

# Riad Sattouf's The Arab of the Future: A Graphic Ethnology of Solitude (or Hope)

Ernesto Priego<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Affiliation not available

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# Riad Sattouf's *The Arab of the Future*: A Graphic Ethnology of Solitude (or Hope)

ERNESTO PRIEGO

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**CORRESPONDENCE:**

ernesto.priego.1@city.ac.uk

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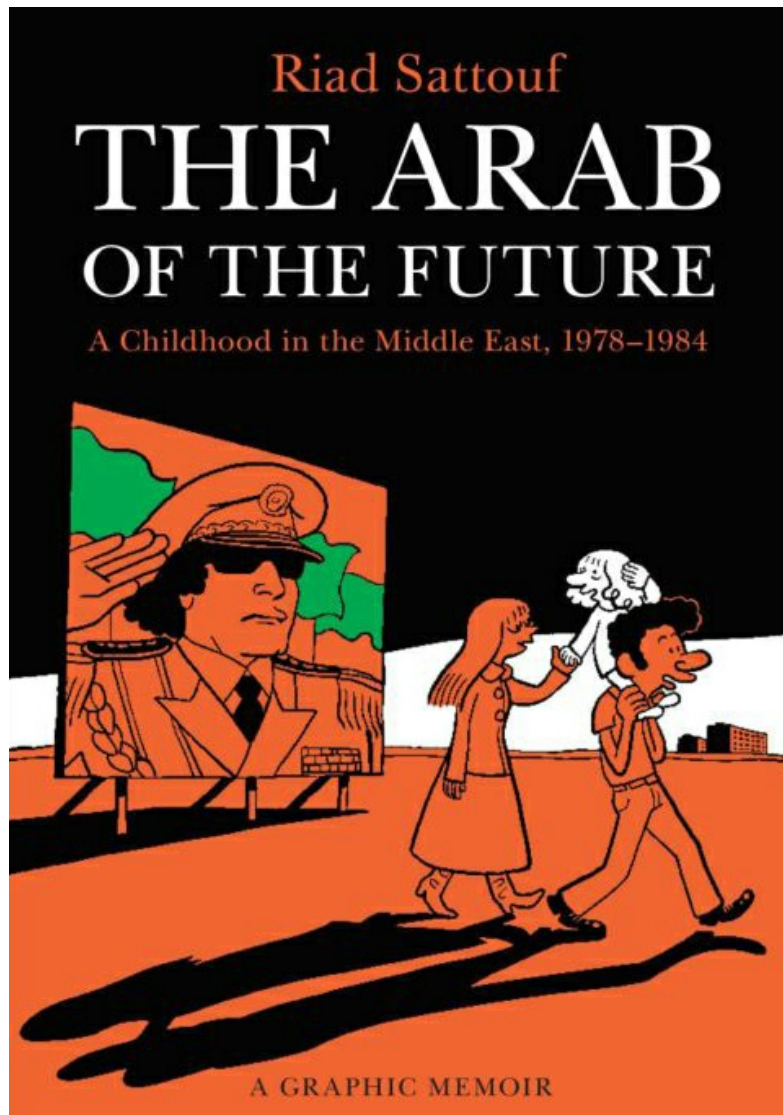


Figure 1. *The Arab of the Future* book cover. © 2014 Riad Sattouf

## Abstract

This article offers a reading of Riad Sattouf's graphic novel *The Arab of the Future* (Two Roads, London, UK, 2016). Following the theoretical vocabulary of Marc Augé (1992), the book is set in the context of the rise of the autobiographical graphic novel and current social and political attitudes to immigration and the Arab world. The article refers to ethnology in relation to *The Arab of the Future* not as a regressive reference to anthropology as a colonialist or even orientalist enterprise, but as an autobiography where human movement from country to country and culture to culture is told from the perspective point of view of, and focusing on, the mixed-ethnicity, multilingual immigrant. By looking at how specific passages of the book employ discursive strategies that correlate to some of Augé's concepts, the article posits that *The Arab of the Future* is an example of that 'ethnology of the future' that Augé imagined as full of contradictions.

### Keywords

autobiography, ethnography, ethnology, graphic novel, graphic memoir

### Background

"Anthropology has always dealt with the here and now. The practising ethnologist is a person situated somewhere (his 'here' of the moment) who describes what he is observing or what he is hearing at this very moment. It will always be possible afterwards to wonder about the quality of his observation and about the aims, prejudices or other factors that condition the production of his text: but the fact remains that all ethnology presupposes the existence of a direct witness to a present actuality."

-Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995) [1992]

Autobiography, in comics and other media, can be said to be a paradigmatic genre of the 21st century. The recognition of 'positions' and the visual and epistemological emphasis on the self has replaced attempts at master narratives or HIStory. In 2016, it is easy to see how comics can serve as a legitimate method of documentation of historical events recounted from the point of view of individuals. Mediated through the always-already-distorted toolkit of cartooning, comics have become an established medium for self-focused, self-aware storytelling.

Graphic memoirs are an ongoing interrogation of the limits of the medium itself: is there something that cannot be told through comics? Graphic memoirs are artistic/literary products that deal with tensions pinpointed by, amongst other factors, subjectivity and representation, stereotyping and faithfulness, accuracy and poetic license. Part of their attractiveness as cultural artefacts is that autobiographical comics problematise notions of objectivity and neutrality, and deconstruct oppositions between history as a discipline (traditionally concerned with documents), ethnology (concerned with direct experience with cultures) and fiction.

Riad Sattouf's *The Arab of the Future: A Childhood in the Middle East, 1978-1984* is the first volume to be published in English in a series of four graphic novel memoirs. Originally published in French, the first two volumes had appeared by the first half of 2015, and the US edition of the first volume was published by Henry Holt in October 2015. In April 2016, *Two Roads*, an imprint of John Murray Press (an Hachette UK company) has just released the first volume for the British market.

As in other well-known graphic memoirs such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (serialised in 1980-1991; graphic novel editions 1986; 1991) and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), Sattouf's book belongs to a now-clearly identifiable genre for which there is already a solid and ever-growing audience (one should say perhaps 'market'). Autobiography in comics form is responsible for a lot of the recent academic attention to the comics medium, which in turn has helped to increase the visibility of comics amongst audiences that, perhaps, would might otherwise have not thought comics deserved any 'serious' attention.

*The Arab of the Future* is about Riad Sattouf's childhood in France, Libya and Syria. The written first-person narration is told from the point of view and perspective of the present, representing, we are to understand, the voice of adult Riad, who we immediately identify with the first name of the empirical

author and also narrator of the story. We *do not*, however, at least in this first volume, see the adult Sattouf. Riad's parents (his mother is French; his father is Syrian) meet in Paris, at the Sorbonne, where Riad's father is doing a PhD in history. The book will take us from France to Libya, Syria, and Jersey.

The visual element of the story shows us and comes from the point of view of Riad, the child of the *Childhood* in the subtitle (figures 1, 2 and 3):

### Style and Structure

Sattouf has a signature style that is easy to recognise as his; the line is carefully modulated to add depth, and his human characters are decidedly cartoony (say, not attempting hyper or even moderate realism). Vehicles, buildings, maps and landscapes are carefully detailed while retaining the same comic strip feel. The colour palette evokes an era before full-colour was nearly ubiquitous, for example the blunt colouring of some children's European albums of the late 70s and early 80s, or the colouring of covers and pages of *Charlie*. Places and artefacts are colour coded: Libya is yellow; France is blue, Syria is pink; Jersey is green. Portable radios (and military berets) are red, while TV and its scenes (and the sound of toy guns) are green. As pointed out by Benoît Crucifix during peer review, Sattouf's palette also evokes the use of shades of three colours ('black and white + nuances of one colour', as described by Crucifix) in some key graphic novels from the 1990s, for example Seth's *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (serialised 1993-1996), Daniel Clowes' *Ghost World* (serialised 1993-1997) and Ben Katchor's comics (for example *Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer*, 1996; 2000), amongst others.

With two notable exceptions, Sattouf structures the book in pages of three rows of panels, featuring between 1 and 4 (rarely, 5) panels on each row. Time or attention, as is often the case with comics, lasts longer or shorter depending on how many panels we have per row, and this determines their size, and hence their duration. In the book this is used very cleverly for subtle effect.

Like Spiegelman's and Bechdel's books (and to less extent like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, 2000), Sattouf's memoir features the father as problematic central figure. Sattouf offers a moving and troubling reflection on the effects of patriarchy on the sense of self. Riad is depicted, with a few exceptions where the text refers only to him or when a situation or scene is about to change, as smaller than other characters, with an oversized head. He is a child, so this is to be expected, but his smallness is starkly emphasised throughout the book so as to bring focus to the fragility and foreignness of childhood (not unlike Charles Schulz's or Quino's depictions of children). (Figure 3).

### From Place to [non] Place

Sattouf's book takes us from place to place and culture to culture, and in the emphasis of differences there is also the unveiling of similarities (I could give examples, but I don't want to deny the reader the pleasure of discovering them when reading the book). In *Non-Places*, Mark Augé writes:

Perhaps the reason why immigrants worry settled people so much (and often so abstractly) is that they expose the relative certainties inscribed in the soil: the thing that is so worrying and fascinating about the character of the immigrant is the emigrant (1995: 119)

Riad's father, an immigrant in France, takes his family along with him in his search for certainties he hopes to find 'inscribed in the soil' of two different countries in the Middle East (figure 4). Sattouf retells, with words and images, the heartbreaking realisation of the non-place in which many immigrants are forced to exist.

In a post- *Satanic Verses*, post- *Charlie Hebdo*, safe-space age, an author (artist, writer, filmmaker) like Riad Sattouf (himself once a *Charlie* contributor) and particularly a project like *The Arab of the Future* emerge like a challenge to the limits of graphic representation. Sattouf's book is challenging amongst other reasons because it deals with the most demonised, Othered identity in Europe. Riad's father's Pan-Arabism and nostalgia for a lost past and land is presented as contradictory and full of

disappointments. Because the narrative takes the characters from country to country, language to language and culture to culture, the narrative perspective is necessarily comparative, and because things are never black and white, either/or, often the conclusions are contradictory.

### A Graphic Ethnology?

This comparative approach implicit in international travel and migration can be called ethnological. The term is of course politically loaded and has a complicated history. 'Ethnology', (from the Greek ἔθνος, meaning "nation"), Wikipedia tells us at the time of writing, 'is the branch of anthropology that compares and analyses the characteristics of different peoples and the relationship between them.' Augé tells us the 'practicing ethnologist' is always 'situated' in a time and a place. Riad, the child, and Riad, the narrator, are situated in different times and places, and yet coincide in this story of recollection and development. In this first volume of *The Arab of the Future* it seems to me that Sattouf is sharing with us a type of ethnological autobiography, a first-person account of personal past experience lived, experienced, remembered and recounted from the hybrid position of the immigrant/emigrant author, between countries and cultures, places and spaces.

I refer to ethnology in relation to *The Arab of the Future* not as a regressive reference to anthropology as a colonialist or even orientalist enterprise. Anthropology as a discipline has struggled to leave behind colonialist, 'othering' associations where the privileged (often white) Westerner gets to do fieldwork with the Other. Ethnology in this case can be related to Sattouf's book as an autobiography where human movement from country to country and culture to culture is told from the perspective not of the traditional Western (often white) ethnologist, but from the perspective and point of view of, and focusing on, the mixed-ethnicity, multilingual immigrant.

All autobiographical comics, up to different degrees, will be the result of direct experience (writing and drawing are always-already performed in the present and as a result of careful observation and interpretation). It's the notion of the immigrant, however, what in my view connects Augé's notion of ethnology with *The Arab of the Future*. Bechdel's *Fun Home*, for example, is not necessarily defined, as a narrative, by the search for a stable place in which to root cultural and political identity (it might be, but at a symbolic or metaphorical level).

In *The Arab of the Future* Sattouf does not only share a personal, honest retelling of significant years in his childhood; a period defined by his father's quest for *a place to be himself* (whatever that means is part of the whole process). In so doing, he gives the reader a witness account of the dilemmas of globalisation, and the painful, difficult challenges of multiculturalism. We are told by press releases and interviews that the book was prompted by events like the 2011 uprisings in Syria and Sattouf's struggle to help his Syrian family come to France, where he lives. As reported by the *Guardian*, he recently told the *ExBerliner* 'that he felt neither Syrian nor French, but rather belonged to a global community of comic book authors'. Where does this global community dwell? Where is this global community at home? *The Arab of the Future* prompts uncomfortable, difficult questions about belonging, origin and destiny.

### Solitude or Hope

'The Arab of the Future' of the title is Riad, who dwells in what I'd dare to call a non-place (or perhaps some kind of Foucauldian heterotopy) between the past (represented graphically through the images) and the present (the future of the graphically-represented past, in the form of the written narration). Comics, as a language, might be this communal non-place, neither here nor there; not near and not elsewhere, or maybe always near and always elsewhere; not just words and not just pictures, but, in this case, both; not just past, and not just memory, but future too.

On the first panel of page 142, Riad is depicted *completely* happy when he's not allowed to go out (the children in Ter Maaleh, Syria, all his cousins, bullied and terrorised him). He sits on the floor on his own, playing with his French toys (figure 5):

In this page, something resembling the 'cocooning' described by Augé takes place (1995: 119);

retreating from violence is only possible by retreating into the self. The stages identified by Augé as constituting this retreat into the self are all there: flight, intensity of experience and revolt. Significantly, this moment of 'complete happiness' in the book follows a particularly violent incident and precedes, in opposition to paternal authoritarian symbolic violence, the maternal protection and the return to a safe place.

There is a loneliness in all of Sattouf's characters, who, often, do not really talk to each other, but to themselves, or keep a repressed/repressive silence (like Riad's mother, whose expressive eyes and facial gestures often tell us more about her than her words). In the constant coming and going of the trial and error from country to country, the immigrant's story is, in spite of the presence of family, one of solitude, but moved forward by hope.

I wonder if a book like *The Arab of the Future* could be described not simply as a 'graphic memoir', but also as a work of graphic ethnology. In my reading the notion of immigrant multicultural identities is at the heart of an ongoing comparative exploration of the notion of 'place' as related to identity and belonging.

In this sense *The Arab of the Future* is a profoundly political and timely book. Perhaps *The Arab of the Future* is an example of that 'ethnology of the future' that Augé imagined as full of contradictions: the ethnology of solitude. But there is also plenty of hope in this story, perhaps foretold by its very title. The present historical moment in Europe calls more than ever for exercises of solidarity and empathy, where 'the whole terrestrial space' becomes a single space and where 'being from earth' (Augé 1995: 120) -being a human being- should be enough to not be treated as illegal.

In retelling his past Sattouf is not merely retreating into himself, but telling us very important things about the historical past, present and possible futures of us all.

### **Bibliographic Information**

Riad Sattouf

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### **Notes**

Riad Sattouf was in conversation with cartoonist Posy Simmonds at the Institut Francais in London on Wednesday 6 April 2016.

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On Saturday 9 April 2016 (five days after this review was first published) the Los Angeles Times Book Prize was announced; *The Arab of the Future* was the winner in the 'graphic novel/comics' category.

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### **Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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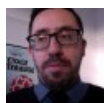
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