approached not as distancing from earlier practices but as productively transforming them. Jacob employs material, aesthetic, and rhetorical resources of analog and digital techniques in a hybrid fashion to compound and complicate their respective effects at an intimate, subjective distance.

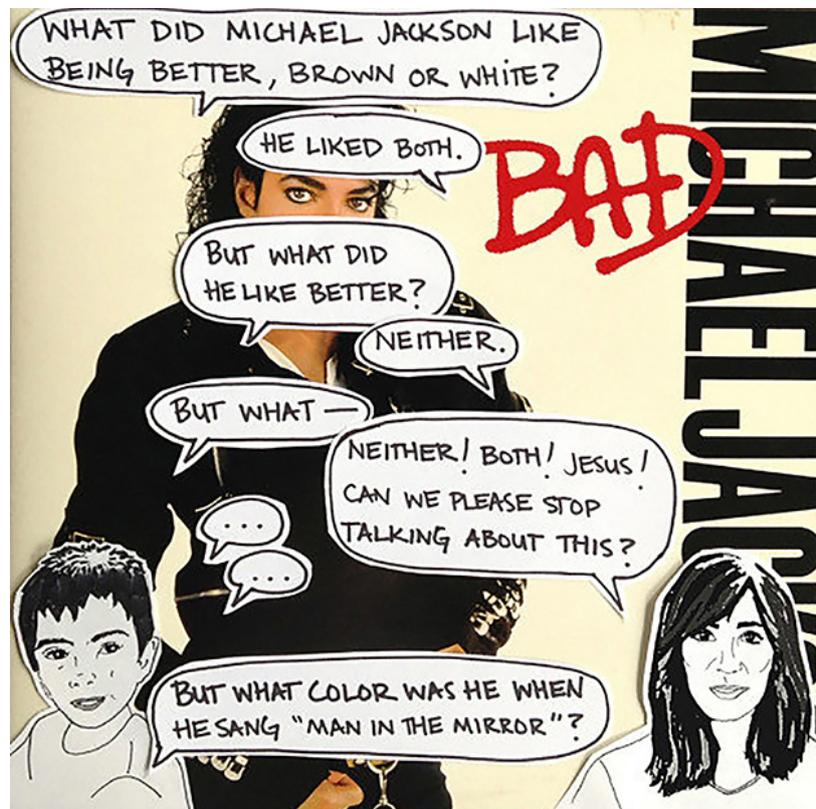


Figure 1. Mira Jacob, 37 Difficult Questions from My Mixed-Race Son, panel 11.

Once we recognize *Good Talk* as hybrid rather than merely imitative in its remediation, employing *both* analog and digital techniques, Jacob's compositions remind us that, as a mass medium, seemingly handmade comics are already mechanically reproduced: they always respond to reproductive conditions, be they digital raster resolution, xerographic contrast thresholds, or lithographic line fidelity. Jacob's practices present a valuable opportunity to investigate techniques often overlooked in non-fiction comics scholarship and to reconsider more commonly discussed analog materiality. Exploring Jacob's digital fabrication and collage aesthetics, I address materialist discourses on the handmade mark and consider other subjective traces in the discretized sign, the photographed index and the vectorized mark, and their composition and recomposition on the page.

I contextualize Jacob's representational strategies in *Good Talk* through the hand's relationship to the authorial subject within discourses on handwriting and comics materiality, exemplified by Hillary Chute's significant contributions to formal non-fiction analyzes which emphasize alternative cartoonists' handmade material experimentation. Foundational authors Thierry Groensteen and Scott McCloud underrecognize these marks' function: in attempting to systematize comics' communicative processes

through analogies with natural language, they pursue semantic stability. Groensteen dismisses marks as an “inferior standard” of semantic units (2007:3), while McCloud – in his McLuhanesque aspirations to universal visual communication – emphasizes the ways in which conventionalized marks approach symbolic writing (1994). Rather than accepting these fraught comparisons to *langue* which, in their abstracting emphasis on semantics, foreclose the unique mark’s value, I read Chute’s (2010) materialist understanding alongside Hannah Miodrag’s discussion of visual *parole* (2013) to consider these marks’ semiotic role as material indices towards their authorship, beyond their mere signification of depicted objects and events. To consign the mark to expressive style is to reduce medium to surface and meaning to abstraction. In non-fiction, such a separation of material support and semiotic content ignores the roles of convention and causation in signifying reality.

Although the embodied mark presents a valuable intersection between media studies and semiotics, focusing on a single practice risks prescriptivism. Departing from a too facile semiotic distinction of indexical as opposed to merely iconic and symbolic signs, through Jacob’s innovative, decontextualizing uses of lettering, photography, and image repetition, I reconsider indexicalities beyond ostentatiously handcrafted aesthetics foregrounding embodied specificity, to consider mechanical and digital practices. Drawing on Ariella Azoulay, Friedrich Kittler, and John Berger’s writings on subjective presence, this article considers the event of photography, the typed hand, and the seeing of drawing to approach the materiality of signified documentation and subjectivity. I introduce Jacob’s departures from more familiar representational techniques which often focus on discursive contexts to which *Good Talk* refuses to conform. I then approach how these formal departures in their repeatability challenge not only indexical causation but also iconic resemblance. Through these departures, Jacob denaturalizes and thereby politicizes the relationship between the non-fictional cartooned sign and referent reality, offering critical insights into the possibilities of representing minority experiences in comic form. Finally, I draw on Sara Ahmed’s account of subjectivity dependent on the encounter with the other and Susan Kirtley’s analysis of cartoonist Lynda Barry’s scrapbooking as techniques that assemble and describe, but incompletely reveal, memory, and subject. Informed by these accounts and Jacob’s descriptions of her process, *Good Talk* is interpretable through this idiom of subjective representation, which does not rely on the intimacy signified by the cartooned or lettered diaristic mark. Employing these techniques, Jacob may speak through alterity rather than identity: by disentangling self-consciously expressed subjectivity from the subjective mark, Jacob’s explicitly mediated and withheld, even alienating, public subjectivity allows her to represent experiences while refusing to perform identification. Shifting much of the intersubjective emotional work from the autobiographer to the reader, Jacob’s alternative digital mode presents a risky but ethically productive formal invitation to encounter the other’s experience without the illusion of subjective equivalence.

1. Textu(r)al rhythms

Creators and scholars of non-fiction comics often emphasize their conspicuously hand-drawn creation that effects an embodied intimacy. Aaron Kashtan perhaps overstates the effects of comics studies' emergent canon when he claims that such North American scholarship on alternative auteurs has "distorted views of the field, causing scholars to identify comics as a whole with one particular genre of comics. Almost all the works in the academic canon are graphic memoirs or works of graphic journalism" (2018:12-13); this overemphasis, he argues, has limited research and

provides an incomplete account of materiality that is frequently biased by a focus on non-fiction genres. For example, Hillary Chute's work on Alison Bechdel and Lynda Barry is based on the naive assumption that printed comics are literal replications of the author's handwriting. (Kashtan 2018: 14)

Kashtan, drawing on Emma Tinker's writing on production methods and publication formats, later juxtaposes the alternative comics community's "fetishiz[ation]" (2018:27) of handcrafted books' perceived value as "strong enough to create the impression that comics produced or distributed by other means are somehow *devoid* of materiality, or materially impoverished" (2018:27). My conversations with comics scholars, creators, and editors anecdotally affirm these perceptions. Despite his borderline polemical tone, Kashtan's sketch of Chute as exemplifying comics studies' emphasis on the handwritten as responding to – and therefore best suited to interpreting – certain expressive modes is valuable as it frames my investigation which similarly attempts to broaden accounts to address the mechanical and the digital.

When Chute responds to Art Spiegelman's observation that "James Joyce and Jacqueline Susann can both be set in Times New Roman" (2010:11) to argue

what feels so intimate about comics is that *it looks like what it is*; handwriting is an irreducible part of its instantiation. The subjective mark of the body is not retranslated through type, but, rather, the bodily mark of handwriting both provides a visual quality and texture and is also extrasemantic [; ... it] cannot be "reflowed." (Chute 2010:11, original emphasis¹)

she emphasizes comics' "extrasemantic" and materially specific immediacy but denies that of typeset media. This opposition elides comics' digital and print mass media contexts as well as digital techniques' challenges to such a dichotomy. In undermining the binary opposition of mechanical and digital repeatable equivalence and modularity

¹ Note: In the following, all quoted emphasis is original, except where specified otherwise.

with embodied, uniquely instantiated marks, digital lettering allows us to reconsider type's medium-specific expressive potential. N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman note writing's materiality when they argue that our postprint, multimodal, and often no-longer-discrete media production methods underscore that print itself is a medium: when writing media were only

quill pen, inkpot, and paper, it was possible to fantasize that writing was simple and straightforward, a means by which the writer's thoughts could be transferred [...] into the reader's mind. With the proliferation of technical media in the latter half of the nineteenth century, that illusion became more difficult to maintain. (Hayles and Pressman 2013: ix)

Jacob's methods and influences refute any similar expectation that typed lettering conforms, in its discrete regularity and modularity, to this fantasy of a neutral, immediate channel, instead evidencing its affective and expressive qualities. Jacob conveys her admiration of Barry's work, not only describing a sense of affinity between Barry's creative processes and her own but also noting that she discovered Barry's *What It Is* (2008) when first exploring graphic narratives and that the book's writing exercises and conceptual inquiries encouraged her own work (cf. Jacob 2019a, 2019c). Of Barry's idiosyncratic lettering that seemingly arbitrarily alternates between uppercase print and lowercase cursive, Chute writes that denotative interpretations are insufficient and that this "ruffling of the visual surface of the book – this inscription of irregularity – slows one down and also works to establish an extrasemantic visual rhythm through the presentation of words" (2010:111). Without overstating Barry's influence, *Good Talk's* consistent lettering is best contextualized by Jacob's awareness of Barry's material practices, perhaps in addition to Jacob's own experiences writing prose from which she departs in *Good Talk*. Rather than as non-reflexively neutral or driven by efficiency, Jacob's lettering should be understood as an aesthetic technique in its own right. If irregularity may be expressive, so, too, may regularity.

One might recognize an opposite effect to Barry's ruffling in *Good Talk's* legible consistency that matches Jacob's dialogic wit and speed. Also, one might further read for regularity as accentuating difference. Jacob represents her fifth-grade teacher's dialogue in a double-spaced, slab-serif faux-typewritten font that lends her voice conservative rigidity and authority, echoing her role and her stiff, grimacing illustration that is juxtaposed by young Mira's unselfconscious smile and 'naturally' articulated (lettered) voice (cf. Jacob 2019d:49). When Mira's father, dying of cancer, smokes to relieve his discomfort, his stoned voice achieves its visual gag due to its wandering difference from Jacob's standard font treatment (Figure 2, Jacob 2019d:236). Jacob also sometimes adjusts her font size, suggesting dialogic volume. Speed and sometimes-underscored dissonance cannot account for Jacob's insistent

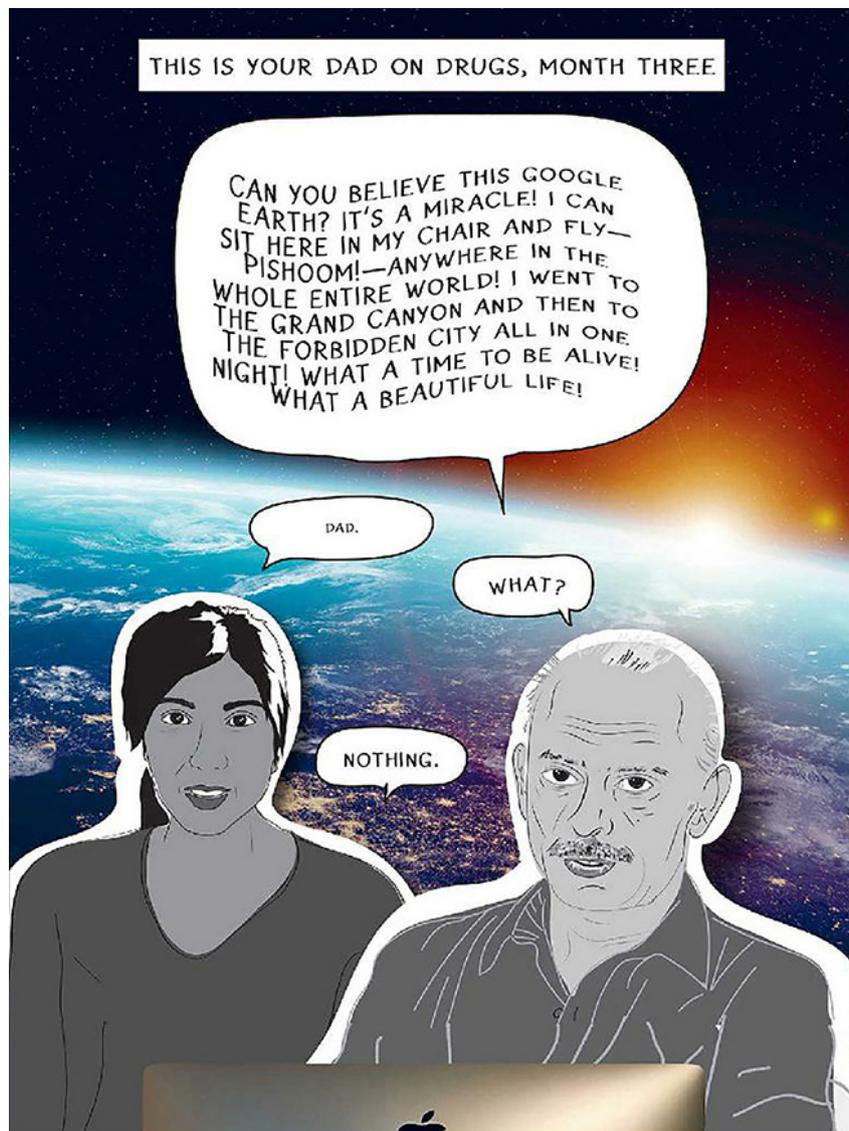


Figure 2. Mira Jacob, *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations*, 236.

regularity; neither effect is so dramatic as to demand consistency, and her short comics are not so typographically restricted.² Furthermore, while letterers often rely on linguistic texture (for example, bold denoting emphasis), *Good Talk* Jacob implements no such sentence-level lettering variations. In accord with her unchanging paper-doll faces that similarly visually deny emotive context (sections 4-5), Jacob rather offers few typographical tonal aids, placing such demands on the reader. Where, as Chute describes, Barry's text demonstrates an extrasemantic rhythmic irregularity in her

² Jacob's 2017 "From His Corner, A Bodega Owner Watches Brooklyn Change" and 2018 "Whereby I Tell My Past Self Future Things," both stylistically similar to *Good Talk* and published in the same period, typographically vary more.

comics, Jacob's very lack of textural variation or emphasis performs an equivalent role by denying her reader recourse to any such expressive support.

These constituent, materially affective marks acquire particular significance in non-fiction cartoonists' distinctly subjective modes of visual witnessing. The twentieth century saw photojournalism's rise, and with it debates on the technical medium's claims of mechanistic truth and objectivity. Integrating comics into the historical tension between photographic and drawn documentary, Chute asserts that comics, as a form "which rejects the verisimilitude of mechanical objectivity and presents in turn a succession of little drawn boxes, reveals its own process of making [... and yet] is also forcefully invested in detailed documentation – of place, of duration, of perspective, of material specificity, of embodiment" (2016:18). Here, Chute asserts that handmade expressions' unique, subjective embodiment accords with a unique experience – once again opposing mechanical processes and reflecting material practices frequently employed in non-fiction comics' creation and interpretation. Renouncing mechanical documentation's false transparency, cartoonists materialize their reflexive subjectivity in the embodied hand.

Cartoonists' drawn opposition to verisimilitude, however, cannot be reduced to abandoning a mechanical form for a subjective one: in a non-fiction context, the truth claims of these media demand consideration. Elisabeth El Refaie draws on Peircean semiotic typology, contrasting photographs' seeming immediacy, iconic in their resemblance and indexical in their dependence on photochemical processes to produce an image, with iconic cartoons which, despite their resemblance, lack an indexical relationship to their content and may in their abstraction tend towards symbolic convention (cf. El Refaie 2012:152). She then approaches non-fiction illustration through Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's social semiotic assertions that visual conventions form the basis of truth values, underscoring naturalism's historical specificity that "there are no necessary or sufficient rules of correspondence between pictures and their real-world referents" (2012:153). Having undermined realism's truth claims and attempting to justify amateur non-fictional style, El Refaie describes an "authentic intention" (2012:155) stylistically characterized by an untrained "aura of the authentic and personal" (2012:155) and suggests that individual style somehow produces a reality effect unaccounted for by Kress or van Leeuwen's cultural conventions. El Refaie briefly considers the stylizing, cartooning hand but, when describing that documentary photographs "redrawn by the hand" retain "some of the[ir] aura of authenticity" (2012:164-165), she treats the hand only as remediating, weakening their indexical relationship. In non-fiction, however, the stakes of connoting truth value are too great to account for differences between photographic immediacy and a cartooned lack thereof only through this gesture towards authenticity or intention.

Hannah Miodrag's comparisons of iconic and symbolic modes offer another account of medium-specific representation. Miodrag describes Umberto Eco's example of "a semicircle and a dot that, in drawing a human face, might represent a smile and

eye, while the exact same forms within the depiction of a bowl of fruit might signify a banana and a grape seed" (Miodrag 2013:9), and further differentiates between figuration that is necessarily instantiated in the *parole* of specific utterances and linguistic combinatory reliance on "a preexistent *langue* – the abstract differential system of language" (2013:9). Here, Miodrag deftly refutes any homology between the constituent, motivated marks of drawing that lack stable semantic iconic value and the arbitrary morphemes of language defined by their semantic value. But in discussing spacing and lexical form, Miodrag notes that such visual configurations,

chiefly looked at here in terms of how they mold the reception of *text*, are vital elements in comics' visual arsenal, but do not operate as signs standing in for an identifiable signified. These devices cannot be considered in isolation from the signifiers they materialize. They constitute the *material* contextual effects that distinguish *parole* from the repeatable conceptual signifiers that constitute the *langue* (2013:79).

Unlike El Refaie's account, which divides style and medium from signification, Miodrag acknowledges the *necessary interdependence* of the sign with its formal and material expression.

Comparing Peirce's indexical-iconic photograph to Chute's description of autobiographical writing and cartooning mark as "forcefully invested in detailed documentation [...] of embodiment" (2016:18) shows both representational forms' material dependence on arising from – and thereby also documenting – their processes of creation upon which their relationship to their objects depends. Externalizing signs' traced conditions of expression from their signification in order to only consider the abstract semantic relationship of signs to conceptual content would ignore their causal relationships to their creation and, by extension, their qualities as a sign. The specific qualities of the material medium and materialized sign are, in practice, interdependent: the documentary sign's indexical connotation of the reality it stands in for would be severed without its material expression. These are stakes of the material trace as connoting the sign's reality, which are precisely the relationships Jacob challenges through her unconventional techniques.

2. Objective and subjective traces

In order to consider Jacob's broader challenges, I turn to her photographs. As she subverts manual-mechanical binaries through her font, so, too, does Jacob unsettle conventional photographic indexicality. Ariella Azoulay's description of the interplay between subjective and objective inscriptions offers one way of interpreting Jacob's strategies.

Azoulay argues

the appearance and disappearance of objects in the gaze of photography do not attest to the essential unreliability of the photograph. They attest, rather, and first and foremost, to the fact that a photograph does not possess a single sovereign, stable point of view [. A] photograph is the product of an encounter of several protagonists, mainly photographer and photographed, camera and spectator. (2010:10-11)

Azoulay rejects the single photographer-subject in favor of a multiple, intersubjective encounter. These implied conditions are potentially “reconstruct[ed]” (2012:121) by the audience’s gaze and imagination, who by recognizing these conditions’ traces may extend their “awareness to all those who took part in the production of the visible, [...] allowing all participants to meet on the same plane, even if momentarily” (2012:121) in what Azoulay calls the audience’s “civil imagination” (2012:121). Azoulay asserts that such traces necessarily include technical media that “inscribe a certain inalienable point of view in arenas where people encounter each other” (2012:27): the camera’s, the mediating object-protagonist that “nobody can identify with” (2012:27) and which thereby denies spectators’ ownership. The encounter’s necessarily incomplete subjective access (as its mechanical protagonist is unknowable) encourages imaginative engagement to subjectively interpret incompletely inscribed encounters, but this trace’s incompleteness also resists total subjective assimilation. Azoulay’s visual trace evidence and subjective recognition aligns with Chute’s reflexive manual documentation, encouraging photographic evidence’s interpretation not in opposition to the manual in its mechanical objectivity but as another documentary trace that also inscribes subjective presence in addition to its visual representation – less ostentatiously than the hand and complicated by its mechanical mediation. Jacob’s iterable font that removes her hand from its unique embodiment encourages us to consider how she employs material remediation in both writing and photography to challenge subjective identification. As the experience of Jacob’s hand becomes independent from any embodied event, so, too, is her photography agnostic to any indexed encounter.

While Jacob sometimes employs documentary photography, her photographic backgrounds often subvert any verifying index by compounding photography’s incomplete subjectivity. Responding to an interviewer describing fictional “world-building” techniques, Jacob states that she “enjoyed placing a character in a certain setting, looking for the right photograph until it said exactly what I needed it to. And I got the same relief doing it that I get writing a good scene in fiction” (2019a: n.pag.). Jacob documents over 250 times she employs others’ photography, accounting for the bulk of her photographic backgrounds. Underscoring world-building

narrative use over verification of, or fidelity to, an event's appearance, Jacob renders the latter suspect through her image-crediting postscriptual index.

For example, Jacob captions a photograph: "I was living in Williamsburg, where the rents were still low and you could see all of glittering Manhattan if you walked down to the East River" (Figure 3, 2019d:126). Juxtaposed with the previous page's technically proficient pre-9/11 New York City skyline, this photograph's reciprocity failure and unassuming content invite the reader to imagine Jacob's repurposed memento or return to her old home to reanimate her past, an intimate moment as we imagine seeing through her camera lens. As Roland Barthes describes the grain of the voice or the hand as the material mark of a subject's embodied effort (1988), this noise might be extended to the mark of an individual photographer's effort as well, the evidence of deviation from technical standards indexed, as Azoulay might agree,



Figure 3. Mira Jacob, *Good Talk*, 126.

simultaneously with its visual content. Jacob, however, attributes this photograph to “Adobe Stock/Bruno Passigatti” (2019d:354). She undermines even her own photographic record, presenting the possibility of subjective insight through intersubjective imagination but then denying it. While her parents’ contextualizing oak kitchen cabinetry bear no external photo credit and therefore indicate that the photographs are Jacob’s, the reader cannot assume that they index or iconically resemble such an experience. Through hyperreal play, the contexts of her often-intimate conversations and revelations, and by extension, the events themselves, remain foreign to us and underscore their function as only *symbolic relays* for experience. Whatever Jacob shows us of her domestic world is a product of world-building, assembled for our benefit, so her reality remains private.

3. Marking oneself

As Jacob subverts photographic expectations, her manipulation of handmade marks – drawing and writing’s material basis – invites a similar exploration into manual and digital connotations. Since the hand’s emotive trace and the photograph’s optical trace also document subjective presences, we may approach Jacob’s digitized hand as it bespeaks the dynamics of presence and disclosure. Friedrich Kittler quotes German nineteenth century journal *Vom Fels zum Meer*’s commentary on the popularization of the typewriter, expressing their anxiety over the lost “intimacy of handwritten expressions” (1999:186) and remarking that, “after the engineer had deprived woman’s tender hand of the actual symbol of female industriousness [weaving], one of his colleagues hit upon replacing the quill, the actual symbol of male intellectual activity, with a machine” (Kittler 1999:186). Rather than exploring gender dualism here, I draw attention to Kittler’s reminder that “[t]he literal meaning of text is tissue” (1999:186)³: the mark, in its embodiment, comes to signify the body itself. Kittler later references Martin Heidegger’s *Parmenides* (1950) comments rejecting the typewriter. Heidegger’s similar unease at type remediating the human hand is most illuminating in his assertion that, without the hand, the “signless cloud” (quoted in Kittler 1999: 199) of the typewritten word is withdrawn from the physical evidence of the writing hand that exists “only where there is [both] disclosure and concealment” (quoted in Kittler 1999:198). Heidegger, like Barthes, deems type’s standardized noiselessness – that only hides its embodied production – lacking. Chute more forcefully defends this originary mark: instead of Heidegger’s suspicions that typing is changing writing, she implies that

³ Referencing the Latin *textus*, tissue or literary style, from “to weave.”

there is some more-authentic *manuscript* when she positions handwriting as closer to the author's body than "retranslated" (2010:11) type (section 1). Preceding her and Spiegelman's comments on Times New Roman, Chute writes,

That the same hand is both writing and drawing in the narrative in comics leads to a sense of the form as diaristic; there is an intimacy to reading handwritten marks on the printed page, an intimacy that works in tandem with the sometimes visceral effects of presenting "private" images.

Handwriting underscores the subjective positionality of the author. Emphasizing the handmade aspect of comics, Spiegelman explains that comics is "as close to getting a clear copy of one's diary or journal as one could have. It's more intimate than a book of prose that's set in type [...]. The quirks of penmanship that make up comics have a much more immediate bridge to somebody [...]. You're getting an incredible amount of information about the maker." (2010:10-11, cf. Spiegelman 1994)

Good Talk pressures the binary of standardized type and grainy handwriting. Having created a repeatable but also unique font from her handwriting, Jacob types in her own hand's discretized image. Although it traces her (vectorized) embodied gesture, and it is through these gestures that her characters speak, her written voice is simultaneously distanced, only the standardized mark mediating the 'bridge' between subjects.

Kashtan likewise challenges the opposition of the hand's 'diaristic' visibility and type's 'concealing' remediation, noting that Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* – diaristic and painstakingly attentive to subjects' handwriting – is (like *Good Talk*) typed by the author in her own hand when not representing documents. He asserts that the presumed material concealment or visibility of the writer's identity is dependent on the graphological optimism that the hand's gesture could unconsciously reveal a stable self rather than socially fluid personae: the "ostensible purpose of graphology was to give its subject an insight into his or her innermost self, but its deeper effect was to reassure the subject that he or she *had* a singular, stable core of selfhood" (Kashtan 2018:34). Kashtan argues that they reveal only the "connotations of personality and intimacy which typewriting lacks" (2018:35) and argues that both graphologists' methods and Chute's diaristic 'sense' reveal their medium bias, a "preference for manual over mechanical labor" in materially claiming authenticity (Kashtan 2018:40). Kashtan describes Bechdel's typed hand as "personal and distinctive, but also reserved and reticent. It exposes itself to a limited degree [...] Bechdel embraces and partially rejects the graphological myth [...]. Alison's depiction of her/self is to some extent a façade" (2018:41). Here, Kashtan might nearly be writing on Jacob's textual practices as well.

Contextualized by Jacob's photographic hyperreal subversion of any disclosed presence, the urgency of materially persuading truth recedes, revealing the limits of Kashtan's interpretive corrections. For all his attention critiquing *historical* graphological connotations of immediacy, Kashtan hazards reducing *formal* mediatic differences to rhetorical performances across media. His account nearly reduces each textual medium's aesthetic specificity to culturally informed material signification, which comes at the expense of recognizing media as formally distinct expressive resources. The expressive and affective connotational differences between Barry's idiosyncratic handwriting and Jacob's almost Comic Sans conspicuousness as a non-connecting script font cannot be reduced to medium-specific socially predetermined conceptualizations of selfhood: we must consider the actual informational legibility of such textual forms. Jacob's font eschews the "incredible amount of information" (1994: n.pag.) Spiegelman ascribes to the hand, not only on the author's supposed *identity* but on her *emotional* state or performance: in her font's typographical flatness, Jacob literally denies access to visual information that emotive lettering might offer. If Bechdel's script speaks to her narrative's partially withheld authenticity, Jacob's, in its photographic context that already denies assurances of reality or experiential access, confirms its distance through its visual informational paucity that forecloses a notable expressive resource in comics. In her chirographic flatness that is contextualized by comics' lettering conventions, Jacob represents her subjectivity neither through materially unreflective myths of textual transparency nor intimate expressive opposition to modular type but rather in writing that in its non-expressivity suggests the formal and semiotic mediating distance between her lived experience and its representation to the reader.

Good Talk's intimate content but materially signified and affectively asserted distance speaks not only to diaristic texture but to specifically diaristic comics. Susan Kirtley describes the tension activated by these comics' telling that "blurs lines between public and private, the diary implying a hidden, secret tale, while the direct address breaks the frame and argues for an implied, decidedly public audience. This [...] *metalepsis* positions the reader as witness, confidante, and friend" (2012:89-90). It is this subjective privacy found in Kirtley's diaristic comics and Chute's embodied hand that *Good Talk* withholds. Texturally, Jacob's figures are incongruous with their photographic backdrops, and repeating vector-drawn caption frames and word balloons draw attention more to their regulated curves than to Jacob's unique hand. Within grey-bordered chapters recalling more distant moments, Jacob's captions situate encounters in time and place and describe intervening events retrospectively and externally. Jacob's verbal pithiness announces its performance for her public audience: Mira's suspended verbal interjection, "Dad. [...] Nothing." (Figure 2), suggests her honest discomfort at her father's uncharacteristic behavior, but Jacob's narration, "This is Your Dad on Drugs" (2019d:236), resists deeper intimacy through its

pop-cultural, jokingly citational tone. In her faster-paced white-bordered chapters set during 2016 and Donald Trump's election, Jacob's interventions are sparser. Typically limited to initial contextualization, if even present, her comments further avoid diaristic revelation, placing the explanatory onus on the depicted encounters themselves. Jacob underscores her captions' descriptive rather than emotionally revealing quality, forgoing even limited text scaling. As with her photographic backgrounds that present the possibility of, but then deny, intimate experiential connections, by articulating her private account through her subjectively unique hand but denying unique visual indexicality, Jacob alters the private-public tension, indicating the former's existence but asserting its subjective absence from the latter address or content. Despite its telling, much of Jacob's experience remains secret: The publicly addressed reader is not Jacob's confidante.

4. Marked experience

I have considered the unique gesture and the repeatable form as visual media supporting the written communication they make possible, and how such marks might affect the reader's perception of authorial subjectivity and expression. Once we have investigated their effects within a restricted scope, it is valuable to explore Jacob's techniques in *Good Talk's* other representational forms constituted by repeated or non-repeated marks, namely, human figures. Considering the mark's subjectivity again, I turn to John Berger's discussion of life drawing's practices and effects. Berger writes, where paintings often disguise their practice by emphasizing mimetic acumen, drawings materially "reveal the process of their own making, their own looking" (2006:43). Berger's claims here underscore embodied marks' temporality. Where Azoulay describes the photographed image's evidencing multiple protagonists' *encounters*, Berger asserts that drawing evidences its necessarily sustained process, a multiplicity of *experiences*. He writes,

A drawing of a tree shows not a tree, but a tree being-looked-at. Whereas the sight of a tree is registered almost instantaneously, the examination of the sight of a tree (a tree being-looked-at) not only takes minutes or hours instead of a fraction of a second, it also involves, derives from, and refers back to, much previous experience of looking. Within the instant of the sight of a tree is established a life-experience. [...] From each glance a drawing assembles a little evidence, but it consists of the evidence of many glances which can be seen together [, ...] so many assembled moments that they constitute a totality rather than a fragment. (Berger 2006:43-44)

Berger asserts the temporal connections between experience, a multiplicity of subjective observations, and their inscription in marks through cyclic glance and gesture. Considered alongside her typed hand, Jacob's explicitly repeated but hand-drawn gestures reveal that they, too, demonstrate her subjective presence while resisting any illusion of experiential transparency or necessary iconic resemblance. Jacob's drawn portraits (derived in some manner from observation) evoke Berger's temporalizing assertions that, in observational drawing, such marks inevitably also evidence the accumulation of experience over time. Susan Stewart similarly asserts the signature's temporality that, like the voice, suggests the personal in its embodiment because it necessarily documents the body over time (cf. Kashtan 2018:28). However, as Jacob eschews her handwriting's unique temporal embodiment through its repetition and as she undermines the photograph's relationship to its documented encounter, she likewise renounces any certainty that her drawings reveal in their resemblance to an observation or memory of the unique experienced event they illustrate. Jacob extensively reuses her small cast of 'paper dolls' that she digitally drew for *Good Talk*, often transplanting complete figures, including their simulated cuts, between panels. Even when hair or clothing changes, poses and expressions – staring at the reader, mouth slightly ajar – typically remain. Although Mira, her husband Jed, and their son Z's expressions change over time, their expressions are consistent within each period, and her parents and brother retain theirs even as they age. Outside of Mira's immediate family and closest friends, this decontextualizing repetition is more pronounced as figures often become iterable categories: her teenage boyfriend returns as a teenage witness alongside adult Mira and a decade later reappears as a fellow passenger. Jacob severs the relationship between these figures and her experiences of individual events or people. To undermine not only index but resemblance questions both objective and subjective access and experiential identification, reducing experiences and figures to their abstracted type as well as emphasizing their role as only (potentially arbitrary) relays in service of merely telling rather than iconically or indexically reflecting or recording her experience.

Jacob's repudiation of the individual gesture or experience is not absolute. As Berger's drawings pull in lived experience, Jacob's do as well. Her rare diagrams illuminate this capacity. Often denoted by graph or lined paper, when Jacob depicts thoughts or summarizes complex events she does so by diagramming and illustrating (Figure 4, Jacob 2019d:38.2). By foregrounding her drawings' decontextualization and iterability, Jacob refuses to guarantee any iconic resemblance to their referents and can draw attention to cartooning as abstraction. Instead of denying the complex depth of their referents, her cartooning materially draws attention to its limits as a signifier that only references such depth. Jacob states,

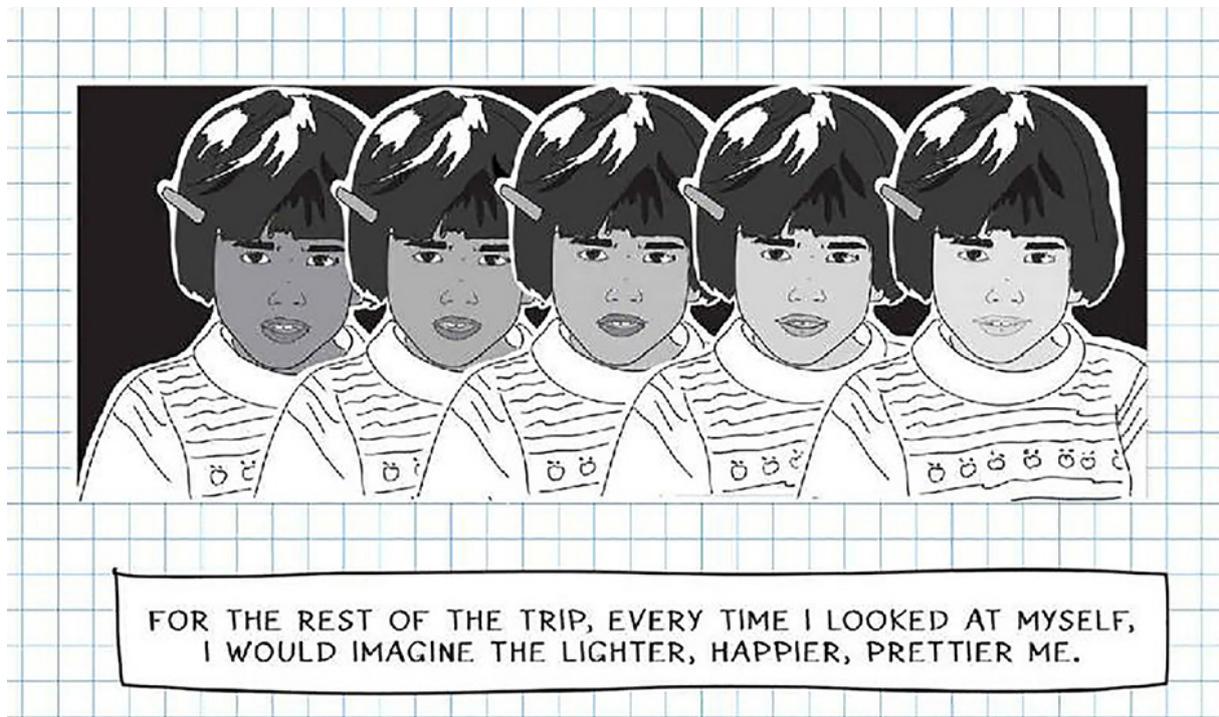


Figure 4. Mira Jacob, *Good Talk*, 38.2.

I imagine that my mother is much more complicated than she appears on the panels in the book, and so are my in-laws and my husband and my child – and so am I. This is a portion of us, and it's never going to be all of us. (2019e)

Ironically, it is Jacob's refusal to represent a moment through precise visual description – for instance a particular expression or a stranger's individuated face – that implies the complexity of represented individuals in her figures' representational insufficiency. Jacob's invocation of imagination as necessarily speculative supposition evokes Azoulay's civil imagination in this recognized complexity that denies certain knowledge in its interruptions.

In accordance with his *tressage* argument, describing nonlinear visual series within linear comics narratives, Thierry Groensteen argues that

once the same motif is represented several times it transports all of its attributes (its predicates) along with it. If we want to provide recognition to the descriptive properties of the drawing, we must therefore admit that it is a description that is infinitely restarted, to which we cannot assign a particular site. (2007:124)

Denied of their unique instantiation in the embodied gesture and of a moment, Jacob's 'paper dolls' resist stable experiential identification and necessarily foreground their abstracted role as such 'infinitely restarting' networked relays of accumulated meaning. I employ Jacob's 'paper dolls' terminology in part to articulate their connection to her prototypical collages but also to reflect their significance to her process. Jacob describes realizing the "urgency" she could effect if she "let the paper dolls speak and if [she] couldn't rely on expressions but [she] also couldn't rely on action. Right. Nobody ever moves. [...] They're just holding the space of basically a brain or a psyche on the page" (2020a; transcription amended according to audio). Whether articulating Jacob's complicated memories of herself and her family in their networked proliferation or as figural palimpsests evidencing their visual and psychic representational insufficiency, these forms' iterable, non-expressive flatness again encourages the reader's imagination of their subjective existence.

Through these interruptions, Jacob denies the reader the sight of her sight and resists their illusions of knowing her experience.

5. Positioned subjects

Jacob's networked repeated forms are not geometric abstractions but representations of other humans addressing the reader through their gaze. Drawing attention to the reader's encounters with her figures through positioning and simulated gazes, Jacob socially charges the experience of sight and space. In writing on the vanishing point's cultural development, Erwin Panofsky notes that linear perspective has rationalized the "subjective visual impression" (1991:66) such that "this very impression could itself become the foundation for a solidly grounded [...] experiential world," (1991:66) perspectively producing a "subjective standpoint of a beholder" (1991:66) in such an intimately experienced space. When Panofsky cites Albrecht Dürer's commentary that "'Perspectiva' is a Latin word which means 'seeing through,'" (Panofsky 1991:27) he evokes the doubled experience of the picture plane as both material surface and illusionistic window. In considering Jacob's compositions within graphic memoir, one might extend Panofsky's argument to 'seeing through' another's unique perspective and experience. If the 'subjective standpoint of the beholder' may imbricate the art-beholding audience's position with that of the event-beholding subjective photographer/drawer, Jacob's subversion of both the photographic index and the observational or mnemonic assembly also representationally subverts her audience's identification with her observing perspective: she denies the fantasy of a shared position and visual experience.

Jacob does not wholly eschew perspectival positioning but instead precisely and often uncomfortably situates her reader through it. As her paper dolls' placement and

scale accords with their photographic perspectival environments, the dolls' persistently returned gazes are necessarily directed towards the reader's position relative to the picture plane. As figures talk to one another while facing the reader in these encounters, Jacob metaleptically positions us as addressees as much as she positions any character. Jacob describes her emotional exhaustion trying to express herself during Trump's rise, throughout which her and other non-White Americans' "White liberal friends were saying, 'This identity politics is really what's the problem.' In the moment that we're feeling the anxiety for real things that are happening, our friends are saying [,] 'Part of the problem is that you're feeling the anxiety'" (2019b: n.pag.). Jacob's subsequent question, "How the fuck do you *look* at someone and say that?" (2019b: n.pag., emphasis added) in her anger and disbelief also implies her belief or hope that the encounter with another should effect solidarity. Responding to this emotionally unreceptive White denial, Jacob describes that her 'paper dolls'

helped me skip [...] the step where I felt all the disbelief. [...] It] became a question of eavesdropping. People can listen or they can not. I just kept moving our unchanging expressions from album cover to album cover [... It] felt like such a relief to do that. [...] To not engage with those voices of doubt, to give them nothing – no part of my emotion, no part of my pain beyond the conversation itself.

My first editor commented and said, "It's jarring when you're having these emotional passages and nobody's face moves, do you think you want to make one or two expressions? A consternation face, or when something's really sad, a little hint of a tear?" And I said, No. I'm not performing this. And that thing that you're feeling when you're uncomfortable because you have to hold the emotion that my face won't? I want that. Because when you stop looking to the characters to emote, the feelings land on you, and you have to make sense of it. The whole reason I wrote this book is because I think America has this kind of insatiable hunger for witnessing racial pain, and then denying it. Demanding the details from bodies of color and then using them to deny all the ways in which those experiences could possibly be true. (Jacob 2020b: n.pag.)

I quote Jacob at length here to underscore the emotional and political commitments underlying her reticence. She politicizes comics' frequently described informational paucity and resultant participatory demands of reader inference: by refusing to emotionally perform the embodied mark – refusing to do the labor of easing the reader's access by performing under their gaze – she instead subjects them to her characters' unemotive script and stares.

It is also through these looks that Jacob asserts the subjectivity that she refuses to perform. A reader's discomfort under simulated gazes is not provoked by their unknowable *distance* from the other but by their *contact* with the other and the emotional work that it demands. Sarah Ahmed's understanding of the intersubjective social encounter as the event through which the subject itself is constituted (2000:23) is particularly relevant to Jacob's explicitly social aesthetic that invites Azoulay's civil imagination. Ahmed argues that "there is no body as such that is given in the world" (2000:40) that instead "bodies materialise in a complex set of temporal and spatial relations to other bodies, including bodies that are recognized as familiar [...] and those that are considered strange" (2000:40). Through Elizabeth Grosz' physically, disciplinarily inscribed body, Jacques Lacan's misrecognizing identification, and Frantz Fanon's racially specific reworking of Lacan's theories, Ahmed argues the contingency of the embodied subject and its contingency on identifying itself relative to specific, rather than abstract, others (2000:42-44). She privileges the skin as the site of this contact: along with its immediate visual signs of difference, Ahmed describes skin as

a border or boundary, supposedly holding or containing the subject within a certain contour, keeping the subject inside, and the other outside; or in Frantz Fanon's terms, the skin becomes *a seal* [... But] Jean-Luc Nancy discusses the skin as an *exposure* to the other, as always passing from one to the other [... If] the skin is a border, then it is *a border that feels*. [... While] the skin appears to be the matter which separates the body, it rather allows us to think of how the materialization of our bodies involves, not containment, but an affective opening out of bodies to other bodies, in the sense that the skin registers how bodies are touched by others. Sue Cataldi's concern with skin as an 'ambiguous, shifting border' centres on the question of how our skin 'paradoxically protects us from others and exposes us to them.' (Ahmed 2000:44-5)

Ahmed's description of this intersubjective barrier and contact resonates with the limning cuts of Jacob's 'paper dolls.' These borders, which cast their digital shadows and obscure other forms behind them, more clearly define their contained figures through the same space that isolates their contents. But it is also only through these mediating spaces that their contained subjects have any contact with their reality. Occasionally – most often between family – these distinctions dissolve as their white trim space exists contiguously with their neighbors'. These spaces, neither static, iconic, nor impenetrable, may be best understood through Ahmed and Cataldi's paradoxical border.

6. Scrapbooked conversations

As much as they isolate figures, these white spaces perform a more literal role, clarified by Jacob's term, 'paper dolls': they identify and differentiate themselves as objects within their page's composition. Jacob's scrapbooked object fulfills a similar role to the conventional cartooned mark that evidences the autobiographer's subjective presence. I distinguish scrapbooking from broader collage techniques through Jacob's gendered description of her cut-outs and their explicitly autobiographical function in her work. Jacob invites her work's gendered reading when describing *Good Talk*'s influences that Barry creates "stories that are both domestic and feral, and that's the space that I was living in with this [book]" (2020b: n.pag.). Jacob's objectification of personal experiences in digital distance, similarly to Ahmed's inside-outside border that both contains and exposes as well as Barry's conjoined domestic-feral narrative structures, maybe better interpreted not in opposition to handmade intimacy but in continuity with it. As Barry's idiosyncratic expressive lettering helps illuminate Jacob's digitally reticent fonts, Barry's collages aid in interpreting Jacob's digital forms.

Despite their materially distinct styles (superficially, Jacob's digitally proliferating objects bear little resemblance to Barry's handmade pages), these artists share underlying scrapbooked compositional practices. Kirtley, introducing Barry's cartooned and collaged "autobifictionalography" (Barry 2002: unpaginated indicia) *One! Hundred! Demons!*, writes that

Barry fashions a scrapbook of sorts, employing this gendered, domestic form to frame her life stories with ephemera from childhood and artistic collages [...] These shaped and constructed images of Barry's life focus on girlhood as mediated through her memory and her skills [...] suggesting a vision that stresses an archival record of personal history through interposing lenses of time and technology. (Kirtley 2012:148)

This archive presents a self that, Kirtley writes, "incorporates artistic renditions of identity along with photographic evidence and mass-produced artifacts, blending an inner vision of character with historical documentation. Through this method, the creator herself remains essentially obscure, revealing her soul while retaining some measure of privacy" (2012:153). Contextualized by Barry's influence on Jacob and my refutation of manual and mechanical oppositions, Barry's manual composition of a physical archive becomes less relevant, and Kirtley's account of materially arranged subjectivity is revealed as equally applicable to *Good Talk*. Reading Jacob's mediation only as more mediated, non-manual, and therefore less immediately available would be reductive. Instead, I find Jacob's digital construction compelling because this arrangement *also* exposes her subjective archive: her "scrapbooking" is simultaneously reticent and intimate. I now explore this latter intimacy.

Z's Michael Jackson album covers compose three-quarters of Jacob's "37 Questions" backgrounds, which *Good Talk's* first chapter retains. Z's questions and Mira's answers address Z's biracial identity, his favorite singer's appearance over time, and tensions around racial police violence and the emergent Black Lives Matter movement, so the unmentioned albums naturally imply intertextual conversation with the narrative (Figure 1, 2015). These dialogues between mother and son, written and drawn in her hand and using his objects of identification, somewhat inexpertly photographed by her on their table (2019e) return in *Good Talk*. This reveals, beneath its disembodied digitality, its intimate archival practice akin to Barry's discussed above. While Jackson's album covers are photographs, Jacob treats them as objects as much as she does her 'paper dolls' or cut-out word balloons. Similarly, *Good Talk's* photographs may be understood first as composed objects rather than as indexing encounters prior to their repurposing by Jacob. Her discrete hand and her roughly cut and repeated dolls, like her photographic backgrounds, communicate meaning as arranged mnemonic symbols and relays which are denied iconicity and indexicality. Like Berger's drawn rather than painted mark, Jacob's objects reflexively account for their subjective creation through their insistent (if digital) materiality.

Recognizing formal similarities between Jacob and Barry's practices, Kirtley's writing on Barry offers another way of reading Jacob's compositions. On Barry's work, Kirtley cites *The Scrapbook in American History*, that "Scrapbooks shuffle and recombine the coordinates of time, space, location, voice, and memory" and later argues that they "are a material manifestation of memory – the memory of the compiler and the memory of the cultural moment in which they were made. [...] They are but partial, coded, accounts – very small tellings of memory" (quoted in Kirtley 2012:173). Recalling Jacob's comment that her 'paper dolls' substitute for "a brain or a psyche on the page" (2020a) and recognizing that they still are, regardless of vectored regulation, the materialization of people being-looked-at, these objectified relays which preserve fragmentary conversations may be understood as Jacob's encoded, 'material manifestation of memory' as much as any ephemera might. Jacob describes,

I think we all have those conversations that just live in our brains forever, because they have informed some part of us so deeply. [...] I gave the book to my family and in-laws before I published it. I said, "This is what's in there and let's talk." (Jacob 2019e: n.pag.)

Jacob's paired deictics are ambiguous: she may mean 'this,' the book's contents, and 'there,' the book-object but, contextualized by her prior statement, 'this' may be as much her memory – as materially relayed through her book – held 'there,' in her

consciousness. Describing a memoir, this polysemy may seem redundant. However, contextualized by Jacob's emphatic refusal to perform her pain, in the face of White American denial of such pain, this materialization is significant. When she refuses to perform, Jacob neither denies her vulnerability nor subjective archival/mnemonic exposure; she only resists easily available identification. Through this exclusion and structuring of her memoir entirely 'in Conversations' in which depicted subjects perpetually address us, we are implicated and asked to interpret these encounters that compose her memoir. We, too, are involved, even if only as 'eavesdroppers.'

In this understanding, the page's surface itself repeats the skin's paradoxical border. Jacob's emotional reticence and placement of the intersubjective onus on us is also her invitation to participate in Azoulay's civil imagination and interpretive labor. Unlike the embodied materiality of graphic memoirs which employ the intimate hand, or that of anxiously performative confessions that Charles Hatfield traces from Justin Green's genre-defining *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (2005),⁴ *Good Talk's* digital materiality is better understood through Kirtley's arranged, archival scrapbook. Recalling the typewriter's severing of the word from the noisy and embodied tissue of the hand, Jacob severs her memoir from the emotively embodied mark in favor of the objectified and composed, discrete form.

Jacob, through this alternative material subjectivity that announces our difference, also sometimes more intimately addresses and includes us. When Jacob relents from this layered density, she allows our limited inclusion in her conversations. She most often signals this by forgoing the visual framing that divides her textual narration (denoted by caption boxes) from the past Mira (whose enunciations are contained by conversational word balloons). Instead, she presents a free-floating and unframed text. Jacob most personally and directly addresses the reader in conversation in this infrequent unbounded format, for instance when she writes over her family album-like pages and for a moment returns intersubjectivity to the event of photography, allowing us to position ourselves *with* her family. In this mode, she allows us to view discrepancies between her enclosed spoken dialogue and her unframed internal monologue. In this register, Jacob shares her hope listening to Barack Obama's campaign speech; addresses us, too, in her aspirational letter to Z that her son has not yet read; admits to morally failing the mother whose grief she did not recognize. Stripped of the dense network of filial expectations, comics conventions, wit, and protective 'paper doll' limning, it is also in this unbounded form that she illustrates her and her father's

⁴ While Green's underground comix autobiography is justifiably recognized for its influence, in considering non-White American non-fiction and comics subjectivity, I draw attention to Miné Okubo's precedent graphic memoir *Citizen 13660* (1946) that expressionistically documents the Japanese-American incarceration alongside her unemotional typed captions. Ho Che Anderson's *King. A Comics Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr* (2005), like *Good Talk*, formally foregrounds experience's mediation and assembly.

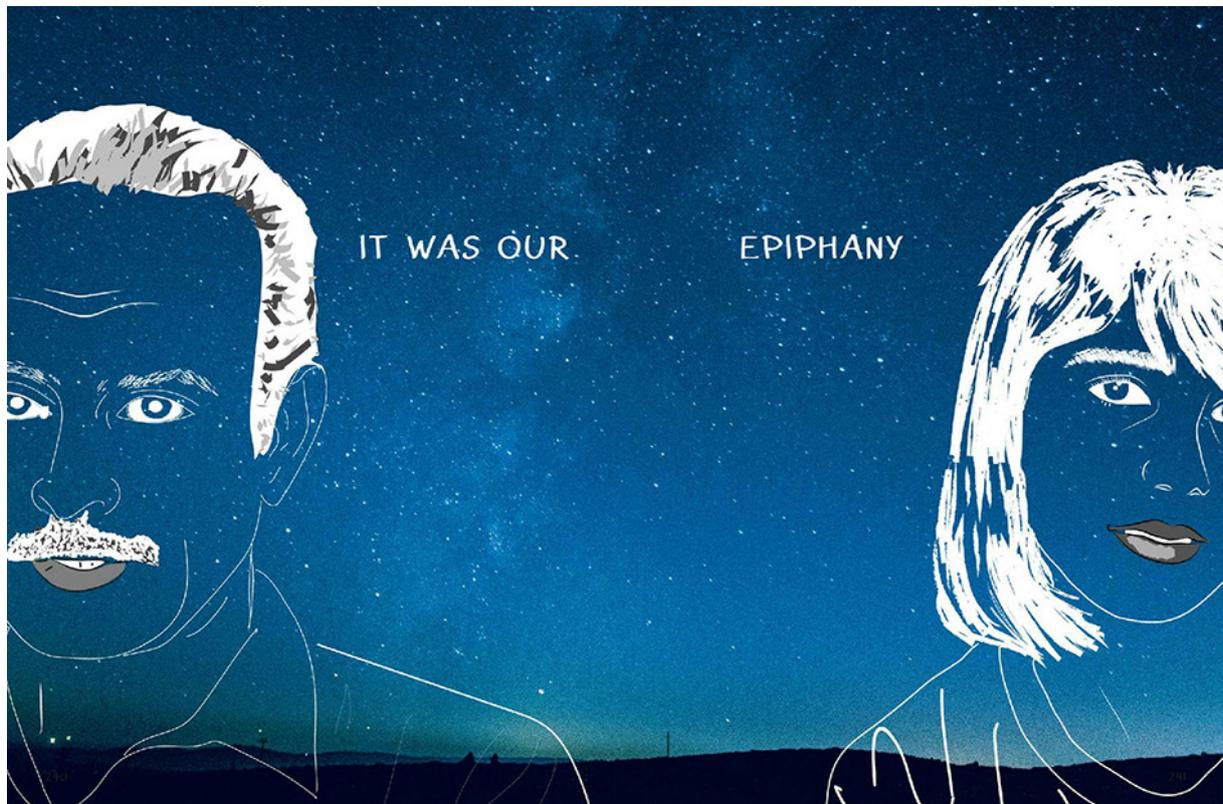


Figure 5. Mira Jacob, *Good Talk*, 240-241.

shared recognition of his impending death (Figure 5, 2019d:240-241). No longer contained by discrete cuts or protective skins, it becomes irrelevant that Mira and her father's marks are not unique, that they neither depend upon nor express the likeness of the moment. They are still *Jacob's* marks, and they address us as seeing and seen in their drawing as much as they, in their depicted gazes and mirrored across the book gutter, address and see each other.

Interpreting Jacob's innovative book, I have reconsidered interrelated material and semiotic associations of truth value with causation and resemblance, modeling how authorial and readerly attention to non-fiction materials and textures might likewise foster ethical attention to communicative and representational processes and, by extension, to the represented experiences. By manipulating and subverting causal and socially expected relationships between signs' material characteristics and their conceptual and experiential content, *Good Talk* presents alternative symbolic, interrupted, reticent, and hyperreal practices and ethics of non-fiction founded on demonstrating its communicative and intersubjective limits to invite more meaningful recognition. Jacob's gazes, these invitations – not to embody another's gesture but to see another's subjectivity and to be seen – evoke this article's epigraph, in which Jacob so succinctly offers her humanity but refuses to implore her audience to accept it and refuses to do

the work of performing it for them, “You see it if you want” (2019a). But these invitations are also recognizable in her closing letter to Z in which she writes, “I hope that you will remember that your heart is a good one, and that your capacity to feel love, in all its complexity, is a gift” (2019d:346). Between these two addresses, one confrontational and the other crucially sharing a letter that, despite its publicity, undeniably addresses Z, we might recognize Jacob’s aspiration that, despite her doubt, such a love that she wishes for is one made richer by encountering and recognizing others’ complexity. As non-fiction manually embodied cartooning risks reader narcissism in the same lines through which it invites empathetic identification, so, too, do Jacob’s ‘paper dolls’ risk depthless legibility as dimensionless signs through the same structures that invites meaningful conversation, but this is a worthy risk.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Katherine Kelp-Stebbins and Michael Allan for their invaluable guidance and encouragement in developing this article, and Stephan Packard, Lukas R.A. Wilde, and the reviewers of this issue for their support and insights.

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