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Comics Explosion: Representations of Persecution in Graphic Narrative, 1995-
2015

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Abstract

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2015

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Tracing the emergence and popularity of comic art and theorizing comics in relation to epistemological paradigms, this dissertation takes graphic narrative representations of persecution as its primary object of inquiry. In the past few decades, graphic narratives depicting persecution, from Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986) to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), have topped national bestseller lists and become standard texts in high school and university classrooms. While these works undoubtedly have been successful because their serious subject matter corresponds to conventional ideas about what makes good literature, the comics medium also affords new ways to conceptualize history. The formal properties of the medium, such as comics' spatial representation of time and visual-verbal tension, lend comics the capacity to

contest dominant notions of history, both in offering counter-histories of specific events and in revealing the logics that implicitly inform the telling of history.

The primary materials of my study treat topics ranging from legally sanctioned discrimination to violent genocides. The title of my study emphasizes my commitment to demonstrating how comics' formal properties explode, by which I mean both expand and upset, history. These materials include graphic novels that narrate histories of persecution in fictionalized settings and nonfiction graphic narratives that use archival research to document past events. Combining philosophies of history and theories of modernity with formal analysis, I explore how comics engage temporality, subjectivity and vision, and argue that these conceptual frameworks for apprehending history themselves participate in the violences they render legible. Due to the medium's fragmented, spatial-temporal arrangement, comics interrogate temporal boundaries, often visually associating times of past oppression with readers' present. Comics complicate universal history at the level of visual register as well, using iconographic images and anachronistic period-specific art styles to denature linear time, for instance. Comics' multi-modal use of visual and verbal signification, layered across panels and pages, animates the contest between the perspectives of historical witnesses and those of the artists who popularize their accounts. For these reasons, comics not only broaden the practice of historiography, but also challenge historical epistemology and question the status of history telling as a mode of representation.

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of my mother, Grace Eileen Reuben, who taught me.

INTRODUCTION

"Comics? Oh, fun!" This is the universal reaction I receive when describing my research, that is, until I specify the kinds of comics I study. Never one for "fun," so to speak, I came to comics belatedly, as an adult reader, and bought my first "comic book" when I was eighteen years old: it was Joe Sacco's *Notes From a Defeatist*. Even though I now write as a dedicated, even fervent, enthusiast of the medium, I remain more interested in the form's personal and historical expressive potential than the fantastical stories it can convey.

In this dissertation, I take graphic narrative representations of persecution as my primary object of inquiry and argue that the medium's formal properties, such as comics' spatial representation of time and visual-verbal tension, lend comics the capacity to contest dominant notions of history, both in offering counter-histories of specific events and in revealing the logics that implicitly inform the telling of history. My analysis treats formal features of comics to interrogate the conceptual frameworks that underpin post-industrial concepts of history. The primary materials of my study treat topics ranging from legally sanctioned discrimination to violent genocides. These materials include graphic novels that narrate histories of persecution in fictionalized settings, such as Megan Kelso's *Artichoke Tales* (2002), and nonfiction graphic narratives that use archival research to document past events, such as Trevor R. Getz and Liz Clark's *Abina and the Important Men* (2012). The works under study might be understood to represent a spectrum between fact and fiction, for instance ranging from Howard Cruse's semi-autobiographical *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995) to Joe Sacco's journalistic *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), but any such factual differences are dwarfed by the texts' shared inquiry into the uses of history.

Significantly, I refer to this project as a study of “graphic narrative representations of persecution,” because the term “persecution” provokes important questions about how to understand history, including questions about the people whose lives history (and the telling of history) impacts. Since the fourteenth century, the connotations of the term persecution have ranged from “injurious act” to “systemic violent oppression” often, though not exclusively, on the basis of religious or racial group affiliation (*OED*). As a means of categorization, “persecution” rests uneasily in regards to the narratives I analyze because, in some of the texts, the oppression individuals experience is neither clearly intentional nor systemic, even as it is manifestly injurious. Alternatively, some of the acts of violence these comics depict might better be termed “genocide,” in as much as the latter term usually connotes efforts to eliminate those who are different; “persecution,” on the other hand, more often signals punishment. Yet, these difficulties foreground the complicated status of group identities in the telling of history, because most concepts of persecution identify groups of people as victims (racial, religious, or else wise) and perpetrators, both of which are fraught identity categories to occupy. Further complicating the matter are phenomena like “White Fragility,” a term coined by Robin DiAngelo to describe the self-perceived experience of victimization claimed by White beneficiaries of systemic privilege, when they are asked to think about racism. Unfortunately, it is often more comfortable to imagine one’s self as victim — and even to feel attendant “emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt” —than to sympathize with the suffering of others (DiAngelo 54).

Combining philosophies of history and theories of modernity with formal analysis, I explore how comics engage temporality, subjectivity and vision, and argue that these conceptual frameworks, which are fundamental to apprehending history, themselves participate in the violence those concepts render legible. One cannot recognize historical persecution without

concepts of sight, experience and time; yet, each of these concepts carries with it assumptions that produce misapprehensions. The title of my study, which turns on Walter Benjamin's call for a philosophy of history that "explodes [blows up] the continuum," emphasizes my commitment to demonstrating how comics' formal properties both expand and upset contemporary notions of history. The texts that form the basis of my study make the case that 'historical truth' far exceeds the strictly factual. The authors and artists who recount and record the past in historical comics broaden the telling of history, not only by way of the life experiences they bring to many of these stories, but also by conceptualizing history through the formal conditions of the comics medium. Due to the medium's fragmented, spatial-temporal arrangement, comics interrogate temporal boundaries, often visually associating times of past oppression with readers' present. Comics complicate universal history at the level of visual register as well, using iconographic images and anachronistic period-specific art styles to denature linear time, for instance. Comics' multi-modal use of visual and verbal signification, layered across panels and pages, animates the contest between the perspectives of historical witnesses and those of the artists who popularize their accounts. For these reasons, comics not only broaden the practice of historiography, but also challenge historical epistemology and question the status of history telling as a mode of representation.

Situating comics in social and political contexts shows the medium's long associations with both mass popularity and cultural subversion. It is only logical that a medium reaching large populations, especially those comprised of individuals previously lacking cultural access, would upset the status quo. Shortly after the appearance of type-based printing technologies that enable newsprint, representational innovations such as daguerreotypes and wood-blocking allowed hand-drawn and photographic images to join newsprint in the mid-nineteenth century. As Joshua

Brown summarizes in his excellent study of nineteenth century pictorial reporting, these images should be understood in conversation with, rather than as mere supplement to, prose narration in news media: “The reader’s participation was intrinsic to the operation of the representation. A complete narrative was not contained in any one image; its comprehension depended on the broader metanarrative ... The pictures added palpability to the news, displaying the context and content of events that would otherwise remain indistinct in the hazy realm of text” (71). In necessitating active reader participation and giving depth to otherwise “hazy” concepts, the combination of words and images on the pages of newspaper dailies showcases much of comics’ potential.

As Benedict Anderson describes in *Imagined Communities*, newsprint culture produces a common experience of events: nations arise as groups of people, confined by geographic borders, reading the same accounts of the present (the news), at the same time, in the same language, in what Anderson terms "unified fields of exchange and communication" (44). Enter "funny pages," comics sections of newspapers from the turn of the 20th century in which humorous story-lines reflect the events and cultural attitudes otherwise expressed in news journalism, allowing individuals with limited English literacy to share in the cultural imagination. Illustrated and cartoon images not only augment the informative mission of news media, but their visual nature enables political satire. As Shelley Streeby emphasizes in *Radical Sensations: World Movements, Violence and Visual Culture*, “In the United States, cartoons were strongly associated with the emergence of ‘yellow journalism’ and the sensational mass-circulation press of the William Randolph Hearst era as well as . . . Wobblies and other radicals who contributed to the newspapers and other periodicals aligned with the world movements of the era” (12).

While the history of the comics medium depends on how one defines the term, most accounts locate the origin of comics in terms of the conditions of post-enlightenment and post-industrial modernity.¹ Many contend that Rodolphe Töpffer and his nineteenth century captioned-cartoons are the proper starting point in a historical account of the media-form, while others trace comics' origin to William Hogarth's sequential paintings in the early eighteenth century. For my purposes, "comics" is a medium that makes meaning through the interplay of multiple discrete (framed) and static "cartoon" images, but comics' lineage includes single-image photographs, illustrations and cartoons, especially those that appeared in newspapers, magazines and pamphlets, the types of publications that later popularize "comics" proper in the early twentieth century. Embracing this lineage recognizes that the modern genesis of visual culture owes itself not only to technologies of (re)production, such as those employed in newsprint, but also to cultural and economic transformations in the structure of daily life. For this reason, Hillary Chute's recent monograph *Disaster Drawn*, contextualizes post-WWII war comics through, what she terms "Histories of Visual Witness," histories that extend from Jacques Callot's *Les Grandes Misères et les Malheurs de la Guerre* (1633) to Francisco Goya's *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (1810-1820), both of which combine serial images and captions to document war.

Some scholars might argue that long-form graphic narratives like those I examine in this study bear only a passing resemblance to "Funny Pages" comic strips and "Superhero" weeklies. Though this claim has been roundly contested by decades of comics scholarship, the assumption

¹ If "comics" is the term used. Other contenders include "comix" and "sequential art." Should the medium be defined by the sequential relationship of artwork, alone? If so, Hogarth is a likely candidate, but one might go further, as Scott McCloud does when he invokes Egyptian hieroglyphs as comics' antecedent. If, instead comics are defined as the combination of word and image, many captioned visual texts might merit inclusion in the medium. Or, perhaps there is something important about the simplified aesthetic style commonly called "cartooning" to the comic medium, but again, this criteria opens up more possibilities than seem to fit the medium (including animated film).

lingers, perhaps because those forms are perceived as lacking legitimacy in academia at large. Optimistically speaking, the recent wave of comics studies monographs published by university presses and the increased frequency of college-level comics course offerings are signs that the medium has finally earned its due legitimacy as an object of humanistic, critical inquiry. Though social scientists and politicians once lampooned the medium as a threat to literacy and morality, educators and publishers alike have now largely embraced comic art. There are, of course, important generic differences between book length publications and serialized work, as between texts devised by teams of writers and illustrators and those that are singly authored, but I offer no categorical opposition between comics' genres or forms. The texts I select for this study happen to be single-publications (not part of serialized work), produced either in collaboration between one author and one illustrator, or by artists solely responsible for writing and illustration.

The argument against comics has often been overtly articulated as fear that children would too readily enjoy comics' visual components to the detriment of reading skills, and implicitly grounded in racist and classist sentiments about literacy. Comic art was dismissed as 'low-brow,' on supposedly aesthetic criteria, a dismissal often leveraged against the artistic productions of minorities. The most influential and most infamous critique of the medium is indisputably Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham is best remembered for his claim that comics' "content and their alluring advertisements of knives and guns," caused "children's maladjustment" and criminality, because this debate over content reached national attention with the 1954 Senate Subcommittee Hearings into Juvenile Delinquency, at which Wertham testified (10). However, Wertham quite plainly evinced elitist ideas about education in *Seduction*: "Comic books adapted from classical literature . . . emasculate the classics, condense them . . . are just as badly printed and inartistically drawn as other comic books and . . . do *not*

reveal to children the world of good literature which has at all times been the mainstay of liberal and humanistic education. They conceal it” (36). In addition to his obvious class and gender biases, Wertham was wrong on the facts, speciously linking delinquency (an ill-defined problem, the rise of which may have been nothing more than a post-war delusion) to the influence of comics, and misjudging comics' impact on childhood literacy.

The derision comics faced in previous decades provides an instructive lesson in comics' subversive potential. As recent scholarship has shown, comics not only encourage readers to develop print literacy by constructing visual stories that depend upon captions and dialogue, but also via their “multimodality” comics may “be used to greater effectiveness in teaching at all levels as a way to arm students with the critical literacy skills they need to negotiate diverse systems of meaning making” (Jacobs 7). How does it happen that a medium later shown to promote literacy and critical thinking is roundly criticized as inappropriate and even dangerous? It is worth speculating that such critics were not concerned that the comics would reduce literacy, but on the contrary, they may well have understood that the medium made literacy more accessible—accessible to people often excluded from education for reasons of national origin, class, race, age and sexuality. That is to say, what if the “problem” with comics was that they educate the “wrong” readers?

Ironically, as John Lent, Trina Robbins and other comics historians have shown, the industry's self-censoring Comics Code, a response to the Senate pressure that was in full effect from 1954 through 1971, helped catalyze subversive comics in the “Underground” movement.² It is doubtfully coincidence that many of the most influential cartoonists channeled the discrimination they experienced into a “low-brow” mode of artistic production, one that

² In 1989, the commission introduced a third version of the code, more flexible than the original and 1971 iterations, but the “Seal of Approval” continued to designate compliance with the code until 2011 (Nyberg).

simultaneously afforded them the opportunity to gain wider acceptance and to forge subcultures. Notable cartoonists in this vein include Mary Wings, creator of lesbian-centered *Come Out Comix* (1973); Keith Knight, whose ongoing autobiographical series (which began in the 1990s), *The K Chronicles*, addresses racist policing and related issues; and, Will Eisner, the son of Jewish immigrants and creator of the hugely popular *The Spirit* (1940), *A Contract with God* (1978), quite possibly the first marketed “graphic novel”, and *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) which helped pioneer the academic study of the medium.

Whereas many comics scholars have approached comics’ subversive content from a biographical standpoint, often interrogating how the medium's formal elements allow authors to express their experiences, my framework foregrounds comics epistemology and challenges individual-oriented approaches, including those that focus on trauma. Certainly, individuals who have experienced persecution, discrimination or trauma have turned to comics as a means of autobiographical expression. As scholars such as Hillary Chute and Michael Chaney have speculated, comic art may provide a more accessible platform to relay deeply personal, minoritized experiences than other media. Indeed, the last two decades have brought widely read autobiographical comics on subjects ranging from mental illness, such as Ellen Fornay's powerful portrayal of living with bi-polar disorder in *Marbles* (2013), through child abuse, as in Phoebe Gloeckner's visually-explicit depiction of molestation, *A Child's Life* (1998) to international warfare, as in GB Tran's memoir about recovering the story of his family's emigration to the US in *Vietnamerica* (2011). Even so, communicating individuals' experiences with persecution is only a small part of comics' subversive potential. However well suited comics are to express authors' experiential truths, the medium poses important challenges to modern

ways of conceptualizing history, challenges that de-stabilize the category of the individual as a knowledgeable subject.

My study is structured around what I consider to be comics' three defining formal characteristics: spatial conceptualization of temporality, heteroglossic combination of visual and verbal discursive registers, and iconographic signification through reference to other visual media. These three formal features intersect to expose and unsettle the logics of universalism, subjectivity and knowledge that undergird many philosophies of history. As in the texts I study here, comics creators can deploy these formal elements to challenge historicism and animate persecution. I devote individual chapters to theorizing each formal property through comics texts that exemplify comics time, narratology, and visuality, respectively. Megan Kelso's *Artichoke Tales*, a novel depicting a fictional civil war, is the primary text in my opening chapter, which interrogates historicism by exploring times and geographies of persecution. In *Artichoke Tales*, characters on both sides of the war are convinced that the other is to blame for their suffering, a dispute the novel refuses to resolve. The primary texts which form the basis for my second chapter, on narratological perspective, Rutu Modan and Igal Sarna's "War Rabbit," and Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*, both trace the contemporary situation in the Gaza Strip (that is in 2009, when both are published) to events of the 1940s and 50s. Rather than presenting two opposing accounts, *Footnotes in Gaza* and "War Rabbit," which draw on interviews with Palestinians and Israelis respectively, reveal many layers of perspectival influence at the levels of visual and verbal discourse. My third chapter further investigates the regime of images by focusing on the iconography of lynching in US racial terror, as this iconography is featured in two graphic novels: Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby* and Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece's *Incognegro*. In my concluding chapter, I discuss how temporality, discourse and iconography

combine in comics to make visible the uncertain meanings of historical narratives through close analysis of Trevor R. Getz and Liz Clarke's *Abina and the Important Men*, a "graphic history" of West African slavery.

As I argue in Chapter 1, "Comics Time," comics' formal arrangement of time as space "explodes" both concepts. In particular, I find a productive opposition to the linear concept of teleological time in comics' formal visualization of time. To illustrate this, I pair Megan Kelso's strategies for representing spatio-temporality in her 2010 graphic novel, *Artichoke Tales*, with the philosophical works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault. Teleology demonstrates causal relationships between present and past injustice, yet teleology measures progress by the conditions of the dominant class in a given society, and is consequently poorly suited to recognizing oppression in the present. "Comics time" functions through non-linear isolated moments, from which readers may construct sequence. Rather than simply presenting moments in time as a-chronicity, comics' non-linear time emphasizes liminality, corresponding to what Walter Benjamin terms the "zero-hour" of Messianic Time. *Artichoke Tales* exemplifies comics' formal ability to express time and space as mutually constitutive; Kelso emphasizes that historical knowledge is contextual through page compositions that unsettle divisions of place, while also suggesting parallels between past and present. Moreover, comics' explosive handling of time and space can pose a challenge to categories of identity, especially those that emerge through historicism.

I take up issues of identity, including those issues of national identity broached in "Comics Time", in Chapter 2, "Comics and Narratological Perspective: (Witnessing) Bias in Direct Experience." It is tempting to conceptualize subjectivity as the conflict between distinct perspectives: Person A sees it like this, and Person B sees it like that. Or, we generalize that

conflict to cultural and national groups: "an Israeli Perspective" for instance. Yet, comics narratology proves the fallacy of individual subjectivity. Much as it becomes impossible to tell how a panel's visualization corresponds with each individual's inner thoughts, so too are our own subjectivities intertwined with the words and images of others. In my analysis of Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* and Rutu Modan and Igal Sarna's "War Rabbit," two "comics journalism" pieces about the Gaza Strip, I extend Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia," which originally described borrowed and adapted spoken language in prose novels, to argue for comics' formal ability to expose the ways external language becomes integrated into internalized individual subjectivity. Through visual and verbal registers that not only augment each other, but also often produce narrative dissonance, cartoonists like Modan and Sacco illustrate the complexity of how discursive communities influence individuals' perception and speech.

Chapter 3, "Lynching Iconography; Modern Knowledge and Power in 20th Century Visual Culture" concerns lynching iconography and visual culture. Here I argue that Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby* and Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece's *Incognegro* showcase comics' formal challenge to dominant modes of looking. Both graphic novels feature iconographic representations of lynching in the context of complex page layouts and visual-verbal narrative techniques germane to the comics medium. These visual narratives counter cultural failures of looking at American racial violence: the refusal to see, ideologically constructed recognition, and problematic identification. I draw on visual culture theory and critical histories of American racial terror, along with illustrated and cartoon images of lynching from the late nineteenth century on, to argue that the two graphic novels reveal the intrinsic participatory role of group spectatorship and individual identification in the American cultural imagination of lynching. In addition to highlighting problematic practices of looking, comics are capable of altering their

readers' viewing habits, because they present images in narrative and physical contexts. For instance, *Incognegro* and *Stuck Rubber Baby* encourage this transformation by featuring protagonists who "fail" to fully look at lynching early in each book and compelling readers to identify with the characters' increased visual awareness.

My concluding chapter, "Teaching History through Comics" argues that comics' ability to narrate history benefits from all of the above formal features, as exemplified through Trevor R. Getz and Liz Clarke's *Abina and the Important Men*, a work that I suggest inaugurates the genre of "historio-graphic narrative." Designed for use in secondary and post-secondary history classrooms, *Abina and the Important Men* illustrates "history" at two levels, adding visual and narrative texture to the court transcript of Abina Manseh's (unsuccessful) legal suit against a man she claimed held her as a slave, as well as illuminating the process through which historians, like Getz, uncover and interpret historical records. Clarke's illustrations negotiate visual realism by drawing on nineteenth century illustrations of West Africa, but resist iconographies and compositions that might objectify enslaved peoples. In the comic portion and the commentary sections that follow, *Abina and the Important Men* also highlights the limits of historical knowledge, especially emphasizing the inaccessibility of knowing how Abina and her contemporaries would have understood her status. Both in its emphasis on process and in its interrogation of the inner-thoughts of the people it represents, *Abina* foregrounds "history" as framework for multiple modes of knowledge, including self-knowledge, which may be most valuable for its student-readers.

Previous debates about the value of comics have generated respectability claims for the medium, countering, "the default assumption that drawing as a system is inherently more

fictional," and less capable of treating serious topics, "than prose" (Chute 453).³ In response, Hillary Chute writes: "Graphic narrative suggests that historical accuracy is not the opposite of creative invention; the problematics of what we consider fact and fiction are made apparent by the role of drawing" (459). The assumption that drawing is inherently fictional leads one reviewer to assert, for instance, that *Artichoke Tales*' condescendingly termed "childlike art style" would seem to invite young readership, were it not for the "nuance" and sophistication of its narrative (Weldon). It is not my intent to demonstrate comics' ability to convey factual history. On the contrary my critical framework embraces the presumed irreverence of drawing and its parodic potential. It would be a mistake to think that taking comics seriously requires evaluating them using only the interpretive frameworks of other literary and media forms; a mistake even beyond the fact that this approach is bound to emphasize areas lacking in comics as compared to those other forms. As much as comics studies gains by adapting and borrowing tools from fields including literary, visual culture and performance studies, theorizing the medium of comics in these terms enriches the study of all.

³ "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative."

Chapter 1. COMICS TIME

"In every other form of narrative that I know of, past, present and future are not shown simultaneously--you're always in the now . . . comics is the only form in which past, present, and future are visible simultaneously" (Scott McCloud, quoted in *Outside the Box*, Chute 26).

"Only images in the mind vitalize the will. The mere word, by contrast, at most inflames it, to leave it smoldering, blasted " (Walter Benjamin, "One Way Street")

As a field of study, comics scholarship is divided on many topics. In fact, there seems to be contention about every aspect of comics - the relationship between words and images, what separates comics from other sequential drawings, the status of web comics in a dominantly print media form, the medium's various names, and so on. But the one area on which scholars and artists alike agree is that comics uniquely handle space and time. As the epigraph by Scott McCloud indicates, comics can depict multiple moments of time, making them all appear at once to the reader. This alone is not quite as unique as McCloud suggests; for example, film can present multiple actions via split-screen (although this technique often connotes simultaneous action, rather than separate moments in time), while painting can capture the passage of full days and longer. Singular to comics, however, is the representation of "time as space" rather than sequence.⁴ A panel's size typically indicates the relative duration of the events depicted therein. So too does the spatial layout of a page's panel-structure, including its gutters, indicate tempo. Containing multiple narrative units (panels), the comics page shows "past, present, and future" all at once. Looking at any one of these units, the reader sees the others in her periphery; the

⁴ Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women*.

events that have just happened and are about to happen. At any given moment of reading, one focuses on a "now," seeing its unstable presentness.

Comics that make full use of the medium's ability to disrupt spatio-temporality interrogate the concept of history. I argue that the formal properties of comics temporality all-but force readers to experience presentness through unstable (seized) pictures of the past and periphery perceptions of the future. Each moment/panel/frame that we experience as narrative-present is self-evidently a picture of the (narrative) past, because we cannot help but see the panels and pages ahead, nor can we help but remember that we have seen the same images in preceding panels/pages. As readers we linger in these already past moments and experience them as/with presentness. Comics scholars such as Josef Witek extol the medium's potential to treat historical events and other "serious topics" as reason for comics' entry into literary studies.⁵ As the epigraphs from revolutionary theorist Walter Benjamin and comics scholar Scott McCloud signal, images go beyond words in significant ways. While there is much to gain by taking comics seriously as literature, comics' scholarship ought also to embrace the formal and generic qualities distinct to contemporary graphic novels.

Comics' temporality is structured by liminality, in which the present exists in a kind of suspended constellation with multiple temporal moments. A reader turns the page, moves the eye and is constantly drawn in to see a present that is charged with its periphery. The materiality of the printed object resists efforts to constrain one's field of vision to see a single panel at a time, because as Thierry Groensteen describes, in his seminal *The System of Comics*, the medium makes meaning through visual repetition: "The comics image, whose meaning often remains

⁵ Comics scholars like Witek, Chute, and Hatfield each argued for the unique contribution comics could make to literary studies, although they variously emphasize different characteristics of comics as central to this potential. Hatfield, for instance, credits the underground distribution model for comics engagement with socially taboo content.

open when it is isolated (and without verbal anchorage), finds its truth in the sequence" (115). Each image in a comics text registers through its relative similarity to other images: for instance, characters look the same on different pages; distinct objects signify by contrast (a book looks different from a phone, for example) but the line-work, shading, and use of color with which they are rendered cohere them to the same narrative world. Unlike single images, such as illustrations and photographs, narrative comics rely upon visual repetition. Yet, as Groensteen also emphasizes, not every panel within a comic contributes to narrative linearity. Quite the contrary, many comics artists employ panels which interrupt the narrative flow as digressions, false starts and circularities.

Comics possess the formal potential for temporal innovation, especially when the conventional grid is disrupted. The linearly plotted grid can be upset in many ways, such as Art Spiegelman's technique of drawing family photographs over gridded panels in the background, making them appear to rest atop the comics page. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which introduced comics to many new readers, employs the medium's capacity for temporal disruption to visualize the Holocaust's lasting impact on his and his father's lives.⁶ Chris Ware is among today's most highly regarded cartoonists in large part for his nonlinear handling of time.⁷ *The Adventures of Jimmy Corrigan* weaves together a fictional family's multi-generational narrative, sometimes on the same page. Ware foregrounds the family story against the visual story of 20th century Chicago. In it Ware exaggerates conventional panel uniformity by including pages composed of increasingly small frames. As a result, readers must squint to register the visual differences between narrative past and narrative present. More recently Ware takes inspiration from early graphic novelist Will Eisner's *The Building*, in his collection *Building Stories* that details the

⁶ These features of *Maus* partially inspire Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory."

⁷ See David Ball and Martha Kulman's edited collection *The Comics of Chris Ware* for thorough discussion.

lives of the human and insect residents of an apartment building. *Building Stories* is told in comics of various lengths and formats, which leaves the reader to decide in what order to read each text and thus to determine the narrative order of the story.

To demonstrate the epistemological contribution comics offer to historical knowledge, in this chapter, I pair philosophies of history with close textual analysis of Megan Kelso's *Artichoke Tales*, an exemplary graphic novel for its handling of time, space and the nature of history. An allegorical piece of fiction, Megan Kelso's *Artichoke Tales* (2010) recounts a civil war in a universe populated by people with artichoke-like leaves on their heads in place of hair. The plot of *Artichoke Tales* centers on Brigitte, as several members of her family and a few strangers recount the history of the nation, its land, and people. The graphic novel's back cover describes the plot as "a moving story about family and war that takes place in an alternate world that eerily echoes *our own*." With this generalization, Seattle-based comics publisher, Fantagraphics refuses to locate the resemblance in either time or space. From this perspective, the violence and mutual distrust of *Artichoke Tales* have as much in common with the Norman conquest of England, circa 1066, as with the Korean War of the 1950s. Yet, what is significant about the novel for my investigation is that Kelso repeatedly questions the formation of shared identity necessary to speak an "our" of this kind. Kelso questions how "we" know history, including the operation of identity/identification, the personal and cultural biases of storytellers, and methodology required to construct and analyze a historical archive. While in this chapter, I approach these identity issues in terms of spatial and temporal divisions amongst individuals, my second chapter continues this investigation and explores related issues of subjective perception, language communities and collectivity (though using different primary texts).

I treat *Artichoke Tales* as representative example of comics that visualize time in constellation, in contrast to strictly linear renderings. Kelso combines comics' formal propensity for temporal disruption with a narrative that compellingly refuses to consolidate the status of history with the 'past.' The past animates characters' present experience, leaving readers the task of navigating colliding timelines. "Histories change tremendously . . . there's always the next generation coming around and trying to fix it, tweak it and put their own spin on it," as Kelso herself told me in an interview, "It's this endlessly unfolding story that all of those different people are trying to get handles on. Somewhere in the middle of those versions is truth, but it's not like we're ever going to *hold it in our hand*" (emphasis mine). German essayist Walter Benjamin cautions against isolating a "picture" of the past as fixed truth: "Historicism depicts the 'eternal' picture of the past; the historical materialist, an experience with it, which stands alone." Benjamin's "Theses on History" repeatedly describe the past as a "picture." Rather than taking any such picture as knowable on its own terms - as something stable enough to be held "in our hand" —the point, is to seize pictures of the past that urgently provoke us to (re)experience that past in the present.

Present Pictures of the Past

Figure 1. *Artichoke Tales*, page 123

Narrative "past" and "present" share space on this page excerpted from Kelso's *Artichoke Tales*, as they do frequently in the graphic novel. In the present, Brigitte's father Dorian is teaching her how to shoot with bow and arrow. Dorian recounts an ambush in the past (depicted at top of the page): "All Southerners are archers at heart, Brigitte . . . When I was 16 some Northern fish merchants came South . . . Fish peddlers hadn't crossed Ladle pass since before the war - decades before I was born" (120). With no other narrative detail the images accompanying the following several pages depict a caravan of travelers pulling large wagons, and a group of marksmen on higher ground who catch them unawares. The motivation for this attack and indeed the morality of it are ambiguous. As the novel makes clear, both Northerners and Southerners describe the other as oppressor, each framing actions the other would call persecution as defense.

Narrative ambiguity about past events runs flush to temporal ambiguity. The central action in the unbordered middle "panel" overlaps the past, while the past permeates the present, because what is "present" on the page looks much like the "past." Notably, Brigitte is posed in page center with a ready bow, visually rhyming with the story's Southern shooters who thwarted the merchant caravan. Dorian narrates the past while Brigitte aims: "'Forefinger pressed to jawbone, he kneels upon the rock.' Tuck yer butt in, Brigitte!" (123). Dorian's narration almost matches Brigitte's present. Deployed as shooting instruction ("forefinger pressed to jawbone" / "tuck yer butt in") this speech might be read as invitation to re-enact, to join with the past. To do so, would of course require Brigitte to overlook the ways that history excludes her, sexual difference not least among them ("he kneels").

Page design and shading augment this tension around historical similarity and difference. As elsewhere in the novel, Kelso uses blue shading to differentiate narrative time. The top three panels (like the page before) each feature a blue horizon, contrasted with the lack of background

shading in the present. There are several interpretations to posit about this stylistic convention, although it needs noting that there are exceptions to the pattern of blue connoting pastness.

Images with this visual contrast are more picturesque than those without. We see the action of the scenes, such as a caravan overturned and a plume of smoke, in visual relief. The events pop on the page. To readers they seem nearer than their setting. In this way time is rendered as landscape; the past is where things happen.

Not only is past time confounded with space, but the past and present overlap via physical space. The blue shading that marks the historicity of the ambush also appears in the foreground of the bottom left panel, drawing contrast between a rock and the hillside. At both visual and narrative ("he kneels upon the rock") registers this blue rock signals ambiguous temporality. The rock before Brigitte and Dorian could be the same referred to in Dorian's verse. No doubt the physical terrain of the storied ambush would have survived largely intact: the ground and rocks are still there. Though Kelso visualizes the past lingering in the present, temporality in *Artichoke Tales* is not uni-directional; rather, past and present approach one another. The page's central action (Brigitte taking aim) occurs in a minimally bordered panel: in place of the standard four perpendicular lines, the middle "panel" is only partially bound on the bottom left. Dorian's speech balloon seems to imply the top (end) of the unlined panel, but it accomplishes this by intruding upon the space of the past (top tier), producing a visual metaphor of the past meeting the present, the boundary between them marked only by their contact.

The subject position of Brigitte herself is defined/troubled through this temporal conflict. The line of her bow's string cuts across - or perhaps completes - the panel boundary, splitting the central moment into two parts, with two Brigittes. In this richly complex page design, the character appears *beside herself*, against a continuous background. Much as the play with blue

background and foreground signals the land's continuous presence across distinct moments in time, if the bow constitutes an ersatz panel boundary, the central tier may be read to signal false simultaneity between Brigitte as she was before and after aiming the bow. However, the openness of the center panel(s) at its sides further troubles temporal boundaries. Rather than presenting a mere trick of the eye to fool readers into viewing two distinct panels as one, Kelso illustrates the act of demarcating time as a challenge to subjecthood. Are the two Brigittes different? Does Dorian's speech change her? Can she stand both in history, as historical re-enactor, and in the present, as a product of that history?

An Explosive Art of Time and Space

How we picture the past depends on how we (choose to) see the present. Intellectual historian Susan Buck-Morss explains the distinguishing role of perspective in "historical materialism":

In Benjamin's dialectical images, the present as the moment of revolutionary possibility appears as the '*vanishing point*' for past history, acting as a lodestar for the assembly of its fragments. Without it, the possibilities for reconstructing the past would be infinite and arbitrary. It thus enabled the historical materialist to keep the proper perspective and not get lost. This is important, because it separates Benjamin's method from historicism which also interprets the past in the light of the present—but, the given present rather than a revolutionary one . . . The failure to distinguish between the present-as-given from the present-as-revolutionary-possibility robbed historical practice of politics. (Buck-Morss 59-60)

In spite of Benjamin's repeated reference to visuality (mirrored in the above language), Buck-Morss refers to the historical materialist's obligation to "catch hold of it [the past] in a *verbal* image" (58 emphasis mine). Perhaps Benjamin was only interested in vision as metaphor for history. In his own historical and philosophical work, Benjamin produced extensive verbal communication (written essays as well as radio broadcasts), but Benjamin also hailed the cinema for what he saw to be its revolutionary potential. How Benjamin conceptualized vision in relationship to historical materialist method is, however, beside the point. Or rather, the point to make here is the inutility of searching for the truth of someone's concept of vision - or any other concept - in the past. Benjamin's intention notwithstanding, my discussion of comics temporality "seizes" on his visual imagery.

The exercise of thinking historically - constructing genealogies of phenomena that endure in the present, situating past events relative to one another and suggesting a causal relationship between them - is fraught with the trappings of historicism.⁸ History might be broadly defined as the representation of the past (although colloquially the term is often confused for the past itself). In this sense, personal and collective memories are historical, whether or not these individual accounts are true (one should put pressure on truth as modern knowledge formation as well). Resisting the concept of sequential development, "[Walter] Benjamin claimed that the temporal order of succession formed no causal sequence—indeed, no meaningful sequence at all" (Buck-Morss 55). Unitary historicist accounts of the past are not false, *per se*; the point here is that historical "truth" can only be defined through the present.

In comics, each panel represents time. Most panels, unlike the ones discussed above, carve out time into discreet units, but the length of time represented (seconds, minutes, days)

⁸ Postcolonial theorist and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty defines historicism: "the idea that to understand anything it has to be seen both as a unity and as a historical development" (Chakrabarty 6).

varies widely from text to text and even within the same page. In cases like the page of *Artichoke Tales* above, it is inadequate to think of each panel as occupying a span of time at all. For this reason, comics scholars frequently claim the medium "disrupts" conventional history and time, alienating the reader's experience. For example, Thomas Bredehoft claims, "The medium of comics clearly has the potential to employ two- and three-dimensional structures in order to defamiliarize or challenge our habit of understanding the narrative line as pervasively linear and sequenced in time" (885). Similarly, Marc Singer writes, "The discontinuous scenes and jarring transitions [in the *Invisibles*] violate our normal understanding of time as linear and irreversible progression from past to present to future, but they are not at all out of place in the world of narrative which has the freedom to present time from multiple perspectives and arrange it into a number of possible patterns" (55).⁹ Describing a particular value for nonfiction comics, Hillary Chute claims, "We see that as historical enunciation weaves jaggedly through paradoxical spaces and shifting temporalities, comics—as a form that relies on space to represent time—becomes structurally equipped to challenge dominant modes of storytelling and history writing" (456).¹⁰ Chute, Bredehoft and Singer each build on Scott McCloud's claim that comics portray multiple temporalities simultaneously and suggest that the medium scrutinizes the very categories of past, present and future. Graphic narratives distort the normatively forward-moving direction of time, because the "sequence" of panels is not inherent or always even self-evident to readers. On the contrary, many comics encourage readers to self-direct their experience; readers participate in

⁹ I refer here to Singer's essay, "Time and Narrative: Unity and Discontinuity in the *Invisibles*."

¹⁰ I refer here to Chute's essay, "Comics as Literature."

sequencing, each panel and each gutter providing potential moments to stop, re-read, etc.¹¹ The medium's spatial presentation renders the direction and speed of time radically unfamiliar.

This denatured visualization of time allows the medium to unsettle both time and space. As Singer notes, narrative theory generally treats elements of narrative plot as "universal categories," because it has "origins in *structuralism*, a twentieth-century intellectual movement that sought to understand all cultural phenomena, including narratives, as the products of shared systems of rules, relationships, and binary oppositions" (56). Comics' potential to disrupt narrative linearity, and the form's ability to imbricate readers in narrative construction are well established in the field. At stake in narrative theory is "History" as knowledge, because, as Hayden White famously argues, the discipline of history conforms to narrative conventions, including the artificial ascription of beginnings/middles/endings to events that are not so neatly ordered.¹² Nonfiction comics exploit the medium's formal defiance of linearity as a way of troubling the narrative conventions that underlie historiography, and therefore to articulate *histories* that resist universalism.

This line of analysis is very good at articulating what comics disrupt: the linear, progressive model of history they undermine. Yet, this is a negative definition. Scholars who seek to positively answer what kind of history comics produce have thus far founded their claims on the basis of subjectivity, to say that comics represent history as memory and/or trauma. Indeed human memory is nonlinear by nature; we lose track of the sequences of our lives, certain life-events seem to occupy more mental space than others, and remarkable instants are recollected as if time stood still to contain them. The inherent narrative multiplicity of comics as

¹¹ In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud suggests that comics are in a sense co-authored by readers, who participate in these ways, as well as by imagining the events omitted in the gutter and completing the details suggested by hand-drawing.

¹² *Metahistory*.

verbal and visual medium lends it special potential to represent competing and complementary perspectives. As Marianne Hirsch and others have argued, visual-temporal interruptions and repetitions lend comics an intriguing ability to capture paths of human memory and experience. I will explicitly explore issues of subjectivity in comics in chapter two, and questions about the subjective status of knowledge also inform my study of visual witnessing in chapter three and narrative authority in chapter four. Even as comics' nonlinear handling of time produces profound and perhaps authentic renderings of history as individuals live it, I suggest that the media form's spatial-temporal dimension also opens ways of understanding history that interrogate subjective limitations.

The way that comics disrupt narrative linearity is part of similar movements in art and philosophy that re-imagine time to be not a series of divisible still points, but rather a matter of flow and movement. Drawing on the work of the late nineteenth century philosopher Henri Bergson, media theorist Tom Gunning eloquently describes modern (Western) knowledge of time as movement, by detailing similarities between comics and other roughly contemporary media forms, including film and the panorama: "The panorama radicalized the process of reading/viewing through a new emphasis on the portrayal of time and motion that rendered the succession of images dynamic and the reader/viewer virtually mobile . . . Comics became modern through evolving a new mobile address to the spectator as much as by evoking motion in the incidents portrayed" (Gunning 40). Whereas linear time assumes a series of distinct moments understood chronologically, the alternative proposed by Bergson is a transitional temporality in which there are no fixed moments. We find this idea echoed in what I refer to as comics' explosive temporality: the time of the action depicted in a given panel is often ambiguous and the transitions between panels flow through "virtually mobile" readers as we take in pages.

Megan Kelso's Imagined Graphic History and/as Messianic Time

The world of *Artichoke Tales*, like the text itself, is one inhabited by competing knowledges of spatio-temporality. Universalist accounts of history assume the same stream of linear time contains all events, an assumption frequently coupled with the exclusion of events that do not fit the implied "process of development," such that the past is interpreted through what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls a "first in Europe, then elsewhere" paradigm (6). In this way, historicism's preoccupation with temporality places spatial geography under erasure: the questions historicism asks, "What happened, when and why?" always contain "where" as their hidden term. Close examination of Megan Kelso's *Artichoke Tales* elucidates comics' formal engagement with time and space as objects of knowledge. At a narrative level, *Artichoke Tales* is very much concerned with the historical contexts in which knowledge is produced.

Before the great civil war that divided the world of *Artichoke Tales* into North and South, a queen was born. Telea, identified at birth because her head is shaped like a crown rather than an artichoke, spends her childhood travelling the country. She lives in each region of what will be her Queendom, where she is meant to learn the customs and values of their various peoples. As Queen she is asked to adjudicate the competing interests of Southerners, who receive subsidies to support their foraging traditions, and industrialized Northerners. These competing interests result in civil war, perhaps because they were irreconcilable, but arguably because Telea failed to learn the knowledge of either community and shirks the task of helping them to know one another. A task *Artichoke Tales'* protagonist, Brigitte, attempts in her journey North years after the war.

A civil war between North and South, motivated by competing economic interests, also understood by the people it effects to result from incompatible cultures: where have we heard

that before? Adding to the familiarity, the northerners are disparagingly called "pale faces" and their skin burns easily in the sun. *Artichoke Tales* interrogates modernity through its depiction of industrial machinery, including military cannons and canned food storage, and monarchical power. Direct historical parallels informed Kelso's creative process, as she told me, "At first I kind of modeled it on the kind of classic American Civil War dichotomy of an industrialized North and an agrarian South, but I was also thinking about all of those post-Cold War civil wars that were taking place in Eastern Europe and Africa."

Kelso's interest in wars distant in either space or time gave way to attention to more immediate conflict:

I remember starting to pay more attention and think about the cyclical quality of these types of conflicts. I also thought about what was going on in Washington State in the early 90s, where it finally became clear that the logging industry as it had been was really over . . . There was so much talk about "our way of life," "the loggers' way of life" and how they were losing their way of life. What does that really mean? You hear that phrase over and over when you encounter conflicts between agrarian and industrial cultures.

Euro-American historiography frequently defines modernity through similar political and technological criteria. These modern technologies contribute to many wars in the Western hemisphere, the American Civil War not least among them. In the above informal conversation, Kelso betrays historicist bias, by reducing disparate conflicts to shared features, and ignoring US slavery's role in the antebellum "way of life." In my reading, *Artichoke Tales* challenges this kind of essentializing logic, but the fact that its author inadvertently repeats it may suggest an advantage of comics expression over verbal discourse.

Certainly a North-South divide is an insufficient taxonomy for the history of modern warfare. Demarcation lines, however drawn across geographies, impose binaries and make membership claims on the individuals who fall to whichever side. Geographic distinctions are often useful to understand conflict, but it is important also to recognize that the material differences operating across such boundaries owe themselves not only to essential features of climate and culture, but such differences also result from the "knowledge" these supposed boundaries produces - as for example the economic disparity between the contemporary "Global South" and "Global North" (the latter phrase more implied than uttered). The narrative and a map in the book's inside back cover establish that southern villages occupy valleys and the northern peninsulas, but Kelso's smooth line-work and minimal detail renders these spaces largely indistinct. In situating her world in an unknown landscape, Kelso denatures readers' perception of geographic difference. For the novel's characters, real variances in climate and terrain distinguish the North and South. However, those same characters sometimes misperceive the uniqueness of their own geographies, as when Brigitte wrongly assumes a certain type of plant does not grow in the North.

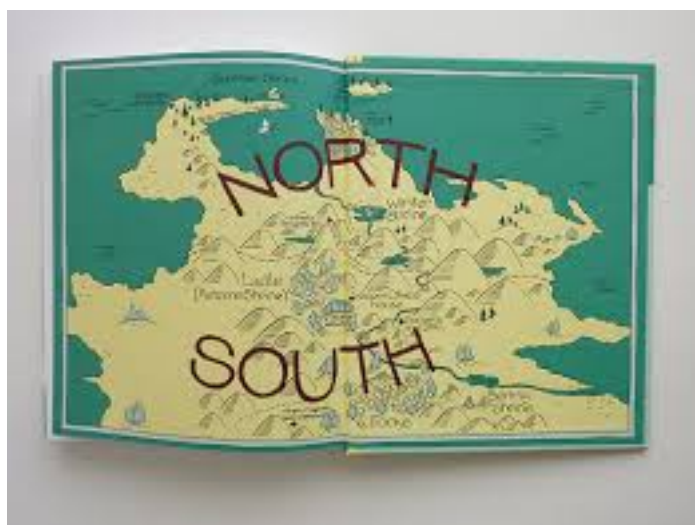


Figure 2 *Artichoke Tales*, Inside Back Cover

As we see in *Artichoke Tales*, absolute, infallible knowledge is unattainable for many reasons. Brigitte, taught that Northern lands are infertile compared to her homeland, has an imperfect knowledge of land she has not travelled. Lacking also is the Queen's knowledge about people with whom she has lived. The Queen saw her fostering across the land as a trial on her path to sovereignty, rather than as an education to help her rule—or so Brigitte's grandmother believes. Historical knowledge is always, necessarily colored by the uses we hope for it. As Friedrich Nietzsche elaborates in "The Uses and Abuses of History for Life," the ways history is taught also follow from the uses of the past imagined by our teachers: "People use history against the young . . . Indeed, history is itself capable of deceiving the young about their most beautiful privilege, about their power to cultivate in themselves with complete conviction a great idea and to allow an even greater idea to grow forth out of it" (41). Brigitte, *Artichoke Tale's* protagonist is a student of history in a culture without classrooms (one of the distinguishing characteristics of the novel's North-South divide is education). As such, no one has "deceived" her. Born and raised after a civil war, her curiosity leads her to interview her family and friends, ultimately venturing across the continent to see the battle locations for herself. Brigitte's pursuit of historical facts to learn about the civil war is shot-through with perceived victimization.¹³ In fact, her inquiry is provoked by her grandmother's caution that she avoid Adam, a Northern soldier, who repairs cannons for the army. The grandmother, Charlotte, forbids Adam from making Brigitte his "camp follower." Brigitte mistrusts Charlotte's knowledge about Adam, implicitly rejecting the grandmother's claim that her historical knowledge can predict Brigitte's future.

Aware that her present life and her future depend on the ways she remembers the past, Brigitte pursues an individually acquired historical sensibility to complicate the lessons Charlotte

¹³ "Shot-through" a term from Walter Benjamin's "Thesis on History" which I'll discuss later in this chapter, articulates the violent potential of historical memory.

has passed down. Her rejection occurs not in an outright denial of Charlotte's truthfulness, but rather in attempting to entertain that truth alongside others'. In Kelso's own words, "Brigitte, she's trying to piece together all of these different accounts. I think she is after, the way a lot of young people are, after truth. She wants to get to the heart of the matter and find out what's real. It's a Rashomon story. There's all of these different versions." History becomes meaningful to Brigitte by simultaneously interacting with multiple versions of the past. The character is motivated by a search for capital-T "Truth," but, like the novel's readers, she discovers that "truth" lies somewhere indeterminate amidst the "different accounts."

I could have begun this dissertation with an example of this kind of multiplicity in a definitively non-fiction graphic narrative. I will do so when I explore graphic narrative perspective on lived history in my second chapter, which considers subjectivity in recent comics about Israel-Palestine. But, to critically interrogate "historical" knowledge and adequately grapple with the ways individual perspective is formed through community, it is necessary to disentangle the concept of temporality from the timelines of known/recognizable events. Kelso's allegorical graphic novel isolates "temporality" from time most readers know it, precisely because the incidents of its plot are so generally familiar to Western readers as to defy direct analogy.

As the philosophers I cite and Kelso's novel elucidate, apprehending time is a form of knowledge. My decision to explore temporality in this allegorical context is informed by the seemingly counter-intuitive fact that Walter Benjamin wrote his famous "Theses on History," a meditation on theoretical conceptions of the past shortly before his failed escape from the reach of the Nazis. In them, he invests his attention not with the particular crisis of Europe's present, nor fears for his future; instead he frames his present situation in the context of the perpetual

"emergency situation" of history. Benjamin's turn to history as a tool for life in the present echoes Friedrich Nietzsche's essay, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life," especially in their shared criticism of the historicist sense of temporal continuity. Benjamin and Nietzsche both suggest that viewing all occurrences as inherently, causally linked is dangerous, and perhaps for this reason they largely refrain from discussing specific historical events.

Benjamin extends concerns about teleology to argue for an alternative historical philosophy, which he calls historical materialism, distinct from historicism and Marxist/socialist philosophies that implicitly endorse historicism. His version of historical materialism is meant to "explode the continuum of history" simultaneously charging the past to be used in the service of the present, and redeeming the past with the present. The theoretical value of Benjamin's contribution cannot be understated, and yet, for all his insight as to what an alternative to historicism should do, his theses provide little advice for how a historian might accomplish these goals.¹⁴ I read Michel Foucault's essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" as a partial answer. While Foucault, a 20th century French philosopher, does not share Benjamin's revolutionary framework, his model of genealogy, with its emphasis on history as disperse and inherently parodic, responds to and elaborates Benjamin's call to "explode" history in both senses: expansion and destruction. Moreover, I posit comics as a media-form capable of responding to Benjamin's call.

Nietzsche, Benjamin and Foucault all argue against linear historicism, and against specifically teleological time, but this is not to say that they do not each value history. On the contrary, Benjamin quotes Nietzsche in his twelfth thesis, "To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge

¹⁴ Benjamin's recently published, albeit never completed *Arcades Project*, about 19th century Parisian shopping centers, was likely meant as a model of historical materialism.

uses it, no matter how elegantly he may look down on our coarse and graceless needs and distresses." As the title of Nietzsche's essay suggests, history, he and Benjamin agree, should not be seen from the pretext of objectivity or disinterest, but on the contrary, "we need it for life and action" (Nietzsche). In his essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault explains Nietzsche's criticism of the pursuit of "pure" knowledge, writing that he "reproached critical history for detaching us from every real source and for sacrificing the very moment of life to the exclusive concern for truth" (Foucault 97). Thus, each of the three insists upon the need for a model of history to serve people living in the present.

Artichoke Tales too insists on the need to know history, as characters understand present advantages and misfortunes as the product of historical consciousness. Every character we meet recites a version of history, their sources varying from immediate experience to classroom instruction. The Northern and Southern communities implicitly disagree on what kind of historical consciousness is beneficial: one that preserves tradition or one that marks progress. Southerners favor tradition, which they practice, honor at shrines and, like Brigitte's poet father Dorian, record. Jimmy, Brigitte's Southern-born grandfather, teaches Ramona, her mother that medical knowledge is a product of history: "A thousand years ago, a girl found out that she could strengthen her mother's weak heart by feeding her tea made from the leaves of a purple flower growing in the forest / Our girl discovered digitalis. It comes from the purple foxglove plant and stimulates the circulation of the blood. That's technology" (Kelso 94). The lesson Jimmy passes down is not simply the plant's medicinal value, but the pride of origin. In this speech he contests the reduction of technology to recent development in human production.

In the history as told by Charlotte, Queen Telea does not see the advantage of "traditional" knowledge that Jimmy find in his adopted home. The queen's former foster mother, Widow

Olive urges her to continue foraging subsidies to keep Southerners from working in the fish canneries and so preserve their heritage: "As you know from your time with us, we have historically subsisted on the Boletus mushroom. But as we depend more and more on fish from the north, our old ways are being lost / It is imperative that we preserve our foraging culture or our whole way of life will disappear " (Kelso 47). This antiquarian appeal holds too little sway with the queen, who reluctantly revokes the subsidy, increasing tensions between the two parts of the country.

Figure 3 *Artichoke Tales*, page 66

Widow Olive appears for the second and final time in the novel, jailed for leading a Southern rebellion. (This page design, which combines two scenes of action without exposition relating them is typical of the ways in which *Artichoke Tales* visually weaves of time and space.) When Telea visits her, each blames the other for "Tearing my country in two" (Kelso 65). According to Widow Olive, Telea "fail[ed] to learn the lesson" of her rearing. She contends: "For hundreds of years north and south were one, but you, my Queen, are a wedge between us" (66). This nostalgia suggests that Telea was responsible for the economic issues that she was asked to resolve. The novel gives no clear indication whether the taxes collected during the Queen's reign to support her rule were in place prior to her birth, but it is established that there had been no Queen for generations before her. The knowledge Telea acquired during her fostering was insufficient preparation for her to maintain national unity, if such unity ever existed.¹⁵ Widow Olive's fostering taught Telea a model of history not designed to deal with change. Her teachers aimed to preserve things as they had been, perhaps because they were unaware of the changes already underway. Faced with a radically different circumstance - in jail, soon to be executed - Widow Olive can still barely comprehend change. To her the course of history is defined by two eras: unity before, and division after. To her, the future looks equally uniform as the past: "The dead, the living and, the yet unborn will blame you, my Queen" (Kelso 67).

While this example casts a poor image of "antiquarianism," Nietzsche's term for an approach to history characterized by the desire to preserve tradition, the progressivist alternative posited in the novel appears similarly limited. *Artichoke Tales* critiques both knowledge paradigms undergirding history in their reliance on linearity. Anna, who "studied Southern poetry in college," insists that traditions like "beeler broth" and "solstice stones" are "partly MY

¹⁵ Readers who imagine prior conflict, despite Olive's claims that the nation knew only tranquility before Telea's reign, would find themselves in good company with Megan Kelso: "What I imagine, and this isn't in the book, but what I imagine is they had another queen long, long ago, and things had gone badly."

culture too, Brigitte. Up North, we don't BELIEVE anymore but we've still got the folklore" (emphasis original, 169). In claiming national lineage entitles her to "folklore" practices once associated with religious belief, Anna associates these practices - and the people for whom they retain religious significance - with the past. Whereas Widow Olive's philosophy of history can apprehend change only as rupture, Anna's historicism is unable to reckon difference beyond transition. She, no doubt like her teachers, assumes that the similarities in "folklore" must result from a shared origin and that the traditional practice changed in the north and remained static in the south. This framework collapses difference to a linear logic of development, and associates time and space such that "here" equates to "now" and farther spaces are associated with a pastness Dipesh Chakrabarty labels "not-yet." Chakrabarty, a postcolonial historian, argues that the West's self-proclaimed position as temporal and geographic center can (and should be) contested, undermined and weakened, but that it is ultimately impossible to reverse this logic.¹⁶

The 'historical' sense of continuity implied by linear time limits people's ability to recognize themselves as active participants in their own time, capable of influencing the future. Compare the following quotations from Nietzsche and Benjamin, to see their convergence on this issue:

Such a person no longer believes in his own being, no longer believes in himself, sees everything in moving points flowing out of each other, and loses himself in this stream of becoming. (Nietzsche)

There is nothing which has corrupted the German working-class so much as the opinion that they were swimming with the tide. Technical

¹⁶ That is to say, the task of "provincializing Europe" is well worth pursuing, even as Europe cannot be fully rendered peripheral in the study of modern history.

developments counted to them as the course of the stream, which they thought they were swimming in. (Benjamin XI)

With strikingly similar metaphors ("flowing" in a "stream of becoming", and "swimming with the tide"/"stream") each criticizes a naturalizing view of historical time that precludes independent action. In Nietzsche's description of this phenomenon, one (foolishly) assumes that nothing can exist which does not emerge easily ("flow") from what has come before. Obviously, such a view of history does not allow room for revolution. An important difference between these two metaphors is that in Nietzsche's the individual simply fails to think of himself and his own agency, while in Benjamin's the individual foolishly thinks of himself as swimming with (and co-forming) the current, when he is actually being abused by it (as the pun on electrical "current" suggests).

Foucault restates Nietzsche and Benjamin's critique, writing, "An entire historical tradition (theological or rationalistic) aims at dissolving the singular event into an ideal continuity - as a teleological movement or a natural process"(88). Benjamin is especially critical of teleological time, a subset of linear time, which he terms the "concept of progress". He criticizes Marxist thinkers, such as Josef Dietzgen, leader of the Social Democratic Party, for conforming to belief in progress, the same logic which he implies enabled the Fascists to come to power:

Progress, as it was painted in the minds of the social democrats, was once upon a time the progress of humanity itself (not only that of its abilities and knowledges). It was, secondly, something unending (something corresponding to an endless perfectibility of humanity). It counted, thirdly,

as something essentially unstoppable (as something self-activating, pursuing a straight or spiral path). (XIII)

Although he does not explicitly call this "teleology," the above description makes it clear that Benjamin faults his contemporaries for believing in a sort of predestined, inevitable advancement of humanity. The belief in progress as "unstoppable" draws particular disdain, because it blinds individuals to historical events that hurt, rather than help humanity. Thus, we might imagine Benjamin to say to the socialists around him, 'You were so committed to the inevitability of Marx's revolution that you failed to see or cry out against the Fascist movement that has dominated Germany and threatens to dominate Europe.'

Benjamin continues his critique of teleology and claims that to do away with this false idea of what will happen to humanity through time, it is necessary to alter the way we conceive time itself: "The concept of the progress of the human race in history is not to be separated from the concept of its progression through a homogenous and empty time. The critique of the concept of this progress [through homogenous, empty time] must ground the basis of its critique on the concept of progress itself". Let us pause for a moment to explicate the two meanings of "progress" in Benjaminian terms: linearity and teleology. Linearity is what he refers to as history's progression through homogenous and empty time. Each minute, day, year, etc. leads to the next, without end, repetition or reversal.¹⁷ Teleology, then, is the idea that as time moves forward so too does humanity advance. This advancement has been variously described as material, intellectual or spiritual. (For some philosophers, such as Hegel, these types of teleological advancement are inter-related.) In other words, the concept of humanity's inevitable, unstoppable advancement (teleology) depends upon a linear model of time. Benjamin implies that society does not (in any necessary or universal way) evolve as the advancement of man, but

¹⁷ Benedict Anderson contrasts this model with what he thinks of as pre-modern "circular time".

he frames this critique in a reconfiguration of the concept of time itself. It is worth noting that Foucault echoes Benjamin on this when he advocates for, "a transformation of history into a totally different form of time" (93).

In contrast to his configuration of "homogenous and empty time" which is intrinsic to teleology, Benjamin proposes the model of Messianic time. Messianic time as a concept draws on three metaphors from Jewish theology: The angel of history who sees everything piled up at once, as detritus, rather than progress; apocalyptic resurrection of the dead, who inhabit their bodies in the material world together all at once; and, the narrow gate open in every epoch through which the Messiah might enter. I will discuss the first two as alternatives to teleology, now, and return to Benjamin's invocation of the Messiah in the context of what he calls the perpetual "state of emergency" below. In his reading of Klee's "Angel of History" painting, Benjamin imagines what human time looks like from a divine perspective: "The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet . . . That which we call progress, is this storm." (IX)

As comics scholars have frequently remarked, the "sequential art" depends upon non-linear semiotics.¹⁸ Especially in comics that utilize full pages (rather than single strips) repetition, peripheral awareness and permeable borders confound sequential reading. When comics scholars note that the medium combines words and images, they draw on centuries' old ideas about the respective domains of literary and plastic arts. In an essay on GE Lessing, visual culture theorist WJT Mitchell summarizes common perception about the respective art forms, "Nothing, I suppose, seems more intuitive than the claim that literature is an art of time, painting

¹⁸ Scott McCloud refers to comics as "the sequential art," a term I find troubling, but one which may inadvertently highlight the non-sequential nature of comics time.

an art of space" (98). It would follow, intuitively then, that comics is a medium capable of handling both space and time, by its combination of words and images. (Film scholars have made this claim for that other visual narrative media form.) Yet Mitchell contends, claims to a formal distinction between temporal and spatial media are in fact claims of value rather than description, because, "The terms 'space' and 'time' only become figurative or improper when they are abstracted from one another as independent, antithetical essences that define the nature of an object. The use of these terms is, strictly speaking, a concealed synecdoche, a reduction of the whole to a part" (104).

Tension between space and time has important resonances with relations of power. In Lessing's art criticism, Mitchell finds a hierarchical formulation of time and space. Echoing the disciplinary divide between the study of history and geography, time is associated with superiority, masculinity and rationality. Doreen Massey, a geographer, laments that philosophers often misapprehend space as a subordinate feature to time: "Temporality is a more pressing concern. Over and again space is conceptualized (or, rather, assumed to be) simply the negative opposite of time . . . time and space must be thought together: not some mere rhetorical flourish, but that it influences how we think of both terms . . . the imagination of one will have repercussions for the imagination of the other" (Massey 17-18).

By isolating fragments of time in a spatial layout, comics reveal the interconnectedness of spatiality and temporality. The combination of words and images reveals how easily time and space coexist in art, and how inseparable the two are in life. In *Artichoke Tales*, Kelso uses the features of comics normally associated with temporal narrative (words) and those associated with physical space (images) to disrupt both sides of the dyad. Comics' visual imagery can often distinguish geographies, such as the urban and the forested, but imagery alone does not convey a

specific sense of place. Captions and character speech, therefore, completes comics spatiality by naming streets, cities, etc. At first glance, *Artichoke Tales* appears to conform to typical comics semiotics with captions that mark time and place, but such captions appear sporadically and are no more illuminating than "elsewhere" (13). Some geographic clarity comes from a map drawn into the book's inside back-cover (an unconventional location for a fantasy map), but the relatively nondescript details are partially concealed by the map's unusual location at the end of the book. I have suggested above that the unfamiliar world of *Artichoke Tales* serves an allegorical function, illuminating philosophies of history. I contend, additionally, that this choice coupled with Kelso's representational minimalism complicates reader expectations of visual art's spatiality.

Moreover, *Artichoke Tales* manipulates comics semiotics to unchain time. In addition to frequent non-linear panel/page design, such as the page depicting Brigitte's archery lesson and the page depicting Widow Olive and Queen Telea's jailhouse conversation, Kelso's captioning mocks the notion of temporal clarity. More frequent than captions that describe place, are occasional, unfixed markers of time: "collection day" (14), "lupine day" (19), "collection night" (21), "surgery day" (29), "market day" (30), "sick day" (36), "cleanup day" (84), "daphne bud day" (86), "roofing day" (91), "market day" (104). These provide the reader little indication of temporal relationship. Some of the days on this list might be tied to geographic seasons, especially "lupine" and "daphne bud," which accompany panels featuring plants, but it is unclear if these plants grow in predictable cycles. Familiar neither with the world of *Artichoke Tales*, nor the customs of its southern inhabitants, readers have little sense of how time is ordered. Supposing that "collection" and "market" days follow a recognizable pattern, those timings are given equal standing with others that clearly arise spontaneously: "surgery day" when Dorian

injures his feet, and "sick day" when Adam's departure leaves Brigitte despondent. Functionally confusing, these vague captions compel readers to look to what is depicted in the images that accompany them, so as to call back the visual art element and in turn to link time and physical space again.

Here-and-Now, Comics Liminality

Kelso's disruption of linear time recalls Walter Benjamin's concept of the "here-and-now," completely dislodged from continuity with the past and the future. To explain this nonlinear model, he invokes the theological concept of resurrection.¹⁹ The idea of resurrection, highlights man's inability to understand the past: "Indeed, the past would fully befall only a resurrected humanity. Said another way: only for a resurrected humanity would its past, in each of its moments, be citable" (III). In this metaphor, the past becomes citable (knowable) precisely when it ceases to be past, when everyone who has ever lived ("in each of its moment") rises from the earth to co-exist. Therefore, as the Angel of History metaphor also implies, true understanding of the past is only possible in the absence of time.²⁰

¹⁹ Benjamin's concept of resurrection seems to merge Jewish and Christian traditions, both of which include mention of reunited bodies and spirits, removed from the limits of time. The enemy, "anti-Christ" is obviously a divergence from Jewish theology, the implications of which are beyond the scope of this project.

²⁰ *Watchmen*'s Jonathan Osterman, also known as Doctor Manhattan, is perhaps the best example the "Angel of History" in comics, as a character who experiences all of time simultaneously and who is often depicted floating ethereally.

Figure 4 *Artichoke Tales*, page 1

The opening image in *Artichoke Tales*, shown above, appears to depict war-beleaguered troops, but this scene occurs after the civil war. The war is long over, Southerners claim to have won it in that they kept their culture, and yet, the Northern army marches on Brigitte's town. What brings the army south is never clarified in the novel. Kelso describes it as a state of "occupation." She told me, "There is this state of peace, but it's because the North is basically dominating the South into staying. It got worse after the war." Southerners like Charlotte greet the army's presence with disdain, but not surprise. Distinctions between then and now are not meaningful to characters whose presents are so marked by the past. Perhaps this is why Dorian writes his poetic history of the war in the present tense: "The damp wind chills, darkness spreads as pale invaders with cold metal heads arrive to poison our land / Our ancient dead cry, for how can warm rocks and perfumed green buds quell the mechanical ranks?" (13). In Dorian's verse, the army of "pale invaders" exists in a lingering state of arrival. The impression is not simply one of repetition. Descriptions like "wind chills" and "darkness spreads" both capture liminal states: the transition from warmth to cold, light to dark. As such, the invasion figures outside of time. To exist outside the logic of linear time is to be caught at the nexus of anticipating the (hoped or feared) future and recognizing the unfinished past, and to anticipate the future is to imagine how it might differ from the present. In a sense this liminality describes the only way we can experience time. In Benjaminian terms "the 'emergency situation' in which we live is the rule" (VIII).

In his calls for "a concept of history which corresponds to" and explains the situation of being "oppressed", Benjamin defines the present as the site of revolution, rather than as a transitional moment. Here, Benjamin recalls Nietzsche who described the "suffering person in need of emancipation" as the living person whose relationship to history is the most fit for use (in

contrast to abuse) for life. The anti-historicist Benjamin imagines seizing a memory of the past as, "historical object solely and alone where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he cognizes the sign of a messianic zero-hour [Stillstellung] of events . . . a revolutionary chance in the struggle for the suppressed past. He perceives it, in order to explode a specific epoch out of the homogenous course of history" (Benjamin XII). Unlike Dorian, *Artichoke Tales*' readers see fragments of time and space in constellation, but the fragments correspond to a fantasy world, not our own. If, "To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize 'how it really was.' It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger," then perhaps realism is irrelevant (Benjamin VI).

Benjamin's call "to explode the continuum of history" is both method and goal. I interpret "explode" in two senses: to expand (as the alternate translation "blow up" connotes) and to destroy. I interpret the first sense, expansion of the continuum of history, as method. In his essay on Nietzsche, Foucault provides a model for how one might seize and expand a "memory" of the past. Foucault contends that history, in its very nature, is parody, and that genealogy transforms it into parody of itself. In reference to monumental concepts of history (that cite the past as inspiration for the present) Foucault remarks, "Historians supplied the Revolution with Roman prototypes, romanticism with knight's armor" (Foucault 93). Foucault articulates an "explosive" potential in such parody, by expanding it:

The genealogist will know what to make of this masquerade. He will . . .
 push the masquerade to its limit and prepare the great carnival of time
 where masks are constantly reappearing. No longer the identification of
 our faint individuality with the solid identities of the past, but our
 'unrealization' through the excessive choice of identities - Frederick of

Hohenstaufen, Caesar, Jesus, Dionysus, and possibly Zarathustra. Taking up these masks, revitalizing the buffoonery of history." (Foucault 94)

Foucault suggests that genealogists take historicism's pretense of continuity, which is, of course, maintained through constant reinvention of the past, and extend it to unlimited, "carnavalesque" identification. This "explosive" method implies its own "explosive" goal: the destruction of time, because this destruction affects not only historical time, but also our very identities. Foucault makes explicit the destructive facet of what it means to be "shot through" with messianic time: "The purpose of history, guided by genealogy . . . does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence . . . it seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us . . . its intention is to reveal the heterogeneous systems which, masked by the self, inhibit the formation of any form of identity" (Foucault 95).

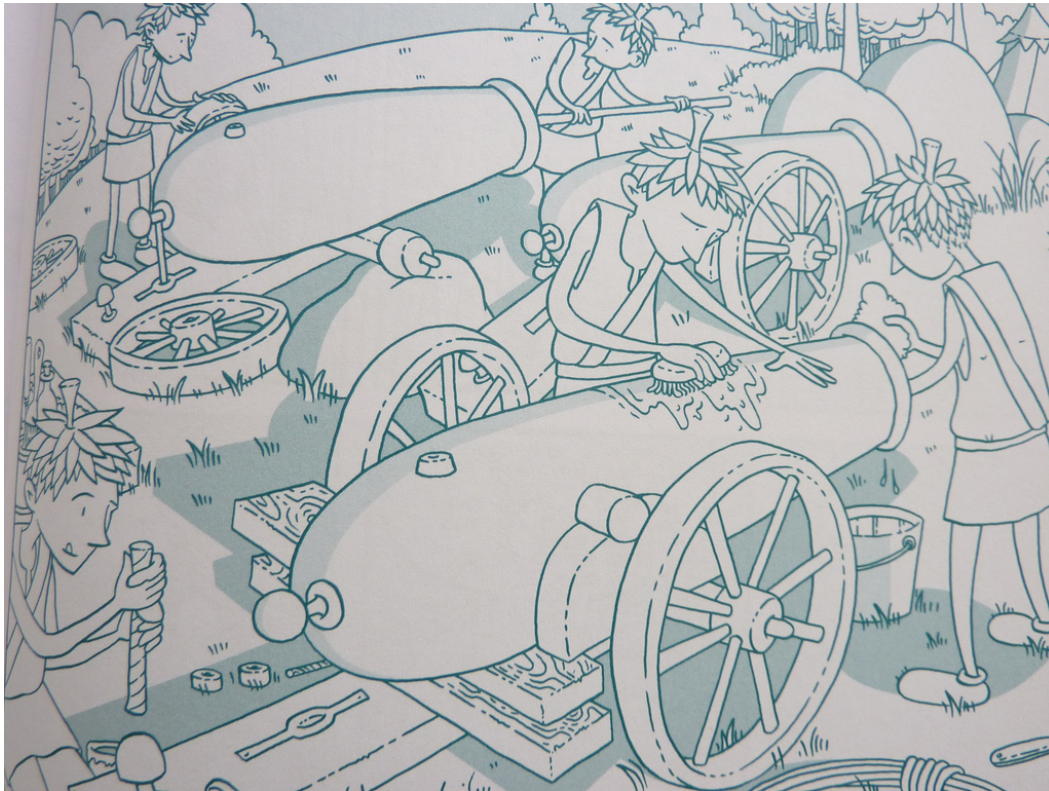


Figure 5 *Artichoke Tales*, page 205

I have suggested that Kelso's allegorical subject matter allows readers to appreciate *Artichoke Tales*' disruption of spatio-temporality by removing resemblances that would impose our own times and spaces on to the text. Such resemblances to "real history" as exist in the novel, "push the masquerade [of history] to its limit" (Foucault 94). If reviewers of Kelso's novel (and indeed the novel's publisher as well) fail to distinguish which part/time of our own world *Artichoke Tales* resembles, this failure arises from a larger failure to apprehend history as what Benjamin terms "monad." The *Artichoke* civil war resembles multiple times and continents in "World History," because "History" defines itself by temporal patterns; the very terminology of "civil war" imposes a spatial logic and framework for apprehending conflict. A loose allegory for many distinct historical situations, *Artichoke Tales* parodies historicism's tendency to collapse spatio-temporal multiplicity and in turn apprehend difference as iteration.

There is another layer of parody operating in *Artichoke Tales*: the visual resemblance between characters in multiple times and spaces. As in the panel above depicting soldiers and canons (at least the third sequence to do so in the novel), characters are indistinguishable from one another. Their pointed noses, thinly lined eyebrows and dotted eyes are—like their artichoke-hair and uniforms—identical. Whatever individual feeling motivates these characters is lost behind indistinguishable "masks" of similarity. Principal characters appear elsewhere with only slightly more distinguishing detail. Even for a reader who has the benefit of context and dialogue, it can be very difficult to follow the narrative for this reason. The panel's action likewise depicts cannons, drawn identically to those that appear several other times in the novel. Much as characters within the novel see the past echoed in their present, images like the one above layer images previously made familiar to readers. This style produces a resurrective effect,

Dorian's "ancient dead" not simply alive in memory, but (perhaps unwittingly) reenacted as parts of a masquerade.

In my opening analysis I questioned how to distinguish Brigitte as she appears side-by-side with herself in a single panel, and asked what it would mean for her to stand in multiple temporal moments. The potential of comics temporality - a potential realized in *Artichoke Tales* - is to visualize the imaginative work of linear time. Those "moments" pictured in panels - and nicely overlaid in Kelso's page design - are fictions. Moments in time exist no more than do frames of space. They are lines we draw, rough edges that exclude elements that should belong, and include others that should not. None of this is to discount or worse turn away from reality as we know it. The point, rather, is to grapple with the ways we apprehend reality: the ways we hold on, seizing images of the past; and, the ways we arrest it, seeking to control its meaning.

It seems logical to end, as Benjamin does, with his final metaphor of Messianic time: the Messiah's narrow gate. With this metaphor, borrowed from Jewish theology, Benjamin reveals the perpetual state of emergency to be also one of perpetual opportunity: "It is well-known that the Jews were . . . instructed . . . in remembrance . . . For that reason the future did not . . . turn into a homogenous and empty time for the Jews. For in it [the future] every second was the narrow gate, through which the Messiah could enter" (Benjamin Addendum B). In other words, redemption is not inevitability, but an ongoing, precarious possibility. To seize this possibility we must recognize the present, like each moment that came before, as a crisis with both revolutionary and destructive potential. Our wars are fought, but not over. As in Dorian's verse, danger advances and might yet be overcome. Kelso's graphic art shows this danger all around us, in space as well as time.

Chapter 2. COMICS AND NARRATOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: (WITNESSING) BIAS IN DIRECT EXPERIENCE

"Characteristic for the novel as a genre is not the image of a man in his own right, but precisely the *image of a language*. But in order that language become an artistic image, it must become speech from speaking lips, conjoined with the image of a speaking person." (Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" 336)

This chapter begins with the somewhat counter-intuitive assertion that narrative perspective in the medium of comics is inherently complex. Too often, popular and scholarly discussion of comics assumes that narrative simplicity follows from the form's visual and verbal consolidation. While no media form is capable of representing reality in all of life's nuance or detail, the distance from signifier and signified is particularly marked in comics, because the visual and verbal language of cartooning is based on abstraction: the visual register lends itself to two-dimensional panel composition; dialogue is confined to the space of speech bubbles; and, mass reproduction discourages the use of color.²¹ For these reasons, comics necessarily exclude certain visual and narrative details more readily expressed in prose and film. However, verisimilitude does not equal accuracy. On the contrary, many examples of "realistic" detail in narrative media produce an exaggerated reality in which hyper-real appearance adds to enjoyment, but confuses the issue of representation.

While it is true that comics simplify each narrative element, including dialogue and the appearance of visual details, the medium's combination of multiple narrative registers produces

²¹ McCloud defines cartoon language as abstraction in *Understanding Comics*.

complex multiplicity.²² The world of hand-drawn comics is quite evidently not the world in which readers live or see; while they may represent it, cartoons do not look like reality.²³ The question, then, is whose world do we see when we read a comic text? Comics theorist Thierry Groensteen approaches this problem in terms of narrative theories of other media, including prose and film, and differentiates between the perspective(s) of characters who experience the narrative and the implied perspectival position of the images themselves: "Even if every image supposes a perceptual source, this may either be personalized, by expressing the viewpoint of a character (we have access to the action 'with him/her' or through his/her eyes' [sic]) or remain impersonal" (84). Often the viewpoints represented in individual panels contradict one another. Likewise, the "view" in such visual representations frequently exists in tension with the verbal narration of a comic's captioning. As comics scholars Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven describe: "The images are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a separate narrative thread . . . The medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified whole, but rather remain distinct" (768).

There is an inherent narrative multiplicity to comics in the combination of multiple still images (panels) and often in the interplay between verbal and visual registers. In *Comics and Narration*, Groensteen distinguishes the verbal and visual registers into roles of "the reciter" and "the monstrator." In theory at least, the monstrator shows narrative elements via drawing and the reciter tells the story through captions. While the two types of "narrators" overlap in function, the reciter is more likely to escape notice. As Groensteen says, "any drawing is necessarily signed and marked by a considerable degree of uniqueness" and as such calls attention to itself as representation (85). In contrast, language, tool of the reciter, can appear "sometimes *neutral*, and

²² Hillary Chute calls this "cross-discursivity".

²³ My discussion of comics' formalism obviously excludes "photo-comics."

sometimes *involved*" (Groensteen 91, italics original). By convention, a comic page may lack words entirely or use them sparingly. The reciter "sometimes stays in the background, and is sometimes interventionist. When 'in the background,' it lets the sequential unfurling of the images do the talking (whether or not they contain dialogue) without feeling it appropriate to intervene" (90). I propose that putting pressure on these two narrative functions (visual and verbal) in and across panels reveals comics' potential to give simultaneous expression to competing subjectivities. Moreover, comics narrativity may reveal the mutual constituency of subjectivities erroneously categorized into binary opposition.

Nonfiction, historical comics constitute a growing trend, in no small part due to the medium's narrative multiplicity. In the field of history, reconciling multiple and contradictory narrative perspectives is paramount. Chronicling historical events, such as the events of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one encounters a range of perception. Individuals' "truths" mitigate one another. Historians recognize that individual experience incompletely reflects reality: relatively minor differences of circumstance can render 'shared' experience quite different for the people involved, and sensory faculties are influenced by personal history and individual embodiment such that two people in exactly the same place at the same time will observe differently. Alun Munslow, who subscribes to Hayden White's theory of history as literature, contends that the historian's proper task is to recognize the material factors motivating each source and to scrutinize the reliability of elements therein. Munslow advocates, "Deconstructionist history openly accepts a dissenting role for the historian as someone who must challenge the established notions of authority within contemporary society by refusing to 'tidy up' the past by ascribing origins and causes with the claim to evidentially certified truth" (74).

Graphic narratives' untidy, multi-modality highlights discursive, visual and ideological imprints on subjective experience: they represent multiple "voices," including Israelis and Palestinians who comment on the way their interests are represented in various media, and they present each discursive account alongside visual representations that trouble testimonial authenticity. To question the relationship of subjective experience and representation in comics and other media, I read the tension between first hand witnessing and second hand reportage in Joe Sacco's novel-length *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009) and artist Rutu Modan and journalist Igal Sarna's short collaboration "War Rabbit" (2009), both works in the genre Sacco terms "comics journalism". These texts both combine first hand accounts of the conflict, from the perspectives of interviewees, with images interpreted through the artists.

Much has been written about Sacco's journalistic play with objectivity and subjectivity, especially concerning whether or not his comics enact what Ben Owen and others term, "ethical witnessing." Scholars like Benjamin Woo praise Sacco for his self-reflexivity. Woo writes that Sacco, "sutures the gap between subject and object, between knowledge of a thing and the thing in itself . . . by absorbing the objective into the subjective and making the process of mediation self-evident" (Woo 13). Yet, others articulate concerns that Sacco's work does too little to challenge modern paradigms of knowledge. For instance, Alexander Dunst cautions, "The offer of recognition institutes a Western figure of authority that often privileges symbolic acknowledgment or psychological healing over material recovery" (Dunst 174). Rebecca Scherr questions the performative nature of Sacco's self-reflexive meta-commentary, "He [Sacco] is no longer a figure simply to be observed, but by deliberately placing the face outside of and the hands inside of the frame, Sacco becomes an almost 'absent' figure we are literally drawn into" (Scherr 190). Though her work has received less scholarly consideration, like Joe Sacco, Rutu

Modan likewise employs hand-drawn comics to interrogate the relationship of subjectivity to historical knowledge. Although Modan's piece is much smaller in length than Sacco's, my analysis treats the two texts equally (perhaps even depending more on "War Rabbit") for two reasons. First, there has already been such a wealth of scholarship on Joe Sacco's comics journalism, to which I am indebted. Whereas attention to Sacco is only growing, Rutu Modan has received far less critical discussion.²⁴ Second, Modan's comics journalism collaboration with Igal Sarna well deserves critical study, because of the way it combines visual and verbal registers to examine the interrelationships between multiple points of view.

In what follows I explore subjective representation in comics from three perspectives. First, I focus analysis of each text at the level of visual-verbal narrative to questions of witnessing. Cartoonists can employ multiple visual/verbal narrative 'tracks' to distinguish amongst the layers of mediation involved in depicting historical persecution. The cartoonists in this chapter are not direct witnesses to the events depicted. Almost all events are represented through some layering of information told to the principal raconteur by another person whom the cartoonist never meets. Cartoonists also employ deliberate page compositions to transition between varying perspectives, a process through which comics authors represent their own perspectives. Thus, this chapter turns secondly, to issues of conscious and unconscious authorial bias. Just as historical "witnesses" recount events through culturally mediated narratives and perspectives, "authorial" perspectives are so mediated as well. The texts in question use the verbal register of comics (usually captions) to indicate cultural expectations, such as when Joe Sacco comments on how events in Palestine are portrayed in US media, but can comics' visual

²⁴ I note with irony that reviews of Modan's graphic novels tend to discuss her work in terms of her own personal experience as a woman, an Israeli and/or descendent of Holocaust survivors, rather than on the work itself. That said, "War Rabbit" was never published with the support of a major US press, but instead through the French, comics focused publishing house Delcourt, as part of an anthology, and then online in English via wordswithoutborders.com. This publication history means that the work received very little marketing.

register become self-conscious about the text's own participation in cultural logic? Can the cross-discursive function of words and images do so? Lastly, if experience and representation both depend on shared cultural knowledges, they are knowledges in which readers too participate. This chapter's primary texts trade on shared identity between author and assumed reader by including authors' biographical information, by echoing familiar speech and images, and at times by encouraging reader identification. Thus, I end by arguing that as Mikhail Bakhtin claimed of literary language in the prose novel form, comics' narrative visual *and* verbal languages reflect the multiple voices that inform individual perspectives, even as those competing voices may harmonize around community identity.

Witnessing and Testimony

Rutu Modan is best known for her graphic novels *Exit Wounds* (2007) and *The Property* (2013). Modan's writing has often taken inspiration from history and from Modan's own life experiences, but the journalistic aspect of "War Rabbit" sets it apart in her oeuvre. Rather than casting a fictional set of characters in a realistic setting, as her graphic novels do in their treatment of terrorist bombings in Israel and Jewish-European ties after the Holocaust, Modan renders the stories of direct historical witnesses in "War Rabbit." Modan and Israeli Journalist Igal Sarna, visit an Israeli settlement during an air raid. Structurally, "War Rabbit" alternates between representations of Modan and Sarna's direct experience traveling to the settlement and imaginative renderings of the experiences of settlement residents, renderings that presumably follow from interviews. (Unlike *Footnotes in Gaza*, "War Rabbit" does not visualize the interviewing process.) At the center is Israeli construction worker Yoram, who is introduced in cell phone conversation with his Palestinian counterpart, Nadam, both men shown atop cranes.

Separately, the story introduces Yoram's children and wife who spend their day in a communal bomb shelter. The story also features a lost rabbit, which functions as titular metonym for "human beings [driven] underground" (10).

Modan hesitates to describe her comics as political. When French publisher Delcourt first approached her for the piece that became "War Rabbit," Modan declined: "I didn't want to do political stories, or comics journalism ... I don't like stories that have an agenda. Well, there's always an agenda to a story but a political agenda is different from an artistic agenda. In politics you always have to decide what side you're on, but in stories, I like them to be more ambivalent because I think that life is more ambivalent than politics, even in Israel" (quoted in Sobel).²⁵ Is it true that to tell (or hear) a political story one must always choose a side? The language of ambivalence connotes wavering between two positions. The idea that there are "two-sides" follows from journalistic convention to tell *both* sides of a story.²⁶ Yet, as I demonstrate in what follows, multiple subjective positions compete for narrative authority in comics like "War Rabbit": the perspectives of each witness, along with those of Modan and her co-author Igal Sarna. If political discourse reduces that variation in subjective experience to two-sided conflict, the comics medium can reinstall that multiplicity. Comics like "War Rabbit" do not have an agenda; they do have multiple biases.

Direct witnessing comes only from Israelis in "War Rabbit." All but one of the scenes in the story seems to correspond to the point of view of an Israeli, specifically to Rutu and Igal's perspectives and to those of the settlement family. Excluding the page depicting Nadam, which shows him operating a crane over Gaza, the story concerns itself with Israeli spaces and

²⁵ I will address translation issues between the French and English publications of "War Rabbit" below.

²⁶ As Marc Singer notes in his discussion of Joe Sacco's comics journalism, "[This] common journalistic formulation, which reduces complex issues to two and only two highly polarized sides" often "excludes" the perspectives of those most directly affected by reported events (Singer 71).

memories. To a degree, this bias is the unavoidable consequence of journalistic limitations; Modan and Igal were unable to cross the border into Gaza and so only had access to Israeli perspectives.²⁷ As Igal laments, the Israeli state denied journalists access to Palestine during the Gaza War, over-representing Israeli suffering: "The tragedy is over there, but they're not letting us in, so every cat that goes missing over here gets a bigger headline than a hundred of their dead do" (2). Modan and Sarna recognize that limited access and the imperative to report available facts can contribute to biased journalism. This dialogue critiques Israeli media in general terms, but it also scrutinizes perspectives depicted in "War Rabbit," because like the newspaper headlines Igal alludes to, the settlement family evinces more concern for a lost rabbit than for Palestinian plight.

²⁷ When I spoke with him, Igal Sarna emphasized the truthfulness of "War Rabbit," claiming that the dialogue is based on interviews he and Modan conducted with everyone in the shelter, including the "boy." Sarna reiterated the complaint depicted in the comic itself, that the two were unable to speak directly with Palestinians, though they would have liked to do so.

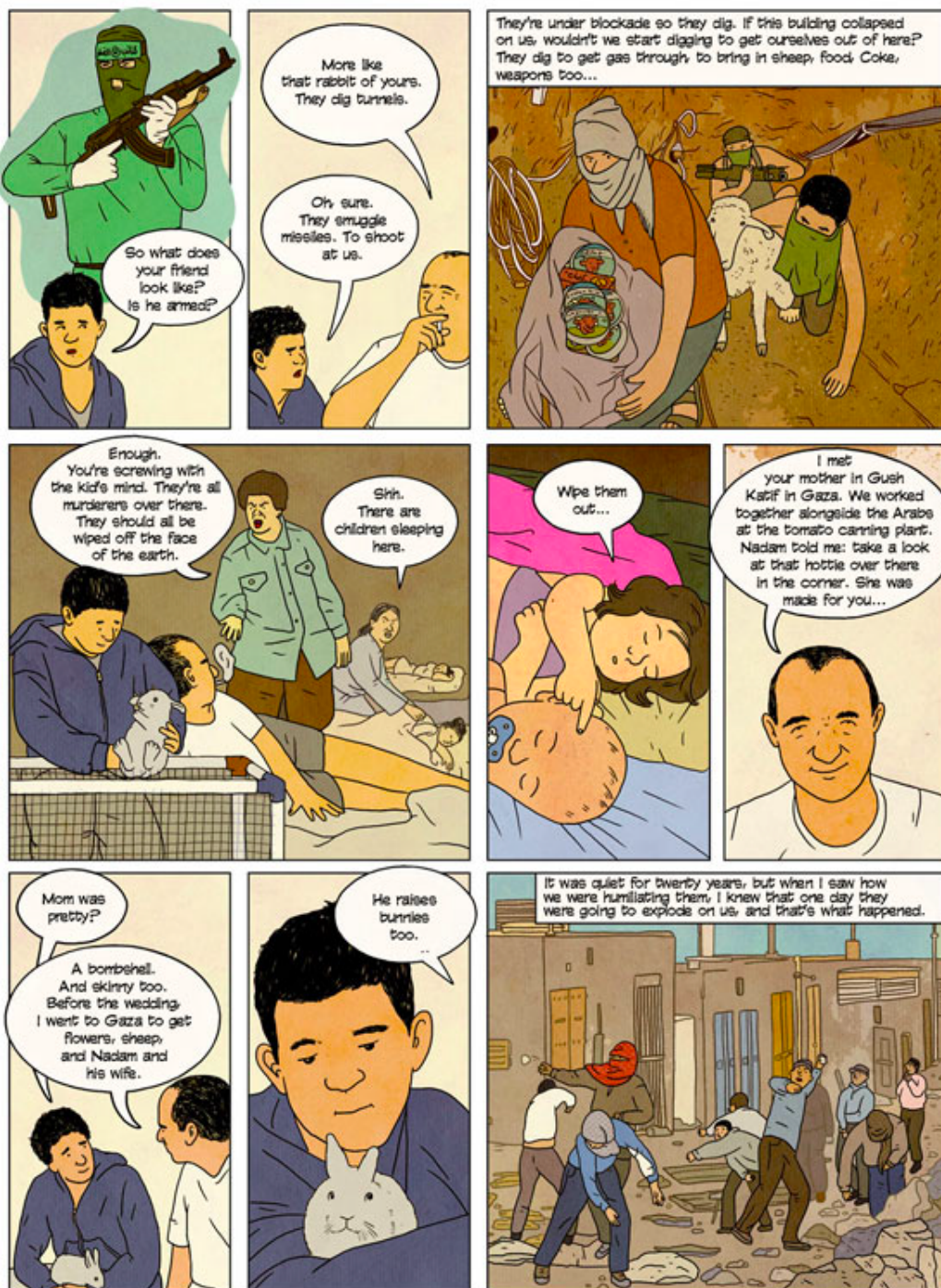


Figure 6 "War Rabbit," page 9

Despite her concerns about political bias, Modan's choice to frame the story from an Israeli perspective appears deliberate: "I felt I had to take the opportunity to show the events from my point of view as an Israeli who's against the war but still sees the complexity of the situation" (quoted in Sobel). A crucial part of that "complexity" is Sarna and Modan's unflinching depiction of Israeli bigotry. A woman in the settlement's shared bomb shelter yelling, "They're all murderers over there. They should all be wiped off the face of the earth" is a particularly reprehensible example of bigotry. In the adjoining panel, one of the children pokes her baby brother and repeats the words, "wipe them out." Without explanatory captioning, readers are left to reconcile the panel of the two sleeping children with the rest of the page through the process Scott McCloud has named "closure": readers must infer the panel's narrative relationship to the others that come before and after. The dialogue in this case reveals more nefarious processes of influence than children's idle repetition of phrases heard. The grammatical transformation of the passive-voiced statement, "They should all be wiped off," to the girl's imperative utterance, "wipe them out," makes the former's call to violence explicit. Through this panel structure Modan suggests that the older generation of Israelis (implicitly, perhaps) instructs the younger to persecute Palestinians.

Equally disturbing as the consciously expressed bigotry, however, is the fact that Yoram's children have so internalized this attitude that they may not be able to appreciate Palestinian humanity, despite Yoram's patient efforts. When Yoram first tells his son, Yakir, that he knows someone in Gaza, the son responds incredulously, "You know a guy who's in Hamas?" (7). Yakir lives through the air-raids with his family, but neither physical proximity to Gaza nor Yoram's direct testimony produces sympathy with Gazan plight. At times, Yakir appears curious. He begins a question, "So what does your friend look like?" but he seeks answers that confirm

previously held bias, asking in the same breath, "Is he armed?" Conceiving these two questions together reveals a troubling failure to recognize humanity in the 'enemy'. In a literal sense being "armed" is not a question of appearance at all. Yakir is not interested in distinguishing physical feature such as hair length, height and facial structure, because he is not interested in Nadam as a person. Modan's drawing in the panel further underscores Yakir's impersonal imagination. A thought bubble above his head shows a person whose body and face are completely concealed by a tunic, mask, and gloves.

Does Yakir (the boy whom Modan and Sarna may or may not have directly interviewed) truly imagine Nadam as a masked militarized figure or do the authors project this imagination onto him? Like other documentary media, comics journalism must grapple with layers of mediation. For instance in this case, Yakir's thought process is likely interpreted by his father based on his speech and mannerisms; Igal Sarna interviewed Yoram, who likely recalled conversation(s) with his son; Sarna relayed his discussions with Yoram to Rutu Modan; Modan herself visited the settlement where she may have heard from Yoram directly; finally, Modan illustrates the above exchange, which appears as one conversation but could easily be a consolidated rendering of multiple discussions between father and son. Indeed, in the script he wrote for Modan, Sarna suggests that the illustrations should ambiguously correspond to characters' imaginations, "Perhaps draw a figure imagined by the boy as well as the father."²⁸

Of course, layered mediation is a feature in all testimony-based nonfiction, including comics, prose and film. What distinguishes comics is that structural elements (including dialogue and drawing) can concurrently correspond to several distinct perspectives. Whereas a camera is limited to available physical spaces and to consenting subjects, comic representation is neither

²⁸ Sarna was kind enough to share his script with me. I have not been able to reach Modan and do not, at present, have access to Modan's notes.

limited by physical proximity nor by technological prerequisites (e.g. lighting). One could argue that this representative freedom too far removes comics representation from reality. Yet, the perceived immediacy of film can function to obscure mediation, as documentary film theorist Bill Nichols describes, "Documentaries usually invite us to take as true what subjects recount about something that happened even if we also see how more than one perspective is possible" (21). As Nichols elaborates in *Representing Reality*, the indexical reality of cinematic images (the verifiable fact that a camera directly records witness testimony) erroneously casts recorded testimony as inherently trustworthy.

Witness authority in hand-drawn comics does not rest on indexical presentation of the witnessing subject, but on the contrary is conferred via abstracting witness testimony from visual representation of the testimonial speaker. Put more simply, the comics page that represents character speech in the form of captions confers more authority to that speech than one that presents the same dialogue in speech balloons. Of the many potential interviewees for the above page, Yoram is the only one whose perspective appears detached from his image. Panels on the upper and lower right of the page depict scenes likely unavailable to Yoram's direct view (and likewise unavailable to Modan and Sarna) and are captioned with dialogue that continues from his speech to his son. In contrast to Yakir's green-tinted thought-image, the image of tunnel interiors appears relatively unmediated. On superficial reading it may seem that Yoram's captioned speech functions like a voice-over to an image that has less subjective status. Indeed, Modan's drawing recalls press photos of the Gazan tunnels. Due to physical constraints, press photographs of the tunnels all feature the same composition, in which individuals (and sometimes livestock) center, the narrow tunnel walls partially concealed by their bodies. Drawing by hand, Modan could have drawn the tunnel from different visual perspectives, but

"War Rabbit" connotes realism by mirroring this composition and by including spatial details found in photographs such as uneven rock face and electrical wiring that runs from the image's outside border through the interior tunnel space.²⁹



Figure 7 Photograph: Khalil Hamra/AP, 2009

Though hand-drawn, "War Rabbit" here trades on widely disseminated photographs. Yoram's dialogue sutures his perspective to the image. Borrowing from Nichols's analysis of documentary film, we might say that realism at the level of the image lends credibility to Yoram's interpretation. By installing Yoram's dialogue in a caption box rather than a speech balloon and by pairing it with a realistic visual rendering of individuals using a tunnel, "War Rabbit" extends narrative authority to Yoram's explanation: "They're under blockade so they dig. If this building collapses on us, wouldn't we start digging to get ourselves out of here? They dig

²⁹ In his script, Sarna indicates that the tunnel illustration should recall press photographs: "A picture of a tunnel from the inside. Leading a cow through the tunnel (I sent photos)."

to get gas through, to bring in sheep, food, Coke, weapons too . . ." (9). However, this realistic image betrays subtle indicators of interpretive bias; rather than depicting an objective image, this panel may instead reflect Yakir's imagination as he interprets his father's speech through familiar visual paradigms. No doubt having seen many photographs like the one above in Israeli media, Yakir perhaps imagines a realistic space.³⁰ It would be consistent with a young perspective to imagine *The Laughing Cow*® branded cheese cartons rather than more nutritive goods, but this detail also reflects the commodity-driven economic reality.³¹ A stronger marker that this image reflects Yakir's imagination is that the fabric drawn over the men's faces to protect their lungs is green (one of the four colors of the Palestinian flag: green, red, white and black), creating a visual connection between the tunnel smugglers and Yakir's " Hamas " fantasy of Yoram. The subtlety of this suggestion works to reveal an essential challenge in visualizing history: realism both informs and responds to cultural imagination. Put otherwise, Modan's photorealistic rendering of the Gazan tunnels provides no satisfying distinction between subjective and objective perspective, because no such distinction meaningfully exists.

Frustration with the limits and biases of mainstream journalism motivated cartoonist and trained journalist Joe Sacco to pioneer the field of "comics journalism." For Sacco, claims to objectivity in journalism are not only deceptive, but the assumption of objectivity also conceals the material circumstances through which journalists may actually influence the people and events on which they report. Sacco writes, "Despite the impression they might try to give, journalists are not flies on the wall that are neither seen nor heard. In the field, when reporting, a journalist's presence is always felt. Young men shake their guns in the air when a camera crew

³⁰ The tunnel ceiling in the comic image appears slightly higher than that in the above photograph, but this difference is negligible given the variation in real tunnel size.

³¹ As the *New York Times* reported in May 2013, entrepreneurs have used the tunnels to smuggle *KFC* fried chicken. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/16/world/middleeast/tunneling-kfc-to-gazans-craving-the-world-outside.html?_r=0

starts filming" (*Journalism* xiii). Sacco's critique of journalistic convention highlights the fact that witness/subject testimony and behavior are potentially influenced by the journalistic situation, including the physical presence of reporter and camera. On the one hand, as "War Rabbit" illustrates, individual perspectives can reflect dominant media representations in ways that conceal bias. On the other hand, media literate witnesses, for become sources for journalists, may react to media representations with performances of conformance, mistrust, confrontation, etc.

Whereas Rutu Modan and Igal Sarna show the consequence of biased media portrayals through representing Israelis who are unable to recognize Palestinian humanity, Joe Sacco counters stereotypical Western imaginations of the Palestinian people by devoting hundreds of pages to representing them (and their stories) in *Palestine* (1996) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009). For *Palestine*, Sacco visited the West Bank and the Gaza Strip during the first Intifada, and records their accounts of contemporary Israeli occupation. *Footnotes* also begins as a journalistic project, with Sacco accompanying Chris Hedges in early 2001 to report on the beginnings of the second Intifada for *Harper's* magazine. Hedges and Sacco visited the town of Khan Younis, where they interviewed survivors of a 1956 massacre. *Harper's* decided not to publish Hedges' paragraphs concerning the massacre: "I found that galling. This episode . . . hardly deserved to be thrown back on the pile of obscurity. But there is lay, like innumerable historical tragedies over the ages that barely rate footnote status in the broad sweep of history—even though . . . they often contain the seeds of the grief and anger that shape present-day events" (Sacco, *Footnotes* ix). "Between November 2002 and March 2003," Sacco returned to Gaza to research the massacre at Khan Younis and another 1956, lesser-known mass killing in Rafah. *Footnotes in*

Gaza is a graphic history of those events, and it is also one of the only - and by far the most extensive - published texts documenting those massacres.³²

³² The other published records, including the UN report on Khan Younis, are included as addenda in Sacco's *Footnotes*.



Figure 8 Footnotes in Gaza, page 47

While Sacco is critical of American and European media for relegating these parts of Palestinian history to obscurity, he acknowledges that to represent those stories means also to grapple with competing perspectives. At its most self-reflective *Footnotes in Gaza* depicts multiple interviewees describing the same event(s), and makes obvious the differences in their accounts. One page, for instance, depicts six interviewees, each closely framed in individual panels with captions indicating his name and a speech balloon of his direct testimony about the same event: the first testimony reads "In the morning, 6 or 6:30, a loud speaker called . . ." whereas testimony in the panel next to it says, "They called at night." (Sacco 205). By representing four other witnesses on the page (most of whom concur that the call was in the morning) Sacco invites readers to decide—or at least to feel as though they are deciding for themselves—which testimony is most credible. Elsewhere in *Footnotes* Sacco depicts himself questioning the accuracy of the testimony he receives: "But I'm very skeptical that Mohammed could have survived so many bullets to the head. And how would he know how many had been fired?" (224). Through gestures like these Sacco demonstrates the relative weakness of individual memory, and assures readers that he responsibly represents witness accounts, making room for reader interpretation.

Ultimately, the sense that readers participate in discovering historical truth is belied by the fact that Sacco visually depicts and thus authorizes particular renderings of historical events. The pages of *Footnotes in Gaza* alternately depict the interviews and field investigation Sacco undertakes circa 2002 and 1956 events about which he gathers information through that research. To mitigate the effect that his own subjective experience might shape his rendering of his first-hand reportage, Sacco takes extensive photographs of the people he interviews and the places he travels, a process he describes verbally in the book's afterward and visually by repeatedly

drawing himself holding a camera and snapping photographs; and like many journalists he relies on audio-recording interviews to directly quote interviewees. When possible he uses historical photographs and other archival materials to illustrate events from the past, but his project is to synthesize these disparate (and relatively few) sources with the testimony he receives through first-hand interviews of historical witnesses.

More so than any of his previous work, Sacco's drawing style in *Footnotes in Gaza* is dense with architectural detail, especially so in contrast to his more 'cartoonish' (fiction and autobiographical) collections *Notes from a Defeatist* (2003) and *Bumf* (2014). With few exceptions, meticulously rendered faces and geographies showcase laborious use of graphical perspective and shading. A consequence of this level of detail is that the drawn images seldom illustrate the captions exactly. Put another way, unlike the visual renderings in "War Rabbit," the images in *Footnotes in Gaza* do not appear to be filtered through individual bias. In many cases, such as the above excerpted page, events are narrated from opposing perspectives, with both witnesses drawn into the page. By pairing the words of multiple interviewees with distinct drawings (which may or may not correspond to individual perspectives) Sacco coheres them through his own narrative authority. The visual renderings do not correspond to each witness's point of view, but through page composition Sacco makes implicit claims about each person's subjective relationship to the events described. In the above example, Sacco uses testimony by two military commanders: Mordechai Bar-On, former IDF chef-de-bureau, and a Fedayeen commander who did not reveal his name. The two men were opposing military leaders in the 1950s. Sacco draws both of their 21st century likenesses in the foreground of his page, the events of the past appearing literally behind their bodies and behind their speech. The similarity in their positioning ends there. Sacco draws the Israeli military leader at a remove from the historical events: Bar-On

appears in the lower right corner of the page, his body superimposed over a riot scene; the edge of the page cuts off parts of his head and body as if to suggest that he belongs elsewhere. In contrast, Sacco draws the Fedayeen commander as the focal point of the page: his face appears in its literal center; the outlines of his body become the contours that separate two panels in the middle tier; his body is cut-off not by the edges of the page, but rather by panels that represent the past; one side of his face even appears to be illuminated by the 1956 truck fire shown in the panel to the left. Through all of these visual features that connect the man to the historical events depicted, Sacco suggests that the past means more to the Fedayeen commander than it does to Bar-On. Thus, while attempting not to represent the events of the past through the visual lens of his subjects, Sacco nonetheless denotes witnesses' subjective positions as individuals affected by those events - and perhaps also affected by the act of testifying.

Language Mediation

Of course, faithfully representing events, past or present, as direct witnesses experience them is an impossible task. It is equally impossible to tell "history" and be faithful to individual memory. The ways culture mediates individual perspective notwithstanding, experience can only be conveyed through languages that have their own cultural contexts. Purely subjective experience remains inaccessible, because representation is synonymous with mediation. As visual artists, Modan and Sacco each make certain presumptions about what we might call "neutral" perspective, most notably by their use of photo-realism, but "War Rabbit" and *Footnotes* also pursue neutrality at the verbal level. In various places, both comics compel readers to understand their visualizations as objective. As Thierry Groensteen observes, "Comics has the unique capacity to be able to illustrate with the same force of conviction the 'real,' the

imagined, the thought, and the felt—and in the transition from one panel to the next it can glide smoothly from an objective to a subjective register" (*Comics and Narration* 131). Remarkably, images and captions that are deliberately and unambiguously subjective can function to establish the texts' neutrality elsewhere. In *Footnotes in Gaza* and "War Rabbit," that subjectivity is alternately aligned with historical witnesses and with the authors themselves.

Language is the most obvious mediating layer between subjective and objective representation. Whatever efforts the cartoonist makes to preserve direct quotations, interviewees' speech is almost necessarily abbreviated to accommodate drawn images in comics' visual-narrative form. In these two comics texts the problem of verbal selection is made all the more complicated by issues of translation. Sacco relies on his fixer, Abed, as his interpreter during interviews, a fact that he obscures in his self-representation. As seen in the above example, Sacco makes no visual distinction between language originally spoken in English and speech which has been translated for readers' benefit.³³ Readers can reasonably assume, for instance, that Bar-On speaks to Sacco in English, given Israel's high English fluency and Bar-On's career as a professor of history, but without a marked distinction between spoken languages Sacco negates the importance of translation. Likewise, in the book's afterward Sacco claims to "have tried to be faithful to the words people used when they were interviewed, even though it meant reproducing choppy word choices" (417). Sacco only indirectly acknowledges that some of "the words people used" come to him through an interpreter. Whereas he directly states, "I cannot speak Hebrew. I had the help of two Israeli researchers," Sacco does not even name the language spoken by the Palestinian interview subjects when he writes: "Abed [Elassouli] agreed to become my translator

³³ While there is no formal convention for denoting translation in comics, the medium affords multiple options for doing so. For instance, one chapter of Jessica Abel's *La Perdida* (2006) directly translates Spanish into English with "subtitles" below each panel. As Abel explains in her forward: "From chapter two on, however, the vast majority of dialogue is meant to be spoken in Spanish, so I dispensed with subtitles and simply 'translated' the dialogue. From then on, when characters are speaking in English, that fact will be indicated by <arrow brackets>."

and guide" (418). In pages depicting the interviews Sacco draws himself speaking to witnesses and in the pages that follow he is shown reviewing tape recordings of those conversations, which might suggest some level of Arabic fluency. Yet, one isolated panel depicts Abed interpret: "He [the Fedayeen leader] is asking us to return in the evening, after the fast" (41). If Sacco could not understand the request to return later in the day, his ability to understand historical accounts - even with the ability to replay the recordings - is an open question.

There are no issues of translation between authors and interview subjects in "War Rabbit," as Modan and Sarna share the Hebrew language with the settlement residents. But, the original Hebrew version of "War Rabbit" is unpublished. The two published version, "War Rabbit" in English and "Haut Les Mains Peau de Lapin" in French are both translated from Hebrew, the French version being the first published.³⁴ Together the two versions of the text, translated into two different languages by different translators, demonstrate the ways the act of translation transforms meaning. The French translation frequently omits phrases that appear in the English, such as the caption under Modan's reproduced "Wandering Jew" painting: "Shmuel Hirschenberg was a painter in Lodz Poland, in 1900, during the pogroms. He painted the Eternal Jew fleeing a *Valley of the Shadow of Death filled with corpses and crosses* unto the hope of a national homeland as the only solution *for the Jews*. And here we are" (Modan 5, my emphasis). The italicized phrases indicate content absent in the French.³⁵ Additionally, the differences between the French and English comic include differences in factual information, tone and metaphor. One factual discontinuity: the English version begins with Igal's reminiscence, "We were a company of thirty tanks . . . " a line that appears in French, "Nous etions trios [3]

³⁴Rosie Pinhas-Delpuech, the French translator also translated Modan's *The Property* and *Exit Wounds*. The English translator, GH Freedman, does not have a similar history translating Modan's work.

³⁵ "Shmouel Hirschenberg de Lodz, en Pologne, a dessin , en 1900, le Juif errant fuyant les pogroms vers l'espoir national comme unique solution. Et voil  ce que  a donne."

blindés." The accompanying image indeed shows exactly three tanks. Translation differences also produce a disparity in tone, which is less easily reconciled by the visual images. For instance, the second panel's English caption "our commander spied a bunny coming out of the lettuce fields" lacks the humor of the French translation's culinary punning on "chef" and "salades." The joke does not translate into English, and so it is omitted.³⁶ In other words, either the most literal translation from Hebrew to French produces a potentially unintended humorous tone, or the French translator chose to insert a joke where none was intended. Thus, some of the differences across these two versions seem to follow unavoidably from linguistic patterns. Collective pronouns, constitute another, and perhaps more fundamental, example of the kinds of meaning the two languages allow: the French version often uses the common collective plural pronoun "on," which connotes "we" (and is so rendered in the English version) in some instances and in other places more directly indicates a general subject, "one" (in the English version this use also corresponds to the rhetorical "you").

Translated into English, these texts remind us that the words we read are not necessarily those first hand witnesses would choose, but this issue would need noting where they not translated from languages other than English. Word choice is not, of course, entirely free; as many rhetoricians attest, language both enables individual expression and confines it through available vocabulary and syntax. While I agree with comics theorist Thierry Groensteen that, "the issue of the narrator can legitimately be raised in relation to any type of story, but that the question should be posed afresh for each medium, because each has its own enunciative mechanisms and, consequently, a distinct narratological configuration," I would add that to

³⁶ "Le chef a vu un lapin bondir entre les salades, affolé par le bruit." The script Sarna shared with me does not appear to include any joke in this section. Intriguingly, however, the word Sarna used in reference to the person who spied the bunny is "officer," not "commander" as it appears in English or "chef" as it appears in French. The fact that both the English and French versions seem to promote the individual to a higher rank than indicated in Sarna's script might indicate that the English version was influenced by the French translation.

investigate speech in comics requires a broader consideration of language itself (Groensteen 81).³⁷ To further elaborate the relationship of individual character expression to language, I turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's "Discourses in the Novel," in which Bakhtin develops his theory of "language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view" (Bakhtin 271). As Bakhtin observes of speaking subjects in prose novels, "The speaking person in the novel is always, to one degree or another, an *ideologue*, and his words are always *ideologemes*. A particular language in a novel is always a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for a social significance. It is precisely as ideologemes that discourse becomes the object of representation in the novel" (333). Bakhtin's observation that individual characters speak through particular ideologies applies well to comics, wherein a characters' "particular way of viewing the world" is represented verbally and visually.

Furthermore, Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and hybridity lend themselves to comics' complex layers of signification. As discussed above, many of the people depicted in "War Rabbit" and *Footnotes in Gaza* narrate events for which they were not present, but rather learned about through others. Likewise, Joe Sacco, Igal Sarna and Rutu Modan visually and verbally narrate events they encounter indirectly through others' accounts. Each act of recounting another's stories is an act of "translation," a joining of perspectives capable of transforming content and tone. Heteroglossia, Bakhtin's term for the recounting of others' speech, structures the novel-genre in such a way not found in other narrative literary forms (especially not so in the epic), but the overwhelming majority of common discourse *is* heteroglossic. Though the process is often unconscious, individual speech - and for that matter, individual thought - is borrowed

³⁷ Here I refer to Groensteen's *Comics and Narration* (published in France as an explicit sequel to *The System of Comics*).

and adapted from the words of others.³⁸ In the novel, "An intentional and conscious hybrid is not a mixture of two *impersonal* language consciousnesses (the correlates of two languages) but rather a mixture of two *individualized* language consciousnesses (the correlates of two specific utterances, not merely two languages) and two individual language-intentions as well" (Bakhtin 360). If there is a difference between novels and comics in this regard, it is perhaps that this "double-voiced" narratological hybridization of individual consciousnesses is often actually triple or quadruple voiced, depending on the interplay of visual and verbal registers, as the above discussion of "War Rabbit" and *Footnotes in Gaza* reveals.

While it is important to recognize factors that bear on comics expression, analysis of linguistic mediation is not sufficient, because, as Bakhtin suggests, language amounts to a way of viewing the world: that is to say, an ideology of experience. Furthermore, like language, experience is constituted individually, but that individual formation operates through borrowing from and opposition to others' expressions within a shared sociopolitical milieu. The complex narrative form of comics is particularly suited to reveal the ways cultural context inform individual perception and expression. Sacco, Sarna and Modan's visual and verbal representations of the Israel-Palestine conflict interrogate the relationship of individual, subjective perspective and language. Taken together, these works, which present 'opposite sides' of the conflict, reveal the contingency of historical knowledge on what we might term "collective subjectivity": I offer this term to capture the ways individual subjects, like those depicted in *Footnotes in Gaza* and "War Rabbit" come to understand their experience through cultural lenses.

Contemporary rhetoric about Palestine/Israel is characterized by competing claims of

³⁸ "In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's." (Bakhtin 345)

victimhood and by the complicated status of group identities. Issues of subjectivity are especially relevant to representations of persecution, because those same identity categories bear on subjective knowledge. Together the concepts of subjectivity and persecution provoke many questions: Whose fear and grief are (or can be rendered) visible? Whose personhood matters enough for attacks on it to be recognized? Who is able to speak on behalf of others, and what claims to shared experience are intelligible? None of these questions has a universal answer, because there exists no universal language for expression, nor universal perception. These concerns are subjective issues in that individual perspective informs their answers, but those individual perspectives — or subjectivities— reflect many voices.

These concerns might seem to imply a Western audience. Indeed, the majority of "War Rabbit" and *Footnotes in Gaza*'s intended readers are American or European. As Rebecca Scherr notes, relaying oppression to Western readers is an ethically dubious project if such knowledge transmission does not benefit the victims in question, and worse yet if the process is painful for the witnesses: "Sacco's work speaks to a reader's sense of ethics and freedom, while the images of Palestinians are depicted as locked into cycles of violence and degradation" (195). Readers benefit from historical accounts of persecution, not only in that many actively enjoy them as aesthetic objects, but also because reading them satisfies an ethical imperative to care about others' suffering with scant risk. Moreover, these accounts have the added benefit of inspiring Western gratitude for one's own freedom and security. Scherr argues that Sacco overcomes this irony by promoting reader sympathy to the point that readers are "visually positioned into the role of potential victim," an optimistic reading that, in my view, overestimates comics' universality (191).

Apprehending history as persecution depends upon discreet group identities: a class/race/creed of people willfully oppressed for their membership in said group and another class/race/creed whose shared identity is sutured through their dominance of the other. Ethical representation requires self-critical identity awareness as much as sympathy with history's victims. As cinema scholar Mark Golub observes about what he terms "the Hollywood redemption history," so-called "accurate" historical narratives can function to assuage spectator guilt and implicitly excuse "present injustices" while reaffirming the status-quo: "they allow the audience not to take responsibility for its past, even as their condemnation presents itself as an anti-racist narrative" (Golub). In Golub's terms, responsible historical representation depends upon the audience's relationship to the events depicted. In the idea that the past belongs to a viewing audience, we again find the issue of subjectivity paramount. For a group to "take responsibility for its past" means in the first place to acknowledge ownership of the past. In most historical representation, whatever the medium, this ownership can only operate through group identification, as few audience members having directly participated in the represented past. In depicting the Palestine-Israel conflict from both sides of the border, the comics journalism of *Footnotes in Gaza* and "War Rabbit" together suggest that collective subjectivity and group identification greatly inhibit the ethical value of empathy with history's victims.



Figure 9 "War Rabbit", page 5

Whereas Scherr praises Joe Sacco's *Footnotes* for causing readers to imagine themselves in the role of Palestinian victim, I counter that such identification contributes as much (or more) to a subjective sense of shared victimhood than it does to the assumption of moral responsibility. In contrast to *Footnotes in Gaza*, which only depicts events inside the Palestinian territories, Modan and Sarna take pains to draw parallels between the two national groups, including the comic's emphasis on people, like rabbits, burrowing underground to tunnels and shelters. In "War Rabbit," Igal Sarna refers to his personal history visiting bomb shelters and Gaza (when the border was open) and generalizes both groups' experiences together, relying on his membership

in one group and journalistic encounters with the other: "So now I'm stuck here, on the one side with the war and people being bombed to death and here on the other, people being scared to death. People are quaking in shelters too, and go argue with the fear of a refugee" (Modan & Sarna 5). This dialogue nearly fills the panel that contains it, otherwise bare save for Igal's likeness and a steering wheel, aligning readers with Rutu Modan as she accompanies him to see the conflict for herself. This speech ostensibly presents disparity in Palestinian and Israeli suffering. The "war and people being bombed to death" are in Gaza, while Israeli settlers are only "scared to death." Sarna appears to critique the irrational "fear of a refugee." Yet, despite sympathy for Palestinian plight, Sarna privileges Israeli subjectivity, which is of course the national group with which he and Modan share membership, using it as a lens to understand both groups.

Empathy founded through claims to collective subjectivity is problematic when that collectivity functions to obscure difference, as is the case in "War Rabbit." The panel immediately below Sarna's dialogue appears to continue his speech, albeit as an unattributed caption: "On both sides of the border, we're all refugees or the children of refugees, tribes crazy with suffering, just shooting at one another" (5). The loss of speech balloons in this bottom tier might signal a shift in narrative voice back to Modan, but the confusion this creates between Modan and Sarna's individual perspectives (as speaking characters in the comic) as well as the ambiguous relationship of their authorial voice(s) to their self-portrayal exposes the inherently mediated quality of subjectivity. This page composition suggests that as individuals both authors, Sarna and Modan, endorse the statement's subjectivity, including themselves in the collectivity it imagines between Palestinians and Israelis. Certainly it is credible that Modan and Sarna view the situation similarly due to their shared background, but the mere fact of co-authorship would

suggest agreement between the two.³⁹ Removed from an identified speaking subject, this caption attempts to extend the subjectivity of "we" to include Palestinians, not only as imagined members of shared community, but also as participants (speaking subjects) in that imagined collective subjectivity.

As comparison to *Footnotes in Gaza* highlights, most Palestinians would likely not appreciate this collectivist rhetoric, nor would they agree with the factual content. It is not my aim here to articulate the "truth" about the Israel-Palestine conflict, or otherwise investigate the facts of history, but the caption's claim that the conflict is made up of "tribes crazy with suffering, just shooting at one another" defies credibility. In their efforts to portray similarity between the two national groups, Modan and Sarna markedly misrepresent each perspective, because both IDF spokespeople and those from Hamas are likely to claim military strategy rather than "crazy . . . suffering" as their chief motivation.⁴⁰ Moreover, the phrase "just shooting at one another" implies that the violence is irrational and random on both sides. This lack of causation is especially notable in contrast to the two grey-scale images of refugees, labeled "Europe Jews 1941" and "Israel Palestinians 1948" respectively. Presented side-by-side, the pictured Jews and Palestinians appear to move towards one another (to the center line that divides the two pictures), driven by forces unseen. The image of Jewish refugees alludes to the cause of their flight by including the Nazi regime mandated star of David on two of the men's jackets. Noticeably absent is the fact that in the 1948 formation of the Israeli state ("Nakba"), Palestinians became refugees fleeing Israeli settlers.

³⁹ Sarna told me that he and Modan divided the project as author and illustrator, claiming full responsibility for the script. Remarkably, however, he was unaware of the English language version of "War Rabbit" published online.

⁴⁰ In *Footnotes* Sacco presents such claims in the words of military commanders on both sides of the conflict along with his extensive chronicling of Palestinian civilian testimony.

"War Rabbit" is far from consistent in its sympathies. Taken alone, these images of refugees and accompanying caption conceive of Palestinian suffering only to the extent that it is imagined to be shared by both sides and without perpetrators. Yet, the comic form all-but requires readers to interpret individual panels together in what Thierry Groensteen terms "the system of comics." Thus, panels that minimize Palestinian suffering and ignore Israel's culpability must be reconciled with the sections of "War Rabbit" that overtly criticize such bias. Elsewhere Igal laments that the Israeli media describe the situation as a violent conflict between equally matched rivals, "The tragedy is over there, but they're not letting us [journalists] in, so every cat that goes missing over here gets a bigger headline than a hundred of their dead do" (Modan and Sarna 2).



Figure 10 "War Rabbit," page 2

Similarly, the drawing that accompanies this speech critiques visual bias. Rutu holds a newspaper headlined, "Half a million Israeli's under fire," but the paper's selected photograph depicts bombing - not in Israel - but in Gaza. Modan highlights the (fictitious) paper's subterfuge twice-over: verbally, through Igal's speech, "You see that? They put a picture of Gaza in the background," and; visually with a much larger, more color-saturated image of the same war-scene in the panel at the page's top right, clearly labeled, "Gaza, December 2008." As authors

and characters, Modan and Sarna seem to critique the exact kinds of bias they display in subsequent pages.

I argue that the comics medium has a marked formal potential for narratological dissonance, because its basic units of expression are always in tension. As a rule, "verbal and visual narratives that do not simply blend together, creating a unified whole," but are rather what Hillary Chute terms "cross-discursive," each register complicating the other. Likewise, the fractured structure of comics panels and "gutters" all but requires that the images and words in a given panel stand-apart from other panels in the same text. Of course, comics artists can—and often do—leverage visual repetition and stylistic consistency to overcome these tensions and create enveloping narrative worlds. Comics' formal narratological tension is exacerbated, however, in "War Rabbit" by the fact that the narrative function is split between two authors, who are each present as characters as well. The competing subjectivities in "War Rabbit" are not simply a matter of multiple voices (or speaking subjects) ambiguously speaking together. As Bakhtin suggests, each speaking person - in real life as well as in novels - tries on the language of *everyone* he or she encounters, testing it and incorporating it: "In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's" (Bakhtin 345). In other words, external consciousness becomes persuasive at the point when it is misapprehended as internal, because individual consciousness, which we apprehend as our own accurate awareness of the world, is always partially adapted from others.

The perspectival inconsistency found in "War Rabbit" reveals conflicts inherent to subjective perspective, expression and language. Individual expression strives to unify multiple viewpoints through language, but, by its association with language, perspective is far from unitary. In "War Rabbit," which Rutu Modan described as a portrayal of Israeli perspective, we

find heteroglossia at the national level. I have suggested that in the text Modan and Sarna's sympathies are unstable, at times lamenting disproportionate media attention to Israeli concerns to the neglect of Palestinians' physical endangerment, yet elsewhere guilty of the same fallacy of equivalence. If the visual and verbal language expression in "War Rabbit" betrays competing sensibilities, it manifests tensions implicit to the cultural context of language itself. When Bakhtin writes that individual consciousness "is half-ours and half-someone else's," the "someone else" in question is a member of a shared social group, a speaking-subject positioned in such a way that his or her voice is heard. This "someone" need not be a person as such, but may be instead an imagined representative of national (or other) groups.

Such an understanding of the internalized relationship of cultural expression informs International Policy scholar Mira Sucharov's study of Israel's self-identity as "defensive warrior" in *The International Self: Psychoanalysis and the Search for Israeli-Palestinian Peace*. Citing Israeli national propaganda and popular media Sucharov argues that in the first decades of its statehood, Israel formed a collective national identity around ideas of shared victimhood and just defense.⁴¹ This identity - known through cultural expression and understood as informing shared perception - faces a crisis by the 1980s, which Sucharov attributes to the war in Lebanon and the first Intifada, both events disrupt the "defensive warrior" narrative: "During the Intifada, Israelis squirmed at the unconscious counter-narratives that were now coming to haunt them. A nation of defensive warriors had been turned into riot controllers and policemen battling unarmed Palestinians, many of whom were children. All of this added up to a deeply experienced cognitive dissonance at the collective level" (159).⁴² Although Sucharov may exaggerate the

⁴¹ Sucharov also alludes to the role of Hebrew language, hitherto reserved for religious use, in Israeli identity formation.

⁴² Sarna's description of the Israeli psyche is less sympathetic. In his script for Modan, he writes that her drawings will "clarify why we are living in constant fear here. A permanent nightmare of death pits. Really important. It

impact of this tension when she credits the Oslo Accords to Israel's need for a stable "role-identity" over geopolitical forces such as US intervention, she persuasively demonstrates a mutual constituency between national language and individual perception. Although national paradigms perhaps provide only a limited framework in late capital era globalization, but nonetheless "national identity" and "national language" are useful, if overly simplistic, lenses for investigating the convergence of "individual" perception and cultural patterns of expression.

I have suggested that comics' formal fracturing of narrative perspective, via panel structure and the interplay between visual and verbal registers, can expose the limits of "subjectivity." Taken together, "War Rabbit" and *Footnotes in Gaza* undermine the concept of individual experience by revealing the contingencies of both perception and expression. These pieces of comics journalism promote reader sympathy and understanding for the depicted personages, while showing the subjects of the works - the individuals interviewed and depicted - limited in sympathy and understanding for others and constrained by cultural patterns of expression. I end the chapter, accordingly, with the issue of readers' own cultural biases. If, as I suggest above, experience and representation both depend on shared cultural knowledge/logic expressed in shared language, readers' subjectivity must be likewise scrutinized: in what ways do my primary texts hail readers? Do these comics solicit readers to be aware of their own cultural biases?

It is impossible to account for the range of readership possible for *Footnotes in Gaza* and "War Rabbit," but the authors of each certainly imagine Western readers without direct experience to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, an assumption evidenced by their American and European publishing venues. It is striking that "War Rabbit" has not been published in Israel,

upgrades the whole purpose of this and illustrates the core of Israeli existence: anxiety and wishing death pits upon others, as long as it is not our death pits."

even as Sarna and Modan maintain large Israeli readerships in their respective work. If "War Rabbit," authored by Israelis who self-critically display their own sympathetic shortcomings, asks readers to be aware of the cultural biases in world view and language that color their subjectivity as outsiders, this solicitation is wholly implicit. Writing for European and American audiences, Modan and Sarna's self-criticism, even if it does extend to a criticism of Israeli society more generally, does not obviously implicate readers. *Footnotes in Gaza*, as an account interpolated through an American perspective, does more to undermine the possibility of objectivity tout-court, but reader self-awareness likely follows identification with Sacco himself, whose image appears more than any other represented individual.

Sacco often casts himself as uniquely able to see truth, a truth he implicitly offers to readers. Sacco describes himself as the lone sympathizer amidst an uncaring world in investigating Khan Younis, "The world has already scraped last week off its shoe, and I want to poke at a story that's half a century old?" (Sacco 7). Yet, as comics scholar Marc Singer aptly observes, in his essay "Views from Nowhere: Journalistic Detachment in *Palestine*," Sacco frequently represents a "false posture of objectivity" grounded in the very journalistic conventions he elsewhere criticizes: "The viewlessness distances Sacco from his subjects and releases him from any obligation to comment on matters that trouble his own sympathies" (Singer 71 and 74). Elsewhere Sacco laments, "History can do without its footnotes . . . history shakes off some footnotes altogether . . . History has its hands full . . . History chokes on fresh episodes and swallows whatever old ones it can" (Sacco 9). The object of this critique is as vague as it is universal: "history" the profession, the human inclination to story-telling, the onward march of events. Aligning his own perspective with objective "viewlessness" and

launching his media critique against universalist ideas of "History" and "the world," Sacco provides readers little motivation to examine their own subjective biases.

In other words, while *Footnotes* is self-aware of certain problems associated with investigating history, such as interviewing context and translation, the book often frames this as a challenge of transposing a particular Palestinian subjectivity into universal knowledge. Concealed by this framework of universalism is the real challenge of relaying one particular subjectivity - that of Palestinian massacre survivors - to the other, equally particular, reader subjectivities. There is one episode, the chapter titled "Did You See Them?" near the end of *Footnotes in Gaza*, which intimates that Sacco's American cultural background may produce fundamentally different perception than Palestinian subjectivity. Though he often positions his perspective on Palestinian suffering as more objective than history-itself, Sacco reminds readers of his (and by extension their) Western subjectivity as it relates to the Iraq War of 2003. When his companions celebrate early Iraq War footage of "American dead on display . . . and close-ups of their wounds," Joe Sacco does not share their intrigue.

Throughout *Footnotes in Gaza*, Sacco portrays his inquiries as invasive and painful, but ultimately necessary for the goal of historical truth. In this brief episode concerning American victims, Sacco as both author and character turns away from violence. Shown huddled in a corner, Sacco narrates his perspective, "I balk . . . the footage of the bodies disturbs me" a disturbance never expressed about images of Palestinian mortality (370). Visually too, the book evinces an uncharacteristic reluctance to represent, when the represented subjects are Americans. In captions the page refers to "American dead on display . . . and close-ups of their wounds," but the panel borders exclude dead faces and the caption-boxes partially conceal those wounds (Sacco 370). Throughout the chapter, Abed and Joe are greeted in the streets of Gaza with the

question, "Did you see them?" For American readers this titular question provokes an ambivalent answer. Yes, panels show images of captured American soldiers faces and partially portray their dead bodies. But, no, few Americans saw the footage itself, which was broadcasted by Al-Jazeera television, a channel reported to have had "140,000 subscribers in the United States" (Richissin). This episode, more than any other in *Footnotes*, suggests that subjective discomfort makes certain kinds of perception unavailable. Much as US networks who found the footage too objectionable to broadcast, and much like Sacco who "balk[s]" at the experience, readers must reconcile received information to their own worldviews.

As a medium, comics articulate an essential relationship between perception and expression. From the simplest units of comics representation, panels, whose visual details operate through exclusions and emphasis, to the interplay of visual and verbal registers, comics narratology undermines the conceit of autonomous subjectivity. Even as the medium seems to invite caricature and archetypical characters, there remains a formal tension in expressive coherence, a coherence normally dependent on the reader. Rather than allowing/inviting readers to suture narratological tensions, such as competing sentiments across dialogue and disjunction at the visual and verbal levels, I argue that Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* and Rutu Modan and Igal Sarna's "War Rabbit" affirm a larger tension at the heart of subjective experience. As each comic text illustrates, perception and expression both filter through many voices.

Chapter 3. LYNCHING ICONOGRAPHY; MODERN KNOWLEDGE AND POWER IN 20TH CENTURY VISUAL CULTURE

"Iconic solidarity . . . I define this as interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated—this specification dismisses unique enclosed images within a profusion of patterns or anecdotes—and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia*" - Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* (18)

"Race relies on the endless circulation and mediation of representation through these very comfortable, historically repeating perspectives. A cue for the eye, these sightlines ensure—or are designed to ensure—that the eye finds the center of attraction, that it sees race, and that we all see the same thing, generally, when we look" - Matthew Guterl, *Seeing Race in Modern America* (8)

Among those who argue that comics is a medium distinct from other visual and narrative forms, many including Thierry Groensteen and Scott McCloud emphasize "comics language". For them, comics deserve unique study not only because their readers encounter comics text in different contexts from other media forms, nor simply because these contexts inform comics' generic features; rather, "comics language" combines the discursive traits of other media in a semiotic structure unique to comics' interplay of words and cartoon images. There has been much critical attention paid to the semiotic relationship between images in a comics page, as well as the combination of text and image. However, in a desire to extol the uniqueness of "sequential art," comics scholars have paid too little attention to its building block – the cartoon – and in

particular to the meanings cartoon images carry with them when translated to comics form.⁴³

Whereas chapter two described the ways individuals borrow and adapt images they have seen into what passes for their "unique" worldview, in this chapter, I turn my focus from individual perception to more fully consider how images address themselves to the gaze.

As Groensteen contends, an “obstacle[s] to real comprehension of the object [comics],” is the idea that “comics are essentially a mixture of text and images, a specific combination of linguistic and visual codes, a meeting place between two ‘subjects of expression’ . . . Against this conception, I intend to demonstrate the primacy of the image” (2-3). Scott McCloud briefly attempts to define cartoon images as singular objects, but focuses on the process of abstraction artists attempt: “Defining the cartoon would take up as much space as defining comics, but for now, I’m going to examine cartooning as a form of amplification through simplification. When we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details” (30). I depart from the aforementioned theorists in what follows by treating specific visual codes that signify semiotically in and beyond comics pages—by which I mean images that are widely recognizable in the meanings they convey even when shown with variant articulations and in various contexts (much as a written word is recognized despite variations in spelling and pronunciation)—outside of what Groensteen calls “the system” of comics, and beyond the control of the artists who deploy them.

In this chapter, I select one iconographic image deployed in graphic narratives about persecution, that of the lynch scene, and examine the ways it connotes US racial terror in *Incognegro* (2008) and *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995). Lynching iconography is a productive and powerful example of the ways images structure sight, and its unfortunate ubiquity makes it

⁴³ How to define comics is far from clear. For my part, I consider hand-drawn images to be historically and stylistically foundational to comics. Granted, innovated "photo-comics" exist, but these prove the rule by exception.

possible to trace the evolution of this imagery.⁴⁴ The swastika may be a more expected example of historical iconography in comics, but the swastika icon is notable for its lack of representation. For instance, the swastika appears many times in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-91), arguably the most read graphic novel to date, in which Spiegelman illustrates his father's testimonial account of his experience as a Holocaust survivor. Yet in *Maus* the swastika image is always in some way distorted: characters and buildings block parts of the icon, the folds of a flag abridge it, and it is foreshortened on the side of a truck. The difficulty of representing the Nazi flag as it might have appeared to Europeans before WWII, that is, prior to its commodification, likely explains Jason Lutz's decision to omit the icon entirely in his graphic novel, *Berlin: City of Stones* (2000), with the exception of one page where the panels themselves form the twisted cross (Lutz 203). Conversely, the swastika appears in Rutu Modan *The Property* (2013), a graphic novel about an intergenerational journey to Poland to recover family property lost in the Holocaust. But here the swastika appears only on the uniforms of historical re-enactors, in a humorous scene in which tourists pay to be rounded-up like Polish Jews. Both of these examples affirm Marcia Landy's description of the iconography of historical representation and memory as "contested commodities." Spiegelman, too, has commented on the commercial appeal of the Holocaust: "As they say, there's no business like Shoah business" (quoted in Staub). During the years of WWII, even before US involvement, the swastika frequently appeared on Nazi uniforms in comic books, and in 1941 (that is after Pearl Harbor) Superman defeated Hitler and saved Europe. These popular publications also speak to the inherent commodification of this imagery.⁴⁵ Barry Laga speculates hyperbolically that this commoditization may extend to the point that "swastikas,

⁴⁴ That ubiquity also means that what I offer here is far from an exhaustive survey, even as I deliberately narrow my focus to images of lynching specifically, rather than other iconographies of persecution.

⁴⁵ As is easily observed in *The Golden Age* DC collection. See also <http://www.supermanhomepage.com/comics/comics.php?topic=articles/supes-war>.

Auschwitz tattoos, SS insignias, and camp uniforms will sell alongside peace signs, tie-dyed t-shirts and Mao jackets" (61).⁴⁶

I invoke the swastika icon, because it raises productive questions about the relationships between material reproduction, commodity culture, and historical violence, especially when it appears in the pages of comics. However, the swastika has a unique history of deliberate dissemination, quite different from the origin of the lynch scene in visual culture. As Malcolm Quinn persuasively argues in *The Swastika: Constructing the Symbol*, the Nazi party deliberately appropriated the swastika as a symbol of Aryan power, because it had appeared across the globe as early as 3000 BC and across Asia, Europe and North America. The swastika appealed to Nazism, because it had no obvious symbolic relationship to the regime or its ideals, but instead because it was ubiquitous. Moreover, the function of the swastika as Nazi symbol is, "an embodiment of the strategy which stabilizes and totalizes power rather than containing it in the form of the 'meaningful' symbol. In Nazism, power and the image of power cannot be separated" (Quinn 14-15). A complex web of propaganda and censorship lend the swastika its contemporary connotations, making it impossible to account for the economic and cultural factors in the production of the swastika symbol, apart from the governmental force and state apparatuses of Nazism. Continuing his study of iconology, WJT Mitchell theorizes images as "drawing" viewers in with emotions and desires distinct from their creators, and so poses the titular question: *What Do Pictures Want?*⁴⁷ Given the Nazi regime's propagandist control over the swastika, and its current social (and in some cases legal) taboo, the swastika appears as an iconographic signifier of persecution forever associated with those who disseminate it.

⁴⁶ The fact that the iconography of racial persecution is most visible in commodified form echoes the historical intertwining of "racial capitalism." Walter Johnson links the emergence of capitalism, slavery and race logic.

⁴⁷ Mitchell suggests the drawn image, and in particular the drawn line, desire differently than other visual objects, further complicating the iconographic import of images manufactured onto textiles, like the swastika and the confederate flag.

In the US context, the confederate flag is the nearest analogy to the swastika, though it appears much more frequently and in diverse contexts. Another important distinction is that what is now termed "the confederate flag" was not the official flag of the Southern confederacy. Only after the civil war had ended did the battle flag of Virginia's confederate army come to represent the confederacy more broadly. On July 10, 2015 the Confederate Flag was officially removed from South Carolina's capital, by a historic vote of that state's legislature, a vote which came 23 days after a white supremacist opened fire in Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Church, killing nine people (and 12 days after activist Bree Newsome scaled the flag pole and temporarily brought the flag down without authorization). Debate about the public display of the confederate flag polarized the nation. Those calling for the flag's removal argued that it is a painful reminder of America's racist legacy and worse yet an incitement to violence. Others defended the public display of the Confederate flag as a symbol of Southern pride—a plurality opinion in national polling prior to the shooting.⁴⁸ Motivating both sides of this heated debate is the belief that visual symbols matter; that looking at a symbol of the past charges one's experience of the present; and, that such an image instructs those who see it in the lessons of history.

The regime of images operates as both mirror and framing lens; iconic images of history inform knowledge of the past and structure ways of looking in the present. Like the Confederate flag, lynching iconography dates to the American civil war. One of its earliest appearances is in an 1868 cartoon published in Tuscaloosa, Alabama's *The Independent Monitor*, which shows two "carpetbaggers" hanging near a donkey emblazoned with the foreboding letters "K.K.K." along with the caption: "A Prospective Scene in the City of Oaks." Where these two symbols differ is in the latter's deliberate use of symbolic imagery to threaten those who would challenge southern

⁴⁸ Libresco, Leah. "Before Charleston, Not Many People Wanted To Take Down The Confederate Flag."

white supremacy. Contrary to iconographic media portrayals of lynching as something carried out by small groups of perpetrators in semi-secret, racial lynching was originally a spectacle of violence. Groups of whites gathered to watch public mutilation and murder. Spectators posed for commemorative photographs with victims. Mutilated bodies were left to hang as threatening signs of black vulnerability; warnings to comply with white supremacy. Illustrations and photographs circulated in periodicals and through the postal system, imbricating the American nation in the racial conditioning of vision. The iconographic image of lynching - which appears repeatedly in American media from the past two centuries and lives in the public imaginary - is connoted reductively by the image of a hanging body. At the level of iconography, events that typically occurred in public squares—occasions for (white) revelry and camaraderie—become furtive acts committed by an anonymous few; this visual translation in illustrations, cartoons and films obscures the role of spectatorship.



Figure 11 Tuscaloosa, Alabama, *Independent Monitor*, 1868

If, as Marcia Landy persuasively contends through her analysis of propaganda films (including the films the Nazi party circulated in Germany before and during World War II) history and memory have become, "contested commodities . . . invoked as rallying points, as forces for cohesion and consensus in the interests of national solidarity," how can a graphic narrative (or for that matter, any text or medium that deploys said iconography) locate persecution in its historical context while contesting and complicating the "popular" narrative of the events' significance (Landy 2)? Can a "graphic" representation compel readers to look without recommitting the same violence of banal looking Saidiya Hartman describes, in her discussion of US chattel slavery, "At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the

uncertain line between witness and spectator” (4).⁴⁹ Visual representations of lynching—like the public killings themselves—speak to the complex relation between identification and participation.⁵⁰ In what follows, I explore issue of lynching iconography from three critical perspectives: the semiotic signification of this iconography within contemporary graphic narrative, comics and cartooning; the ways in which modern visual culture has been shaped by these scenes of violence; and, the potential ability of artists to appropriate and recontextualize said iconography.

Shared Visual Codes in Comics, Photography & Illustration

Images of American racial terror are not merely exemplary instances of violent iconography; American racial terror was defined by formative events in modern (20th century) visuality, spectatorship and sight. In other words, the lynch scene is a uniquely loaded, complexly signifying historical visual trope, because images featuring it are foundational to visual culture. As Jacqueline Goldsby argues, in her study literary representations of lynching, *A Spectacular Secret*, “the violence of lynching secretly shaped the experience of seeing in modern America” (228). In what follows, I gesture to American racial terror as a modern articulations of power and visuality; while directing my attention to a semiotic analysis of the lynch scene in Howard Cruse's 1995 "graphic novel" *Stuck Rubber Baby* and Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece's 2008 collaboration, *Incognegro*.

⁴⁹ Shawn Michelle Smith suggests, "Hartman's concerns become magnified when one addresses visual texts, in which the representation and reproduction of the violated black body can function as a kind of fetish, obscuring from view the white torturers who also inhabit these images" (118).

⁵⁰ The 'line' between empathy and objectification was no doubt central to the controversy surrounding *Without Sanctuary*; James Allen's public exhibition of lynching picture postcards, some of the images in which are discussed below. For more on the exhibit itself and public reaction, see Sandy Alexandre's chapter "Addresses Unknown" in *Properties of Violence*.

Whereas the swastika appeared in cultures across the globe long before its iconographic association with Nazism, the hanged-man lynching image has a much shorter history. It bears noting that the term "lynch" did not have a racial connotation in antebellum America, and continued to be applied to the public execution of white criminals (especially on the US frontier) as late as the early 20th century. During the height of racial terror, in the early decades of the 20th century, vigilante mobs and the Ku Klux Klan also targeted other groups of minorities, including Italian immigrants, homosexuals and the disabled. In *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*, Jacqueline Goldsby argues that the:

"Cultural logic" of [racial] lynching enabled it to emerge and persist throughout the modern era because its violence "fit" within broader, national cultural developments. This synchronicity captures why I refer to lynching as "spectacular": the violence made certain cultural developments and tensions visible for Americans to confront. On the other hand, because lynching's violence was so unspeakably brutal—and crucially, since the lives and bodies of African American people were negligible concerns for the country for so long a time—cultural logic also describes how we have disavowed lynching's normative relation to modernism's history over the last century. (6)

Demonstrating the connection between verbal discourse and the visual imaginary, the term "lynching" takes on its present day meaning at roughly the same historical moment as images of it become mass produced. Goldsby's understanding of lynching as "spectacular" corresponds to my own understanding of iconographic visuality in terms of technologies of sight and ways of seeing; not only did cultural practices and technological ability (most notably for lynching in the form of the photograph-postcard, which I discuss below) converge to circulate these images, but,

as Goldsby emphasizes, these phenomena make "developments and tensions visible." Visual culture scholars often remark that modern knowledge itself is articulated through the conceptual framework of sight; in the US this phenomenon is inextricable from the history of lynching. As Goldsby writes: "Lynching was a vital link in this new order of display because the violence, like these other visual phenomena ['amusement parks, world's fairs, urban theater districts'] heightened Americans 'consciousness about vision' in its own particular ways" (Goldsby 224).



Figure 12 Spectators at the lynching of Jesse Washington. May 16, 1916. Waco, Texas.

Photographic images of lynching proliferated at the turn of the nineteenth century. James Allen's landmark book *Without Sanctuary* (published in 2000 and now a website as well) collected nearly 100 of these images, most of which first circulated as postcards. While the composition and exposure vary between these images, largely owing to differences in camera technology over the decades, these photos share certain common features: the victim's body is nearly always shown hanging, more often than not from a tree; the victim is relatively unidentifiable, either because the composition does not show his (or more rarely her) face, or because his face has been brutalized beyond recognition; likewise, his body is often burned or

dismembered; and, most of these photos portray a crowd of spectators/participants, often deliberately posing for the camera.⁵¹ Due to the "secrecy" of their circulation, not all of the characteristics of these photos remain part of the public, popular imaginary of lynching. Additionally, Sandy Alexandre remarks upon the disparity between the real circumstances of lynching violence and what would become its iconographic image:

The majority of lynchings—and certainly the most spectacular ones and the ones that drew most attention—occurred in growing towns and semi-urban localities in the New South. However, while these may have historically constituted the predominant venues, the dominant images surrounding lynching have overwhelmingly been rural—or distorted to appear rural. The iconic force of ruralizing what was primarily an urban/suburban phenomena reflects, in no small part, the desire that many had to relegate this barbaric phenomenon to the fringes of civilized society. (8)

The iconographic 'image' of lynching removes the crowd of spectators, many of whom would have touched victims' bodies while posing for photographs and then taken parts of their brutalized flesh as souvenirs.⁵² Surviving photographs show this physical proximity.

Visualizations more familiar to 21st century readers can be traced to newsprint illustrations and political cartoons, which illuminate the difference between photographic record and iconographic features.

⁵¹ As Goldsby notes, these images circulated in secret, exacerbated by "the resistance on the part of the press regarding publishing lynching photographs prior to 1915" (Goldsby 219).

⁵² In his fascinating essay, "The Black Body as Souvenir in American Lynching," Harvey Young theorizes these body parts as souvenirs, a controversial designation in the field of performance studies, precisely because the violence of lynching so objectified and commodified black bodies.

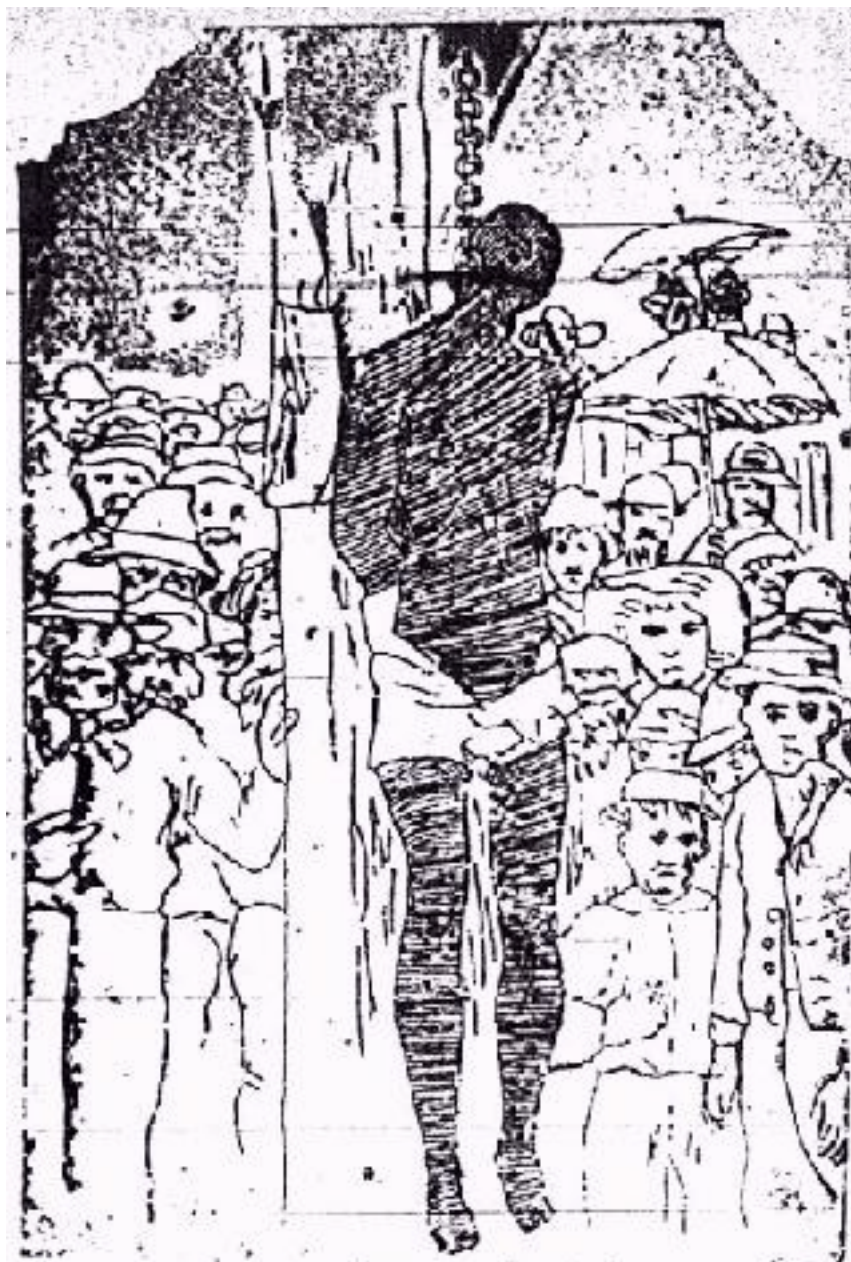


Figure 13 1893, Newspaper unknown



Figure 14 Sunday, April 30th, 1899, *The San Francisco Call*

Visual Codes: Material Conditions of Reproduction

To understand lynching iconography's signifying function within the comics medium, one must consider the genealogies of print circulation and visual culture in terms of mode of production and rhetorical context. By the turn of the 20th century, woodcut illustration technologies were widely employed in print media, ranging from visual reporting to advertisements. Along with the boom in photographic and cinematic production, reproduced hand-drawn images were integral to modern visual culture. Nicholas Mirzoeff suggests this feature of modernity produces both a transformation in modes of knowledge and a structuring of visibility as a mode not only of knowledge, but also of power:

Visibility is a specific technique of colonial and imperial practice, operating both 'at home' and 'abroad,' by which power visualizes History to itself. In so doing, it claims authority, above and beyond its ability to impose its will . . . Visibility is thus a regime of visualizations, not images, as conjured by the autocratic leader,

whether the plantation overseer, the general, the colonial governor, the fascist dictator or the present-day 'authoritarian' leader. (xxx)

For example, picture postcards popular in early twentieth century (such as those taken at lynchings) reflect the aesthetic priorities in photographic technology, the choices of photographers themselves, the self-presentation of the crowds pictured, and the values of those who circulated and preserved the postcards; all of whom exercise a degree of power in regards to the visual image.⁵³ These forms of spectatorship operate through what Matthew Pratt Guterl terms racial "sightlines" in his exploration of race in American visual culture, *Seeing Race in Modern America*. While the material circumstances of race relations in America have changed greatly in the past century and half, Guterl emphasizes that representational patterns and indeed "prescribed reading of an image" endure, because these sightlines are relatively rigid.

One reason for that rigidity may be that material factors in the production of late 19th and early 20th century illustration led to iconographic standardization, and the "language" of cartoon images up to this day is informed by this codification from early in the history of modern visual culture. Mid-nineteenth century print illustration used a woodcut engraving process that involved "twenty-four men taking twelve hours a piece" to produce each complete illustration (Brown 236). The fact that so many individuals collaborated on each image, from on-the-spot sketch reporting to carving the woodblocks, motivated a standardization of visual codes:

Engravers were now [in the late 1860s] trained to transcribe the drawn lines and washes into (in the phrase of the print historian William Ivins) 'a predetermined system or network of engraved lines.' Individual style and expression were suppressed to ensure that the constituent blocks present a uniform effect. 'A certain kind of line, it was held, should be used to represent ground . . . another

⁵³ For more on the aesthetic conventions implicit in photographic technology see *Practices of Looking*.

kind to represent foliage; another to represent sky; another, flesh; another drapery, and so no. (Brown 38)

Of course, two-tone engraving (invented in the 1890s) and later technologies reduced the need for such uniformity, but the decades in which these conventions were used as defaults nonetheless shaped iconography thereafter. Likewise, frequent readers of 20th century comic books' are familiar with the similar iconographic effects produced by division of labor (from coloring to lettering) and the major publishers "house styles".⁵⁴

Visual codification is problematic, even if—and in fact also because—this iconography masquerades as generic happenstance. Even the ostensibly benign examples listed above (foliage, flesh, drapery) contribute to a universalistic visual imaginary that more closely corresponds to the lived experience of certain viewers than others.⁵⁵ Such visual codes are iconographic when, viewed outside the context of their original media form, their individual particularity is idealized and negotiated through universalism.⁵⁶ Put another way, iconography converges with and participates in cultural stereotype. Stereotyping is indeed a particular risk inherent to cartoon/comic language. In his essay, "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race," Marc Singer observes, "Comics rely upon visually codified representations in which characters are continually reduced to their appearances" (17). More strongly put, Art Spiegelman asserts, "since cartoons are a visual sign language, the stereotype is the basic building block of all cartoon art" (quoted in Caron 139).

⁵⁴ I point to this historical example to complicate the authorial control with which McCloud invests cartoonists and comic artists.

⁵⁵ In fact, as Sandy Alexandre explores in *Properties of Violence*, lynching has everything to do with way land, bodies and goods are constructed as the property of whites.

⁵⁶ For example, the Madonna travels across media, signifying a universal ideal of maternity that simultaneously portrays and conceals religious values: "The sheer number of paintings created with a mother and child theme throughout the history of Western art attests not simply to the centrality of the Madonna figure in Christianity, but also to the idea that the bond between mother and child represented in images like this is universally understood to be natural, not culturally constructed" (Sturken and Cartwright 36-37).

Despite these standardizing forces, I argue that the comics medium is a site of iconographic contest wherein artists constantly re-envision the world and reshape its visual imaginaries. This contest is critical, because media responses to persecution often rely on iconographic registers that work against the interests of the oppressed. As Rebecca Scherr notes, "all human rights iconography is specifically designed to participate in 'an affective economy that transforms others into objects of feeling and sight' . . . All too often, however, the feelings produced are those of a kind of sympathy that does not question or critique the site of looking itself " (Scherr 26). Comics' characteristic combination of word and image lends it a particular relationship to iconography, in that, "The word text and the pictorial text are continually deconstructing each other, allowing the reader no solid pattern or strategy with which to quiet the continual play between them" (Schmitt 159). As I explore below, this deconstruction peculiar to comics reveals three features of iconography: iconographic images structure vision; iconographic images signify anachronistically, retroactively imbuing connotation; and, similarly, they cast individual experience in general terms. Though I will focus on the lynch scene, these characteristics apply to iconography generally.

There is no collection of hand drawn images of lynching, let alone anything akin to *Without Sanctuary*, but illustrations and cartoons of lynch scenes appear in newspapers and other publications as early as the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁷ In the 1890s, both the mainstream and the Black press published illustrations along with articles (in a manner similar to the way photographs now accompany journalism). These illustrations shared many features of lynching photography, most notably the emphasis on the crowd, as exemplified by an 1893 illustration of C. J. Miller's lynching that accompanied Ida B Well's eye-witness reporting of the event in the

⁵⁷ Newspaper archives do not include information on illustrations or cartoons in their databases, making them regrettably difficult to locate.

April 30th, 1899 edition of *The San Francisco Call*. In fact, the former was reportedly drawn based on a photo taken at the scene. (The technology required to re-print photographs in news journals existed, but was much more costly, and therefore inaccessible to most presses.) These late nineteenth century illustrations aspired to a photographic style, and in the process reflect a certain ubiquity of the photographs themselves, suggesting that journalists imitated the postcard photographs taken of participants to commemorate the event, either drawing directly on them as source material or unconsciously reproducing their aesthetics.⁵⁸

Cartoons differ from other hand-drawn images in that their visual register is primarily one of commentary, rather than representation; cartoons generally do not labor to capture realistic details for their own sake, but instead strive for the minimal visual detail required to invoke an idea: “A good cartoon does not contain *unnecessary* complications in its imagery or its title” (Press 22). Goldsby treats illustrations and cartooning without distinction, using the two words interchangeably, “. . . news reports [in the black press] were rarely illustrated by photographs of the murders. Instead, hand-drawn cartoons were featured prominently on newspapers' front, inner, and editorial pages. These visual depictions of mob violence were no less graphic than camera-made pictures; in fact, they were often quite gory and always explicit in their physical detail” (Goldsby 252). While it is difficult to imagine which images Goldsby has in mind here, this description is a fair representation of illustration. In a similar manner to the image described above from the April 30th, 1899 issue of *The San Francisco Call*, the images Goldsby describes take the place of photographs which the newspapers in question were unable to reproduce.

⁵⁸ A practice continued by comics journalists like Rutu Modan and Joe Sacco who take extensive photographs for reference.



Figure 15 April 17, 1906 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, (commenting on the lynching of three black men in Springfield, Missouri).



Figure 16 "Copper Trust to the Press: 'It's all right, pal; just tell them he was a traitor.'" 11th August 1917, *Solidarity*.

Indeed, threatening intention and the display of power were contributing factors to the emergence of this particular iconography. For example, in 1868 Tuscaloosa, Alabama's *Independent Monitor* published a cartoon image of two bodies hanging from a tree limb, a 'carpet-bag' labeled "Ohio" in one of their hands. This early cartoon shows non-black victims (as do others, like *Solidarity*'s August 11, 1917 cartoon about the murder of labor organizer Frank Little), but the cartoons themselves often rely on composition and captions rather than shading to

depict skin color. The most notable feature of this composition is that in these cartoon images the victim's body is always hanging, usually from a tree, although in some cartoons only the noose and rope are visible. In at least two instances (1906 and 1930), the tree is replaced by the Statue of Liberty in indictment of the nation and government for their failure to end lynching. The contextual absence in these images is evidence that the visual iconography of lynching had formed quite early in the history of modern visual culture. In this iconography, the mere depiction of a hanging body is enough to suggest perpetrator and motive.

If these iconographic images operate as visual language, what do they mean? How does this "cartoon language" travel into the comics medium? Thus far, I have drawn together scholarship about comics language, visual media technology, and the troubling history of American racial terror exemplified by lynch iconography. In the following close readings of graphic narrative texts, I demonstrate that comics signification must be understood in a larger context of modern culture. And the visual-verbal complexity of the comics medium lends graphic narrative a critical capacity to complicate iconography and unpack visual culture's relationship to racism and other forms of persecution.

Comics, Site of Iconographic Contest

Figure 17 *Incognegro*, page 7

Incognegro is a productive textual example of comics' iconographic vocabulary.

Incognegro, published in 2009 and written by Mat Johnson and illustrated by Warren Pleece, was inspired by real-life “hero,” Walter Francis White, an African-American journalist who risked his safety by passing for white in the Deep South at the height of Klan violence in the early 20th century. It is a long-form graphic narrative that uses the super-hero comic tradition to interrogate the contemporary iconography of American racism. Lynch scenes appear in multiple instances the book; each features lynch mobs, gathering around a tree, and a hanging man. In fact this is the very first image (after the title page), occupying a full “splash” page. Although *Incognegro* has received scarce critical attention, the few scholars who treat it all explore its lynch scene imagery.

Despite a general acknowledgement that the images within the pages of *Incognegro* recall photographs of lynching, scholars have yet to discuss these images in relationship to lynching iconography in cartooning and other aspects of visual culture. In his article, “Black and White and Read All Over,” Tim Caron insightfully explores stereotypes and racist physiognomy in *Incognegro*. He also compares the lynch scenes to lynching photography, but does not mention cartoon depictions. Theresa Fine and Robert Loss both describe *Incognegro*'s historical accuracy. Fine argues, “Terrible not only in the violence these depictions invoke but in the truth they reveal, McKay's lines and Pleece's image address the truth of lynching: lynching is not quiet, hidden vigilante justice; it is public and social, it is humiliating, and it is a legacy of the South passed down to the children who bear its witness” (112). For reasons I explore in Chapter four, I find the concept of historical truth suspect, and moreover, the idea that a comics text be valuable on the basis of historical accuracy seems to me to underestimate literary complexity, because

literature has the potential to transform questions of historical fact to ones of historical import.⁵⁹

Surely, *Incognegro* reveals much about the realities of lynching in the past. More important though, is what it suggests through the ways contemporary readers see (images of) the past.

Some of the scholars writing about *Incognegro* have mistakenly treated lynching photography as symptomatic - rather than constitutive - of racism and racial violence. For instance, Caron claims, "Pleece's visual representations of the spectacle of lynching within the pages of *Incognegro* are among the most powerful images in the entire book, and most of the visual impact of this opening splash page is derived from the illustration's uncanny similarity to one of the nation's most shameful photographic genres, the lynching photograph" (145). While Caron is generally correct, readers are not likely to recognize the photos themselves, but rather the iconographic resonance of the scene.⁶⁰ Like Susan Sontag, I see these visual culture phenomena as enactments of domination, which reproduce "racism's cultural logic" (Goldsby's term). Because of their rarity, the photographic images in question are perhaps only obscurely familiar to most of the people who pick up *Incognegro*, yet nonetheless, their history helped shape the iconography of race and persecution in the U.S.

In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud argues that the more visual complexity in character rendering, the less universal they appear and the less able readers are to identify with them. Of course, whiteness occupies a privileged place in relation to universality. The issue of identification and universality is especially important to graphic narrative's ability to communicate histories and experiences of oppression. McCloud's claim has rightly been met with criticism in the comics scholarly community, and in fact, when pressed in an interview by

⁵⁹ Joseph Witek devotes a section of his *Comics as History* to educational comics (marketed for school children), texts that contain the same problems of ideological bias as found in traditional textbooks.

⁶⁰ If as Goldsby claims said photos circulated in secret, and if they no longer circulate widely - realities that make the 2000 publication of *Without Sanctuary* such a widely recognized, remarkable achievement - how could the similarity to these photographs make the pages stand out?

R.C. Harvey, McCloud suggests that "identification" may have been the wrong term, because he understands "identification" to mean relating to a character in an image, as in seeing them with a personality. This is quite different from his suggestion that readers project themselves into iconic drawings. Still, scholars writing about *Incognegro* tend to repeat McCloud's logic in a few ways. For instance, Caron and Loss both describe the "birds-eye" point of view Pleece employs in his opening splash page. While historical photographs of lynching encouraged viewers to objectify victims and take pleasure in the power to look, Loss contends *Incognegro* subverts these practices of looking: "The 'bird's eye' perspective softens the blow . . . allowing the reader to maintain a brief sense of historical distance and detachment -- indeed, the visual perspective suggests that we can only begin to engage with history from a distanced perspective of knowledge" (533-34). As my first chapter argues, this idea of historical remove denies the persistence of racism in the present (which scholars of American racial violence term 'slavery's afterlife'). Moreover, this logic assumes a universal reader, capable of "detachment," which is to say, one who cannot see him or herself as a part of the picture; a reader who does not fear racial violence, whose family did not suffer it, who has (or admits) no personal stake in the subject matter.⁶¹ Rather than attain knowledge through distance, lynching iconography invites immediacy (not to mention affect), as well it should given that its referents point to interrelated histories from which no reader can truly claim "detachment": racial terror, visual culture, commoditized production, capitalism.

⁶¹ Wallerstein traces the emergence of race and capitalism through what he calls "universalist doctrine." As Immanuel Wallerstein observes in *Race, Nation, Class* (co-written with Etienne Balibar), race emerged as a product of capitalism's need for cheap labor, and a justification for capital's refusal to value labor equally. Race logic, in effect, allows capital to proclaim that some people and some people's labor is more valuable than others, at the same time as modern democracy is based on what Benedict Anderson calls "formal universality." That is to say, global capital functions by the denial of equality, underpinned by racism, and through cultural structures that assume equality. It is not surprising, then, that one finds universalist bias in critical responses to *Incognegro*.

Often in graphic narrative, one can easily spot which comic characters are "black" or otherwise racialized even when they aren't quite human (e.g. super-hero comics & *Krazy Kat*). This racial marking is accomplished by the way characters are inked and colored and by exaggerated features. In consequence, Franz Fanon observes that comics encourage black children to identify with white characters, ultimately producing a conflict in their identity (ego): "The magazines are put together by white men for little white men . . . In the magazines the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer" (146).⁶² In the graphic narrative, the normative conflation of whiteness with universality allows Zack Pinchback to pass as white and gain access to Klan activity, but structurally Johnson and Pleece also call attention to universalism, by making it easier for readers, both white and black, to identify with white characters in graphic narrative.

Unlike the comics Fanon describes, Warren Pleece's black and white artwork obscures racial difference in *Incognegro*: "In 'erasing' color from their text, Johnson and Pleece seek not to eradicate racial categories but to wrestle with the radicalized representations of African Americans in the comics medium—for to place a word, a concept, or a literary text 'under erasure' is to actually draw attention to it, forcing us [to] wrestle with an abiding absence. What then is remarkable about Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece's collaboration on their graphic mystery is the way in which it struggles mightily to render visually the artificiality of racial categories" (Caron 139). That the character of Zane Pinchback (aka *Incognegro*) should be rendered racially neutral is thematically logical; the plot hinges on the illegibility of his race. From an artistic perspective it is also a practical choice to obscure every character's race, else

⁶² Fanon argues, the black child aligns himself imaginatively with the white protagonist in conflict with those racialized villains, only to discover that despite his "essentially white" "way of thinking" the white world sees him as black and therefore dangerous (Fanon 148).

Zane Pinchback might too strongly resemble one racial group or the other. But the effect of this choice is that, with the exception of some subtle shading work readers must rely almost exclusively on context to know which characters are black and which are white.⁶³ And of context there is plenty.

Incognegro disrupts iconographic representation of Klan violence by rendering the faces of the perpetrators and victim racially indistinct; every face is drawn in black outlines with neither color nor shading. The splash page shows that blackness is not about skin color itself, but rather about how one is seen and treated. I am fascinated, looking at this image, by the question of what readers see. I am not at all sure that most readers will even register the fact that the character being hanged and mutilated has no visible skin color. I would argue that the process of closure causes some to envision or imagine skin color on the victim when they first encounter the image. The political cartoons I discussed earlier likewise compel viewers to “complete” the picture and imagine race as a detail so obvious it need not be shown. At issue here in my argument, is not so much how race is seen, but how racism operates through (structuring) sight. Scott McCloud's concept of closure, that is the filling in of narrative details comics require from readers, mostly concerns the relationship of action between panels. When it comes to completing the details of faces, McCloud argues that instead of using the information on the page to fill-in the rest, we readers see ourselves in the simple, iconic renderings of characters. But, in this case, the iconographic nature of this lynching image defies the logic of identification.

While many of the characters in this image could easily be transplanted into another text and solicit the identification McCloud describes, I argue that the page, whose focal point is the hanging body, plays much more strongly on the recognition of violent iconography than on the instinct to identify with characters and see our own selves reflected in them. Moreover, the

⁶³ Caron observes that Ryder's portrayal is one such exception.

page's captions encourage this "closure" of envisioning skin color by announcing: "Between 1889 and 1918, 2,522 negroes were murdered by lynch mobs in America." Located in the upper left corner of the page, this caption ensures that readers identify the iconography. It also transforms those innocuous looking characters - the men in sweater vests and girl with pigtails, not the one wearing the Klan robe and pointed hat - into a lynch mob. It names them as perpetrators of, rather than witnesses to violence and thus further undercuts identification. Perhaps the most familiar point of identification in the image is that of the camera on the bottom of the page, the outside voyeur. As Loss notes, in the graphic narrative splash page, as in the photographs it recalls, a pointing hand directs the viewer's (and the photographer's) attention, commanding participation at the level of looking.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ This analysis recalls my discussion of the "terrorist" Yakir images in "War Rabbit." Though McCloud theorizes comics identification operating along a spectrum of realistic detail, he ignores visual cues that command objectification rather than identification.

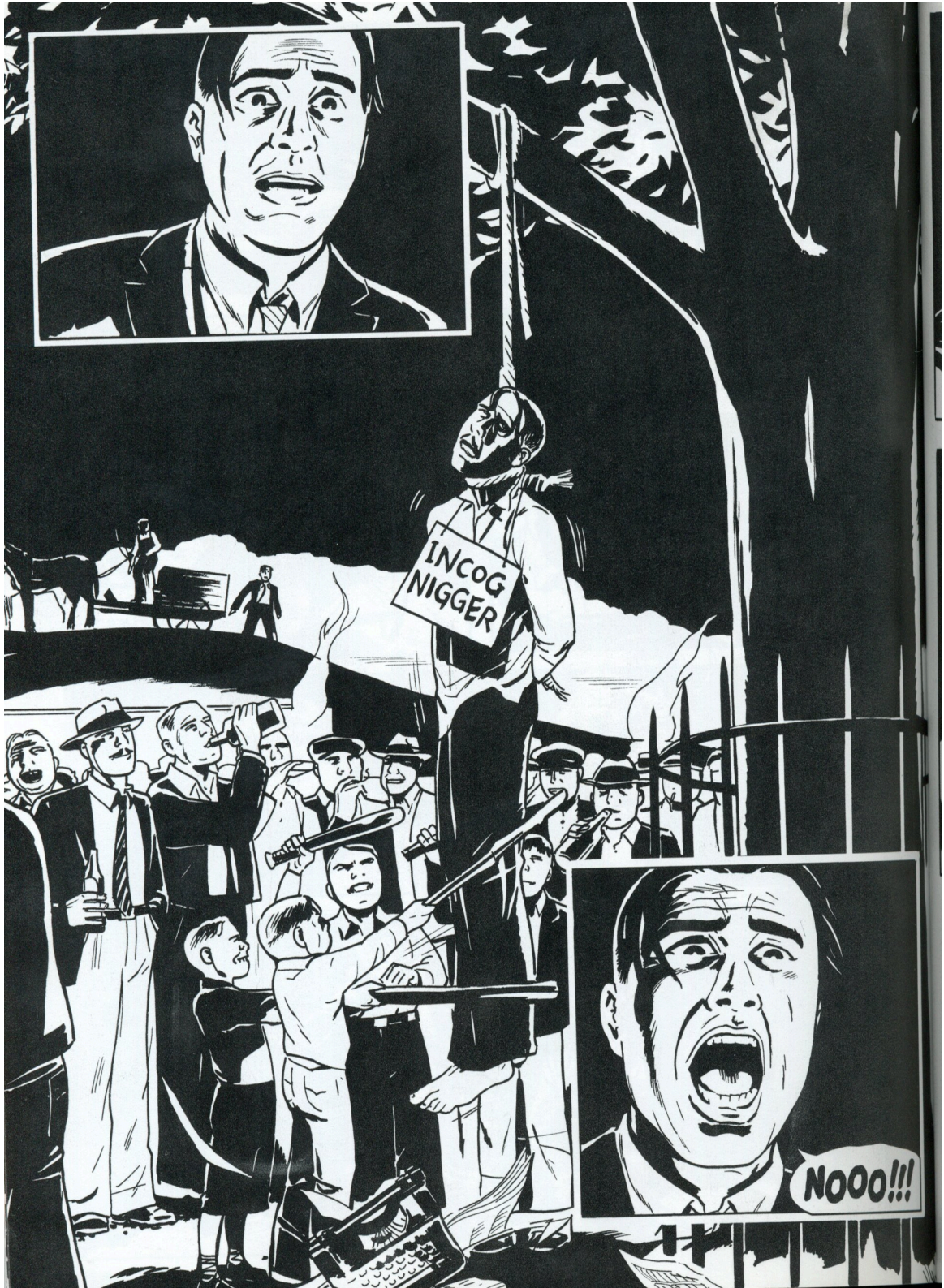


Figure 18 The Lynching of Carl, *Incognegro*, page 110

Other scholars have implied that *Incognegro* undermines universalist looking practices, when they praise it for garnering reader identification with lynch victims, “re-humanizing” them and absolving them of purported crime. Tim Caron proclaims, for instance, “Pleece's drawing succeeds in re-humanizing the lynch victim . . . Pleece's line drawing, and his artwork . . . reminds us that these men did indeed possess thought, speech, action, and will,” while Theresa Fine writes, “ That Carl is lynched not only demonstrates plainly that lynch mobs were acting to assert power, not to punish crimes” (Caron 152, Fine 117). While I appreciate Caron’s attention to the subtleties of Pleece’s artwork and Fine’s reminder that Johnson’s plot works to challenge the pretext of black criminality, neither scholar seems to notice that the page depicting Carl’s murder doubles down on the victim’s iconographic status as visual object.⁶⁵ Local Klan members, aware that *Incognegro* is in town to report their activities to national audiences, capture Pinchback's friend Carl, but they mistake the other light-skinned Northern black man for the journalist. This final lynching image (again a full page) splits its focus between the lynching crowd, and overlaid “picture-in-picture” close-up panels of Pinchback's reaction as he watches the scene from the foreground. Carl hangs with a sign “Incog-Nigger” draped around his neck. This sign interpolates Pinchback (an interpolation that also recalls Fanon), arguably forcing him to see his vulnerability as a black man.

More to my point, the progression of the plot has thus far aligned readers to identify with Pinchback in his adventures, such that if we still don't identify directly with the lynch mob or its victim, we do see ourselves in it's intended victim, Pinchback. In sharp contrast to the opening lynch image, which offers little access from the point of view of identification, except perhaps by aligning readers with the camera eye, the plot of the story and this final image invite readers to

⁶⁵ These scholars' universalist appeals to the humanity of lynching victims risk overlooking the fact that Carl is murdered precisely because the Klan members objectify his black skin.

identify with racial vulnerability.⁶⁶ As such, the page displaces identification to the act of looking (rather than framing identification in terms the looked upon object), because the iconography directs our gaze and sympathies, and the novel itself has built Zane as the character with whom readers identify, and Carl as the object of his and others' gaze. This page design emphasizes the act of seeing as locus of privilege. While a certain economic barrier limits who might see the visual reproduction (either photographic or hand-drawn) of lynch mob killings, only whites were able to physically attend lynchings and see them directly, and of course, such constraints of access apply to most visual objects.

As if in anticipation of white readers' difficulty identifying with the character, Johnson has Pinchback explain his ability to pass by performing whiteness: "That's what white folks never get. They don't think they have accents. They don't think they eat ethnic foods. Their music is classical. . . They think they're just normal. That they are the universal, and that everyone else is an odd deviation from form. . . That's what makes them so easy to infiltrate" (19). I read this speech as a reflection on the identification solicited by the graphic narrative form. I have suggested that the iconographic staging of racial violence undercuts the medium's normal process of inspiring identification. This passage invokes the assumptions of universality inherent in that process. The character announces, "Race doesn't really exist . . . race is a strategy," opaque phrases scholars would be remiss to take at face value. *Incognegro* indeed "renders visually the artificiality of race" (Caron 139). Yet, while its protagonist declares race merely a strategy to be subverted the graphic novel itself does not effectively argue for this perspective.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ If racism and capitalism are as profoundly linked as Wallerstein, Balibar and Johnson suggest, anyone who threatens capital experiences this vulnerability. Indeed the post-bellum threats to "carpet baggers" and the early twentieth century "lynchings" of labor agitators in the North, many of whom against Irishmen and Italians (who were not considered white at the time) show that violence committed to preserve white (economic) supremacy did not only target American blacks.

⁶⁷ These statements that race is easily subverted by those with the proper attitude echo neoliberalism's burdening of the individual to rise above systemic inequality.

It's clear that race exists for Zach Pinchback: he works for a Black paper, devotes his investigative journalism to racial violence, and risks his life doing so. The topic of the novel is not race – or how race is represented – per se; it is rather the way racism operates as a specific form of persecution, and the role of modern visual culture in promoting and redressing persecutory violence.

Iconographic reclamation? Civil Rights & Queer Coalition

If iconography operates as part of comics "language" and informs the visual codes of various modern media, then like all language the meaning of iconographic images changes over time. As the political cartoons I discussed above suggest, racial signification dominates the lynch scene as it was portrayed in late twentieth/early twenty-first century comics, even though it was also an intended sign of intimidation to Northern whites in reconstruction and (mostly white) labor activists in the early twentieth century. This racial consolidation of iconographic meaning can be described in part as the product of an explicit shift in racist ideology, such as the propaganda tactics of the Ku Klux Klan, but it also reflects larger patterns of normalization and knowledge formation in modern visual culture. As Michel Foucault describes in *Discipline & Punish*, modernity can be characterized as surveillance society; individuals learn how to behave "normally" by observing others as well as by imagining themselves being seen. Visuality is central to Foucault's theory of power: the ability to oversee large groups of people produces and secures power; and, individuals understand and others as potential objects of knowledge.

Visual media then play a two-part role in disciplinary society: media are part of the disciplinary "machinery," and visual media technologies inform the ways subjects see each other and themselves, "through the formation and accumulation of new forms of knowledge"

(Foucault).⁶⁸ What Foucault calls the "asymmetrical" power relations of disciplinary society strive to "normalize" subjects (into efficient workers, docile inmates, etc). Surveillance technologies feature visual codes that inform this normalization. Such as the rhetorical/visual codes of early photography in which "working classes, colonized peoples, the criminal, poor, ill-housed, sick or insane were constituted as [the] passive . . . objects of knowledge. Subjected to a scrutinizing gaze, forced to emit signs, yet cut off from command of meaning, such groups were represented as, and wishfully rendered, incapable of speaking, acting or organizing for themselves" (Tagg 11). Visual codes emerging through photographic representation travel into other media and, as John Tagg implies in his history of photography, these photographic practices objectify oppressed groups and mark abnormality in them, representations that travel beyond and across particular medical, legal and governmental institutions.

Consequently, iconographic images tend to simplify historical facts through binary categories like normal/abnormal, powerful/powerless and oppressor/oppressed. Considering similar patterns of disciplinary surveillance, such as late nineteenth century photography deployed amongst different social groups, iconography has a remarkable ability to consolidate meaning. The fact that lynching is "seen" to be a uniquely racial phenomenon, not only masks the wider pervasiveness of this form of vigilante justice as it was used to enforce sexual, political, economic and national norms between the mid- nineteenth and twentieth centuries; but it may also inhibit coalition amongst those same different categories of disenfranchised and persecuted groups today.⁶⁹ First published in 1995, Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby*, the fictional story of a gay male character's coming of age during the US South's African American

⁶⁸ As John Tagg observes, nineteenth and early twentieth century photography was itself a "discursive system" imbricated in disciplinary power; photographs were used as evidence in courts, documentation in hospitals, and educational sources (4).

⁶⁹ *Lynching in the West* treats some of this forgotten history of non-black lynching.

Civil Right Movement, complicates the relationship between racism and homophobia through a provocative incorporation of lynching and civil rights iconography.

Cruse's book makes significant use of historical events, though he obscures its setting by referring to the years it takes place only as "Kennedytime" with certain temporal markers, such as the murder of Emmett Till and the March on Washington. Likewise, its action takes place in the fictional town of "Clayfield," which most scholars take as a stand-in for Springville, Alabama the small town (30 miles from Birmingham) where Cruse himself grew-up.⁷⁰ Told in flashback, *Stuck Rubber Baby* chronicles Toland's coming-out during the optimism and danger of the Civil Rights Era. Despite youthful flirtations and dalliances with boys, teenage Toland commits himself to heterosexuality by dating Ginger, a woman who happens to be very involved in local civil rights activism. Before achieving self-acceptance as a gay man (that the novel is framed through a middle-aged Toland's conversation with his male partner assures as much), Toland fathers a child with Ginger. With Ginger, Toland attends rallies and becomes committed to the movement himself, especially after hearing stories of Klan brutality and seeing his friend Sammy hanged for interracial homosexuality. However, Toland consistently views the events he witnesses through the lens of his own safety and insecurity as a gay man. Structurally, the book's plot also relegates racism (including its violent incarnations) to a backdrop for homosexual struggle, often framing homosexuality as an issue of self-acceptance, rather than a vulnerable positionality.

In contrast to *Incognegro*, which makes implicit connections between race, gender and class, as categories of persecution, *Stuck Rubber Baby* assertively links homophobia and racism by portraying individuals victimized by both. Some scholars criticize Cruse's depiction of these

⁷⁰ The book has, in fact, been prone to speculation about other autobiographical detail. During his presentation at the 2016 International Comic Arts Forum (ICAF), Cruse acknowledged similarities between himself and Toland, his protagonist, noting that certain differences between the two were made only to serve the plot.

two interrelated categories of oppression, seeing his graphic novel as a negation of racism's unique and still-present historical violence.⁷¹ Indeed, there is something uncomfortable about Cruse's packaging of KKK intimidation, aggressive police dogs and lynching in the context of self-acceptance and romantic gratification. However, the issue is not an incompatibility between racism and homophobia - on the contrary, both inspired similar violence - rather, as Gary Richards suggests, the novel suffers for too neat divisions between past oppression and present equality, and between accepting heroes and bigoted villains.⁷² Ironically, Cruse casts the African American Civil Rights Movement as an inclusive space, welcoming of queer sexuality, a-normative gender and untraditional family structures; if this reflected historical reality, the Civil Rights movement would likely not have been followed by separate LGBT (or for that matter feminist) activist movements, which, in turn, have likewise marginalized African American and trans individuals within their ranks.⁷³

Rubber Baby, set in the 60s, highlights the role television and magazines, explicitly visual mass media, play in visual culture.⁷⁴ In these media, individual images and events become iconic, such that individual victims of racial violence command visual attention, cast against that familiar lynching iconography. Near the beginning of the graphic novel, Toland (teenaged at this point) happens upon an image of Emmett Till. Cruse references this icon with Toland's retrospective narration in caption, "It was a close-up photograph of a dead black person whose skull was all caved in . . . Since then I've learned that it was Emmett Till, a fourteen year-old boy

⁷¹ Recently, some of these criticisms are informed by the context of 21st century marriage equality campaigns that similarly appropriate the language and history of "civil rights," both as organizational model and as a moral standard of comparison upon which to claim expanded legal rights.

⁷² Cruse may have taken some of this criticism to heart. In his ICAF speech, he emphasized the inadequacy of simple divisions between "good" and "bad" people, and professed the belief that most "good" people unwittingly hold prejudiced ideas, which they have an obligation to confront.

⁷³ Cruse told me that before writing the book he had imagined African American churches to be homophobic spaces, but through conversation with Southern blacks, he was persuaded that homosexuality was tolerated within that community.

⁷⁴ An important thematic similarity to "War Rabbit."

who got bashed, lynched and dumped in a river in Mississippi because he said something flippant to a white woman" (2).⁷⁵ In this scene, Cruse indirectly invokes the power of iconography, denies readers the chance to see the photograph itself (or a drawn facsimile), and instead depicts his character's reaction. It is Toland's face shown in close up, and, in the panels that follow, his (imagined) skull "caved in." Given the work's thematic association of gay and black persecution, it is tempting to misinterpret this moment as Toland appropriating the black experience to describe his own struggle, but at this point in the novel the young protagonist has no context for the image, nor has he begun to identify himself as gay. On one hand, this sequence suggests a profound potential for visual images to inspire identification. Neither context nor likeness explains Toland's personal shock. Seeing Till's battered, swollen head causes Toland to imagine his own skull coming apart.⁷⁶ On the other hand, Toland resists this identification, seeking assurance that this type of injury cannot possibly befall him, and he does so, moreover, seeking an essential superiority: "Are white people's skulls harder than Negro skulls?" he asks his father (Cruse 2). Young Toland wants to understand Till's mutilated corpse as the product of racial weakness. Seeing the evidence of Till's pain, Toland wants to feel safe. If Toland is compelled to identify with the image he sees, readers of *SRB* are likewise liable to identify with him, and consequently to invest in his sentiment of (white) insecurity - an investment that comes at the cost of seeing Emmett Till (whose images is not pictured).

⁷⁵ David Bordelon notes that the racist books Toland's father proudly displays in their home challenges easy associations of racism with ignorance: "In *SRB* images of print culture illustrate both the problems of and solutions to prejudice" (108). Bordelon reads newspaper as metaphorical "background" in contrast to the graphic novel's foregrounding of Toland's identity-crisis (114).

⁷⁶ Interestingly, the visual presentation of Toland's imagined injury is quite different from the picture of Emmett Till circulated in the black press: Toland imagines his facial features in tact, where Till's face is unrecognizable.

Figure 19 *Stuck Rubber Baby*, page 2

At various points his desire for safety leads Toland to dissociate from the pain of black people near him, and arguably motivates his ultimate decision to leave the South. Granted, Toland's identification with African American Civil Rights is not entirely self-serving. He risks bodily harm in joining movement demonstrations, but he is moved to do so, at least in part, because he feels himself and his friends personally endangered by racial violence. *Stuck Rubber Baby* and the critical conversation it has inspired exemplify the challenge of representing and/or inspiring collective action, especially action in the name of countering distinct but interrelated injustices. Cruse has drawn criticism for appropriating Black experience and Civil Rights imagery to illustrate his protagonist's struggle as a gay man in the South. Indeed, the iconographic deployment at work in *Stuck Rubber Baby*, particularly in its portrayal of Klan violence, risks collapsing American racial violence with other forms of persecution. An obvious reason *Stuck Rubber Baby* trades on the iconography of American racial terror, is because the American persecution of homosexuals lacks the iconographic campaign of racial terror. Yet, this iconographic contest also, perhaps unintentionally, articulates homophobic persecution and racial terror as part of a larger pattern.

Looking past the protagonist's limitations, I read the narrative and formal elements of this graphic novel as a deliberate thwarting of lynching iconography to expose the interconnections between types of oppression and expand the way readers "see" history. Whereas *Incognegro* anachronistically portrays Klan iconography in its lynch scenes, most notably the white pointed hood, the same apparel appears in *Stuck Rubber Baby*, set precisely during the height of KKK revivals and at a time when Klan branches held public marches and meetings in full regalia.⁷⁷ *Stuck Rubber Baby* features two "lynchings," the first of which is an initiation ritual in which a group of Klansmen forcibly remove a black man from his store, to kill him. Cruse depicts this

⁷⁷ *Klanville USA*.

lynching with irregularly shaped panels (i.e., the sides and angles of which are not equal) and men wearing the iconic pointed hoods of the KKK (53-54). The exaggerated panel angles - that their corners form sharp points - echoes the shape of those hoods, highlighting the looming threat of violence rendered through this iconography. This threat is leveled indiscriminately against African Americans, illustrated when the killers think Sledge is another black man: "Wren told Shiloh later on that the killers never once called Sledge by his name. They kept saying 'Rastus.' Shiloh doubted they even knew who Sledge was. He was just black and handy" (Cruse 53).

Figure 20 *Stuck Rubber Baby*, page 53

In this sequence, the jagged panels depict a Klan attack on a black man and his family, which shares space on the page with conventional, rectangular panels of Toland and his friends reacting to the story. On the page, the adult Toland sits in the background of the many paneled images; his figure is bigger than any of the other characters shown and the shading surrounding him is the only gradation from light to dark. Toland's position reclined on a couch mirrors his younger counter-parts in the relative safety it connotes. Also drawn outside a panel boundary is Sledge's young son, who reaches out from the black background in the bottom of the page as he cries, "Daddy-." This contrast produces an intensely jarring reading experience: the young boy almost jumping out of the page (an effect produced both by the boy-figure's body language and the page composition), while the adult Toland recedes. The two characters compete for visual attention - with each other and with the action inside the panels - suggesting tension between past and present.

Similar 'jagged' panels connote the novel's second lynching, that of Sammy a gay, white, civil rights activist.⁷⁸ Unlike Sledge's murder, Sammy's body is presented iconographically, as he is left hanging from a tree with a sign ("Nigger-Loving Queer") marking his crime, much as *Incognegro*'s Carl is hanged with a sign marking his crime around his neck ("Incog-nigger"). That Cruse draws a queer white male as the iconographic victim of lynching, rather than a black man, is one of the ways his book seems to appropriate the history of African-American targeted racial violence in the service of a gay civil rights agenda. While Cruse consolidates multiple forms of oppression that each have their own legacy and context, I contend that Cruse deploys this iconography not merely to appropriate one group's struggle in the interests of another, but instead to argue that the persecution of homosexuals and African Americans are part of a larger pattern

⁷⁸ Like Sledge's young son, Cruse presents Sammy reaching out and looking towards readers, with another page composition that centers visual focus on an appeal for recognition (Cruse 112).

of oppression, a pattern he highlights through visual rhymes (jagged panels, exploding brains, images that dominate and break out of the gutter).⁷⁹

Sammy's brutal death appears twice in *Stuck Rubber Baby*, each time covering a sequence of several irregularly paneled pages: first chronologically in the narrative and again as flashback when Toland delivers his eulogy. Both times, the "gutter" (white space between panels) disappears, and in its place jagged panels showing segments of the scene appears a-top full-page compositions. Much like the pages depicting Sledge's abduction, the adult-Toland narrator again competes for space on the page with the story he is telling, but the order is reversed: in this latter case, the top of the page (usually understood to come first sequentially in a regularly paneled comics' page) shows Toland's friends discovering Sammy's hanged body, and whereas on the bottom of the page it is adult Toland who appears to reach out (178). Adult Toland is drawn thrice, each figure superimposed over the one before it such that it appears larger and closer to the reader. The next page repeats this imagery, showing the adult Toland, comforted by his partner, four more times. Cruse's sophisticated page composition exemplifies the comics medium's ability to visually convey the experience of traumatic memory, but Cruse's dialogue questions the potential for visual images to translate experience.⁸⁰ Still wracked with grief decades later, Toland tells his partner (and the reader), "If I just hadn't touched it . . . If it had just been a scary picture of something awful in the woods . . . I might have had a safe place in my memory to stash it . . . Someplace where it'd stay put and leave me alone" (Cruse 178).

⁷⁹ When I asked him about the historical parallels between homophobia and racism, Cruse did not express a theory of systemic persecution. Instead, he answered that these problems (and implicitly their connections) are self-evident, if only we have the integrity to be honest with ourselves.

⁸⁰ Marianne Hirsch and Hillary Chute have each written about the ways in which trauma fractures memory, order and time.



Figure 21 *Stuck Rubber Baby*, page 178

In the above quote, Toland wishes that he had only the removed experience of looking at pictures with which to identify lynching, suggesting that the knowledge produced by visual representations fundamentally differs from that gleaned through first-hand, tactile encounters. Looking as he describes it connotes privilege and safety, while touch brings vulnerability and, perhaps, greater knowledge. His phrase, "something awful in the woods" recalls iconographic illustrations like that from *The San Francisco Call* Sunday, April 30th, 1899 (discussed above). The tactile experience of reading comics—be it newspaper ink on one's hands or the careful turning of pages to preserve condition—is arguably one of the distinguishing factors of the medium.⁸¹⁸² Of course, Cruse's graphic novel itself questions the importance of direct touch, as Toland's reaction is contrasted with that of the perpetrators and the police, both of whom also touch Sammy's body. This issue of sensory contact raised by *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s Toland relates to the contact represented in lynching images. Iconographic representations of lynching, like the "something awful in the woods" Toland imagines, efface the tactile contact of lynching: iconographic reductions show neither direct physical contact between spectators and victims (e.g. "witnesses" who beat and tortured victims, as well as those who posed for photos with their bodies) nor the physical proximity of residents, black and white, who would inevitably cross public spaces and stand on the sites of the killings.

Perhaps the distinction between looking and touching is not only a question of proximity, but also one of disruption; Toland does not willingly touch Sammy's body. To the contrary he unknowingly walks into it, is knocked down and struggles to get up. Indeed, boy Toland is so affected by Emmett Till, not because of any physical touching, but because the image he sees so

⁸¹ For instance, Scott Bukatman has focused the physical experience of a reading child sprawling atop *Little Nemo in Slumberland* newspaper broadsheets. Rebecca Sheer writes about the "haptic visuality" at work in Joe Sacco's drawing of hands.

⁸² Of course, many comics text originally distributed in print form are now available electronically. (*Stuck Rubber Baby* itself is currently out of print but available as an e-book.)

disrupts his understanding of human mortality. To some extent, Cruse's page compositions may be read as attempts to produce a similar experience in the reader, who finds characters jumping-out of the page, and perhaps even feels compelled to turn the book sideways and upside-down to take-in its layered images. Yet, these disruptions in the reading experience only happen through reader-complicity, because the reader of a graphic novel—like the photographic beholder—can always choose to look away and return to the relative “safety” of life outside the text.

Toland's desire for the feeling of safety recurs throughout the novel from his wish that the incident of Sammy's murder be kept in "a safe place in my memory" to the comforting gesture of his partner rubbing his shoulders (179). Correlate to his desire for safety comes Toland's fear of experiencing violent persecution. On stage to eulogize Sammy, Toland finds himself paralyzed when he looks out at the funeral crowd, until he sees Shiloh, the black, bandaged victim of a racially targeted bombing and attempts to relinquish some of his safety through empathy: “For some reason my eyes locked on Shiloh's eyes . . . and it came back to me what had put him in that wheel-chair . . . and I imagined the explosion at the melody motel . . . and what it must've been like to be Shiloh . . . and see a flaming tornado of shattered beams and concrete blasting toward me” (Cruse 190). As Gary Richards suggests, the fraught empathy in this moment is one of many instances of the white male protagonist finding comfort and affirmation through self-serving interaction with his black friends. In Toland's imagination “being” Shiloh is a matter of seeing what he would have seen, but this formulation is contrasted by his suggestion (previously shown in the text, but chronologically from the perspective of an older Toland) that he might have moved on easily, “if it had just been a scary picture” (179).

His identification with Shiloh is immediately followed by a flashback scene of Sammy's death, which he now also sees through the point of view of its victim, but this time his empathy

extends beyond sight to physical touch: "...And it was like I was Sammy . . . And I felt what Sammy felt . . . And strange men's hands were all over me, dragging me somewhere that I didn't wanna go" (Cruse 191). Moreover, Toland's empathetic identification with Sammy includes his thoughts, "And I knew that I might very well be about to die," perception of his own bodily movements, "My foot was squirming this was and that," and vision, "And I was so teary eyed, the faces around me were nothing but dark, watery blurs" (191).

Toland's imagination is much richer when it comes to the details of Sammy's death, than it is to the experience of either Emmett Till or Shiloh, a contrast explained not only by the proximity through which Toland comes to know of the violence (literally touching the murderers and victim, versus seeing the violent aftermath in person and in photography), but also because Toland sees his own vulnerability in Sammy's death. Eulogizing Sammy, a white man lynched (ostensibly) for having sex with black men, Toland who has done the same, tells the spectators, "It could have been me" (193). In each of the similarly framed moments in which Toland identifies with victims of racial terror, he worries, quite literally that the same might happen to him, worries that are portrayed via panel breaking graphics. In each case too, Toland overlooks the particular vulnerability of the victims: a young Northern raised black teenager in the deep south, and a vocal critic of racial violence who railed against the status quo for news cameras. Both are individuals who publicly defy segregation. Unlike confrontational Sammy (in encounters with his father, news cameras, and the police), Toland's acts of defiance—a member of a large march, partier at a (quasi-underground) gay-club, a lover who keeps his sex life concealed—while certainly all entailing some degree of risk, all provide him the safety conferred through anonymity.

Iconographic Comic Language

Comics is self-evidently a visual medium, and its artists frequently exploit visuality by capitalizing on the differences between visual and verbal representation. Often, comics texts seem to suggest that their visual elements are present to compensate for the unreliability and insufficiency of language (i.e. the written word). However, as I have argued, the visual language of comics borrows from and, moreover, interrogates visual tropes in illustration, photography and other visual forms. Mass reproduced lynching iconography exemplifies the rhetorical (language-like) status of codified visuality in modernity. At stake in these images is the broader conditioning of sight and knowledge through racial hierarchy. To fully reckon with America's ongoing history of racial injustice, we must overcome failures of sight telescoped in lynching iconography. One of these failures is refusal to engage. At figurative and literal levels, modern Western sight disciplines us not to look at all. To turn away from images that disgust and upset us. To see, but not look. Additionally, dominant narratives (digested through the voices of others, as I suggest in Chapter 2) prevent us from looking for ourselves. Cultural knowledges teach us to mistake the act of seeing familiar patterns for authentic engagement, such that our sight is filtered through the lens of ideology. Moreover, problematic identification constitutes a third failure of looking. We objectify the victims of brutality by implicitly projecting ourselves into the role of spectator; or by viewing the suffering of others principally as catharsis for our own.

Racism operates through the structuring of sight in modern visual culture, of which lynching iconography is an illuminating example, and the cartoon depictions of lynching discussed above can be read as markers of lynching's entry into the terrain of iconography. Attention to the shared visual codes amongst comics and other contemporary media not only enriches the study of comics as a literary field, but also illustrates comics' value in cultural

studies. Comics are particularly adapted to representing persecution as historical subject, because, persecution's relation to power operates through sight: lynching victims' bodies are left as intimidating warnings; lynchings themselves are public entertainment, for whose privileged to attend; these killings are coalesced into an iconography that itself compels certain practices of looking. All of these visual features of persecution appear in *Incognegro*, in which author Mat Johnson and illustrator Warren Pleece bring attention to the history of American racial terror and to its visual and cultural legacy. In depicting one character's encounter with some of this imagery, Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby* unpacks the challenges to reclaiming iconography. Both graphic narratives portray the violent social performance of white supremacy through visual representations of lynching. This iconography, like the spectacular, ritual nature of lynchings themselves, dehumanizes the victims of racial violence. The two graphic narratives under analysis each strives to complicate this iconography by emphasizing the faces of victims, who first appear alive, narrating their murders from the point of view of those closest to them, contextualizing their killing in contemporary patterns of violence, and by juxtaposing characters' experience of removed iconographic viewing and first-hand sensory encounter. Read together with the genealogy of lynching images, *Stuck Rubber Baby* and *Incognegro* illustrate comics' unique capacity to deconstruct visual culture's participation in modern knowledge.

Chapter 4. TEACHING HISTORY THROUGH COMICS

By examining the ways comics narrate particular histories of oppression, such as American racial terror and the Palestinian conflict, this dissertation has treated the comics medium's formal properties as occasion to investigate "history" as the intersection of teleological time, iconographic vision, and heteroglossic language, conceiving all of these as modern epistemological formations and challenging the universalism inherent in each. In so many words, this project has sought to articulate the philosophical contributions comics offer to historical knowledge, and to interrogating the making of history in particular. Despite the fact that the majority of my primary texts represent history as an object of knowledge, I have favored issues of form over content in order to question the categories of knowledge that underpin any and all historical representation. Yet, even as it is important—nay imperative—to understand these comics texts as interventions in the construction of historical knowledge, it would be remiss to disregard the representative claims the graphic texts make about their historical subject matter. In this final chapter, I apply the philosophical and formal frameworks developed in previous chapters to analyze a comics history of slavery, Liz Clarke and Trevor R Getz's *Abina and the Important Men: A Graphic History* (first edition 2012), which exemplifies comics' capability for nuanced historical representation. *Abina*, designed as a textbook, illuminates one woman's quest to claim agency for her own life against the entangled forces of slavery, British colonialism, and (late nineteenth century) West African patriarchy. Limited archived material exists to document the life of Abina Mensah; and that life, partially uncovered, can only be narrated at the nexus of local and global socio-economic, political forces. For these reasons, *Abina* is, to borrow a phrase from Joe Sacco, the type of story usually confined to "the footnotes of history." This chapter

argues that *Abina and the Important Men* exemplifies the formal potential of the medium to narrate historical events, while simultaneously interrogating 'history' as knowledge category.

Historian Trevor R. Getz and illustrator Liz Clarke collaborated to produce a "graphic history" of Abina Mansah, a West African woman who fled slavery and filed legal suit, with the British colonial court in 1876, arguing that her "master" should be punished by British law.

Abina and the Important Men is a textbook composed of several parts, parts which combine to articulate 'History' as a process rather than simple object of knowledge: a "Graphic History" of Abina's trial, archival transcripts from the trial itself, a section on "Historical Context" that follows conventions of the textbook genre, a "Reading Guide" that includes distinct sets of questions for use in primary, secondary and postsecondary students, and (in the book's 2nd edition) a section that contains three other historians' brief essays on the thematic and methodological issues in *Abina and the Important Men*. Through this structure, *Abina and Important Men* constantly engages in meta-discussion of its historical representations.

Abina and the Important Men makes history's unknowable elements visible. For instance, in juxtaposing the speech that appears in dialogue bubbles in the opening graphic section with the same words in the neatly typed transcripts, the material record of history—the transcript written by an agent of the court (perhaps the judge)—comes to signify its own absences, because the vast white space of the page around the words themselves contrasts with the level of detail in Liz Clarke's well researched but necessarily imaginative graphic rendering of people and places. The sections that follow further complicate the status of archival material by calling attention to factors that may have undermined the transcript's accuracy, such as the possibility that the judge had to divide his attention between participating in the court proceedings and documenting them. Moreover, Getz problematizes the transcribed words by highlighting translation issues between

Ewe and Twi, the spoken Ghanaian languages Abina and other witnesses would have used, and English, the court's official language. As I elaborate below, language is central to *Abina's* project of historicizing one woman's life experience as interpretive object in the conceptual framework of "slavery."

While it is presently impossible to foretell whether other historians and publishing houses will join in producing history textbooks in comic form, *Abina and the Important Men* achieved an immediate level of success that may well signal an emergent genre, which I call historio-graphic narrative.⁸³ Oxford University Press has begun a series, and has thus far published two other graphic histories, both illustrated by Liz Clarke: *Mendoza the Jew: Boxing, Manliness, and Nationalism, A Graphic History* (2013), and *inHuman Traffick: The International Struggle against the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Graphic History* (2014).⁸⁴ Awarded "The James Harvey Robinson Prize for a teaching aid which has made an outstanding contribution to the learning of history in any field for public and educational purposes," by the American Historical association in 2014, *Abina and the Important Men* is now in its second edition, published in 2015. This recent interest in comics as tool for historical pedagogy reinvigorates a mid-century US educational trend in comics production. As Joseph Witek recounts, "For almost thirty years . . . the Gilberton fact-based comics were impeccably researched and handsomely produced. In fact, some artwork from Gilberton comics was eventually used to illustrate school textbooks" (14).⁸⁵ Before the 1954 Comics Code Authority "sucked [them] bloodless by the censors" *EC* (Educational Comics, which was tellingly rebranded Entertainment Comics) and the Gilberton

⁸³ Historio-graphic narrative combines "graphic narrative," Hillary Chute's label for long form nonfiction comics and "historiographic metafiction," Linda Hutcheon's postmodern appellation for novels about the making of history.

⁸⁴ *Oxford University Press* is the second oldest university press, currently the largest university publisher, and its titles are consistently popular. If any major press can be called a trend-setter, *OUP* should certainly qualify. In the forward to *inhuman Traffick*, Rafe Blaufarb report that OUP editor KJKJ proposed the graphic format to him, sharing *Abina* as an example of the type of work desired for the new series.

⁸⁵ As Witek discusses, *Classics Illustrated* historiographic comic art was executed by such cartooning greats as Jack Kirby, best known for creating *Captain America* and many other *DC* and *Marvel* titles.

Company published nonfiction comics whose subject matter included the US Civil War, Sports History, and biographies (Witek 15).

The stakes of naming this new historio-graphic genre exceed advocating for more comics texts of similar style and purpose to *Abina*, though I certainly do hope to see more of these materials. Rather, conceptualizing such historical comics in generic terms underscores the fact that these self-reflective, pedagogical texts present a particular framework for historical knowledge. While "genre" has been variously theorized in taxonomic and semantic terms, I favor rhetorician John Frow's epistemological formulation: "Genres actively generate and shape knowledge of the world . . . Far from being merely 'stylistic' devices, genres create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or of philosophy" (2). Much as the comics medium's formal properties challenge epistemological frameworks for time, subjectivity and visuality, historio-graphic narrative solicits particular reading expectations and practices that engage those frameworks. In particular, association with so called "low-brow" comics genres means that many readers meet historio-graphic narratives with suspicion. This suspicion is amplified through media-specific formal tensions and leveraged into meta-commentary on historical knowledge and authority.

Though there is strong precedent for comics as pedagogical tool, *Abina* is the first graphic history textbook following the "deconstructive turn" in the field of history. I have argued that comics have formal potential to examine universalist conceptual frameworks of temporality, subjectivity and vision, but until recently this potential had been best explored, not in explicitly educational comics but rather by more mainstream comics genres, such as *Incognegro*'s noir mystery and *Footnotes in Gaza*'s travelogue style journalism. In contrast to the comics explored

in this dissertation, all authored after 1980, Witek suggests mid-century educational comics, which were marketed for classroom use, reflect the didactic values of their publishers and so use comics' formal structures to convey "logocentricity" in an "authoritative tone": "The layout of the pages and the composition of the individual panels, especially in the configurations of the human figures, combine to create a world that is solidly grounded in space, with clear and logical power relationships among the people" (Witek 23-24). Thus, while recent historio-graphic narratives echo mid-century pedagogical comics texts in targeting student readers with non-fiction subject matter, the newer texts' thematic meta-commentary on the doing of history and formal challenge to universalism constitute a distinct genre, apart from those earlier materials.

Sharing historical content with mid-century educational comics and reflecting the formal innovation found in many mainstream graphic narratives, *Abina and the Important Men* affirms comics' pedagogical value. Much scholarship in the field of comics studies asserts the pedagogical value of comics that directly represent social and political events, such as Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical *Persepolis* (2000) and Josh Neufeld's *AD: New Orleans After the Deluge* (2009). There have also been many proposals to consider comics more broadly as cultural markers for the times and places in which they are produced.⁸⁶ Recently, historians have begun to recognize the medium's particular promise for the teaching of history. *Comic Books and American Cultural History* (2012), edited by Matthew Pustz, is the most thorough collection of essays devoted to the ways comics represent history. The essays treat a range of historical subject matter, as represented in comics directly and in treating the texts themselves "as cultural artifacts." A fine chapter by Jessamyn Neuhaus, for instance, recommends teaching comics as primary sources in history methods courses, because students readily perceive comics books as "incomplete" sources with "biases," descriptors history students struggle to apply to more

⁸⁶ For example, José Alaniz's work on disability in the Silver Age of Superhero comics is in this vein.

conventional sources (17). Thus, investigating comic books as primary sources reveals methodological issues that apply to historical research more generally.

Educators have brought comics into the history classroom with good cause. Similar to the value of comics as historical source material, Bryan E. Vizzini advocates teaching comics as historical argument, in an essay published as part of the collection *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (2009 edited by Stephen E. Tabachnick). An advantage of comics, according to Vizzini, is that the medium's obvious selection of "historical episodes" and "use of color and frame development to influence readers emotionally . . . require[s] students to . . . isolate and assess the writers' evidence: what is verifiable, what is speculation, what is embellishment or fabrication" (241). These interpretive imperatives mean that students understand comics histories as arguments about, rather than mere reports of, their subject matter. Alicia C. Decker and Mauricio Castro likewise commend the adoption of comics in the history classroom, suggesting that such graphic histories provide an engagement with both historical subject matter and with the stakes of historical representation. In their co-authored essay on teaching *Unknown Soldier*, Decker writes: "Students who were not as likely to read throughout the course *did* read this [comic] book. It was a way for me to connect with more of my students on a deeper level. The book made it easier for students to think critically about the content, as well as the context in which it was presented" (181).

As historio-graphic narrative, *Abina* capitalizes on these advantages to explicitly engage comics' historical pedagogy on two axis: representing the past and theorizing history. In the section entitled, "Subjectivity, Expression and Language," I explore the methodological challenge of narrating Abina's story, given that the only records of her life are transcribed in English, a language different from that which she would have spoken. As Getz elaborates,

Abina's subjective understanding of "freedom" and "slavery" is unknowable to history, and the usefulness of these interpretive frameworks are themselves uncertain. I explore related issues of historical specificity relative to universalism in "Iconography and Visual Language," which focuses on Clarke's attempt to accurately and compellingly visualize details of clothing, setting and mannerisms. Of particular interest are the visual changes between the two editions of the text, mostly in response to expert reviews that noted inaccuracies in the first edition. The spatio-temporal dimension of historical writing contextualizes such linguistic divides. Lastly, in "Temporality and Geography," I examine how *Abina and the Important Men* frames its subject matter chronologically, emphasizing the contemporary ambiguous status of slavery under British colonial law and verbally alluding to (but never visually depicting) parallels between Abina's "enslavement" and industrial working conditions elsewhere.

Subjectivity, Expression and Language

As Getz and Clarke repeatedly emphasize, Abina's story is not easily told. Opacity exists at almost every level of her story, including her very name. The English court transcript refers to "Abina Mansah," a spelling preserved in both editions of *Abina and the Important Men*, but "common modern (Ghanaian) spelling" would be "Abena Mensah/Mansa" (Getz XIX).⁸⁷ In the course of her life, Abina's status depended upon several "important men," those who held her as a slave and those who had the judiciary power to decide on her case. While there is no direct evidence pertaining to Abina's early life, the regional history together with her testimony in the case against Quamina Eddoo indicate:

Abina was most likely born in northern Eweland and grew up speaking Krepi. She was most likely originally enslaved in 1869 or 1870, during a combined Asante-

⁸⁷ I follow this spelling convention and use "Abina Mansah."

Akwamu-Anlo campaign in this region led by Asante General Adu Bɔfoɔ, whom she cites as her first master . . . In 1874 , the British and their coalition partners signed a number of treaties with local independent rulers that created the Gold Coast Colony and Protectorate. Although slavery was technically outlawed in the resulting polity, a demand for labor and the status provided by enslaved retainers drove a thriving trade in slaves even after 1874 . . . [Following war raids] Abina was then transferred into the possession of a trader named Yowawhah and traveled to the Protectorate with him in Fall 1876. Somewhere along the way, they were married. One of their trading stops was in the town of Saltpond, about eight miles from the British administrative center of Cape Coast. Here, Yaw left her at the household of a trading partner, Quamina Eddoo. (Getz and Ehrisman 95-96)

Abina fled Quamina Eddoo to Cape Coast, and sued him for having kept her as a slave. In the court transcript, Abina claims that Quamina Eddoo gave her to his sister, Eccoah, and then shortly attempted to force her to marry one of his workers, named Tandoe. Eddoo successfully denied ever having held Abina as a slave, insisting that she resided in his household as a guest, testimony corroborated by his sister Eccoah and by Yowawhah, who claims in court documents to have left Abina, his "wife" in Eddoo's care temporarily.

That Abina knew herself enslaved proved inadequate to persuade judge William Melton, a British colonial officer of the Gold Coast Colony and Protectorate, who likely had difficulty comprehending local marriage customs and property relationships. There is also reason to suspect that Melton's decision reflected tacit colonial endorsement of slavery, given that the British empire gained considerable wealth through trading in gold and agricultural products such

as kola nuts, palm oil and cocoa, trades that relied on (what we might easily term) "slave labor." The identities of the jurors in Abina's case remain unknown, but they would likely have been English-speaking professionals who supported the status quo. Getz writes in the "Reading Guide" section of *Abina*: "In general, these arguments posit either that slavery in the Gold Coast was customary and rather benign, with the master as a father figure protecting young people rather than exploiting them, or that disrupting the slave-labor economy would slow down the region's economic development" (146). Suffice it to say, Melton's subjective understanding of the case and the reasons for his ruling in favor of Quamina Edoe cannot be separated from the enlightenment ideals of freedom Melton would have shared with his English countrymen, nor can discussion of his perspective exclude the cultural values of the jurors with whom Melton consulted to render his decision.

Pondering her objective for bringing charges when she was unlikely to win the case, Getz concludes that Abina wanted to speak and be heard. In the second edition of *Abina and the Important Men* (published in 2015: I refer to this is the edition throughout unless otherwise indicated), Abina appears in front view (that is to say, facing outwards towards readers) her face upturned, she says, "It was never just about being safe. It was about being heard" (77). The dialogue attributed to her in the comic implies that Abina specifically wanted those of her contemporaries that did not understand her condition of enslavement to realize the deplorable nature of her circumstances, and to reckon with West African slavery more broadly: "I went to the court so that I could say what needed to be said. So that they would hear how my life was. So that they could hear that I was a good woman, a virtuous wife, but was sold as a slave" (77).⁸⁸

⁸⁸ In a journal article, published entirely apart from *Abina and the Important Men*, Getz proposes an alternate explanation of Abina's motives, "that Abina's motives revolved as much or more around issues of respect and protections inherent in the condition of marriage" as she was

Unlike the graphic narrative's court scenes, which greatly rely on archived transcripts for subjects' speech, Getz invented this dialogue and the scene in which it is spoken. Ironically, these words do not belong to the real woman named Abina. *Abina and the Important Men* may provoke readers to "hear" its protagonist, but doing so does not amount to hearing the woman herself.

The assumption that Abina brought her case to court principally to be heard, as illustrated in the comics form, provokes a more specious implication: that Abina would have wanted to be heard not only by the "important men" of her time, but also by "history." In the book's reading guide, Getz ascribes to Abina this desire to be "heard" historically:

Arguably, Abina's voice was silenced in the first stage of the process in that she did not write her own account of what happened. Yet, as we have argued above, by going to court and having her story heard and recorded, Abina made sure that she would not be silenced forever. Without that effort, she—like so many other young, enslaved females,—might have disappeared from history forever. As a direct result of her insistence on going to court, and with a little luck, we *can* now hear her. (140)

It is, of course, the work of historians to excavate stories like Abina's from elliptical references in archived materials, but Getz undermines his own claim to have recovered Abina's "voice" from that historical silencing by suggesting that "hearing her" requires "a little luck" and active confrontation on our parts. Getz rightly suggests that those of us with access to historical records (direct or through works such as *Abina*) are more likely to learn the "story" of slavery than we are to properly hear the voices of individuals like Abina. Throughout the prose sections of *Abina*

and the Important Men, the authors take pains to mark their reconstruction of Abina's life as a good faith attempt that is unavoidably filtered through their own perspectives, but the emphasis here is not on the efforts or failures of the book's authors, but rather on granting agency to Abina for making her story known. It is no small point that historians like Getz are indebted to the historical persons they research. Had Abina not brought the case to trial and spoken, the details of her life would be entirely unknown to twenty-first century readers. And yet, to say that her efforts make the "Graphic History" possible, is not at all the same as imagining that she would have wanted to be remembered in this way.

Abina and the Important Men strives to make readers aware that its claims about Abina's desire are speculative. Laudably, the above passage continues its discussion of hearing Abina: "Of course, it is too simple to suggest that the mere finding or even printing of Abina's testimony reverses the silencing. Instead, excavating her voice from within the document requires that we also confront the limitations and processes of representation and translation by which her testimony was turned into a transcript and then a graphic history" (140). These lines echo a sentiment resonant throughout *Abina and the Important Men*: that Getz and Clarke's collaboration—a secondary source on Abina's life—involves the same interpretive obstacles as primary sources like court transcripts. Primary sources represent through synecdoche, whether by capturing the physical index of a person's activity or by recording their words and expressions. A person's recorded speech from one moment of her life no more captures the sum total of her expression or beliefs, than an imprint of one's hand can be said to convey his full physicality. Often, as is the case with Abina's story, the historical record preserves little at all. Thus, whatever we may hear of Abina's voice is necessarily partial, incomplete and potentially even deceptive. Through such meta-commentary, Getz and Clarke challenge readers to take an

active role in "excavating her voice," and in the same gesture emphasizing that, "we have a particular responsibility to try not to overwrite Abina's story with our own" (141).

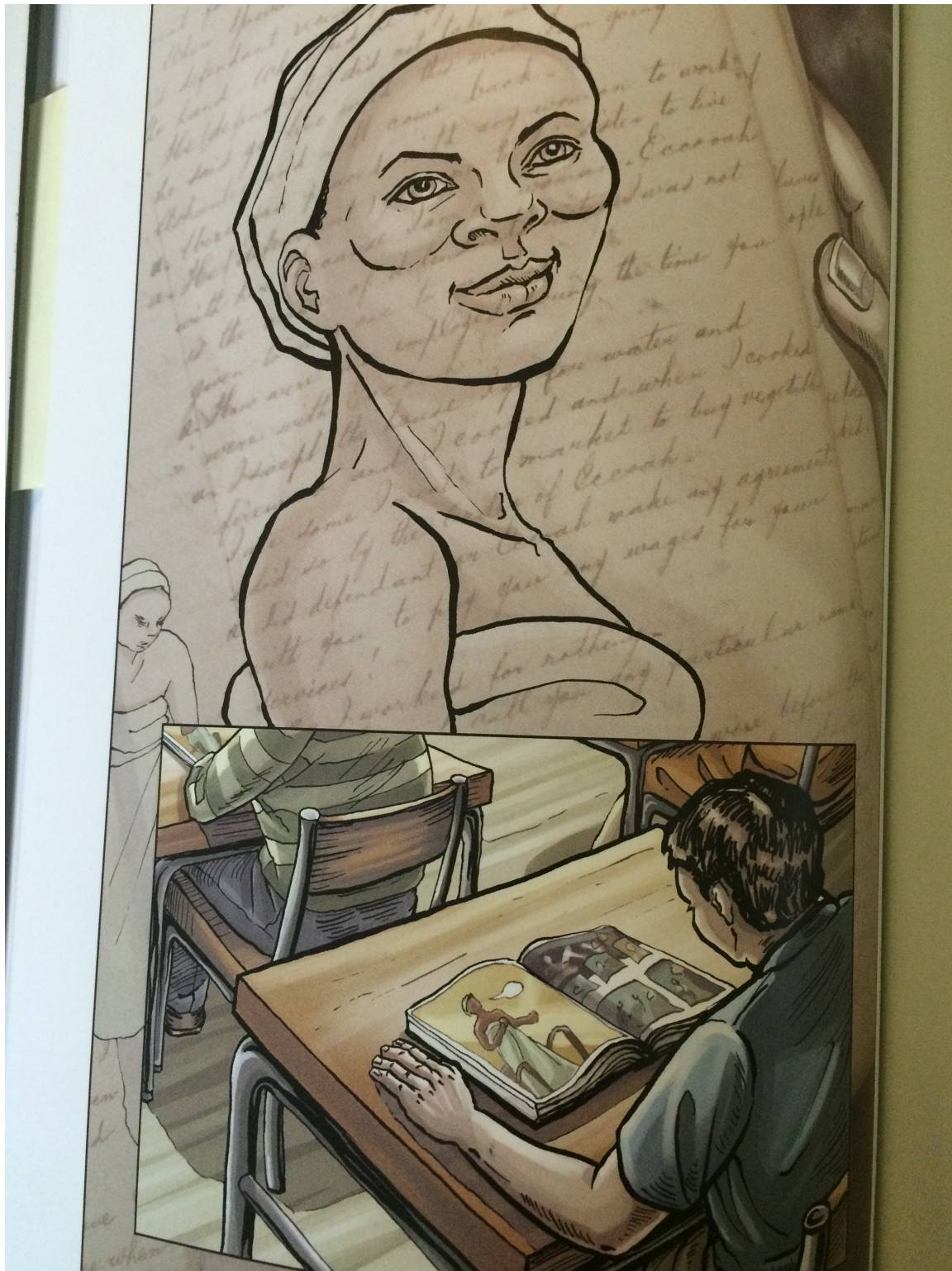


Figure 22 *Abina and the Important Men*, page 80, final page in comic section

While *Abina and the Important Men* inquires about its protagonist—what did she say and what desires motivated her—the collaborators position Abina's subjectivity in constellation with other subjectivities, including the individual subjectivities of readers. In fact, the final pages of the comic section visually interrelate Abina, Getz himself, and other readers as "subjects." In the final sequence the authors first note that there are few historical documents about people like Abina, compared to "plenty of documents . . . written about (and by) men like Brew, and Davis, and Melton, for they are important men" (79). Yet this final sequence seems to suggest that by telling her story centuries later (to Anglophone students), the historio-graphic narrative redeems Abina's life. In fact, the final section of the graphic narrative is titled, "Abina Silenced, Abina Redeemed," and the very last caption reads, "But a voice like hers cannot be silenced forever, and one day, not too long ago . . ." (Getz and Clarke 80). Three wordless pages complete this thought. The first and second are splash pages, single full page images, respectively showing Getz seated in contemplation over a document (a book or ledger) and a closely framed image of that same document from which Abina's figure appears to rise. These pages are distinct in their composition as the only pages to rely exclusively on visual images and the only instance of sequential splash pages. Shirking subtlety, these pages portray Getz' work as a historian in relatable terms: in one page he sits with a thought bubble in what appears to be a library, and in the next Abina metaphorically comes to life before his eyes. This meta-representation comes full circle in the final comic page, which again depicts Abina rising out from (her image atop) the historical document, but this image, unlike the previous page, shows Abina's face looking outward to the reader. The first close image of the Abina on the document included a hand holding it by the left side. This final image likewise includes a hand holding the document, except it is a right hand, visual signaling a parallelism between Getz reading the archived

document and students reading *Abina*. This meta-gesture is made all the more explicit by the inset panel at page bottom showing a student reading a comic that looks to be *Abina and the Important Men*.

The most superficial meta-commentary transitions from the book's self-reflexivity as an object itself to a call for readers to thoughtfully engage. In fact, the open pages on the student's desk correspond to Abina's declaration at her trial, "Therefore I knew I was a slave, and so I decided I would come here and complain!" (37).^{89 90} *Abina and the Important Men* is a textbook designed for students of various curricular levels, but this conclusion provokes the more advanced students to recognize themselves holding a book in their own hands, to turn back the pages and find the above quotation. In the process, Getz and Clarke suggest that Abina brings her complaint not only to the trial court itself, but also to the pages of history and to the classroom. Logically of course, Abina could not have, "decided I would come here" to those students. Positioning student-readers as historical interlocutors who "hear" Abina's story through transcribed testimony, simultaneously compels readers to identify with the "Important Men" who heard that testimony in 1876 and to imagine themselves as superior to those men for being able to recognize what they did not. This problematic identification is furthered by the fact that the drawn student-surrogate resembles those important men more than Abina herself in appearing both white and male.

⁸⁹ This dialogue, most closely approximates that given in the "Transcript" section of *Abina and the Important Men*: "I heard that master (meaning white man) had said we were all free. Yet I had been sold and I had no will of my own and I could not look after my body and health: that I am a slave and I would therefore come and complain" (92).

⁹⁰ The changes made between the first and second editions of *Abina* alter pagination including moving many pages that initially appeared on the right hand side of the book when opened to the left, such that the opposite-facing pages reproduced at bottom of page 82 clearly belong to the book's first edition. It is likely that Clarke and the publishers decided redrawing the image for continuity was simply unnecessary, as this same image appears in the first edition. Nonetheless, this inconsistency is a moment of self-referentiality, well in keeping with prose sections of the second edition that explicitly comment on changes made between the two editions.

While Getz and Clarke may err in their attempt to relay Abina's desires as they pertain to her historical legacy, their graphic collaboration well captures the fact that Abina's desire to be heard must have been negotiated in relationship to her interlocutors. Indeed, linguistic constraints, such as translation difficulties and the fact that Abina did not read or write, make it difficult to uncover Abina's intentions. Whether or not she imagined an audience for her story beyond the people to whom she directly spoke, articulating Abina's desire to be heard is crucial to the collaborator's effort to grant her agency. In her testimony, Abina suggests that slavery was principally a denial of her agency. Wanting the ability to make meaningful choices for herself, she fled Quamina Eddoo's household. Getz and Clarke reasonably assume that Abina would have wanted similar agency over her historical legacy, and so *Abina and the Important Men* imagines Abina herself speaking through its pages.

In Getz' terms, the central challenge of *Abina and the Important Men* is to translate Abina's life for contemporary Western readers, without overwriting her story. I have suggested that the book's effort to engage student-readers as historians may be guilty of overwriting Abina's story with implicit claims that through reading the history students might in some way redeem it; the implication is that 'hearing' Abina now corrects for the indifferent response she received in her life. However, this kind of overwriting is scarcely avoidable, because all historical accounts reflect their particular audiences. Indeed, as I discussed in Chapter one, philosophers Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault argue there are advantages to self-consciously deploying representations of the past as images seized for the living, particularly because the alternative, "exclusive concern for [historical] truth," can "detach" individuals from more immediate life (Foucault 97). Getz explicitly describes his handling of history as "forum" for discovery, a welcome contrast to what Nietzsche names the "monumental" and "antiquarian"

approaches to history, which seek to honor and emulate the past, respectively. Rather than emphasizing the value of history, it would be easy for a book like *Abina and the Important Men* to overwrite Abina's story, instead, with the heavy weight of the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery. Yet, the book's emphasis on the process of history allows it to interrogate the concept of slavery as Abina's contemporaries would have understood it, rather than provide simple exposition comparing "slavery" in its respective historical contexts.

Thus, *Abina* illustrates two trials: the graphic narrative depicts the 1876 court proceedings to determine whether or not Abina had been a slave; the rest of the book encourages student-readers to interrogate definitions of slavery in relationship to historical and contemporary labor conditions throughout the colonial/colonized world. Each of the historical persons depicted in *Abina* grapples with the definition of slavery. Some, like Abina herself, are confident in their own experientially motivated understanding, but must negotiate their concept of slavery against those of the other court participants, whereas others, like Judge Melton, approach the definition of slavery philosophically and legally, relying less on individually held understandings of slavery and freedom. Likewise, Getz, Clarke and the other historians who contribute essays to *Abina and the Important Men* interrogate what slavery would have meant to those individuals, and examine how those definitions inform and challenge contemporary ones. Introducing essays by historians Sandra Greene, Kwasi Konadu and Antoinette Burton, that respond to the prompt "Was Abina a Slave?" Getz discusses, "The label we have used throughout this whole book in describing her as a slave. Despite their usefulness, identity labels like *slave* are troubling, for they threaten to reduce an individual's life to a single dimension" (171). Here Getz emphasizes that if Abina was a slave, her enslavement should not define her. Indeed, no individual life should be defined by

one identity category, but the point bears particular importance concerning the category of "slave," a term which has historically been used to connote "non-person."

Although Abina lost the court case, it is remarkable that she was even able to bring the suit to court. Britain outlawed the trade and keeping of slaves in all of its colonies in 1834; British laws against slavery were applied to parts of West Africa in 1875 with the establishment of the Gold Coast Colony and Protectorate; but, until 1900 slavery remained legal in parts of the Asante empire not-yet under British control. As British anti-slavery law had only so recently been applied to the Gold Coast, the case became a referendum on the meaning of slavery. In the graphic portion of *Abina and the Important Men*, the judge and lawyers frequently discuss the definition of slavery, largely foregrounding debate as an issue of translation. Indeed, the Asante word for "slavery" refers to the condition of being bought (rather than owned) and the word for "master" is an honorific applied equally to men of social importance; these linguistic disparities impeded Abina's ability to communicate her experience. Yet, the problem of translation runs much deeper, these linguistic differences reflecting vastly different ways of conceptualizing freedom and societal organization. At the level of diction, language reflects discursive communities and the cultural values they share.

Iconography and Visual Language

Nowhere is the phenomenon of culturally specific discourse more apparent in *Abina and the Important Men* than in discussions about free will. In the graphic history Melton asks if Abina was "compelled to work against your will." This exchange is not directly present in the surviving transcript proceedings, although Melton asks Abina if her condition was "without your consent and against your will" multiple times in that record (30, 91). The comic uses a thought

bubble to register Abina's probable confusion at this line of thinking: "These questions are mad. I was the least person in the household. I did what I had to...How am I supposed to answer this man?" (30). Getz and Clarke attribute this thought process to Abina, representing as a person who actively made choices about how to act and how to speak, even as she was forced to do so from a subordinated position. The illustrations visually emphasize her weak position as well. Abina sits on the witness stand, but Melton dominates the page, the panel-less image of his torso occupies nearly a quarter of the page, his head overlapping — and thus obscuring — Abina's body. Given this visual dominance, Melton appears as a bully when he remarks that, "The question of free will is at the heart of the question of slavery. Yet this girl cannot understand such a complex concept" (30). In that Melton's apparent definition of slavery involves the total absence of free will, his speech denies Abina agency over her own life, which adds insult to the injury of implying that she lacked the intellect to "understand such a complex concept." This page design strives to visualize conceptual conflict, to show not only that the individuals had competing perspectives about slavery, but also to position those perspectives in a way that readers might engage their own understanding and sympathies.

Contrary to Melton's notions, the concept of free will poorly distinguished the status of slave from that of (free) servant or wife in the Gold Coast, because contemporary Asante social networks of obligation were structured through familial and economic ties: "Most Twi-speakers lived in a complex web of dependencies revolving around obligations to the matrilineage (*abusua*) and its head (*abusua panin*). Vassalage, debt pawning, ritual oath-bound obligation, and other types of service were common. Conceptions of individual liberty existed, but they were not central to identity" (Getz and Ehrisman 98). Unable to confirm an exchange of money and with no evidence that Quamina Eddoo physically abused Abina, the English born Melton likely

relied on the Enlightenment concept of "free will" to adjudicate her status as part of Eddoo's household. Despite the faults of this line of inquiry, *Abina and the Important Men* favorably contrasts Melton's interest in Abina's felt-experience of her condition with those other standards for defining slavery. Conversely, the exchange of money and physical abuse may constitute more objective standards for establishing who is or is not enslaved, insofar as both events can be witnessed by third parties. Yet, such definitions of slavery, concerned more with the things done to a person than with that individual's feelings, cast the enslaved person as object.



Figure 23 *Abina and the Important Men*, page 43

Images of slavery, like the images of racial terror I discuss in chapter three, risk recommitting victims' objectification. Representing slavery poses a challenge for artists like Clarke, because they must capture the brutality without crossing the line into gratuitous representation. Objectifying images of the violence of slavery solicit problematic viewing pleasure, not least because they position viewers in a role closely mirroring that of the perpetrators of violence and so inhibit identification with victims themselves. Yet, as *Abina's* meditation on the definition of slavery suggests, gratuitously violent representation does another more serious kind of violence to people who have been enslaved: mistaking bodily harm for the deepest kind of injury. For these reasons, Clark includes few images of physical violence in *Abina and the Important Men*. In fact, the first edition of the book included a splash page that depicts Eddoo ripping Abina's matrimonial beads from her body, but this page does not appear in the second edition (Getz and Clarke 24, 1st edition). The scene depicted the loss of Abina's married status, following regional custom, but the sexually suggestive page composition centered around Abina's inverted body and the male figures holding it. One can conclude, given the second edition's increased emphasis on Abina's agency, that the collaborators felt the splash page risked fetishizing Abina's disgrace.

However, the visual register of comics can enable viewers to recognize "realities" they would otherwise only abstractly entertain. In particular, hand drawn images in comics (and other media forms) can challenge dominant iconographies and generate new perspectives for viewing history. Images also function as a kind of translation, helping viewers to grasp concepts like "logging," the punishment of confining people to the exterior or interior of a log. Clarke's illustration of logging emphasizes the dehumanizing nature of the practice. The narrow panel echoes Abina's confinement in the log, whose proportions seem to defy credibility: the right side

of the panel, where Abina's head appears, is roughly twice as tall as the left; her shoulders are scarcely visible, making it difficult to imagine how her arms and legs could possibly fit inside the log (43). Here, the reader must attempt to make sense of the image by visualizing Abina's body. The reader's necessarily uncomfortable mental exercise joins Abina's own discomfort, but foregrounds the existential violence of dehumanization along with physical pain.

Of course, Abina's physical pain is part of her experience, and the fact that one master abused her complicates her status in Eddoo's household, where she was fed, clothed and not beaten. If, as I suggest above, Clarke's illustrations more closely align readers with the trial judge and jury than with Abina herself, this stylistic result may be motivated by the authors' sense that, like Melton himself, readers are all too likely to conceptually reduce slavery to extremes of physical violence. Thus, the page in question confronts readers with a relatively familiar image of slavery: a black person held down and beaten. Perhaps most twenty-first century student-readers will fail to recognize the correspondence of this image to the visual culture of American racial terror and the iconography of lynching. The image faintly echoes the iconography of US chattel slavery by including such details as the whip, but it frames a kind of gaze radically distinct from the images of lynching I discussed in chapter three. Like the portrayal of logging, Clarke's illustration of Abina's having been flogged suggests more physical violence than it shows: it does not show the whip making contact with her flesh, nor does it include physical scars. Moreover, no individuals look at Abina's suffering in Clarke's illustration. There must, of course, have been people who did look when she was flogged, but the perspective of the illustration emphasizes what those witnesses likely did not see - the reactions in her face and body as she feels injuries both physical and existential. Whereas Getz' captions suggest that

readers may differentiate themselves from those in the nineteenth century courtroom by *hearing* Abina, these images likewise ask readers to *see* her.

If hearing her depends upon successful translation and inference from the scraps of her recorded speech, seeing Abina, of whom there are no surviving images, is an even greater feat. It is impossible to say how closely Clarke's illustrations resemble the real-life Abina, because contemporary portraits were only taken of "important men." This limitation gave Clarke a degree of freedom in representing Abina, who she draws with facial features that are relatively common in the region. However, the issues at stake in accurate visual representation extend beyond mere plausibility to include issues of bias. Getz writes of Clarke's attempt to accurately and compellingly visualize details of clothing, setting and mannerisms:

The issue of accurately representing the past in this volume was complicated by the illustrator's need to represent Abina's world graphically. A written history of Abina might reasonably omit the question of what Quamina Eddoo's house looked like, or what kind of furniture might have been in Cape Coast Castle, or what clothing Abina likely wore. A graphic history cannot do so, however. The illustrator and author had to find and consult paintings, illustrations, and even photographs from that period to provide the necessary visual information for the reader. (144)

The book includes some of those visual references alongside this reminder, allowing readers to compare them and judge accuracy for themselves. Like written records, illustrations and photographs are necessarily incomplete representations of the past. They capture only the level of detail allowed by the images' borders and focus. More importantly, the details they do include reveal as much about the artists' way of looking as they do about the visual object itself.

As my discussion of photography in previous chapters has explored, visual references inevitably invoke bias of one sort or another. Nineteenth century images of Africa, both hand drawn and photographic, often emerged as objects of European curiosity. As a result, the detailed accuracy of any given image must be reconciled with its exotic potential. Clothing style is one of many visual details fraught with the perils of registering difference. Historian Rafe Blaufarb who collaborated with Liz Clarke to produce *Inhuman Traffick* writes of investigating what footwear African Kru sailors would have worn on board ships. In addition to the fact that there were limited sources on the question, Blaufarb suggests that historical accuracy itself can produce other problems: "African footwear (and clothing in general) turned out to be highly politicized. Depictions of Africans barefoot are sometimes denounced as racist on the grounds that they suggest Africans are primitive. At the same time, to portray Africans in European-style shoes implies to some critics a disparagement of or discomfort with indigenous African culture" (Blaufarb XX). Regrettably, Getz fails to make a similar admission in *Abina and the Important Men*. However, issues of implicit racism likewise informs Abina's dress. The book's website includes preliminary character sketches, including one of "Abina in alternate clothing" naked from the waist up (abina.org). In the book itself, Abina wears African wrap dresses, but her chest is always clothed. In all likelihood, the collaborators decided that the accuracy of portraying Abina's bare chest might be misconstrued as a disparagement of West African culture, and an insult to her in particular. Moreover, such a depiction of female nudity would not be considered acceptable in many American schools. Indeed, inadvertently sexualizing Abina would have been a grave misstep, especially considering her apparent appeals to feminine virtue in claiming herself Yaw's wife.

Temporality and Geography

At the visual level, *Abina and the Important Men* avoids universalizing its subject matter, holding the stakes of accurate representation very high. In fact, Clarke made changes to the way she illustrates landscape to improve the visual accuracy between editions, particularly in drawing a species of palm tree indigenous to the region. This specificity of place is important, because slavery, an institution with a global legacy, manifests multiple geo-political iterations. Put simply, the "slavery" of British Protectorship West Africa differs from "slavery" in the same region, prior to British rule, as it also differs from concurrent oppressions elsewhere in the world. Moreover, British anti-slavery law did not bring an immediate improvement to the condition of slavery in the Gold Coast colonies, and may have ironically brought a negative transformation.⁹¹

⁹¹ In his scholarly article about Abina, Getz summarizes, "The exact impact of the 1874 –5 ordinances ending recognition of slaving in Protectorate courts is still widely debated, with many historians doubting that large numbers of dependent individuals in the Protectorate significantly transformed their situation" (104).

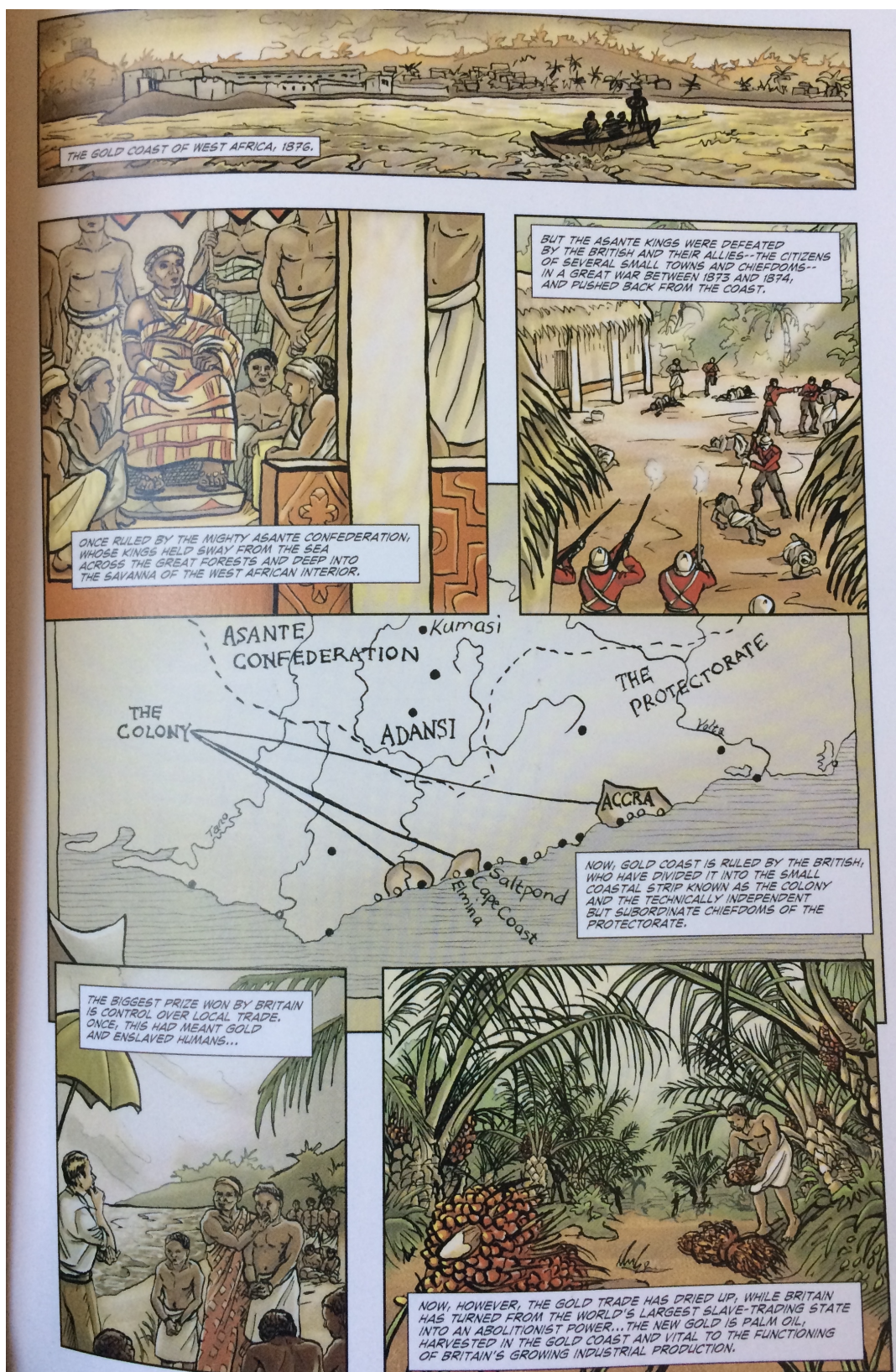


Figure 24 Abina and the Important Men, page 5

Elsewhere in this dissertation I have argued against the conceit of teleological time and suggested that the formal media properties of comics denature the idea of temporal progress. In narrating a history that directly challenges the logics of teleology and universalism, *Abina and the Important Men* makes fitting use of comics' capacity for spatio-temporal disruption. The opening page situates Abina's story geographically and temporally by utilizing regional markers such as landscape, wardrobe and, of course, the map. The panels overlay that map, a visual design that emphasizes simultaneity and spatiality over linear temporality. The captions also resist linear temporality by referring to the historical moment of 1876, during which time the British ruled the Gold Coast, as "now" (5). Throughout the graphic narrative, captions use the present tense to narrate regional events, a choice which echoes the presentness of each panel in the comics medium. Thus, the panoramic image of "The Gold Coast of West Africa, 1876" at the top of the opening page must be viewed with images from the then recent past: a "mighty Asante Confederation" King, British soldiers (in red coats) defeating the Asante, and a slave market.

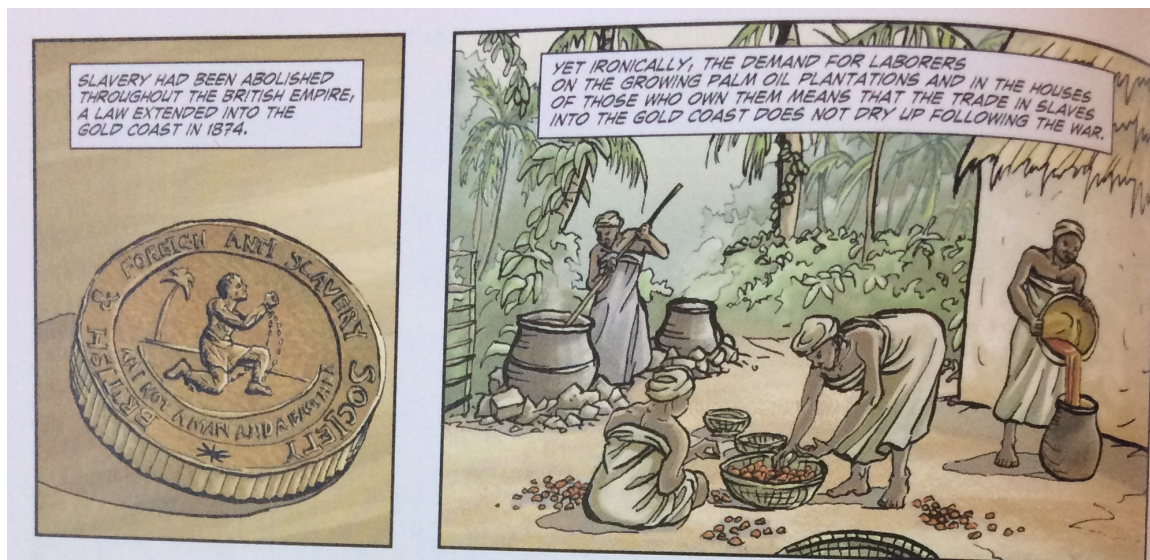


Figure 25 *Abina and the Important Men*, page 6

A strictly chronological telling of slavery in the Gold Coast and the British empire would risk under-representing European responsibility for the slave trade. Young students, especially, might confuse Great Britain's Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 as indication that Britain had no part in promoting slavery in the Gold Coast, which it did not fully conquer until 1874. Rather than arriving as liberators to spread European enlightenment to Africa, European economic and military interventions destabilized the region and fueled slave-driven economy. While they might have presented those dates and events chronologically, Getz and Clarke instead emphasize the "now" of 1876. The lower left panel depicts a white man considering the purchase of African slaves, under a caption reading, "The biggest prize won by Britain is control over local trade. Once, this had meant gold and enslaved humans..." (5). The juxtaposition of verbal and visual registers is confusing, especially for young readers, suggesting that Britain "won" "enslaved humans," even though technically speaking the British "control over local trade" was the control that extended abolition to the newly formed Protectorate. Economically, however, British rule created new demands for slave labor.⁹² On the next page, the collaborators make the lack of progress more explicit, noting that while British control established legal freedom, "ironically, the demand for laborers on the growing palm oil plantations and in the houses of those who own them means that the trade in slaves into the Gold Coast does not dry up following the war" (6).

Another way in which European intervention promoted slavery was in instigating war; members of defeated kingdoms were frequently taken hostage and sold into slavery. In this kind of slavery, preceding British rule, "Nnɔ nkofoɔ [one category of Asante "slaves," female plural

⁹² Especially given that British magistrates, like Melton, would have judged the treatment of enslaved laborers on the Gold Coast in comparison to the conditions of industrial laborers in Europe, the legal status of slavery in the British Protectorate, as it intersects with relationships of kinship and apprenticeship, provokes interesting corollaries to Marxist distinctions between "real" and "formal" freedom, a topic discussed in Walter Johnson's *River of Dark Dreams*.

of *odonkɔ*] tended to originate from far away and had often been captured in wars or kidnapped. They generally passed through a period in which they were entirely alienated from the family and households in which they found themselves" before being assimilated into the community (Getz and Ehrisman 102-103). Thus, *Odonkɔ* status can be understood as a kinship relationship—forced assimilation into family units—rather than a relationship of property. Moreover, this relationship was not permanent. As a result, more frequent war meant that enslaved individuals were likely to be captured repeatedly, not remaining in any household long enough to become fully assimilated. This seems to have been the case for much of Abina's life.

Between the two printed editions of *Abina and the Important Men*, Getz received critical feedback from other historians and continued to research Abina's life. A notable change between the editions is the latter's increased emphasis on temporal causation, specifically the colonial impact on the geography of West African slavery. For instance, in the newer edition, Abina says, "Then there was another war, and I was stolen again, and sold to a man name Yaw Awoah. He told me I was married to him and that as his wife I would help him to carry goods for sale in the British colony," where in the previous edition she describes the circumstances of her slavery in terms of the individual men who traded her: "Then one day a man named Yaw Awoah came. My master in Adansi gave me to him. He told me I would work for him now, carrying goods for sale" (22, both editions). The new dialogue presents British involvement as a doubly enslaving force; wars between Asante Kings and the British caused Abina to be captured and sold, and the British controlled economic trade gave Yaw Awoah incentive to acquire Abina.

Trading posts in the British coastal colony transformed master-slave relationships, in that their location created an incentive for "important men" to enslave people to carry their goods to market, and then sell those same people along with the goods. In one of the essays included in

the book, historian Sandra Greene writes: "It was extremely common for traders . . . to purchase slaves to carry their trade goods . . . On arrival at their destination, they often sold both their goods and those slaves they no longer needed or wanted" (174). Whereas frequent wars disrupted the assimilation of enslaved peoples into new kinship units, colonial trading posts motivated a form of slavery completely removed from kinship structure. Of course, buying and selling human beings was against the law in the British Protectorate, so that economic incentive could only be realized through legal subterfuge. In a scene between Quamina Eddoo and James Hutton Brew, his lawyer, the latter explains a slave-holder's possible defense strategy: "There are two basic strategies for beating an accusation of slavery. First, convince them that the slave is an apprentice. Or second, convince hem that the girl was purchased as a wife / That, of course, is why young girls make the safest and best slaves to own! That and the fact that they find it hard to run away, and are easily intimidated!" (32). It is well worth noting that this scene draws on the historian's inference rather direct evidence such as court documents. Indeed, Quamina Eddoo is exonerated by Yaw Awoah's testimony that Abina was his wife, whom he left temporarily in the care of Quamina Eddoo, rather than simply (slavery and marriage were not mutually exclusive relationships) a woman he held and sold as a slave.

The second edition of *Abina and the Important Men* devotes far more attention to the gendered aspects of Abina's case. Getz attributes this choice to recognition of Abina's repeated reference to herself as Yaw Awoah's "wife" in the court transcript. Abina's insistence on her marital status may have worked against her in the courtroom. In the graphic narrative scene discussed above, Brew clarifies to Eddoo that the British mistake West African marriage gifts for payment, and plans to exploit the contemporary misconception that "We 'buy' our wives." Yet, the commentary sections of *Abina and the Important Men* complicate the implication that

Abina's marriage to Yaw Awoah was subterfuge for her enslavement. Sandra Greene suggests that Yaw Awoah married Abina, because doing so provided him the advantages of "sexual companionship" along the journey and that treating Abina as a wife made her loyal to him: "What is clear is that he did indeed claim Abina as his wife by acknowledging publicly that he had had sexual relations with her. Such a public claim, however, did not require him to alter his understanding of his wife as also his slave" (174).

In contrast, historian Kwasi Konadu suggests that Abina appeared content as Yaw Awoah's wife (however entwined this status was with slavery). Faced with the prospect of a forced marriage to a man (Tandoe) she did not desire, Abina concludes, "that I had been sold" by Yaw Awoah, a realization she does not claim to have reached on coming into Eddoo's household. Konadu speculates,

The threat of violence when she refused to be married [to Tandoe] induced her to run away, [but] was she really seeking 'freedom' from 'slavery' or from a coerced marriage? . . . Marriage to Yaw Awoah, whether real or imagined, offered some protection from the physical and verbal abuse . . . and it gave some value to her labor. . . a childbearing young woman like Abina would have seized these fundamental opportunities of marriage and childbirth to become linked with 'free' men like Yaw Awoah in order to stabilize her shifting status from captive to wife to stranger-captive. (178-79)

Yaw Awoah may well have understood Abina to be his slave and treated her as such, as Greene suggests, but Abina did not sue him. On the contrary, she claimed her marital status to him and sued Eddoo for holding her as a slave, even as she testifies that Awoah must have sold her to Eddoo. Similarly, Getz suggests that Abina brought the court case not to punish Eddoo (from

whom she had escaped successfully); rather, "by arguing that she was not only enslaved but also more properly Yaw Awoah's wife, Abina made a powerful case that she should be seen by the administration and by the community as a respectable woman" (Getz 171).



Figure 26 *Abina and the Important Men*, page 71

For *Abina and the Important Men* to succeed in its stated goal of transmitting Abina's voice to readers and granting her the agency to tell her own story, student-readers must accept the unresolved tensions raised by the collaborators' attempt to model history as "forum." Was Abina a slave and if so when? This question goes to the heart of the tension between the ways "history" understands slavery and the ways individuals understand their own condition. There are other tensions in how students will interpret *Abina and the Important Men*. *Abina and the Important Men* suggests parallels between Abina's "enslavement" and industrial working conditions elsewhere, invoking tensions around visual knowledge, space and time. For instance, in the graphic narrative Brew, Quamino Eddoo's British educated lawyer, says, "An apprentice in London isn't much different from a domestic slave here. / In fact, there are many similarities between our two cultures. Just as here in the Protectorate, the fathers in Britain make the rules for the family, and everyone else follows" (32). The book's allusions to exploitative labor practices elsewhere in nineteenth-century British empire lack a visual component, leaving student-readers to imagine the conditions of workers, wives and children in late nineteenth century London. By confining these allusions to the verbal register, Clarke and Getz implicitly ask readers to translate *Abina's* images of West African slavery to European contexts, an inversion of conventional paradigms.

Abina and the Important Men investigates the knowledge frameworks that underwrite history —iconography, temporality, and subjectivity—making it an ideal pedagogical text to inspire active student reflection on the purpose of historical knowledge. I argue that the graphic narrative opens the debate over who is and is not enslaved into the present through comics' temporality and iconographic visual register. *Abina and the Important Men* makes no explicit reference to twenty-first century "slavery," but the book's formal interventions make such

comparison obvious. By not making specific reference to contemporary conditions, the book can speak equally to students in many locales, and equally well to the students of 2016 as to those decades later.⁹³ As in the opening page, the final chapter in the graphic narrative opens with a page design that profoundly frames slavery in the present tense. Though the page verbally situates its subject matter in colonial West Africa ("The Gold Coast Colony and Protectorate"), it describes historical conditions with a surprising level of urgency ("All day, all over," "More and More") and a suspicion of the law: "English Justice was supposed to eliminate slavery but instead it has just shifted it onto the backs of children, who have become safer slaves to own than adults" (71). Ironically, the only topic grammatically assigned to the past is the obligation to "eliminate slavery." In contrast, the "shift[ing]" burden of injustice operates in the past imperfect: beginning long ago, but ongoing. This sentence makes the lesson of Abina's failed court-case more general. The collaborators here emphasize that rhetorical idealization of freedom may be a false promise; or worse, those ideals may manifest in legal practice that produces the opposite.

The way slavery appears from the visual perspective of *Abina and the Important Men* should not be conflated with the way Abina's treatment is drawn, because each illustration of Abina's experience is paired with an overarching narrative uncertainty about her status. Importantly, while the text never definitively defines Abina as slave (but rather tasks readers with deciding whether and how to see her as such), the book does include images of people it considers enslaved. The "slavery" it shows? It looks simply like labor. The images include no markers of brutality, no task masters, and significantly, no isolation. Captions proclaim, "People go about their business. / They do so with the help of numerous enslaved children" (71). The two panels accompanying those words, which show the unloading of small boats and a residential

⁹³ *Abina and the Important Men* is designed as a textbook. Classroom conditions and school district budgets (not to mention publishing houses) create a material incentive for such longevity.

street, respectively, are each the width of the page and of a short height (the panels' proportions are closer to panorama than standard cinematic shot), a difficult panel composition to absorb without moving one's eyes side-to-side. The adults and children in each scene are distinguished by their size and the fact that only the children appear to be carrying goods. Yet, given the panel dimensions and the uniformity of dress, student-readers might not notice anything amiss in the distribution of labor. Indeed, nothing in the image distinguishes which of the adults are slave masters from those who are parents (if any).

This page design challenges the conceit of iconographic vision. Much as elsewhere in its graphic narrative *Abina and the Important Men* depicts regionally specific plants and buildings, these illustrations depict specific types of labor. The middle tier of the page, which contains three images of labor, emphasizes the importance of contextual specificity. Though they are defined as "enslaved children," the individuals are granted other identities, because "They are carriers / domestic workers, [and] / net haulers on fishing boats" (71). Individuals in these middle tier images more closely resemble adults than children. Unlike the two uppermost panels, which showed individuals standing on the same plane, the figures in the middle tier panels all appear to be the same height, due to the narrow and tall panel shape and compositional depth which produce foreshortening. Difference in the dimensions of panel frames literally corresponds to different visions of who is laboring.

Thus, the three figures shown pulling in a fishing net at page right, for instance, have no defining resemblances to slaves, raising multiple ambiguities. The juxtaposition between visual and verbal register might suggest that the narrator(s) is unreliable. This tension might indicate the authors' uncertainty that having been enslaved as children should define the laborer's status as adults. Of course, this visual opacity recalls images of Abina being beaten, in that that which

they do not show marks both sets of illustrations. Those images of Abina emphasize her face and her inaccessible interiority. These images of people whose labor is not entirely free highlight the importance of iconographic framing.

As I indicated at the outset of this chapter, one of comics' great pedagogical strengths is that the combination of verbal and visual discourse allows books like *Abina and the Important Men* to communicate their content to students at multiple educational levels. Perhaps, the grammatical close reading I perform above might be lost on junior high students. So too might be philosophical mediation on competition between legal and economic forces. Even so, Clarke's highly researched and thoughtful illustrations make those issues immediate.⁹⁴ Whereas the verbal register in the first page of *Abina* achieved a sense of presentness through repeated use of the word "now," it is more so at the level of image, in this latter case, that Clarke suggests slavery exceeds the bounds of a particular time and place. The images on the page accessibly articulate similarities between slavery in the Gold Coast Protectorate and labor conditions elsewhere. The question of slavery is more than one of authority ("According to whom was Abina a slave?") and more than one of temporal location ("When was she a slave?"). The question of slavery, like all historical phenomena, is also fundamentally one of recognition: What does slavery look like?

The central questions raised by *Abina and the Important Men* remain unresolved, because they are fundamental to the modern experience. Those questions concern how we understand the past, its violences, and its ongoing legacy for, to recall Walter Benjamin's phrasing, the here-and-now. I make the case for comics, in classrooms and beyond, on the basis

⁹⁴ There exists a dangerous and reductive interpretation of verbal/visual meaning that associates verbal literacy with advanced thought, and images with mere entertainment value for children. By no means, do I wish to endorse that interpretation. On the contrary, I suggest that philosophical discussion and literary analysis are suited to university classrooms, because those pedagogical practices are already quite common in those settings.

that comics is a medium that constantly interrogates the "how" of knowledge. This occurs partly by sheer virtue of the medium's relative youth in (so called) serious contexts, as well as by the explosive transformations in comic arts of the last few decades. More importantly, comics' formal features intrinsically reflect modern ways of knowing; and in holding up sight, subjectivity and temporality as constructs, comics help readers to imagine alternative ways of knowing. *Abina and the Important Men* exemplifies comics' potential to advance historical knowledge in particular, because it sheds much needed light both on the story of a woman who might easily have been silenced and on the process of learning about Abina, a process that is ongoing for Getz, and quite possibly for student-readers as well.

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