

4-25-2013

What are the properties of editorial cartoons that heal?

Frank Bramlett

University of Nebraska at Omaha, fbramlett@unomaha.edu

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Recommended Citation

Bramlett, Frank, "What are the properties of editorial cartoons that heal?" (2013). *English Faculty Publications*. 27.

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What are the properties of editorial cartoons that heal?

On 23-24 April 2013, I attended a conference called “Images of Terror, Narratives of Insecurity: Literary, Artistic and Cultural Responses.” The conference was held by Project CILM–City and (In)security in Literature and the Media, and the organizers “aim to examine how literature, art and culture have dealt with notions of insecurity and to what extent they have provided significant challenges and responses to hegemonic discourses.” Visit [this website](http://www.cilm.comparatistas.edu.pt/) (<http://www.cilm.comparatistas.edu.pt/>) for more information about the project and visit [this site](http://conferencecilm.weebly.com/) (<http://conferencecilm.weebly.com/>) for more information about the conference.

The faculty at the University of Lisbon are not alone in their quest to understand how people respond to these crises. After the events of September 11, 2001, Jewel James decided to create a series of healing poles as a gift to the people of the United States. Barbara Robins, a friend and colleague of mine, is a scholar of Native American literature and culture, and she has interviewed James as part of her ongoing research about healing through art. You can get an article by Robins [here](http://barbarakrobins.cgpublisher.com/product/pub.26/prod.1198) (<http://barbarakrobins.cgpublisher.com/product/pub.26/prod.1198>). When the poles were finished, James, a [Lummi](http://www.lummi-nsn.org/website/index2.html) (<http://www.lummi-nsn.org/website/index2.html>) artist, had the poles transported as a traveling exhibit across the United States. Visit the website at the [National Library of Medicine blog](http://nlmtotem.wordpress.com/2011/06/28/jewell-james-artist-profile/) (<http://nlmtotem.wordpress.com/2011/06/28/jewell-james-artist-profile/>) for more information and to see images of the poles.

My question for this blog entry has to do with the way that editorial cartoons, for example after the Boston Marathon bombings, offer readers a way of healing after tragedy. For Boston, some cartoons express rage, some express sorrow, and some express frustration and confusion. This piece, by [Jerry Holbert](http://bostonherald.com/holbert) (<http://bostonherald.com/holbert>), relies on readers’ knowledge of the figure of Justice. Holbert has retained some of the traditional elements here: the figure’s eyes are covered, and she holds a sword. However, the figure doesn’t hold a balance in her other hand. Instead, she grips the sword with both hands, seemingly ready to strike.



<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/holb130420.gif>

The caption uses the words 'wounded,' 'bruised,' and 'bleed,' words which no doubt will resonate with Boston residents, especially at this time. The last sentence of the caption expresses a kind of resolution to readers, that justice will be done. It assures readers that even though the community has been harmed, something will be done in response to the tragedy. Further, interaction between the image and the language suggests something else: it issues a warning to the people who committed the atrocity, an implied promise that they will not go unpunished.

In light of the Boston bombings and through my participation at the conference, I had time to reflect on 9/11, and I remembered that the image below made a strong impact on me. There's a [short article \(http://www.wired.com/politics/law/news/2001/09/47102?currentPage=all\)](http://www.wired.com/politics/law/news/2001/09/47102?currentPage=all) at Wired.com about it. It takes patriotic symbols, like the Statue of Liberty and the U.S. flag, and repurposes them. The Liberty statue very clearly becomes a mother figure, but instead of holding aloft a torch she holds a gun. The U.S. flag, which is often raised on a flagpole to fly in the wind, is instead wrapped around a baby. These visual discourses of motherhood, safety, and violence coalesce into a statement: a response from the nation. The linguistic caption reinforces the visual message by using the lexemes *dangerous*, *mother*, and *children* all in the same sentence.



https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/wtc_poster_osama13_f.jpg

I do not wish to claim here that editorial cartoonists have the intent of offering some kind of healing to their readers. I think it's much more complex than that. After all, artists in this situation might be expressing their own anger and confusion, so they may not be thinking about healing when they create their cartoons. However, some readers may find elements of healing in those cartoons, even when the cartoons are at the same time expressing anger, disgust, frustration, and confusion: an array of reactions to tragedy.

Can readers find healing in these kinds of cartoons? Even if the cartoonist does not intend the message of healing, even if the cartoonist expresses something more akin to anger, perhaps these kinds of cartoons begin to create a space for readers to begin the process of healing.



Posted by [Frank Bramlett](#) on [April 25, 2013](#) in [9/11](#), [Editorial Cartoons](#), [Healing](#), [Native American](#), [Political Cartoons](#).

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About Frank Bramlett

Until June 2014, I am a visiting lecturer in the English Department at Stockholm University, where I offer seminars in Sociolinguistics; Language and Gender; and Language and Comics; among others. For Fall 2014, I will return to the English Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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