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# Graphic Narrative: An Introduction

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GRAPHIC NARRATIVES ABOUND. They are taught in the academy; they are adapted to the big screen; they are ubiquitous on the web. Almost a decade ago, in 2006, Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven edited a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* devoted to graphic narrative, which they describe as “the first special issue in the broad field of modern and contemporary narrative devoted entirely to the form of graphic narrative” wherein they note that the need for such an examination demonstrated “the viability of graphic narrative for serious academic inquiry” as it also showed what graphic narrative “does differently from the kinds of narratives with which we have more typically been engaged.”<sup>1</sup> They write: “Our work is now to explore what the form can tell us about the project of narrative representation itself.”<sup>2</sup> Two years later, Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti considered the role of graphic narrative in life writing in their special issue of *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*. Dedicated to “exploring the potential of autographics as a concept and a practice,” they argue that “[c]omics lead the way in thinking about the cross-discursive practices of autographics.”<sup>3</sup> Since these special issues went to press, the field of graphic narrative has swelled, both as now-established figures in the field, like Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel, and Chris Ware continue to publish innovative and exciting texts and as new cohorts of writers and voices proliferate, such as Gene Luen Yang (*American Born Chinese*, 2008, and *Boxers & Saints*, 2013), GB Tran (*Vietnamerica*, 2011), Jessica Abel (*La Perdida*, 2008), David B. (*Epileptic*, 2006, and *Black Paths*, 2013), and John Lewis (*March Trilogy*, 2013, 2015, and forthcoming). Histories, such as *Abina and The Important Men* (2011), and biographies, like *Woman Rebel: The Margaret Sanger Story* (2013), join journalism—as in the works of Joe Sacco—and memoir—by writers like Spiegelman, Satrapi, and Bechdel—as other compelling forms graphic narrative currently takes. Academic journals committed to the form, such as *Studies in Comics*, *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics*, and *ImageText*, dedicate themselves to the larger work of comics scholarship. There is little question that it is an exciting moment in which to read, study, teach, and write about graphic narratives.

This special issue of *South Central Review* hopes to demonstrate some of that excitement as the essays assembled here work together to illustrate recent trends in graphic narrative scholarship, taking for granted that such examination is needed, building on the work done by Chute, DeKoven, Whitlock, Poletti, and others, and extending such analysis into new realms. That said, many of the most celebrated graphic narratives continue to be autobiographical and the majority of the essays included in this special issue likewise focus on self-representational texts. The image selected for the cover reflects such an interest, as it, too, asks readers to consider the position of a graphic subject in her particular environment. Titled “The Looking Glass,” this collage was created by the Paper Haberdasher, artist Joanna Mullen, and invokes such preoccupations as graphic representation, the visual and the visible, imagination and interpretation, the possibilities inherent in and of mixed-media collage, and the role of commerce in art. Mullen’s work, A. I. Miller writes for the *C’Ville Art Blog*, “tenderly embraces the history, mythology, and experienced cultural significance of the images she is using.”<sup>4</sup> “Most of the images are composed more like paintings than comics or film,” he continues, writing about Mullen’s Superman-intensive show from 2013. “Almost every image beautifully captures extended moments of time where the viewer can contemplate the scenes, actions or landscapes.”<sup>5</sup> Such is the case for “The Looking Glass,” a beautiful and haunting image that borrows from and extends artistic traditions in both literature and comics. Mullen, like many of the authors and artists considered in the following pages, confronts the expectations of what comics can render. We readers should be contemplative in our engagement with these works, too, considering the specific contexts in which they are constructed, being challenged by them—and challenging them in turn.

Like “The Looking Glass,” the articles collected here prove that graphic narrative scholarship continues to be invested in the fraught nature of representation, in the interplay of the visual and of the visible, in questions of archivization and ephemerality, in the artistry itself, and in the dissemination of stories—whether in bookstores, through testimonies, or online. The first cluster addresses some of the larger, structural or institutional questions that arise in graphic narrative studies: the role of the visual and the role of the marketplace. In the service of taking on the task Chute and DeKoven establish, figuring out what graphic narrative suggests about narrative representation, Nancy Pedri’s article, “What’s the Matter of Seeing in Graphic Memoir?,” uses an approach founded in Narratology and Film Studies in order to argue that focalization—“the filtering of knowledge as well as thoughts, feelings,

memories, and other intellectual processes of fictional agents,” as she puts it—should encompass ocularization, rather than be distinguished from it, as so much work in graphic narrative has posited. The artificial separation between focalization and ocularization, she argues, elides aspectuality, what she describes as “anything that communicates the qualia of a situation, including ocularization.” Relying on highly visual and influential graphic memoirs, especially David Small’s *Stitches* and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Pedri provides a foundation for considering and reconsidering how readers make sense of such cross-discursive texts as graphic narrative.

Using another interdisciplinary framework, materialism, and locating his analysis on Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Robert Hutton investigates the mainstream literary market and how factors in publishing and distribution influenced the evolution of alternative comics. Relying on Pierre Bourdieu to inform his discussion about how the material conditions of publication influence the comics marketplace, Hutton fills a hole in extant scholarship by paying close attention to the context in which art comics are produced. *Maus* serves as his primary example and its publication provides what he describes as “a watershed moment for the entry of comics into mainstream bookstores,” although he also touches on Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* and Adrian Tomine’s *Optic Nerve*, among others, to provide further support for his discussion. Pedri and Hutton’s contributions exemplify some of the exciting elements of contemporary graphic narrative scholarship as they provide and extend interdisciplinary foundations for our continued interrogations of such texts.

Comprising the center of this special issue are contributions that confront issues of visibility, ephemerality, race, and history as they look to Art Spiegelman’s 9/11 memoir *In the Shadow of No Towers* and Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece’s novel *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery*. Together, these articles maintain the centrality of the visual, of witnessing by the authors and artists as well as by the readers, to graphic narrative throughout the twentieth century as they engage texts that insist on the inextricability of history and representation. At the same time, these texts rely on conventions of comics—the superhero, the comic book, the comic strip—in order to ground readers’ assumptions about established narratives. Sinéad Moynihan, for example, reads *Incognegro* as the kind of “hybrid project” theorized by Chute and DeKoven that unsettles binaries as it juxtaposes technologies of representation with racial passing and relies upon the comic book superhero figure in order to destabilize expectations of both comics and narratives of racial passing. In this, the first graphic novel devoted to the subject of racial passing, she, as she explains, “examines

the particular combination of visual and textual vocabularies deployed in *Incognegro* to portray the ambiguously-raced subject, comparing it to the ways in which such subjects have been racially-encoded in more conventional literary and cinematic narratives of passing.” Providing a thoughtful discussion of the superhero figure, along with a nuanced and historically situated discussion of passing narratives and legacies, Moynihan adroitly explores *Incognegro*’s presentation and interrogation of the visual politics and processes inherent in representations of racial ambiguity. Considering comics and their histories in critical readings of graphic narrative, my contribution examines the place of the comic supplement in Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* and the role of the old comic strips included at the end of the memoir. The collection of comics presented in *No Towers*, I argue, forces readers to confront questions of permanence and trauma brought on by the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers on September 11, 2001, as Spiegelman considers the roles of ephemera, geography, and palimpsest in everyday life and in our creation of history. The serial forms of collage and of comics themselves allow Spiegelman to assemble a text that is employed in collecting and archiving memory in service of history.

Extending investigations into the role of the archive to address representation, the final pieces in this special issue foreground manifestations of space and place in oral histories and narratives of trauma. Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Josh Neufeld’s *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*, and Phoebe Gloeckner’s *A Child’s Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, the authors of these articles suggest, ask readers to interrogate the roles of biography and memoir in stories told and re-told in graphic format. In “‘A Vast ‘Network of Transversals’’: Labyrinthine Aesthetics in *Fun Home*,” K.W. Eveleth sees *Fun Home*’s engagement with allusions to literary mazes—like *Ulysses* or *La Recherche du Temps Perdu*—and sexual mazes as an extension of the Icarian games with which the memoir begins. In this way, he reads *Fun Home* itself as a labyrinth through which he develops his own theory of such labyrinthine aesthetics. Explaining that focusing on “the aesthetics of labyrinthine spaces engenders a pained celebration of false passages, misleading corridors, and superfluous ornamentation as elements of queer potentiality,” Eveleth extends *Fun Home* scholarship by Ann Cvetkovich, Robyn Warhol, and Valerie Rohy and theorizations of labyrinths and illusion established by thinkers like Horkheimer and Adorno. Graphic memoir allows for the visual elements of illusion to coincide with the production of memory across times and places, demonstrating such an aesthetics and characterizing their artificers.

Jim Coby's analysis of Josh Neufeld's *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*, too, negotiates the production of memory as Neufeld provides seven testimonies of survival after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005. This book, which was initially presented in online installments, weaves these stories together portraying a collective history that, Coby argues, provides a kind of catharsis for its storytellers. Coby presents Neufeld as a kind of medium through whom these stories can be shared and represented visually to readers through the mode of graphic narrative. Of particular note, Coby suggests, is that the Web-based version of *A.D.*—through its use of hyperlinks and serialized installments—allowed Neufeld to project trauma in an experiential way, one that “immerse[s] the audience in the city.” Frederik Bryn Køhlert also engages trauma in order to argue that the formal properties of graphic memoir connect uniquely to the visuality of memory as described in trauma studies. Køhlert reads Phoebe Gloeckner's comics collection *A Child's Life* and the hybrid *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* as presenting a unique opportunity to interrogate the relationship between graphic narrative, life writing, and trauma. Extending Suzette Henke's conceptualization of scriptotherapy to posit one that is particularly visual and thereby allows the author the ability to dissociate from the traumatic memory, he proposes that “the narrativizing potential of [graphic narrative] can be productively mobilized both for therapeutic purposes and as a means to assert agency for the victim of trauma.” The possibilities created by graphic narrative—the dissociation allowed by the creation of a visual avatar or the witnessing that the avatar and the reader perform—allow the author, Køhlert writes, to externalize and construct the traumatic narrative, and thereby reinscribe the subject.

Appropriately, the book reviews that conclude this issue further situate readers into the robust and dynamic contemporary climate of graphic narratives as they examine books that hope to extend the theoretical frames with which we read, understand, and consider the unique grammar of graphic narratives. Andrew Kunka's thoughtful critique of Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey's *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* provides readers with insight into Baetens and Frey's important discussion of some of the fundamentals of reading and analyzing graphic narratives, and of work within the field of Comics Studies, more generally. Baetens and Frey, Kunka explains, make definitional and historical arguments about these narratives, delineating a spectrum running from the graphic novel to the comic book, which is especially suited to those new to or teaching comics. And, reviewing influential comics scholar Thierry Groensteen's most recent book, *Comics and Narration*, Rachel Trousdale notes that Groen-

steen's work continues to provide us with vocabulary and framework for our encounters with the unique form that is comics as he provides readers with examples from Europe, Japan, and America. Together, these reviews detail the kinds of long-form analyses of graphic narrative that are currently available, and make us eager for more.

As this issue goes to press, it has been many months since the bloody attack at the offices of the satirical weekly publication *Charlie Hebdo*, in Paris, at the beginning of the year. Targeted because it published cartoons featuring the Prophet Muhammad, images banned in some interpretations of Islamic law, this violence reminds us how essential, powerful, and salient images are and can be. Among the dead were a number of cartoonists who, according to Françoise Mouly, art editor of the *New Yorker*, “‘weren’t hiding behind their drawings. They knew the dangers. There had been firebombs and threats. They were actually defying a gag order given to them by extremists.’”<sup>6</sup> Importantly, Mouly reminds us, images are vital—as art, as political statements, and as life—across the world. While it is true that graphic narratives are no longer solely relegated to the margins of literary study, it is also true that such forms continue to challenge expectations, in the marketplace, in the classroom, and in the hands of readers. For many, comics retain the stigma of the juvenile or the unserious, when, as the articles assembled in this special issue contend, the reality can be quite the opposite. “Cartoons have an immediacy that prose can’t have,” Art Spiegelman explains. “The problem is cartooning is as much a literary form as it is a visual form, and it requires a great degree of sophistication to grapple with it.”<sup>7</sup> It is my sincere hope that the articles within this special issue of *South Central Review* not only remind readers some of the ways in which reading graphic narrative matters—that comics, cartoons, and images matter—but that they also provide surprising and often breathtaking ways to truly grapple with the difficult, essential, and significant subjects these narratives present.

## NOTES

1. Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven, “Introduction: Graphic Narrative,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (Winter 2006): 767, 768.

2. *Ibid.*, 768.

3. Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti, “Self-Regarding Art,” *Biography* 31.1 (Winter 2008): vi, vii.

4. Aaron Miller, “‘Look up in the Sky!’” *C’Ville Art Blog* 8 March 2013.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Quoted in Ravi Somaiya, “The Men Behind the Cartoons at *Charlie Hebdo*,” *The New York Times* 8 Jan 2015. Web. 10 May 2015.

7. Quoted in Miller, Laura. "Neil Gaiman Stands Up for *Charlie Hebdo*: 'For f\*\*k's sake, they drew somebody and they shot them, and you don't get to do that,'" *Salon* 5 May 2015. Web. 10 May 2015.