‘The Gutters of History’: Geopolitical Pasts and Imperial Presents in Recent Graphic Non-Fiction

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Introduction: Iran and the Axis of Evil

On 23 January 2002, George W. Bush described states such as North Korea, Iraq and Iran as ‘an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world’.[1] Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham reveal how Bush’s phrase functioned as

> a kind of cognitive breakthrough, an effort to restructure the international system as it was in the 1930s—an attempt to see the world through the eyes of that period. Recalling the Second World War, the Axis Powers are evil, and the implication is that something must be done about them.[2]

By invoking the twentieth-century’s well-trodden historical organisation of complex global forces into the binary categories of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, Bush justified continued US imperial intervention in the Middle East in the twenty-first. Meanwhile, he erased the history of invasive foreign policies and geopolitical provocations that have long informed the fraught relations between the two regions. Bush thus produced Iran as a convenient ‘other’, a metaphoric and symbolic scaffolding up against which the US could be (re)constructed as a beacon of progress, democracy and liberal humanism.

In his repurposing of the phrase ‘axis of evil’, Bush reproduced a dualism that for the postcolonial critic Derek Gregory is built into colonial modernity: ‘Modernity produces its other, verso to recto, as a way of at once producing and privileging itself’.[3] Drawing on the notion of ‘imaginative geographies’ first outlined by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978), Gregory asks: ‘what else is the war on terror other than the violent return of the colonial past, with its split geographies of “us” and “them”, “civilisation” and “barbarism”, “Good” and “Evil”?’[4] This is ‘the colonial present’, in which a repertoire of rhetorical signifiers tar with the same simplistic brush a geographically, racially and culturally distinct ‘other’ from which all ‘evil’ originates independently of the West. Prior historical entanglement or even provocation are smoothed over and erased by such rhetoric.

Gregory’s term is specifically designed to highlight the continuities between the discursive strategies of the colonial past, as documented by Said in *Orientalism*, and the West’s present day imperial endeavours. If geographical distance enables Bush's historical misrepresentation of US-Middle East relations, the graphic non-fiction discussed in this chapter sets out to show how the US and Middle East are in fact historically, as well as socially, politically and economically, bound up with one another. It is by foregrounding such entanglements that this graphic non-fiction sets out to challenge and dismantle the proto-colonialist rhetoric of which the phrase ‘axis of evil’ is symptomatic.

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[1] Bush, ‘Redefining the U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda’, 4.
[2] Heradstveit and Bonham, ‘What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran’, 422.
[3] Gregory, *Colonial Present*, 4.
[4] Gregory, *Colonial Present*, 11.

The concept of imaginative geographies also raises dynamics of 'seeing', and it is into this geo-historical plane of orientalist vision that the comics I will discuss most effectively intervene. As Gregory writes:

> vision is always partial and provisional, culturally produced and performed, and it depends on spaces of constructed visibility that—even as they claim to render the opacities of 'other spaces' transparent—are always also spaces of constructed invisibility. The production of the colonial present has not diminished the need for contrapuntal geographies.[5]

Gregory here transposes Said's later notion of 'contrapuntal reading' into a geographical or spatial mode of representation. Contrapuntal reading, Said writes, 'must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded' (1993, 66-67).[6] I argue that the comics addressed in this chapter offer a contrapuntal reading of the colonial present's orientalist rhetoric in order to challenge it, while also challenging a tendency to fetishise the imaginative power of the comics 'gutter' in much comics criticism. For it is in a contrapuntal sense that I deploy the phrase included in the title of this chapter, 'the gutters of history': the comics' gutters *materialise* contrapuntal geographies and histories spatially on the page, thereby accounting for the historical omissions of the colonial present and reinserting them to effectively challenge the West's contemporary neo-imperial interference in the Middle East.

Persepolis and the Gutters of History

Writing in 2011 in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Iranian historian and cultural critic Hamid Dabashi offered a succinct answer to Gayatri Spivak's notorious postcolonial question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?':

> Of course s/he [the subaltern] does; of course s/he has. The subaltern needs no representation, or theorisation, or terrorisation from any English and Comparative Literature department. This is the enduring lesson of Edward Said [...] who to his dying day remained critical of his colleagues who were mystifying people's struggles in a prose and politics that even their own colleagues could not understand.[7]

Speaking of the way in which Iranians and other Middle Eastern peoples are represented in the US in the post-9/11 era of the 'War on Terror', Dabashi contends that the problem is not whether subalterns can speak. It is whether Western scholars, critics and readers, who are either blinkered by dominant historical narratives or, conversely, preoccupied with 'agonising about the gap between their own intellectual discourse and the natives of whom they speak', are capable of listening to them.[8] In recent years, with their gradual mainstreaming as a 'serious' cultural form, comics—and especially works of graphic non-fiction—have become a medium through which such modes of listening might be more effectively achieved.

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[5] Gregory, *Colonial Present*, 12.
[6] Said, *Culture & Imperialism*, 66-67.
[7] Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*, 77.
[8] Eagleton, 'In the Gaudy Supermarket', 3.

Though concurring with such assertions, I will also challenge here some of claims made for the formal components of comics that do this work. In her comments on the movement of graphic art through the global marketplace, and indicatively citing Said's own preface to the 2001 collected edition of Sacco's *Palestine*, Gillian Whitlock acknowledges that 'difference is not transcended or resolved in these transits'.[9] Nevertheless, she maintains that comics are, in the end, able to circumvent such problems because 'the essence is the medium not the message', emphasising one of their formal components in particular:

> the gutters of comics [are] aporia—blank spaces where new meanings can be generated and a distinctive cross-cultural translation can occur. This is a meaning produced in an active process of imaginative production whereby the reader shuttles between words and images, and navigates across gutters and frames, being moved to see, feel, or think differently in the effort of producing narrative closure.[10]

This emphasis on the radical potential of the gutter is a legacy of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993), where he claims that 'the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics'.[11] This has been much repeated by comics critics, including Thierry Groensteen, who in *The System of Comics* goes some way toward challenging the fetishisation of the gutter (it is 'insignificant in itself') but who still maintains that 'the polysyntactic gutter is the site of a reciprocal determination, and it is in this dialectic interaction that meaning is constructed, not without the active participation of the reader'.[12] Most recently, Kate Polak has added yet another qualificatory layer to this ongoing discussion: 'we don't automatically project a new connecting image into the space between the panel we just read and the panel we are about to read. What we instead do is use the gutter as a cue to employ our imagination in connecting the images'. Nevertheless, Polak still remains convinced that it is 'the constructedness of the page, highlighted by the gutter, [that] creates a space of imaginative possibility'.[13]

There is here a fairly well-trodden critical route that invests not comics' images, varied and vibrant as they are, with the ability to provide cross-cultural communication and historical reevaluation, but rather the empty spaces in between them. It might therefore be tempting to argue that it is in the gutter that comics' contrapuntal histories are formed and foregrounded. But I want to set aside this reading, for it is not what I mean by the phrase 'gutters of history', at least as they function in relation to the graphic non-fiction discussed in this chapter. I am suspicious of the emphasis on the imaginative work that takes place in the gutter, first because 'closure' denotes a rather conservative ideological movement that might serve to close down rather than challenge and fragment the historical narratives of the colonial present. But second and more importantly, the graphic non-fiction to which I will turn in the next section of this chapter tends *not* to present the gutter as a 'blank space' into which the reader projects their own counter-historical narrative. Rather, these gutters are resolutely 'filled in' with visual metaphorical signifiers of the contrapuntal history that the comics hope to make visible. Their gutters are not blank spaces inviting imaginative reconstruction (perhaps even speculation), but quite the opposite. Exposing contrapuntally the gutters of history, the gaps between panels

[9] Whitlock, 'Autographics', 969.
[10] Whitlock, 'Autographics', 977.
[11] McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 66.
[12] Groensteen, *System of Comics*, 114-115.
[13] Polak, *Ethics in the Gutter*, 12.

offer clear signifiers that direct readers very specifically toward the longer geopolitical histories that underpin the colonial present.

It is first worth tracing the critical genealogy of Whitlock's assertion a little more closely, because it leads us back to Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, a comic that has garnered, since its first translation from French into English in 2003, widespread critical celebration and unprecedented sales figures.[14] While *Persepolis* is undeniably a brilliant comic, its success beyond (and perhaps also within) the academy is surely in large part due to the historicity of its moment of publication. As many readers will know, the first volume, *Story of a Childhood*, tells the story of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution from the perspective of a young Satrapi. 'Marji' is a rebellious young girl who enjoys rock music and cigarettes rather than Islamic culture and dress, while the Islamic Revolution is depicted as an oppressive movement opposed to the 'decadence' of 'capitalism' and 'the West'.[15] Without denying the authoritarianism of Iran's post-revolutionary governance, a surface level reading of *Persepolis* squares neatly with the narratives of the colonial present that justified a new US-led war in the Middle East (its first translation into English after all coincided with the US invasion of Iraq). It paints a broad picture of young girls having their freedoms abused by bearded, anti-democratic and oppressive Islamic men, a story that when accepted uncritically appears to support Western intervention rather than challenge it.[16]

Whitlock takes her argument about the importance of the 'blank spaces' of the gutter to comics' 'cross-cultural communication' from Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley's commentary on *Persepolis*, who writing in 2005 themselves acknowledge that 'part of the appeal of this book may be that there is currently in the West a greater interest in hearing from a member of the axis of evil, especially in an autobiographical form that promises to disclose the intimate secrets of an exotic other'.[17] They further concede that *Persepolis* 'demonstrates liberalism's need for an abject or menacing other', particularly through its reconfirmation of 'stereotypes of [...] subjugated, veiled Muslim women'; and yet they also insist that the comic still 'disrupts the categories of good and evil which have emerged in recent Western political discourse about the East, particularly Islamic countries'. Importantly, they claim that this subversive 'work' takes place in the gutter, before then conceding once more that such 'empty spaces in the text that can either be filled with easy answers provided by the dominant ideology or they can function as sites of *aporia*'—the aporia of the gutter being Whitlock's above noted point of departure.[18]

These critics thus locate the radical potential of *Persepolis*' historical counter to the rhetoric of the colonial present not so much in Satrapi's drawn images, but in the blank spaces of her comic's gutters. Yet because these gutters are blank and open to interpretation, even these commentators concede that *Persepolis* might just as easily reproduce the 'dominant ideology', as Naghibi and O'Malley call it, as it might offer a contrapuntal reading of geopolitical history and contemporary modes of imperialism. The fetishisation of the subversive space of the comic's gutters in these arguments is further complicated by the fact that *Persepolis*' global success is in no small part due to the widely celebrated film adaptation, which though co-directed and mostly drawn by Satrapi herself, of course has no gutters at all. I therefore share Joseph Darda's slightly more cautious engagement with *Persepolis*, who notes that though commentators claim 'that the graphic memoir is uniquely capable of making

[14] See Malek, 'Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production', 369.
[15] Satrapi, *Persepolis*, 4.
[16] See Davies, 'Postcolonial Comics', 17-22.
[17] Naghibi and O'Malley, 'Estranging the Familiar', 224.
[18] Naghibi and O'Malley, 'Estranging the Familiar', 245-246; Whitlock, 'Autographics', 977.

an ethical appeal to the reader', exactly 'what this mechanism is and how it functions in the text' remains unclear.[19]

The empty gutter and the iconicity (or 'universality') of the cartoon face, both of which are rooted in McCloud's work, are frequently cited by critics as the specific formal attributes that allow comics to transcend 'many of the national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries imposed by other media'.[20] But as Darda asks:

> It is not altogether clear from these accounts, however, what places this act of reading in the ethical realm. What compels the reader to meet the demands of the autographic? If the text encourages us to inhabit the precepts of the narrator, is this a site of ethics or one of egoism?[21]

While I am more interested in geopolitical and imperial rather than 'ethical' histories in this chapter, I am similarly wary of an ambiguous recourse to the mechanism of the gutter or the icon. We can therefore expand Darda's contention that the comics' 'form does not construct a better or more accurate representation of trauma and otherness' (to which we might therefore add colonial and imperial histories), but rather 'it highlights the constructedness of representation in general' (to include then the politically motivated fabrications of the colonial present), and in so doing facilitates 'understandings outside of our prescribed notions of difference' (that is, a realisation that the rhetoric of the colonial present is very much a continuation of systematic imperial interference in a region that the West seeks, and has always sought, to demonise).

I want then to emphasise that what I am calling the 'gutters of history' pertains more precisely to the way in which comics recover and reevaluate the history of Western-Middle Eastern relations in the twentieth-century, thereby correcting the strategic omissions of the 'war on terror' and 'axis of evil' rhetorics of the colonial present. In the case of *Persepolis*, these strategies are in fact to be found in the paratexts that 'frame' the way readers approach Satrapi's comic, rather than in the comic's pages (whether panels or gutters) themselves.

This is not to say that Satrapi does not challenge the dominant historical narrative of the colonial present in her comic. Very early on, Marji's father explains to his young daughter how the authoritarian Shah came to power, and an entire page dramatises Britain's influence on Iranian politics through a conversation between the then future Shah and a British colonial officer: '"When you are emperor [...] you will have everything."/ [...] "What do I have to do?"/ "Nothing! You just give us the oil and we'll take care of the rest"'.[22] The comic clearly informs readers that Britain, and perhaps by implication the West more generally, has long had local influence in Iran, installing authoritarian regimes that facilitate its imperialist appetite for Persian oil.

Nevertheless, when situated within the context of the post-9/11 colonial present, this is not a drastic condemnation of the West's historical imperial intervention. While the British are criticised somewhat, there is virtually no mention of twentieth-century US-Iranian relations. *Persepolis* does not itself answer Gregory's call to reveal 'the continuing impositions and exactions of colonialism in order to subvert them: to examine them, disavow them, and dispel them'.[23] The claim for *Persepolis* as a project of 'historical reclamation', as

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[19] Darda, 'Graphic Ethics', 32.
[20] Parker Royal, 'Foreword', x; Elahi, 'Frames and Mirrors', 314-315.
[21] Darda, 'Graphic Ethics', 34.
[22] Satrapi, *Persepolis*, 21.
[23] Gregory, *Colonial Present*, 9.

Darda notes, is made not so much by the comic's content, but rather by Satrapi's preface, which now introduces the most widely read 2008 English translation that is also branded with the film's cover art. Here, Satrapi claims that her motivations for writing and drawing *Persepolis* were to counter twenty-first-century connections of Iran 'with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism'—and she continues, 'an entire nation should not be judged by the wrong-doings of a few extremists'. Interestingly, it is in this preface, which directly addresses itself to the rhetoric of the colonial present, that she details one particularly important historical moment that is nevertheless omitted from the comic itself:

> In 1951, Mohammed Mossadeq, then prime minister of Iran, nationalised the oil industry. In retaliation, Great Britain organised an embargo on all exports of oil from Iran. In 1953, the CIA, with the help of British intelligence, organised a coup against him. Mossadeq was overthrown and the Shah, who had earlier escaped from the country returned to power. The Shah stayed on the throne until 1979, when he fled Iran to escape the Islamic revolution.[24]

Here Satrapi highlights a particular instance of Western interference, one in which British and US imperial forces mobilised to secure access to Iran's rich oil reserves. Still, the consequences of this moment remain implicit, and 'the projection of the colonial past into [our] profoundly colonial present' are not foregrounded here.[25] The long history of the West's geopolitical interference in Iran is re-restricted to the gutters of Satrapi's syntax, even as her reason for citing the deposition of Mossadegh is surely to emphasise the extent to which that intervention was itself in part responsible for the later 1979 Islamic revolution.[26] I therefore now turn to examples of recent graphic non-fiction that address this historical gutter (and others) in particular, doing so in order to emphasise how the West's twenty-first-century imperial interventions in the region are very much a continuation of, rather than departure from, such geopolitical machinations, even as these are mostly occluded from dominant historical narratives in the colonial present.

Operation Ajax and the Colonial Past

As the subtitle of Michael de Seve and Daniel Burwen's *Operation Ajax: The Story of the CIA Coup that Remade the Middle East* (2015) suggests, their comic documents in detail the historical moment to which Satrapi makes passing reference in her preface. Unlike *Persepolis*, Burwen and de Seve's glossy colour pages resemble a more conventionally Western comic book aesthetic. First published by Cognito Comics, it was later re-issued by self-described radical leftwing publisher Verso, who marketed it on their 'Graphic Non-fiction Reading List' alongside comics such as *A Child in Palestine: The Cartoons of Naji al-Ali* (2009) and Kate Evan's much-celebrated work, *Red Rosa* (2015).[27] It is thus aligned from the outset both with radical, anti-colonial histories and a politicised non-fiction tradition. It places the long history of the West's interference in the Middle East centre-stage, beginning with a brief account of Britain's tactical drawing of Iran's borders in the early twentieth century, before emphasising

[24] Satrapi, *Persepolis*, xiii.
[25] Gregory, *Colonial Present*, 28.
[26] Satrapi spells Mossadegh's name 'Mossadeq', reflecting the difficulty of translation into the Latin alphabet. I will use the former throughout the remainder of this chapter, as this is how it is written in the graphic non-fiction I discuss.
[27] See Ganesan, 'Graphic Non-Fiction Reading List'.

how British imperial and then US foreign policies toward Iran have always sought to secure, first and foremost, reliable access to the region's oilfields.

In his book *Resurrecting Empire* (2004), Rashid Khalidi addresses this recurring preoccupation with oil, stressing the continuities similarly emphasised by Gregory between colonial pasts and the colonial present. In particular, he details how as foreign secretary, Winston Churchill had during the First World War commissioned 'a new generation of dreadnought battleships in the midst of a deadly Anglo-German naval race'. Loaded with masses of weaponry and armour plating, the ships in this new fleet 'made Britain profoundly dependent on oil', a commodity that 'overnight became crucial to Britain's global hegemony'.[28] Britain's imperial interest in Iran was thus from the outset embedded in a much wider constellation of geopolitical relationships, as access to the oilfields was secured through the formation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company—one of the first and most aggressive multinational corporations of the twentieth century and that, in its modern incarnation, still operates under the name of British Petroleum (BP).

Operation Ajax details this wider global context before offering an account of the process by which a weary British Empire, now under the rule of a post-war re-elected Prime Minister Churchill, becomes increasingly subservient to the US. The title refers to a coup in Iran in 1953 that was instigated by the then newly-formed CIA, providing a template for the dubious and underhand foreign policies that the organisation would continue to practice throughout the Cold War, most notably in Central and Latin America. As the comic documents, in 1951, the prominent lawyer and parliamentarian Mohammed Mossadegh was democratically elected by the Iranian people on a promise to nationalise the country's rich oil reserves. In an effort to combat the removal of these resources from their direct control, Britain resorted at first to economic sanctions, and when those failed, off-shore military embargoes. A similar struggle would occur a few years later when Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal, another crucial route that satiated Britain's imperial appetite for cheap oil, though on that later occasion the US, as the new global hegemon, would force Britain to relinquish their imperial meddling in a 'crisis' now widely regarded as the symbolic historical endpoint of the British Empire.[29]

In Iran's case, however, as McCarthyite paranoia grew in the US and President Eisenhower replaced Truman, Mossadegh offered a useful foreign scapegoat with which to bolster domestic consent for America's increasingly adventurous foreign policies. The interests of old and new imperial powers thus aligned, resulting in 'Operation Ajax', a coup led by CIA-funded gangs of impoverished Iranians and a US-orchestrated Iranian military that deposed Mossadegh and reinstalled the Shah. Re-narrating historical gutters otherwise occluded from the rhetoric of the colonial present, *Operation Ajax*'s afterword itself points out that the 'Shah's increasingly repressive rule ultimately set off the explosive revolution of 1979, which brought to power a militantly anti-Western clique of mullahs' (2015, n.pag.).[30] Foregrounding the West's complicity in the historical event only footnoted by Satrapi, this afterword further connects the 1953 coup to the succeeding eight-year-long Gulf War with Iraq in which estimates of around 1.5 million people died, and which forms the historical background of much of *Persepolis*. But most importantly for this chapter's interests, it also

[28] Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire*, 84-85.

[29] See Grob-Fitzgibbon, *Imperial Endgame*, 341-349.

[30] *Operation Ajax* is unpaginated, and so I am unable to point readers to the exact moment in the text when the specific sections I discuss occur. I will therefore describe whereabouts they roughly take place in the book.

self-consciously brings the specific events of the 1953 coup into direct conversation with the rhetoric of the colonial present:

> Given the shattering importance of Operation Ajax, why do Westerners know so little about it? Part of the reason is that nations, like individuals, prefer to recall aspects of their past that evoke good feelings. We are endlessly proud of the times we liberated the oppressed. Episodes when we have crashed into a democratic country and consigned it to dictatorship are less comforting. Rather than confront those misjudgements and try to learn from them, we consign them to footnotes or forget them entirely.

First inverting Bush's rhetoric of bringing 'democracy to the Middle East',[31] there is a further nod in this final sentence to Joe Sacco's groundbreaking work, *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), which as Hillary Chute notes, 'toggles back and forth between the present and the past [to emphasise] their connection'.[32] Similarly, while Burwen and de Seve relate in meticulous detail a quite specific set of historical events, they map these onto the longer history of Western intervention in the Middle East to expose the historical gutters strategically omitted by leaders such as Bush and Tony Blair in their attempts to justify the more recent though equally catastrophic 2003 foray into the region.

Operation Ajax's afterword is printed in typewriter script on 'Top Secret (Security Classification)' archival paper, aesthetically invoking the facsimiles of the CIA's 'Initial Operation Plan' for Operation Ajax that are themselves included in an appendix to the comic. Transforming these archives into the comics form again recalls Sacco's own meticulous reconstruction of oral testimonies as contingent yet important reservoirs of historical evidence. As Charlotta Salmi observes of Sacco's work, the footnotes are turned 'from a chronological appendage to an epistemological category in [their] own right', functioning as 'narratological metaphors for subalternity'.[33] *Operation Ajax* thus returns us to Dabashi's insight that of course, the subaltern can speak, if only we would listen.[34]

Nevertheless, I want in this chapter to replace the idea of the 'footnotes of history' with the 'gutters of history' in order to show, perhaps counter-intuitively, how graphic non-fiction such as *Operation Ajax* might challenge the critical emphasis on the gutter as the site on the comics page invested with the most radical re-historicising potential. Throughout the comic, the gutters warp and contract to accentuate, as in many other graphic narratives, the rhythms of the plot, but also to draw attention to the fragmented nature of the historical narrative Burwen and de Seve have compiled. Most notable however are its full page bleeds, when the frames that shift in size and shape page by page are quite literally *undermined*. Punctuating key moments in the plot, in these scenes the bleeding images run to the very edge of the page, filling the gutters between the few panels that do remain superimposed—almost floating—over them.

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[31] See Sanger, 'Bush Outlines Vision for Expanding Democracy in Mideast'.
[32] Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 221.
[33] Salmi, 'Reading Footnotes', 416.
[34] Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*, 77.

Fig.1: A moment from early on in *Operation Ajax*'s narrative, when Mossadegh has been successfully elected despite Britain's efforts to sabotage his political ambitions.

Consider the climax of Chapter Five, when Mossadegh, after being democratically elected, attempts to form a cohesive government (see Fig.1). A vote in parliament to grant the new Prime Minister the power to make law is passed with a 99 percent majority, and the new revolutionary leader ushers 'through a staggering list of reforms': 'Iran was on the brink of what could be a great democracy', we are told, 'despite escalation of sanctions from the Brits' and even as 'British gunboats' remain 'in sight of shore'. Meanwhile, the black gutters in the upper half of the page bleed down into the dusk-like sky of the bottom half, which are in turn layered over with floating, panel-like documents. Here Mossadegh's democratic reforms themselves fragment the semi-regular shape of the comic's panels, as the gutters are inverted into—or 'filled' with—a full archival account of histories strategically occluded from the colonial present.

Or we might similarly examine a page in which the British attempt to depose Mossadegh by bribing multiple powerful sectors of Iranian society to take a 'no confidence vote in his government' (see Fig.2). Here the comic's gutters disappear almost entirely, reduced to shadowy crevices to convey formally an atmosphere of underhand dealing. This dissolution of the comic's basic architecture corresponds here to the depiction of the imperial power's conspiratorial activity, serving to highlight the counter-history that *Operation Ajax* is attempting to recover. The comic is speaking the silences of history, moments strategically occluded from historical narratives to service the political machinations of the colonial present, through a form that self-consciously speaks from its own 'gutters'. It is in this sense, then, that we might think of *Operation Ajax* as filling in, or perhaps even subversively illuminating, 'the gutters of history'.

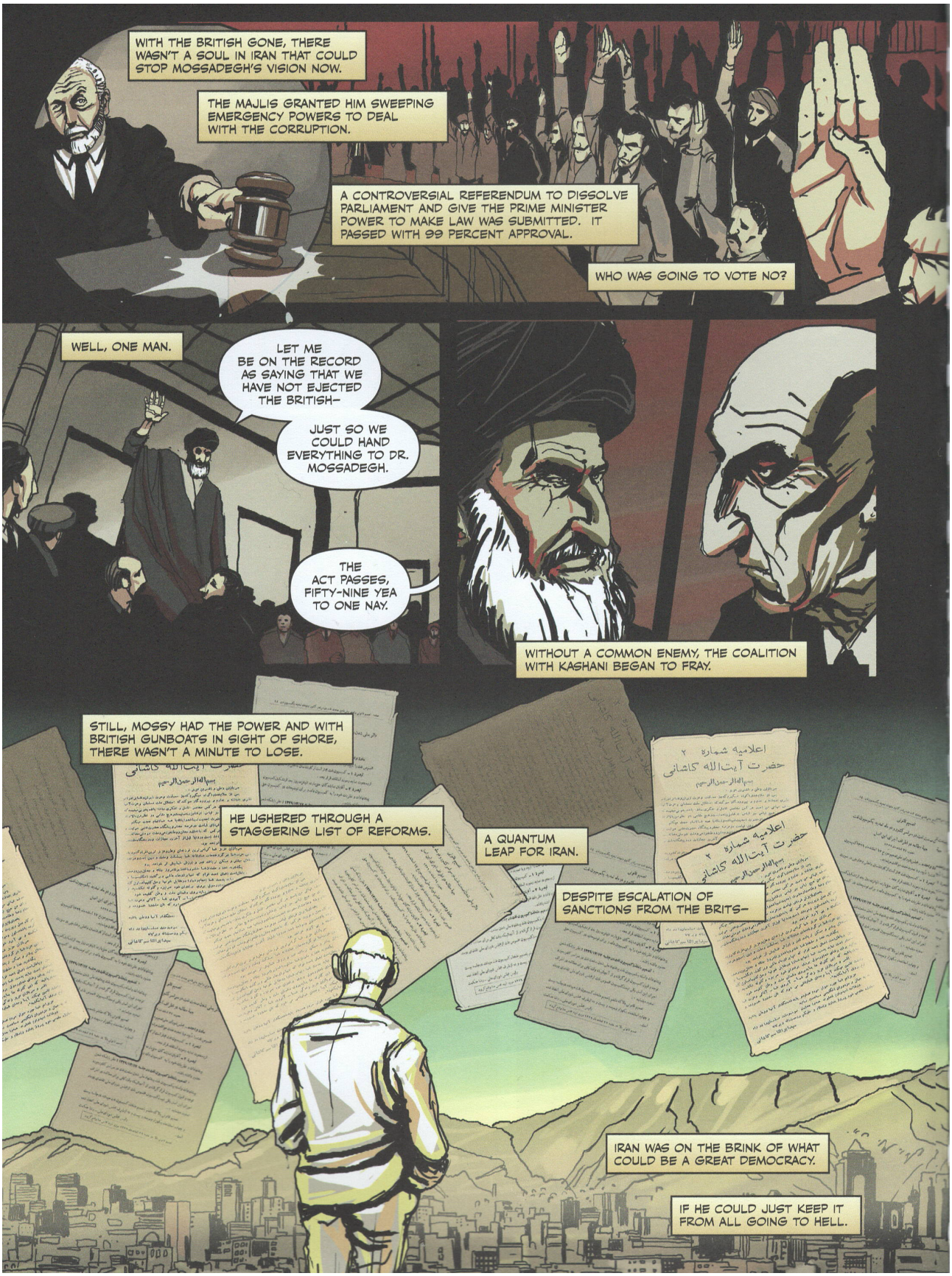

WITH THE BRITISH GONE, THERE WASN'T A SOUL IN IRAN THAT COULD STOP MOSSADEGH'S VISION NOW.
THE MAJLIS GRANTED HIM SWEEPING EMERGENCY POWERS TO DEAL WITH THE CORRUPTION.
A CONTROVERSIAL REFERENDUM TO DISSOLVE PARLIAMENT AND GIVE THE PRIME MINISTER POWER TO MAKE LAW WAS SUBMITTED. IT PASSED WITH 99 PERCENT APPROVAL.
WHO WAS GOING TO VOTE NO?
WELL, ONE MAN.
LET ME BE ON THE RECORD AS SAYING THAT WE HAVE NOT EJECTED THE BRITISH–
JUST SO WE COULD HAND EVERYTHING TO DR. MOSSADEGH.
THE ACT PASSES, FIFTY-NINE YEA TO ONE NAY.
WITHOUT A COMMON ENEMY, THE COALITION WITH KASHANI BEGAN TO FRAY.
STILL, MOSSY HAD THE POWER AND WITH BRITISH GUNBOATS IN SIGHT OF SHORE, THERE WASN'T A MINUTE TO LOSE.
HE USHERED THROUGH A STAGGERING LIST OF REFORMS.
A QUANTUM LEAP FOR IRAN.
DESPITE ESCALATION OF SANCTIONS FROM THE BRITS–
IRAN WAS ON THE BRINK OF WHAT COULD BE A GREAT DEMOCRACY.
IF HE COULD JUST KEEP IT FROM ALL GOING TO HELL.

Fig.2: British imperial agents attempt to manufacture a vote of no confidence in the recently elected Mossedagh.

This is not to say that *Operation Ajax* does *not* have gutters in the conventional sense—of course it does. Moreover, even if the gutter is not spatially present on the page, its imaginative function still remains, as readers connect the framed image in one panel with that of another. This is also not to mention the gutter between the borders of the pages, though even these, as for the film adaptation of *Persepolis*, bleed into one another in the more complex and fluid rhythms of the electronic app version of the comic.[35] Nevertheless, my contention here is that the gutters are at least *on occasion* quite literally filled in, and these occasions correlate with *Operation Ajax*'s most historically subversive moments. It is in this sense that the comic offers what Said would call a 'contrapuntal reading' of imperial history, one that throws into relief 'what was once forcibly excluded'.[36] For after all, the building of the comics page through the selection of a series of panels is similarly predicated on forcible exclusion as much as framed inclusion—to return to Gregory's account of the colonial present, these 'spaces of constructed visibility [...] are always also spaces of constructed invisibility'.[37] If these exclusions are left for comics readers to imaginatively intuit by comics such as *Persepolis*, *Operation Ajax* goes further to self-reflexively suggest a correspondence between the filling in of its own formal gutters and the recovery of the gutters of history that are otherwise invisible in the colonial present.

Best of Enemies: A Contrapuntal Reading for the Colonial Present

Triangulating my reading of *Persepolis* and *Operation Ajax*, I want now to offer a brief reading of Jean-Pierre Filiu and David B.'s two-volume (to date) 'History of US and Middle East Relations', collectively entitled *Best of Enemies* (2012, 2014). There are strong relationships between Satrapi's work and this graphic non-fiction, including both aesthetic influence and historical content. *Persepolis*'s semi-abstract print resembles David B.'s much-celebrated *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* (published serially from 1996-2003, and collected and translated into English as *Epileptic* in 2006). Indeed, Satrapi produced much of her comic in the Parisian studio workshop, 'des Vosges', and the original French version was published by L'Association (also the publishers of *Haut Mal*) with an introduction by David B. himself.[38] Meanwhile, the historical juncture at which Filiu and B. choose to divide the first two volumes of *Best of Enemies*, 1953, is also the year of Mossadegh's deposition, again the moment of US imperial intervention that Satrapi mentions in her 2002 preface to *Persepolis*. This graphic non-fiction account of the West's centuries-long entanglement in the Middle East foregrounds, as does *Operation Ajax*, this instance of geopolitical interference as a decisive historical moment for any project attempting to challenge the selective rhetoric of the colonial present.

[35] See Burwen, 'CIA: Operation Ajax iPad Tour'.
[36] Said, *Culture & Imperialism*, 66-67.
[37] Gregory, *Colonial Present*, 12.
[38] See Prassel, 'Marjane Satrapi—new literary phenomenon in comics'.

Fig.3: Gilgamesh paraphrases Donald Rumsfeld's 'knowns and unknowns' speech in the opening pages of *Best of Enemies, Part One*.

Best of Enemies foregrounds the contemporary political motivations underlying its contrapuntal reading of the imperial past in the first sequence of its first volume. Ostensibly relating the 4600 year-old story of Gilgamesh, the semi-fictional ruler of the city of Uruk that is located in modern-day Iraq, the comic insinuates into this history the rhetoric of the colonial present. Setting out to defeat a mythological demon, Gilgamesh justifies his imperial ambitions to the elders of Uruk with the following statement:

> There are things we know, and we know we know them. These are known knowns. There are also things we know we don't know. These are known unknowns. [...] But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. What does this tell us? That the world we live in is vast and difficult, a complicated world where denial and manipulation are common currency.[39] (see Fig.3)

Filiu and B. reference here perhaps the most infamous rhetorical moment of the colonial present: Donald Rumsfeld's 'knowns and unknowns' speech, which as David Graham observes, proved that 'in an age of soundbites', 'quick quips [...] are the rhetorical weapons of choice'.[40] But there is more here than simply a satirical gesture to a faintly amusing, if terrifyingly befuddled speech As filmmaker Errol Morris explored in a series of 2014 blog posts for *The New York Times*, Rumsfeld was not the first to use the phrase, which has throughout the twentieth century been entangled in the rhetoric of American defence budgets, secret service intelligence and the fraught and often overlooked imperial past. We are returned yet again here to Gregory's comments on the partial vision of the colonial present, which rests on 'spaces of constructed visibility' and 'spaces of constructed invisibility'—those knowns and unknowns that I have also been tentatively transposing onto the surface of the comics page as it engages in a contrapuntal reading of the gutters of history.[41]

I do not wish to over-emphasise the connections between these various layers of visibility and invisibility—form, content and history. Nevertheless, by triangulating the counter-histories variously provided by this body of graphic non-fiction with, on the one hand, the strategic omissions of the colonial past in the rhetoric of the colonial present, and on the

[39] Filiu and B., *Best of Enemies, Part One*, 3-4.
[40] Graham, 'Rumsfeld's Knowns and Unknowns'.
[41] Gregory, *Colonial Present*, 12.

other, the formal architecture of a medium predicated on a selective inclusion and exclusion of (sometimes archival) images, we arrive at what I am terming here 'the gutters of history'. Yet I also want to maintain that, at least for *Operation Ajax* and *Best of Enemies*, the 'gutters' do *not* function so much 'as aporia—blank spaces where new meanings can be generated and a distinctive cross-cultural translation can occur'.[42] These recent examples of graphic non-fiction do *not* rely on the imaginative work of the gutter, but rather emphatically visualise the historical gutters they set out to recover. This is likely in part due to the different genres in play here—for Whitlock, 'autographics', for this chapter, graphic non-fiction. However, I would also contend that this shift away from the aporetic gutter might be productively transposed back into critical discussions of the graphic memoir.

Insert Figs.4a & 4b: The concluding, two pages of *Best of Enemies, Part One*, depicting the success of the CIA-led coup against Mossadegh.

Both *Operation Ajax* and *Best of Enemies* quite literally *draw* the CIA-led coup against Mohammed Mossadegh, mentioned only in the preface of Satrapi's comic, into the main visual and narrative body of their historical accounts. In so doing, they re-emphasise the importance of what *is* seen, rather than simply what is left to the reader's intuition and imagination. *Best of Enemies*' account of Mossadegh's deposition occurs in the final pages of the first volume. Drawn in David B.'s distinctive trademark abstract style, the comic's concluding pages are typical of the whole. B.'s intense metaphorical drawings do not so much ask the reader imaginatively link the comic's constituent panels, as McCloud argued they should. Rather, they demand a sophisticated engagement with the visuals actually present on the page, and that in their metaphorical abstraction require significant imaginative work simply for their full meaning to be deciphered.

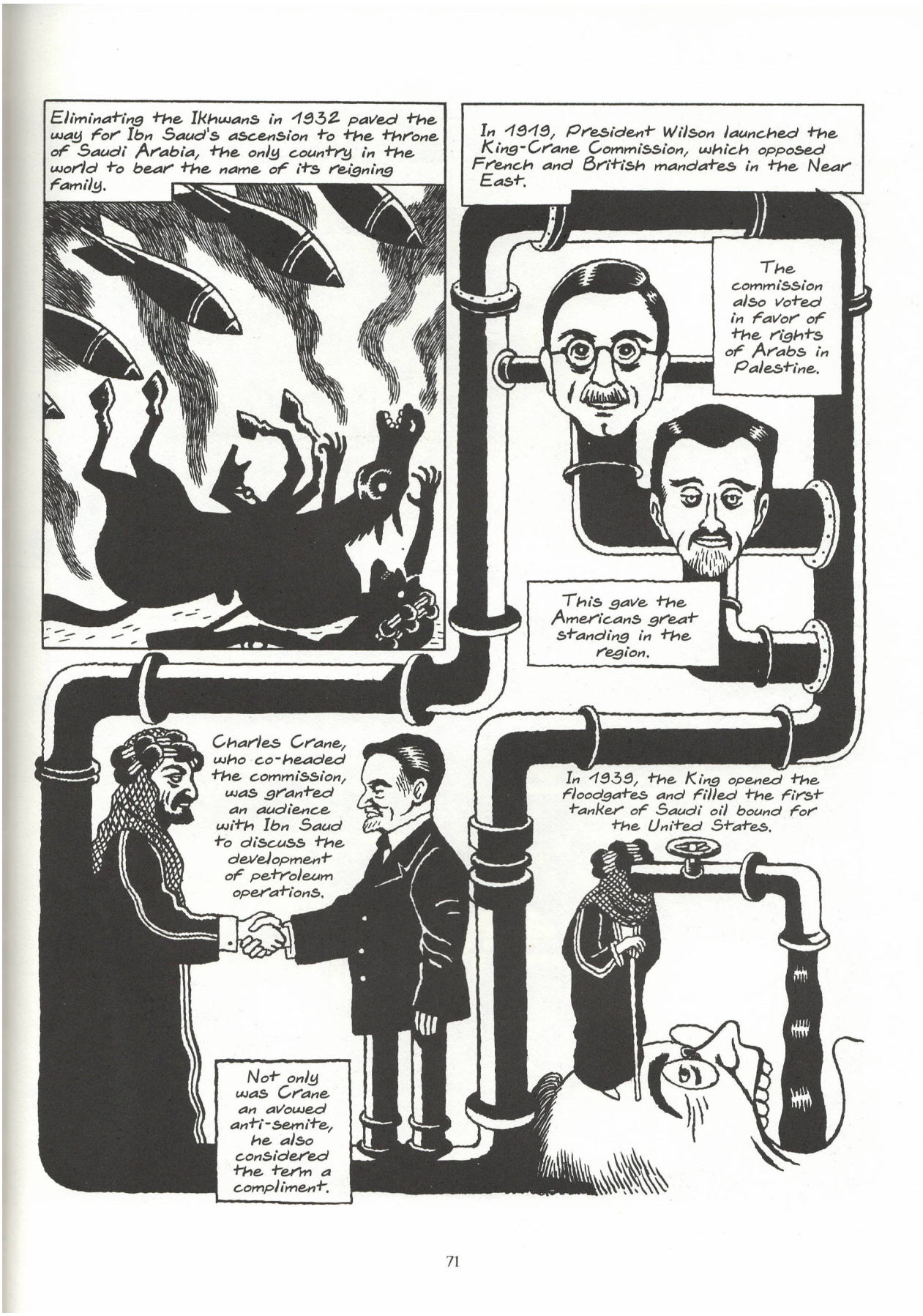
We are still to an extent being asked to take 'two separate images and transform them into a single idea'.[43] But *Best of Enemies*' account of Mossadegh's deposition also forces us to imagine *with* David B. so as to fully comprehend his loaded metaphorical visuals. Why is Mossadegh depicted with a skull-like head in the penultimate panel? Because he and his aspirations for a democratic parliamentary system in Iran have been consigned, with the help of the CIA, to the historical dustbin. Why are their bananas floating in the background of the final panel? Because Operation Ajax became a template for US-funded coups across the world during the twentieth century, including in the 'banana republic' of Guatemala a year later in 1954. Here the gutters of history are not left to the reader's imaginative engagement with what the comic does *not* make visible, but foregrounded by, to use Gregory's words once more, 'spaces of constructed visibility'.[44] The relevance of this project to the colonial present is foregrounded in *Part One*'s final page, which concludes by sarcastically emphasising the continuities between Britain's formal imperialism in the Middle East and the following period of US geopolitical intervention: 'The era of the colonial powers was over. The American era had begun'.[45]

[42] Whitlock, 'Autographics', 977.
[43] McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 66.
[44] Gregory, *Colonial Present*, 12.
[45] Filiu and B., *Best of Enemies, Part One*, 114.

Conclusion: Oil in the Gutters

I want in conclusion to highlight one final scene in *Best of Enemies, Part One*, which details the departure of 'the first tanker of Saudi oil bound for the United States' in 1939.[46] On this page, the reader is invited by a single panel into the comic's sequential rhythm (see Fig.5). However, the spaces of the gutters are then suddenly filled in with an image of oil piping, the infrastructure used by the US to extract the resource that has long been the cause of the West's geopolitical entanglements with the Middle East. The comic's gutters are thus transformed into an image signifying perhaps the most blatant historical omission from the rhetoric of the colonial present—the extraction of oil. Returning to Dabashi, the comic visually reveals here how 'lingering colonial interests combine with expanding American imperial designs to [incorporate Middle Eastern countries] into the imperial modus operandi that serves oil companies and other corporate interests'.[47]

[46] Filiu and B., *Best of Enemies, Part One*, 71.
[47] Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*, 218-219.



Insert Fig.5: The gutters in *Best of Enemies* are quite literally filled in with the piping infrastructure used to extract oil.

Best of Enemies here builds on both *Persepolis* and *Operation Ajax* to offer a contrapuntal reading of US history in the Middle East, as the economic and geopolitical machinations that are forcibly excluded from the narrative of the colonial present gush into the historical gutters of Filiu and B.'s comic. The gutters become here not vacant sites for readers' imaginative aporia, but a decisive invocation of the infrastructural gutters along which Middle Eastern oil must continually flow. These, then, are the gutters of history: the graphic non-fiction discussed in this chapter sets out to direct readers to the ways in which 'the capacities that inhere within the colonial past are routinely reaffirmed and reactivated in the colonial present', revealing 'the continuing impositions and exactions of colonialism in order to subvert them: to examine them, disavow them, and dispel them'.[48] The comic's gutters here materialise contrapuntal geographies and histories visually on the page, filling in the historical omissions of the colonial present and organising them spatially in a way that effectively challenges the West's continued imperial interference in the Middle East.

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