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**A 9/11 Coloring Book:
Islamophobic Propaganda or
Educating Kids About Freedom?**

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Abstract

Educational? Factual? Disgusting? Islamophobic? Controversy surrounds the publication, shortly before the 10th anniversary of 9/11, of a graphic novel/coloring book. Both the form and content of the book have escalated sharply polarized and emotional responses, including CAIR's (Council on Islamic American Relations) judgment that the work is a disgusting caricature of Muslims that linguistically links Muslims with the labels radical, extremist, and terrorist, and thereby promotes the assumption that all Muslims are implicated in the 9/11 attack. Wayne Bell, the publisher of Really Big Coloring Books, denies this accusation, arguing instead that it is a factual book designed to help parents teach children the meaning of the events of 9/11. The visual content is equally as problematic for many critics as is the stereotypic naming of the enemy: many of the images are deemed inappropriate content for children in the target age range for coloring books (2-12). This essay offers a close reading of the form and content of the narrative and contextualizes the controversy through an analysis of the use of polarization.

Keywords: 9/11, coloring book, Muslim stereotypes, narrative, trauma, cultural memory, framing

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On August 3, 2011, Really Big Coloring Books, Inc. published a ‘Graphic Coloring Novel on the Events of September 11, 2011’ that they call a ‘memorial tribute’ and a ‘Kids Book of Freedom’ (cover page). PRWeb includes the following description:

Created with a need and desire that demonstrates honesty, reverence, integrity, and good character the book is exciting, with a historic and an educational perspective.

(<http://www.prweb.com/releases/2011/8/prweb8687965.htm>)

It is the way the coloring book tells the story of 9/11 that has generated dramatically different and highly polarized responses. This essay offers a close reading of the form and content of the narrative to contextualize the controversy over *We Shall Never Forget 9/11: The Kids’ Book of Freedom*. Polarized characterization of self and other in the book is reflected in equally extreme responses protesting or assenting to the strategic division into two competing and fundamentally incompatible camps.

Published shortly before the 10th anniversary of 9/11, both the form and content of the book have escalated sharply polarized and emotional responses, including CAIR’s (Council on Islamic American Relations) judgment that the work is a disgusting caricature of Muslims that linguistically links Muslims with the labels radical, extremist, and terrorist, and thereby promotes the assumption that all Muslims are implicated in the 9/11 attack. ABC quotes CAIR’s Dawud Walid as saying, ‘Little kids who pick up this book can have their perceptions colored by those images ... it instills bias in young minds’ (Smith).

Wayne Bell, the publisher of Really Big Coloring Books, denies this accusation, arguing instead that it is a factual book, based on market research, and designed to help parents teach children the meaning of the events of 9/11. He contends that the book does not make a statement about all Muslims, but it is a fact that the 19 radical, extremist terrorists (his label) who attacked the United States were Muslims. Robert Spencer writing for *Jihad Watch* concurs with Bell:

Well, Walid, [CAIR spokesperson] maybe if radical, extremist, terrorist Muslims, acting in the name of Islam and motivated by Islamic teaching, hadn’t murdered 3,000 Americans on Sept. 11, 2001, a coloring book about that terrible day would depict Muslims in a different way. But of course, this is the one truth that Hamas-linked CAIR and its allies and useful idiots would most like to obfuscate, so as to more easily advance their narrative that Muslims are victims and the problem is really “Islamophobia.”

(<http://www.prweb.com/releases/2011/8/prweb8687965.htm>)

Reader comments run the gamut of extreme responses, rejecting CAIR’s accusation of brainwashing by pointing to the Wahhabi madrasas on one side, to a reminder of the terrorism perpetuated in the name of Christianity on the other end of the divide. Both sides resort to name calling and retreat to polarized positions that leave little room for discussion, understanding or education.

Aligning itself with graphic novels and proclaiming itself a memorial tribute, it is appropriate to examine this rhetorical artifact as a narrative, designed for children, whose message is carried in both the visual and verbal texts. A careful reading of the narrative will explore both its content – the characters, plot, setting – and its expression – its alignment with graphic novels and children’s coloring books and the form of its expression through paradigmatic and syntagmatic linkages in what Chatman (1978) labeled the ‘structure of narrative transmission’ (p. 26).

We Shall Never Forget 9/11, like all narratives reflects choices. The events of that day, as Hayden White reminds us, do not tell their own story. An historical account either ‘openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it’ – what White terms a ‘discourse that narrates’ – or it can narrativize, as in discourse ‘that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself as a story’ (1987, p. 2). With fictional accounts of historical time periods the choice of narrating or narrativizing is of little consequence to White, ‘But real events should not speak, should not tell themselves’ (White, 1987, p. 3) he contends, because when they appear to do so they merely mask the choices that the author has made in characterization, in the attribution of values and motives for action, and in causal connections that are asserted.

After looking at choices in the content and expression of the narrative, the essay turns to two strategic choices, the use of polarization and its consequences, and, in Saul Alinsky’s (1971) terms, an ethics of ends and means.

Content of the Narrative

The 36 page coloring book, *We Shall Never Forget 9/11*, printed on 8.5x11” paper, begins with a narrative about the events of 9/11 including a predictable plotline and stereotypic characterization. Scenic considerations are minimal when compared with other more symbolic renditions of the 9/11 story. The second half of the book turns to a discussion of ‘some of our freedoms and our way of life’ (Bell, 2011, p. 19). A brief discussion of the political history of our freedoms is followed by a series of children’s activities centering on freedom and patriotism.

A summary of the book’s plot for retelling the 9/11 story includes the following events in order of their recounting, each on its own page: 1) overview of the meaning of 9/11 as ‘sneak attacks’ on the World Trade Centers, the Pentagon, and a failed attack ending with the plane crashing near Shanksville, Pennsylvania; 2) 6 AM – the plan for the 19 terrorists supported by Bin Laden; 3) 7 AM – board airplanes dreaming of the 70 new wives each will receive as a reward in heaven; 4) 8:46 AM – North Tower attacked; 5) 9:02 AM – South Tower attacked, Bush informed; 6) 9:37 AM – Pentagon attacked; 7) 10 AM – brave passengers thwart terrorists and crash the plane in Pennsylvania; 8) 11 AM – Americans realize terrorists have attacked, and terrorists claim they are doing Allah’s work; 9) 12 PM – all flights grounded, and the American public is upset and angry; 10) 1 PM – Bush promises to ‘hunt down and punish’ (p. 10) Bin Laden; 11) New York Mayor Giuliani inspires the nation; 12) 3 PM – survivors found by rescue workers at ground zero; 13) 4 PM – news sources report Bin Laden is the likely person responsible for the attacks; 14) 5 PM – Salomon Brothers Building collapses without additional deaths; 15) 6 PM – Bush returns to Washington; 16) 7 PM – pictures of the dead and missing are posted near ground zero; 17) 8 PM – Bush addresses the nation and promises punishment; 18) 9 PM – reject any narrative that holds the US partially responsible for the attacks; 19) Obama captured and America remains free. The plotline is not new to this particular rendering of the 9/11 story, but some of the focus on the promise of 70 wives for the terrorists and Bin Laden hiding behind a woman are also not typically included in re-tellings of this event.

Characterization is highly stereotypic for both Americans and the hijackers. Highly polarized, Americans are described verbally as innocent (the most employed label), heroic, brave, peace-loving, freedom-loving or victims. Visually Americans are depicted as somber or sad. On the page devoted to the photographs of the dead and missing only 2 of the fifteen drawings have individuals with somber expressions; the remaining 13 show smiling Americans. The events of 9/11 have changed good natured, happy Americans; terrorists are implicitly responsible for this change in character. In stark contrast the hijackers/Muslims are most frequently labeled 'radical Islamic Muslim extremists' with an occasional addition of terrorist at the end of the list of negative terms. When terrorist isn't added to the 4-term descriptor it is still used in the text on most pages that mention the hijackers. They are also referred to as murderous thugs, devils, cowards, and freedom-haters. Visually, the hijackers are shown on 5 of the 19 pages telling the story of 9/11. Male hijackers are usually smiling unless their lower face is masked. Bin Laden is shown twice, once with a somber expression and once as he is being shot where he is drawn with a look of terror on his face as he hides behind a veiled woman. Two of the 5 pages contain images of women, fully covered. Curiously in both cases all we see of the women are their eyes, which are noticeable sexualized when compared with the two images of American women who wear normal western dress and whose face is not covered. These women, however, do not have eyes or breasts that sexualize their appearance.

Scene is minimized if one compares this book's treatment with other 9/11 narratives. In an analysis of the U.S. television commemorative narratives on the 5th and 10th anniversary of 9/11, I concluded that although New York City, the Pentagon, and Pennsylvania are where the action of the narratives takes place, it is America as sacred space that is interrogated and traveled (Collins, 2007). Some elements of this symbolic scene remain, e.g., a full page image of the Twin Towers covered by smoke (an iconic image), a drawing of a plane with the Tower intact in the background, a shot of the damaged Pentagon, and two shots of ground zero – one of rescue workers sorting through the debris, and the other of two people leaving ground zero amidst smoke (also an iconic image). Because leadership is part of the characterization of President Bush in this narrative, there are three pages of him working in the Oval Office and one of him at the elementary school when he learned of the attack (an iconic image). Scene is central to the final page in the first half of the book wherein an American soldier shoots Bin Laden as he hides behind a veiled woman. What is more obvious in the scenic construction of the narrative is the contrast between what is described as a beautiful, calm day before the terrorist attacks contrasted with the horror of the attack and implied return to calm with the death of Bin Laden and discussion of national freedoms.

The history and definition of current freedoms and the American way of life provide the content of the second half of the book. Starting with an enumeration of the Bill of Rights, the coloring book turns to the founding fathers signing the Declaration of Independence and then abruptly switches to a page on which Obama is seen signing a Top Secret document below which is a drawing of an attorney in court and a robed judge. The text reads, 'What is a lawyer, judge, a court? Why is justice blind? Ask your parents' (p. 22). Three pages follow with children demonstrating freedom of the press, 'freedom to play where you want and with who you want' (p. 26), and the right to bear arms that is illustrated with two boys dressed as frontiersmen and carrying toy guns.

The last quarter of the book offers a series of activities, familiar to primary school aged children. One page asks the child to write a story about freedom, other pages contain a flag crossword puzzle, an amendment matching game, a freedom word search, a statue of liberty connect the dots game, space to draw a picture of what freedom means to the child, and a page that begins, 'I am an American...What do I want to tell the world about me' (Bell, 2011, 34). Within this section a page includes freedom of religion and two pages cover freedom of speech. The last page, a patriotic page, includes the lyrics for patriotic American songs and the text of the Pledge of Allegiance.

Expression of the Narrative

In examining the expression of the narrative two dimensions warrant consideration, the substance of that expression – how it follows the manifestation of a coloring book for children and whether it meets the substantive requirements for a graphic novel – the other claim that Bell makes for his book, and secondly, the form of expression reflected in the structure of narrative transmission. Bell claims the book is both a children's coloring book and a graphic novel that 'is designed for all children of all ages, their parents, and those who know' (back cover). Structurally, the book is much like any other children's coloring book, aside from the serious theme and the amount of verbal text on each page. The theme, containing both the destruction of the Twin Towers and parts of the Pentagon, and the shooting of Bin Laden with the detail of the gun having fired ammunition, has been the concern in a number of media accounts of the book and it seems to have fueled much of the controversy. Critics pose the question: Is this suitable subject matter for young children, and if it is, is the graphic detail age-appropriate? Comparing the coloring book with a second coloring book on the same events helps clarify the choices Bell made in the expression of the narrative. The *9/11 Coloring Book: A Day We Remember* (Carlson, Jr., 2011) also notes the attack on the Pentagon, except the building is whole in the image in this version of the story of 9/11, and the Twin Towers figure in the book, both on the cover and on the first two pages. The initial image is one of the towers with a tri color rainbow diagonally linking the two buildings; it appears on the cover. The image, uncolored this time, is also the first one in the book, waiting for the child to color it. The second image is a drawing of the Towers as part of the New York City skyline, with an American flag in the foreground. The iconic image of the plane, smoke in the background, and the South Tower is included, but not until midway through the book. Even in this image, there is no evident damage to the building from the plane. Both books contain a picture of a rescue worker in full suit and re-breather, but in Bell's book the workers (two) and a dog find only a shoe amidst the debris: in the comparison book the suited rescue worker sits in the rubble with head bowed and hands clasped. The verbal text accompanying this image reads,

Firefighters walked up the stairwell to the floor where the plane had crashed. They went to help people escape from the building. . . .But many people did not evacuate, because no one told them to. The rescue workers were not able to talk to all of the people. (p. 12).

Of the 12 drawings in the comparison coloring book, 5 are of rescue workers. There are no images of terrorists, and no depictions of imminent death. In short, those events

of story that are comparable in the two coloring books are treated quite differently. Most noticeably, the graphic detail is not depicted in the Carlson, Jr. re-telling of 9/11.

As a form, coloring books are not usually dominated by text, but this is the case with Bell's book. As an example, the page on the shooting of Bin Laden has slightly over 300 words of text, and the first page of the book is of similar length. Although the average length of text is slightly under 100 words per page, this much text is atypical of the form. The Carlson, Jr. book averages approximately 60 words per page, with words and images on separate pages.

Inconsistencies between text and images and the target audience for children attracted to the coloring book as a form of discourse are also problematic with Bell's choices in the form of expression. As a coloring book the pictures have sufficient detail to demand the manual dexterity of a child over 10, but by that age most children are no longer interested in coloring books. The vocabulary, with words like signify, conspiracy, harbor, vigilance, bear arms, congregate or elusive, is geared toward older children. Ironically, however, many of the prompts suggest a younger child, for example, 'ask your parents to tell you what the words lawyer, judge, or court mean,' or when the written message suggests that the child write a one page explanation of freedom and then mail it to 'someone in China, Russia or the Middle East. Ask mom and dad for some stamp money and a little help at the Post Office' (p. 24).

The visual content is equally as problematic for many critics as is the stereotypic naming of the enemy: images of the Twin Towers in flames or the page depicting Osama bin Laden hiding behind one of his wives moments before he was killed are deemed inappropriate content for children. This later image is referenced in the majority of media responses to the publication of the coloring book. The choice of a coloring book as the form of the narrative concerns those who argue coloring books are targeted at 2-12 year olds, and the book's subject matter is inappropriate to an audience of this age range.

Besides claiming that the book is a kid's coloring book, Bell labels it a graphic novel. The book does not follow the form of a graphic novel. Although what counts as a graphic novel remains open for experimentation, this form employs the comic strip format arranged sequentially to tell a story. There are several graphic novels in print that deal with the events of 9/11 including *9-11: September 11, 2001* (2002), and *9-11 Artists Respond* (2002). Both of these examples capture the trauma of 9/11 through carefully developed pathos. Although most of the comic strips are well beyond the narrative level of elementary school children, one by Gary Fields represents the firefighters as a Dalmatian. The mother of the puppies explains why dad can't tuck them into bed; he 'saved a lot of people. . .no matter what. People like mommies and daddies, little children. . .' (Gaiman et.al., 2002, p. 59). Both of these 9/11 graphic novels share some of the events of story, the characterizations, and scenic elements that Bell employs, but the form of expression is distinct and highlights the inappropriateness of Bell's categorization of his work as a graphic novel.

Finally, narrative form of expression necessitates examining the structure of narrative transmission, that is the kind of connections that the narrative encourages the reader to make. Does it matter, for example, that the Muslim women depicted in Bell's book are visually sexualized (pp. 3 & 19) and the American women are not (pp. 9 & 13)? Yes, just as the page where the hijackers are promised 70 wives in heaven if they carry out the jihad against the United States matters. Both of these linkages

suggest that Islam is not a *real* religion in the same way that Christianity (one of the American women wears a conspicuous cross around her neck) and Judaism are. It suggests that while Islam postures female modesty and male devotion to God, in effect it does not have a moral code (simply because it is presented as different than our own). The religious condemnation is carried a step further on page 8 where two masked ‘radical Islamic Muslim extremists who simply want to murder innocent civilians and instill fear in our lives,’ one holding up the *Koran*, are identified as doing so because it is ‘the work of Allah’ (Bell, 2011, p. 8). The implications of this kind of linkage is explored in the two strategies that are apparent in the coloring book – polarization and an ethics of means and ends.

The Strategy of Polarization

9/11 was a traumatic event for Americans – for those who lost loved ones and friends in the attacks, and for citizens thousands of mile away with no connection to those who died that day. What united the citizenry was a belief that the nation was attacked and hence solidarity with nationhood and a perceived national sense of loss. Traumatic events rob one of agency, a sense of being able to control the experience of the trauma. One way to feel a sense of agency is to meld a diverse group into one of shared community. In the example of 9/11, to create a shared sense of victimhood and to blame others for the loss. Scholars in rhetoric have long argued that the response often comes in the form of a rhetoric of polarization. King and Anderson explain,

Polarization always exhibits two dimensions. On the one hand it implies a powerful feeling of solidarity . . . On the other hand, polarization also presupposes the existence of a perceived ‘common foe’ which the group must oppose if it is to preserve the fabric of beliefs out of which the persuader has woven its identity. (1971, p. 244)

Polarizing rhetoric develops strategies of affirmation, selecting ‘those images that will promote a strong sense of group identity’ while simultaneously engaging in a strategy of subversion that selects ‘those images that will undermine the *ethos* of competing groups, ideologies, or institutions’ (1971, p. 244; see also Fisher, 1970 and Bowers & Ochs 1970). Affirmative and subversive images need not be accurate as much as they need to be believable as explanations of one’s consubstantiality with one’s group and divided from one’s enemy in all significant ways. Symbolic images call groups into being. Affirmation in Bell’s book comes by equating American identity with freedom and American actions with patriotism – the second half of the book. A good example of this is evident in the following description:

Children, the truth is, these terrorist acts were done by freedom-hating radical Islamic Muslim extremists. These crazy people hate the American way of life because we are FREE and our society is FREE. We must be prepared to know and understand the truth. America is FREE. . . . America does not hate other people in the world, but we love the world in which we live and will defend our way of life. (Bell, 2011, p. 19)

At the same time blame is cast on the polarized Other through subversion of Islam by claiming it promotes immoral behaviors, hypocrisy, and violence. Islam functions rhetorical as what Bowers and Ochs term a flag issue, one that may not be the most important difference, but is a difference that can be easily exploited to prove one’s superiority over the Other. Islam as a religion that promotes immoral behavior and

Islam as a religion that promotes violence become ways of othering, of demonizing the enemy. Interpreting Bowers and Och's original discussion of polarization, Harpin explains, 'The flag issue is not necessarily the most important point under dispute, but is rather a target that symbolizes larger issues. The rhetor undertakes to create strong emotions . . . [so] that the audience will lash out in anger about the flag issue' (2001, p. 295). Interestingly, at the end of the book a mother tells her children, 'Freedom of religion also means you are free to tell other people about your religion, and invite them to join it, or to worship informally and still be protected' (p. 30). Earlier references to Islam, however, have seemingly excluded that religious choice. Husna Haq, writing for *The Christian Science Monitor* argues, 'To me, this coloring book is a part of that hate-espousing rhetoric and it's even worse because it's injecting that venom into children (2011). The problem, he notes, is that 19 extremists are synecdochally linked to all Muslims. And as we noted at the end of the last section, all Muslims are linked to an immoral and murderous code of behavior sanctioned by Allah.

Polarizing rhetoric justifies almost any position one takes about the ethics of ways and means, and it is a discussion of the ethics of narrative choices to which we turn in the last section of the essay.

The Ethics of Means and Ends

In *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky argues that change in the world demands that those without power understand what is needed to take power away from those who have it. Attempts to change the power balance will inevitably meet with a discussion of the ethics of means and ends (Alinsky, 1972, pp. 24-47). Rather than asking the universal question, Do the ends justify the means?, Alinsky asserts that the only ethical question is 'Does this *particular* end justify this *particular* means?' (1972, p. 24). In the case of the attacks on 9/11 the answer to the general and the particular question would likely be the same. International conventions, guided by standards of human rights, generally do not allow acts of extreme violence against civilian populations, even to call attention to issues that those in power ignore. But focusing on a particular means to a particular end would have the advantage of leading us to the problematic polarizing rhetoric that Bell's coloring book promotes. Verbal labels like radical, extremist, terrorist, Islamic, Muslims have become demonizing terms that trigger immediate emotional repulsion, but do little to foster understanding for how these 19 individuals and their sponsors could come to such an extreme means. They facilitate subversive rhetoric that demonizes whole groups rather than particular individuals engaged in particularly unethical actions. When children are given examples of how Allah rewards his followers and then syntagmatically told that many Muslims 'believe that it is okay to mistreat, lie to, or even kill an infidel at any time they chose to do so' (p. 3) and then one line later told 'they hate our way of life;' it is not hard to see *them* as being all Muslims. In contrast the child is told that as Americans we do not hate (despite the name calling and flag issue of religious difference that is prominent in the text).

Why should we care about the issue of means and ends, about particular narrative choices that Bell makes in the coloring book? Stanley Hauerwas, writing in the area of Christian social ethics reminds us that 'The form and substance of a community is

narrative dependent and therefore what counts as “social ethics” is a correlative of the content of that narrative’ (1983, p. 10). Polarizing narratives may be highly successful in affirming a community, but as they do so they subvert others; they teach us not to trust strangers, not to cooperate, but instead to fear others. It follows that without a basis for cooperation, communication cannot occur. Rather, ‘Good and just societies’ he argues, ‘require a narrative. . . which helps them know the truth about existence and fight the constant temptation to self-deception’ (Hauerwas, 1983, p. 18). The narratives we tell have ethical implications. It is not enough to proclaim one’s values and good intentions if one’s narratives foster divisiveness rather than cooperation. Just as the ethics of the particular means of the 19 hijackers for a particular end is deemed unethical, so too we must conclude the particular polarizing strategies in Bell’s book do not facilitate understanding or cooperation with Muslims generally or with those who believe in jihad against nations who hold power over them in particular.

The narrative content and the narrative expression of Bell’s coloring book may offer some education to children about American freedoms, but strategic use of polarization reflects a social ethic that warrants the labels Islamophobic and propaganda.

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